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ART & AUCTION

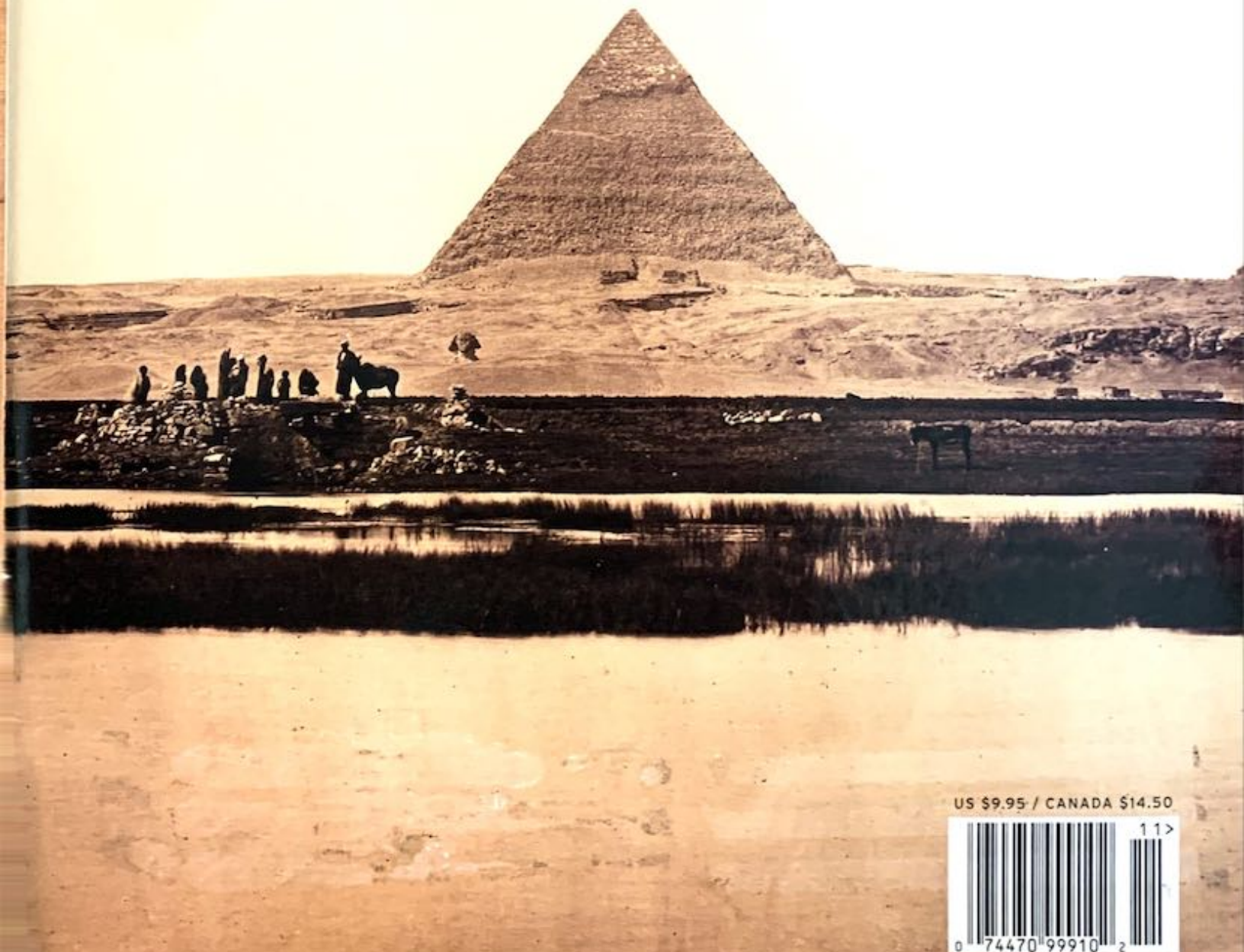
INSIDE THE ART MARKET

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Not long ago, California Impressionist paintings went for a song at garage sales. Today, fueled by new money and nostalgia for the Golden State's golden past, collectors are flocking to the field.

BY CAROL KINO

CALIFORNIA, HERE THEY COME

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N JUNE 19, A CROWD OF MORE than 700 people gathered in the Pasadena Civic Center for the California and American paintings sale held by John Moran Auctioneers, a family-run auction house based in neighboring Altadena. Interest centered on two early 20th-century paintings by Guy Rose, a California native who painted with Claude Monet at Giverny. The first of the Rose

works to come up was a portrait, estimated at \$400,000 to \$600,000. Around a dozen bidders competed for the painting before auctioneer John Moran finally sold it for \$1.1 million, a record for the artist and the field. Moran later hammered down one of Rose's seascapes at \$600,000, twice the high estimate. Not bad for a market that 25 years ago barely existed at all.

Rose, along with William Wendt and Granville Redmond, ranks in the top tier of plein air and Impressionist painters active in California between 1890 and the 1930s—the Indian summer of Impressionism. Many of these painters were quite successful during their lifetime, when their works were bought by real estate developers and tourists, among others. But by the 1950s and '60s,

Grass-roots initiative:

California painters W.A. Griffith and William Wendt helped form the Laguna Beach Art Association in 1918. Griffith paid homage to his colleague with *William Wendt at Work*, circa 1928 (est. \$40-60,000), most likely painted in Laguna Canyon. It is part of the October 23 sale at John Moran Auctioneers.

their paintings were going for a song at garage sales and thrift shops. Thanks to advances in scholarship in the 1970s and the hot collecting climate of the '80s and '90s, the market for early 20th-century California paintings has begun to mature.

Today the market sustains a broader collector base and more sales venues—specialist galleries as well as fairs like the Fine Art Dealers Association show in Los Angeles, held in September. On the other hand, the field still has the frenzied feel of a collectibles market, with dealers continually “rediscovering” new artists as material by the better-known names dwindles. But one thing is certain: Prices are rising, reflecting California’s dramatic, if unstable, economic growth.

Ten years ago, according to dealer Tom Gianetto, president of Edenhurst Gallery in West Hollywood, the median price for a first-rate work might have been \$20,000 to \$30,000. Today, he says, “the normal price for a good California painting starts at \$50,000 and goes up to \$100,000,” with top-quality works surpassing the six-figure mark and a truly exceptional piece skimming \$1 million. Gianetto, the underbidder on the Rose portrait at Moran’s sale, is

California Impressionism is a term “applied broadly to paintings that are painted broadly,” quips New York dealer Richard York. Below: Joseph Kleitsch’s *Park Avenue, Old Laguna* (est. \$300-500,000), goes on the block at Christie’s New York on November 7. Opposite: Butterfields of San Francisco is offering Marion Kavanaugh Wachtel’s *Sierra Landscape* (est. \$25-30,000) on December 12.





considered by some to be at least partly responsible for this state of affairs: He's known for bidding aggressively at auction, and paying—and reselling at—record prices.

At first glance the market appears to be fueled by the popularity of French Impressionism and of the first wave of American, or East Coast, Impressionism, as top examples of these genres have become increasingly expensive and rare. Rose's record certainly seems a bargain compared with Claude Monet's auction high of \$33 million, achieved at Sotheby's London in 1998, or Childe Hassam's top price of \$7.9 million, realized at Christie's New York the same year.

But the greatest force behind this market is California's growth. As dealers in the field are fond of pointing out, the state would—if considered independently from the rest of America—qualify as the world's fifth-largest economy, thanks to strengths in technology, finance and entertainment. What's more, many collectors and scholars there are natives or longtime residents itching to have

their cultural heritage taken seriously. For them, plein air painting provides a nostalgic vision of California's vanished paradisiacal past.

"It's part of California history, and there's obviously a lot of money in California," explains Ray Redfern, who says his Laguna Beach gallery has sold more Rose paintings than has any other dealer. Gianetto enthuses, "We don't need to buy Monet, we have Guy Rose! Why not look to our own native sons?" Some gallerists, like Redfern and both George Stern and Jeffrey Morseburg in West Hollywood, are second-generation California dealers, whose parents also sold Impressionist or plein air painting, though not always the California variety.

Many collectors too have deep ties to the land. Joan Irvine Smith, a third-generation Californian whose family ranch once blanketed a fifth of Orange County, began her collection in the early 1990s with plein air landscapes painted on her property. Throughout the art market recession, she bought so voraciously

ciously that many dealers dubbed her "St. Joan" or, less attractively, "the vacuum cleaner." New York gallerist Gavin Spanierman says that Irvine Smith is the reason he no longer deals as extensively in California Impressionism: She cleaned out his gallery's stock in the early 1990s. Many of these purchases ended up in the Irvine Museum, which she founded in 1992. She also has a gallery in Laguna Beach that specializes in historical and contemporary California plein air painting.



AS GENRES GO, CALIFORNIA plein air painting seems relatively amorphous. The bulk of its practitioners were European and East Coast émigrés, many of them trained in France, who were lured west by the scenery, the light and a climate that allowed them to paint outdoors year-round. But, perhaps because today's market is so hot, the phrase "California painting" can also

denote a work made in Europe by a California native like Rose, or a California scene painted by a visiting East Coast Impressionist like Hassam, who occasionally painted in San Francisco, or like William Merritt Chase, who briefly taught in Carmel. (Increasingly, the rubric also includes contemporary painters working in a plein air mode, who stand to benefit from the historical association.) The market has even been stretched to include such indoor genres as portraiture, bird and flower paintings and still lifes. As Richard York, one of a handful of New York dealers to have trafficked in the field, laughingly puts it, "The term is applied broadly to paintings that are painted broadly."

The state's celebrated geography also makes for thematic and stylistic variety within the genre. Catherine Leonhard, director of American art at Christie's Los Angeles, explains, "California is such a large state, with so many dramatic differences in terms of light and landscape, that you see a lot of interesting things going on in the paintings." Works from Southern California tend to be more Impressionist in style, with a lighter, brighter palette, while those made in the cooler, foggier north owe more to tonalism and Barbizon painting, featuring moody, subdued colors.

In general, though, the state's rugged landscape helped give California Impressionism a bolder look than the French variety. And the artists' distance from Europe's reigning cultural centers and academies (they tended to band together in local exhibition clubs instead) offered them greater freedom to experiment with different styles. George Stern, one of the field's most respected dealers, describes the work as "a Post-Impressionist hybrid." An Arroyo Seco scene by Elmer Wachtel, he says, might have a

One of the most popular California artists during his lifetime, William Wendt now commands six figures for strong works. "His prices have almost doubled in the last three or four years," says Whitney Ganz of William A. Karges Fine Art in West Hollywood, who sold Wendt's *Spring Creek*, 1919, right, to a collector last year.







California Impressionism assumed a bolder, more rugged look than the French variety, with some examples—mainly those from the north—resembling Barbizon paintings. Opposite: Elmer Wachtel's *Sunset, California Coast*, circa 1920, from Trotter Galleries. Below: Armin Hansen's *Fishermen Salvaging a Wreck*, circa late 1920s, sold by Montgomery Gallery of San Francisco.

Barbizon-like foreground and an Impressionist-style background. Stern considers this part of the appeal. "There was no big boss who told them how to paint. They were free to do what they wanted to do. That's what attracted a lot of people out here. That's also the reason it took them so long to be discovered."

Dealer Jeffrey Morseburg of West Hollywood says the top tier of Southern California Impressionists, whose activity peaked between 1909 and 1930, includes Rose; Wendt, famed for his muscular landscapes; and Redmond, known for his bright poppy fields. Other well-respected artists of the region are Edgar Payne, who painted Sierra scenes; Franz Bischoff, who painted lush flower arrangements; Joseph Kleitsch, a portraitist; Maurice Braun, a Theosophist who created emotive nature scenes; and Marion Kavanaugh Wachtel, who made stylized watercolors of tree-filled landscapes.

Most of these artists painted where they lived, in rural towns like Pasadena and seaside colonies like Laguna Beach, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Carmel and Monterey. Braun was San Diego's best-known talent. Husband-and-wife artists Elmer and Marion Wachtel worked in Pasadena. Payne, Kleitsch and Wendt were members of the Laguna Beach artists' colony, as was Jack Wilkinson Smith, known for his depictions of crashing surf. Redmond, a deaf mute educated in San Francisco who was reportedly the inspiration for Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, painted throughout the state.

San Francisco, which developed its art market during the Gold Rush, is a different story. Its tonalist landscape painters were active earlier, peaking from 1890 to 1915. According to art historian Nancy Moure, the foremost Bay Area artists included



Arts & Crafts painter Arthur Matthews, who taught at the California School of Design (now the San Francisco Art Institute), and his student, the Post-Impressionist Joseph Raphael, who spent much of his career in Belgium. Francis McComas, a Matthews student influenced by Cézanne and the Cubists, was one of three California painters to exhibit at the New York Armory Show in 1913.

The scene soon moved south from San Francisco because the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed many painters' work—and much of the historical record. Artists decamped for the coastal towns of Monterey and Carmel or for Southern California. In Monterey, William Ritschel and Armin Hansen, another of Matthews' students, made dramatic seafaring scenes, and Euphemia Charlton Fortune, a California native who had studied with William Merritt Chase, painted peninsula landscapes.

Tonalist activity in San Francisco was further transformed by the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, which featured new work by European artists. One such case is the Oakland Society of Six, generally considered the area's first "modern" movement. Active in the 1920s, these painters—William Clapp, August Gay, Selden Connor Gile, Maurice Logan, Louis Siegfriest and Bernard von Eichman—made compact, powerful, explosively colored plein air scenes inspired by the Fauves.

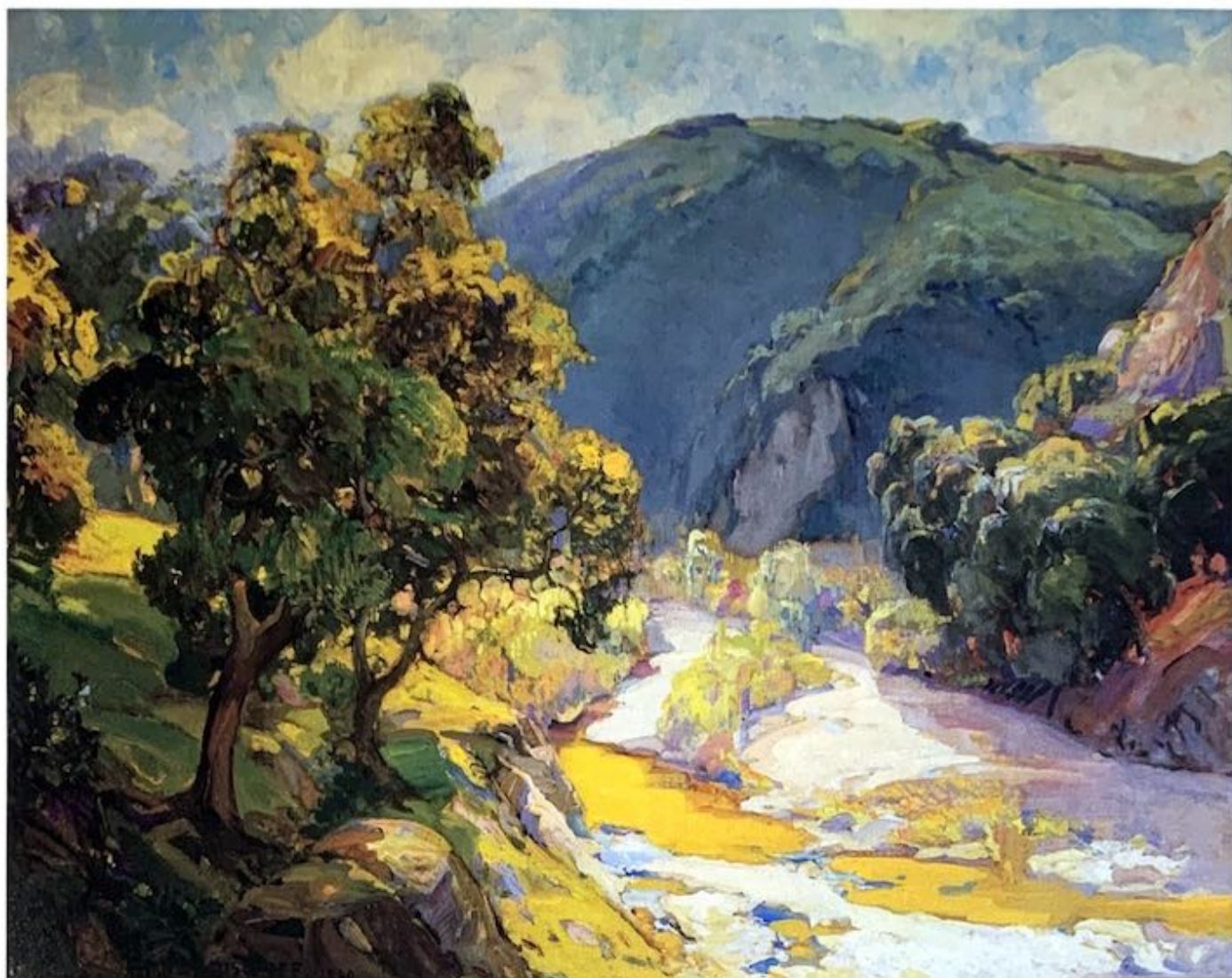
IT TOOK 50 MORE YEARS FOR THE SOCIETY OF Six and their Impressionist predecessors to gain value in the marketplace. Many say the galvanizing moment came in 1977, when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) deaccessioned many of its California paintings through Sotheby's Parke-Bernet in Los Angeles. "We started seeing a collector base develop by 1978 and 1979," Morseburg says. "The [Parke-Bernet] auction put a lot of really good paintings on the market." In this group were five paintings by Rose, which brought between \$1,500 and \$5,500 each. Ray Redfern believes that one was resold privately four years ago for more than \$1 million; his most recent Rose sale in the gallery, he says, was for \$650,000.

Publications and exhibitions also made a difference. In 1975, Moure, then an assistant curator at LACMA, self-published the *Dictionary of Art and Artists in Southern California Before 1930*, which she co-wrote with Lyn Wall Smith. It was the first historical account of the movement. "There really was no field," says Moure. "I looked upon it as just a little project of my own, to gather all this data together." (Today she chronicles the movement on her comprehensive Web site, www.californiaart.com.) The first major statewide survey devoted to the subject, "Impressionism: The California View," appeared at the Oakland Museum of California in fall 1981. And in 1982, Ruth Lilly Westphal self-published the collection *Plein Air Painters of California: The Southland*, the first illustrated volume on the subject and one that some say gave the field its name.

Poppy fields were a quintessential theme of Southern California painting, and Granville Redmond was the master. Here, Redmond's *Landscape with Poppies*, circa 1915, from George Stern Fine Arts.







According to Scot Levitt, director of the American art department at the San Francisco-based auction house Butterfields, Westphal's book "definitely turned the tide in terms of increasing prices." Butterfields began holding regular California and American art sales in 1985. "In December 1986," Levitt says, "prices really took a noticeable jump."

Other auction houses followed suit. Moran, founded in 1969, held its first California and American paintings sale in 1990. And Christie's L.A. entered the field in 1998, one year after opening its Beverly Hills branch.

These days, there's a close race between Butterfields, which holds twice-yearly California and American paintings auctions, and Christie's, which has twice-yearly sales that include California, American and Western art. In these categories for the year 2000, Butterfields grossed about \$8.5 million, with Christie's ringing in at \$6.8 million and Moran at \$3.7 million. Moran, generally regarded as the field's last bargain-hunting ground, holds three sales a year, including one in October (see "Fall Auctions," opposite page).

Today dozens of galleries are also active in the field. Most have set up shop in Los Angeles and a few in San Francisco, with others hanging their shingles in former artists' colonies like Pasadena, Laguna Beach and Carmel. Not only are these communities filled with wealthy clients, but they are also a source of fresh-to-the-market material that has remained with local families for years. Jeffrey Moran, vice president of Moran

Born in Austria, Franz Bischoff emigrated to the States in 1885 and moved to the L.A. area in 1906. He's one of the field's many adopted sons: European emigrés who took to the California life and land. Here, Bischoff's *Vista Arroyo Seco*, 1920, from George Stern Fine Arts.

Auctioneers, says his location held great appeal for the Pasadena family that consigned the two Rose paintings the firm sold in June. "In talking with them," Moran says, "I suggested, 'What better place to sell the paintings than where they originally came from?'" (Coincidentally, the record-setting Rose portrait was exhibited in the 1920s at a gallery on the intersection now occupied by the Pasadena Civic Center, where Moran holds its sales.)

WITH CALIFORNIA DEALERS selling to their neighbors, it's no wonder that most New York dealers see this as a mostly regional market. "Most of the material comes from California," says Fred Hill of Berry-Hill Galleries in New York, "and most of it goes to California. There's definitely a premium on the material there."

There is even regionalism within the state, with both Northern and Southern California collectors preferring local works. Whitney Ganz, director of Karges Fine Art in West Hollywood (which also has a Carmel branch), points out that "the lion's share of the market is in Southern California." (His parents, Joann and Julian Ganz, own one of the country's pre-eminent collections of 19th-century American art.)

In addition, San Francisco dealers don't always respect what's going on down south. "I know those paintings bring a lot of money, and the dealers there are very excited about them. If it has poppies and lupins and it's a bright, clear day, you can sell it," says Peter Fairbanks of Montgomery Gallery, one of the few galleries in San Francisco to specialize in the period. (Another is Maxwell Galleries, whose owner, Mark Hoffman, died in July; see page TK.) Fairbanks adds that many Southern California painters

worked as commercial artists for movie studios and lacked the training of their San Francisco counterparts.

While some Northern California dealers report a collecting lull among their high-tech and venture capital clients, most dealers say that the California paintings market as a whole is growing at a healthy pace, and growing beyond the state. They are quick to cite clients on the East Coast and elsewhere. George Stern of West Hollywood says he makes as many as half of his sales to clients outside California, while Terry Trotter, who has a gallery in Carmel, says he's recently placed work in Italy and Ireland.

There are other signs that the market is maturing. "In the first decade of collecting this material, through the 1980s," says Trotter, "everything that had the California look was snapped up. But now, with ongoing publications and exhibitions, there is greater focus on determining the more important painters—those who exhibited nationally and internationally and who were important teachers."

Museum shows are also helping to cultivate interest outside California. Harvey Jones at the Oakland Museum of California organized a Guy Rose retrospective in 1995 that traveled, among other places, to the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, and the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey. And coming next fall, "Masters of Light," organized by the Irvine Museum, begins a European tour of four different venues before ending up in California in early 2004. The Irvine Museum has previously exported California Impressionism shows to Atlanta, Chicago and New York—another sign that the movement is taking root beyond the West Coast.

That is not to say that California boosterism is gone. "This is an all-encompassing movement," claims Gianetto. "It's not a fluke or an anomaly. Asking who likes California Impressionism is like asking who listens to lyric opera in Italy. This is our patrimony!"

CAROL KINO is a regular contributor to *Art & Auction*.

Fall Auctions

23 OCTOBER John Moran Auctioneers: California and American paintings

Need to know: "Traditionally October has been one of our stronger sales," says director Jeffrey Moran, "though I don't anticipate we're going to beat June." The sale takes place at the Pasadena Civic Center.

Highlights: William Wendt's *Oaks and Rocks*, 1928 (est. \$80–90,000); William Alexander Griffith's *William Wendt at Work*, circa 1928 (est. \$40–60,000); Marion Kavanaugh Wachtel's *Arroyo Seco*, circa 1938 (est. \$20–30,000); and Edgar Payne's *At Anchor*, circa 1925 (est. \$20–25,000).

7 NOVEMBER Christie's Los Angeles: California, Western and American paintings, drawings and sculpture

Need to know: This sale is directed by Catherine Leonhard, formerly the California specialist at Butterfields. According to some dealers, estimates in past sales have been aggressive.

Highlights: Joseph Kleitsch's *Park Avenue, Old Laguna*, circa 1928 (est. \$300–500,000); and three works estimated at \$50,000 to \$70,000: Granville Redmond's *Poppies and Eucalyptus Trees*, circa 1915; Joseph Raphael's *Printemps à Uccle*, circa 1912; and John Marshall Gamble's *Spring Afternoon Near Santa Barbara*, circa 1920.

12 DECEMBER Butterfields: American and California paintings, prints and sculpture

Need to know: This sale, organized by longtime American specialist Scot Levitt, takes place in Los Angeles and San Francisco, with auctioneers in both cities and a video simulcast. It will also be broadcast on eBay, which owns Butterfields, to allow Internet participation.

Highlights: Several Wendt oils, including *Autumn Foliage*, circa 1903, *Autumn Aglow* and *Falling Shadows* (est. \$60–80,000 each); Payne's *Mountain Lake in the Sierras* (est. \$30–40,000); and Wachtel's *Sierra Landscape* (est. \$25–30,000).