CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

An American Impressionist:

The Art and Life of Alson Skinner Clark

by Deborah Epstein Solon, Ph.D.

Alson Skinner Clark (1876–1949) is hardly a familiar name, even to scholars of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American art. The resuscitation of Clark's career is part of the ongoing scholarship in the field of American Impressionism whose scope has broadened significantly within the last ten years to include artists heretofore overlooked.

Clark was born in Chicago during the Centennial year, a decisive and turbulent period in American history when the country, and the national economy, was still in the throes of recovery from the Civil War. Nonetheless, art advanced to new levels during the decade of the 1870s. The period introducing "American Renaissance," using the Centennial as a point of departure, was rife with social contradictions, but allowed the arts to flourish on a grander scale than ever before.

Clark's father, **Alson Ellis**, was from an impoverished background. After serving in the Civil War, he moved to Chicago and established a highly successful commodities business at the Chicago Board of Trade. Eventually, he was able to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his wife, **Sarah**, and their sons, **Mancel**, **Edwin**, and **Alson** (their daughter, **Mary Emily** died in 1871). Alson's artistic talent was apparent from childhood, and his parents enrolled the young student in evening classes at **The School of The Art Institute of Chicago** in 1887.

Clark's Chicago childhood was privileged. Musing on Alson's early interest in art, his wife, **Medora**, would later recollect in a 1956 interview with the **Archives of American Art:**

> *I think the desire to draw was always extant with Alson Skinner Clark. When he was nine or ten years old, it made itself manifest—and obnoxious as well—to the his church-going parents, for during the long Sunday sermons he surreptitiously recorded the bonnets and bald pates in*

Ruins of San Juan Capistrano, c. 1919
Oil on board 31″ × 25″
Private Collection, Courtesy of
The Irvine Museum

front of him in the only place available at the time—the frontispiece and blank rear pages of the family hymnals.

In 1889 the Clark family embarked on a two-year trip around the world. This experience gave young Alson his first introduction to European art and perhaps was the catalyst to his future insatiable appetite for travel and painting. We know much about Clark through his diaries and letters—the quotidian diary entries for the young Alson in Europe focused on food, the weather and his studies, but also discussed the churches, museums, galleries, and opera performances the family attended.

Upon graduating from high school, Clark briefly enrolled as a full-time student at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago where the traditional academic program (mostly dependent upon French principles) included requisite drawing from casts and still-lifes before advancing to the live model. In 1896, following a disagreement with one of his teachers, and displeased with what he considered the slow and laborious process of drawing from casts, Clark quit the school. Determined to continue his studies, Clark moved to New York to work under the tutelage of **William Merritt Chase (1849–1916)** at the **Art Students' League of New York.**

Although Clark's parents supported his intention to become a painter, his mother was concerned about her twenty-year-old son living alone in New York; so she went with him. Adding to the unusual arrangement, Alson's childhood friend **Amelia Baker** joined them. The three shared a flat at Seventy-Seventh Street and Columbus Avenue. According to Sarah Clark: "For two years Mela [Amelia] and I have talked of spending a winter in New York, in Bohemian fashion, and have searched for a good reason for doing so, in vain till this time. Alson, however, came to the rescue in his desire to study art with a New York master, and made it seem a necessary thing to do."

Taking Paintings to the Salon, Paris, c. 1905
Collection of Jean Stern, The Estate of Alson Clark

When Chase opened his own school, Clark, among many other students, followed him. A dedicated and sympathetic instructor, Chase's influence on Clark was enduring throughout the young artist's career. In fact, Clark's *Early Nude* (1898) bears an inscription that Chase actually worked on the painting. The two summers Clark spent working *en plein air* at Chase's school in Shinnecock, Long Island presaged his inclination towards Impressionist practices.

Clark left to study in Paris in November 1898, but had reservations about leaving his family. He wrote in his diaries: "My dear Mama, how I hate to leave her for so long. I do love her so." Aspiring young American painters had several options for instruction in Paris, but by far the most popular school was the **Académie Julian.** Nonetheless, Clark rejected the Julian, finding the working conditions there "disgusting." Instead, he enrolled in the newly opened, **Academia Carmen, James Abbott McNeill Whistler's (1834–1903)** short-lived school. This decision was surprising, as Whistler was the artistic antithesis of Chase. Known for his phlegmatic temperament, Whistler was ill-suited to the demands of an instructor. At first, Clark found the school "rotten." The tuition was higher than at other schools, strict rules of decorum were enforced, and Whistler's critiques were often more theatrical than instructional.

On one rare occasion Whistler held a small soirée for his students at the studio. There, Clark acquired insight into Whistler's working methods:

He showed us several of his starts and finished pictures. They were elegant and really almost came up to the Old

Masters. His things are so simple that you look at them a moment and everything comes out but nothing pushes itself forward so that you notice it especially but see the whole thing.…He arranges his palette very queerly. He first has black, then raw umber, light red, burnt sienna, Prussian blue, burnt umber, some more black, vermilion, raw sienna, yellow ochre and white.…His studio is very dimly lighted and all the walls are of a warm, dark pink.

Clark recognized the quixotic artist's genius. He was a willing acolyte, and attended Whistler's atelier intermittently until the school's demise in 1901. By this time Whistler had a profound effect on Clark, even the way he arranged his own palette.

In March of 1899, Clark entered his first work in the Paris Salon. In a letter written the following month to Amelia Baker, he described his experience:

Wednesday Wilson and I went to the Salon to see the stuff carried in and all the awful things that went in—I never saw such a lot of bad painting. The wagons come up to the entrance and take their wads of pictures in and there are crowds of people watching the stuff enter. I have little hope that [my picture] will pass the jury but one can never tell as there is a great deal of "pull" in the Salon, and as I have not studied under any Frenchman I may be thrown out. I don't care what happens although of course I would rather be in than out. Exhibitions are, after all, a farce.

When his painting was rejected, Clark pretended indifference: "It doesn't' matter to me at all as I haven't a reputation to make and there isn't much honour in being in unless you get in squarely as only very few do.…" Nonetheless, inclusion continued to be his goal and when his work, *The Violinist* (1901), was accepted later in 1901, he was hardly nonchalant. Whistler's early influence is seen in Clark's first successful entry in the Paris Salon. *The Violinist* allows for the exploration of muted hues of brown and green to explain a sombre, brooding mood. The primary sense is of a compositional arrangement—the placement of the solitary individual and the exploration of dark colour—as opposed to interest in personality or narrative.

Clark was repeatedly ill and while living in New York he went frequently to the doctor to have his stomach "pumped." In the spring of 1901, he suffered increasing physical infirmities. Told that he needed an appendectomy—a serious operation at the time—he booked passage back to America on June 1 and scheduled the surgery in Chicago.

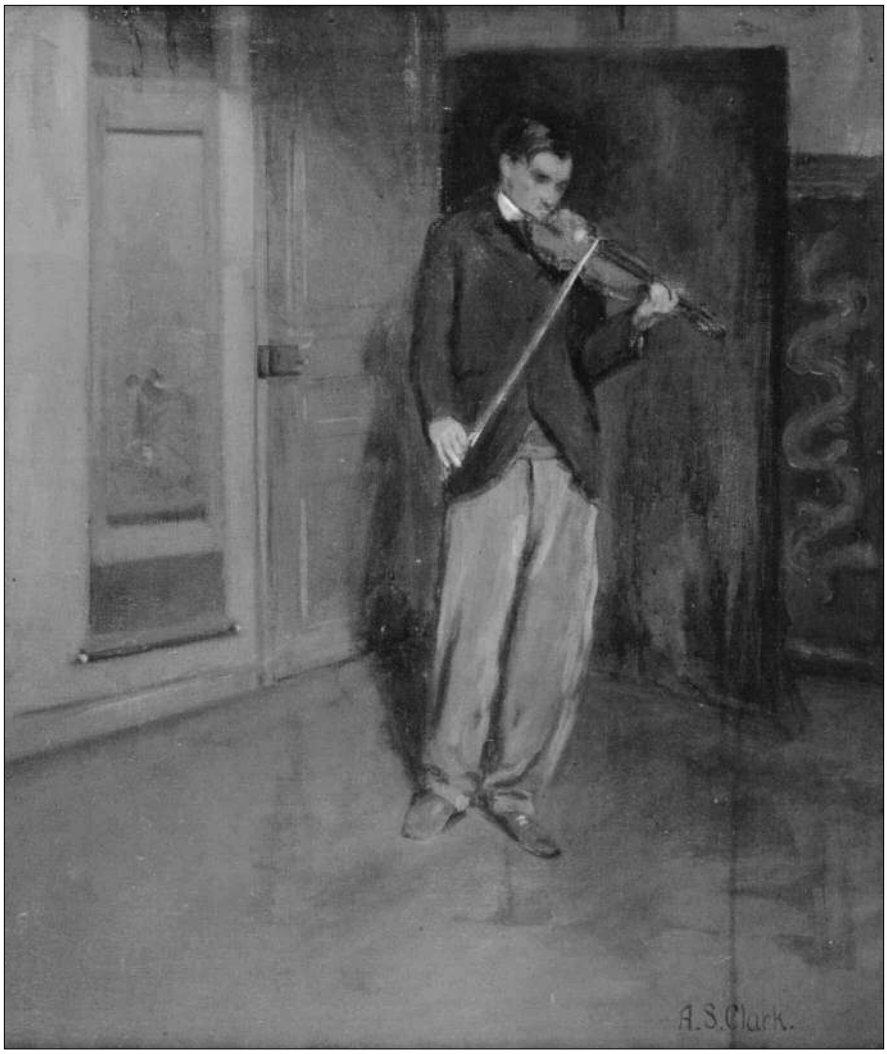
Clark spent the summer of 1901 at the family summer home on Comfort Island, one of the Thousand Islands in Alexandria Bay. In the fall, he rented a barn in Watertown from Amelia's parents and converted it into a studio. Watertown was a small, provincial city near Lake Ontario and the Canadian border and the closest city to Comfort Island. His decision to stay in Watertown marked the beginning of his professional career and heralded a new chapter in his personal life. He had gained experience and sophistication through his sojourn in Paris. Now, still strongly influenced by both Chase and Whistler, he began to develop a personal vocabulary.

Clark was the only professional artist living in Watertown, and one of the local girls, **Atta Medora McMullin**, agreed to pose as a model—with her mother as a chaperone. Unexpectedly, love blossomed, despite the artist's appre-

CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

WINTER/SPRING 2006

Contents



The Violinist, c. 1901
Oil on canvas 26″ × 22″
Collection of Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California
Gift of Alson Clark, Jr.

hensions. "In the evening I would have liked to have seen Medora, but stayed home and wrote. I have no more business in marrying than the man in the moon for I am fickle and can't help myself. It is a misfortune and not a fault." Yet, just a few days later, he wrote, "In the afternoon she posed. I could not work as I wanted to tell her that I loved her but could not. We sat by the fire knowing each other's minds." By the end of January, Clark professed his love.

From the beginning, Medora proved to be a supportive partner, assisting Clark as he organized his first solo exhibition in Watertown. Always cognizant of his obligations, on the eve of the exhibition, Clark wrote: "Tomorrow begins my career as an artist and with that the knowledge that some of my works may bring us our living." In fact, financially he was more fortunate than most artists. In the 1890s, his father had purchased the **Wadsworth-Howland Paint Company** (later renamed the **Jewel Paint Company**), in the hope that his sons would enter the business. The business provided income for the artist and his siblings throughout their lives.

Clark was thrilled about his first exhibition, which featured small paintings depicting the city of Paris: Approximately forty people attended, and a few pictures sold: Medora considered the event a "grand success." From Watertown, the paintings travelled to Chicago for Clark's first major exhibition, at the **Anderson Galleries**. Critical response was overwhelmingly positive for the "Chicago boy," with a consensus that the "young man certainly has decided talent." The *Chicago Tribune* declared, "Popular opinion has decided that it is a very promising display for a young artist.... Mr. Clark has a style of his own. It is suggestive of Japanese reminiscences, is refined and pleasantly frank.... The sentimental does not interfere with the boldness of using masses."

Alson and Medora, as she was known, were wed on September 20, 1902, and sailed on the *S.S. Minnetonka* for a Europe. On November 7, they moved into an apartment at 6, rue Victor-Considérant in Paris. Soon after settling in, Alson's friend, artist **Frederick Carl Frieseke (1874–1939),** moved in with them until the rooms above their apartment became available. Among the constellation of American artists in France during the early twentieth century, Clark's friends included such notables as **Lawton S. Parker (1868–1954)**, **Will Howe Foote (1874–1965)**, **Henry S. Hubbell (1870–1949)**, **Richard E. Miller (1875–1943)**, and **Guy Rose (1867–1925)**. However, he was especially close to Frieseke in the early years. Frieseke painted from the Clarks' apartment balcony and occasionally used Medora as a model. The artists worked assiduously during the winter in order to prepare for the spring Salon. As part of the preparation, many analyzed each other's works. Some assisted each other when it came time to deliver paintings to the Salon, often renting and sharing wagons. They even

exchanged formal clothing to wear at openings: "Many painters didn't possess the required outfit, so there would be a hurried return to some base, a quick exchange, and the frock coat and hat would make a second trip to the Salon on a smaller, but happy man."

Clark meticulously documented his paintings on small note cards or in notebooks, often with tiny photographs. He wrote "Whistler" on several of these cards, unabashedly confirming his indebtedness to the master. *The Necklaces* (*Les Colliers)* (1905) is perhaps his greatest homage to Whistler's portraiture. Clothed in a flowing gown and placed in front of an elegant mantelpiece, Medora stands with her back to the viewer as she examines different necklaces. The title refers not to the model but rather to the objects she holds, removing any association with her individuality. Even as Clark matured—and aligned himself with Impressionist practices—Whistler's influence still endured.

The Clarks travelled extensively while maintaining their Parisian residence, visiting Normandy, Giverny, parts of Italy and Spain, the Netherlands, Dalmatia, and Canada, periodically returning to Comfort Island, Chicago and New York to sell his "American" paintings through the art dealer **William Macbeth,** who favoured American subject matter.

After painting in Spain, Clark was eager to organize his Spanish paintings for an exhibition in America, and so the Clarks returned to Chicago in January 1910. A show of the Spanish paintings opened at the **O'Brien Art Galleries** in March of that year. Seventeen of the thirty-eight canvases sold immediately. His New York dealer, Macbeth, agreed to exhibit works that were still available.

The Clarks returned to Paris, but by June they left for a visit to the artist colony in Giverny, returning again for a short stay in October. Giverny's fame is associated with its most distinguished resident, **Claude Monet (1840–1926)**. However, an American colony was first established there in the 1880s, and by 1910 Americans were well entrenched. The influx of tourists and artists to this village caused a surge in prices from everything from food to real estate. And, figuratively speaking, the American community was highly incestuous. They lived, painted, played, and argued all within full sight of each other. Ultimately, Medora did not find it a convivial atmosphere: "The more I reflect on the possibilities of Giverny as a place to go, the less I care for it. The petty jealousies…the fights, the spying on you by your neighbours all works up to the least attractive place…to spend a season. Then the similarity in all of the work. I have kept out of it." However, in Giverny, Clark solidified his commitment to Impressionism. Like most Americans, Clark practiced a modified form of Impressionism, one that allowed him to combine his aca-

The Necklaces (Les Colliers), 1905
Oil on canvas 38 3/4″ × 30 1/8″
Collection of Earl and Elma Payton

demic drawing skills with the chromatic and stylistic freedom of Impressionist practices.

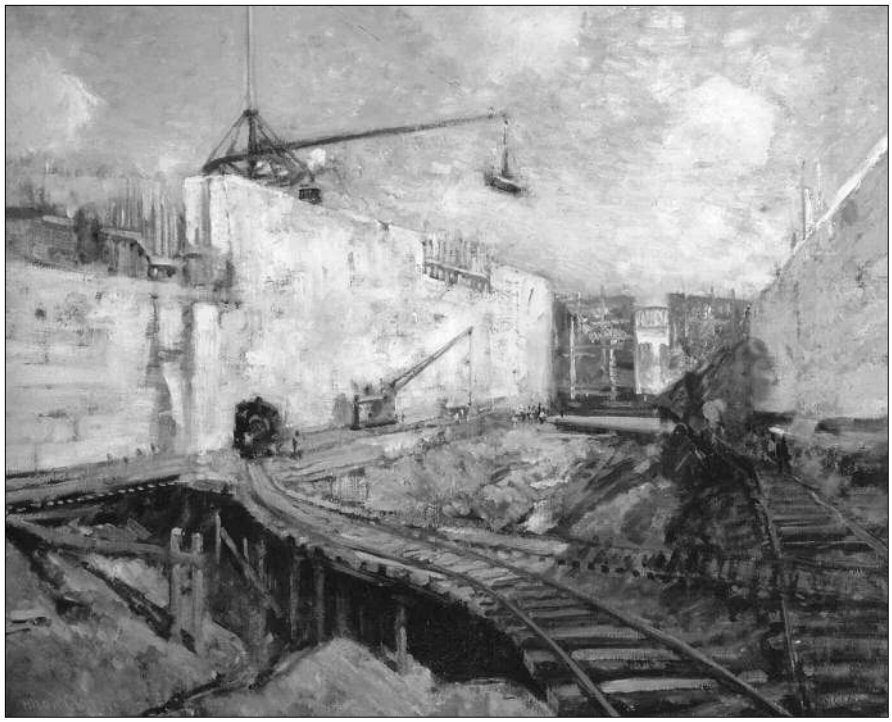
Clark's paintings were included at venues such as The Art Institute of Chicago, **The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**, the Paris Salon, and the **National Academy of Design**. His continual thirst for new subjects proved financially successful: a steady stream of sales through his dealers in Chicago and New York provided a modest, but satisfactory income.

In the spring of 1913, the Clarks decided rather spontaneously to visit the Panama Canal Zone. Construction on the vast and costly canal was nearing completion, and Clark was determined to somehow be involved in the epoch-making enterprise. Although they arrived in Panama without letters of introduction or accommodations, both were eventually secured. The supreme commander of the project gave Clark unprecedented access to the labour trains and construction sites, where the artist worked furiously in the stifling heat to portray the excavations, the construction of the locks, and the ubiquitous railroad.

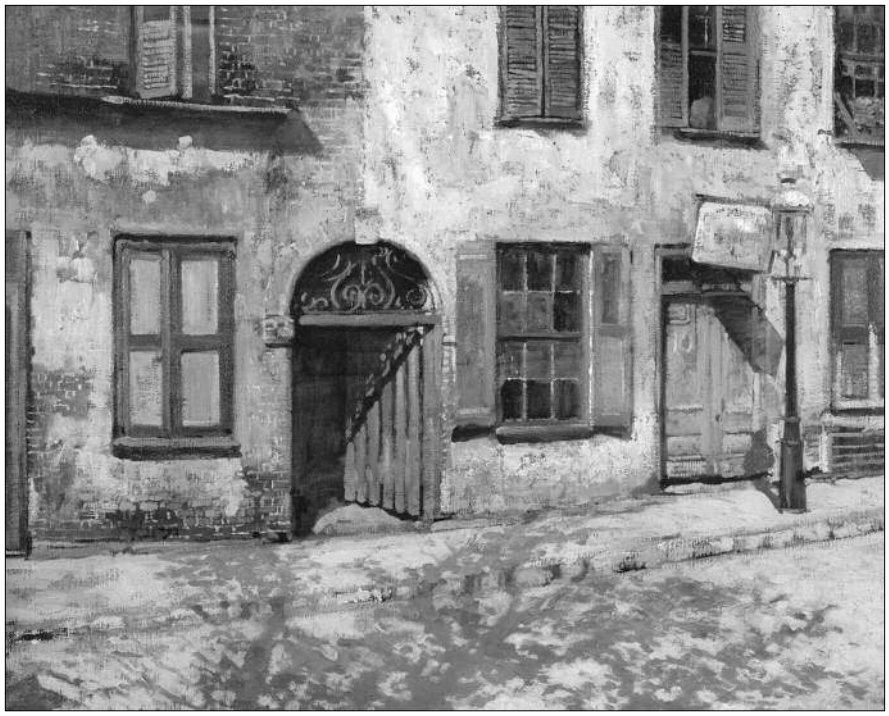
Clark wrote to his mother:

> *This is such a busy place for me I never get time to write more than a postal. We get off on the 6:40 train in the morning, getting up at five-thirty or so and get back at noon, leave for lunch and go off again at one-thirty, getting in at seven and after dinner go to bed.... In the afternoon at present I go to the Culebra Cut where all the blasting has been going on and the slides, and I paint there. It is wonderful all over....*

By June, with a significant number of canvases completed, Clark



In the Lock, 1913
Oil on canvas 25″ × 31″
Collection of W. Donald Head/Old Grandview Ranch



Alson Skinner Clark (1876–1949)
Catfish Row (also known as *Cabbage Row*), c. 1917
Oil on canvas 26″ × 32″
Collection of Paul and Kathleen Bagley

contacted **John Trask**, the director of fine arts for the forthcoming *1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition*. Although Clark's impetus for painting the canal was purely personal, he quickly he recognized the value of these celebratory images for the exhibition. Trask agreed, granting the artist a room to exhibit eighteen paintings. With such a distinction, Clark joined the ranks of luminaries similarly honoured with their own rooms in San Francisco, among them **Frank Duveneck** (1848–1919), William Merritt Chase, **Childe Hassam** (1859–1935), **Edmund Tarbel** (1862–1938), **John Twachtman** (1853–1902), James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and **John Singer Sargent** (1856–1925).

The Clarks were vacationing in France during the summer of 1914 when World War I erupted. Based on correspondence in August 1914 from Clark to his mother, they were completely stunned and underestimated the situation's gravity. "Perhaps by the time you get this," he wrote, "all will have blown over and there will not be anything to worry about." Temporarily stranded—and facing the conundrum of getting themselves and the Panama paintings back to America—they eventually secured passage on a ship, rolled the massive canvases, and carried them as luggage.

Forced to remain in America, the Clarks accepted an invitation from **Charles and Edith Bittinger**, friends from the early days in Paris, to visit them in New England during the winter of 1916. Clark was invigorated by the chilly New England climate, painting *en plein air* in snowshoes. In January 1917, they agreed to join another couple on a "short trip" to Charleston. Clark had spent very little time in the South, and was overcome by Charleston's charm and history. He enjoyed the genteel Southern hospitality and undoubtedly would have stayed if not for a stunning turn of events. When the United States entered World War I on April 16, 1917, they immediately left Charleston and returned to Chicago; at age forty-one, Clark enlisted in the Navy.

Although hardly a candidate for conscription, Clark believed that his fluency in French and familiarity with the French countryside could be useful. Originally assigned as a translator, he was subsequently reclassified as a military photographer in May 1918. He was assigned to take aerial surveillance photographs while dangling precariously over the side of an open plane, an F2A Flying Boat. The experience left him deaf in one ear—a condition deemed reversible—and Clark was advised to live in a warm climate when he returned to America.

Opting to go west—but knowing nothing about California—the Clarks reluctantly left for Los Angeles, arriving in February 1919. As they travelled across the country, Clark announced to Medora that he would no longer paint. Although Clark's diaries do not refer to this rather radical pronouncement, fresh from the horrors of war, he may have viewed his painting career as insipid. However, once in California, his hearing steadily improved; he regained his spirits and resumed painting.

Southern California offered Clark new and exciting possibilities for his art through the diversity of landscapes, romantic Spanish Colonial missions, and the proximity to exotic Mexico. **The Mission San Gabriel** and **Mission San Juan Capistrano** became familiar haunts for the Clarks, with Alson delighting in the decaying architecture weathered by time and the unusual Western flora. *Ruins of San Juan Capistrano* (c. 1919) underscores the dignity of this artefact, even in its ruinous state. In 1919, intending to remain in California until they could return to Paris, the couple purchased a parcel of land with a "shack" in Pasadena. As California became more familiar, a new home and studio were constructed. Clark refurbished a Dodge truck, which he equipped for plein air painting, and travelled to Banning, Hemet, the High Sierra and Palm Springs with artists **Orrin White** (1883–1969) and **John Frost** (1890–1937).

Two significant events marked Clark's early years in California: a reunion with a friend from France, Guy Rose, and the birth of his son. Rose returned to his native California to teach at the newly formed **Stickney School of the Fine Arts** in Pasadena. He became director in 1918 and asked Clark to join the faculty. When Rose suffered a debilitating stroke in 1921, Clark assumed the directorship. That same year, Clark's son, **Alson Jr.**, was born. The euphoria of his new baby was tempered by the rigors of caring for a newborn. Accustomed to freedom and quiet—and clearly slightly overwhelmed—Clark bemoaned that "my painting days are over, I fear." Like all new parents, the Clarks quickly learned to adjust to a new schedule, and their son's arrival encouraged the artist to seek more structure and stability in his life.

Another milestone that year was Clark's first solo exhibition in southern California. **Earl Stendahl**, the most powerful art dealer in Los Angeles during the 1920s hosted the exhibition, which included both East and West Coast scenes. Concurrently, Clark's works were on exhibition at the **Corcoran Gallery** in Washington, D.C., and the **Art Institute of Chicago.** By the fall of 1922, the couple decided to make Pasadena their permanent home, closing up their Paris studio and

The Artist's Cottage (Pasadena), c. 1925
Oil on canvas 36″ × 46″
Collection of Gregory A. Young

shipping its contents to California.

During the next several years Clark took frequent trips throughout California, the Southwest, and especially to Mexico, in particular Cuernavaca and Taxco where the architecture, landscape, and indigenous population inspired another aspect of his art. In 1925 Clark began a rather unlikely phase of his career as a mural painter when he was commissioned to paint the enormous curtain (measuring twenty by thirty-two feet) for the newly constructed **Pasadena Playhouse**. On the heels of its success, he was approached by **J. Harvey McCarthy**, a native Californian and wealthy entrepreneur who was financing the **Carthay Circle Theater** in Los Angles, to paint a series of murals chronicling the history of California. Clark settled on seven ambitious scenes, including *The Arrival of the Oregon at San Francisco* (c. 1925–26), documenting the arrival of the vessel that brought first official news of California's statehood. Shortly thereafter he painted a series of murals at the **Pasadena First Trust and Savings Bank** (now **Bank of the West**), and eight large paintings for a private men's club in Los Angeles. Between projects, Clark continued to paint *en plein air* in the late 1920s, mounting successful exhibitions with private dealers and museums throughout the country.

Clark's willingness to immerse himself in international cultures was a consistent element throughout his diverse career. With this understanding, his emerging characterization as a "California artist," starting in the mid-1920s, seems incongruous. While Clark spent the latter portion of his career in California, over half of his life was spent elsewhere. Beginning in 1923, **Antony Anderson,** critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, began to shape Clark's transformation:

> *All globe-trotting artists land at some time in Southern California, and not a few of them unfurl their tents and decide to remain here forever and a day. It seems to be actually true—therefore—what we have seen and heard so often stated in print and out—that Southern California is the Mecca of painters. For many years Alson Clark has been a pilgrim and a wayfarer…. But he hadn't found Mecca. Four years ago he came to Southern California and remained.*

By the early 1930s, Clark was accepting decorative commissions for private homes, designing wallpaper and screens, and painting murals for dining rooms and libraries. Although his interests were always diverse, he was undoubtedly delighted to find work during the depths of the Depression. However, against the bleak economic backdrop, Clark took a bold step in 1933: he decided to drive across the country with his family, allowing more than a year to meander and paint. In 1935 the couple took their final journey to Europe. Even after such a long hiatus, Clark still saw Paris through the same inquisitive eyes of his youth, painting city scenes such as *Paris, Rooftops* (1936) from their hotel window.

Clark's popularity remained consistent throughout the 1930s. While the battle raged between modern and traditional artists, Clark remained unaffected by the debate. He was a devotee of Impressionism throughout his life, patently rejecting modernism with no misgivings. Two generations of collectors had avidly acquired his works; his paintings continued to be included in museum and gallery exhibitions; and, in 1940, the **Los Angeles County Museum** awarded him a self-curated retrospective of twenty paintings, including works

from Panama, Chicago, Cuernavaca, France, New England, Taxco, and California.

When the United States entered World War II, Clark contributed to the war effort by organizing a group of craftsmen who produced instruments for the military. By 1945, Clark's health was in decline. Diagnosed with a heart condition, he was cautioned not to drive. Since he could no longer travel, he substituted his love of painting *en plein air* for figure painting in the studio. In 1948, after a severe bout of pneumonia and four months of recuperation, he was allowed to resume work in his studio in March 1949. Medora described the day he began to paint once again as "joyous," as the artist returned to his lifelong passion. The joy was short-lived: Clark suffered a paralyzing stroke the following morning and passed away within a week. In her inimitable fashion, Medora remembered, "my son and I could only rejoice that he had in his lifetime been denied only one small week of the use of that wonderful right arm." Her personal grief was mitigated by knowing that, above all, Clark's inability to paint would have been a tragedy far greater than death.

News of Clark's death initiated an outpouring of sympathy. Although serious about his work, Clark's *joie de vivre* made him a favourite among colleagues and friends. He was characterized as "an artist sensitive to beauty," an apt description for one who could extract beauty from the crumbling walls of ruins or marvel at the newest technological construction feats; an artist who was equally at ease painting California's desert flora or the urban landscapes of Chicago and Paris.

Notes:
The author Deborah Epstein Solon, Ph.D., is an independent curator and an instructor at Irvine Valley College. Her publications include, Colonies of American Impressionism: Old Lyme, Cos Cob, Shinnecock, and Laguna Beach *(1999), and* In and Out of California: Travels of American Impressionists *(2002). She has just co-authored a publication with Dr. William H. Gerdts on the artist* **Colin Campbell Cooper (1856–1937)**. *That catalogue accompanies a major exhibition that will open in 2006.*

An American Impressionist: The Art and Life of Alson Skinner Clark *was exhibited in 2005 at the Gibbes Museum, Charleston, South Carolina and at the Pasadena Museum of California Art.*
A 150-page full colour catalogue ($35 soft-bound/$45 hard-bound) with essays by ***Deborah Epstein Solon, Ph.D.****, and an introduction by* ***Dr. William Gerdts****, Professor Emeritus, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, is available through both museums.*

Rooftops, Paris, 1936
Oil on canvas 22″ × 18 1/2″
Collection of the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio
Gift of Mrs. Alson S. Clark