



**OIL-ON-WOOD** paintings from 2020 show turn-of-the-century cottages (right) in Great Smoky Mountains National Park's historic Elkmont district, which was once a logging community and later, a vacation spot. The park and a nonprofit partner are working to preserve 19 of the homes, many of which have been vacant for more than two decades. Far right: A visitor at Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida. Colored pencil on paper, 2020.



# PARK PALETTE

With 11 residencies under her belt, an artist is painting and drawing her way through the National Park System.

**ART BY HEATHER HECKEL**

In 2016, Heather Heckel, a middle school art teacher based on Long Island, New York, sat down at her computer and typed in the search terms “nature,” “art” and “travel.”

Voila, the National Park Service’s artist residency website popped up. Each year, around 50 park sites host visual artists (as well as some writers, musicians and other creative types) who live in housing in the parks and are asked only to explore and create art — and maybe offer a public presentation or class. Intrigued, Heckel sent out a dozen applications, eventually landing back-to-back residencies at Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas and Weir Farm National Historic Site in Connecticut. The summer unfolded just as she had dreamed it would, and she came home with a collection of new artworks and a determination to keep the park gigs going.

Nine residencies later (for a grand total of 11 if you include a few that didn’t come with park housing), Heckel has undoubtedly met that goal. Over the last five summers, her park-hopping has included stints of two or four weeks at Homestead National Monument of America in Nebraska, Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site in Arizona, Indiana Dunes National Park in Indiana, Herbert Hoover National Historic Site in Iowa, Whiskeytown National Recreation Area in California and Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area in Washington. She also spent time as a visiting artist at Big Cypress National Preserve one winter break when she was in Florida with family





**A 2019** oil-on-wood portrait of Alvis Burbank, a ranger at Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site in Arizona, which is surrounded by the Navajo Nation (above left). Above right: A mailbox outside the 19th-century caretaker's house Heckel stayed in during her residency at Weir Farm National Historic Site in Connecticut. Colored pencil on paper, 2016. Far right: Whiskeytown Lake at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area in California. Oil on paper, 2017.

and devoted many weekends last fall and winter to completing a close-to-home residency at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site. Though the coronavirus scuttled her plan to spend a month this summer at Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina, she managed to find a way to get there for an abridged program.

"I've fallen in love," said Heckel, 35. "The more I do it, the more I want it to continue."

In all, she has produced about 170 park-related pencil drawings and oil paintings (including a few in progress). Her subjects range from antique farm equipment at Homestead to a visitor in leather biking gear at Big Cypress to a woven tray at Hubbell Trading Post, which is surrounded by the Navajo Nation. She has made works depicting most of the historical buildings at Herbert Hoover's birthplace and small details (copper pipes, a closet, a mailbox) at the 19th-century caretaker's house she stayed in at Weir Farm. Sometimes, she paints grand landscapes, but more often, what excites her is the people she encounters or offbeat objects or simply the way

a shaft of light plays across a worn wooden floor.

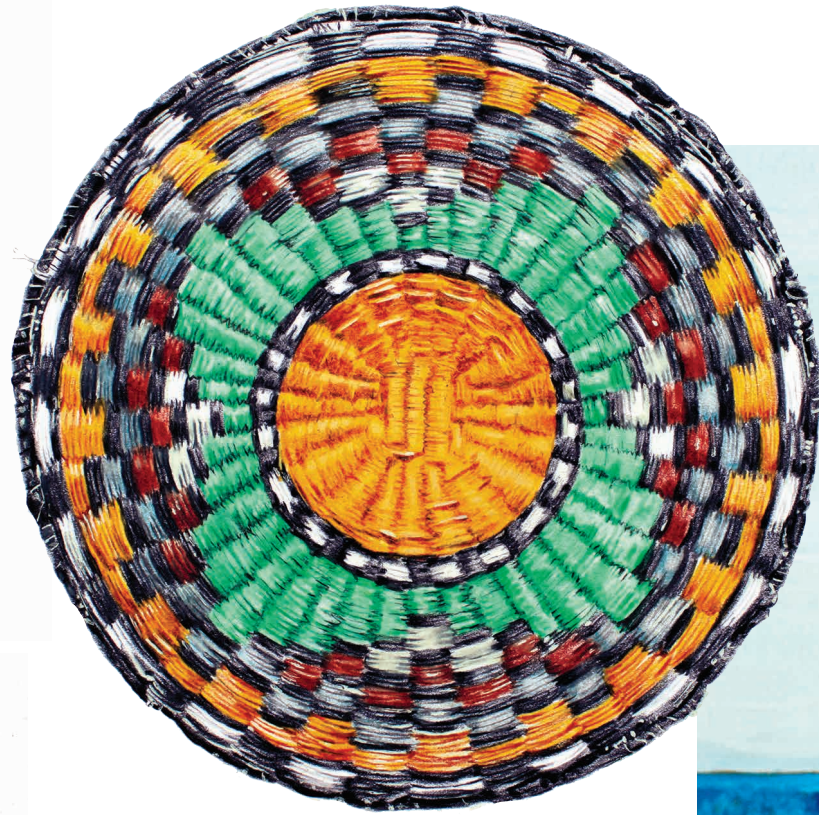
"Visitors looking for a big-picture view might walk by that old sink in that old house, but she's looking at it and drawing us in through her creative lens. And helping to draw out stories," said Sheridan Roberts, who oversees the artist residency program at Great Smoky Mountains. "There are stories to be found everywhere in this park."

Ever the diplomatic teacher, Heckel couldn't be coaxed into picking a favorite park or residency. "They've all been especially magical," she said.

Fair enough. In that spirit of inclusiveness, National Parks editors have selected 13 of her works to showcase, homing in on pieces that illustrate her versatility, highlight hidden park corners and underscore the great variety of places within the park system. — *Editors*

*To find out more about the artist, go to [heatherheckel.com](http://heatherheckel.com). To learn about the National Park Service's artist-in-residence program, go to [nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm](http://nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm).*





**HECKEL SPOTTED** the porcelain frog (above left) in a bedroom at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site in New York. (She paired it with goldenrod and a bee she saw in the garden.) The home of President Theodore Roosevelt from 1885 to 1919, Sagamore Hill was known as the “summer White House” during Roosevelt’s years in office. Colored pencil on paper, 2019. Left: A vintage sign along Central Avenue in Hot Springs, Arkansas, the town that has been home to Hot Springs National Park for nearly 100 years. Colored pencil and ink on paper, 2016.

**A WOVEN TRAY** (above left) at Hubbell Trading Post. Known as Hopi plaques, these trays are made by Hopi women from Munqapi and the Third Mesa area. Colored pencil on paper, 2019. Above: The Florida Tropical House is located on the shore of Lake Michigan. The house was built for the 1933 World’s Fair in Chicago and then floated by barge to what is now Indiana Dunes National Park. Colored pencil and oil paint on paper, 2018.



**A STAFF MEMBER** at Joanie's Blue Crab Cafe, which sits on a private inholding along Tamiami Trail in Big Cypress National Preserve (top). Colored pencil on paper, 2020. Above: A colored pencil drawing of Herbert Hoover's boyhood train, completed in 2018. The train is part of the collection at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, which Heckel had access to during her residency at the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site in Iowa.



**A 2017** oil painting of Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area, Washington.