

From Porcelains to Paintings

The Unique Artistic Journey of Franz A. Bischoff

By JEAN STERN



Although his name is not widely known today, Franz A. Bischoff (1864-1929) was once celebrated across the United States. Best known for the sumptuously faded pink roses he painted on china and canvas, Bischoff drew attention at both the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. In 1910, he helped launch the California Art Club, which went on to become the most powerful art organization in Los Angeles, and remains influential today. Transcending his temporal success, however, are his luminous paintings, which demonstrate the exceptional gifts for color and design he first honed while decorating porcelain in central Europe.

OLD-WORLD ARTISAN

Bischoff was born in Stein Schönau, approximately 65 miles north of Prague. Now in the Czech Republic, this town was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time, so Bischoff's native language was German. Having received a basic elementary education, he began apprenticing in the local craft school at age 12. He was a precocious student, and knew even in childhood that his talent was exceptional. At 15 he moved to Vienna, where he studied applied design, watercolor painting, and ceramic decoration.

Bischoff also studied briefly in Dresden, one of the great centers of German porcelain painting. In the West, porcelain is commonly referred to as "china" because it was invented there about 1,000 years ago. It is made with kaolin clay, a mineral that turns to glass when fired at extremely high temperatures, becoming impervious to water. As early as 1710, German pottery factories had mastered the secret of making porcelain, and Dresden harbored many studios that decorated (rather than manufactured) it.

Not long after completing his studies in Vienna, Bischoff immigrated to the U.S. Questions linger about exactly when he arrived, though it was most likely 1882, when he was 18. In New York, Bischoff worked as a decorator in a china factory, and soon moved to Pittsburgh to take a better job painting designs on lamp shades at a glass factory. In 1888, he followed this firm to Fostoria, Ohio, a center of American glass manufacturing thanks to its cheap natural gas and five railroad lines.

There Bischoff fell in love with another European emigrant, Bertha Greenwald (1872-1966), and they married in 1890, ultimately parenting a daughter and a son. In 1888, the artist met Mrs. Mary L. Wagner, a china painter and socially prominent arts patron in

GRAPES (WINE TANKARD)
1899, PORCELAIN, 15 IN. HIGH
COLLECTION OF PAULA AND TERRY TROTTER





PINK AND WHITE MAMAN COCHET ROSES

N.D., OIL ON CANVAS, 34 x 30 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

open-work patterns. Bischoff depicted all kinds of fruits, birds, fish, figures, and landscapes, but his favorite subject was flowers. He especially loved roses, and sometimes noted on the object the specific name of the hybrid depicted (e.g., Maman Cochet). Not surprisingly, this passion earned him the epithet “The King of Rose Painters.”

By 1893, Bischoff was a pillar of Detroit’s art community and began to manufacture and market his own colors to wholesalers nationwide, who clamored loudest for a unique pinkish-grey he called “Ashes of Roses.” (He always started with grey glazes and added stronger colors on top.) By the mid 1890s, Bischoff was recognized nationally as one of the three men who had developed the “American Style” of porcelain decoration, as distinct from the traditional “Meissen Style.” (Ironically all three were native German speakers.) This new style favored painted over sculptural elements, emphasizing representational and naturalistic forms (such as florals or pastoral subjects) on shaded backgrounds accompanied by washes of color.

A NEW LIFE ON THE WEST COAST

Bischoff’s love affair with California began in 1900, when he stopped in Los Angeles and admired its climate, landscape, and rapidly growing art

colony. Five years later, he purchased a lot in South Pasadena, and early in 1906, the Bischoffs left Dearborn for good, stopping in San Francisco before heading south. A few days after they left San Francisco, the city was destroyed by the infamous earthquake and fire of April 18, 1906.

Bischoff was welcomed warmly by the small but dynamic professional arts community of Los Angeles, where he established a studio in the Blanchard Studio Building downtown, then home to the Art Students’ League of Los Angeles and equipped with a large exhibition space. Bischoff began building a new studio-house on his South Pasadena lot along the picturesque Arroyo Seco, which was already home to numerous artists, writers, and musicians.

Bischoff’s arrival in Los Angeles coincided with the start of his career as a landscape painter. Until now, the only canvases he had produced were elegant sketches and full-scale still-lives of flowers, particularly roses, which served as studies or models for his porcelain designs. Though he continued to paint still-lives, Bischoff shifted his attention to landscapes, gradually curtailing his porcelain work, so that by 1915 he may have ceased it entirely. Figures rarely appear in Bischoff’s oeuvre, and when they do, they are usually incidental to the landscape.

It is interesting to ponder Bischoff’s relatively sudden turn to easel painting, particularly at a time when his popularity as a ceramic painter

Detroit. Two years later he relocated to Detroit to work in her studio, but within a year had opened his own firm, where he painted porcelain superbly and taught small classes, which were always full, particularly with women from Detroit’s elite. Among them was Mary Chase Perry, who later established Michigan’s renowned Pewabic Pottery. In 1895, the Bischoffs moved to Dearborn, Michigan, where Franz became a U.S. citizen a year later.

Bischoff painted on high-quality bisque “blanks” with transparent glazes (layers of glass-forming minerals, such as silica or boron), which were combined with color-forming minerals and melting agents, often lead or soda. Once painted, the porcelain item was heated in a kiln so that the glaze melted and became a layer of colored glass on the surface. Bischoff regularly used two, three, or more layers of glazing. A surprising number of glaze colors are revealed only after being fired, which means the color of the work in progress is not the color it will end up being. Moreover, any additional firing to apply further colors risks damaging previous layers, not to mention cracking the piece. Bischoff personally glaze-painted and fired every piece, turning out astonishing numbers of beautiful, flawless works of art.

These included vases, bowls, plates, platters, tankards, serving dishes, plaques, and wall tiles, many of them accented by intricate gold leaf and

CANNA LILIES (RED)

N.D., OIL ON BOARD, 26 x 19 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF THE IRVINE MUSEUM

(and the popularity of the medium itself) was at its peak. Perhaps it was dissatisfaction with the limits imposed by size and choice of subject matter, or perhaps his recent exposure to California's landscape, with its grandeur and freshness. His growing association with local landscapists was also surely a stimulus. Lastly, this change of direction came when he was in his early 40s, after a long period of hard work that had won him a comfortable style of living, a time in life when many individuals make career changes.

In 1908 the Bischoffs moved into their new home, designed in an elegant blend of Italian Renaissance, Gothic, and Mission styles and built of poured concrete, a necessity for firing ceramics in the basement's kiln. Its gallery measured 36 by 40 feet, with high, concave ceilings punctuated by several half-circular skylights. Its oak floors were covered with Turkish rugs and bear skins, and its walls with flower and landscape paintings. In one corner were several cases displaying Bischoff's painted ceramics. The studio featured a large picture window overlooking the Arroyo Seco and San Gabriel Mountains.

Because the foliage and flowers in the surrounding gardens would offer an important source of inspiration for Bischoff, much thought went into their design. He often painted there and many of his pictures show Bertha and the children enjoying the property's beauty. Bischoff constructed an array of pergolas that echoed the color and pattern of the trim on the house's windows and doors. These supported various flowering vines, such as climbing roses and especially wisteria, the unofficial emblem of the Art Nouveau and Arts & Crafts movements. A series of beds contained large, colorful displays of flowering plants, including canna lilies, chrysanthemums, peonies, hollyhocks, and various annuals. The warm climate allowed the Bischoffs to enjoy flowers of one type or another throughout the year.

A LIFE LIVED OUTDOORS

In addition to his still lifes, which were gathered from the garden and taken into the studio, Bischoff painted *in situ* in the garden, getting down to the same level as his plants, conveying the feel of the dark, moist soil, swaying breeze, and filtered sunlight. His colors varied from the dark greens and browns of leaves and stems to a brilliant mixture of exploding pinks, yellows, golds, and soft blues for the blooms. The texture also varied from an almost precise rendition

of individual petals to a whirling pattern of strokes, applied throughout with rapid facility. These flower studies were usually painted *alla prima* on unprepared boards measuring 19 by 26 inches. A fine example is *Canna Lilies*, illustrated here. There is no sign of preparatory drawing, and the brush is used boldly. The forms of flowers and leaves are only suggested, with little attention to detail. Yet, from a distance, the effect is that of close observation. Always experimenting, Bischoff also introduced the relatively short-lived vogue for painting flowers under electric lighting around 1911.

In 1908, Bischoff held an exhibition of recent work in his home gallery, including many small plein-air sketches of the Arroyo Seco. His favorite sketching method was to take along several board panels, mea-





MISSION SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO
 N.D., OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 30 IN.
 COLLECTION OF PAUL AND KATHLEEN BAGLEY

asuring about 13 inches by 19 inches, find an interesting bit of landscape, and paint the view quickly. A typical panel might show a foreground stream, a cluster of sycamore trees, or perhaps a sky at sunset. Having captured that effect, the remainder was hastily painted, with little attention to detail. Occasionally, the unimportant parts were left unpainted. These numerous panels were used later to compose Bischoff's larger paintings. Thereafter, he would store them away, unsigned and unframed. On special occasions, he would show the more complete sketches and sell them to buyers who were not ready or able to purchase major works. Normally, the panels would remain unsigned until they were sold.

By 1912, Bischoff was one of southern California's leading plein-air painters. That year, however, he and his 21-year-old daughter left on an eight-month voyage to Naples, Capri, Pompeii, Venice, Florence, Rome, Munich, and Paris. Although he intended to study Old Master paintings on his only return to Europe, Bischoff seems instead to have been riveted by his first encounter with French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Among the works Bischoff made abroad were pastel and gouache drawings inspired by Edgar Degas's ballet dancers, and also a small, charming oil copy of Van Gogh's *The Sower*. It seems most likely he saw the originals in Parisian galleries, such as those of the rival dealers Paul Durand-Ruel and

Georges Petit. For a brief period after his return home in 1913, Bischoff's art offered much bolder color harmonies, best represented by a series made around the port of Los Angeles at San Pedro. One still-life of this phase offers the slightly tilted perspective pioneered by Paul Cézanne, while the complex background patterning in another reminds us of contemporaneous works by Pierre Bonnard.

In 1920, Bischoff made the first of several extended painting trips into California's majestic Sierra Nevada mountains, inspired by the superb vistas painted there recently by his fellow California Art Club member, Edgar Payne. And during the mid-1920s, he often painted along the central and northern coasts of California, especially the communities of Cambria, Monterey, and Carmel-by-the-Sea. This region's cooler light contrasted markedly with the more intensely colored views of Bischoff's Laguna Beach and La Jolla paintings. He was enthralled by the rugged beauty of the rocky central coast, the visual effects of fog, and especially the distinctive Monterey Cypress trees, which can live as long as 2,000 years. Like so many artists before and after him, Bischoff deeply admired their tenacity against the sea's incessant winds.



GOLD RIMMED ROCKS AND SEA, NEAR HIGHLANDS
 c. 1925, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 40 IN.
 COLLECTION OF PAUL AND KATHLEEN BAGLEY

Between 1924 and 1927, Bischoff produced a group of luminous, warmly colored paintings of the picturesque village of Cambria on the central coast, as well as the farms around it. Here he explored the traditional theme of the symbiotic relationship between man and nature, with Cambria epitomizing the nobility of rural life with its attendant cleanliness, spirituality, and above all, tranquility. Many of these works were drawn with a softened line, which results in a fuller, rounder form, reminiscent of children's storybook illustrations.

Bischoff's paintings of northern California, although occasionally striking in color and provocative in line, are firmly rooted in the Impressionist manner. They are works that deal primarily with the various visual effects of light. Moreover, they retain several qualities characteristic of American Impressionism: a well-developed sense of depth and space, a retention of solid form, and a reverential approach to nature as subject matter. Many of Bischoff's titles point to this reverence; e.g., *Mist-Veiled Days, Monterey; Gold Rimmed Rocks and Sea, Near Highlands; Beneath a Sky of Mazarin, Point Lobos.*

In 1926, Bischoff trained his eye on the desert landscape near Palm Springs, and in 1928 on Zion National Park in southwestern Utah. There he relished the pageant of vivid colors seen in the towering sandstone cliffs, which change throughout the day and required him to use intense hues applied in broad bands. These audacious colors stretched beyond Impressionism toward the thresholds of Fauvism and Expressionism.

Alas, the trip to Utah proved to be Bischoff's last. He died in 1929 at home in his beloved Arroyo Seco at the age of 65. Fortunately,

his daughter Frances Bischoff Mace did not die until 1979, aged 88, which means the thread connecting us back to Bischoff is not so very long. I warmly encourage readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* to discover this master's art for themselves this season at the Pasadena Museum of California Art. ■

JEAN STERN is executive director of *The Irvine Museum* in Irvine, California, and a prolific authority on the art and artists of California. He is grateful for the assistance of the researchers Marian Yoshiki Kavinick and Phil Kavinick, the late Bob Yost, the extended Bischoff family, and Carol Greenwald Montana.

Editor's Note: Jean Stern has guest-curated *Gardens and Grandeur: Porcelains and Paintings by Franz A. Bischoff*, the largest retrospective ever dedicated to this master artist. On view at the Pasadena Museum of California Art through March 20, it coincides with *The Irvine Museum's* publication of Stern's 224-page book, *Franz A. Bischoff: The Life & Art of an American Master*. (This volume also contains an essay on china painting by Scott A. Shields, chief curator of the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, who guest-curated the porcelain section of the PMCA exhibition.) Stern will lecture and sign books at PMCA on January 30. PMCA is located at 490 East Union Street, Pasadena, CA 91101, 626.568.3665, pmcaonline.org