

[main text panel] End of the Range: Charlotte Skinner in the Eastern Sierra

Charlotte Butler Skinner (1879-1963) was an artist and educator who lived in the Eastern Sierra of California from 1905 to 1933. Born in 1879, she spent her early life in San Francisco, studied painting and drawing at the California School of Fine Arts and the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art, and was an active member in the local arts community. After marrying fellow student, artist, and mining engineer, William (Bill) Lyle Skinner in 1905, she moved to the remote, rural community of Lone Pine, California, where for thirty years she immersed herself in depicting the landscapes of Owens Valley, and teaching art classes for local youth.

Skinner's naturalistic portrayal of landscapes was the topic of admiration from critics, earning her recognition for her work. Guided by her appreciation for the natural landscape of the Eastern Sierra, Skinner created spirited works that portray the Owens Valley at a time of great economic, social, and political change in the region.

Skinner was part of a circle of renowned artists working in the American West in the first half of the twentieth century, including Dorothea Lange, Maynard Dixon, Sonya Noskowiak, Roi Partridge, and Ralph Stackpole. The Skinner home on Brewery Street in Lone Pine became an escape from the hustle and bustle of the San Francisco Bay Area for artists and friends seeking community among the company of other artists. Committed to her artistic practice, Skinner exhibited extensively during her lifetime in exhibitions held at the Stanford Art Gallery at Stanford University, the Portland Art Museum, and the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. Skinner also exhibited at the Nevada Art Gallery (today the Nevada Museum of Art) in 1952. This exhibition is the first institutional presentation of Charlotte Skinner's work in more than sixty years. It also includes family photographs and works by Skinner's artist-friends, along with Panamint Shoshone baskets from her personal collection.

The exhibition is generously supported by John A. White, Jr., in memory of Charlotte Skinner's grandson, James Skinner

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[section text] Looking to the Landscape

Skinner frequently accompanied family members on outings to the perimeter of the Owens Valley, the High Sierra, and nearby Nevada. The works in this gallery include scenes from Silver City, Nevada, and locations in California such as Laurel Mountain and Convict Lake near Mammoth Lakes, Mount Tom outside of Bishop, and Palm Springs, all located within a few hours from her home.

Mining was the predominant industry of the Owens Valley in the early 1900s, and it shaped the careers and lifestyle of the Skinner Family. Charlotte and her husband, Bill Skinner, jointly owned three local mines outside of Lone Pine and nearby in Darwin Hills. Skinner would travel to the remote sites and record them in paintings she made onsite. Due to the long distances between Lone Pine and the mines, she did not carry an easel, canvases, or oil paints, which would have been a burden during the difficult desert excursions. Rather, she chose to carry her less cumbersome watercolors, which she used to paint *en plein air*. Skinner recorded mining infrastructure in her paintings, including mine structures themselves, worker housing, roads and pathways, and aerial ropeways used to transport ore. These elements, however, appear miniature in comparison to the mountains that tower around them.

Skinner's colorful, expressive style in many of the pictures shown in this gallery mark a divergence from the Tonalist painters with whom she studied under while living in the Bay Area, including her mentors, Gottardo Piazzoni and Arthur Frank Matthews. Her representational approach to painting was informed by contemporaries including Maynard Dixon and William Wendt, who's vibrant canvases depict similar scenes of California and the American West.

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[section text] Skinner's Later Life

By the early 1930s, Charlotte and Bill Skinner struggled to reconcile their rural, small-town lifestyle with the changing social, environmental, and political landscape of the Owens Valley. Much of this disruption was a result of the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct that diverted water from the Owens River to Los Angeles. In 1932, the couple sold their home and land in Lone Pine to the City of Los Angeles. They moved to Eugene, Oregon in 1933, where Skinner became active in her new community, exhibiting her work and engaging with local social clubs.

Skinner and her husband didn't reside in Oregon for long. In 1935, they returned to California and settled in Morro Bay on the central coast, where they remained until their passing. From her new oceanside residence, Skinner painted Morro Bay and the Pacific Coast. She once again became part of the artistic scene, which included some of her longtime acquaintances including painters Aaron Kilpatrick, Cadwallader Washburn, and William Wendt.

Skinner played an active role in the seaside community, organizing and judging local exhibitions, and she regularly opened her home for guests to view her fine art and Native American basket collection. After having lived in Morro Bay for almost thirty years, Charlotte Skinner died on August 19, 1963, at the age of eighty-four. She and her husband Bill, who predeceased her by eleven years, are buried together overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Morro Bay.

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All artworks are a bequest of John A. White, Jr., in memory of Charlotte Skinner's grandson, James Skinner, unless otherwise noted.

[Quote on wall]

"My work has been exclusively of the Sierra Nevada and the Desert Country of Owens Valley." – Charlotte Skinner