



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909

Armin Hansen: The Artful Voyage

by Scott A. Shields, Ph.D.

NEARLY SIX FEET FOUR AND AN imposing 250 pounds, **Armin Carl Hansen (1886–1957)** was as powerful as his paintings. When he entered a room, it was as though a blast of salt air had blown in from the Pacific. According to *Los Angeles Times* art critic **Antony Anderson**, who wrote on May 23, 1915, “Looking at the paintings by Armin C. Hansen . . . , you will at once and inevitably conclude that the painter of such big men and breezy seas must be big and breezy himself. No other sort of man could possibly have done them. . . . You will be right, for Armin Hansen is big and young and strong—the living embodiment of his own pictures.”

Imbued With Power

Like Anderson, other reviewers would also equate Hansen’s physical stature with the virility they perceived in his work. Doing so was meant as high praise, as hypermasculinity was widely considered to epitomize good art. Although Hansen rendered lush still lifes, spirited rodeo scenes, and painterly landscapes, his signature subjects were of fisherfolk and the sea. Within these, he sought to capture the raw power and vitality of the Pacific and those who sailed and earned their living from it, rather than the beauty of the ocean’s light and colour for its own sake. Often described as *Impressionist*, Hansen’s art departed from the calm beauty that typified the style, even though it consisted of bold colours and, at times, broken brushstrokes. For the most part, Hansen rejected Impressionism’s gentility, focusing instead on humanity’s symbiotic relationship with nature. He did so with broad masses of colour, dynamic compositions, and the elimination of superfluous detail.

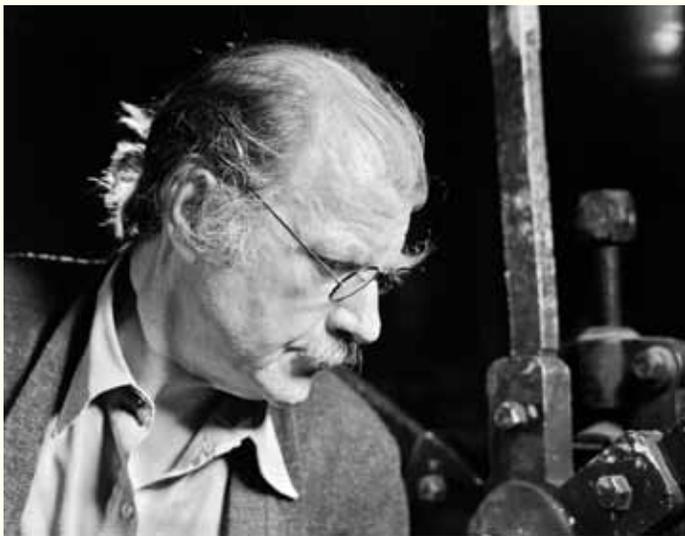


Men of the Sea, 1920
Oil on canvas 51 3/8" × 57"
Collection of Monterey Museum of Art
Gift of Jane and Justin Dart, 1991.202

California-Bred

A son of California, Hansen knew the Golden State’s terrain, people, and activities intimately. In the West, he was among the first to exploit the aesthetic potential of commercial fishing, and he chose the theme in large part because he knew it well from firsthand experience. In February 1923, *American Art News* wrote that “Hansen’s pictures are paintings of California by a Californian,

and they have a quality of intimacy with his subject that no artist can infuse into a casual impression.” At heart a storyteller, Hansen pursued subjects of broad consequence. He depicted scenes, characters, and activities that while specific to the Monterey Bay region also conveyed universal themes of physical labour, hardship, danger, bravery, and loss. He rendered these scenes in oil, watercolour, graphite, pastel, and on



Armin Hansen,
n.d. Photographer
unknown
Collection of the
Oakland Museum of
California, 2009.0.5.4

the etching plate. Audiences within California and well beyond regarded these depictions highly for their careful balance between truth and aesthetics and for their boldly powerful execution. Celebrated especially as an etcher, Hansen earned a reputation as one of America's finest practitioners of the medium, which on a national level surpassed his renown as one of California's preeminent painters.

Early Influences

Hansen began his art studies under his father, **Herman Wendelborg Hansen (1854–1924)**, a renowned painter of the Old West. The elder Hansen was

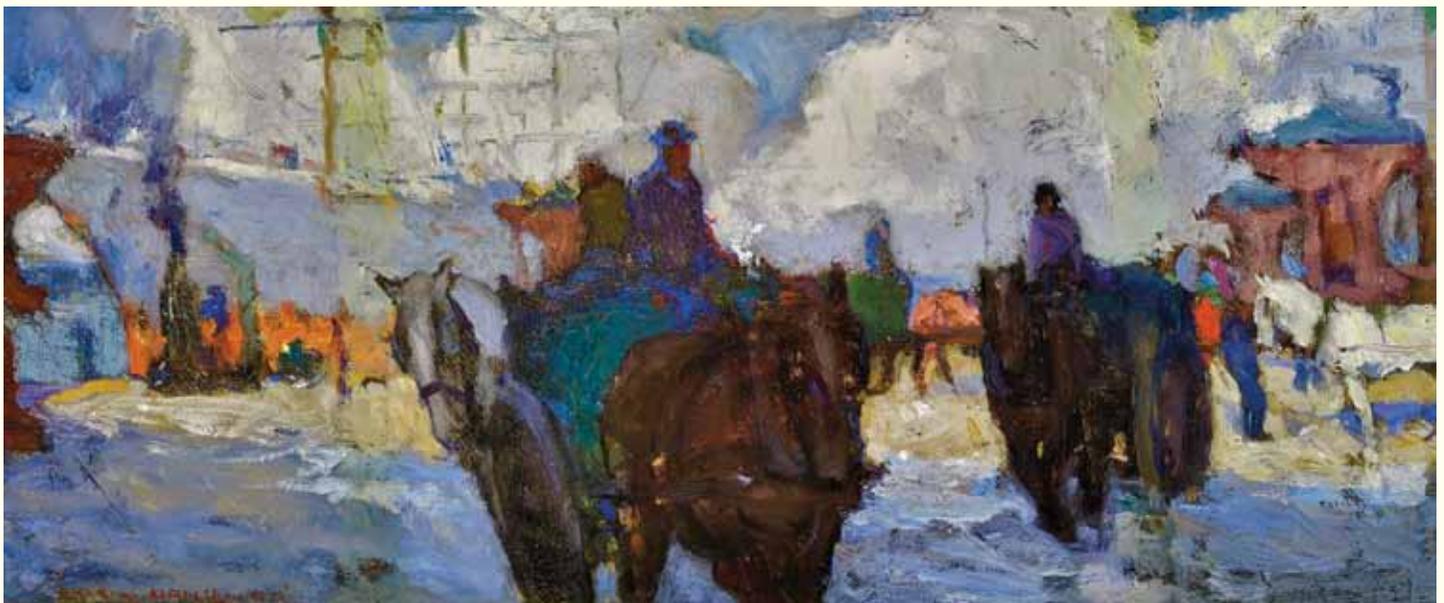
born in Germany to a father who was a draftsman. At age twenty-three—and inspired by stories of the American frontier—Herman Hansen immigrated to the United States and eventually made such subjects his own. He instilled in his son an appreciation for adventure and for narrative painting.

From 1903 to 1906, Armin Hansen pursued formal training with **Arthur Mathews (1860–1945)** at the **Mark Hopkins Institute of Art in San Francisco**, where Mathews was director. Mathews's tonal style, with its narrow range of colours, flattened patterns, and prioritization of design over detail, influenced the young Hansen. In the fall of 1906, Hansen went to

Europe, studying in Germany under the maritime painter **Carlos Grethe (1864–1913)** at the **Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart** (*K. Akademie der Bildenden Künste*). He would then spend four years in Belgium, painting marines, village views, and fishing scenes around Nieuwpoort—all the while working as deckhand on North Sea trawlers, gaining firsthand knowledge of life on the seas. In late 1912, he returned to San Francisco with 100 new canvases.

Discovering Monterey

The following spring, Hansen made his first documented appearance in Monterey, and it was not long before he started painting the Peninsula's growing fishing community and fleet. But Hansen did not immediately find the sort of aesthetic possibilities that he had hoped for. Accustomed to Belgium's enormous fishing fleets with hundreds of boats and picturesque, colourfully dressed fishermen, he was disappointed in the town's "jerk-water wharf," which had only one building at the end of it and just a few fishing vessels. "Frankly, Monterey looked pretty dismal to me after Europe," he told a reporter from the *Carmel Pine Cone-Cymbal* on April 11, 1947, "It was a hell of a place, and Main Street looked like the devil." It was not until a friend took him to Point Lobos that he realized the region had aesthetic potential.



Coal Docks #2, n.d.
Oil on board 8 1/2" × 18 5/8"
Private collection



Fisherman's Quay, c. 1910

Oil on board 15 1/2" × 19 3/4"

Oakland Museum of California

Gift of the Women's Board of the Oakland Museum Association, A58.70

In contrast to previous Monterey artists, Hansen held a more liberal outlook on the town's modernization and, at least initially, was not as concerned with its development and loss of history. He embraced change, and this was especially true when it came to fishing, Monterey's fastest-growing industry. Before him, when artists painted Monterey scenes with workers, they most often depicted them in connection with the historic Carmel Mission or quietly performing agricultural chores in peaceful harmony with the land. These paintings evolved into pure landscapes focusing on the beautiful coast, with attention accorded the wind-sculpted Monterey cypress on rocky shores. Hansen, who saw himself as part of a new generation, painted pure landscapes infrequently and believed the indigenous and emblematic cypress to be overused. The same was also true of the Carmel Mission. On the few occasions that Hansen painted it, he did his best to avoid the familiar frontal façade that other artists had frequently rendered.

For the most part, Hansen found his expression in challenging subjects that

were harder to like: the activities, boats, and weather-beaten visages of fishermen. As critic **E. Van Lier Ribbink** of the *San Francisco Examiner* explained on March 7, 1920, Hansen demonstrated that Californians could "paint pictures which do not of necessity require fields of poppies or old Missions for subject matter." And yet, Hansen's paintings still seemed to effectively represent the Golden State. *Los Angeles Times* art editor and critic **Arthur Millier**, quoted in *The Wasp-News Letter* of December 20–27, 1930, wrote, "Armin Hansen is a painter of whom California may be proud. His major development has taken place here and he has so completely identified himself with the lives of the Monterey fishermen that another can scarcely attempt these subjects without being accused of imitation."

Sardines!

Before Hansen, Monterey Peninsula artists had seldom portrayed local fishing activities—both because they were not considered worthy of artistic attention and because they were not as pervasive—as the industry had not yet developed or modernized. In the second



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Salmon Trawlers, n.d.
Oil on board 15 1/2" × 19 1/2"
Collection of W. Donald Head, Old Grandview Ranch, Saratoga, California



Fisher Life, n.d.
Oil on canvas board 15 3/4" × 19 1/2"
Private collection

half of the nineteenth century, whaling was one of the region's few remaining forms of commerce, but the industry was in steady decline as whale numbers dwindled and superior alternatives to whale oil were discovered. Other types of fishing methods were primitive. Even at the time of Hansen's arrival in early 1913, Monterey's commercial fishing and canning remained modest. It was not until World War I, when fishermen began to exploit Monterey Bay's abundance of sardines, an inexpensive and easily transportable form of protein, that a multimillion-dollar industry was created. Soon, Monterey's fishing wharf became known as "Cannery Row," where the day began with the night catch being hauled in and ended with the fish being canned. The booming sardine industry provided Hansen with an abundance of action-packed subjects to paint.

As in earlier California paintings by other artists, Hansen's depictions of Monterey's fishing industry often reference humanity's smallness in the face of nature, but they also suggest the ability of humankind to confront and rival the harshest forces of wind and waves. In some scenes, Hansen's subjects became nature's heroic equal, as reviewer **Eleanor Minturn James** acknowledged in the *Carmel Pine Cone* on August 14, 1931, when she wrote that Hansen's fishermen "both serve the sea and make it serve them." For Hansen, portraying man's contests with the environment came naturally. He had grown up admiring such scenes in his father's Western paintings and had experienced such challenges firsthand during his tenure on European fishing boats.

An Individualist

Though there were always a few conservative detractors, most viewers appreciated the boldness of Hansen's dynamic scenes of fishermen, which often portrayed advancements in technology and fishing practices. The artist himself explained to the *Carmel Pine Cone* on February 8, 1935, "The whole world is changing now. If you are alert, and a part of this age, you must change with it." Hansen's depiction of motorboats in particular marked an important break from the work of his California predecessors, who generally

found modern modes of transportation unsuitable subjects for art. In addition, Hansen also welcomed cultural changes and capitalized on the ethnic diversity of Monterey's fishermen. Eleanor Minturn James wrote on August 14, 1931, that Hansen knew his subjects both "racially and individually, their tricks of feature, gesture, loves and hates, pettiness, jealousies . . . resignation, courage, [and] sturdiness." Hansen knew these men and their vigorous way of life intimately because he had accompanied them on their voyages in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In his mind, he was one of them.

Hansen arrived at his mature style by 1920 and was already recognized as one of California's foremost painters. In 1926, he would become an Associate Member of the **National Academy of Design** in New York (he was accorded full membership in 1948). Some reviewers began calling him the "Winslow Homer of the West," both for the subjects he portrayed and the directness with which he presented them. To bring his subjects before a wide audience, Hansen exhibited in cities throughout California, across the United States, and, occasionally, in Europe.

Conclusion

Throughout his life, Hansen saw himself as a student with more to learn. He remained open to new ideas and welcomed the rapid changes taking place in the art world. Even as Abstract



War, 1942
Oil on canvas board 18" × 24"
Collection of Crocker Art Museum by exchange

Expressionism gained widespread acceptance in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he was not threatened, but motivated, telling a reporter from the *Carmel Spectator* on February 18, 1954, "I think it is the most wonderful thing ever to happen. To me, I mean. When a painter like myself paints for a long time and gets a certain amount of recognition he soon begins to feel that he has arrived

and that he knows it all. Then all of a sudden something comes along that he knows nothing about and he gets knocked off his high-horse and has to start thinking. This abstract painting keeps me thinking and it's wonderful."

But Hansen had already made his mark and therefore continued to focus on subject matter that he knew best—fishing. In a *San Francisco Examiner*



On the Fishing Grounds, n.d.
Oil on board 9 1/2" × 11 1/2"
Collection of Christine and Reed Halladay



After the Day's Catch, n.d.
Oil on board 13" × 17"
Collection of Donna and Mark Salzberg



Lampara (Large Plate), 1936
Etching 13 1/8" × 15 5/8"
Courtesy of Josh Hardy Galleries



Kitty and the Blue Wagon (later The Farmhouse), c. 1915
Oil on canvas 30" × 36"
The Irvine Museum, Irvine, California

obituary published April 25, 1957, two days after Hansen's death, the artist was quoted as saying, "Every move I have made and everything I have done, has always been to go back to the sea and to the men who give it its romance. I love them all." Given his training, experience, and interests, Hansen had established a presence in Monterey at the perfect moment, just as the fishing industry offered an untapped and dynamic artistic frontier, and as the international atmosphere of the town itself presented new opportunities. Hansen's adoption of these subjects as his own, coupled with his bravura technical approach, realized the aesthetic potential of the Monterey Peninsula in a new and extraordinary way and, by so doing, contributed a new chapter to the story of California art. ■

Notes:

Author **Scott A. Shields, Ph.D.**, received both his master's degree and doctorate in art history from the **University of Kansas** and is Associate Director and Chief Curator of the **Crocker Art Museum** in Sacramento.

Featuring nearly 100 works, the exhibition **Armin Hansen: The Artful Voyage** was organized by the **Pasadena Museum of California Art** in conjunction with the **Crocker Art Museum** and is on view in Pasadena from January 25 to May 31, 2015. A 280-page hardcover catalogue, published by **Pomegranate Communications, Inc.**, written by the exhibition's curator, **Scott A. Shields**, accompanies the exhibition. Following its debut in Pasadena, the exhibition travels to the **Crocker Art Museum** (June 28 – October 11, 2015) and the **Monterey Museum of Art** (October 29, 2015 – March 7, 2016).