The history of the Laguna art colony is an important part of the cultural legacy of Laguna Beach and California. Interest in California Impressionism remains significant due, in large part, to the efforts of local art museums and other cultural heritage institutions.

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Laguna Beach has one of the most beautiful shorelines in California, if not the world. It is situated on a large sandy cove that is surrounded to the north and south by high bluffs of immense beauty, and to the east by striking hills with canyons between. All of that is complimented by the unique light in Laguna, a light that enhances the scenery tremendously.

The landscape painters who first came here around 1900 had found paradise, as it was a perfect environment for impressionist painting. They came back often and many established their studios and homes in Laguna. Artists like Edgar Payne, Elsie Payne, William Wendt, Frank Cuprien, Anna Hills, Guy Rose, Granville Redmond, George Gardner Symons, Jack Wilkinson Smith, Isaac Frazee and Norman St. Clair were moved by the beauty and the spirituality of the natural surroundings and their art reflects this.

As the Laguna artists gained fame in the early decades of the twentieth century, they organized an active Art Gallery in 1918 and, shortly after, the Laguna Beach Art Association was formed. It became apparent almost immediately that the Art Association would quickly outgrow the Art Gallery space and that a new, larger, more permanent space would be required. The successful effort at locating land and funding involved the artists and the entire Laguna Beach community. The opening of the new gallery took place in February 1929.

Fundraising for the new gallery and to support the Art Association involved numerous strategies, including pageant plays, which were the precursors of the Pageant of the Masters. Most of the funds that kept the Association going through the early 1930s were generated by auctions of donated paintings. Through the second half of the 1930s, money was generated by the annual, week-long Festival of the Arts, which was established in 1932. Nine Festival of the Arts were produced in various locations around Laguna Beach between 1932 and 1940. In 1941, the Irvine Bowl was built and became the permanent location of the Pageant of the Masters and the Festival of the Arts.