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LUXURY MAGAZINE

SPRING/SUMMER 2021



As American as Pie

Pastel-colored paintings of pies and cakes launched his career, but there is more to the American Master **WAYNE THIEBAUD** than just desserts.

BY JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN



The California-based painter Wayne Thiebaud, who turned 100 last November, is best known for pictures that he made around 60 years ago depicting pie and cake slices on plates arranged in rows on countertops. These pictures of ready-to-serve diner desserts have become icons of American Pop art, but they are only one course in the visual banquet that Thiebaud (pronounced TEE-boh) has produced over a seven-decade career.

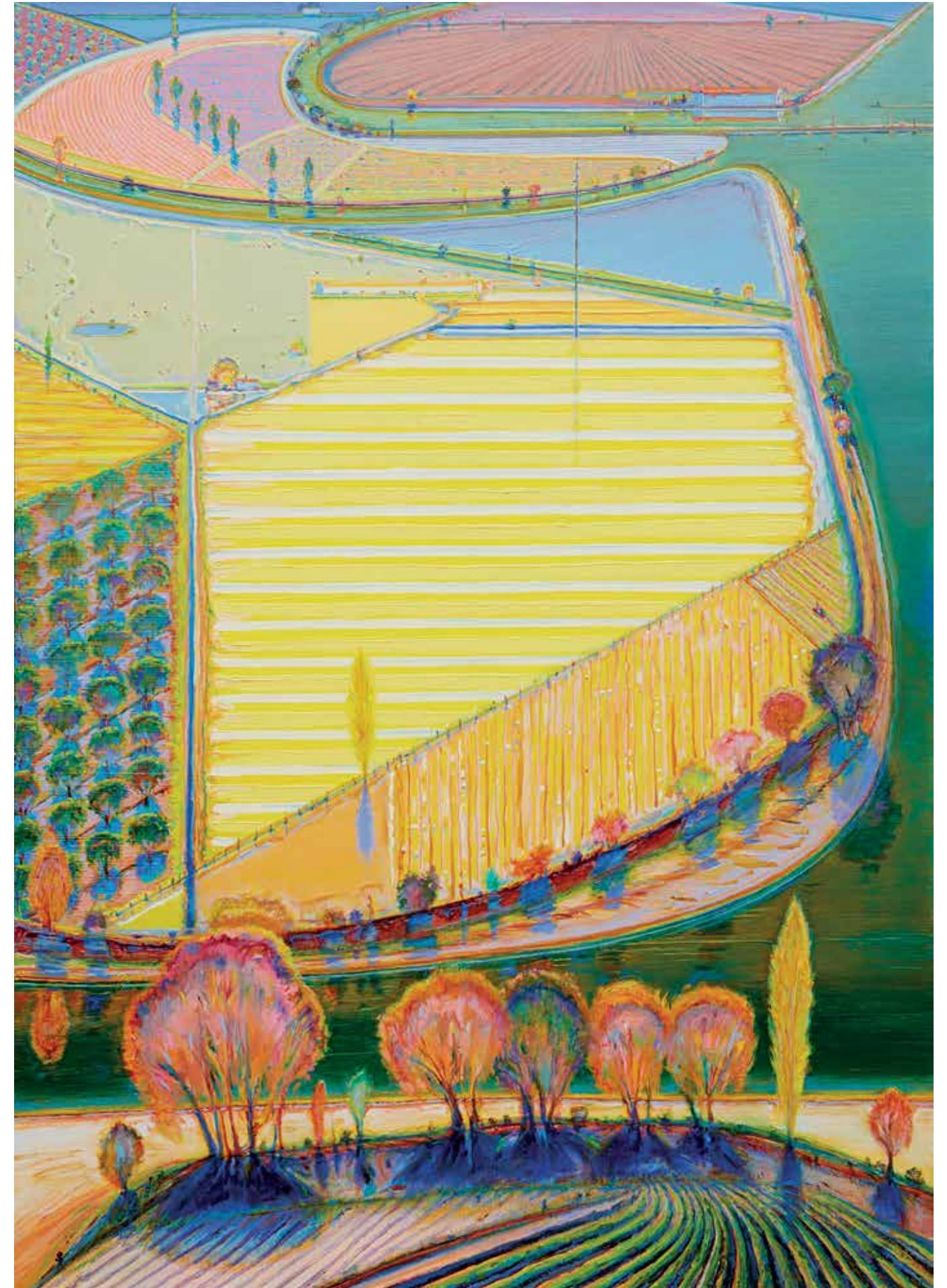
Thiebaud never considered himself part of the Pop art movement, but his realistic paintings of everyday items such as sandwiches, clothing, and cosmetics coincided with Warhol, Lichtenstein, and others depicting mass-produced products from Campbell's Soup cans to Mickey Mouse. Their work was critical of consumerism, but Thiebaud's celebrated the abundant pleasures of postwar American middle-class life. When his food still lifes appeared in his first New York solo show, at Allan Stone Gallery in 1962, they sold out, and museums including MoMA acquired the works.

That same year he was included in two seminal exhibitions that consolidated the Pop art phenomenon: *New Realists* at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York and *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art Museum, and he was given a solo show at the de Young Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. With favorable reviews in art periodicals as well as *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and *Newsweek*, Thiebaud, in his early 40s, was on his way.

He went on to paint people and landscapes ranging from Southern California beach scenes to the hilly topography of San Francisco and abstract panoramas inspired by the California Delta near Sacramento. Lately he has made a series of vignettes that feature clowns, a somewhat wistful commentary on the artist as entertainer and the human comedy in general.

Examples from each series are currently on view in *Wayne Thiebaud 100: Paintings, Prints, and Drawings*, an exhibition organized by the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento to mark the artist's centennial. (See sidebar for tour venues and dates.) →

Green River Lands, 1998



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CARTOONS AND COMMERCIAL ART

Thiebaud was born in 1920 to a working-class Mormon family in Mesa, Arizona, but grew up mainly in Long Beach, California, where his father found work after a failed effort at cattle ranching in Utah. Like many kids of his generation, Thiebaud loved the funnies pages in the newspaper and dreamed of being a cartoonist. As a teenager he briefly apprenticed as an animator for The Walt Disney Studios, and took classes in commercial art at a trade school in Los Angeles. He interrupted junior college to serve in the US Army Air Force (1942–1945) where he hoped to be a pilot, but his artistic talent led to his designing posters and drawing cartoons for the newspaper of his base near Sacramento.

After the war, newly married, he tried unsuccessfully to sell his cartoons to New York magazines, then worked several years in advertising at Universal Studios and Rexall Drug Company, where an erudite colleague urged him to think of himself as an artist. He resigned in 1949 to pursue a teaching degree

at San Jose State College on the GI Bill and transferred to Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento) where in 1951 he completed his bachelor's and in 1953 his master's degrees in art history and education. By 1951 his paintings, influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Bay Area Figurative Art, were the subject of a show at Sacramento's Crocker Art Gallery.

In graduate school he began an eight-year stint teaching art history, film, and television production at Sacramento Junior College (now Sacramento City College). During a 1956–1957 sabbatical in New York, he met Willem de Kooning, who advised him to find his own path. Thiebaud threw himself into painting the now famous still lifes with a reductive realism informed by his memories of restaurant jobs and his training as a commercial artist.

He reveled in finding the fewest gestures needed to suggest a three-dimensional object on a flat canvas. Subjects are set against single-color backgrounds in indoor settings

bathed in clear, bright, even light. The sharply modeled forms, rendered in saturated hues, cast bluish shadows. Edges are delineated with parallel bands of vibrant green, orange, blue, or red, giving objects a sort of electric halo that he dubs "halation."

Thiebaud learned graphic clarity from the advertising men, sign painters, and cartoonists with whom he worked, but the sensuality of his paint derived from the gestural brushwork of Old Masters and Abstract Expressionists. He thickly applied oil pigments to underscore their materiality and to replicate the things they represent—creamy white paint spread like buttercream frosting or daubed into puffs of meringue, or dense crimson paint that doubles as greasy lipstick.

He painted the figure in the same manner as the still lifes. Though models included his wife and friends, his portraits are devoid of personality and sentiment. Typically shown in isolation standing at attention or seated on a chair, subjects are emotionless with blank expressions concealing their inner worlds.

LANDSCAPES OF THE IMAGINATION

After buying a house in San Francisco in 1972, he began an inventive series of cityscapes exaggerating the vertiginous topography. Streets rise vertically, parallel with the picture plane, dotted with cartoonish cars and flanked by buildings drawn in perspectives that cast shadows across the pavement. The resulting distortion of space and height creates a roller coaster effect that conveys the chaos and instability of urban life. Related pictures

of overlapping freeways thronged with traffic embody the density of California's networks.

In the mid-1990s he turned his focus to the rural landscape of the Sacramento River Delta. These large canvases portray imagined vistas often with no horizon or sky, as if from an aerial perspective and from more than one viewpoint. Cultivated fields, represented by intensely colored patterns, form a patchwork intersected by roads and reflective bodies of

water, relieved by details such as trees and cattle. These abstract visions, and a series of mountain pictures begun in the early 2000s, portray the American West as a magic-real terrain of mesas, buttes, and solid clouds that calls to mind the setting of George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" cartoons and draws on Thiebaud's memories of the family ranch and his grandfather's California farm where he spent time in his youth. →



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Ripley Ridge, 1977



AMERICAN MASTER

Soaring auction prices in the past decade reflect growing recognition of Thiebaud as an American master. *Pies* (1961) sold for \$4 million in 2011, *Encased Cakes* (2011) leapt to \$8.5 million in 2019, and *Four Pinball Machines* (1962) set a new Thiebaud record when it topped \$19 million last year.

His work is collected by most museums of modern and American art, including the Whitney Museum in New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, both in Washington, D.C.; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the San Francisco Museum of Modern

Art; and numerous other major institutions. He represented the United States at the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1967 and has had retrospectives organized by SFMOMA in 1985, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 2000, and Acquavella Galleries in 2012. He was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Bill Clinton.

His primary dealer was Allan Stone from 1962 until the dealer's death in 2006. Currently he is represented by Paul Thiebaud Gallery in San Francisco and Acquavella Galleries in New York and Palm Beach.

Thiebaud revisits themes from earlier

periods—he is still painting pies today—and he has worked in multiple mediums, including graphite, charcoal, ink, pastel, watercolor, etching and aquatint, and lithography.

In addition to his fine art, he has made 10 covers for *The New Yorker* and provided illustrations for two cookbooks. His distinguished teaching career includes 42 years in the art department at UC Davis, where he remains a professor emeritus.

Twice married, with multiple children and stepchildren, he continues to live and work in Sacramento where he has occupied the same house for half a century.

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Shoe Rows, 1975
Opposite: *Four Pinball Machines*, 1962

**“A LOT OF WONDERFUL PEOPLE HELPED ME ...
I OWE A GREAT DEBT TO SIGN PAINTERS AND
GRAPHIC ARTISTS, FASHION DESIGNERS,
GRAPHIC DESIGNERS, AND COMMERCIAL ARTISTS.”**

Thiebaud recently spoke with *LUXURY MAGAZINE* on the phone from his midtown Sacramento studio, recounting the advice he received from Willem de Kooning; the importance of humor, caricature, and color in his work; and his stint working in the circus.

How does one master the craft of painting?
Since I didn't go to art school—I would have loved to have done so—I had a lot of wonderful people who helped me, and they gave me a critical premise of the formal values and the basic tools for how you do things properly to achieve good effects. I owe a great debt to sign painters and graphic artists, fashion designers, graphic designers, and commercial artists.

Early in your career you painted with a loose touch related to Abstract Expressionism. After your 1956–1957 sabbatical in New York, where you met Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and other established artists, you returned to California and began straightforward still lifes. What did de Kooning tell you that led to the change?

I had been taking students on holiday field trips to artists' studios and museums in New York. I asked de Kooning if he would let us come to his studio. He was a saint in terms of approachability, so I had some meetings with him by myself at his studio on 10th Street. He was forthcoming in the following way: He said that I was a pretty good painter, but lacked any kind of focus in a way that was important. He said, like many young painters, I was focusing on what I call “the signs of art.” Someone suddenly becomes famous and everybody looks at what the signs of that particular painter are—brushstrokes, drips, whatever.

He asked, “Why are you painting anyway?” That question stopped me. He said, you have to find something you really know something about and that you are really interested in, and just do that. Don't spend so much time looking at what you think will make you successful. →



Boston Cremes, 1962
Opposite: *Two Kneeling Figures*, 1966

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I came back to Sacramento and said to myself, what has my life been? I grew up a Mormon boy in America. I worked in restaurants and helped cook hamburgers, washed dishes, was a busboy. I started as directly as I could, took the canvas and made some ovals, thinking about Cézanne—the cube, the cone, and the sphere. I put some triangles over them and thought, well, maybe that could represent a pie on a plate. I had seen them laid out in restaurants and I was always interested in the way they formed these nice patterns. I said, all right, I'll go ahead with this. As I finished, I looked at it, and said, my god, I just painted a bunch of pies. That's going to be the end of me as a serious painter. I've got a teaching job, so I'm okay.

But I could not leave it alone. I painted another one of different kind of pies, and I made some little cakes. I'd painted some gumball machines very early on, all tricked out with silver paint like Jackson Pollock. Again, all the signs of art. I decided, I'll just paint a damned gumball machine and that's the way it's going to happen.

Your still lifes turned out to be a great success when you showed them in 1962 at Allan Stone Gallery. When your focus shifted to figure painting, you treated your sitters much as you treated still-life objects—without dramatic action or clues of their state of mind. What were you trying to achieve?

Figures are the most difficult subject matter of all, in my opinion. I tried to paint some from memory and ran smack up against my limited awareness of anatomy and of the conditions that make figure painting work. So, I did academic drawings weekly for about 7.5 years. I wanted to make a decent figure painting, in proportion and space, to look like a piece of sculpture existing in a little fictive, three-dimensional world. But, also not to have any kind of expression, not to denote any narrative—as if you're sitting looking at someone across from you. You don't know them, they don't know you. You look at their clothing, you look at their shoes. I'd try and present that as clearly as possible, with a cast



shadow. I admire the photographs of August Sander because they're plain presentations of a German cook, a German schoolteacher, a butcher. This is some guy in his ordinary jacket and pants and shoes.

The San Francisco pictures and the Sacramento River Delta landscapes play with space in ways that are very different from the straightforward still lifes and figures. What was this fundamental change about?

I believe very much in changing. I paint people, places, and things, which gives me the option of painting anything. I would like to believe I could paint anything, any day, any time, any way in which I would like. It's not a very good career move, according to many fellow painters, but for me, that's the challenge and that's the charge, the joy, and the agony. I never required being successful. That's why I went into teaching.

You've talked about yourself as a kind of thief of art history. I see relationships between your works and Édouard Manet, Henri Matisse, Giorgio Morandi, Edward Hopper, Walt Kuhn, Richard Diebenkorn, Saul Steinberg, and many others.

It's kind of unlimited. That's why I kept teaching. Having to teach art history, aesthetics, criticism became my education. It was a great challenge to try to catch up on some deeper and more useful educational potential, coming into the world of ideas, poetry and great literature, music, and so on. That's the code of honor, so to speak, about trying to make yourself an artist of some kind. That's one of the most difficult things to do, to try to find your own voice, to try and love tradition, but to not be overwhelmed by it. However tiny a contribution you can make, it doesn't matter so much as it does to simply take it on and contend with it. →

Five Seated Figures, 1965
Opposite: *Freeway Curve*, 1995



What are you working on these days?

I've gotten together all the figure paintings that I have kept around, about 150 of them: a number of self-portraits I've never shown, some little narrative paintings that I've fooled around with, the portraits of the clowns. There are paintings of little figures on beaches, in shopping malls, on dance floors. I'm interested in combining those totally different kinds of working with the figure. I'm not interested in planning an exhibition, but I am determined now to make a book of these, plus the ones that are in collections and museums. There will be a kind of catalogue raisonné of the figures, of which there's never been a comprehensive show. I'm going to call it *People: Figure Paintings, Portraits, Self-Portraits, and Clowns*. I want to create a catalogue as I did of the clowns and of monotypes, so that it will be part of

the archives of my foundation. I'm reworking some of the paintings, changing them quite dramatically, which I like doing. I know that conservators don't like this sort of thing, but I don't give a damn as long as I can get it to look the way I want it to look.

You titled a recent work *One-Hundred-Year-Old Clown*. Are your clowns somewhat autobiographical?

Humor has always been at the center of my work, or certainly near it. I collect original cartoons and in my own work, I love it when people smile or when I see they are bemused. I worked briefly in the circus and became a great admirer of the clowns and carnival people that I sold newspapers to as a kid. That world interested me and I'd never done anything with it. When my wife passed away, and then my son within a year, I wanted

something just to sort of be preoccupied with. I concentrated and painted maybe 50, 60, or 70 of those clowns in as interesting a way as I could manage.

The clowns depart from the earlier figure paintings not only because many of the clowns are in motion rather than still, but also because you paint them more freely.

Caricature was very much part of my interest in terms of style. It's not as simple as cartooning. It's much richer. There's a caricature of color and a caricature of space, like Cubism. I think stylistic derivation and expansion and development is based on a kind of caricature, whether it's medieval caricature or the way that Goya uses caricature or the way the Persians caricature. There's a caricature of almost all the formal elements that you can use, in my opinion. →

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One-Hundred-Year-Old Clown, 2020

Other than portraits painted before the model, much of your work is based on memory. Can you talk about that?

Memory is probably not the defining word. The *imagination* needs to confront the memory and to learn that the memory is not a fixed thing. It's not something you just have so much of. Rather, the memory is developed by confronting your lack of knowledge. So, while the memory is a great product of expression and awareness, it's essentially the imagination that you finally are able to use.

Some of the Pop artists transcribed photographs or used photo-mechanical means of getting the image onto the canvas. Do you use reference images, maybe photographs?

I have a very big aversion to photography as a thing to use or even as a habit or tradition of painting. It's a seductive medium and a wonderful medium and a great convention, but it's a separate convention from our two-eyed view as human beings. I think my works are not realistic. They are representational. If you look carefully at a tie or a sucker, that's such a basic shape that it doesn't require much memory. And the same is true of many of my object paintings. They're usually chosen for their pretty clear-headed simplicity. Or that they are things that have become almost touchstones in our daily lives. The complexity comes from figuring out compositionally what I might be able to develop. I try to look for ways of presenting forms in ways that have not seen them presented. And sometimes to do things that they shouldn't do.

You can make a landscape composition where you simply go from one [corner of the canvas] to the other, or you can overwhelm the weight distribution so the painting is somewhat uncomfortable, so its balance is slightly tentative. This, of course, is a way of building tension. If we're using our bodies, our plumb line is very much aware of our sense of balance. That's what painters base little

rectangles and squares on. It's all about how the shapes relate to the edges, and not just the four sides, but other vectors. Figures must come outside toward us and recede inside away from us to infinity. Those are the options you have as a painter. Even though you're on this flat surface, the extraordinary, miraculous aspect of painting is fictive space. And getting yourself to make the leap to faith, that that space can be coherent and believable in your sensations, is a major and wonderful trick.

You perform it wonderfully. The landscapes are particularly engrossing.

They come quite simply from the use of various projective systems, or not being hesitant to use whatever extraordinary combinations I can come up with. I'm very influenced, of course, by cultural variations [of landscape], whether it's Japanese, Chinese, Persian, any kind of other modalities that you can think of. And that's why art history is so crucially important to painters. It's not just our inspiration but our guidepost and our visual library.

Rather than represent every minute detail of a motif, you seem to try to get the essential contours and tonal changes, a reductive approach that can tend toward abstraction.

I admire abstract painting very much and I'm basically always convinced that my work is abstract. Brushstrokes are simply shorthand notations, like taking shorthand of writing. You learn to get what you hope will essentially denote something rather than rendering it. When there is too much [detail], that kind of rendering leads to a kind of taxidermy, a kind of death. It's like you're an accountant rather than a shorthand taker. There are wonderful combinations—sometimes unconscious, often accidental—that go into mixing and matching. It is one of the most extraordinary, miraculous things that we have wonderful, alternate painting worlds by Van Gogh and Rembrandt and on and on and on. And we wouldn't have

had the worlds of Van Gogh without that extraordinary unique set of organized paintings that come from his taking from Monticelli, French tapestries, and so on.

Can you talk about color in your work?

For my painting students, the palette has two yellows (a warm and a cool), two reds, two blues, and then black and white or tertiary colors of some measure. It's a Fauve-type palette and it gives you the basis of being able to make not just any color, but the power of the color. That's the secret of painting: getting the color value right. I try to get some of each color in as many different areas of the picture as I can, so there is a kind of aura, almost like sunshine or the rainbow effect.

Was the aura effect, which you've called "halation," something that you devised deliberately?

No, it just kind of happened. If you take anything out in the sunshine and put it on a white surface, you get very clearly those auras and those vibrating halations. It comes with the fact that we're seeing [with our binocular vision] two views that never quite coordinate.

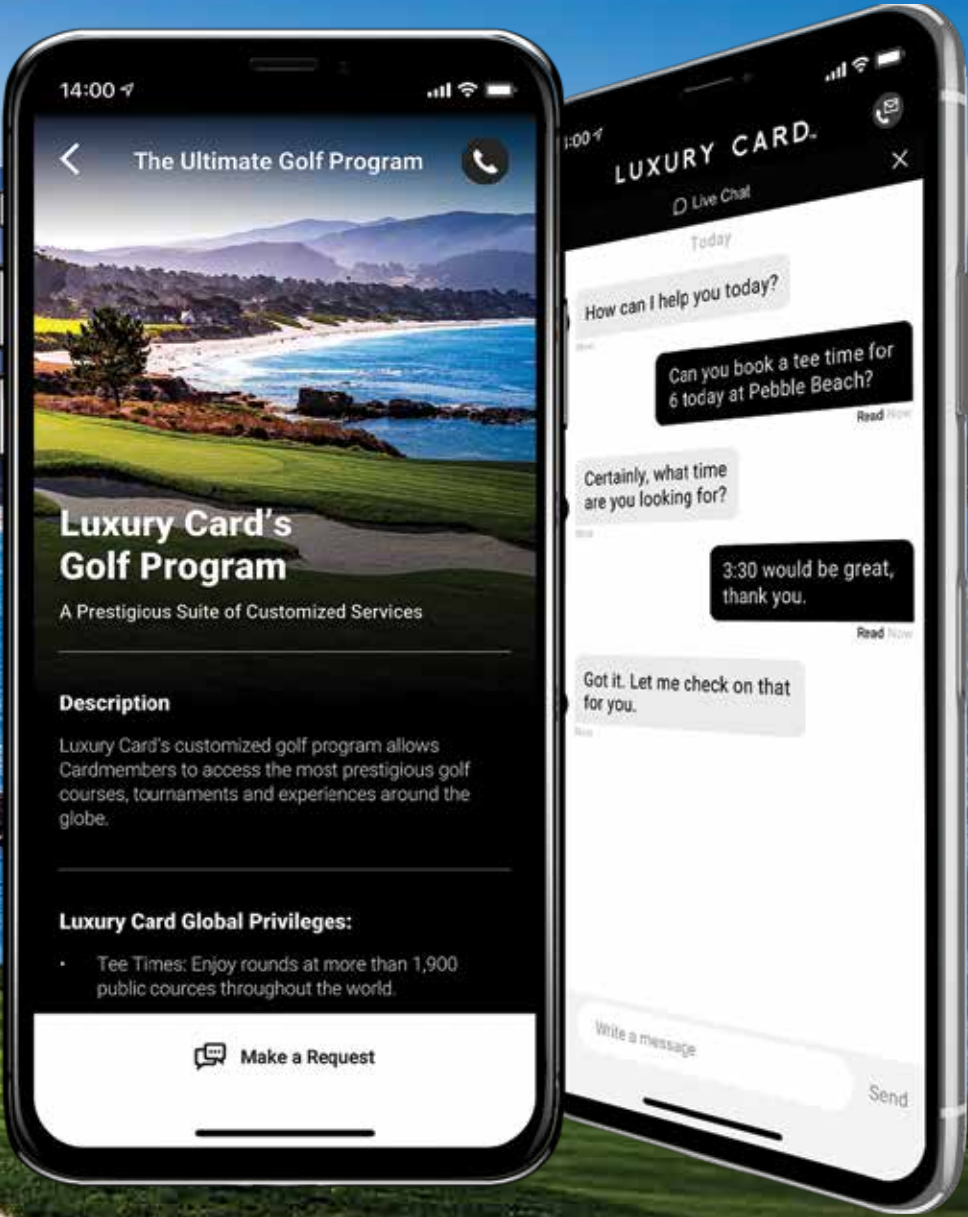
Can you talk about beauty?

The art critic Dave Hickey once asked at a conference what theme we should be focused on in coming years. Everybody gave interesting responses until he said the word "beauty." He said it emptied out the place. They were much more interested in social issues and god knows what? But beauty—yes, it's primary. It's what we search for. ♦

Part II of this interview in which Thiebaud recounts details of his family life, the rhythms of work and home, his relationship to Mormonism, and life as a centenarian continues online at luxurymagazine.com.

Wayne Thiebaud 100: Paintings, Prints, and Drawings will be on view at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis (July 25–October 3), McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas (October 28–January 16, 2022), and Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania (February 5, 2022–May 8, 2022).

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