

News

Wilderness and watercolors: Hidden museum honors one adventurer's stunning artwork

An exploration of Palo Alto's The Foster

by Kate Bradshaw / Almanac

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Anne Baxter, co-executive director at The Foster, talks about Tony Foster's "Bluebells—Looking WNW near the Top of Luxulyan Valley" (2014). The piece is part of the "Journey," or series of works, called "Exploring Beauty: Watercolour Diaries from the Wild." Photo by Magali Gauthier.

As a child, Palo Altan Jane Woodward dreamed of living in a museum. She spent her summers visiting her grandmother in Manhattan and loved to fantasize about what it would be like to live in the Metropolitan Museum, like the characters did in her favorite book, "From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler" by E. L. Konigsburg.

Woodward grew up to study geology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Stanford University, and then business at Stanford, but always retained her love for art and museums alongside her love of the wilderness, especially of the American West. She now teaches energy and environment courses at Stanford and is a founder

and managing partner at MAP Energy, a renewable energy and natural gas investment firm, according to Stanford.

Decades ago, she said, she went to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and was struck by a chance encounter with several watercolors by Tony Foster. They depicted California's High Sierras on a journey that Foster, a British watercolorist and explorer, had taken along the John Muir Trail.



Tony Foster's "Twenty-Three Days Painting the Canyon—From West of Navajo Point" (2013) is a watercolor and graphite piece on paper. Displayed below the painting are a small map and a stone arrowhead by Homer Etherton. Courtesy The Foster.

and it's easy to lose track of time, absorbed in Foster's bright, engaging plein air works created over 17 journeys around the globe.

The Foster houses the permanent collection of the Foster Art & Wilderness Foundation, founded by Woodward, and displays two of those 17 "Journeys" of Foster's works, collections titled "Sacred Places" and "Exploring Beauty." Each "Journey" represents a complete trip's worth of collected artworks. Entrance is free.

The artwork

Tony Foster is a unique artist for a number of reasons, museum co-directors Eileen Howard and Anne Baxter explained while giving a recent tour of the museum. The painter from Cornwall carries art supplies all over the world with him, using lightweight materials and a tiny paint box, but always with a full set of paintbrushes and — as a proper Englishman — adequate supplies for afternoon tea.



Some of Tony Foster's paint brushes and materials on display at The Foster in Palo Alto on Oct. 12, 2021. Photo by Magali Gauthier.

Her encounter with those artworks launched within her a passion for the painter's work that would, decades later, lead her to create one of the Peninsula's premier museums, and one of the only museums dedicated to a living artist in the world, The Foster.

Despite its 14,000-square-foot footprint, it's easy to miss The Foster if you're not looking for it. A converted ambulance storage facility for Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford, the museum is nestled in a nondescript corner of Palo Alto's warehouse district at [940 Commercial St.](#)

The museum's exterior is covered with climbing vines, an apt exterior for a facility celebrating wilderness art, while its interior, which has no natural light, is perfect for housing light-sensitive watercolors. Walk inside the space

Painting in extreme environments, he has also pioneered new watercolor techniques, such as mixing gin into the water at very high elevations while painting in the Himalayas, or using plastic vellum and colored pencils to paint underwater coral reefs.

Kristin Poole, artistic director of The Foster, writes that Foster's work builds on the traditions of artists like J.M.W. Turner that emphasize nature's ferocity and man's insignificance, as well as explorer artists like Thomas Moran, George Catlin and William Henry Jackson.

His process "necessitates being able to withstand grueling physical conditions as well as significant patience while waiting for site, weather and time of day to cooperate, reinforces the messages that none of this — whether it's the act of truly seeing, locating and translating site, or honoring the humbling forces of nature — is easily accomplished," she said.

One signature of his work is that included alongside his paintings are what are called "souvenirs" — little mementos, whether taken or rendered, that highlight the details of whatever environment Foster was in. For instance, there might be a study of leaf colors with a painting of an autumn forest, or little vials of water samples framed alongside a river painting.

The Sacred Places collection represents Foster's 15th journey, into the Four Corners region of the American Southwest. The Exploring Beauty collection represents Foster's 16th journey, in which he asked various luminaries in science, exploration, writing and the environment to nominate what they thought were the most beautiful places in the world. He then went to those places and painted them from his own perspective.

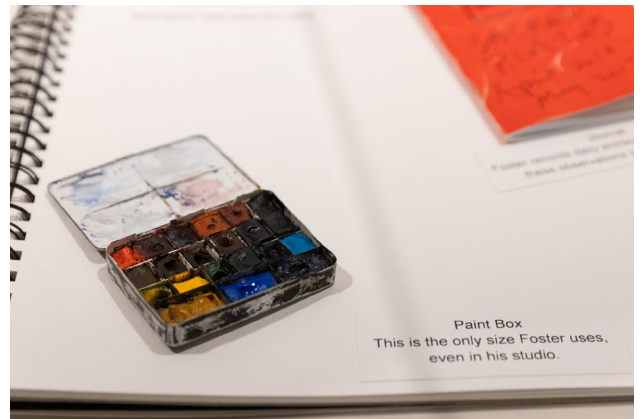
Becoming a patron

After that first sighting of Tony Foster's artwork, Woodward worked diligently to find out more. The museum provided few curatorial details about the art, so she kept calling the museum. Eventually, she learned that Foster was represented by Montgomery Gallery in San Francisco. Over the years, she became a dedicated buyer of Foster's work. Many years later, Woodward invited Foster to join a trip she was organizing on the San Juan River.

While on that trip, Woodward recalls, she began to reflect that there was a sort of "market failure" that there was no artistic institution with enough space to show a full "Journey" or complete set of artworks from one of Foster's trips.

"It was a very organic evolution, to recognize that if I wanted to hold Tony's journeys intact, and share them with the public, we needed a space. It's only been in the last few years that we've called it a museum," she said. The museum, she added, is also used as a type of staging area for other, potentially larger museums to see what one of Foster's journeys looks like in full from a curatorial perspective. The foundation also works with other museums looking to showcase Foster's work, and provides curatorial support through Howard's and Baxter's shared expertise.

Since the museum opened in 2016, Woodward said, one of the most gratifying things has been hearing from friends and visitors to the museum who told her that the art had evoked memories of specific places they'd been



Some of Tony Foster's paint brushes and materials on display at The Foster in Palo Alto on Oct. 12, 2021. Photo by Magali Gauthier.



From left: Artist Tony Foster, artistic director Kristin Poole and patron Jane Woodward at the Palo Alto Baylands. Photo courtesy Corinne DeBra/The Foster.

to or inspired them to get out into the wilderness on their own.

“I love Tony’s art because it’s just beautiful to behold, but I like using it to have these conversations about all these layers around place,” she said. “I believe strongly that reflecting on place and why it’s important to protect is really important.”

Weathering the pandemic

Howard and Baxter were calmer than expected while talking about how the pandemic has affected museum operations.

Yes, The Foster was closed for a long time, and it’s been hard to get the word out that it’s open again by reservation, but overall, there have been some benefits, they said.

For starters, because travel has been restricted, Foster himself has actually been more available than he might otherwise be for interviews and archival works, they said.

Foster also busied himself during the pandemic with a project titled “Lockdown Diaries,” while facing a strict quarantine in England that limited time outdoors to one hour a day. During that hour, he would find new pedestrian routes to walk around his neighborhood and new objects to study in his artworks. Over time, he created some beautiful small studies, including one set of 56 days’ worth of drawings that has been made into a print that the Foster is selling to support wilderness-focused nonprofits both locally and internationally.

Dealing with the travel restrictions from the pandemic, he said, “has made me study my backyard more profoundly, and I have found great joy in the close study of small subjects. The closer you look the more you see!”



Tony Foster in his studio in Cornwall, UK, 2021. Photo courtesy Paul Mounsey/The Foster.

Foster said that one lesson that he plans to carry forward is: “Be patient and find joy where you are — even if confined to a small area.”



Tony Foster's "Looking Out from Deer Cave, Mulu—Six Days" (2015) is a watercolor and graphite piece on paper. Below the painting are bead necklaces, a small beaded work in an acrylic box and a small map. Courtesy The Foster.

Nobody can spend long periods of time in these places without becoming concerned about their future," he said in an email.

"Whilst painting in primary rainforest I heard chainsaws whining and enormous trees crashing to the ground. I canoed down clear rivers where gold dredgers poison the water with mercury; camped in pristine deserts knowing the prehistoric water tables were being sucked dry. In the Arctic, as the ice melts, mining companies are moving into pristine landscapes. Sitting underwater on scuba, I have drawn myriads of fish of unimaginable variety and beauty to find a year later the corals bleached and the fish gone.

"I hope when people experience my work they will be moved to strengthen their desire to protect the planet's ecosystems. I am speaking out more clearly now whenever I am offered a platform."

Go to thefoster.org for more information or to make reservations.

Kate Bradshaw writes for The Almanac, a sister publication of PaloAltoOnline.com.

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Back at the Palo Alto museum, Howard and Baxter said that they're trying to get the word out that the museum is not only open again, but that each reservation almost guarantees visitors to have the museum to themselves for about an hour.

A shifting planet

Foster's next journey, slated for the Green River, was postponed this year, but there is a special exhibit of his work being shown now at the Royal Cornwall Museum called "Fragile Planet: Watercolour Journeys into Wild Places."

In recent years, those who are familiar with Foster's work also say that he has become more vocal about advocating against climate change. While his work has long espoused the "leave no trace" principle, he has expressed shock at the environmental changes he's seen in more recent journeys, Baxter said.

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