



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Still Life Painting in California

A CONTINUOUS TRANSFORMATION

by Elaine Adams

STILL LIFE, CONTRARY TO ITS NAME, IS A form of artistic expression that constantly evolves. Objects change through time, as they vary in style and purpose or even become obsolete. Cultural tastes and interests also change including what is revered and enjoyed as part of nature's bounties. One may consider still lifes as societal statements locked in time. Still life paintings often show the natural world combined with that of the manmade—flowers in a vase, fruit in a bowl, food on a tray—symbols of human triumphs in domesticating nature and containing it for everyday use and enjoyment.

Still Life painting was particularly popular among seventeenth century Dutch artists during what is now termed as their "Golden Age." After making peace with Spain in 1648, the Netherlands became a highly prosperous economy. The flourishing burghers wanted to show their new found wealth, but rather than spending their money on high fashion clothing, they invested in grand homes and filled them with the finest luxuries, particularly original works of art. According to the

educational text, *Masters of Taste: Genre and Still Life Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, published by the Albany Institute of History and Art, "During the seventeenth century, Netherlanders bought directly from artists' studios, from art dealers or bookshops, or from temporary stands set up at *Kermis* (street fairs). ...even most small towns could boast at least a few resident painters. In fact, some Dutch communities had more artists than they did butchers."

Just as French terms are often applied when describing facets of *Impressionism*, in homage to the nineteenth century artists who developed the movement, Dutch terms are applied to *Still Lifes*, in the language of the artists who popularized the genre. The term "still life," which can also be hyphenated as "still-life," is itself derived from the Dutch word, "stilleven," meaning "still model." For the erudite, there are specific terms referring to specific types of still lifes, such as *Vanitas*, which means "vanity" and refers to earthly pleasures; an *ontbijt* is a focus on simple things, usually associated with breakfast; *banketje*, means "little banquet" and



John O'Shea (1876-1956)
Bird of Paradise, c. 1931
Oil on composition board 48" × 36"
Collection of Marcel Vinh and Daniel Hansman
Photographer: Christopher Grandel/Adamson-Duvannes Galleries

features arrangements of lavish foods, such as lobsters and exotic fruits; *fruytje*, means “little fruit;” and *Hammetje*, means “little ham” for paintings that prominently feature ham subjects. A typically masculine subject is tobacco with its accoutrements, which is called a *tabakje*, “little tobacco.” “Pronk” means “ornately luxurious to the extent of being showy or ostentatious,” thus an ornate still life is called *pronkstilleven*.

Later, in eighteenth century France the artist **Jean Chardin (1699–1769)** brought the art of still life painting to an elevated height. He may have painted everyday objects, such as cooking utensils, tea kettles, and vegetables, but Chardin masterfully glorified these simple things through exquisite modelling, rich colour, glowing light and convincing texture. An accomplished still life artist can evoke through his or her paintings feelings of abundance, emptiness, beauty, lamentation, spirituality, nostalgia, the work can be narrative or rich in symbolism or can reflect the artist’s autobiography. Studying a still life painting is akin to studying oneself—a kind of Rorschach Test that leaves the interpretation entirely up to the viewer’s personal experiences, lifestyle and tastes at that moment in time.

Although not widely studied in the past, California still life painting has recently gained attention among prominent art scholars. In the new publica-

tion, *Not-So-Still Life: A Century of California Painting and Sculpture*, which accompanies an exhibition of the same title that opened at the **San Jose Museum of Art** last November, co-author and co-curator of the exhibition, **William H. Gerds, Ph.D.**, explains the artists’ incentive, “Painters often took up still life at either the beginning or the conclusion of their careers – at the beginning because the subject matter was immobile, and at the end because the artists themselves were restricted in movement.”

MANY ACADEMICALLY-TRAINED ARTISTS OF the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to California from the Midwest, East Coast and Europe. Lured by the state’s sunshine and vast vistas, plein air landscape or sun-drenched figurative paintings became the preferred subjects among California artists and patrons. It is fascinating, however, to discover the rarely exhibited still life paintings created by many of these illustrious artists including **Mabel Alvarez (1891–1985)**, **Dana Bartlett (1882–1957)**, **Maurice Braun (1877–1941)**, **Joseph Kleitsch (1881–1931)**, **Jules Pagès (1867–1946)**, **John Hubbard Rich (1876–1954)**, **Guy Rose (1867–1925)** and **Joseph Henry Sharp (1859–1953)**. Some California artists, including **George Brandriff (1890–1936)**, **Armin Hansen (1886–1957)**, **Joseph Raphael (1869–1950)** and

Donna Schuster (1883–1953), painted several personal and unusual still lifes that reveal much about them and their everyday surroundings—typically showing their studios or even their meals. There are a few California artists who are principally noted for their work in still life paintings, particularly **Anne Bremer (1868–1923)**, **Alice Chittenden (1859–1944)**, **Edwin Deakin (1838–1923)**, the wife and husband team of **Alberta B. (1855–1911)** and **William J. McCloskey (1859–1941)**, **Nell Walker Warner (1891–1970)** and **Edith White (1855–1946)**. Perhaps the most cele-



Granville Redmond (1871–1935)
Solace, 1900
 Oil on canvas 10" × 17"
 The Delman Collection, San Francisco

brated California still life artist is **Paul de Longpré** (1855–1911). Born in Lyon, France to a family of artists, de Longpré gained a formidable reputation in Europe for his delicate floral paintings on fans and china. In 1890 he moved to New York and nine years later, inspired by southern California's sunshine and the ability to grow and paint flowers year-round, he moved to Los Angeles. In 1900 he purchased a bit of land for ten dollars on Caheunga Boulevard in Hollywood and built a grand home in a Mission-Moorish-style. In 1902 de Longpré purchased an adjoining three acres from **Mrs. Daeida Wilcox Beveridge**, widow to Hollywood's original land developer, in exchange for three paintings valued at \$3,000. De Longpré's home and gardens, consisting of 4,000 rose bushes, became a tourist attraction, drawing approximately 25,000 visitors each year. In several of his floral paintings de Longpré included bees, a familiar theme that can also be seen in seventeenth century Dutch still lifes, as well as the occasional live insect or small bird. De Longpré was dubbed "Le Roi des Fleurs," (King of flowers) and De Longpré Avenue in Hollywood was named in his memory.

In the painting, *Still Life with Lobster*, by San Diego landscape artist **Charles Fries** (1854–1940), a luscious looking lobster takes centre focus, which by seventeenth century Dutch standards would label the scene a *banketje*, a lavish banquet. However, due to the lobster's humble surroundings, including a meagre bunch of radish, lettuce and an old cooking pot, the painting may be better described as an *ontbijt*, a focus on simple things. But what may be lavish in seventeenth century Netherlands could be considered simple in twentieth century San Diego—an example of reinterpretation based on time and place.

IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA THE IRISH-BORN artist **John O'Shea** (1876–1956) applied his interest in gardening to his talent for stylized painting. O'Shea's particular focus was the exotic flowers transplanted in California, such as the bird of paradise, a native of Africa. Such flora would have certainly been alien to the Irish landscape and no doubt sparked a sense of mystery and fantasy to O'Shea.

Granville Redmond (1871–1935) continues to be revered for his paintings of poetic California landscapes of both northern and southern regions, as well as his glorious moonlit scenes of the Pacific Ocean and his vistas of seemingly endless fields of poppies and lupines. But his rarely known still lifes



Paul de Longpré (1855-1911)

Rambling Roses, 1908

Watercolour on paper 23" × 17"

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Randal J. Williams

Photograph courtesy of Spanierman Gallery, LLC,
New York

Painted early in his career are also worth noting. In his 1900 *Solace*, Redmond creates a *tabakje* scene, complete with a pipe, tobacco pouch and matches. The painting is reminiscent of the masculine smoking theme that was popularized during the mid to late Victorian era.

Another artist who is considered a giant among California landscape painters is **Edgar Payne** (1883–1947). Payne is especially synonymous with the Sierra Nevada and its rugged grandeur. For this reason it is particularly interesting to discover a pair of small still lifes, *Sunflowers* and *Ranunculus*—the only two known still lifes to have been painted by Payne. Similar to how he approached painting mas-



Charles Fries (1854-1940)
Still Life with Lobster, 1905
 Oil on canvas 16" × 24"
 Collection of the San Diego
 Historical Society, gift of
 Lawrence Laughlin, 1981
 Photographer: Nick Juran



Franz Bischoff (1864-1929)
White and Pink Maman Cochet-Roses
 Oil on canvas 34" × 30"
 Private collection
 Photograph courtesy of William A. Karges Fine Art,
 Los Angeles and Carmel, California

sive mountains, Payne handled these delicate floral subjects with his inimitable sweeping bold brushstrokes, thus making his subjects even more vibrant and exhilarating. His wife, **Elsie Palmer Payne** (1884-1971), painted several still lifes and had an entirely different approach, one that was more modern and surreal, with simplified shapes.

Franz Bischoff (1864-1929), one of the premier California artists, who in 1909 held the first meeting of the **California Art Club** in his South Pasadena studio, was a highly accomplished floral painter. Bischoff was born in northern Bohemia (Austro-Hungarian Empire) and studied ceramic decoration in Vienna. He moved to New York in 1885 where he worked as a porcelain painter, a career he continued in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), Fostoria (Ohio) and then in Dearborn (Michigan). He founded the **Bischoff School of Ceramic Art** in Detroit and in New York City, and formulated and manufactured his own colours. Bischoff finally settled in the Los Angeles area in 1906 and was soon labelled the unofficial heir to de Longpré's legacy as "King of the Rose Painters."

According to **Patricia Trenton, Ph.D.**, co-author and co-curator of *Not-So-Still Life*, "When modernism began to appear in California during the late 1910s, still life proved to be a perfect vehicle for the innovation and the use of unconventional subject matter that identified the modernist style. A neglected, often unpretentious genre, it was less freighted with the ideological baggage of historicism than were religious or history painting. Because its

boundaries could be stretched, as Cézanne had demonstrated, the few bold California artists who made forays into modernism used still life to experiment with the new aesthetics (for several examples, **Henrietta Shore**, **Rinaldo Cuneo**, **Nicholas Brigante**, **Helen Lundeberg** and the pioneer of modernism in southern California, **Stanton Macdonald-Wright**). They adapted various stylistic modes of European Modernism—Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, variants of Symbolism and Surrealism, and Geometric and Biomorphic Abstraction.”

Today, creating interpretations of still lifes continues to intrigue artists, some who use the medium to idolize familiar objects that eventually become nostalgic, as in the paintings of **Wayne Thiebaud** (B. 1920) and **Ralph Goings** (B. 1928), both represented in the *Not-So-Still Life* exhibition. But there are several facets to contemporary still lifes, including some sculptural works that may be considered still lifes. Mainly, still lifes are vehicles for self expression. In creating a still life an artist has complete control over the choice of objects, their placement, lighting and their significance.

Dr. **Susan Landauer** chief curator at the San Jose Museum of Art, describes the growing fascination for still lifes, “In recent years, with postmodernism’s increasing eclectic engagement with the art of the past, artists are more involved than ever with deconventionalizing the conventional. Like other traditional genres such as landscape and portrai-

ture, still life has experienced both a dramatic resurgence and a radical transformation.” She continues, “The phenomenon of California still life is, in fact, ultimately a story of individuals. ...California has its own history and its own cast of characters. To assume that its product should be the same as it is elsewhere in the country – or worse, that it is merely derivative – is to deny the wealth of individual contributions California artists have made.”

Notes:

Research for this article was gathered from the publication, Not-So-Still Life: A Century of California Painting and Sculpture, a 225-page exhibition catalogue with 170 images, published by University California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, in Association with the San Jose Museum of Art. \$65 cloth cover or \$34.95 soft cover, ISBN # 0-520-23937-7. Available through both host museums or through U.C. Press at 800/822-6657. The exhibition, Not-So-Still Life is organized by the San Jose Museum of Art and jointly curated by William H. Gerdts, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of the Graduate School at the City University New York; Susan Landauer, Ph.D., Katie and Drew Gibson Chief Curator at the San Jose Museum of Art; and Patricia Trenton, Ph.D., Independent Curator. Additional research information was provided by The Irvine Museum; Albany Institute of History and Art; and from Patricia Trenton’s lecture notes, “Still Life Lecture for Orange County Museum of Art, June 14, 2002.”



The exhibition, Not-So-Still Life is on view at the San Jose Museum of Art, November 22 – February 15, 2004 and will continue at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, March 6 – June 27, 2004.

The exhibition, The Poetry of Still Life, featuring paintings by contemporary-traditional artists is on view at The California Art Club Gallery, March 9 – June 6, 2004.

Wayne Thiebaud (B. 1920)
Confections, 1962
 Oil on linen 16" x 20"
 Collection of Byron Meyer