National Watercolor Society

The First 100 years

This exhibition held at Oceanside Museum in California and curated by Ken Goldman celebrates the 100th anniversary of the NWS.

Since 1850, California has been home to a large number of extremely talented and versatile watercolour artists. The National Watercolor Society (NWS), originally named the California Watercolor Society (CWS), was founded in 1920 by a small group of like-minded artists, many of whom were students at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. Tired of being rejected by the American Watercolor Society for being too colourful and for leaving too much white paper, the group rebelled against the establishment and began exhibiting what became known as the California Style of watercolour painting. This new representational art documented scenes and activities of everyday life on the Pacific Coast, from California’s cities and industrial sites, to its beaches and harbours, and its vast, open landscapes. This approach to watercolour painting generated a great deal of attention from the New York art market to the Walt Disney Studios where artists worked on classic films like Fantasia, Snow White, and Pinocchio.

Today, although the membership of NWS has expanded to include artists throughout the entire USA and abroad, its roots are still firmly planted in Southern California with its own gallery in San Pedro. This exhibition highlights the works of 21 California masters involved with the early CWS, plus 58 selected paintings by current members. Like their predecessors, each of the artists explores aspects of Southern California’s cities, rural cultures, unique lifestyles, or natural beauty from their singular interpretative points of view. The exhibition is curated by Ken Goldman. This is the first of two exhibitions that will celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the NWS. The next exhibition in November 2020 will include all NWS members including 20 early California master paintings from the Hilbert collection. It will be curated by Gordon McClelland and placed in an adjacent area next to about 70 paintings by current NWS members. Past presidents, Gerald Brommer and Ken Goldman will jury the current members of NWS.
The History of the NWS

(Based on California Watercolors 1850-1970 by Gordon T. McConnell & Jay T. Last)

In 1917, America became involved in World War I. Many Californians participated in the war but the West Coast was a long way from Europe and in many ways still isolated from eastern America where the war effort was centred. Most prominent artists were more than fifty years old and not able to serve. For them, this period became a time to organise groups of artists for the purpose of fellowship and art exhibition opportunities. One of the most important art clubs to form in the post World War I era was the California Watercolor Society. Originally it was a very small organisation with only fourteen members. Dana Bartlett was the president and in a Los Angeles Times article stated that the goal of the Society was to set up high quality exhibitions of watercolours to help further the appreciation and understanding of work done in this medium. He also added that there would be no attempt to make it a large organisation. The first annual exhibition of the California Watercolor Society was held in 1921 at the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, which later became the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The first twenty-five annual exhibitions were held there. Throughout the 1920s, the California Watercolor Society grew in membership to just over 100 members. From 1946 through the early 1960s, they often exhibited in Santa Barbara, San Diego and San Francisco, but mostly at the Pasadena Art Museum. From the late 1960s through the 1970s, the society grew larger and because it was becoming a nationally-known society, in 1967 the name was changed to California National Watercolor Society. During this time, Laguna Beach Museum of Art was most often its host gallery with occasional showings at the Otis Art Institute and Palm Springs Desert Museum. In 1975, as membership increased nationally and internationally by the thousands, the board of directors voted to shorten the society’s name to National Watercolor Society (NWS). Throughout the 1980s to mid-2009, the annual shows were held, in alternate years, at the Brea Civic Cultural Center and the Muckenthaler Cultural Center. In 1999, the National Watercolor Society purchased a building at 915 South Pacific Avenue in San Pedro, California and in 2010 established its own gallery where it continues to hold its annual exhibitions along with occasional international exchange exhibitions. This is the society’s centre for offices, gallery, workshops, and a place to house its growing permanent collection.

Ken Goldman

"The idea for this project first came about after I was asked if I could search out venues in California for a group of internationally known artists to have a series of exhibitions in the USA. As president of the NWS 2015 - 2018 with connections to several museums that had previously exhibited my work (the San Diego Museum of Fine Art, Laguna Museum of Fine Art and Oceanside Museum of Art), I pitched the idea to all three. They all liked the idea very much but preferred an exhibition of regional rather than international artists. Not wanting to lose the opportunity completely, I re-adapted the idea to a Southern California exhibition featuring the phenomenal success of NWS, originally founded in 1920 as the California Watercolor Society. Oceanside Museum was the venue I selected."