



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

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

Franz A. Bischoff (1864-1929): A BOHEMIAN BOUQUET

by Jean Stern

PERHAPS IT WAS THE FREE-spirit of the gypsy lifestyle associated with Bohemia that expounded a litany of unique and vibrant artists in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Or perhaps it was the austerity of the Victorian Era that inspired a need to invent *Bohemianism*. In either case, it was at the height of Bohemian-chic that **Franz Anton Bischoff** was born on January 14, 1864 in Steinschönau (now known as Kamenický Šenov), a small town about fifty miles north of Prague in northern Bohemia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Having been raised in the Bohemian culture steeped in ornamental craftsmanship, Franz Bischoff is unique among early California impressionists because of his early training in the decorative arts that he acquired in glass and porcelain studios. Whereas most *plein air* artists had backgrounds in illustration and academic art schools that emphasized drawing and realism, Bischoff was seemingly more preoccupied with colour harmonies and creating pleasing shapes.

Bischoff's childhood education was basic elementary schooling, but at age twelve, he began a three-year apprenticeship in the local craft school. He was a precocious student, and was already aware that his talent in art was exceptional. Years later, looking back on his experiences as a young apprentice, Bischoff remarked, "Talents are not considered at all. When I first began, I had to do firing [in the ceramic kilns], carry wood, and all that. In Bavaria a boy must go to school until he is fourteen years old, but I began [craft school] at twelve. I had a particular privilege."



Roses
Oil on canvas 30" × 40"
Collection of The Irvine Museum

Bischoff In America

IN 1882 BISCHOFF WAS EIGHTEEN years old when he left home and immigrated to the United States in search of a new life. Soon after arriving in New York, he began putting his specialized art skills to use when he took a job working as a decorator in a china factory. A few months later, he moved to Pittsburgh to take a better paying job, painting designs on lamp shades at a glass factory.

Bischoff worked in glass factories in New York, Pittsburgh, and Fostoria, Ohio where, in 1884, he met **Bertha Greenwald (1872-1966)**, a fellow European immigrant. The two were married on

May 24, 1890. Franz and Bertha had two children, a daughter whom they named **Frances Matilda**, born on February 15, 1891, and a son named **Oscar Franz**, born on January 1, 1895.

Detroit

IN 1890 THE BISCHOFF FAMILY moved to Detroit where Franz worked briefly in the china studio of **Mary Wagner**, a prominent socialite and patron of the arts. He soon opened the **Franz A. Bischoff's Art Studio** at 84 Madison Avenue in Detroit. There, he produced his own exceptionally painted porcelain and taught classes in watercolour painting and china



Bischoff Family, 1906
Franz, Bertha, Frances and Oscar
Courtesy of The Irvine Museum

decorating. Bischoff's endeavours prospered. He received numerous orders for his hand-painted chinaware and his china painting classes that were popular and always full, particularly with women from Detroit's high society.

Bischoff was a superb painter on porcelain, and as most china painters he did not produce his own porcelain pieces. Rather, he painted on pre-made bisque "blanks,"

porcelain items fired only one time and sold unpainted. Bischoff used the highest quality blanks from the very best European and American factories. Among the European marks seen on the base of his porcelain pieces, one can see **Havilland, K.P.M., T & V** from **Limoges, Sèvres,** and **Royal Vienna**. As for the many American-made blanks, he favoured two American **Belleek** brands, one bears the intertwined initials of "CAC," a mark used by the **Ceramic Art Company**, and the other has the script capital "L" mark of **Lenox**.

Bischoff personally glaze-painted and fired his pieces in his own studio, turning out astonishing numbers of characteristically beautiful and flawless works, including vases of all sizes and shapes; bowls and plates; platters, serving dishes, fish sets; punchbowls; decorative plaques and painted wall tiles. Many of the pieces were accented by intricate gold leaf and open-work patterns. His painted motifs included all variety of fruits, birds, fish, figurals and scenic landscapes. His favourite subjects, however, were flowers, but above all, Bischoff loved to paint roses. He was acclaimed for his elegant renditions of roses, which earned him the

distinction of being called "The King of Rose Painters."

By 1893, Bischoff had become an established member of the

Detroit art community. That year he served as vice-president of the **Detroit Ceramic Club**, and was elected president the following year. In an interview with the *Detroit Journal* of May 17, 1893, he was designated "one of the most talented and successful ceramic artists in the country."

His apprenticeship as a youth in Bohemia taught Bischoff all aspects of the art of porcelain painting, including making his own tools and pigments. Now, in Detroit he began to manufacture and market his specialized colours, which he formulated in his home workshop. Bischoff's colours were the best ceramic glazes available, including various metallic gold colours, and were used by numerous china painters throughout America. He was best known for an immensely popular colour, a unique pinkish-gray, he called "Ashes of Roses."

In December, 1893 Bischoff held a large and broadly acclaimed display of his hand-painted tiles at the New York City studio-gallery of **Luetta Elmina Bumstead Braumuller (1856-1898)**. Mrs. Braumuller was a well-known and highly respected china painter. In 1882 she published *Lessons in China Painting*, and was the publisher and editor of the monthly magazine, *China Decorator*, circulated in Europe and America. She was a member of the wealthy and influential Bumstead family of Boston, and thus was received at the highest level of well-bred New York society. For Bischoff, the Braumuller show was the most successful exhibition of his



ABOVE:
Three Roses
Porcelain plate 9 2/5" diameter
Collection of Jean and Linda Stern

RIGHT:
Grapes
Porcelain bowl 15" diameter
Collection of Dr. Donald Head





Franz A. Bischoff painting a vase in his studio, c. 1905
Courtesy of Jean Stern

porcelains to date, and he returned to Detroit swamped with orders.

By the mid 1890s, Bischoff's fame as a master of porcelain painting was reaching nation-wide proportions. The field of American porcelain decoration in the early twentieth century was dominated by three outstanding artists: **Franz Aulich (1856-?)**, **George Leykauf (1860-1922)** and of course, Franz Bischoff. The three masters become close friends. They all spoke German, were European trained, and had resided in the Detroit area at one time or another. Like Bischoff, both Aulich and Leykauf achieved great fame for their naturalistic renditions of flowers. By far, however, Bischoff was the best-known of the three.

Termed an "Impressionist" china painter, Bischoff made a point of capturing the essence, as well as the real form of his subjects. His technique was particular as he started with initial layers of greys and added stronger colours as he worked. To Bischoff the role of the colour grey and its associated tones, was paramount. He told his students, "You will become an artist only when you learn the importance of grey."

In the early 1980s this author had a few occasions to meet and talk to women who had taken classes with Bischoff. They described their experiences with their teacher in the most glowing terms. Each said that he was extremely

courteous and well-mannered. He always wore a suit and tie, but used an apron when he demonstrated painting techniques. He spoke English with a heavy German accent, but they had no trouble understanding his instructions. All had stated that he was most attentive to each student in turn.

These same ladies were in general agreement that having "Bischoff vases" was a social necessity for a well-to-do household. Yet, each had confided in me that while the vases cost a considerable amount, a "Bischoff" could be obtained for a lot less by enrolling in one of his classes.

As a rule Bischoff purposely kept his classes small, usually at six students or less. According to his former students, the expectation was that Bischoff would take turns to personally and gently critique each student's work by taking the brush himself and completing a good part of the design to demonstrate proper technique and colour. Although never signed by Bischoff, and often incomplete, these treasures, touched by the hand of the master, nevertheless were highly prized by their owners. Each now considered themselves as owning a Bischoff.

In January 1895 Bischoff travelled to New York City to conduct six-week classes in watercolour and in china painting. Later, in spring, Bischoff moved his family to Dearborn, Michigan, where he opened a studio.



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Dearborn

BY 1899 HE HAD OPENED THE **Bischoff Art School** in Dearborn where he taught classes in watercolour painting and china decoration. His industrious habits not only brought him success as a china painter, but also enabled him to own a house free of debt and employ a live-in servant.

On January 20, 1896, Franz A. Bischoff became a citizen of the United States of America. In the winter of 1899, Mary L. Wagner, Bischoff's former business associate and long-time acquaintance, left for New York and then to Paris to present the "American Ceramic" display at the celebrated **International Universal Exposition of 1900**. The Exposition featured a vast amount of art from many countries. It was clearly the most important and the largest art display of the year.

Running from April 15 to November 12, the exposition drew more than 50 million people. It is believed that Bischoff showed at least two of his works in the exhibition, as reported in the

January 31, 1900 issue of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "Bischoff, the well known mineral painter, has a handsome vase with poppies of pink and purple tones, also a large vase with nasturtium blossoms." Bischoff's passport indicates that he travelled to Paris to attend the exposition. His 1900 passport described him as follows: Age: 36 Years; Stature: 5 feet 4 Inches Eng. (sic) [English inches] Forehead: high; Eyes: blue; Nose: not prominent; Mouth: small; Chin: pointed; Hair: light brown; Complexion (sic): fair; Face: round.

In 1903 Bischoff participated in the **Artists of Detroit** annual exhibition; and the following year he sent a comprehensive display of his china painting to the **Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis**. The Exposition was one of the major post Victorian-era World's Fairs and was held to celebrate the centennial of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. The fair opened on April 30, 1904 and closed December 1 of the same year. In May of 1905 Bischoff showed his work as a member of the **New York Society of Ceramic Arts** in New York City.

California

IN 1900 BISCHOFF CAME TO California on a visit. He stopped in Los Angeles and was impressed by the climate and scenery. In 1906 he and his family moved to San Francisco, and soon thereafter, decided to settle in Los Angeles. Bischoff began seriously painting landscapes after becoming a successful china decorator and only after moving to California. Although he continued painting flowers throughout his life, he slowly eased away from china painting once he established himself in Pasadena and became influenced by the burgeoning community of landscape painters in the area.

Most of Bischoff's early landscapes were painted in and around the picturesque Arroyo Seco. From the earliest, Bischoff preferred painting plein air sketches on 13 by 19 inch boards. These paintings present an exceptional insight into the brilliance of his oil technique. The free flowing rhythm and his sure and well disciplined hand are clearly evident in these sketches. The freshness and spontaneity of the moment are evident in his quick

presentation. These small oil sketches made up a large part of the display that were often hung together among his larger works at his public exhibitions held at his home and studio-gallery.

The California Art Club

IN 1906 A GROUP OF TEN Los Angeles artists, all of whom were men, met at the studio of **William Swift Daniell (1865-1933)** to form the **Painters' Club of Los Angeles**. According to an article by art critic, **Antony Anderson**, in the *Los Angeles Times* of March 25, 1906, the club was created to "meet in the spirit of comradeship and good temper...for mutual criticism and suggestion on one another's recent work." In addition to the ten founding artists, Antony Anderson was asked to be a founding member.

Although it is not certain that Bischoff was one of the original ten, he quickly joined and participated in the club's organizational meetings. Unfortunately, after only three years, the "good temper" and "mutual criticism" had deteriorated into sessions of philosophical bickering and furious disagreement; and the Painters' Club went out of existence late in 1909. According to Anderson, the members felt that "the club had outgrown its usefulness" and that "new conditions surround us today, new problems confront painters, new methods must prevail."

Founded in December of 1909, the **California Art Club** evolved out of the Painters' Club of Los Angeles. The second organizational meeting was held at the studio of Franz Bischoff in Pasadena (now South Pasadena) on Saturday, February 5, 1910. The meeting was organized by mostly immigrants. In addition to the Bohemian-born Bischoff, the notable artists present at the February, 1910 meeting were **William Wendt (1865-1946)** and **Hanson D. Puthuff (1875-1972)**, both from Germany, **Carl Oscar Borg (1879-1947)** from Sweden, and the New Jersey-born **Jack Wilkinson Smith (1873-1949)**. The new club was different in structure from the Painters' Club as it allowed sculptors and women artists to join. Also, the California Art Club adopted a constitution similar to that of the **Society of Western Artists (1896-1914)**, with a by-law that stipulated "... that the club can send its exhibitions



Roses

Porcelain vase 17 3/4" high
Collection of The Irvine Museum

over a circuit of cities in California.”

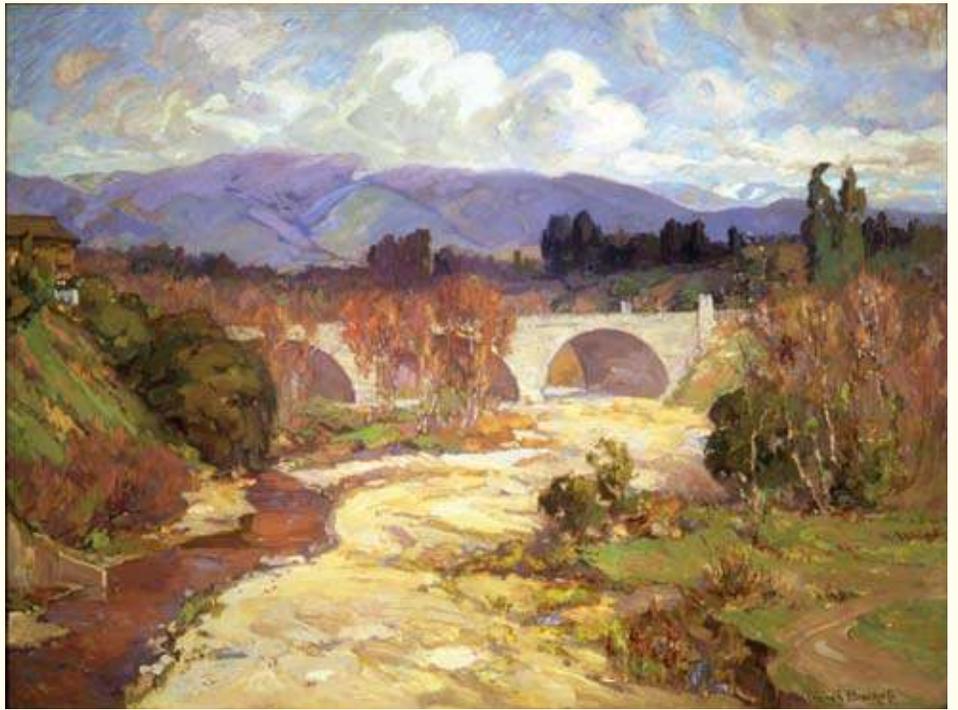
A permanent Exhibition Committee was established, consisting of William Wendt, **Robert L. Wagner (1872-1942)**, Carl Oscar Borg, **Charles Percy Austin (1883-1948)**, and Franz Bischoff. **Frank R. Liddell (1864-1923)**, manager of the **Hotel Ivins** and part-time painter was elected the club's first president. The California Art Club would go on to become the largest and most powerful art organization in early twentieth-century Los Angeles.

Bischoff's early paintings, prior to 1920, were painted in a *Tonalist* style, showing softer, more muted colour harmonies, than those painted later. Although he was at all times an exceptional and bold colourist, his earlier paintings appear more naturalistic in colour scheme, than the brighter, higher-keyed colours of the later works.

In an exhibition held at his studio in March, 1912, Bischoff displayed the following paintings: *Roses*, *Cloud Shadows*, *White Roses*, and several paintings titled *Mums*, *Rainy Day Arroyo*, and *Cliffs and Sea*, (a Santa Monica scene.) In the accompanying *Los Angeles Times* article, Bischoff is quoted as saying, “I never have to go very far away from home for my inspiration to paint.”

In September of 1912 Bischoff took an extended trip to Europe. His departure was marked by a surprise party organized by several of his friends and fellow artists and was held at his studio. Bischoff's European excursions included visits to Naples, Capri, Venice, Rome, Munich, Paris and London, studying the Old Masters along the way. He was sufficiently inspired by the French Impressionists, and painted several watercolour copies of later pastels by **Edgar Degas (1834-1917)**. Bischoff's trip was fruitful, and he produced several oil paintings and watercolours before returning home to Pasadena in July, 1913.

In October, 1914 Bischoff exhibited twenty-seven new paintings at the **Friday Morning Club**, a women's club that held regular art shows at their exhibit hall located at 940 South Figueroa Street in Los Angeles. Among the paintings displayed were *San Pedro Harbor*, *Fishermen's Fleet*, *Moonlight in San Pedro*, *Delivering the Catch*, *San Pedro*, *Midday in the Canyon*, *Springtime*, and

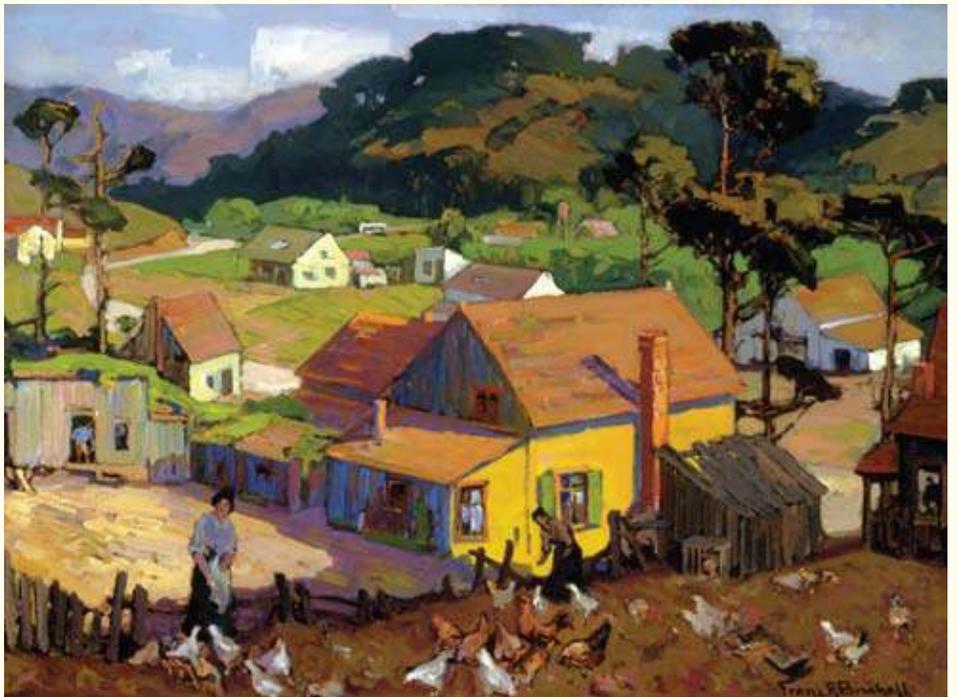


Arroyo Seco Bridge, c.1912

Oil on canvas 30" × 40"

Collection of The Irvine Museum

(York Boulevard Bridge over the Arroyo Seco, painted just after its completion in 1911. The Pasadena Freeway now runs underneath.)



An Afternoon Idyll, Cambria, c. 1927

Oil on canvas 19" × 26"

Collection of Paul and Kathleen Bagley

Venice. All of these paintings, except for *Venice*, suggested that Bischoff still remained fairly close to home in his search for inspiration.

The Sierra Nevada Mountains

FOLLOWING THE FALL 1919 showing of two groundbreaking Sierra paintings by **Edgar Payne (1883-1947)** at an exhibition held by the California Art Club, a significant number of artists were captivated to paint in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. A dedicated plein air painter, Payne did not want to be tied down by shepherding a group of artists who had never painted in the mountains. However, when it came to **Conrad Buff (1886-1975)** Payne's attitude was different. Two years earlier Buff had assisted Edgar and his wife **Elsie Palmer Payne (1884-1971)** on a massive mural commission for the **Congress Hotel** in Chicago, and

the three artists got along very well. Moreover, Buff was an excellent cook, and having him along meant that Edgar and Elsie would be freed up to paint all day and not have to take turns cooking. (From a personal communication with **Evelyn Payne Hatcher (1914-2009)**, daughter of Elsie and Edgar Payne.)

Buff and Bischoff were also good friends. They were both native German speakers, as Buff was born in the German speaking part of Switzerland. The two men made ideal travelling and painting companions. Early one morning, Buff and Bischoff drove out from Los Angeles in Buff's old, rickety Ford Model T pick-up truck with the goal of joining the Paynes, Edgar, Elsie and their six-year old daughter Evelyn, for a trip to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Along the way, they endured blown-out tires and over-heated radiators until they finally reached a small hamlet in the Mojave Desert. In Buff's oral history (UCLA archives), he

described their harsh journey:

"In the morning, early, at about four o'clock, we started out. From Mojave on, there were no roads. Just two wheel tracks in the sand. Sometimes there wasn't any sand, just rocks."

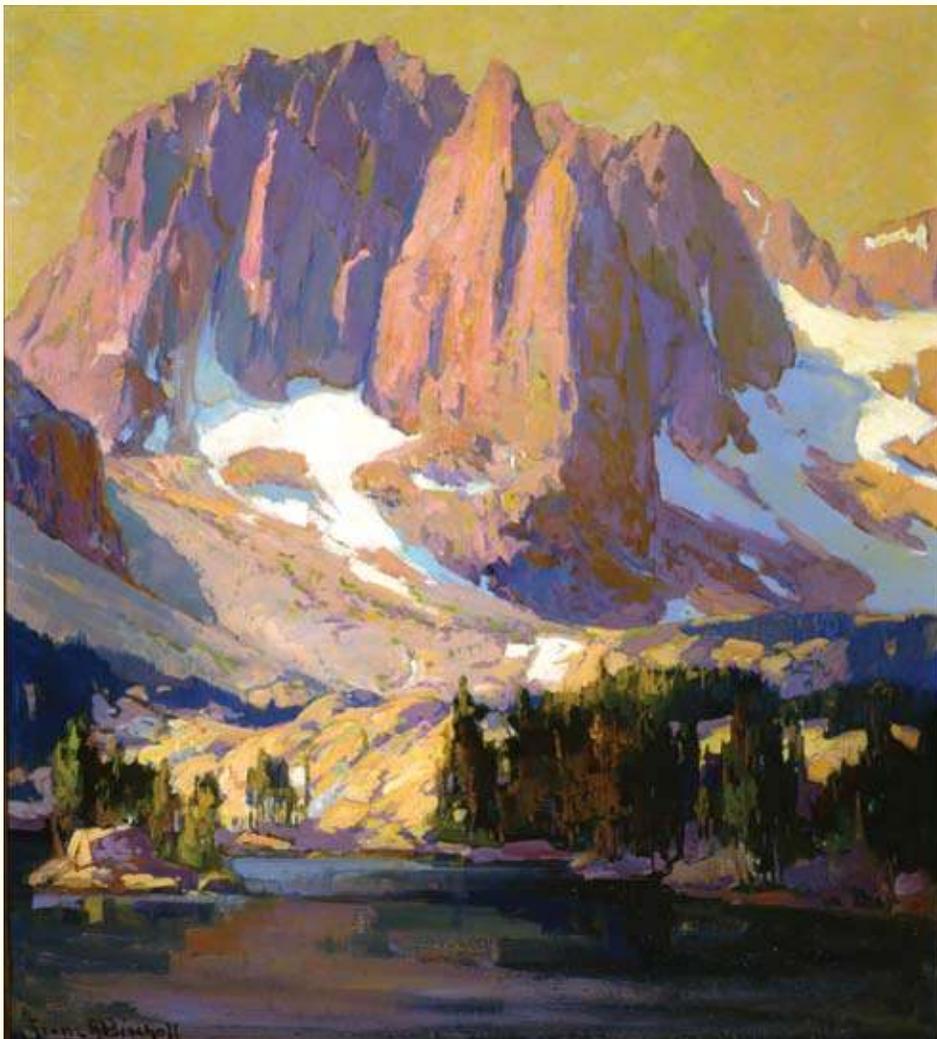
Driving north, Bischoff and Buff eventually reached the small town of Lone Pine, in the Owens Valley, late that first day and decided to set-up camp for the night. Conrad Buff continues:

"In the morning...We drove on and it got to be quite hot again. Finally we got to Big Pine in the late afternoon. No Payne, and we didn't know what to do."

"So we started out [on the road up Big Pine Canyon] and went all right for a while until it began to get steep. Of course, it was still very hot. The engine started to boil, so we had to go down to the creek [the road paralleled Big Pine Creek] and get a bucket full of water and put it into the radiator. We drove about another half block and the engine would boil again. So we went down to the creek again and filled up the radiator with cold water. We did that about five times, but finally the car just wouldn't pull any more. So we had to go back."

"We decided we'd go back [to] Lone Pine and see if we could meet Payne. And sure enough, after we had driven four or five miles, there came Payne with his family. [By] then it was too late to do any more than just find a camp. He said we wouldn't be able to drive there [to the camp up Big Pine Canyon], that was out of the question. We'd have to have a packing outfit to take us up there."

The refreshing high mountain scenery with its majestic vistas that could be seen from several easily accessible locations, such as Bishop Creek and Big Pine Canyon, seems to have completely occupied Bischoff's attention. Two of his Sierra works, *Mount Alice* and *Black Lake and Glacier*, were shown in the California Art Club's annual fall exhibition in 1921. *Mount Alice* (also titled *Mount Alice at Sunset*) is a depiction of the granite monolith that is now called "Mount Temple Crag." Painted in his studio from several field sketches, Bischoff shows Mount Alice in the early evening in brilliant tones of red and pink with occasional highlights



Mt. Alice at Sunset, c. 1919

Oil on canvas 34" × 30"

Collection of Morton and Donna Fleischer



Gold Rimmed Rocks and Sea, c. 1925
Oil on canvas 30" × 40"
Collection of Paul and Kathleen Bagley

of lime green, all set against a mustard-coloured sky. The provocative colour scheme is singularly convincing, as one would expect from Bischoff, the ultimate colourist. Antony Anderson wrote about the exhibition in the *Los Angeles Times* of October 16, 1921, complimenting the artist on the technical advances in this painting: "Beauty has never been absent from his work, but here he has caught it and given it decisive expression, it is no longer tantalizing and fugitive."

In May of 1922, Bischoff held another exhibition in Los Angeles at the **Stendahl Galleries**, then located in the **Ambassador Hotel**. He showed sixteen paintings of flowers and landscapes including several mountain scenes. *Palisades Glacier* and *Sunset Lake and Glacier* were two of these paintings. In a newspaper review of this show, this time, Antony Anderson was irritated by Bischoff's heightened use of bold colours, "... (his) chief fault is a certain lack of solidity of forms, a tendency to utilize color for its own sake and to disregard the fact that objects in nature must have the quality of those objects when translated into paint."

It seems that Bischoff was not dissuaded by Anderson's scathing comments. In fact, he may have been encouraged in an opposite way, because in November, 1924 Bischoff presented

twelve canvases at the Biltmore Salon with higher-keyed colour schemes and even bolder colour harmonies than he had previously exhibited. These recent subjects included fresh scenes of the Monterey area and had such titles as *A Cool Drifting Fog* (now in the **Gardena High School** collection), *A Villa on the Monterey Coast* and *Windswept Twisted Cypress*. A few Pasadena scenes were also hung, one of which, *Clouds Drifting Over the Mountains*, clearly showed his penchant toward using stronger colours.

In the summer of 1928 Bischoff and another artist, **J. Christopher Smith (1893-1943)**, took a *plein air* painting trip together to Utah. Their resulting works were shown separately in October; Smith at the **Wilshire Galleries** in Los Angeles and Bischoff at the **Kanst Galleries** in Hollywood. Bischoff's paintings were of **Zion National Park**. One of these paintings that depicted a scene with old shacks set against the red and pink crags of the area's distinct sandstone mountains, received special mention in a press review: "The colours of these Utah scenes are particularly bright and bold. They reflect the work of a true colourist with a secure knowledge of colours—not only their role in nature but also their role in visual perception."

It would be difficult to classify Franz

Bischoff into any single school of painting. He was certainly influenced by the Impressionists, as seen in his loose, vigorous handling of paint, as well as his treatment of colour in his earlier works and his love of *plein air* painting. Yet he moved into experimental colour handling that would probably be more at home among the Post Impressionists, such as **Van Gogh** and **Gauguin**.

Many of Bischoff's later works, such as *Clouds Drifting Over the Mountains* and his Utah landscapes suggest a slight flirtation with *Expressionism*, with a bold juxtaposition of colours, reminiscent of the *Fauves'* aim to "liberate colour from its role in nature," and to explore the psychological power of colour. A group of small panels painted in Big Pine Canyon, near Bishop, California, show Bischoff's remarkable progression of colour use, ending with a provocative mountainscape painted in moody tones of green and purple.

Bischoff demonstrated that he was first and last an exceptional colourist with an eye for design. Among a multitude of Southern California painters who have endlessly presented the area's beautiful mountains, the bright, sunny landscapes and the elegant, graceful eucalyptus trees, Bischoff stands out for his enlightened handling of colour, refreshingly evident in his paintings of these same scenes. We clearly recognize his genius today, yet in his time, one may have considered him both blessed and cursed for his fervent use of colours. As noted by Antony Anderson "Bischoff couldn't give us bad colour if he tried, but he can give us patches of colour that don't belong to landscapes and he can—and does—give us small areas of paint that are not, as mere paint, en rapport with the areas beyond them. He sometimes employs two different methods of laying paint in the same canvas and that fault annoys us." Today, more than fifty years later, we find Bischoff's use of colours to be robust and precise, much like the arrangement of a magnificent floral bouquet. 🌸

NOTES:

The author **Mr. Jean Stern** is a noted scholar and expert on California Impressionism and Executive Director of **The Irvine Museum**.

The exhibition, **Gardens and Grandeur: Porcelains and Paintings by Franz A. Bischoff**, is on view at the **Pasadena Museum of California History** from November 14, 2010 through March 20, 2011.