



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage for More Than 100 Years



November, 1881
Oil on canvas 38.4" × 20.5"
Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Rennes, France

Uniting Man and Nature in Paint

LOVELL BIRGE HARRISON, THE EARLY YEARS (1881 TO 1896)

by Andrea Husby, Ph.D.

ARTIST, ILLUSTRATOR, writer, teacher and critic, **Lovell Birge Harrison's (1854-1929)** multifaceted talents placed him among the first rank of American artists, in figure, landscape and marine painting, in a career that spanned the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth.

In 1876, while Harrison was still a student, he met the impressive **John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)** at the **Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition**. Sargent advised Harrison to terminate his studies with **Thomas Eakins (1844-1916)** at the **Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts** and to further his art education in Paris. Harrison took Sargent's advice and soon left for France. By the fall of 1877 he was

enrolled in the atelier of Sargent's teacher, **Emile Carolus-Duran (1837-1919)**. Harrison later attended the prestigious **École des Beaux-Arts** where he studied under the leading French history painter **Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889)**. After spending several years at the École, Harrison became one of the very few American artists to matriculate through the arduous program.

Like other American students, he spent his summers in the numerous art colonies that dotted the French countryside learning the secrets of *plein air* (in the open air) painting. He spent several summers in the picturesque village of Grez-sur Loing near Paris, where he joined other remarkable Anglo-American artists of his generation

such as Willard L. Metcalf (1858-1925), Will H. Low (1853-1932), Theodore Robinson (1852-1896) the Irish artist, Frank O'Meara (1853-1888), the Scottish painter, R.A.M. Stevenson (1841-1900) and his cousin, the author Robert Louis Stevenson (1852-1894), to name a few.

HARRISON'S ROMANTIC LIFE was also beginning to take root when he married his model and muse, the Australian-born, Eleanor Ritchie (1854-1895), who was an accomplished artist in her own right. By 1882 his reputation as a figure painter was gaining momentum. His painting, *November* (1881), was not only exhibited at the Paris Salon, but was also purchased by the French government, a rare distinction for an American artist at the time.

Like other works from this early phase in his career, Harrison's isolated figure in *November* is placed within a landscape setting that mirrors the psychological mood of the subject. Such works reveal his conviction that all great works of art result from the merging of technique and meaning. Like his later atmospheric landscapes, for which he is now best known, these important early works reveal his use of the formal elements of art as a means of visualizing the unifying element of his oeuvre—his belief in the harmonious oneness of man and nature.

After six years studying and working in France, it seemed that Harrison's future was well on its way. However, success was hampered when he developed a severe case of malaria, probably contracted at Grez-sur-Loing, which would plague him throughout his life. Driven by his illness and in search of healthy climates, Harrison's hasty departure from France began a long period of wanderlust. Shortly after their return to the United States, the young couple spent time camping in the high desert region of the Rocky Mountains,

armed against the “Indians, desperados and bears that infested the area.”

The Harrisons were among the first artists to settle in northern New Mexico, taking up residence in Espanola, a small, dusty town midway between Santa Fe and Taos. They soon set up their easels under sun umbrellas and began capturing the magic of the local landscape and the activities of the native population. It was here that Harrison began his career as a writer and illustrator, and in May 1885 he published his first of many travel articles under the title, *Espanola and Its Environs*, for the publication, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. He also continued exhibiting extensively in the United States and France, both alone and with his brother, **Thomas Alexander Harrison (1853-1930)**, who was quickly becoming a leading member among the expatriate American painters in France.

BY 1885, HARRISON'S HEALTH improved, and the couple felt free to embark on an extended trip through Europe and Southern France, eventually settling in Étapes. Here they joined other American artists drawn to this charming French fishing port located on the coast of Picardy, including expatriates **Ruger Donoho (1857-1916)** and **Walter Gay (1857-1937)** who shared Harrison's interest in the *plein air Naturalism* of **Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884)**. Combining the technique of spontaneous *plein air* painting with an academic approach to figural subjects, Bastien-Lepage's aesthetic offered American artists the opportunity to explore *plein air* painting as a means of capturing the shifting effects of light without abandoning the mastery of classical draughtsmanship taught at the Academy.

In 1889, Harrison exhibited at the **Exposition Universelle** and won a silver medal for his earlier painting, *November* (1881). Though his reputation as a figure painter continued to grow, Harrison's canvas, *Evening on the Seine* (ca. 1889-90), suggests that he may have begun investigating landscape subjects just prior to leaving for Australia in the fall of that year. Upon arriving in Eleanor's homeland, the Harrisons quickly befriended members of the popular



Evening on the Seine, c. 1889

Pastel on paper 28 3/4" × 39"

Collection of North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina

Heidelberg School of *plein air* painting including **Tom Roberts (1856-1931)**, **E. Phillips Fox (1865-1919)** and **Charles Condor (1868-1909)**. Initially the couple planned to stay for two years, but left after eighteen months in the spring of 1892. A deciding factor could have been the arduous trip he made through the harsh climates of Gippsland where he gathered material for a travel article, and which may have taxed Harrison's health. California's moderate climate beckoned with the promise of a healthier environment.

The summer of 1894 found the Harrisons in Montecito, just south of Santa Barbara, building several stone structures, including a home and studio on a five-acre parcel of land that was adjacent to "Arcady," the estate of **Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead (1854-1929)** and **Jane Byrd McCall Whitehead (1861-1955)**. The Whiteheads were prominent in the arts community and surrounded themselves with the leading artists of the time. In 1903 Jane Byrd and Ralph Radcliffe combined their names and founded **Byrdcliffe Art Colony** in the small town of Woodstock, nestled in New York's Catskill Mountains, that became a major contributor toward the **American Arts and Crafts Movement**. Given their

shared interest in the arts, the Harrisons were quickly drawn into the Whitehead's circle of highly accomplished friends. Although, "he would rather die than give a lesson," Harrison agreed to advise Mrs. Whitehead on her painting skills. This gesture of friendship, which launched Harrison's teaching career, would serve him well in the future, as in 1904 he would accept a teaching position at Byrdcliffe.

In Santa Barbara, both of the Harrisons frequently accompanied Ralph Whitehead on riding excursions into the mountainous area in nearby Ojai. It was probably on one of these trips in 1895 that Harrison was inspired to paint *California Landscape*, a rare wilderness scene. The vantage point in this early landscape looks eastward across a mountain range, capturing the unique lighting effects of what has been called Ojai's "pink moment," which occurs during the fall and winter months when the sunset reflects off the mountains, producing a pink glow across the surface of the range.

Sadly, this idyllic period in the couple's life was not to last. Eleanor and their only child died within days of each other due to complications associated with childbirth in April 1895. Harrison

expressed the impact of this tragedy in two seascapes, *Night Sinks into the Sea* (1896) and *Serenity on the Pacific*, from the same period. These highly evocative early seascapes resonate with a profound sense of loss, the pain of which is eased by the contemplation of the eternal cycle of nature, symbolized by the timeless motion of the ocean's waves.

HARRISON'S FIRST EXHIBITION focusing on landscape subjects was shown in 1897 at the **American Art Galleries**. The exhibition included work by his brother and was titled *Paintings by Birge Harrison and Alexander Harrison*. The exhibition contained several "bright and sunny" California landscapes with titles referring to Santa Barbara that were praised for their "outdoor feeling."

While Birge Harrison's interest



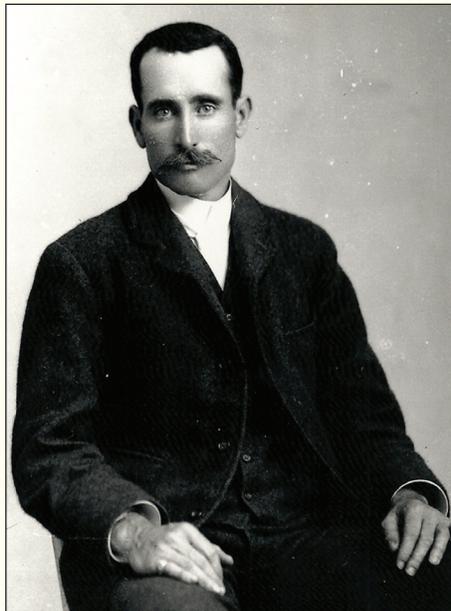
ABOVE: Photo of Eleanor Ritchie Harrison
RIGHT: Photo of Lovell Birge Harrison

in marine painting was no doubt influenced by his brother's previous success in pursuing this subject, it probably began much earlier for the brothers. During their youth in Germantown, Pennsylvania, both boys, only a year apart in age, were frequent visitors to the studio of **William Trost Richards (1833-1905)**, one of America's most accomplished marine artists. Richards and the Harrison brothers shared a belief in the unity of man and nature and a fascination in exploring the inexhaustible faces of nature that the ocean reveals. Painting at mid-century and a leader among American Pre-

Raphaelite artists, Richards' approach relied primarily on description. Birge Harrison was more concerned with suggesting nature's moods and his personal response to his experience of them, by concentrating on carefully modulated colour as a signifier of emotion.

It is clear that in his early California seascapes, Harrison concluded that the formal methods of the *Tonalist* landscape movement allowed him to pursue his interest in outdoor painting, while providing a form for the personal expression of his belief in the unity of man and nature.

Set in mid-ocean, *Night Sinks into the Sea* shows only two primary elements, the sea and the sky. Careful modulation of colour and tone produce a harmonious effect and mood. The coastal scene of *Serenity on the Pacific* is arranged diagonally across the canvas, leading the viewer's eye from



the near shore toward the expanse of ocean, culminating in the distant horizon where they merge. In both works, Harrison has chosen the sunset as one of the most evocative times of day, capturing the quality of vibration, which he defined as the "scintillating effect of living light," and wrapping the scene in an envelope of atmospheric mist, successfully conveying not only his emotional response to nature, but also suggesting a spiritual dimension that offers the viewer an experience of a world larger than himself.

In these early works, as in all of his later landscape paintings, Harrison



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Old Mexican Chapel by Moonlight
 Reproduction from Birge Harrison,
 "Española and Its Environs"
Harper's New Monthly Magazine (May 1885)

used the characteristically Tonalist techniques of simplified composition, atmospheric veiling and the modulation of colour and value to re-create a directly observed reality, which on further contemplation, suggests subjective and personal associations. In light of the tragic loss of his wife and newborn baby, it is not surprising that these early seascapes resonate with emotion silently contemplated and are among his most evocative works. They also reveal the theoretical stance that Harrison steadfastly maintained throughout his career: that art is nature seen through the individual artist's temperament.

In 1896 while visiting his uncle in Plymouth, Massachusetts, Harrison became re-acquainted with his uncle's step daughter, **Jeannie Seaton Harrison (1865-1932)** whom he soon married. The couple made their home in Plymouth, but later moved to upstate New York where Harrison co-founded the **Art Students League at Woodstock**.

Harrison enjoyed a long and successful career conveying his belief in the harmonious relationship between man and nature as portrayed in his *Tonalist* paintings. The publication of his 1909 book, *Landscape Painting*, was based on his lectures as the director of the Art Students League at Woodstock and in the more than a dozen articles that ensued, Harrison was widely recognized as one of the most articulate and influential champions of the *Tonalist* Movement in America. ■

Notes:
 This article is based on **Dr. Andrea Husby's** dissertation, **Birge Harrison: Artist, Teacher and Critic.** (City University of New York, 2003). *Dr. Husby is currently on the faculty of The Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco, and the adjunct faculty of Santa Rosa Junior College. Harrison's*

*work was recently exhibited at Nevada Museum of Art in an installation entitled, "The Work Ethic in American Art" (December 5, 2009 – March 28, 2010). Out of print for nearly seven decades, Birge Harrison's book, **Landscape Painting**, is now available on **Amazon.com**, and if accessed through californiaartclub.org from the home page, Amazon will send a donation to the Club.*



California Landscape, 1895
 Oil on canvas 17 1/4" x 23 1/4"
 Private Collection



Floating Ice, c. 1910
 Oil on canvas 30" x 40"
 Private Collection