



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

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

Jean Mannheim (1861-1945): Cultivating Colour and Versatility in California

by Richard W. Reitzell

THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY was an incredibly dynamic period for California and in particular, for southern California and Los Angeles. The allure of a mild climate, the beauty of the Golden State, and the search for new opportunities led to an influx of innovative artists, many already well-established and respected in the East and Midwest. Inspired by their new and pristine surroundings these academically-trained artists would give rise to the regional art movement that would become known as *California Plein Air* or *California Impressionism*. Among these artists was the German-born Jean Mannheim who arrived in Los Angeles in 1908.

Like many artists who settled in southern California, it didn't take long for the colourful and diverse environs to attract Mannheim's brush. In 1911 Everett C. Maxwell, Director of the Museum of History, Science and Art in Los Angeles, commented in *The Graphic* that Mannheim "is essentially a figure painter and that in this all-too-sparsely populated field of art his great future lies wide and golden before him. However, since Mr. Mannheim's arrival in the land of a thousand wonders, the silent call of the eternal hills has lured him forth to interpret their message of truth and beauty through the medium of his brilliant brush...his landscape renderings, strong, virile marvels of technical dexterity, rare in color and marvelously decorative?"

Few California artists tackled as many varied subjects as Jean Mannheim. Known first as a skilled painter of casual and formal portraits and genre scenes, he ranged beyond to paint a wealth of



The Fairy Tale, c. 1910
Oil on canvas 39" × 34"
Private Collection

subjects, from marines to desertscapes, harbour and industrial scenes, to mountains, valleys, streams, gardens, and still lifes. In a 1916 *Los Angeles Times* article "From a Versatile Brush," art

critic Antony Anderson differentiated between painters who were true to a single genre or style and those who, like Mannheim, captured a wide range of subjects. Anderson described



Self-Portrait, c. 1935

Oil on masonite 24" × 20"

Collection of Richard and Lynn Reitzell

Mannheim as “one of the most versatile of our Los Angeles painters” and noted that, “impelled by his artistic curiosity, Mannheim has not hesitated to paint anything that looked paintable to him, and the result is that his technique has become remarkably sure and fluent, besides being marked with a splendid vigor.”

Jean Mannheim, the third of six children, was born on November 18, 1861 in Bad Kreuznach in what is today a wine-growing region in western Germany. His father, also Jean, was German and worked as a clothes dyer by trade. His mother, Gertrude, was of French-Alsatian descent. Mannheim’s father taught him to draw at a young age and the artist would later fondly recall long walks with his father, who with the eye of a dye-maker, would point out the many colours of nature, strong and subtle around them. After apprenticing at a bookbindery, Mannheim left home at seventeen and travelled throughout Germany plying his trade by day, while attending evening art classes and painting portraits of anyone who would pose for him.

In 1883 at the age of twenty-one Jean Mannheim left Europe for America. After settling in Chicago he travelled through central Illinois earning income along the way by teaching art. He then made three extended stays in Decatur, Illinois interspersed with four trips to Paris for further art studies. Between

1891 and 1902 Mannheim studied at the Académie Julian, the Académie Colarossi, and L’École Delecluse under such prominent instructors as William Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), Paul Delance (1848–1924), and Rodolphe Julian (1839–1907).

In Decatur, Mannheim’s portrait business grew into a successful career and he became an integral figure in the city at large as well as within the artistic community. In addition, he developed strong ties with the local media, which, in various “Around the Town” and “Scraps of News” columns, frequently announced the progress of the artist’s portraits of local citizens.

Mannheim’s visible talent, engaging personality, strong German accent, interesting tales of life abroad, combined with some slight eccentricities, seemed to match well with the town’s developing expectations of what a successful artist should be like. His art schools thrived as he supplemented his teaching with Paris-style innovations such as live models and annual student exhibitions. In addition, Mannheim had the unique distinction as an artist to have had a tavern named after him. This unusual honour occurred after a local proprietor, hoping to attract a “classier” clientele, replaced the former common risqué saloon painting with a number of Mannheim’s refined genre works. Pleased with the result, the tavern keeper renamed the establishment “The Mannheim,” a name it carried for several decades.

THE AMERICANS WHO LIVED IN Paris during the last decade of the nineteenth century experienced an incredibly dynamic art and teaching environment. A favourite lecture topic of Mannheim’s was student life in Paris. He would note that “composition and drawing, which had heretofore been stressed so forcibly, was now a secondary consideration. Everything was colour.” He often concluded that “When I first went to Paris, the impressionists were painting with big dots of colour. Two years later I went back, and the pointillists were painting with little dots. Then came the post-impressionism, cubism, and other extremes. Finally I thought, ‘Well, nuts. I guess I’ll just paint.’”

In 1902 Mannheim returned to America settling in Denver. He married Eunice Drennan, a former student and model. They had two daughters, Jeanne and Eunie, and remained in Denver for five years, where Jean taught at the Denver Art School and the Woman’s Club. He painted portraits in the winter, while in the summer months he travelled into the mountains on sketching expeditions. In 1907 the family moved back to Europe and for several years he worked closely with the internationally renowned muralist Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) at the London School of Art. However the cold, damp English weather was difficult on his wife’s health and seeking a better climate, they moved to southern California in the fall of 1908 and built their home on the bluff of Pasadena’s Arroyo Seco.

Mannheim lost no time in entering the burgeoning Los Angeles art scene. In 1909 he established a studio in the Blanchard Building on Broadway Street in downtown L.A., where he held his first exhibition. Later that year he became a Gold Medal recipient at the



Study in Sunlight, c. 1908

Oil on board 27" × 18"

Private Collection



Arroyo Garden

Oil on canvas 20" × 24"

Private Collection

Courtesy of George Stern Fine Arts

1909 Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition held in Seattle, Washington. In a familiar pattern, Mannheim quickly developed his portrait business and established himself through commissioned works of many of Los Angeles's leading citizens.

Sadly, as Mannheim's career was ascending, his wife Eunice became severely ill with peritonitis and died within two days on January 24, 1910 at the age of forty-four. Mannheim and his children were devastated, but he found solace in focusing on his work and raising his daughters.

His 1912 portraits of razor-blade founder King Gillette led the press to boost regional pride by extolling the finished works as "taken to indicate that easterners are at least becoming awake to the fact that California painters are the equals of those in Europe and along the Atlantic Coast." Another headline read, "California Art is rivalling Europe and the East," and chronicled that "millionaire and connoisseur King Gillette" had purchased seven Mannheim pictures, paying "the price of two automobiles."

Jean Mannheim and fellow German émigré and leading artist William Wendt (1865–1946) developed a strong friendship that lasted nearly four decades. When Wendt received a telegram that he had been accepted as an associate member of the prestigious National Academy of Design in 1912, he selected his good friend Mannheim to paint his inaugural portrait. Though very different personalities, the two shared a common love of the traditional aspects of their craft and served the artist community throughout their careers. Wendt through his organizational leadership of artists' clubs, primarily the California Art Club, Mannheim through his lifelong interest in teaching and mentoring young artists. Their duo-exhibition at the Friday Morning Club in 1914 was heavily attended and, at the time, an innovative pairing that was described by Antony Anderson as "one of the most important shows of the year...and peculiarly interesting in that it offers us the opportunity to study and compare the works of two men, both eminent as technicians, yet radically



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King Camp Gillette, 1912
Oil on canvas 38 1/4" × 34"
Collection of National Portrait Gallery
Smithsonian Institution
Gift of the Gillette Company



The Lady in White, c. 1911
Oil on canvas 39" × 34"
Collection of Richard and Lynn Reitzell

different in method and subject.”

Later in 1914, with the backing of the influential Pasadena Music & Art Association, Mannheim and fellow Paris-trained artist Channel Pickering “C.P.” Townsley (1867–1921) founded the Stickney Memorial School of Fine Arts. The school was located on the corner of Fair Oaks and Lincoln Avenues in Pasadena (now the 134 and 210 freeways) and was built and donated by Susan Homer Stickney in memory of her sister. In the April 1915 issue of *The School Arts Magazine* (a monthly journal written about U.S. arts education) described the experience at the Stickney School: “A distinctive feature of the summer work will be classes from the costume model posed in the open air. The country in the vicinity is as beautiful as Italy.”

Townsley was an experienced arts administrator. While in England, he founded the London School of Art where he was director and an instructor along with Frank Brangwyn. In addition, Townsley worked for several years with William Merritt Chase

(1849–1916) for whom he managed the Chase Shinnecock School on Long Island. During the first two years of the Stickney School’s existence Townsley served as director and Mannheim served as the sole instructor.

THE STICKNEY SCHOOL ADVANCED the artistic credentials of the Pasadena art colony and would later include Guy Rose (1867–1925) and Alson S. Clark (1876–1949) on the faculty, both eventually became directors. After several years of leading instruction, Mannheim, as with many of German heritage, stepped out of the public eye due to the growing pre-World War I anti-German sentiment. However, he would continue to lead art classes and provide private instruction for several decades and taught a number of the area’s young artists including Kathryn Leighton (1875–1952), Sam Hyde Harris (1889–1977), Harry Tillcock (1882–1973), F. Carl Smith (1868–1955), and Grace Vollmer (1884–1977).

The period between 1909 and 1920

would prove to be a most productive phase of Mannheim’s career. His works were broadly exhibited at California Art Club exhibitions, the twin “Panama” expositions of 1915 and 1916, as well as numerous solo exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum, and elsewhere. His subject matter expanded beyond formal portraiture and included his immediate surroundings of the Arroyo Seco as well as northern California’s Monterey Peninsula. Furthermore, his developing style of casual portraits set in sun-dappled gardens set his work apart from those of most California Impressionists. Mannheim was also among the first to paint the “sights and sounds” of the new harbour in San Pedro, leading an art critic to comment, “when artists see the treasures which Jean Mannheim has found in San Pedro, it will be their haunt thereafter.”

As the Pasadena art scene flourished in the early 1920s, unlike many of his contemporaries who were represented by prominent art galleries, Mannheim

remained independent and relied on his associations with the California Art Club, the Pasadena Society of Artists, and the Laguna Beach Art Association for exposure, as well as exhibits at area city halls, hotels, libraries, bank lobbies, and even auto dealerships. His annual home studio exhibitions garnered a great deal of attention from local art critics and the general public. Antony Anderson referred to these annual treks to Pasadena as “occasion for genuine ‘pilgrimages’ by art lovers. Not that the pilgrimages are either long or arduous, for Pasadena is an accessible suburb and the roads that lead to it are among the finest in the world.”

Mannheim was also aided by his warm, engaging style and charismatic charm that built a wide network of friends and supporters. It was generally known that Sunday afternoons at his home and studio were a standing open house, and that the doors were open to anyone who dropped by. Everett C. Maxwell once described the home as “the scene of many gay and distinguished gatherings that chat upon every subject from art to cabbage culture over the dainty tea tables set beneath the striped awnings. Artists, writers, actors, society women, kings of finance, connoisseurs, and students gather here in democratic fashion and are sure of a hearty welcome from the genial host.”

DURING THE 1930S, THE southern California art world was changing dramatically. A number of the stalwart painters of the Pasadena art colony had passed away, including Guy Rose in 1925, and both Franz A. Bischoff (1864–1929) and Elmer Wachtel (1864–1929) in 1929. The Great Depression had devastated artists and patrons alike and the representational landscapes of the early California artists were being replaced by evolving abstractions of modernism and the grittier urban depictions of the California scene painters. Exhibitions often impelled multiple juries to judge the ranges of traditional and modern art, and controversy was everywhere as the emerging art factions collided with the traditionalists.

While essentially retired, during this period Mannheim continued to be a



The Idle Hour, 1911

Oil on board 20" × 24"

David and Mildred Schmidt Memorial Collection



Dablías

Oil on canvas 20" × 24"

The Gallup Collection



Jean Mannheim with daughters Eunie (left), Jeanne (right), and Sissy, the family dog, c. 1917

sought-after portraitist, and he rendered canvases of a number of prominent patrons, most notably Albert Einstein who had befriended him during the scientist's visit to the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena in 1931. By then in his seventies, the artist continued to paint a broad array of favourite subjects including the Laguna coast, the Arroyo Seco, the Coachella Valley, as well as genre scenes, many tinged with depression-era themes. A bright note came in 1935 at the age of seventy-four when Mannheim met and married Olive Brown Edwards (1891–1948), a native of Boston who, like Jean, was an accomplished violinist and loved to entertain.

MANNHEIM REMAINED A frequent exhibitor at the Ebell Club in Los Angeles including a highly acclaimed solo show in 1936 that was recognized to have “placed him more securely than ever in the position of a leader among Southland Painters.” Stanford University held two Mannheim exhibitions, the first a duo-exhibition with Edgar Payne (1883–1947) in 1935, and again in 1942, devoting the entire Stanford University Art Gallery's main exhibition room to Mannheim's oil paintings. His paintings were also



Study of Artist's Home, c. 1920
Oil on board 15 1/2" × 12"
The Charlotte Silver Memorial Collection

shown at a number of major exhibitions, including the 1935 California-Pacific International Exposition, the California State Fairs of 1936, 1937, and 1938, as well as the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, held at Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay.

On September 6, 1945, Jean Mannheim passed away in his Pasadena home from complications of a stroke. His nearly sixty-five year career was complete with artistic contributions that included teaching the next generation of plein air painters to appreciate a diversity of subjects in their brilliant colours and sense of life. ☐

Notes:

The author Richard W. Reitzell is a third-generation Californian and the great-grandson of the artist Jean Mannheim. He grew up in Pasadena near his great-grandfather's Arroyo Seco home. Reitzell's enthusiasm for the early California art scene has led him to research local art history, drawing extensively from his family's personal collection of letters, scrapbooks, and photographs. He served on the Jonathan Art Foundation's Board of Directors and edited the organization's recently published book, *Art at the Jonathan Club*. Rich Reitzell researched and authored the book, *From a Versatile Brush: The Life and Art of Jean Mannheim*, published in 2011 by Arroyo Publishing in Moorpark, California.