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A Long-Lost Classic of Texas Art Was Found in a Janitor's Closet— and Now It's Getting Its Own Museum Show

The painting by Audley Dean Nicols is headed to San Antonio's Witte Museum in April.

Sarah Cascone, February 6, 2019



Audley Dean Nicol, *View of El Paso at Sunset* (1925), detail. Courtesy of the El Paso Independent School District.

It's hard to imagine how Audley Dean Nicol's 22-foot-long painting of an El Paso sunset went unnoticed in a school janitor's closet for years. But somehow, *View of El Paso at Sunset*, a hallmark of early Texan art, spent years languishing at the El Paso High School, all but forgotten. The painting of lilac-hued peaks, set against a glowing pink and yellow sky of puffy clouds, was originally commissioned in 1925 for the First National Bank in Downtown El Paso. It was then purchased by a local man who gifted it to El Paso High, which put it on view until 1972, when a group of alumni raised money for its restoration—an effort that did not go as planned.

Instead, the work wound up in the custodian's closet. Fortunately, the El Paso Independent School District eventually realized its error and brought the historical treasure out of the shadows. It has been on loan to the El Paso Museum of Art since 2001 and, this April, will travel to the Witte Museum in San Antonio for the exhibition "The Art of Texas: 250 Years."



Audley Dean Nicols, *Desert at Dusk* (1928). Courtesy of Bonhams Los Angeles. "Audley Dean Nicols is one of the most celebrated early Texas artists," Kevin Burns, an assistant curator at the El Paso Museum of Art, told the *El Paso Times*. "He was really well-known for painting these large-scale landscapes of the West Texas desert."

Nichols, who moved to El Paso in 1919 and lived there for the rest of his life, rendered the desert sands in surprisingly vivid tones. "The so-called gray of the desert is a mistake," he once told the *El Paso Times*. "The desert is everything but gray. There are clean fresh blues in the skies,

pinks and yellows in the sunset, opalescent purple, rose, and lavender in the distant mountains, dull greens of every shade in the vegetation, and reds and yellows in the rocks and earth—but never gray.”



Audley Dean Nicol, *View of El Paso at Sunset* (1925). Courtesy of the El Paso Independent School District.

The artist’s record at auction is just \$35,000, according to the [artnet Price Database](#), set in 2017 at Bonhams Los Angeles for *Desert at Dusk*, a small 16-by-24-inch painting. But *View of El Paso* is considered a public asset and so, at least for now, it’s staying put in the public eye.