

The Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné Project

2020

Release of the Catalogue Raisonné

After nearly eleven years of research and preparation, it is time to publish and make public the Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné. The catalogue will be published online using software called panOpticon. panOpticon is specifically tailored for catalogues raisonnés and has been used to publish the catalogues of many well-known artists including Fitz Henry Lane, Mary Cassatt, and Paul Cézanne, to name a few. I find the Fitz Henry (Hugh) Lane catalogue especially beautiful and expansive in its treasure trove of supplementary materials and history of sailing vessels in New England. I want to effusively thank Susannah Shepherd of panOpticon who did all of the behind-the-scenes programming and styling of the online catalogue. I think that you will agree that she has done a stellar job.

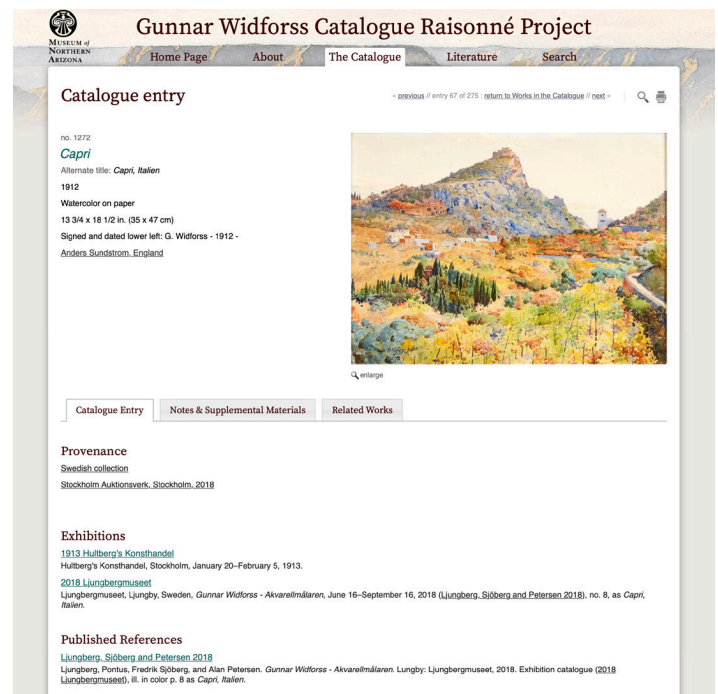
A catalogue raisonné is a comprehensive, annotated listing of all of the known works of art by an artist, and may include works in a particular medium or in all media. There are many variations, broader and narrower, in scope. As the original French term means, a “reasoned catalogue” (i.e. compiled and annotated based on evidence for the information it contains), each catalogue raisonné is individualized based on the artist who is the subject of the publication, and the author’s approach and perspective. You may be wondering about the spelling. Catalogue raisonné is a standardized term in the art world and catalogue is never anglicized to catalog, even in the United States.

For example, in the case of the Widforss Catalogue Raisonné, I have included a large selection of archival and ephemeral materials. This is because in the 1920s and 30s, Gunnar’s paintings were used for a large number of commercial reproductions, such as menus for the hotel restaurants in Yosemite, and postcards of both Yosemite and Grand Canyon.

The advantages of an online catalogue raisonné include the fact that it is a living document that is easily updated and revised, and it is easily and widely

accessible. In addition to photographs and information on over 1,200 of Gunnar’s paintings, the catalogue includes an extensive bibliography, many previously unpublished photographs, the catalogue of ephemera, and Gunnar’s exhibition history.

You can access the catalogue at www.gunnarwidforss.org. Access is free, but you’ll be asked to register as a user with your email address.



An example of one record, *Capri*, 1912, Watercolor, 13 3/4 x 18 1/2 inches (35 x 47 cm), (GWCR 1272)

An Ongoing Project

The catalogue is published! It is a monumental endeavor, and it continues—with work on the book about Gunnar’s life and artwork. I’m now in the midst of the first draft. If you enjoy browsing the catalogue and stepping back to another era, please consider making a donation to support the project.

To make a donation you can go to: gofundme.com/exdn5-gunnar-widforss-catalogue-raisonne

All donations are gratefully accepted.



Arks in the Oakland Estuary

In a letter to his mother, Blenda, dated December 5, 1928, Widforss referred to painting the harbor and old houses in Oakland. The improvised community of houseboats and “arks,” as they were referred to, was home to artists, musicians, and bohemians in general. Gunnar made paintings of at least two of the arks (GWCR 372 and GWCR 616) and the Oakland Estuary (GWCR 1220 and GWCR 1262). One of these, below, I believe to be one of Gunnar’s finest paintings of any subject. It is a fabulous painting by any account.



Ark in the Oakland Estuary, 1928, Watercolor, 19 1/8 x 23 1/4 inches (48.6 x 59 cm), (GWCR 372)

Excerpted from “Artist Tells of Life in Ark Dweller’s Colony” by Kathryn Eshleman, *Oakland Post-Enquirer*, October 8, 1932

There is at least one of everything in his Ark, which is numbered, for the convenience of the city directory: Ark number Four. The little cottages in the colony number off from the left, as you face them with the wash of the tide sounding behind you; from the Bay Farm Island bridge, where sits enthroned the mayor of the community—Mayor-by-courtesy Harry Young, bridge tender.

You enter Ark No. 4 over a long and , narrow, somewhat unsteady boardwalk, built over the loose sand and the ropy-rooted brush. The ark, itself tips above the shallow surf, and a rowboat bobs at its back door.

HOME OF ARTIST

This is the home of Otto Riehl, artist, philosopher, individualist. The pride of his heart and the showplace of the colony is his “garden” which looms in old nail kegs on a porch above the water, the heat of the sun kept away by a canopy of patched pieces of old sail. Zinnias and asters entirely enclose it, and the walls are trellised wood.

As he worked, Riehl talked about the “colony,” and the “Arks” that mean freedom to the men who live in them. Until two years ago I had a studio in Oakland, but this—this is the life! This is a paradise for painters here.”

GYPSY LIFE

He described the gypsy life of his neighbors: “Most of us are notable in some way or another. There’s George Jennings—only everyone knows him as ‘Pot-Shot’—the, best duck shooter on the bay. The oldest inhabitant is Martin Olson, he’s a character, He’s lived here 57 years. What does he do—oh he just sits. And sometimes he sits and smokes his pipe. And there’s Harry Young, our mayor! He’s the bridge tender, officially, but for us he’s the Mayor and keeper of the library, where we go to borrow books.”

Not necessity, but choice, has brought the colonists to the row of Arks an the beach. And they are very conscious of their good fortune and try to help others, in the manner of more conventional communities.

On the door at the back end of the board-walk, at the entrance to the garden is Riehl’s armorial plate, which he says is the keynote of his existence. And in its brilliant cobalt and orange somewhat dimmed by the mists from the marshes and the sea, it says: “Happy is the man who can forget what he cannot remedy.”

One of those places created spontaneously by the iconoclasts, the seekers after freedom from order and convention, the “Colony of Ark Dwellers” is Greater Oakland’s Telegraph Hill, its Greenwich Village.

This sounds just like the type of place that would attract Gunnar after a few months in Yosemite Valley or at Grand Canyon.



San Francisco from the Oakland Estuary, 1928, Watercolor, (GWCR 1262)





Grand Canyon Centennial

One hundred-and-one years ago Grand Canyon became the fifteenth national park in the United States. Today, more than any other artist who has painted the subject, Gunnar is remembered as the painter of the Grand Canyon.

In the winter of 1923, Gunnar Widforss was approaching his third year of living in Yosemite Valley. It was a prolific period for him. He was producing the best work in his career and he was gaining recognition in California. A chance, though inevitable, meeting with NPS Director Stephen Mather over breakfast in Camp Curry led to Widforss' next artistic challenge. Each man certainly knew of each other and each man had a great gift to give each other. Widforss could give visual branding to Mather's nascent Park Service, established only seven years earlier, and its treasures. Mather offered Widforss an artistic challenge and greater recognition.



Grand Canyon, 1923, Watercolor, 22 x 20 1/4 inches (55.9 x 51.4 cm), (GWCR 176)

That chance meeting led Mather to commission Widforss to do some paintings of Zion National Park. The artist made two trips to Zion and in July of 1923 he made his first visit to the North Rim, a short jaunt in his Willys Overland Roadster. The rest, as they say, is history. Gunnar made it to the subject he is best remembered for and he fell in love with it.

Gunnar wrote a lengthy and enthusiastic letter to his friend Francis Farquhar, known for his history of mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada.

Though I have heard hundreds of times about that place, it surpasses all imagination. I suppose you know it from the South Rim. Nothing I ever saw has impressed me any way in comparison. Simply wonderful, and I am sure that the future will give me opportunity to paint there as much as I'd like.
Excerpt from a letter written to Francis Farquhar from Zion Canyon, July, 1923.



Gunnar Widforss at Bright Angel Point in 1923 with Thomas Heron McKee, pointing, and other members of the McKee family. Thomas McKee and his wife Elizabeth ran the Wylie Wayside Camp on the North Rim where Gunnar stayed. (GWCR 6065)

By 1926 Gunnar was spending more time at the Canyon than in Yosemite and he was producing great numbers of paintings. He made many friends including ranger Mike Harrison and photographer Emery Kolb and was welcomed as a resident of the small village.

I hope some day to be remembered for my paintings of Grand Canyon.

Excerpt from a letter written to his mother from Bright Angel Lodge, April 1925.

Although, his career was peaking when the Great Depression squelched many artistic opportunities and severely limited artists' sales, Gunnar persevered. Despite being well-known as "The Painter of the National Parks" during the 1920s and 30s, an honorific title never bestowed on anyone else, his recognition had faded by the Second World War. But, among contemporary artists who paint Grand Canyon, Gunnar set a standard to which most of them aspire.





Here are reflections on Gunnar's legacy from a few well-known contemporary Grand Canyon artists:

Bruce Aiken:

Gunnar Widforss, even now, nearly 100 years since his death, continues to impress and influence artists in their quest for understanding the color, light and structure of Grand Canyon. The importance of his work cannot be overstated, especially for young artists pursuing the elusive form of the Canyon. His powerful and unique body of work speaks to color, light, and form rendered with artistic accuracy.

Greg Hull:

It's difficult to paint at Grand Canyon without conjuring up the legacy of Gunnar Widforss. I can remember the first time I saw a watercolor of the Canyon by him and I was blown away. His colors were inspiring and the sense of atmosphere he achieved is breathtaking. Then while painting at Yosemite, I saw his work at the Ahwahnee Hotel and realized his importance to me and the art world in general. I had to see more of this and I immediately searched for a book about him. I found a copy of the out-of-print Belknap book from Northland Press and bought it. It is a treasure. I have "planted" a brush at his gravesite at the Grand Canyon and continue to be inspired by his work.

Glen Knowles:

Gunnar Widforss is, and will forever be, the watercolor painter of Grand Canyon. His paintings capture the grandeur, mystery and truth of the Canyon with such fidelity that I cannot imagine Grand Canyon without including his artistic contributions there.

Merrill Mahaffey:

In 1974, on one of my first visits to the Museum of Northern Arizona, I viewed several small watercolors lent by the Goldwaters. I had been educated to view realist art after the Armory Show as stale illustration to be disdained. Here were some amazing 20th c. realist works by someone I had never seen before. They were intensely drawn with an impressionist style of color. They showed time of day and time of year. There was drama that rivaled even Van Gogh. Widforss' small paintings are an important contribution to American art history. They express a truth about the land that I had never seen before. With my extensive art history education, how could I have only just discovered this work?

Curt Walters:

In my opinion, Gunnar Widforss reigns supreme among all the Grand Canyon painters. Today he is especially admired by artists for his draftsmanship and masterful watercolor technique. Widforss spent much of his life creating fair weather images of

Grand Canyon, the very nature of true plein air paintings; filled with lovely color as a direct result of the clean, crisp air of his era. His amazing body of work is unique and is a true gift to all of us. Gunnar Widforss gifts us the spirit of Grand Canyon.



Inner Gorge from the Mouth of Bright Angel Creek, c. 1930, Watercolor, 20 1/4 x 16 3/8 inches (50.8 x 41.3 cm), (GWCR 220)

In the first newsletter that I sent out in 2012, I asked if anyone knew the the owner of this dramatic painting of the Inner Gorge. Susie Verkamp put me in touch with one of her cousins, and there it was! The painting was given as a gift from Mary Jane Colter to Max Tristler, who worked for her at the South Rim. Max had married Jan Verkamp.

I want to sincerely thank Max and Jan's son, Richard and his wife Martha, who donated the painting for our collection here at the Museum of Northern Arizona. Sadly, Richard has passed away, but last summer, I met with Martha in Hot Springs Arkansas and she transferred the painting to me. Many thanks also to Susie Verkamp!

