



Looking Up The Canyon

Date

1916

Primary Maker

William Wendt

Medium

Oil on canvas

Description

This 1916 oil on canvas landscape may depict Holy Jim Canyon, near Santiago and Trabuco Canyons, in Orange County's Santa Ana Mountains. William Wendt was born in 1865 and spent much of his first 15 years apprenticing to be a cabinetmaker. Wendt's 1946 obituary in the LA Times is the only known source for information on his hometown and incorrectly attributes it to Bentzen, a nonexistent town in northern Prussia. Feeling unfulfilled, Wendt emigrated to Chicago in 1880. The only professional training he received in his career began shortly thereafter when he studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. His first job working in Chicago was as a commercial artist where he spent six of the week's seven days indoors mass-producing paintings as part of a human assembly line. On the seventh day he traveled to what little untamed Illinois he could find to paint landscapes. According to historian Don Meadows, Wendt's only art training was 6 months with J. Frank Waldo of Chicago, a "hack" painter per D. Meadows. Wendt told Waldo he had no money to pay a teacher so spent 6 mo. working in Waldo's studio. It was during his time working as a staff artist that he got to know George Gardner Symons who would become a repeat travel companion and another of the most important early Californian painters. Together the duo made their first trip to California in 1894. While it would be easy to say that Wendt fell in love with California at first sight, in truth California's courtship of Wendt was a lengthy process of enamoring him trip by trip. In 1906 Wendt married sculptor Julia Bracken, and the newlyweds settled in Los Angeles with William painting and Julia practicing her craft. As often as Wendt had the chance, he bivouacked through the Southland's golden hills painting and sketching en plein air. When he returned to his studio, he enlarged his sketches on grand canvases. The great transcendentalists had come and gone by the time the William Wendt first arrived in California. The man who would become perhaps the most important Southern California Impressionist painter captured many locales throughout his life, but California's climate and resulting palette met his style handsomely. Living the transcendental lifestyle in this frontier state was Wendt's preferred mode of being, and is a truth which pervades every aspect of his art. Over his tenure in California, Wendt became one of the most prominent advocates for the arts in California. Beginning in 1911 he helped found the California Art Council and served as the President for the next half dozen years. In 1913, Wendt was elected an Associate Member of National Academy of Design, and would gain other honorary titles among the California Art Club, the Society of Western Artists, and more. In 1918, he moved to Laguna Beach and became a pivotal member of the burgeoning art colony there. For his various roles in mentoring new

generations of California painters—a result of Wendt living much longer than many of his plein air contemporaries—he earned himself the title “dean of Southern California painters.” Wendt liked to make long sketching excursions into the country where he could commune with nature and paint on-site. His landscapes, unlike those of the “Eucalyptus School” artists, had sound underlying structure, natural and organic colors, and his compositions were derived from the actual geological formations that he viewed in person rather than composed from imagination in the studio. Unlike some artists whose careers peaked shortly after leaving art school and then declined, he produced stronger and bolder work as he aged. Having grown up in another country entirely and being somewhat late to transcendentalism, there is no way of knowing if Wendt was familiar with its most famous authors, but it was as true for Wendt as it for Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson that nature was a temple he worshipped in, a muse, and an old friend. Though Wendt was by all accounts a kind and humorous man, he was quiet and of few words. He described city life as “soul-destroying” and admitted to regularly suffering from bouts of melancholy. Wendt's landscapes are devoid of any sign of modern life, and instead portray a rural, untouched, idyllically preserved Californian wilderness. This portrayal of California belies the reality of urban growth in the Golden State that Wendt would have begun to witness during his lifetime. This speaks to the rural escapism and nostalgia, in response to increasing industrialization and modernity, common among turn-of-the-century artist's groups with roots in Romanticism, such as Arts and Crafts and Transcendentalist painters.

Dimensions

30 × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm) Framed: 39 1/2 × 49 1/2 × 2 1/2 in. (100.3 × 125.7 × 6.4 cm)