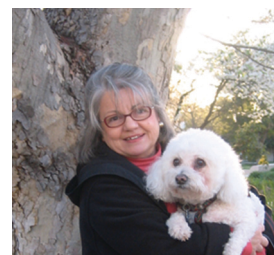




ART AND ABOUT... ...A FERTILE VALLEY



Anca Colbert with Oscar

We take it for granted that Ojai has established a tradition of being home to artists and other creative people, but then one wonders: When and how did Ojai become such an artists' town? Why have so many painters, photographers, sculptors and potters chosen to live in this valley? From the established, professional artists to the accidental (occasional?) craftsmen, what attracts them here? What keeps them here?

Is it the light? The mountains? Is it the draw of an ancient, sacred energy in the valley? Is it the immersion in nature's beauty and abundance? Is it the birds at the lake, the bears in the mountains or the coyotes crossing the fragrant orange orchards and our path? Is it those luminous clouds? The intense starry nights? The open spaces? The silence?

Is it the sense of belonging with other kindred spirits whose lives are also driven by the need to give shape to their world and visual reality? Is it the sweetness of the air one breathes here? Is it the richness of a soil in which almost anything thrives and grows?

There is no doubt that this fertile valley is a rich ground for artistic creativity. One can only muse about the relationship between art and nature. Historically, a long debate...

Is there a kind of music, a palpable resonance to the life and spirit of this valley to which artists respond even more strongly than others? Probably.

"Correspondences" comes to mind. The poem was written in 1857 by Charles Baudelaire, whose writings about art were as visionary and influential as his poetry. It evokes the mysterious power of nature's language:

*La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisent parfois sortir de confuses paroles
Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.*

Translation:

*Nature is a temple where living pillars
Sometimes breathe out mysterious words
Like some long echoes that from afar have merged
Into a deeply dark and profound unity,
As vast as the night and as vast as the light,
So perfumes, colors and sounds speak to each other.*

In 1922, Jiddu Krishnamurti settled in Ojai. He believed, like the Chumash Indians, that the mountains in this valley were sacred. Beatrice

Wood, the celebrated "Mama of Dada," first arrived here as a devotee of Krishnamurti, as did so many other artists, musicians, writers, actors and Hollywood celebrities who came to Ojai in the '30s and '40s to hear him speak under the oak trees. In 1947, Wood built a house and studio across from his on McAndrew Road in the East End. Then Vivika and Otto Heino, also world-renowned potters and ceramic artists, bought that house from their friend Beatrice when she moved up the hill to the Happy Valley School Foundation in the early '70s. Her studio became a cherished destination for art lovers from Los Angeles and beyond.

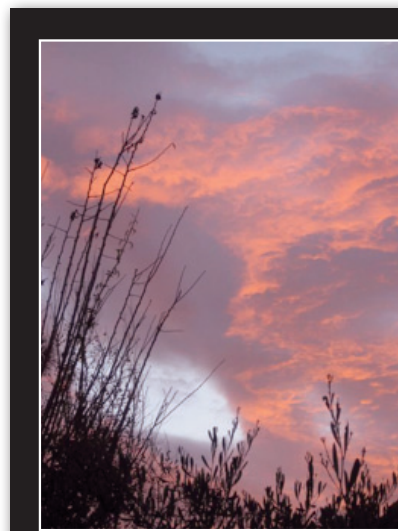
Other artists discovered the area and fell under its spell. By 1984 a few of them formed a group, the Ojai Studio Artists. They open their studios to the public once a year, and their October Tour is now an established tradition and a great visitors draw.

Circling around the powerful connection between creativity and environment, we also recognize that there is an inner necessity to the process, regardless of where one lives. There is an essential joy at the center of the creative fire, and no matter how familiar or even intimate one is with its manifestations, we remain in awe of the powerful process and its mystery. But that's another story.

It's been often remarked that artists have "no choice" about doing what they do. They are a conduit for a greater force that drives them, and allows them to hold that space and the connection with that energy. Matisse said: "Creativity takes courage." How true. Maybe Ojai offers a safe haven for that much-needed courage. Or maybe some just have no choice about where they feel "this is home."

On the subject of determinism and free will, Isaac Bashevis Singer put it best. When asked whether or not he believed in free will, he answered:

"Of course, I have no choice!"



Anca Colbert has a lifelong personal passion for words and images. Anca owned two fine art galleries in Hollywood and organized numerous exhibitions in other cities; she was a publisher and cultural events promoter. In Ojai for 18 years, she works appraising art and consulting with collectors, artists, and international arts and educational organizations.