

Coast to Cascades: C. C. McKim's Impressionist Vision

Though C. C. McKim (1862-1939) moved to the Pacific Northwest late in life, his impact on the regional art scene was transformative. He arrived in Portland, in late 1910. Enthralled by the Oregon landscape, he was inspired to create evocative images of the coast, mountains, rivers, meadows, and forests that capture the area's unique beauty and character. Almost overnight, he rose to prominence due to the quality of his artwork, his roles as mentor and teacher, and his writings about art.

McKim was a savvy self-promoter, exhibiting his work extensively, thereby insuring the attention of art press and collectors. Beyond his own work, McKim helped launch and run three art organizations in Portland. He was highly sought after by other artists to offer critiques and lead sketching trips. Further, his well-timed arrival was a critical factor in the Oregon art community's embrace of impressionism in the early decades of the 20th century. McKim became impressionism's most ardent proponent, in great part making it the preferred mode of expression among Portland's top artists.

This exhibition is part of the Northwest Perspective series at Tacoma Art Museum, highlighting the careers of significant Northwest artists and contributing original research on Northwest art history. McKim, a key figure in Oregon's art history and in the broader story of impressionism in the Pacific Northwest, is long overdue for reconsideration and appreciation.

Exhibition organized by Tacoma Art Museum and curated by Mark Humpal and Margaret Bullock.

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C. C. McKim and Impressionism in Oregon

Impressionism was introduced to the Northwest through artists, collectors, and exhibitions as early as the 1880s. In later decades, C. C. McKim's mastery and active advocacy were critical factors in popularizing the style in Oregon.

One early Portland proponent was Charles Erskine Scott Wood (1852-1944), a lawyer, writer, and collector who promoted the work of American impressionists J. Alden Weir (1852-1919) and Childe Hassam (1859-1935). Frank Vincent DuMond (1865-1951), also an impressionist painter, came to Portland often to teach and lecture and organized two massive art exhibitions for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition. Included were many works by well-known European and American impressionists including several Northwest artists.

Regional schools and universities also played a role in the spread of impressionism, notably Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. The art department, established in 1880, trained a number of well-known Oregon impressionist painters. The Portland Art Museum School, led by modern art advocates curator Anna B. Crocker (1868-1961) and painter Harry Wentz (1875-1965), encouraged artists to use avant-garde styles including impressionism.

McKim's move to Oregon and enthusiastic embrace of this new mode of painting added key momentum to impressionism's rising popularity in the region. Under his influence, it rapidly became the predominant style of work produced in Oregon in the 1910s and 1920s.

C. C. McKim's Evolving Style

Though C. C. McKim rarely dated his paintings, there are enough dated works or images that are clearly attributable to a particular period to track changes in his techniques and compositions across his career.

Only a handful of McKim's early landscapes, painted in Maine in the late 1890s or early 1900s, are currently known. These paintings reflect the muted, earthy palette used by his teacher Charles Lewis Fox (1854-1927).

His first impressionist works began to appear around 1909. They were painted in lighter, brighter colors applied in an overall pattern of short strokes and dabs. By 1911, McKim had begun to vary his painting techniques within a work to achieve different effects. These images combine passages of smooth, blended color with thickly painted detail laid on with both brush and palette knife.

During the 1910s, McKim steadily increased his mastery of color variations through both bold and subtle modulations. He regularly left areas unpainted using the color of the canvas to suggest sand or sky. Increasingly, his landscape vistas appear to extend further and further back into space creating far-reaching views.

By the early 1920s, McKim had tightly honed his skills to create complex compositions and use varied amounts of paint for emphasis. By the end of the decade and into the 1930s, he favored broad vistas with detailed foregrounds beyond which detail dissolves into a soft haze of muted light and cool colors.

C. C. McKim: A Brief Biography

Charles C. McKim was born in 1862 in South Bristol, Maine. He worked as a clerk and grocer in Portland, Maine before deciding to pursue a career as a professional artist. His training included lessons from a local painter, Charles Lewis Fox(1854-1927), and membership in an outdoor sketching group called the Brushians where he was exposed to a variety of artistic styles.

McKim relocated to Portland, Oregon in late 1910. The first exhibition of his work there in 1911 established his reputation as an artist of note. He continued to pursue an active exhibition schedule through the 1910s and 1920s while playing a key part in the local art community. He helped found several art organizations including the Society of Oregon Artists (1912) and the Portland Palette Club (1916), and served as a teacher and mentor. In the early 1920s he began writing about art topics for the weekly magazine, the *Spectator*.

From 1929 to 1931, McKim traveled to parts of the Southwest and southern California. Back in Oregon, in 1934 he painted a series of works for the government's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The later 1930s saw a decline in both his artistic production and his health. McKim died in 1939 at the age of 76.

Chat Panels

[chat 1: with Haystack Rock pair, PPS and Wilder]

Revisiting certain sites or subjects under different light and weather conditions, like Claude Monet (1840-1926) and his water lily series, is a hallmark of impressionism. Artists study how environmental variations alter perception of a familiar motif and change the mood of a painting. Though McKim created multiple images of a number of locations throughout his years in Oregon, he particularly favored the Oregon Coast and Columbia River Gorge.

Haystack Rock, a basalt formation in Cannon Beach, Oregon was the subject of a number of McKim's works, painted at sunset and sunrise and in storm and calm. Though he used the same approximate vantage point in both of these paintings, the varied distances and atmospheric conditions resulted in two very different images. A third variation is also on view in this exhibition.

[chat 2: marine images, Homer, with some pair or cluster of seascapes]

McKim made a specialty of seascapes, painting rocky shores and crashing waves, clearly fascinated by the power and drama of this setting. While most American impressionist painters preferred placid scenes of holidaymakers on the beach, McKim's images were instead reminiscent of the paintings of Winslow Homer (1836-1910), Maine's most celebrated artist and the acknowledged master of the marine image.

Throughout his career, McKim mentioned personal ties to Homer. Over the years what was first described as a momentary encounter gradually became a personal artistic exchange. Others embellished this account further, claiming McKim was one of Homer's students.

Clearly, McKim wanted to affirm some kind of artistic kinship with Homer and his signature subject, the sea. In Oregon, McKim found a similar coastal setting and distinguished himself as the Northwest's premier marine painter.

Individual object labels, some with extended texts

Untitled (Landscape with mill and waterfall), circa 1900

Oil on canvas

Collection of John and Annick Impert

This is one of McKim's earlier works in oil. It is reminiscent of images by the French Barbizon School artists, who, in the mid-19th century, popularized moody landscapes painted with subtle color variations.

McKim's use of this style most likely reflects the influence of his teacher, Charles Lewis Fox (1854-1927), whose earlier works it resembles. Soon after this was painted, McKim and Fox both began experimenting with the bright, unblended colors and loose brushwork of impressionism.

The Pines, Willimantic CT, 1903

Watercolor on paper

The Miranda Collection

When McKim first began painting, he joined an outdoor sketching group that ventured into the countryside around Portland, Maine to draw and paint. All members of the group had nicknames; McKim was called "The Watercolorist".

Though he went on to work primarily in oil, McKim's early watercolors reveal his skill with the medium. Here he works in a limited palette of colors creating a variety of effects, from detailed to atmospheric. McKim also hand colored images for a local photographer, a job that would have further honed his skills with watercolor.

Untitled, circa 1905

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Matt and Judy Wilder

Springtime, 1909

Oil on canvas board

Mark Ross Gearhart Collection

A Frozen Brook, circa 1910

Oil on canvas board

Collection of Matt and Judy Wilder

Untitled (Sunset through pines), circa 1910

Oil on canvas board

Mark Ross Gearhart Collection

(four on a single label) All works:

Untitled, circa 1910
Oil on canvas board
J. Franklin Fine Art

This group of landscape studies suggesting different seasons of the year were painted while McKim was still in Maine. They are early examples of his impressionist style using bright, clear colors applied in short strokes and dabs. He used the impasto technique of thickly applying paint to add texture and enhance the play of light across the painting's surface. The dense network of marks that almost obscures parts of the image is another characteristic of McKim's early work. He later learned to use this kind of brushwork more sparingly to emphasize particular elements of a painting rather than overall.

Eagle Cove, Cape Elizabeth, 1911
Oil on canvas
Collection of John and Annick Impert

The Pond, 1911
Oil on canvas
Collection of Mark Humpal and Diane Zuhl

Untitled, circa 1911
Oil on canvas
Collection of Ron Werner and Scott McCoy

Untitled, 1911
Oil on canvas
Collection of Matt and Judy Wilder

Salmon River Bay, 1911
Oil on canvas
Collection of Dr. Mark and Angela Reploeg

Untitled (Portland waterfront), 1912
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Arlington Club

Untitled, 1913
Oil on canvas
Collection of Ron Werner and Scott McCoy

Kelley Point, circa 1915
Oil on canvas
The Miranda Collection

Mt. Hood from a Marsh, circa 1915

Oil on canvas

The Miranda Collection

This strikingly beautiful painting is considered one of McKim's masterworks. Painted around 1915, the carefully structured image exhibits the increasing compositional abilities McKim developed during his first decade in Oregon. Though more thinly painted, he added texture to the clouds and mountain to counterbalance the more detailed marsh in the foreground. The woods across the middle, modeled in rich blues and touches of pink and purple, provide a transition from the darker colors in the foreground to the lighter blues and whites of mountain and sky.

Winslow B. Ayer House, circa 1915

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Dingman Family

This city scene, focused on a structure and with recognizable figures, is unusual for McKim. He rarely included figures, and when present they were often minimally indicated with just a few quick lines. Buildings are more common but often screened by or buried in vegetation. The Portland waterfront scene, also in this exhibition, is another of McKim's rare urban images.

Untitled (Cabin in the woods), circa 1915

Oil on board

Mark Ross Gearhart Collection

Untitled (Haystack Rock), circa 1915-1920

Oil on canvas

Collection of Portland Public Schools, Portland, Oregon

Untitled, circa 1918

Oil on canvas

J. Franklin Fine Art

Untitled (Crown Point), circa 1918

Oil on canvas mounted to board

Collection of Jeff and Esther Clark

The Rocks, Ore. Coast, 1920

Oil on paperboard mounted to canvas

Collection of Coburn L. Grabenhorst, Jr.

The unusual surface texture in this work is the result of both paint application and the inherent quality of the paperboard McKim used. Small irregularly-sized granules of grit are embedded in the surface that he then painted over. The

uneven texture bounces and fragments light adding shimmer to this image of waves breaking against the rocks and suggesting the spray of water droplets in the air around them.

Untitled (Haystack Rock), circa 1920

Oil on canvas board

Collection of Matt and Judy Wilder

Sauvie Island, circa 1920

Oil on canvas board

Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Museum Purchase: Funds provided by Northwest Art Purchase Fund and Northwest Art Council, 2012.153.1

Untitled (Across the Columbia with St. Peter's Dome), circa 1920

Oil on canvas

Collection of Mark Humpal and Diane Zuhl

Multnomah Falls, circa 1920

Oil on canvas board

The Miranda Collection

Untitled (Columbia Gorge with Yeon Mountain, St. Peter's Dome, and Horsetail Falls), circa 1920

Oil on canvas

Collection of Dinah Adkins and Tom Towslee

Mount Hood from Bull Run Lake, 1921

Oil on canvas

Collection of Pam and Charles Muehleck

Oregon's majestic Mt. Hood is one of the most painted landscape motifs in the state. McKim, however, avoided creating detailed views of it for many years after moving to Oregon, noting in an interview "It is so big and incomprehensible, and it has been done so many times." Though it appears as a hazy form on the horizon in some earlier works it was not until the early 1920s that McKim finally made paintings centered on the famous mountain.

Low Tide, Ya[c]hats, Ore., 1921

Oil on canvas

Collection of Elaine Bernat and Roger Saydack

This work is a masterful example of McKim's mature impressionist style. In contrast to his earlier works which were thickly painted throughout, this painting demonstrates how he learned to adjust the amount of paint applied to emphasize particular elements. The shimmering surface of the pool and its reflection of the sunset sky demonstrate his expert abilities with color.

Untitled (Columbia Gorge), circa 1920s
Oil on paperboard mounted to canvas
Mark Ross Gearhart Collection

Coastal, circa 1920s
Oil on paperboard
Collection of Elaine Bernat and Roger Saydack

Patton Creek, 1924
Oil on canvas
Collection of Jeff and Esther Clark

Untitled (Haystack Rock, sunset), circa 1925
Oil on canvas board
Mark Ross Gearhart Collection

Untitled, circa 1925
Oil on canvas board
Collection of Matt and Judy Wilder

Untitled, circa 1925
Oil on canvas board
Collection of Matt and Judy Wilder

Columbia River, circa late 1920s
Oil on canvas
Oregon State University Memorial Union

The composition of this work is characteristic of McKim's late paintings. By the late 1920s he favored broad, deep vistas with detail gradually diminishing from the foreground toward a horizon seen through a haze of light.

This painting is one a group of five belonging to Oregon State University, all images of the Oregon Coast or Columbia River Gorge. The University acquired them from McKim for their growing campus art collection celebrating Oregon artists and subjects. Four of the five are on view in this exhibition.

Foggy Day, Yachats, circa late 1920s
Oil on canvas mounted to board
Oregon State University Memorial Union

Up the Columbia, circa late 1920s
Oil on canvas
Oregon State University Memorial Union

Sand Dunes, circa late 1920s

Oil on canvas

Oregon State University Memorial Union

South Shore of Columbia (from Washington side), 1934

Oil on canvas

Benton County Historical Society, Horner Collection

During the nationwide economic depression in the 1930s, the U.S. government designed programs to create jobs for people in all walks of life, including artists. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was the first to employ fine artists between 1933 and 1934, both commissioning and buying existing work. McKim submitted a number of landscape paintings to the Oregon PWAP that were sent off to government institutions across the U.S. This painting was later returned to Oregon.