'Into the Desert Light: Early El Paso Art 1850-1960' Exhibit Catalog

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INTO THE DESERT LIGHT
EARLY EL PASO ART 1850–1960

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Into the Desert Light: Early El Paso Art 1850–1960
Curated by Christian J. Gerstheimer

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Front cover: Audley Dean Nicols, Untitled, Oil on canvas, Susan H. & Claude C. Albritton Collection
Frontispiece: Lewis Teel, Cloud Shadows, Oil on canvas, Geralyn & Mark Kever Collection
Back cover: Hari Kidd, Juárez Plaza (c. 1940s), Watercolor on paper, Cita Schuster Collection

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A search for the great frontier, dreams of carving out a place for family and future, solitude, and visions of lands long since quieted by time and place…these are the motivating forces of the great migration to the pass from the south of Mexico to the north and from the eastern United States to the west. It continues to shape El Paso even today. Nestled along the southern tip of the great Rocky Mountains, long since sculpted and shaped by the Rio Grande River through the high mesas of the desert southwest, this city, rich in culture and historical significance is still quietly silhouetted against a backdrop of fertile valleys and soaring mountains of five thousand shades of brown outlined by a piercing blue sky. It is a stroll into the desert light.

But those who have been blessed with the experience of our majestic landscapes, magenta and auburn morning lights, dusks of copper yellow and brilliant orange, or the deep cobalt nights, know that it is the magic created by nature that draws our population. It brings with it hope that fills the soul. These are the motivating forces of the founding artists of El Paso. They brought culture, they captured what our minds could only imagine, and they gave to us that sense of home, a place in time.

Into the Desert Light, a visual dialogue in art of the creative forces that arrest our routines and remind us of the true purpose of our efforts, tells the story of sixty artists who became messengers of the past and scribes of what our future was to hold. Influenced by the isolation of location and our inclusion in the American dream, the artists of early El Paso have demonstrated that we are never too far away from our neighbors but never so close to be assimilated.

Inspired by the Enlightenment’s equation of nature and religion, the Romanticism of national expansion and patrimony, and the Realism of painting that which is meaningful to the individual rather than the state, El Paso’s early artists reflect the trends and motivations of their nineteenth century counterparts in Santa Fe and Taos, the hill country of San Antonio, the mid-Atlantic and upstate New York. While focusing on the landscapes and community that nourished them, they documented the significance of regional histories and stories, the social turmoil and challenges of war, the oddities of life, and the normalcy of home. They painted and sculpted with fidelity to nature, with clarity of progress, with accuracy of form, with nostalgia of location.