



Drawing by  
Guy Coheleach

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Founded 1904

**Pasadena Audubon Society**  
A Chapter of National Audubon Society

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To bring the excitement of birds to our community through birding,  
education and the conservation of bird habitats.

September 2023- October 2023

## AVIAN ART

### Colluding to Trick the Eye: Birds in the Paintings of Mary Kay West

An Orange-breasted Bunting perched on a blue-and-white Chinese porcelain vase overflowing with hydrangeas, a Blue Flycatcher eyeing some ripe persimmons from atop a silver goblet, and a dazzling pair of Hooded Orioles investigating some pomegranates bursting open and releasing ripe ruby seeds. These are some of the characters I encountered early this summer at an art opening in Pasadena. The gallery was American Legacy Fine Arts on Linda Vista Avenue, and these lively birds populated the paintings of North Carolina-born artist Mary Kay West, whose paintings are so masterfully rendered with realistic detail that I instinctively stood very still as I gazed at these paintings – so as not to scare the creatures off!

For me, West’s work was a double treat. Professionally, I am an art historian specializing in Asian art and was a curator at Pacific Asia Museum for almost a decade. Personally, I have recently become a bird enthusiast and photographer, sparked when I moved back to Pasadena in August 2020 and failed to capture pictures of Red-whiskered Bulbuls on my phone. I soon broke down and bought myself a “proper camera” and joined the Pasadena Audubon Society. Increasingly, I find my passion for art and birds colliding, as when I discovered West’s paintings.

Mary Kay West apprenticed with renowned artist Benjamin F. Long IV. Long, who opened an atelier in her hometown of Asheville in the early 1990s to carry on the classical realist tradition. She completed her studies in 1994 and then moved to Santa Barbara, and has lived and worked in California since then, showing her work extensively. Her still lives, often painted in oil on panel in a classical realist manner are infused with a delightful playfulness. Her trompe l’oeil (“fool the eye”) paintings, such as *The Cabinet*, use familiar household items as a recess or inner space for the three-dimensional effect required to fool the eye. In many of these paintings, birds play a key role in this artistic trickery. “The bird is a male Red-headed Fody,” West explains. “He is included in the story not just to add life to the stillness, but as a dimension that is coming forward towards the viewer.”



*Pomegranates and Orioles* by Mary Kay West, oil on panel, 24” x 16.875”  
Courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts and the artist

exotic birds in West’s paintings charmed many guests at the exhibition. I saw several people stepping back and forward and then to the side to view the paintings from different angles. “Looking at a Mary Kay West trompe l’oeil painting brings immense joy and instantly uplifts one’s spirit,” says Elaine Adams, Director of American Legacy Fine Arts. “The depiction of beautiful birds thriving and contentedly inhabiting our interior space evokes a strong sense of connection, allowing us to empathize and share in their freedom.”



*The Cabinet* by Mary Kay West, oil on panel, 18” x 14”  
Courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts and the artist

Meher McArthur

Mary Kay West’s work can be viewed at American Legacy Fine Arts on their website (<https://www.americanlegacyfinearts.com/artist/mary-kay-west>) and in person by appointment (626.577.7733).

## CONSERVATION & ADVOCACY, PART 2

### Help ProjectPhoenix Understand the Effects of Wildfire Smoke on Birds

In the age of megafires, people and wildlife are increasingly exposed to hazardous smoke. Although birds are highly sensitive to any air pollution, we know very little about how smoke affects them. Science-based information is critical to inform bird conservation efforts in a rapidly warming world.

ProjectPhoenix engages community scientists across California to monitor birds during the fire season (August–October), providing valuable data on bird activity when wildfires are likely to impact air quality. Community volunteers conduct weekly, 10-minute, stationary surveys at a location of their choosing and submit their observations to eBird (see below). Data collection is ongoing through October 31, 2023. This information will be shared with decision makers in our state to inform wildlife conservation policy.

Collecting data for ProjectPhoenix is very easy! First, choose your monitoring site. Your site could be a yard, park, or city street – any space that is accessible and convenient for you. We encourage our volunteers to choose sites they find personally meaningful, such as their home or community center. Your site

The realism, cleverness and presence of exquisite and often

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