

# Museum

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"I really liked the campus," Hilbert recalled. He had no idea then, however, that the guided tour would eventually lead to the fulfillment of a dream he shared with his wife, **Janet**: the establishment of a public museum to display their extensive collection of California Scene art.

The Hilberts have made their fortune through Hilbert Properties, a private Newport Beach-based real estate management company he founded in 1987. He was a longtime collector of Native American blankets, antique radios, and even Packard automobiles when he and Janet discovered California Scene art upon finding a painting in a consignment store nearly 25 years ago.

The painting spoke to them, he said. "California Scene art is a kind of time capsule."

## Scenes of Inspiration

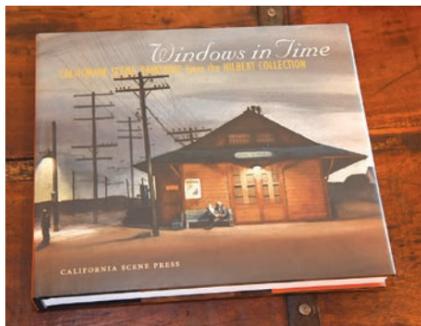
The term 'California Scene art' describes works that capture life in California, from epic landscapes to narratives of everyday life. The genre's heyday was in the 1930s, when artists such as **Millard Sheets**, **Rex Brand**—who designed the seal for the city of Newport Beach—**Phil Dike**, **James Patrick** and **Phil Paradise** used their canvases to document California culture during and in the aftermath of the Great Depression.

There has been a resurgence of collectors' interest in the genre in the last two decades.

The collection he and his wife have amassed is composed primarily of artworks from 1930 to 1970, with an emphasis on scenes from California's beaches, vistas, urban and rural communities, and the people who called them home.

"Each painting is rich with history," said Hilbert. "There are all these little places around Southern California that have disappeared ... California Scene art brings them back to life."

The Hilberts began acquiring California Scene art in the early 1990s and for many years loaned paintings from their collection to



"San Dimas Train Station": painting by Millard Sheets, pictured here on book cover, will be iconic image for Hilbert Museum of California Art

museums, including the **Bowers Museum**, the **Laguna Art Museum**, the **Irvine Museum** and the **Long Beach Museum of Art**.

"We realized that offering these works for people to see them full time would be the best thing in the world, rather than just in occasional exhibits or hanging on our walls at home," Hilbert said. "We decided to open up a museum to the public."

The couple considered the possibility of a stand-alone museum, Hilbert said.

"I've been on the board of many museums over the years, and I realized that a stand-alone museum presented many challenges. Perhaps partnering with an existing institution was a better option."

## "Call Me"

Hilbert said he was hit with inspiration within a few days of his visit to Chapman. "What about Chapman for our museum?" he recalled saying to Janet. "'Do they have an art museum?' I looked online—they didn't. I was very excited. Right away I called the vice chancellor's office. I left a message for [Executive Vice President for University Advancement, Marketing and Communications] **Sheryl Bourgeois** that went something like this: 'Every great university needs an art museum. So call me!'"

The Hilberts at the time were the sponsors of a painting exhibit at the **Pasadena Museum of California Art** titled "California Scene Paintings from 1930 to 1960" that fea-

tured 75 oil paintings, watercolors, drawings and prints from their collection. Chapman President **Jim Doti** went to the exhibit and came away impressed.

"He loved the whole idea of the museum," Hilbert said.

The Hilberts soon gave Chapman \$7 million worth of art along with an additional \$3 million to go toward establishing the museum. They credit Doti and Bourgeois with making the Hilbert Museum of California Art a reality.

"Chapman did what they said they would do," said Janet Hilbert, a retired **Santa Ana College** business professor. "They provided this beautiful museum."

## Open House

The Hilbert Museum of California Art is slated to hold a public open house on Feb. 26 and 27. The 7,500-square-foot building will house the initial gift of 247 paintings, as well as rotating exhibitions from the Hilbert's entire collection, which numbers approximately 1,000 pieces. Eventually, Hilbert says, the museum will receive the bulk of the collection.

Original plans called for the museum to be part of a mixed-use facility that included a 400-bed dormitory for Chapman University students at the site of the former Villa Park Orchards Association Packinghouse, a Chapman-owned building adjacent to its campus.

Neighbors objected to the dorm, fearing overcrowding and potentially "rowdy" students, Hilbert said.

Chapman officials, not wanting to delay the opening of the museum while they worked with neighbors to find a solution to the dorm situation, soon identified a potential location for the museum near campus at 167 N. Atchison St.

The suggestion won over a key constituent immediately.

"It's so beautiful," said Janet Hilbert. "This is the perfect building!"

## Vision

Hilbert said that the vision for the museum is to show visitors a positive idea of everyday

life in California. One such painting is "After Class—Campo" by Rex Brand, who used watercolors to depict high school-age kids playing baseball in a vacant lot while their friends lean against '40s-era cars to watch.

"It has so much energy, so much life," said Hilbert. "This is a slice of life from a bygone era."

Among the Hilberts' proudest contributions to the museum is a 1933 watercolor by Millard Sheets called "San Dimas Train Station," which shows a lone man sitting on a bench in the dark as he waits for the coming train. This, Hilbert said, will be the Hilbert Museum of California Art's iconic image.

"San Dimas Train Station' has a powerful impact on people," Hilbert said. "Perhaps the man is waiting for the train to take him to work. You can make up your own narrative."

Hilbert said that he and Janet want to create a museum that everyone can connect with on some level.

"When people look at one of these pieces, we hope they will see something of value to them—something that has personal meaning," Hilbert said.

## Connection

The Hilberts have developed an eye for choosing valuable artwork over the past 25 years.

The point, for them, has been acquiring art, with an eye on building a collection rather than works that would grow in monetary value.

"We collect this type of art because we connect with it," Hilbert explained. "There are three main questions we consider: Is it beautiful?, How is the composition laid out?, and What is the narrative?"

Visitors to the Hilbert Museum of California Art will be able to answer those questions for themselves. The Hilberts have been very deliberate about selecting the artwork for the museum.

"We went through our entire collection," he said. "We selected the very best ones, the ones that mean the most to us—because those are the ones we want the public to see, experience and enjoy." ■

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