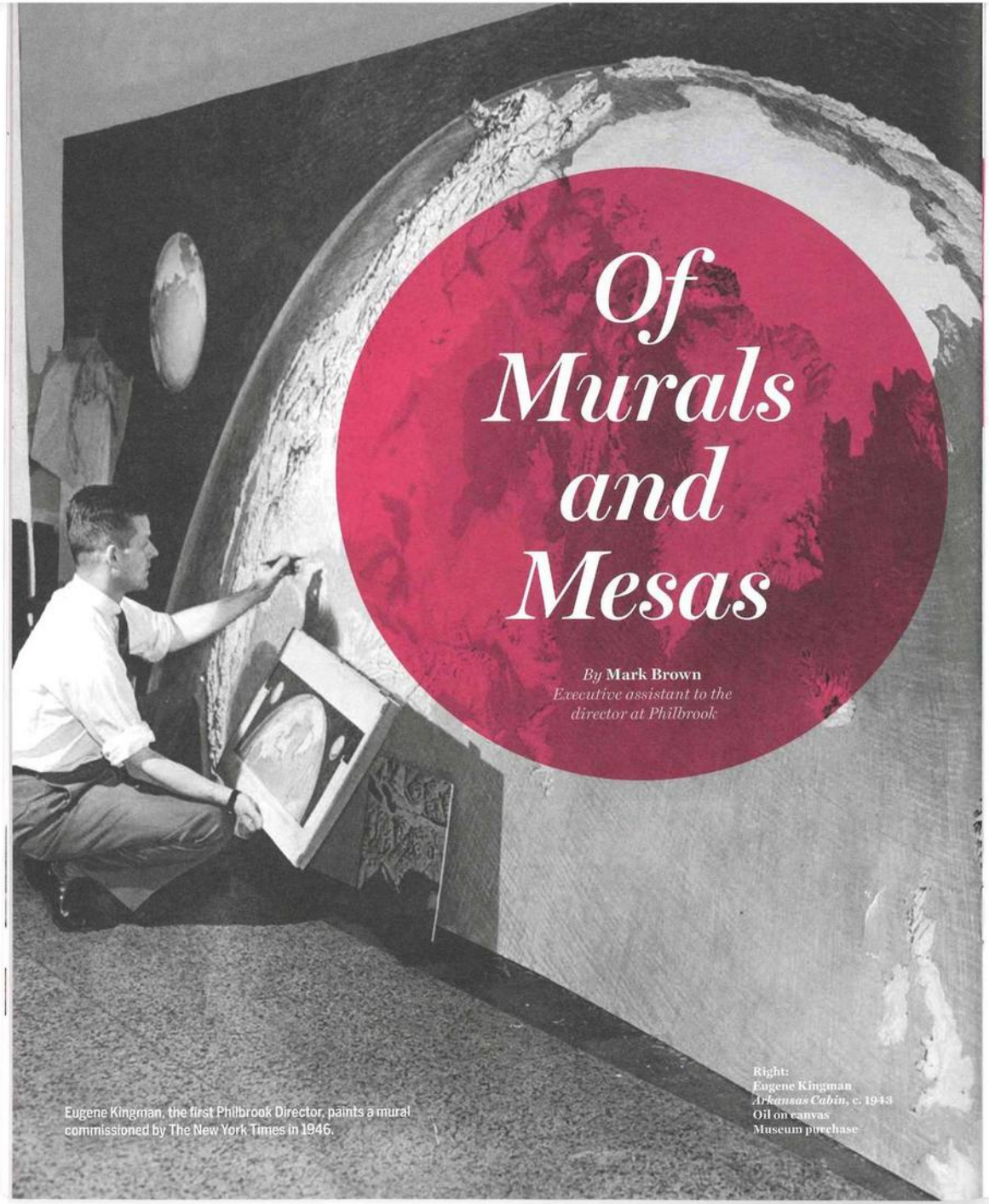


Of Murals and Mesas

By **Mark Brown**
Executive assistant to the director at Philbrook

Eugene Kingman, the first Philbrook Director, paints a mural commissioned by The New York Times in 1946.

The first Philbrook Director was all over the map

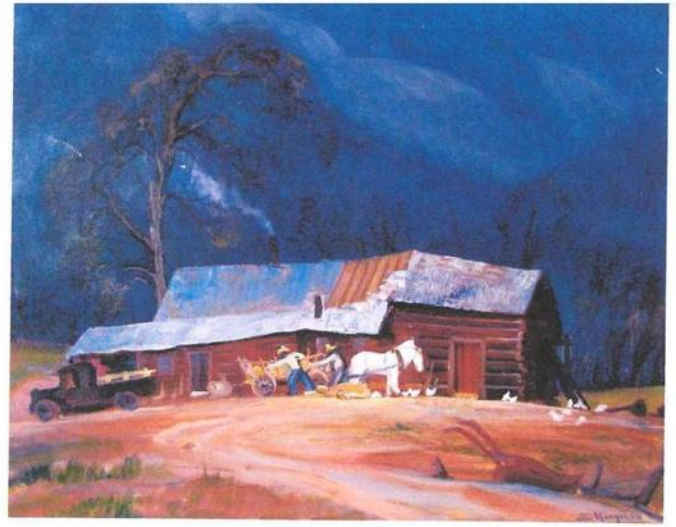
One of the stories pitched on the March 1937 cover of *National Geographic*—sharing the marquee with the "First Color Photograph from the Stratosphere"—was a twin feature on Crater Lake and Yosemite, two national parks some 500 miles apart. "With 13 paintings by Eugene Kingman," read the byline.

Two years later, Kingman would become the first director of the new Philbrook Art Museum, the 72-room Renaissance villa gifted to the people of Tulsa by Genevieve and Waite Phillips, who'd built and lived in the house since 1927. But in '37, Kingman was still on tour. His westward trek began in 1931, when the U.S. National Park Service commissioned Kingman to paint seven murals for the Paris Colonial Exposition, a six-month exhibition that drew some eight million visitors.

"New Englander Chosen Philbrook Museum Head" read the *Tulsa World* headline of June 11, 1939. Kingman was an instructor of mural painting at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) when Philbrook came calling. However, it was the *Nat Geo* article that set him apart in the field of 40 candidates reviewed by the Southwestern Art Association board, the young Museum's governing body.

"It is fortunate that we have obtained a fine, young fellow with enthusiasm to build a museum," said A.B. Butler Jr., board president, "and with the interest in geology which is particularly significant in the 'oil capital'."

Kingman's magazine assignment had been to imagine a time before Crater Lake, "Many thousands of years ago," read the caption under one of his depictions, when "molten rock from deep within the earth poured forth to build in the Cascade Range of southern Oregon lusty Mount Mazama," which in time blew its top, leaving a crater, or caldera, steep-sided and icy deep. The seven paintings (and six more covering a similar geologic event in Yosemite Valley) portray Mazama through the seasons and the epochs, rugged contours bathed in winter and summer, fire and ice, in a style reminiscent of Alexander Hogue—if Hogue were a prehistoric natural realist.



Right:
Eugene Kingman
Arkansas Cabin, c. 1943
Oil on canvas
Museum purchase

"The boy's painting showed amazing freshness and vigor with a deep understanding," said Wallace Atwood, who wrote the accompanying story. "With his aid, it has been possible to go beyond the realms of photography and reproduce the ancient landscapes interpreted from the geologic records."

The 30-year-old "boy" must have cut quite a swath. "Kingman is a big, husky fellow who has made frequent Western trips," wrote Malvina Stephenson in that Sunday *World* story. Following up in the *Tulsa Tribune*, Sara Ann Mott began, "Easy to know and easy to like, young blond Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Kingman are in Tulsa today looking over their new job as director and 'associate director.'

"His wife is almost as tall, and almost as blonde, and the green of her smartly tailored dress was reflected in her eyes. She uses her hands to emphasize her statements and looks to her husband for acceptance of what she is saying."

Elizabeth Yelm, one of the first women ever to earn a masters degree at the University of Denver, was a student of anthropology who worked in the museum at Mesa Verde National Park near Durango, Colorado. After a swift courtship, she and Kingman married shortly before he took the Philbrook job. But not so short they couldn't fit in a honeymoon to San Francisco for a convention of the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums).

There was an attempt, in the news of the day, to allay any public dread that Philbrook had hired some East Coast elite with a foot in Europe and an eye toward the abstract.

"Nothing Bohemian," read a quote from Theodore Sizer of the Yale school of fine arts, where Kingman had studied. "His scientific interest (in dinosaurs) is almost as great as his artistic ones."

On the website devoted to his life and work (eugenekingman.com), daughter Mixie Kingman Eddy wrote that her father "reflected the spirit of plein air." On that bio page, a photo captures Kingman painting a long view of the Sierra Nevada. He's wearing a banded fedora and plaid shirt, with his khakis rolled up around his knees, and his horse hitched to a tree root.

"New Englander Chosen Philbrook Museum Head"

Tulsa World, June 11, 1939



Oklahoma Artists' Seventh Annual Exhibition jurors: left to right: Jerry Bywaters and Eugene Kingman, 1947.

"The reading of resumes can sometimes be a rather dry exercise," wrote David Pease, dean of Yale University, in a 1990 letter to the Boston Athenæum. "Such is not the case with Kingman."

Fifteen years after his death in 1975, and a full 50 since he took the Philbrook post, Kingman's legacy remained of archival interest in the world of arts and letters. We'll never know how long he might have stayed in Tulsa: Three years into his tenure, war broke out. Kingman went into the Army as a cartographer, assigned to the maps division of the Office of Strategic Services, a World War II incarnation of the CIA.

After the war, Kingman took over the directorship of the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, where he stayed for 22 years. While exhibit design and promotion became his specialty, Kingman continued to paint, finding inspiration in his new environs.

"Time for painting is limited," he wrote in his artist's statement for an exhibition titled *Kingman's Nebraska*, "so my working radius is within a few miles of Omaha; but here at hand is a wealth of material that is expansive, yet intimate and human in all its parts."

Kingman's landscapes bear the hallmarks of other American regionalist works, with a heartland vacillating between idyllic and apocalyptic, depending on the political climes and the inclemency of the sky. Kingman's style was literally all over the map, from the New Deal-era WPA commissions to paint dinosaurs on post office ceilings, to the yellow cornfields of the Platte valley rattling in late-harvest fallow, to the mountain vistas of his beloved West.

While people seldom populate Kingman's canvases, his paintings never fail to evoke a kind of humanity.

"It was his philosophy that art cannot be held apart from everyday life and the historical development of a people," wrote Laurance Hoagland, president of the Joslyn, on the passing of Kingman in 1975.

A mural of the North Atlantic—painted by Kingman and cartographer Richard Edes Harrison and installed in 1948—hung over the entrance in the lobby of the *New York Times* for 40 years. "Every Day Is a Fresh Beginning — Every Morn Is the World Made New," read the accompanying excerpt from the Sarah Chauncey Woolsey poem, "Begin Again." When the *Times* moved into new headquarters in 2007, the 147-square-foot artwork was rolled up and stuck in a basement. In time, it was rescued, now hanging in a branch of the Omaha Public Library.

"The mural's artistry — stunningly realistic for a generation that had never seen Earth from space — was looking out of date," wrote Times Metro reporter David Dunlap.



Eugene and Elizabeth Kingman, 1938.

"What's that?" said my oldest son, squinting south toward New Mexico.

From the Park Point overlook atop Mesa Verde, white clouds billow above the valley floor, begging to be volleyed. Montezuma County, the southwestern most in Colorado, spreads north in a carpet of pasture and cropland; to the south, a smattering of mesas and mountain peaks. Out there, alone, stands Shiprock, a cathedral-like outcropping (the geologic term of art is "monadnock") more than 1500 feet off the desert floor, and visible to a curious tween with a roving eye.

It was here, on a tour of the Ancestral Puebloan ruins, that Eugene Kingman found love.

"Mom and Dad met on one of her guided tours of the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde," Mixie Kingman Eddy wrote for *The Living New Deal* archival project. "According to Mom, it was her storytelling around the campfire that led Dad to fall in love with her. When she resigned from her ranger job a year later to marry him, all of her park colleagues (mostly men) signed her ranger hat."

After Kingman retired his post at the Joslyn, he and Elizabeth relocated to Lubbock, where in 1969 he became the first director of the new Museum of Texas Tech University, founded in 1929 as the West Texas Museum. Kingman could have been describing the Texas Panhandle when he said, upon taking the reins as director of Philbrook three decades earlier:

"It'll be a story of the southwest plains—a history of this territory by and for the people. It won't be a museum. It'll be a place to come and stay and return to again and again."

Eugene Kingman died in Lubbock on 20 February 1975. After a memorial service at St. Paul's on the Plains, Kingman's ashes were laid to rest at Swan Point Cemetery in his native Providence. Elizabeth "Betty" Kingman kept working well into her 80s, collaborating with a team of archaeological scholars at the School of American Research. She died in 2005.

More than 75 years since the Museum's opening, in many ways Philbrook still travels down the path mapped out by Kingman, striving daily to be "a place to come and stay and return to again and again."

Then and Now





Much like Eugene Kingman, our new Philbrook Director found a path into the world of museums as a working artist. Scott Stulen has shown his work at a variety of venues including Weisman Art Museum (The University of Minnesota), Ebers Moore Gallery (Chicago) and Rochester Art Center (Rochester, MN). When not attending to Philbrook duties or his two young children, Scott still finds time to return to his artistic roots in the studio. It all comes back to art.

Learn more about Scott and his work at www.scottstulen.com.

Top:
Scott Stulen in his studio.

Bottom:
Scott Stulen
It's Very Beautiful and Very Cold, 2010