



# CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

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



*Abandoned, 1934*  
Oil on canvas 39 5/8" × 49"  
Collection of E. Gene Crain

## Millard Sheets: A CALIFORNIA VISIONARY

by Gordon T. McClelland and Elaine Adams

**P**ERHAPS MORE THAN ANY other artist, **Millard Owen Sheets (1907-1989)** created a multi-faceted arts legacy that is uniquely Californian and evocative of his times. His prolific output included architecture, product design, tile murals, stained glass windows and continuous exploration into various artistic directions. Moreover, he provided a basis for arts education that continues to serve art students today.

Sheets was a native Californian raised on a ranch in the Pomona Valley, thirty

miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Pomona, named after the ancient Roman goddess, *Pomum* ("fruit" in Latin), was incorporated in 1888 and became the fifth chartered city of Los Angeles. The city was aptly named, as its local economy was based on agriculture, and by 1916 the **Pomona Valley Citrus Farmers** produced more than one-third of California's citrus produce. Millard Sheets' paternal uncle was co-founder and first president of the **Los Angeles County Fair**, which held its debut on October 17, 1922 under six tents and

attracted 49,000 visitors. It was in this rural environment that Millard Sheets was raised and became sensitive to California's agricultural lifestyle.

Millard Sheets' mother died in childbirth. His father, **John Sheets**, was deeply distraught and unable to raise his son on his own. Millard was sent to live with his maternal grandparents, **Louis and Emma Owen**, on their neighbouring horse ranch. His grandmother, at age thirty-nine, and grandfather, at age forty, were still relatively young. Additionally, with two of their four youngest daughters, ages ten and fourteen, living at home, family life appeared normal. His grandfather, whom Millard would call "father," was an accomplished horseman and would bring horses from Illinois to race against **Elias Jackson "Lucky" Baldwin (1828-1909)** at Baldwin's "Santa Anita Stable," later to become **Santa Anita Park**. The older of Millard's two aunts babysat him and kept him occupied with doing drawings.

**T**HE MAGIC OF MAKING pictures became a fascination to Sheets, as he would later explain in an October 28, 1986 interview conducted by **Paul Karlstrom** for the **Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution**:

"When I was about ten, I found out that a lady living just down a couple of blocks on the same street I did in Pomona was painting copies in oil. I discovered it because I was walking down the sidewalk one day and I saw her in a bay window—a real artist, I thought, painting. And I kind of slipped into the bushes and saw that she was painting a pretty good sized painting. She saw me and said, 'Would you like to come in?' And I said, 'I certainly would.' And I went in and I was so excited to see a real painter working and—even though they were



Millard Sheets, 1922  
Snapshot photograph 4" × 6"  
Collection of the Sheets Family

copies and copies of not very good copies—but she was a painter! She was pleased about my excitement. She said, ‘If you’ll bring a quarter every Saturday, so I can buy the materials, I’ll help you paint. I’ll help you learn to paint.’ So I did that for about a year. And of course my copies were probably worse than hers, and the whole thing was pretty bad. But the Los Angeles County Fair opened up at that time, and it was one of the biggest fairs in the country—it always has been.”

**A**T AGE FIFTEEN MILLARD Sheets entered a landscape painting in the “copied” art category at the first Los Angeles County Fair. The subject was of Lake Kilarney, California, which he copied from a tinted photograph. He was amazed to read in the newspaper that he won the first place award—three dollars in cash! In his interview with the Archives of American Art he described his excitement and the experience when he went to visit his prize-winning work at the Fair:

“...a [firm] very cranky voice behind

me [said], ‘Did you paint that picture?’ And I said, ‘Yessir. And he grabbed me by the collar from in back, and dragged me across...into a little private office that had been built

inside this tent, and I never heard anyone really take after anyone like he did after me. He stood up in front of me, that was after pushing me down in a chair, ‘Don’t you ever make another copy as long as you live. You absolutely must never do that again.’ And he just harangued me for about twenty minutes. Scared the hell out of me. When he finally finished, he said, ‘Now do you understand you don’t do this kind of thing?’ And I said, ‘Yessir.’ He said, ‘You go out and you paint, outdoors. You paint still life. You do anything except copy. And you have to draw.’ And again, it almost sounds like a fake story, but he said the same thing that Mr. [Hinkle] the man in Laguna [said].”

(The experience Sheets described, which took place at the Fair, occurred with the Polish-born artist Theodore B. Modra who was the director of exhibitions at the County Fair. He compared this experience to a similar one that would occur in Laguna Beach the following year with artist Clarence Hinkle.)

Continuing with his interview with the Archives of American Art, Sheets explained the lack of art education in early twentieth-century rural Pomona:



*Pomona Fairgrounds*, 1926  
Watercolour and gouache on paper 8" × 12"  
Collection of Tom and Carolyn Sheets Owen-Towle



“It wasn’t till I was a junior in high school, that I ever saw an art book. And that was a book called *Art of the Ages*, which was then a kind of [stringy] little book that most high schools had, and that’s about it. The teacher of art at that time [Miss Daggs] had been the Latin teacher, and when Latin seemed to go by the wayside as a requirement, she became the art teacher. And a wonderful person and she had a certain amount of enthusiasm but no real knowledge. The first artist that I ever really met was a teacher I had in junior high school, two or three years before the time I’ve been speaking of. She had studied art in college, and she had a rather typical art-college background, which in those days was anything but a professional artist’s background. But she had enthusiasm and she was very supporting of all of us who were interested. Used to take us out and teach us how to observe things and how to feel about things, and I’ve always been very grateful of the fact that she entered my life.”

**A**S A TEENAGER SHEETS RECEIVED art instruction from **Theodore B. Modra (1873-1930)**, who was then living in nearby Ontario. Modra studied with **Robert Henri (1865- 1929)** and was in art classes with **George W. Bellows (1882- 1925)**, along with other New York artists who became known as the “**Ashcan School**” of painters. Modra showed Sheets pictures of Bellows’ classic paintings inspired by New York City street scenes and figurative works which captured the culture of labourers and working-class people. These pictures made a lasting impression on the young artist.

At age sixteen Sheets was accepted to show a painting at the **Laguna Art Association Gallery** (now the **Laguna Museum of Art**), where he met artist **Clarence Hinkle (1880-1960)**, a well-known local painter who would become Sheets’ mentor, as well as his second art instructor. Sheets studied with him for two years although he continued to receive feedback from Hinkle until he was well into his twenties.

Hinkle taught Sheets the importance of starting every work with a strong

abstract design composition on which to build his more representational works. He also introduced him to the idea of forming in his mind a strong visual image of what the final art would look like, before ever starting to paint.

Sheets had already learned to set his colour palette and had a good understanding of light and dark values. He was also comfortable with the challenges of painting outdoors. Hinkle took him out on painting excursions and showed him how to quickly block in the composition, and then how to finish the work using spontaneous and confident brush strokes. Once Sheets got comfortable with this procedure, all he wanted to do was go outdoors to paint. By the time he was nineteen he was out painting on location nearly every day.

Millard Sheets’ grandparents encouraged creativity and freedom; however, his father was not as open-minded. Although he offered to pay for his son’s college education, when the time came, Sheets chose to attend an art school, to which his father said “... I wouldn’t send you to an art school, [but] I’ll send you to any college in the United States.”

From 1925 to 1929 Sheets attended **Chouinard Art School** in Los Angeles, where he studied under **Frank Tolles Chamberlin (1873-1961)** whom he credited as being his greatest influence. It was Chamberlin who helped Sheets refine his studio painting style and it was he who introduced Sheets to watercolour painting, as well as to the work of the English watercolourist and muralist, **Frank Brangwyn (1867-1956)**. To help pay for his tuition Sheets borrowed money from his uncle, in addition to building approximately 200 student lockers for the school. After a year and one semester, Mrs. Chouinard asked Sheets to teach a watercolour class. The job would also help pay for his own education.

Sheets was apprehensive about teaching watercolour painting, as he was new to it himself. The story is that Chamberlin saw Sheets struggling outdoors on a 40 by 50 inch oil painting as he attempted to keep his canvas from setting sail by anchoring his easel down with heavy rocks. Chamberlin said, “Why don’t you paint in watercolour?” To which Sheets replied, “How the hell



## CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2010

### Contents

- Cover* Millard Sheets: A California Visionary  
*by Gordon T. McClelland and Elaine Adams*
- 7 From the Vault: California Art Club in Search of a Home: The Hollyhock Years, 1927-1942  
*by Eric Merrell*
- 10 Spotlight on Stanslav Prokopenko  
*by Beverly Chang*
- 11 *The Ring* Exhibitions
- 12 Membership Programs and Events
- 14 Collectors’ Circle Corner
- 15 Call for Entries
- 16 Chapter News and Events
- 17 News Briefs
- 18 Donations
- 19 Museum/Gallery Exhibitions and Lectures
- 29 Membership News
- 29 Recommended Books
- 30 New Members
- Advertisers
- 15 American Legacy Fine Arts
- 16 Kingofframe.com

do you paint in watercolour?" At the time, very few artists were familiar with the medium, but within Sheets' first year at Chouinard a new organization of nine artists had developed, called the "**California Watercolor Society**." Sheets became their thirteenth member. Within his first three weeks of teaching the medium, thirty-five students signed up for his watercolour class. The following year, he taught two watercolour classes.

Suddenly a core of watercolour artists began to emerge from Chouinard that included Sheets' friends, **Phil Dike (1906-1990)** and **Phil Paradise (1905-1997)**. Together, they would paint on locations throughout southern California, developing a new art movement that would earn them the title, "California Scene Painters."

From 1926 to 1944 Sheets was primarily focused on painting with oils on canvas and watercolours on paper. He painted practically nonstop and was given forty-two solo exhibitions

across America during this eighteen year period. No other California artist of his era came even close to receiving that much exposure. Sheets' artistic interest evolved around the burgeoning art movement that was based on New York's Ashcan School. The Ashcan School emphasized the plight of the common man during the Depression Era.

This movement of social realism in the mid-1930s took the form of *Regionalist Art*, also known as *American Scene Painting*, as the nation's predominant genre of art. Each region of the country seemed to have a leading artist that represented their particular brand of *Regionalism*. In Ohio it was **Grant Wood (1891-1942)**. In Missouri it was **Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975)**. In Texas it was **Alexander Hogue (1898-1994)**. In California that artist was Millard Sheets.

Sheets quickly grasped the idea of producing art that captured the essence and energy of people in their everyday environment as he experienced them. When at home in Pomona Valley he

Painted farm and ranch scenes. When attending Chouinard in Los Angeles he painted the surrounding city, suburban and industrial environments.

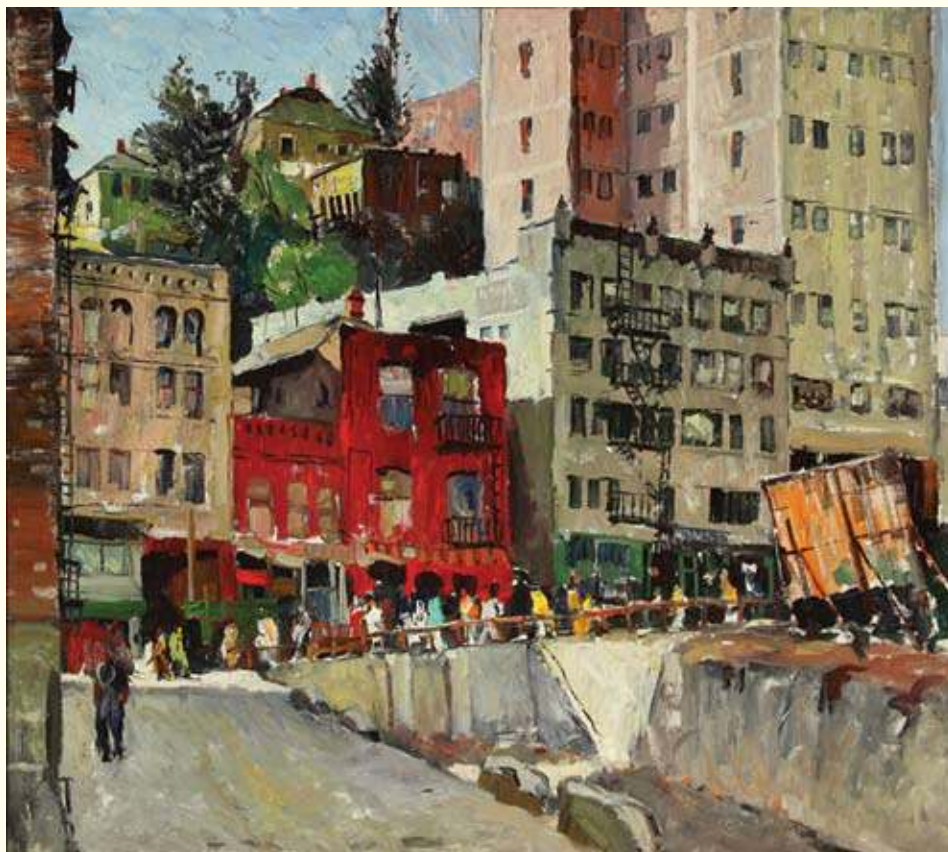
**I**N 1929 NATIONALLY KNOWN ART dealers **Dalzell** and **Ruth Hatfield**, of the **Dalzell Hatfield Galleries** in Los Angeles, discovered Sheets and became his primary art dealer. The Hatfields were highly influential in the art world and sold important works by renowned European post-impressionists, such as **Van Gogh, Cezanne, Matisse, and Braque**. Being represented by Hatfield was a huge break for Sheets.

Sheets was completely committed to developing his career. He painted every day, entered art competitions all across America and achieved top awards. His first solo exhibition at the Hatfield Galleries was a success, which gave the artist further confidence.

Sheets also received second place in the annual **Edgar B. Davis Art Competition** held in San Antonio, Texas. With the cash award he made plans to travel to South and Central America and Europe to paint and study. But, just before he left, he met **Mary Baskerville**, who was also an art student, and the two quickly fell in love. Baskerville encouraged Sheets to take his trip and promised to wait for him. With that, he left for his year-long journey.

On his travels Sheets visited museums, painted on location, and while in Paris he studied lithography under the master printmaker, **Dorfinant**, at whose studio he met **Henri Matisse (1869-1954)**. In France, at the young age of twenty-two, Sheets had the distinct honour of having a painting accepted at the **Paris Salon d'Automne**. Many of Europe's premier artists waited years to have a work accepted into this prestigious exhibition and a number of very famous artists never succeeded. While travelling abroad he sent his paintings by mail to Hatfield, who continued to show the works in Los Angeles and sold them across America.

In 1930, five months after Sheets returned to Los Angeles, he and Mary Baskerville married, and he began his amazing ascent in the American art scene. Although he launched his career right after the 1929 Stock Market Crash, it seemed Sheets had the "Midas touch,"



*Spring Street, 1930*

Oil on canvas 32" x 36"

Collection of Howard and Roberta Ahmanson



as everything he endeavoured to do resulted in success.

From 1931 to 1957 Sheets served as director of the Fine Arts Exhibition of the Los Angeles County Fair. He was made a member of the venerable **California Art Club** and even served on the Jury of Selection and Awards in 1932 along with Phil Dike, **Kathryn W. Leighton (1875-1952)** and **Dean Cornwell (1892-1960)**. Also in 1932 Sheets received regular invitations to exhibit his work at major museums throughout America. His participation in the annual exhibitions at the **Carnegie Museum** and **Metropolitan Museum of Art** brought serious recognition for him on the East Coast, and he was elected into the prestigious **National Academy of Design**.

Locally, the farm-related subjects Sheets had been painting fit perfectly with the speeches that **President Franklin Roosevelt** was giving in regards to the importance of honouring farmers and recognizing their occupation as the backbone of the American economy.

**I**N 1932 SHEETS WAS HIRED AS an assistant professor of art at **Scripps College**, an all-girl school in Claremont, California. Under his leadership Scripps Art Department became nationally renowned. In 1938, he additionally became the Director of Art at the Claremont Graduate School. Following his tenure at Claremont, he became director of the **Otis Art Institute** in Los Angeles from 1954 to 1960 and restructured the school's academic program to include BFA and MFA degrees. Sheets was a consummate teacher, and although from 1965 to 1985 he was no longer teaching in formal classrooms, he conducted many painting workshops around the world.

He established a friendship with **Albert Bender**, who was a leading figure in the San Francisco area art community. Through Bender, Sheets met important international artists including **Diego Rivera (1886-1957)** and became friends with nearly all the key Bay area artists. He also received invitations to teach at **University of California at Berkeley**, and was represented in San Francisco by the



*San Dimas Station, 1933*

Watercolour on paper 15 1/2" × 22 1/2"

Collection of Mark and Jan Hilbert

**Courvoisier Gallery**, and became a key mural artist for the *Golden Gate International Exposition* on Treasure Island in San Francisco, and a member of the **Bohemian Club**.

Sheets and artist **Edward Bruce (1879-1943)** spent time visiting and painting together for several years in the early 1930s. A few years later Bruce became the head of the mural production division of the **Public Works of Art Project (PWAP)**. He immediately appointed Sheets to a prominent position in the southern California division of the PWAP along with **Stanton MacDonald-Wright (1890-1973)**.

By the mid-1930s Sheets was nationally recognized as one of America's finest watercolour artists. In 1935 the **Milch Galleries** in New York City presented him with the first of a series of solo exhibitions. That same year an impressive art book was published which documented Sheets' art to that date.

After viewing the first watercolour exhibition at the Milch Galleries the art critic **Malcolm Vaughn** wrote, "It is Millard Sheets' debut in New York, a debut of such merit that in making his bow in the East, this Westerner immediately proves himself worthy of a place among the peers of American

watercolour painting. Our noblest master at the medium, Winslow Homer, did not manifest at twenty-eight years of age a higher talent."

During World War II, Sheets served as an artist correspondent in Burma and India for *LIFE* magazine and the **United States Air Force**. The horrific scenes of famine and death he witnessed influenced some of his later work. Much of the paintings he produced, particularly in the 1940s of Mexico and California, were painted in darker, more sombre tones.

**M**ILLARD SHEETS WAS DRIVEN by an abundance of energy and artistic vision. To help keep up with his imagination and the many commission opportunities that came his way, in 1953 he founded the **Millard Sheets Design Company**. The company employed approximately thirty professionals including engineers, architects, draughtsmen and artists. Under Sheets' direction, they designed more than 200 architectural projects and murals that span the United States. Among the most celebrated are the buildings and accompanying artistic elements for **Home Savings of America** throughout California. He also created a new official seal for the County of Los Angeles.



*California, 1935*  
Oil on canvas 30" × 40"  
Collection of Peter and Gail Ochs

Outside of California Sheets' major commissions included murals for the **Detroit Public Library**, **Mayo Clinic**, the dome of the **National Shrine** in Washington, D.C., **Notre Dame University Library**, and the **Hilton Hotel** in Honolulu. The **Pomona Mall** was designed by Millard Sheets in 1962 as a nine-block-long pedestrian mall, and is the first such mall built west of the Mississippi. His artworks are displayed in more than forty-six museums in fifteen states, including the **Smithsonian**, **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, **Museum of Modern Art**, **Whitney Museum**, the **Chicago Art Institute**, and **Los Angeles County Museum of Art**.

Sheets' artistic capacity took root as an imaginative farm boy who liked to draw pictures, eventually to express his surroundings the way he saw them. With the encouragement of his nurturing grandparents, Millard Sheets learned to believe in himself and matured into a truly home-grown California visionary. 📍

*Notes:*  
Co-author **Gordon T. McClelland**, studied art at **California State University at Fullerton**, and has authored four books and co-authored nine books, all relating to California art. In addition, he is an authority on West Coast Fruit Box Labels, and has helped organize a number of exhibitions on California art and culture. Co-author **Elaine Adams** is a published author and public speaker on topics relating to fine arts and aesthetics, and is Editor-in-Chief of the **California Art Club Newsletter**.

The **Pasadena Museum of California Art** is hosting the exhibition, **Millard Sheets: The Early Years**, from February 14 to May 30, 2010. Some of the paintings on loan were award-winning works that are now in prominent collections, including the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**,



*Millard Sheets in front of his mural for the Notre Dame University Library, May 1964. Photo taken by Robert W. Kelley for LIFE magazine.*

**Encyclopaedia Britannica Collection of American Art and Whitney Museum of Art**. Furthermore, a number of the watercolours are the exact works exhibited in the most prestigious 1930s era annual watercolour shows at the **Chicago Art Institute and National Academy of Design**. The exhibition is accompanied by a hardbound book.

The **Millard Sheets Center for the Arts** began as the Fine Arts Program of the **Los Angeles County Fair** and has been an integral part of the Fair since its founding in 1922. The Center presents contemporary, as well as historical art in a variety of styles and media from around the world. The 12,000-square-foot complex was built in 1937 by the **Works Progress Administration** and was dedicated the **Millard Sheets Gallery** in 1994.