

**IN THE 1870S, A NEW STYLE** of painting developed in France. Turning away from the fine finish and detail of classical works, the light-filled scenes captured a split second of everyday life, a single moment in time—the impact made on the eye in a fleeting instant—in brilliant colors that seemed to glow on the canvas. The movement was termed “Impressionism,” a name derived from the title of a composition—“Impression, soleil levant” (“Impression, Sunrise”)—by one of its key figures, Claude Monet.

American artists studying in Paris at the time brought the style back to the U.S., eventually reaching California around 1890. The pure, unspoiled landscape and intense light found on the West Coast, especially in areas from La Jolla to Monterey and Carmel, recalled Southern France, and the region quickly became the mecca of another burgeoning school of art: California Impressionism.

“California had quite a number of art colonies up and down the coast,” says Betsy Fahlman, adjunct curator of American Art at Phoenix Art Museum. “Its amiable atmosphere offered a range of scenes. The landscape was extremely popular.”

From 1900 to 1930, peaking between 1910-1920, the state attracted plein-air painters from around the world. While the quality of work produced rivaled that of its French counterparts, paintings from the region were not as coveted or well-known as those by Monet, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas or Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Phoenix resident Mort Fleischer long had an affinity for French Impressionism, but he was put off by the works’ exorbitant price tags. One day in 1983, while on a business trip in Los Angeles, he decided to stop by the now-closed Petersen Galleries. It was there that he saw a painting by Franz A. Bischoff. He was immediately hooked on the pivotal American

style. “I like powerful paintings, and this was a very strong image,” Mort explains. “Bischoff was a master of color.”

Recalls art historian Jean Stern, who managed the gallery, “Mort walked in and picked out six or seven of my best paintings, and that was the start of his and Donna’s collection.

“At the time, not many people were attuned to this art and, therefore, there were some very good examples available and they weren’t as expensive as they are now,” Stern adds. “Mort had the foresight of getting into a field that nobody else was in and getting the best works out there.”

Paintings by such noted artists of California Impressionism, including

Franz A. Bischoff rarely painted large canvases. “Roses,” circa 1912, is an example of one of his oversized works. The oil-on-canvas measures 40"H by 50"W. Scenes such as this earned the artist the title “King of the Rose Painters.”



# Of Light and Moment

A WORLD-CLASS COLLECTION OF CALIFORNIA IMPRESSIONIST PAINTINGS SHOWCASES THE BEAUTY OF A BYGONE ERA.

BY REBECCA L. RHODES  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WOODALL



**ABOVE** Art enthusiasts Mort and Donna Fleischer relax in their home's private gallery. The couple own more than 300 California Impressionist paintings, many of which are on display in the gallery's large conference room.

**RIGHT** Mort's favorite piece is "In the Orchard," circa 1915-1917, by Joseph Raphael. This impressive oil on canvas, measuring 58.5"H by 58.25"W, "exudes power," Mort says. "Raphael used a lot of impasto (thick layers of paint) on it."



William Wendt, Hanson D. Puthuff, George Gardner Symons, Edgar A. Payne, J. Christopher Smith, Donna Schuster and, perhaps the very best of the group, Guy Rose, soon followed. "We love the style. It's fresh and bright," Mort notes. "I really like French Impressionism, too, but it would have wiped me out. My rule for collecting is, first, you have to love it, and then you have to get in early in the cycle."

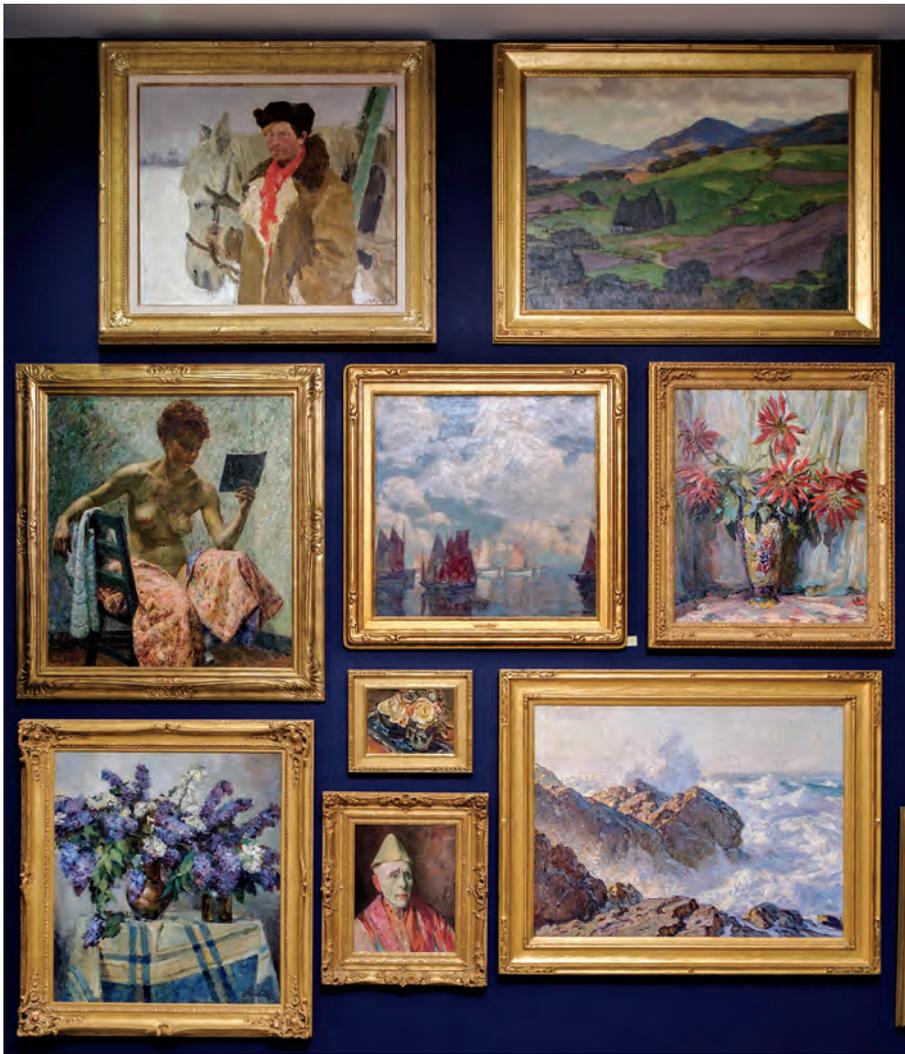
Today, Mort and his wife, Donna, have amassed a world-class assemblage of more than 300 works of California Impressionism. So great is the couple's collection that in 1990, they opened The Fleischer Museum in North Scottsdale, which was dedicated to the California Impressionist style and allowed Mort and Donna to share their love of the art with the public. Managed by Donna, the museum remained open for 16 years.

Following its closure, the couple moved their paintings into a climate-controlled building on their expansive Rio Verde ranch. Many are displayed in a large conference room. Arranged floor to ceiling like puzzle pieces, their elaborate gold frames shimmer against the bold navy walls. "The color shows off the paintings well," Donna comments. "A lot of the works feature blues in them, so it makes for a nice background." The rest of the artworks are stored on a pull-out rack system that allows the Fleischers to easily access and rotate pieces as they desire.

There are scenes of coastal terrain, mountain grandeur, sylvan landscapes and great carpets of wildflowers—as well as works depicting international destinations and even national landmarks, such as the Grand Canyon, a popular subject for California artists. "They would travel and paint around the world, so there are a lot of different influences and subject matters," Donna explains.

Deep blues, verdant greens, majestic purples, delicate pinks and cheerful yellows combine in visions that come alive as the viewer steps back. "If you get up close to these canvases, some of them look like nothing but gobs of paint," says Mort. "But when you move away from them, you can see how the artists put colors together that don't really belong together. That's hard to do."

According to Stern, the Impressionists learned how to use color from scientists who were hired by textile companies to develop more intense shades. "They



discovered that by combining complementary hues, they could achieve a very vivid contrast, which results in that sense of natural illumination. The artists were able to create shadows that actually had light and color in them.”

The paintings’ intrinsic beauty showcases a special time and place in our nation’s history. “California Impressionist art doesn’t have a story. There’s no real moral or anything that encourages you to be patriotic,” says Stern. “It’s just captures nature and a part of America that is now full of people. So many of the scenes no longer exist.”

“California Impressionism was a popular style,” says Betsy Fahlman, adjunct curator of American Art at Phoenix Art Museum. “It’s brushy, bright in color and cheerful.” Landscapes, coastal scenes, flowers and women were popular subjects for artists such as William Wendt, Christian von Schneidau and Edgar A. Payne, whose works are seen in this vignette.



his description of the dense, mist-filled atmosphere over the opalescent sea.”

Sadly, Rose died at age 58 following years of suffering from the effects of lead poisoning, but he is remembered for his masterly brushwork and ability to capture light.

## Plein-Air Paragon

Mort and Donna Fleischer’s art collection encompasses more than 300 works by some of the leading painters of the California School of Impressionism, but the couple’s most prized piece is one by the most significant artists of the genre. “Mist over Point Lobos” was painted circa 1918 by Guy Rose (1867-1925), a native of the Los Angeles area who studied in Paris and later lived in Giverny near his friend and mentor, Claude Monet.

“Rose had the distinction of being a genuine Californian but also a very serious Impressionist painter,” says art historian Jean Stern. “This particular work is a wonderful example of the style, and it’s been reproduced numerous times on

posters, book covers and notecards.” The serene painting, rendered in bright shades of aquas, greens and tans, expresses a fleeting moment when the warm midmorning sun burns off the cool coastal fog along the rugged Northern California shore at Carmel. On a nearby table is a framed photograph of Donna taken 25 years ago, with the same rock formation in the background.

In the book “California Impressionism” (Abbeville Press), authors William H. Gerds and Will South write that the painting “is a measure of the artist’s mastery over his methods and his ability to convey what he perceived. He expertly evoked sensations in the viewer through