



By Anca Colbert

'Vista through Sycamores, Ojai Valley,'  
by Edgar A. Payne, circa 1918

# QUEST FOR LIGHT

There are so many talented, passionate landscape painters in Ojai! No wonder. The legendary light quality in this mountain valley has drawn artists to the area for more than a century.

Historically, the relationship between nature and art is an essential one in every culture, one that has endured and evolved over time from meticulous representation to lyrical abstraction. The breathtaking natural beauty of the land surrounding us keeps inspiring artists to capture moments in time and space, to return to favorite sites

## Finding Ojai artists out *en plein air*

through the changing seasons, to explore their emotions in nature, and to re-visit the always shifting “here and now.” The fleeting here and now...

Many are drawn to paint outdoors, immersing themselves in nature and adding the excitement and the challenge of capturing those fleeting moments in a

rather short period of time. Some complete their works within a few hours, while outdoors. That challenge takes special skill and speed. Those are practicing pure plein air painting. Others start them outdoors, but finish them later in their studios, from memory or with the aid of sketches, notes and photographs taken at the time of their field trips.

What exactly is plein air painting? The French expression “en plein air” means “in the open air.” It is not a particular style, as often believed. It simply refers to the act of painting outdoors as opposed to in a studio. The trend of working in natural light started around the mid-19th century, increasing in popularity with the Impressionists around 1870-1880. Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt and others worked outdoors, often under a large, white umbrella helping to diffuse the light over their set-up.

Two practical, technical improvements helped spread the trend: the introduction in 1841 of premixed oil paints sold in squeezable metal tubes, followed by the crafty invention of the self-contained, light-weight easel box with telescopic legs (the “French Box Easel”). Both developments facilitated the portability of a painter’s studio into the outdoors.

The new way of working quickly spread to North America, where it found passionate adepts in Canada and among many East Coast painters (e.g. Winslow Homer, Andrew Wyeth, William Merritt Chase, John Singer Sargent).

In California, plein air artists were active mostly between 1900 and 1930 and are generally referred to as California Impressionists. They grouped in colonies in the north around San Francisco, Carmel and Monterey, and in the south around Laguna Beach, Pasadena and Los Angeles. The Southern California plein air school flourished around Laguna Beach in the 1920s. It inspires disciples and attracts art collectors to this day.

Edgar Payne (1883-1947), one of the most accomplished and influential artists of that movement, moved from the East Coast to California, as many others did at that time. He lived in Santa Barbara for a short while, then mostly in Laguna Beach. His paintings of the region are characterized by the use of “strong tonal contrasts in which intense daylight achieves the effect of glare from surfaces that seem to reflect it,” and a

“I am following Nature without being able to grasp her.”  
– Claude Monet

predilection for sycamores and eucalyptus trees. His luminous view of the Ojai Valley (facing page) was probably painted around 1918. (A word of thanks to Dan Schultz for pointing out this gem, as documented in “The Paynes – Edgar & Elise – American Artists” (1988) by Rena Neumann Coen. It appears the whereabouts of this painting is still

currently unknown.)

**BERT COLLINS**, one of the three founders in 1984 of the Ojai Studio Artists (OSA) group, has been an influential teacher to many local artists, guiding them to develop their skills with a particular sensitivity to landscape painting. In 2005 Christine Golden, one of her studio students, started the TOPA Group, Ojai’s own plein air group: it included Gayel Childress, Richard Rackus and Jim Menzel-Joseph, among many others. The group was active until 2010. Working in oil and pastel, members of the group often favored Ojai Land Conservancy sites for their outings. At that time Steven Curry and Jennifer Moses were also part of



Dan Schultz painting en plein air at Crystal Cove.





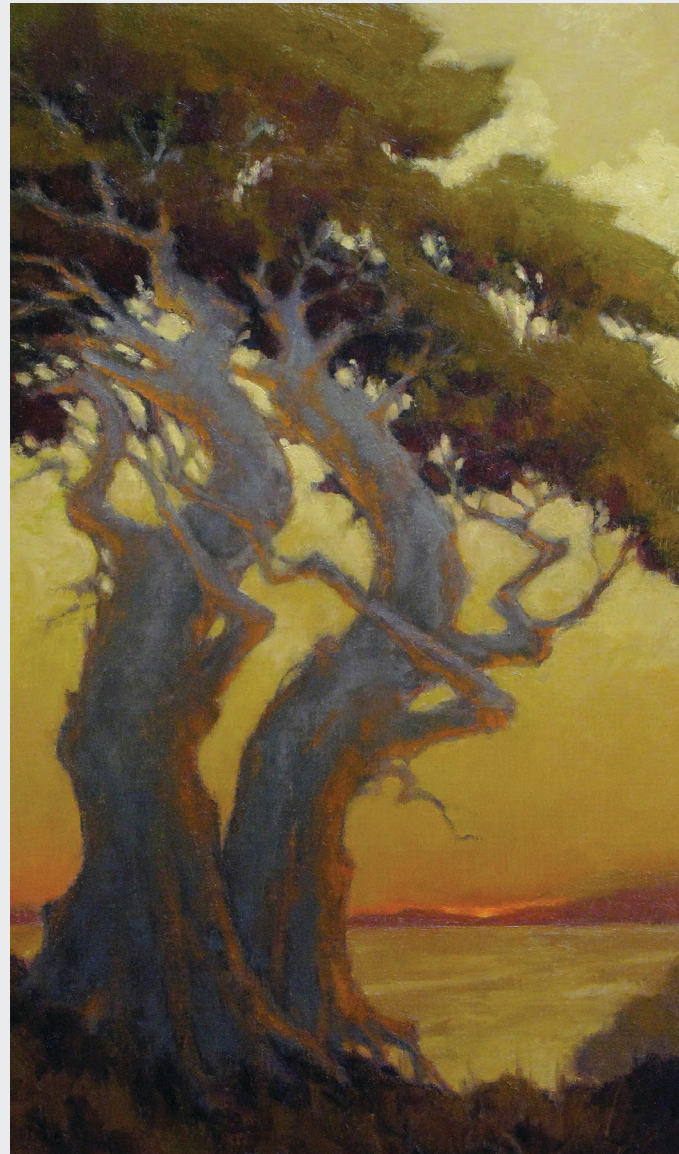
“Ojai Color Study” by Dan Schultz, Oil on Linen, 2011



“Open Fields,” by Steven Curry, 2014, oil on linen.

TOPA. Along with Dan Schultz, a more recent newcomer to the Ojai’s art scene, their approach is characteristic of the color palette and realism of the Early California Impressionists. It so happens that they all share a similar, strong professional background in graphic design and illustration. Each of them left their careers as commercial artists to follow their hearts, and venture on a less traveled road as fine art painters. Dan Schultz, Steven Curry and Jennifer Moses are all members of the prestigious California Art Club, founded in 1909 in Pasadena to honor and promote contemporary-traditional fine art.

**DAN SCHULTZ** was born in Albuquerque. He grew up in Colorado Springs, then attended college in Pensacola, where he earned a B.S. in commercial art. After a career in graphic design, and eager to find a more artistic community in a small town in California, he and his wife discovered Ojai and decided it was going to be home for their family. They moved here in the spring of 2011. Shortly after, Dan opened his studio/gallery space on Signal Street around the corner from the Arcade. An affable young man, he easily engages in conversation about his art, his influences, his



“Let’s Tango” by Steven Curry. Oil on linen.

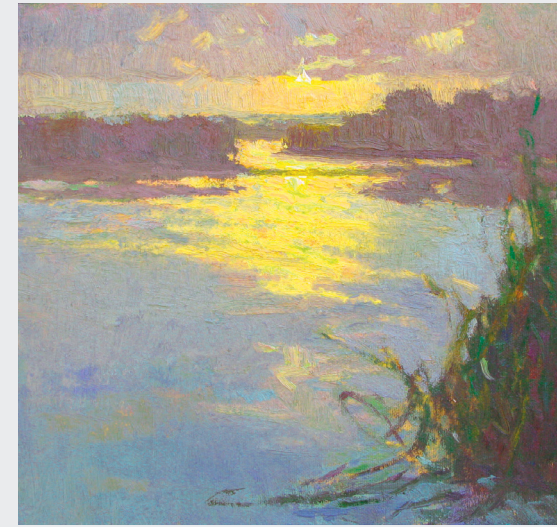
inspiration and his students.

“I regularly talk to people who mistakenly think that plein air painting is a particular style of painting. It’s not so much a style as it is the effects of the weather, changing light and time constraints on the artist,” he wrote in his blog.

Mornings, around 8 a.m., are his favorite time to paint “because of the quality of the atmosphere; if you look towards the sunrise, you get a haze effect. It’s easier to paint as the light is increasing.” For his plein air work he likes small sizes, like 8x10”, “because you can capture the feeling of that day in one sitting.”

Among his favorite artists are William Wendt, Edgar Payne, Sargent, and Joaquin Sorolla. The recipient of numerous awards, Dan brings solid composition and color subtlety to his work. He is also a devoted teacher who takes his classes out into the open air at the Ojai Meadows Preserve and on Shelf Road.

**STEVEN CURRY’S** favorite time to paint is the end of the day “when the shadows are long, when the limbs light up, when the sycamores are whiter.” He too has been deeply touched and inspired by Ojai’s nature, particularly the Ojai Meadows and Cañada



“Suspended Dawn Study,” Jennifer Moses, 2014, oil on canvas panel.

Larga. An avid traveler, he has also painted the sea, the rivers and the mountains of Northern California (Petaluma, Sonoma, Carmel, Point Lobos) and snow scenes in Colorado and Wyoming. A modern-day Tonalist, Steve brings a strong energy to his works, often creating a moody, mysterious atmosphere by the use of dark, contrasted shadows against misty, luminous backgrounds. In “Let’s Tango,” painted in Carmel, he was drawn to capture “the coastal Cypress trees shaped by time and wind... the last light of the day illuminating the trunks.” There is a high emotional charge here, made visible by his use of a fractured light effect that engages the viewer’s eyes to keep moving within his carefully constructed composition.

Steve was born into a family of artists in Northern California. From an early age he was encouraged to explore his love of drawing and painting. After earning a degree in Visual Communication, he moved to Los Angeles and worked as a graphic designer. The owner of a thriving graphic design agency in Santa Monica for 15 years, in 2002 he retired to Ojai to pursue his passion for painting, which once settled here, he embraced full time. He prefers smaller sizes for his plein air works; he often finishes larger works in the studio. Meticulously attentive to his oils and all other materials, he makes his own panels by using a fine Belgian linen, which he stretches and mounts himself on masonite. The frames “must have soul” to be part of the work’s authenticity, so he searches for vintage ones (gold leaf, closed corners) from the 20s and 30s to complement his paintings. His works can be seen at the Tartaglia Gallery in Ojai,

The Waterhouse Gallery in Santa Barbara, also in Cambria and Santa Fe.

Steve admires the works of Edgar Payne, Guy Rose, Percy Grey, and also Arthur Mathews, one of the founders of the American Arts and Crafts Movement who was a major influence on the development of California art in early 20th century.

**JENNIFER MOSES** has also been inspired by Arthur Mathews’ aesthetics and his belief in the “symbiotic relationship” between the frame and the work of art. She works with an artistic framer, who creates historically appropriate and exquisitely crafted frames showcasing her idea of each individual painting. The frame itself then becomes a work of art, complementing and echoing the painting. Jennifer has been showing her work at the Primavera Gallery in the Arcade for many years. Her recent exhibition “Lit from Within” clearly confirmed her emergence as a significant painter in the tradition of the French and Early California Impressionists. It also demonstrated her interest and foray into a more contemporary approach, with larger paintings edging their way towards abstraction. Nowadays she prefers the term “observation based painting” to plein air. Her larger oil paintings are not easy to complete outdoors, so she takes her inspiration from the outdoors, along with numerous notes, then “lets the ideas percolate over time and get incorporated into the painting.” She layers her work, takes a long time, carefully ponders nuances; sometimes she feels more like she’s sculpting than painting.

After getting a degree in art education in Richmond, Virginia, she moved to

“The transformation of nature in art is rendering the natural phenomenon transparent to transcendence.”  
— Joseph Campbell

New York.. She left New York and moved to Ojai in 1994 and experimented with various aspects of design, ceramics and photography. As a painter she was self-taught, until studying with David Gallup at the California Art Club (CAC) in Pasadena. His mentorship played a significant role in her development. But she warns, “you have to be careful not to become a clone of your favorite artists.” A painter whose art combines subtlety and strength, “the very dense and the barely there”, Jennifer Moses is the recipient of numerous awards and the focus of attention for serious collectors.

“It is the essence of a place that is at the core of all my work. From nature I extract a unique quality such as atmosphere or light to set the mood for my paintings. I may walk around or sit for a period of time until that quality reveals itself and only then do I begin to paint. I often find that I am drawn to the intimate aspects of a landscape, a moment in time or a specific feeling that unfolds when I’m quiet.”

The vibrational quality of light, its pulsations, keep endlessly renewing what we see and what these three Ojai artists are moved to bring to life on canvas. Finely attuned to nature’s moods and light shifts, as well as to their own feelings and reactions, they reveal and interpret those subtle changes in colorful, light-filled paintings. The immersion in real nature allows for a visual, sensory, emotional and spiritual experience that transcends the physical world. Through their powerful fascination with the “here and now” some artists are able to merge with that short space in time, which in turn becomes a visible conduit for all who look and see. ☺