

Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape and Colorado & the West

Cruising the scenery.

By Michael Paglia

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The world-famous majestic scenery of the nearby Colorado Rockies — the gorgeous mountains, not the sorry baseball team — has attracted artists to our state for well over a century. In fact, Colorado, New Mexico and California all but cornered the market on Western landscape painting during the last part of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth. This broad narrative provides a foundation for ***Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape***, currently on view at Golden's Foothills Art Center. The show includes a large selection of these historic landscape paintings, some of which are superb, and juxtaposes them with an equally large assortment of contemporary landscape paintings, many of which are strong, too.



"Rain in Colorado," by Charles Bunnell, watercolor on paper.



"A Mountain View," by Frank Vavra, oil on canvas.

Details:

Through July 8,
Foothills Art Center,
809 Fifteenth Street,
Golden, 303-279-
9470.

Through June 30,
David Cook Fine Art,
1637 Wazee Street,
303-623-8181.

For the *Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape* slide show, [click here](#).

For the *Colorado & The West* slide show,

Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape is a traveling show that was organized to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the sometimes beleaguered Colorado Council on the Arts, which was formed in 1967 when Republican governor John Love signed the arts advocacy office into being. (That's right: There was a time in the not-so distant past when Republicans were actually a positive part of the cultural life of Colorado.) The show was put together by Rose Glaser Fredrick, a freelance curator. Sponsored by the CCA, along with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the El Pomar Foundation, this is a major effort. A show of this type, with a heavy historical component, usually takes years to put together, but Fredrick thought it up only last June — and the exhibition's tour started just over six months later, in February!

That's astounding, considering the fine result Fredrick came up with. Not only is the show large, but it's also logistically complicated, with Fredrick having drawn pieces from many different collections. There's even an accompanying catalogue. I can only say that Fredrick must be a workaholic *and* well-connected, given the loans she was able to arrange from such private collectors as the Loos and the Reigers, as well as the usual suspects, the Denver Public Library and the Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art.

The historic part of the show occupies the intimate Metsopoulos Gallery, the anteroom beyond, and the Bartunek Gallery. An odd call on Fredrick's part was to organize the catalogue in chronological order according to when the artists first came to Colorado, especially since the show is hung in a more free-association way. As usual, I think it would have made more sense to arrange it by when the artworks were done.

[click here.](#)

Subject(s):

[Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape, Colorado & the West, Foothills Art Center, David Cook Fine Art, Charles Bunnell, Frank Vavra, Birger Sandzen, Vance Kirkland, Rose Glaser Fredrick, Colorado Council on the Arts](#)

Nonetheless, my first glimpse of "Grey's Peak, Colorado" — done by George Smillie in 1917 — just inside the Metsopoulos had me setting aside any concerns about organizational irrationality on Fredrick's part. Smillie, a New Yorker with direct connections to the Hudson River School, turned the heroic and rugged scene into a stunningly beautiful cotton-candy confection. Across the room, William Bancroft does essentially the same thing, if on a smaller scale, in "Pikes Peak at Sunrise," from 1900.

The creamy smoothness of these impressionist paintings gives way to the chewy roughness of expressionist-style pieces hanging in the Bartunek, including two paintings by Ernest Lawson from the 1920s that look like they were done in chewing gum — and I don't mean that in a pejorative way. Also as much about paint as they are about the landscape are the jarringly bright and roughly painted pieces by Frank Vavra and Birger Sandzén. And the cubistic panel "Cripple Creek Mine," done in 1936 by Charles Bunnell, as well as the surrealistic Vance Kirkland "Ruins of Central City," from 1935, are not to be missed.

At this point, the show hits a conceptual wall, transporting us decades forward into our own time, and it loses focus as it proceeds through the Waelchli and Quaintance galleries. It's not that there aren't some great things in this section, because there are, but it never jells as a coherent display. Among the standouts are works by Chuck Forsman, Tracy Felix and Joe Arnold, an artist hitherto all but unknown to me.

Sometimes when things are done quickly, ideas conceived on the spur of the moment wind up affecting the final product in unanticipated ways. One problem I see with *Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape* — one that would have been easy to correct by simply switching out eight or ten pieces for others — is the big hole that exists between the first part of the show and the second. But this gap was intended by Fredrick, who decided to compare and contrast work from the period of the 1890s to the 1930s with what's happening now and in the recent past. Obviously, that leaves a chronological, and stylistic, gap of fifty years.

Another problem is the way that Fredrick mixed the newer works. Neo-traditional paintings hang alongside non-traditional ones carried out in various contemporary-art styles. Denver Art Museum curator Ann Daley is a pioneer in this difficult juggling act, but she's got plenty of room in her galleries to bridge such aesthetic gaps and give space to the different sensibilities. For her part, Fredrick was forced by logistical issues at Foothills to hang paintings cheek-by-jowl in styles that are antithetical to one other.

None of these issues are fatal, though, and Fredrick's *Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape* is very impressive despite them. She should be congratulated for pulling off such an over-the-top show, and for doing it in record time.

While we're on the subject of back-slapping and shouting "Hear, hear," David Cook, who owns David Cook Fine Art, also deserves a round. Every summer for many years, he has presented his own show on the history of regional art, and they've always been great. As usual, this year's ***Colorado & the West*** at David Cook rivals a museum show on the topic. Though he doesn't have the backing of grant-giving entities, as *Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape* did, his show is every bit as good, with some of the same artists appearing in both. *Colorado & the West* does

have one clear advantage over *Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape*, at least from the vantage point of rich people: The paintings at David Cook are for sale, unlike the historic pieces at Foothills, which are already locked up in other rich people's collections.

Colorado & the West starts off with a rare example of a Jan Matulka abstracted landscape from 1925. Matulka, a European modernist who worked at the Broadmoor Academy, is an important artist whose work is rarely exhibited, and *Colorado & the West* is worth seeing just to catch a look at this piece. Matulka's proto-cubism relates nicely to the contemporaneous work of other early Western modernists, most notably Marsden Hartley. The influence of cubism was important in Western art, especially in New Mexico and Colorado, and in addition to the Matulka's vague references to it, there's the cubo-regionalist black watercolor of a rainstorm by Charles Bunnell and a fully cubist composition of a figural group by Frank Vavra.

Expressionism was another dominant force in the art of the West, and there are two wonderful though modest landscapes by another Broadmoor Academy artist, Birger Sandzén. These highly abstracted mountain scenes are done in thick blobs of pink, purple and green paint in some very unnatural shades of each. Famous New Mexico transcendentalist-associated artists Alfred Morang and Raymond Jonson are also represented in the show. The Jonson is unusual in that it's completely abstract, unlike his signature cubo-regionalism, which is not unlike Bunnell's style.

As I was thinking about the show at David Cook in relation to the Foothills exhibit, I realized that some of the time gap in *Masterpieces of Colorado Landscape* could have been filled in by the pieces in *Colorado & the West*, though admittedly there would still be several decades missing. That means I think it would be a good idea to see both shows back to back, despite the acknowledged inconvenience of having to go between LoDo and Golden.