

CLOSER LOOK

A Riverscape, From Higher Ground

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

IN 1951, a decade before Wayne Thiebaud became famous for his still lifes of cakes and pies, he had his first one-man museum show at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, where he had recently moved. The Crocker has been closely linked to the artist ever since, mounting several large solo exhibitions of his work over the years and letting him riffle through its storage rooms for inspiration. Now, with the museum reopening on Oct. 10 after a major expansion, Mr. Thiebaud is returning the favor with a gift: his new painting “River Intersection,” based on the snaking waterways and cultivated fields of the Sacramento River Delta. Since the mid-1990s, when he began a series devoted to this landscape, Mr. Thiebaud has found the palette and patterns offered by the delta region to be a rich source of inspiration.

He began the painting by walking around the fields and levees — sometimes climbing them to get higher vantage points — and making sketches and studies that he later re-configured from memory back in the studio. “‘River Inter-

section’ tries to express various seasons, various times of the day, various vantage points, and then tries to get the thing to come together like a whole,” he said. “For me, painting has a lot to do with the exercise of empathy, where you have to believe that you’re walking the path or under the trees, that you are somehow able to transfer yourself into that picture.”

Scott Shields, the museum’s chief curator and organizer of “Wayne Thiebaud: Homecoming,” which will run until Nov. 28, said: “A river scene was the piece of the puzzle that we lacked for our collection. Thiebaud chooses things he knows really well. That’s true of the landscapes, it’s true of the people. He loved his pies. It was the way he started, and I don’t think he’s ever gotten away from that.”

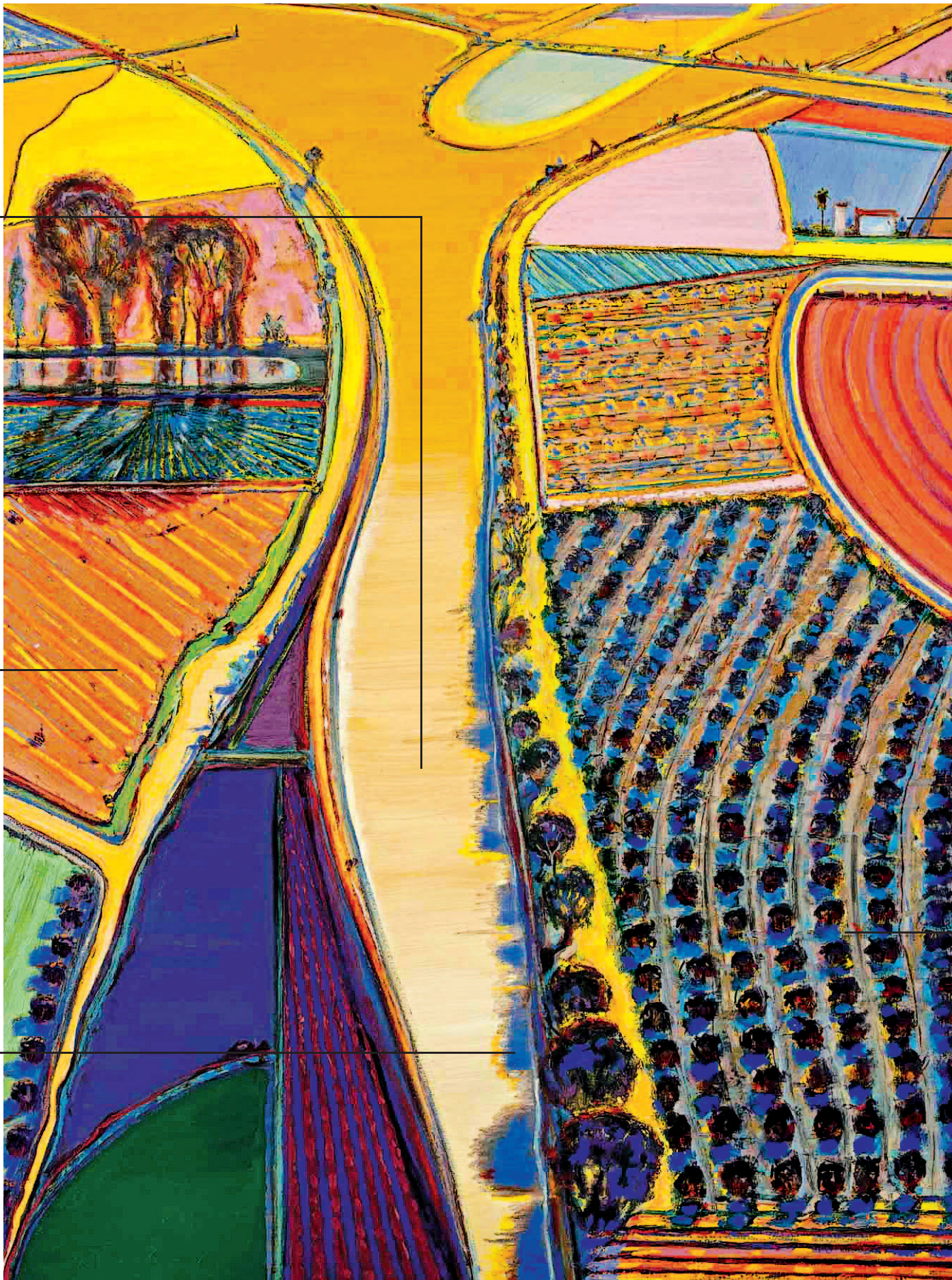
ONLINE: WAYNE THIEBAUD

More images and past coverage of the artist’s work: [nytimes.com/design](https://www.nytimes.com/design)

PLAYING WITH PERSPECTIVE Mr. Thiebaud creates a vertiginous sense of space by suppressing the horizon line and seamlessly shifting between aerial mapping and a more standard vanishing-point perspective. The lower half of the river is shown from above while the upper part seems to tip back in space as it forks. The flat, patterned fields are pictured from a bird’s-eye view, while trees pop out, casting shadows, as though seen from varying side angles. “I’m orchestrating with as much variety and tempo as I can,” Mr. Thiebaud said.

AFFINITY FOR LANDSCAPE Besides his familiarity with this California farmland for most of his adult life, Mr. Thiebaud spent some of his childhood on his family ranch in Southern Utah, where he plowed and harvested the fields. “The wonderful patterns and design motifs that crop up in agriculture fascinate me,” he said. Mr. Shields said of “River Intersection”: “It’s almost like he’s tending the fields with his brushwork, echoing the shape of the cultivated land.”

PALETTE Mr. Thiebaud uses the interaction of his high-keyed palette — juxtaposing warm tones with cool — to create a sense of light emanating from the painting. The mocha hue of the river seems to glow against the melancholic blue shadows of the trees lining the river’s edge. Typical of his work, Mr. Thiebaud made halos around these shadows with bits of other colors to produce visual vibrations.



INFLUENCES Pierre Bonnard was front of mind while the artist was working. “Bonnard uses color like he’s got a bucket full of hot coals and ice cubes,” Mr. Thiebaud said. The use of golden light and diagrammatic, maplike space in the painting is also informed by Mr. Thiebaud’s longtime interest in Byzantine illuminated manuscripts. In a nod to Chinese landscape painting, he inserted tiny objects to create disparities in scale, like the little farmhouse near the upper right corner and mechanical farm tools that read as specks in the fields.

THEMATIC LINKS Similar to the exhilarating perspectives in his cityscapes of San Francisco — another man-made landscape — here Mr. Thiebaud lets the viewer soar over the river, though in the earlier series he often situates the viewer at the foot of his precipitous streets. The repetition of the planted rows and play of shapes in the quiltlike farmland echo the serial march and geometry of the cakes and pies in his signature still lifes. Whether displaying desserts or the bountiful California landscape, his work exudes a quintessential kind of American abundance.