

The Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné Project

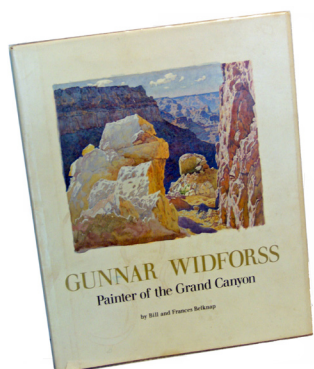
2022

Update on the Catalogue Raisonné

The Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné was published in the fall of 2020. During the past two years I have added thirty-two new records for previously unknown paintings (some that you'll see on the following pages) and have updated the records for numerous other works as my research has continued to yield fascinating information and stories about Gunnar's life and art. This is the beauty of the online catalogue raisonné, new records and updates are easily made. Additionally, in the past two years, more than six hundred people have registered to use the catalogue. I am excited and humbled by the great interest that Gunnar is receiving. More on that later. I know that Gunnar would be amazed and thankful for the great interest in his work.

As this is the season of giving – If you enjoy using the catalogue please consider making a donation to help support this project. [You can visit this Go Fund Me campaign and easily make a donation.](#) Donations of any amount are gratefully acknowledged and will directly support ongoing research, updates to the Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné, and publication of the monograph. With your support, Gunnar's legacy will continue to grow.

This year, I have a few gifts for patrons! The first two people who donate \$500, or more, will receive a copy of the 1969 book by Bill and Francis Belknap, *Gunnar Widforss: Painter of the Grand Canyon*. Both copies are in excellent condition. The third patron donating \$500, or more, will receive an archivally printed and matted giclée print of *Mojave Point, Grand Canyon*, 27 1/2 x 18 in. (69.9 x 45.7 cm), catalogue number 134.



Gunnar Widforss in the Media

This fall, Catherine and I took a three-month road trip up through the northeast and down to Virginia. I wrote this newsletter while on the road. We made a stop in Chicago on August 25th where I gave a talk on Gunnar for the Swedish-American Museum. Angelica Farzaneh-Far and the staff there made us feel at home and we enjoyed seeing the exhibits in the museum. A few weeks later, while visiting the greater Boston area, I gave a talk for the Swedish-American Cultural Center in Newton. Director Kerry Lavin welcomed us in their beautiful Nordic Hall.

There are two articles on Gunnar coming out soon in prominent magazines! The first, [Perspective: The Wilderness in Watercolor by Gussie Fauntleroy, is in the October-November issue of Western Art and Architecture](#). Then, in January, *Arizona Highways* will have an article on Gunnar written by Matt Jaffe.

If you belong to a VASA lodge and would be interested in having me come and give a talk to your members about Gunnar, please contact me. I would love to come and visit you.

For regular updates, stories and photos, follow the [Gunnar Widforss Facebook page](#).

Exciting New Catalogue Entries!

Earlier this year I learned of several new and very exciting paintings of Gunnar's that I hadn't seen before. One was of Grand Canyon, painted near the Colorado River and Phantom Ranch, [#420 in the catalogue](#).

Another was of the coast near Menton France, painted in 1913, [#569 in the catalogue](#). This painting currently resides in New Zealand and is



for sale, if you may be interested in it! And then, three were done on Catalina Island. The Catalina paintings were especially exciting to see because previously I only had a couple of examples from there. They are really great paintings! You can see them on the following pages.



Gunnar in Los Angeles and Catalina Island, 1921

What follows is an excerpt from the third chapter of the manuscript for my monograph on Gunnar Widforss. At this point in his life, January 1921, Gunnar Widforss was setting out on an adventure that would change his life. After planning for much of 1920, he was on his way to Japan to paint and study Japanese art firsthand. He left Gothenburg on December 15th, 1920, for the United States as his first destination.

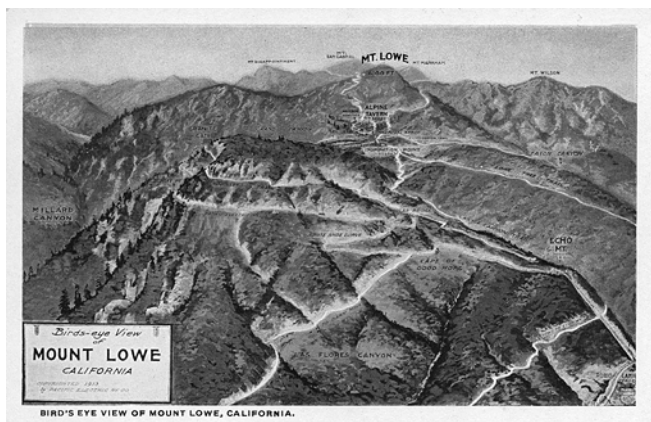
On January 4th, 1921, Gunnar Widforss arrived in New York City after a seventeen-day Atlantic Crossing aboard the Cunard Line's *Saxonia*. In a letter to his close friend Carl Häggart, he commented that he felt "strangely dried out." The United States prohibition against alcohol included steamships that were registered in the United States and thereby extensions of US territory. After spending a few days sightseeing and visiting friends in New York he was on to Chicago. There he wrote that, "It's been two or three years since I have felt so peppy. Maybe it's the 'dry.' It almost seems so."¹

It seems that Widforss enjoyed drinking, perhaps to the extent that he was alcoholic. If so, he was a very high-functioning alcoholic with respect to his ability to work at such a prodigious rate and manage his business as well as he did. His close friends confirmed this after his passing. Tom Moore, the manager at Phantom Ranch in Grand Canyon in the 1920s, and known to be a boot-legger, recounted to Bill and Francis Belknap (authors of *Gunnar Widforss: Painter of the Grand Canyon*, 1969) that, "Gunnar had to have a quart of whiskey every day."² While this seems to be a bit extreme, Widforss' close friend George Collins also told the Belknaps that, "Gunnar loved booze and cigarettes."³

After his transcontinental train journey, Widforss arrived in Los Angeles on January 7th. After several days of sightseeing, having depleted his travel funds and not painted in three months since Denmark, he sought suitable subjects and locations to return to work. He found exactly what he was sought at Mount Lowe, on the southern range of the San Gabriel Mountains, just north of Pasadena. In fact, Mount Lowe would have felt very familiar and similar to what he had found at Mont Salève Switzerland in 1904.



Gunnar Widforss at the Echo Mountain funicular railroad, Mount Lowe, January, 1921. Souvenir photograph from the artist's scrapbook.



Pictorial map of Mount Lowe, courtesy the Mount Lowe Preservation Society. ([GWCR 6183](#))

Mount Lowe offered an easy weekend getaway for local residents in the same manner that Mont Salève did for the residents of Geneva. It also was a destination for secretive romantic rendezvous for the fashionable Hollywood set. The first railway to climb the slopes of Mount Lowe opened in 1893 and over time was expanded to include a funicular section that connected the so-called Mountain Division that ran from Altadena to Echo Mountain, a subsidiary peak, with the Alpine division that continued higher with its terminus at Crystal Spring and the Swiss chalet styled, Ye Alpine Tavern, that offered refreshments and twelve rooms. Mount Lowe had everything that





Los Angeles and Catalina Island, 1921

Widforss needed, a comfortable place to stay and a ready clientele for his work. He reported to Häggart that he was, “painting a lot,” and the views reminded him of the coastal mountains of the Côte d’Azur, which he was intimately familiar with from his years spent there.⁴

View from Mount Lowe would have been among the very first paintings Widforss made upon his return to the United States. It was painted a short distance from Ye Alpine Tavern and is a view to the west of La Cañada, the Verdugo Mountains, and to the Santa Monica Mountains on the skyline. The coastal mountains and valleys are reminiscent of the Alpes-Maritimes in



View from Mt. Lowe, 1921, Watercolor, 13 x 17 1/8 in. (33 x 43.5 cm) ([GWCR 155](#))

southern France where Widforss spent his formative years. Most of the paintings that he made at Mount Lowe would most likely have been sold to tourists visiting the sites there.

After working at Mount Lowe for two weeks, Widforss departed for a potentially more lucrative destination, Catalina Island. Like Mount Lowe, Catalina was a popular destination for wealthy celebrities and weekend tourists from Southern California with ferries and luxury liners, such as William Wrigley Jr.’s SS *Catalina* (known as the Great White Steamer) providing passage from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Wrigley had made his fortune in the confectionary and chewing gum market. At one point, he owned a controlling interest in the whole island and he did

much to develop it as a desirable destination, financing infrastructure and attractions for tourists, such as a fine hotel and the famous casino. He developed local mineral resources, and facilitated the extensive planting of trees and shrubs in developed areas.

Widforss spent nearly a month in the idyllic location that had to remind him of the Côte d’Azur. He made some outstanding paintings but financial success eluded him. Wrigley himself bought three paintings. However, efforts to sell paintings to his advertising department led nowhere. Widforss offered six paintings to the advertising manager for \$50 each,



Pebbly Beach, Catalina, 1921, Watercolor on paper, 13 1/4 x 17 1/2 in. (33.7 x 44.5 cm). ([GWCR 309](#))

and was offered a paltry \$25 for all six. Rightly refusing the offer, he consigned ten paintings at the hotel. Among the five currently known paintings done on Catalina, the three included here display Widforss’ characteristic attention to detail and atmosphere, with his remarkable technique and its exceptional clarity and rich color.

From Catalina, Widforss returned to Mount Lowe for a few days. Then, he headed north to Yosemite Valley where he arrived at the end of February. Yosemite would become, along with Grand Canyon, one of the locations that would come to define the Swedish painter’s legacy. He was forty-two years old. He was energetic, vigorous, and driven to find beautiful landscapes that would challenge his artistic skill and satisfy his sense of aesthetics. He also suffered from





a variety of maladies. Having traded paintings to his dentist in New York for dentures in 1906, they must have been a source of discomfort throughout his life. He regularly complained to Häggart and his mother of stomach pain, and he continued to suffer from periodic episodes of fatigue and what seems to have been minor depression, which even the techniques of Émil Coué [self-help guru who Gunnar studied briefly with at Lake Como in 1920] and his mantra, “Every day, and in every way, I am becoming better and better.” seemed unable to alleviate. On the other hand, *perhaps it did work*, for it was in Yosemite that the artist’s life was to change dramatically in every way, short of romance.



Catalina Island, 1921, Watercolor on paper, 17 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (44.5 x 34.3 cm). ([GWCR 434](#))



The Ocean, Catalina Island, 1921, Watercolor on paper, 13 1/4 x 17 1/2 in. (33.7 x 44.5 cm). ([GWCR 1305](#))



Gunnar painting at Bridalveil Fall, Yosemite, c. 1926. Photograph from the artist’s scrapbook.

1. Letter from Gunnar Widforss to Carl Häggart, January 8, 1921.
2. Bill and Francis Belknap interview with Tom Moore. Museum of Northern Arizona Gunnar Widforss Archive, MS138-XIII-1.
3. Bill and Francis Belknap interview with George Collins. Museum of Northern Arizona Gunnar Widforss Archive, MS138-XII-26.
4. Letter from Gunnar Widforss to Carl Häggart, January 17, 1921.

Thank-you for your continued interest and support.
Warm wishes for the holiday season.
Alan

