

COVER STORY



GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY; NPS/MICHAEL QUINN

**SO NEAR
YET SO FAR**
Just 10 miles
distant as the
condor flies, the
North Rim is a
215-mile drive
from the
canyon's more
heavily visited
South Rim

A luminous landscape that grips you like no other

In midafternoon at the South Rim, it was hard to believe that Americans once had to be encouraged to visit the Grand Canyon. Daytrippers, fresh off the train after a two-hour journey from Williams, pouted at the end of selfie sticks; hikers sweated the last yards up the Bright Angel Trail; diners in the El Tovar Hotel gazed through the windows over the crumbs of their club sandwiches; and browsers in the gift shop dithered over the Grand Canyon thirstystone coasters, the Grand Canyon prickly pear taffy, and the beige cotton Grand Canyon National Park bandanna, complete with topographic map of the Colorado River, that carver of the chasm.

A few browsers, this one included, paused by a postcard stand, where offerings included reproductions of two watercolours. Even at seven inches by five, they were impressive: images of near-photographic detail, subtly balancing light and shade and conveying a powerful sense of the canyon's depth. I didn't need to turn to the back to see that they were by Gunnar Widforss. He had brought me to Arizona, just as, in the Twenties and Thirties, he brought thousands of others.

It is almost a century since the Grand Canyon was designated a national park – on Feb 26 1919, three years after the creation of the National Park Service itself, under the directorship of Stephen Mather, businessman, outdoorsman and born promoter. It was Mather who



SPLENDID ISOLATION
A viewpoint on the Widforss Trail, above; the Grand Canyon Lodge, above right

set Widforss on his way to becoming “the painter of the national parks”. Widforss was making a reputation but not much of a living by the age of 41, when he left his native Stockholm in December 1920 intending to travel via the United States to Japan. By the time he reached Los Angeles, he was short of cash, so he did what he had long done in Europe: he found scenic places busy with tourists where he could sell his landscape paintings.

By March 1921 he had reached

Yosemite Valley in California, where he bumped into Mather one morning. Mather needed someone to show Americans what there was worth seeing and saving in their country's newly protected places; Widforss needed work. Over the next decade, the Swede (who would become a US citizen in 1929) painted pretty much all the national parks in the west. His paintings were everywhere – from railroad company brochures to the galleries of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC.

No landscape gripped him as the canyon did. He wasn't the first notable artist to paint it (Thomas Moran and William Holmes preceded him), but he was alone in making the place his home, giving his address as “Grand Canyon”.

And yet, less than a century on, though the North Rim has a Widforss Trail and a Widforss Point, the man himself is forgotten. Well, not quite. He has two notable champions. One is a fellow Swede, Fredrik Sjöberg, who with his 2016 book *The Art of Flight* has paid entertaining tribute to Widforss's role in that great American project, as he puts it, to place “virgin reserves... here and there throughout the country, like Sundays in a landscape of weekdays”.

The other champion is Alan

ESSENTIALS

Michael Kerr was a guest of Arizona Office of Tourism (visitarizona.com) and flew from London to Phoenix with British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com; returns from £597). He stayed at Tempe Mission Palms (001 480 894 1400; missionpalms.com; double rooms from \$237/£183 next month); the Residence Inn Flagstaff (001 928 440 5499; marriott.com; from \$136); Thunderbird Lodge (grandcanyonlodges.com; from \$234); and Grand Canyon Lodge North Rim (001 877 386 4383; grandcanyonforever.com; from \$141).

Further reading: *Arizona & The Grand Canyon* (Moon Guides); *How the Canyon Became Grand* by Stephen J Pyne (Penguin).

For further information about the artist Gunnar Widforss, see gunnarwidforss.org.



Petersen, curator of fine arts at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, a silver-haired, silver-bearded man of 63 with the lean frame of a regular cyclist. In 2009, he organised the first Widforss exhibition in 40 years. He is cataloguing the artist's works (currently more than 1,200) and planning – when he gets a break from teaching – to write a biography. When we met in Flagstaff, one of the tourist gateways to the canyon, he told me: “My mission over the past 10 years has been to get Gunnar greater recognition.”

Thanks to Sjöberg's book and Petersen's writing, I was well acquainted with the Widforss story. How he had been born in 1879 as Gunnar Mauritz Widforss, one of 13 children whose father Mauritz was a

shopkeeper dealing in guns and hunting clothes and whose mother was an amateur painter. (The shop, incidentally, was bought in 1968 by the womenswear chain Hennes, which renamed itself Hennes & Mauritz – now better known as H&M – and added men and children to its customer base.) How, when he fetched up at the Grand Canyon, he traded paintings with the company running the El Tovar Hotel (one hangs in the lobby still) for a room in a staff dormitory and meals at Bright Angel Lodge. And how, having been warned by a doctor that he shouldn't be working at altitude, he resolved to wrench himself away from the canyon and his friends and, on the drive to bid them goodbye, had a heart attack. He died on Nov 30 1934, aged 55.

Until I arrived in Flagstaff, though, and joined Petersen in an archive room at the museum, everything I had seen of Widforss's work had been a reproduction. But here were nearly 20 paintings, mostly of the canyon but also including depictions of a park in Colorado and cypress trees in Monterey in California. There was a thrill in seeing the luminous layers of his watercolours on an original.

New to me, too, was the story of how Petersen's and Widforss's careers had become entwined.

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