

# Mac Schweitzer

Mid-Century Expressions of the Sonoran Desert

Ann Lane Hedlund, PhD

*I want people to wake up to the beauties of the desert as it is.*

Mac Schweitzer, 1952



**Javelina, circa 1954.**

Ink or tempera with stenciling and sgraffito on poster board (homemade scratchboard), 8½ x 11 inches.



**Mac Schweitzer (1921-1962) in front of her illustrated map of Arizona for the American Red Cross, Tucson, 1950.**

In 1946, Mac (Mary Alice Cox) Schweitzer arrived in Tucson at the age of twenty-five. After briefly living in town on Tyndall Street, she and her husband John "Jack" Schweitzer and their young son Kit moved into the western Tucson Mountains off Anklam Road, where they lived in a simple bungalow owned by Alice Vail. Surrounded by acres of open desert, Mac set up her painting table in front of the kitchen window and commenced to study the desert and its wild creatures. This was nothing that her formal training at the Cleveland School of Art in Ohio had prepared her for and just the sort of thing the intrepid artist was ready to embrace.

The mid-twentieth-century modernist art movement was just rising in the Southwest when Mac arrived in Arizona. Earlier, East and West coast modernists—involved in visual, verbal, dance and other art forms—rejected traditional realism, sought dramatic means of expression, experimented with personal experience, and embraced abstraction. Naturally drawn to these approaches, Mac explored such forms, too. Her stylized figures, blocky and curved shapes, indigo and earthy tones, and varied media all form hallmarks of mid-century design.

In the two decades after she left Ohio, Mac took part in more than 150 events and honors throughout the

Southwest and beyond, including many one-person and juried shows. Between 1948 and 1961 her work received eleven awards at the prestigious art shows of the Arizona State Fair in Phoenix. For a time, she illustrated weekly news columns with images of George L. Mountainlion and his desert buddies at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

Mac gravitated to galleries that embraced the "new" modernism and collectors were drawn to her style. Architect Nicholas Sakellar built his family's striking modern home on Westward Look Drive in 1960 and hung Mac's painting, *Grandmother* (1961), there. The modernist house built in the same year for Mr. and Mrs. Thomas J. Via showcased two of Mac's paintings of Navajo life. The western desert setting of William K. Richey's home, a horse property on River Road, displayed a large landscape painting by Mac over the fireplace. Her work appeared in the Tucson foothills home of pace setters Richard and Nancy Hughes, major collectors who owned at least thirteen works by the artist. Harris Ackerman, Pima County Attorney and civic leader, and his wife Vivian, a noted cultural beacon, acquired as least two of Mac's pictures of Navajo women for their home, while June Johnson Caldwell ("J.C.") Martin was drawn to a stylized image of a moth alighting on a bare rock.



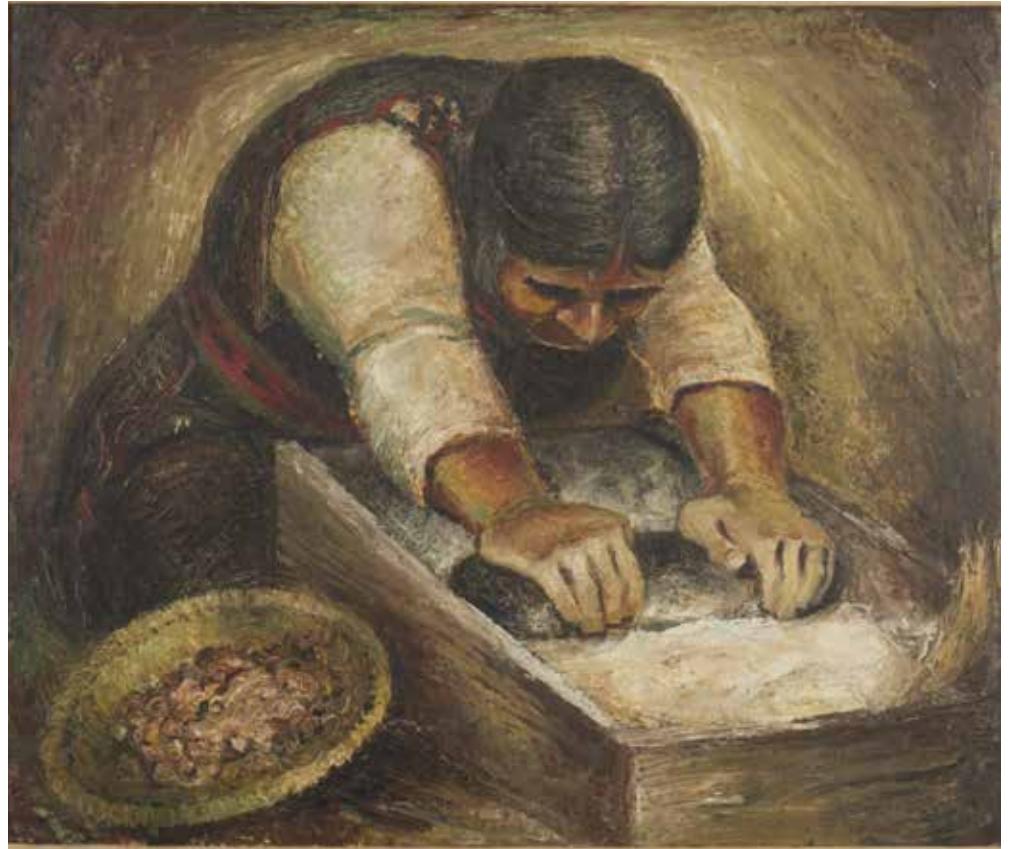
**The Vail homestead off Anklam Road, Tucson, 1949.** Photo by Alfred A. Cohn.



**Armadillo, 1957.** Ink on pebble mat board, 9 3/4 x 21 3/4 inches.



**Prickly Pears, 1957.** Ink and watercolor on pebble mat board, 9 3/4 x 17 1/2 inches. Private collection, Tucson.



**Corn Woman (Grinding Corn), circa 1954.** Oil (thick impasto) on Masonite, 19 x 23 inches.

Mac's dynamic artistic career in Arizona is profiled and illustrated in the new book, *Mac Schweitzer: A Southwest Maverick and Her Art* (Sentinel Peak, University of Arizona Press, 2025). The following passages adapted from chapter 4 emphasize the rise of Tucson as a mid-century arts colony, with Mac Schweitzer as a leading participant.

#### A RISING CAREER (1946-1958)

Mac once said to a reporter that she "never painted anything worthwhile" until she came to Tucson. In the Sonoran Desert she found a place where her observations of nature and its inhabitants could flourish in drawings, paintings, and prints. In the city known as the Old Pueblo, she discovered a lively arts colony that welcomed contributions from a talented young artist like herself.

In a slim catalog for the 1998 exhibition, *Tucson's Early Moderns: 1945-1965*, at the UA Museum of Art, Peter Bermingham and Maurice Grossman summarize the story of Tucson as a thriving mid-twentieth-century arts colony. Their twenty-one brief profiles of artists including Mac characterize the impressive yet little-recognized modernist movement in the Tucson area. Julie Sasse's 2023 history of the century-old Tucson Museum of Art provides a more ample account of this art community's dynamism, drawn from a wealth of local newspaper and archival resources. Many of these sources include stories and images of Mac, her work, and her colleagues in the Old Pueblo.

#### Tucson Arts Organizations at Mid-Century

An offshoot of the Tucson Woman's Club, the Tucson Fine Arts Association (TFAA) formed in 1924 to promote local arts by presenting exhibitions, lectures, and other events. In early years, TFAA members were divided almost equally between artists (architects, craftsmen, painters, photographers, and sculptors) and art patrons (private collectors and businesspeople). Each January the organization held an "open" show, which was not juried but offered both Exhibitors' Choice and Popular Choice awards to entrants. The Temple of Music and Art at 330 South Scott Avenue first provided gallery space. By the 1940s, TFAA shows took place at the Tucson Fine Arts Gallery in the basement of the Chamber of Commerce, at 80 South Stone Avenue.

In 1946, the Tucson Independent Artists Group (TIAG) formed to counter a trend toward exclusionary juried and invitational shows, the aim being "a non-political, non-categorical, non-profit association." Announcing that "anyone's work will be exhibited without judgment by the group," it apparently took a cue from artists in Taos, where the Society of Independent Artists had promoted an open door policy since the first decades of the century, rather than using a jury.

While still a newcomer to Tucson, Mac eagerly united with the community of artists and patrons who worked to promote the city's art scene. She joined both the TIAG



**High Stud (Wild Stallion), 1948.** Oil (thick impasto) on Masonite or canvas board with linen backing, 21 x 18 inches. Private Collection, Tucson.



**Thorny Cactus, 1957.**  
Ink on Arches paper.  
21½ × 10 ¾ inches.  
Collection of Thomas D. White.



**Brahma Bulls, 1955.** Ink and watercolor on pebble mat board, 10½ × 13¼ inches.

and TFAA, the cost of the latter's membership being "the dollars you can afford to give." From November 1947 to January 1948, Mac showed two oil paintings—*Shootin' the Breeze* (1947) and *Catalina Torrent* (1946)—and other works in *New Look at Art*, the first TIAG open show.

Although she later joined professional, independently run galleries, Mac began by displaying work at other notable Tucson venues. As early as March 1947, she showed "landscapes and portraits of children as well as her horse pictures" in a one-person show at the historic and widely admired Arizona Inn at 2200 East Elm Street. In April, La Tienda, a shop at 52 West Alameda Street, exhibited her paintings and drawings. And in July of the same year, Mac joined eighteen other artists to show at the Southern Arizona Bank and Trust in Tucson.

The Tucson Festival of the Arts was founded in 1950 and sponsored juried and invitational art shows through 1996, with a growing roster of public events and educational programs each spring. This nonprofit organization (unaffiliated with TFAA) aimed to "weave together by the imperishable bond of artistry the many-colored threads

that make up the civilization of the Southwest," and further, "to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the Southwest and regional arts and crafts," according to its brochure. In contrast to TFAA and TIAG, which were artist-centric, the festival committee focused on tourism. Nevertheless, the groups occasionally collaborated and often shared the same exhibition venues.

Hoping to catch the attention of winter visitors, the Tucson Festival Society organized the first festival for March 25 to April 8, 1951. A lively series of events run by volunteers celebrated the visual arts, theater, music and dance, scholarship and writing, and architecture. As with the TFAA and TIAG shows, Mac became a regular at the annual Festival Society exhibits.

Through their artistic contributions, committee work, and volunteerism, Mac and her colleagues regularly participated in the groundwork that became one of Tucson's most notable art institutions—the Tucson Museum of Art. In 1962, TFAA underwent a formal name change to the Tucson Art Center Inc. In 1975, the Tucson Art Center at 235 West Alameda Street officially



**Hopi Mesa, undated (post-1955).** Watercolor on pebble mat board, 9½ x 25½ inches. Private collection, Tucson.

reincorporated and became a museum with plans for a permanent collection and ongoing exhibitions. The institution endures today.

#### Museums, Galleries, Awards, and Reviews

Concurrently with showing at the downtown Tucson nonprofits—the annual TFAA, TIAG, and festival events—Mac also showed paintings, drawings, and prints in independent professional galleries. In 1948, the newly opened 261 Gallery and Workshop at 261 North Court Street invited Mac to join as a working member of its stable. Ruby Warren Newby (1887–1952), the highly respected former head of the art department at Rollins College in Orlando, Florida, and educator Virginia Callies founded the gallery as a nonprofit fine arts cooperative. Associated with the modern-trending TIAG artists, the downtown space formed a lively center of activity for four years.

In 1952, the artist shifted from 261 to Jack Petty's Studio Gallery in the bohemian neighborhood of Ash Alley, where many friends and colleagues congregated. Called "Tucson's Greenwich Village," the one-square block boasted "restaurants, western wear shops, silversmiths, a saddler, a picture framing shop, weavers, lead soldier casting, art studios and outdoor gallery, coffee shop and folk singing venue," as well as the Tucson Press Club.

#### "Down the Path to Abstract Painting"

Working within a growing arts colony prompted Mac to articulate her views on occasion. In an article published in 1952, she explained some of her tenets:

*I paint pictures for the same reason a composer sets down a melody or an author writes a book—to capture the thoughts running around in my head and crystallize them in paint on canvas. That is the only way I can express myself to my own satisfaction.*

*Most people who have followed my painting may not realize that I am leading them down the path to abstract painting. The subject matter is recognizable so far, but the [pure, nonobjective] patterns and lines are definitely there.*

*Through years of "looking and seeing," which is the most important part of my trade, I have learned to look past the obvious and see the subtle colors, interesting shapes, patterns and textures. Rarely do I paint "on the spot" any more for it is not a realistic picture that I wish to produce, but impressions and moods. . . .*

*An artist has to paint a subject in a manner which a camera cannot duplicate.*

*(Mac Schweitzer "Purpose of Painting is to Make You Think," Tucson Daily Citizen, June 16, 1952, 24).*

#### NOTES:

Excerpts adapted from *Mac Schweitzer: A Southwest Maverick and Her Art* by Ann Lane Hedlund, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona. © 2025, The Arizona Board of Regents. (Footnotes have been removed here; full references are available in the book.)

Illustrations are courtesy of Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West unless otherwise noted.

A major one-person exhibition, "Mac Schweitzer: A Southwest Maverick Rediscovered," will feature the artist's diverse works at Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West from October 18, 2025 until September 30, 2026.