

A Florilegium of the Historic Joseph Wood Krutch Garden at the University of Arizona



In 1951, Joseph Wood Krutch, a noted New York City drama critic and Columbia University literature professor, decided to spend a 15-month sabbatical in Tucson, Arizona. At that time, he was already recognized as part of the East Coast's group of influential American "Men of Letters" with many books in print, including three widely read biographies of Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, and Samuel Johnson. By the end of his life, in 1970, he would have some thirty-five books to his credit.

While in Tucson, Joseph Wood Krutch (pronounced KROOCH) became fascinated by the Desert Southwest, partially through the influence of the great Western conservationist Aldo Leopold, and by human kinship with the land. What followed was his extraordinary book, *The Desert Year*, in which he describes his immersion in the desert. He came to believe that only by immersing himself in the land and its plants and animals, rather than merely by looking at them as a tourist, could he truly see and know it. As Krutch said, "There is all the difference in the world between looking at something and living with it." (*The Desert Year*, p. 3*)

Lessons from the Desert

Coming from the East Coast, Krutch realized that the desert was not universally appealing in the same way that murmuring brooks and smiling green fields might be. *The Desert Year* records his thought that, "To some it seems merely stricken, and even those of us who love it recognize that its beauty is no easy one. It suggests patience and struggle and endurance. It is courageous and happy, not easy or luxurious." (p. 9) Once immersed, he recognized the challenge and importance of continuous observation in order to actually see the desert life around him. He asserts, "It is not easy to live in that continuous awareness of things which alone is true living. Even those who make a parade of their conviction that sunset, rain, and growth of a seed are daily miracles are not usually so much impressed by them as they urge others to be. The faculty of wonder tires easily and a miracle which happens everyday is a miracle no longer, no matter how many times one tells oneself that it ought to be." (p. 37) His assertion is ever more relevant for contemporary urban societies, in which the combination of urbanization and its distractions easily obscure the delicate relationship between people and the planet.

Living on an upper bajada in the Tucson area, Krutch marveled that in the desert all life finds the dryness to be normal and all life lives contently within a "universe-as-it-ought-to-be" (p. 20), a dryness that creates a natural equilibrium in plant spacing. Plant life in the desert is not crowded, such as you find in temperate forests or in the tropics. "One does not push one's way through undergrowth; one strolls almost as in a garden. . . . roots spread far and shallowly. . . . [It's] hard to believe that this untouched country has not been thinned by some human gardener." (p.23) The natural equilibrium in the desert creates a curious air of being a park rather than a wilderness. This natural balance of desert elements that Krutch observed stood in sharp contrast to the spacing of things in towns and cities of Krutch's ordinary life.

Krutch was one of the first Establishment writers to draw attention to applying this wisdom of the desert, reflected in both plants and animals, to our own adaptation

within the world. He saw in the palo verde and ocotillo dropping their leaves during the dry seasons, in cacti storing water, and in the blooming of wildflowers only after winter rains a model of necessity for adaptation. He especially highlighted the ocotillo as expressing “the spirit of the Sonoran Desert—one which combines oddness of form and habit with the courage to flourish under seemingly impossible conditions, and which combines the defensive fierceness of thorns with the spectacular, unexpected beauty of brilliant flowers.” (p. 209) As plants and animals have learned to endure desert austerity, so should we. Rather than change the environment by digging wells, channeling streams, and manipulating landscapes to replicate another place, he asked if we couldn’t learn to live with the luxury the desert offers just as it is.

Many of the “artificial technological jungles” in which we live do not allow a space for the natural world to exist. In the desert we are confronted with the importance of balance in our own relationship to nature. While alone on a mountaintop looking down at the desert, Krutch realized also that the space and resiliency of the land below him offered the chance to reflect not only on himself but also on man in general. The question “What is Man?”, which occupied writers of the early- and mid-twentieth century, brought new answers when Krutch asked it here. He was determined to remember this profound lesson when he returned to the city: “I shall be reminded . . . how whole acres . . . in which nothing grows have been turned into a desert far more absolute than any I have ever seen in the Southwest, and I shall wonder whether man himself can live well in a place where nothing else can live at all.” (p. 184)

When *The Desert Year* was published in 1954, after Krutch returned to New York, it met with wide acclaim and was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for Natural History. In addition to *The Measure of Man*, for which he won the National Book Award in 1955, more books of natural history and conservation followed, among them *The Voice of the Desert* (1954), *The Great Chain of Life* (1956), *The Grand Canyon: Today and All Its Yesterdays* (1957), and *The Forgotten Peninsula* (1961). Yet the impact of *The Desert Year* and its message were perhaps the most significant, particularly on later writers

such as Edward Abbey in his influential *Desert Solitaire* and on the principles motivating the environmental movement today.

Preserving the Lessons of Joseph Wood Krutch on the UA Campus

As the message of harmony between human and nature has spread in recent years, urban landscapes reflecting these principles are increasingly abundant. One of the oldest, continually maintained gardens of this type, however, began on the University of Arizona campus in 1891 as an educational display garden, planted by Professor James Toumey. Relocated, expanded, contracted, and expanded again over the years, in 1980 President John Schafer approved a request to name the garden in honor of Joseph Wood Krutch to perpetuate his legacy of encouraging the preservation of our natural environment in the midst of urbanization. It is now under the care of the Campus Arboretum and maintains more than 60 plant species. With the Sonoran Desert Florilegium Program, the Campus Arboretum has embarked on establishing a florilegium of the Krutch Garden to document the scientific and aesthetic value of this historic native plant collection. A florilegium (plural florilegia) is a book of flower and plant drawings historically established by royal and wealthy European patrons to celebrate and document the plants of their gardens. Currently, florilegia are collections of botanical works of art documenting plants either in a specific garden or in a specific geographical region. The Sonoran Desert Florilegium Program (SDFP), under the administrative umbrella of the Tucson Cactus and Succulent Society, is the premier effort of its kind organized to create, collect, exhibit, and store botanical images for research, documentation, education, and aesthetic appreciation.

By undertaking this project to have all plant species in the Krutch Garden illustratively documented, the Campus Arboretum will be responsible for raising the funds to purchase all resulting artwork. The SDFP is recruiting artists to participate in the Florilegium's creation as well as assisting the Arboretum with fundraising. The artwork will be accessioned into Special Collections at the UA Library where they will be archived and permanently stored. Special Collections will exhibit them in the Science

Library and other campus locations and make them available for public loan elsewhere. Artists retain copyrights to the originals, but Special Collections and the Campus Arboretum will be permitted the option to create digital copies of the artwork for other display purposes. Each piece of botanical art will conform to detailed specifications. To learn more or to donate to this remarkable continuation of Joseph Wood Krutch's legacy in Arizona, contact the UA Campus Arboretum (email: infoarboretum@ag.arizona.edu or [520] 621-7074).

* From Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Desert Year*, First University of Iowa Press edition, 2010.

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