



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Pioneers of Artists' Alley

by Elaine Adams

Adapted from the essay, "Three Creators of Artists' Alley," by David T. Leary, Ph.D.

AT THE START OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, California attracted an eclectic array of creative and philosophical thinkers who were lured out west in search of the spirit of adventure that was *California*. Many of these individuals formed groups that became colonies of one sort or another. Although settlements devoted to social or spiritual causes have historically drawn considerable attention and scholarship, distinct arts groups also existed and are worthy of examination.



Frank Tenney Johnson (1874-1939)
Somewhere on the Range, c. 1938
Oil on canvas 24" × 30"
Private Collection

It is no great surprise that artist colonies flourished throughout California in picturesque areas such as Pasadena, Laguna Beach, Carmel, Monterey, Santa Barbara and San

Francisco, particularly during the state's culturally burgeoning years from the 1910s through 1930s. Still, Alhambra hardly seems a likely place for an art colony.

Alhambra of the 1920s was a quiet, middle-class community, roughly seven miles east of downtown Los Angeles with a population of only nine-thousand. It had a temperate climate and a good view of the San Gabriel Mountains to the north, yet there was nothing uniquely scenic or highly cultural about the town. But stories about an almost mythical society of creative people residing in Alhambra turn up in old-timers' reminiscences, as well as newspaper articles.

Indeed, there must have been something in the blend of the locale and its inhabitants that forged creative energy. Surely, an essential ingredient can be found in its three pioneer artists that developed a colony in this unlikely location. The first to arrive was **Victor Clyde Forsythe** (1885-1962) in 1922. Immediately following Forsythe was **Frank Tenney Johnson** (1874-1939). Upon Johnson's urging, came **Jack Wilkinson Smith** (1873-1949) in 1926.

Forsythe was a native Californian, born in Orange, but felt his roots were in the Old West. His parents were from Tombstone, Arizona where they operated a store that was located next door to the **OK Corral** at the time of the notorious gunfight in 1881. While living in central Los Angeles young Forsythe grew up with stories about the Old West and its wild eccentrics such as **Wyatt Earp**, **Doc Holliday** and the **Clanton-McLowery** gang. As a boy at **Harvard Military School** he showed a natural flair for



cartooning. Later, he enrolled at the Los Angeles School of Art and Design where he studied under Louise Garden MacLeod (1857–1944). His apparent talent got him a job on William Randolph Hearst's *Los Angeles Examiner* where he briefly worked as a staff artist.

In 1904 Forsythe headed to New York where he was accepted at the Art Students League and studied under Frank Vincent DuMond (1865–1951). The following year he was hired as an illustrator for Hearst's *New York Evening Journal*. Forsythe's income and celebrity status were indeed on the rise, as was his romantic future. He met Los Angeles native Cotta Owen and soon they were married.

FORSYTHE GAINED NATIONAL recognition for his cartoons and comic strips particularly for *Joe Jinks* and *Way Out West*, as well as for his patriotic World War I posters. In 1915 he became a men-

tor to the unknown illustrator Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) whom Forsythe introduced to the *Saturday Evening Post*, thus launching Rockwell's inimitable career. For a time, the two artists shared a studio in New Rochelle that had previously belonged to Western artist Frederic Remington (1861–1909). In his autobiography Rockwell comments on Forsythe's influence over his work: "Vic was about the only person I knew who would give me any real criticism."

Another artist inspired by the West and who came from the ranks of the illustration art world was Frank Tenney Johnson. Johnson was born near Council Bluffs, Iowa and raised on a farm located on the old Overland Trail literally in sight of westerning wayfarers on horseback, stage coaches and covered wagons. In 1884 the family moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin where Johnson attended school, though with scant interest. Then, just in his mid-teens,

he began frequenting Milwaukee's Layton Art Gallery and found his life's direction. At Layton he apprenticed under the panorama scene painter F.W. Heine (1845–1921), whose specialty in horse painting was no doubt an education applied by Johnson for work to come. Then, he studied with Richard Lorenz (1858–1915), a former Texas Ranger and a member of the Society of Western Painters, who shared with Johnson his valuable painting techniques, as well as his first-hand experience with the West.

Combining his native talent, local instruction and jobs in commercial art, Johnson slowly made his way into the art world. A small inheritance allowed him to go to New York in 1895 to study at the Art Students League for five months. Then, he returned to Milwaukee where in 1896 he married local girl, Vinnie Reeve Francis, and worked as a free-lance illustrator until he raised enough money to return to New York. In 1902 he and Vinnie moved to New York and Johnson was accepted to the prestigious New York School of Art where he studied under American luminaries, Robert Henri (1865–1929), William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) and John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902).

Johnson won increasingly profitable illustration assignments—particularly portraying images of the West for popular publications such as the Zane Grey novels. The editor of *Field & Stream*, Emerson Hough, sponsored a 1904 trip to a ranch in Hayden, Colorado where Johnson could observe cowboy life firsthand for artistic authenticity.

Johnson and Forsythe were close friends in New York and shared an interest in the Western experience—and perhaps even discussed feeling misplaced on the east coast. In 1922 at the peak of Forsythe's newspaper career and active social



Victor Clyde Forsythe (1885–1962)

As the Desert Awakes, 1922

Oil 30" × 40"

Photo courtesy of Jean Stern, The Irvine Museum Collection of Morton H. Fleischer



Jack Wilkinson Smith (1873-1949)
Crystal Cove
Oil on canvas 52" x 70"
Collection of The Irvine Museum

life that included yachting, golfing and a circle of illustrious friends such as leading artists, **Dean Cornwell** (1892-1960), **Charles Dana Gibson** (1867-1944) and **Howard Chandler Christy** (1873-1952), he and Cotta decided to pack up and head west. It seems Clyde had a longing to paint life in the desert, including the prospectors with whom he would share campsites; and Frank Tenney Johnson soon followed his friend to California.

Both Forsythe and Johnson had in-laws residing in Alhambra. Cotta Owen Forsythe's parents had been living there since 1912; and Vinnie Francis Johnson's parents, sister and brother-in-law moved to Alhambra at about the same time Frank and Vinnie arrived. The Forsythes moved in with Cotta's family on South Wilson Avenue (now Atlantic Boulevard). Also in 1922, but without giving up their New York base, the Johnsons leased a residence with Vinnie's

family at 29 South Fourth Street where they lived until 1926. It seems that the decision for the Forsythes and Johnsons to move to Alhambra may have been at least partly due to the wives.

MUCH OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA at this time was ranchland. **Clyde and Bernice Champion** raised oranges on their twenty-seven acre property located on the west bank of the arroyo that divided the two cities of Alhambra and San Gabriel. In 1924 the Champions decided to subdivide their land. The Forsythes immediately purchased a lot located on the southeast corner of Alhambra Road and North Almansor Street where they built their home and named it "Orange Blossom Manor." The following year they added a studio above the garage.

In 1926 the Johnsons purchased a piece of Champion land and built their California-shingle home at 22

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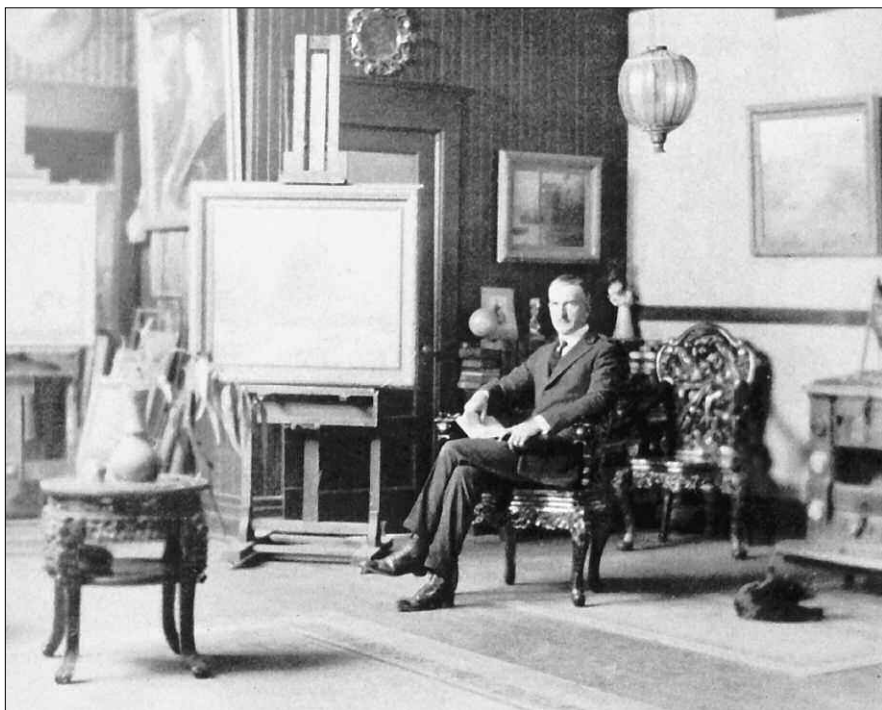
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Clyde Forsythe (on right) at the Uplifters Parade with Arthur Holliday, Mike Lang, U. S. Marshal Robert Clark, and Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz who was Grand Marshal. September 16, 1940, Los Angeles.

Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library



Jack Wilkinson Smith in his Champion Place studio, 1923.

Photo courtesy of Jean Stern and The Irvine Museum

Champion Place with a setback second story and large windows facing north towards Mt. Wilson. It seems that Alhambra's own "Little Bohemia" was now effectively underway.

Only a block and a half long and barely fifteen feet wide, the colony itself was not especially prepossessing at first glance. Situated principally along a cul-de-sac—*Champion Place* on the map, "Artists' Alley" in popular lore—the unassuming neighborhood was, however, pleasant and overlooked an arroyo amidst a shade of lofty eucalyptus trees. Forsythe and Johnson attracted a host of leading western personalities and artists such as Will Rogers, Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), Edward Borein (1872–1945), Dean Cornwell and Norman Rockwell. Forsythe, along with fellow "Desert Painters" James Swinnerton (1875–1974), Nicolai Fechin (1881–1955) and Maynard Dixon (1875–1946), shared many painting trips to California's expansive Mohave Desert. Forsythe immersed himself in the lore of the West, often living in ghost towns while on painting forays. Johnson painted his favorite wilderness themes—Indians, cowboys and early frontier settlers. In time, Johnson's iridescent paintings of moonlit cowboys in contemplation became known as "The Johnson Moonlight Technique."

The environment at Artists' Alley was clearly conducive to creativity, as well as to camaraderie. Social life was indeed full for Forsythe and Johnson. In addition to entertaining visiting friends at Artists' Alley, they joined the Santa Barbara equestrian group, *Rancho Visitadores*, co-founded by Ed Borein, for the delightful purpose of enjoying a group ride through scenic countryside to visit neighboring ranches—a quaint custom that continues in Santa Barbara to this day.



WITH THEIR WESTERN AND Desert paintings escalating in demand, and an apparent shortage of places to exhibit them in Los Angeles, in 1923 Forsythe and Johnson helped establish the **Biltmore Salon** (also known as “**Biltmore Galeria Real**”) in the newly built palatial Spanish-Italian Renaissance style **Biltmore Hotel** located at 506 South Grand Avenue. Culture in southern California was indeed beginning to bloom. In 1926 Frank Tenney Johnson encouraged his friend Jack Wilkinson Smith to take a look at the house next door to his at 16 Champion Place, and introduced him to Clyde Champion. Smith must have been inspired by the location because he promptly bought the house. Bernice and

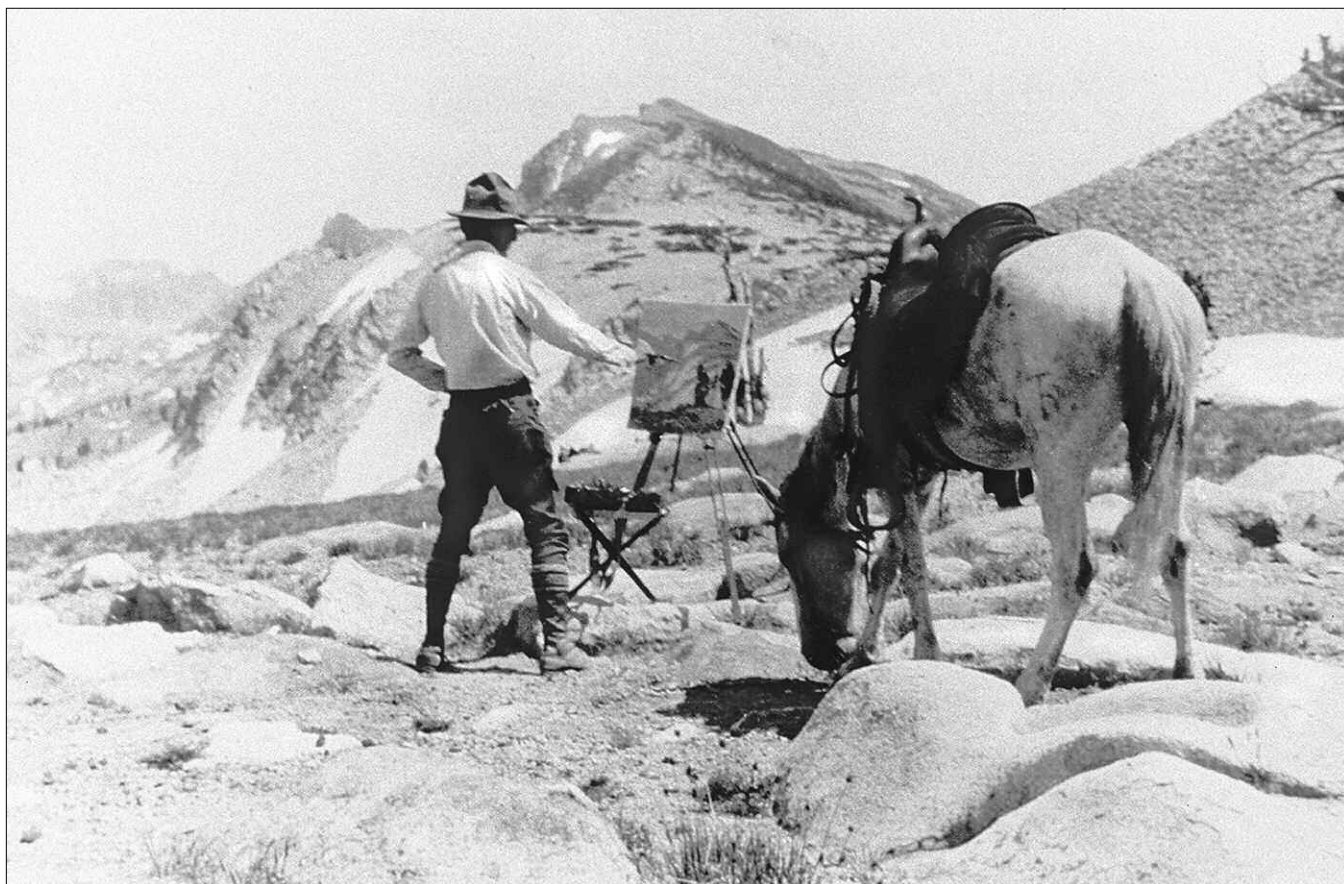
Clyde Champion built their home across the street from Smith’s.

Jack Wilkinson Smith was born in Patterson, New Jersey. His grandfather owned an eighty acre farm in New York, which now includes **Madison Square Garden**. Jack was raised with some degree of artistic sensitivity; it is noted that his father was a decorative painter for the **New York State Capitol Building** in Albany. In his teens and already an aspiring artist, Jack dropped out of school and worked his way to Chicago where he attended the **Art Institute of Chicago** and apprenticed under **George Gardner Symons** (1863–1930).

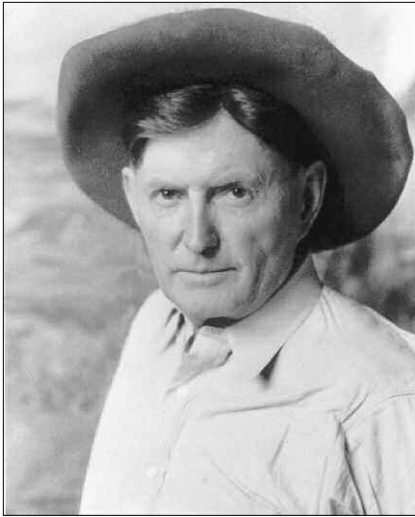
Smith travelled to Lexington, Kentucky where he soon established himself as a sign and scenic painter, and it is during this period

that he met and married **Emma B. Troop**. Also in Lexington, he held his first solo fine art exhibition, which drew the attention of cartoonist **Winsor McKay** (1867(?)–1934) who helped Smith get a job as a newspaper artist on the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. While in Cincinnati, Smith studied under **Frank Duveneck** (1848–1919) at the **Cincinnati Academy of Art**. Then, in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, Smith travelled to Cuba to sketch frontline combat scenes, which brought him national notice.

The western landscape, however, was beckoning Smith. Inspired by photographs, he began painting the imagery of the West before actually having been to the West. Feeling encouraged by the sale of some of these works, in



Jack Wilkinson Smith painting en plein air in the desert with his horse.
Photo courtesy of Jean Stern and The Irvine Museum



Frank Tenney Johnson (1874–1939)
Photo Courtesy of Jean Stern and The Irvine Museum

1906 he and Emma moved from Cincinnati to Los Angeles.

Smith was quickly indoctrinated into life at the colony, and eventually was the primary organizer of the Biltmore Salon exhibitions, which included works by fellow local artists. He had a key role in the start of the **Painters of the West** group that included twenty-five local artists, and on December 14, 1923 they marked the inaugural exhibition of the **Biltmore Salon**. Among the exhibiting artists were Forsythe, Johnson and Smith, as well as **Franz Bischoff**, **Carl Oscar Borg**, **Kathryn Leighton**, **Hanson Puthuff**, **Jean Manheim**, **Donna Schuster** and **William Wendt**. The opening attracted several hundred people and according to the December 15, 1923 issue of the *Los Angeles Times* social scene writer, **Fred Hogue**, described the grandeur of the salon as "...spacious, velveteed and tapestried...a gallery that is said to be second in size only to the Grand Central Gallery of New York...."

New York Sculptor **Eli Harvey** (1860-1957) and his wife **Edith James** came out west in 1928 and soon succumbed to the uniqueness of Artists' Alley. The following year they built a Florentine-style home

and studio at 130 Champion Place. Eli Harvey was a highly regarded sculptor whose *Elk* represents the **Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks** and whose animal figures adorn the **Lion House** in the **Bronx Zoo**, and are in the collections of the **New York Zoological Society** and the Metropolitan Museum of Art—making him a formidable addition to the colony at Artists' Alley.

Across the street from the Harveys lived Alhambra's first city attorney, **Alfred Barstow**, whose daughter, **Mary**, was an attractive, young teacher. In 1929 Norman Rockwell was going through a divorce from **Irene**, his wife of thirteen years, and was suffering from depression. So, at Forsythe's invitation, Rockwell came to Alhambra. The Forsythes introduced Rockwell to Mary Barstow, who made an immediate impression on Norman. He was thirty-six, she was twenty-two. Within three weeks, they were engaged. Three months later on April 17, 1930 they were married in the Barstow's garden.

Norman Rockwell could be seen

daily bicycling through the streets of Alhambra with his briar pipe in his mouth and his coattails flapping in the wind. He consistently sought interesting faces for his *Saturday Evening Post* assignments and found many locals happy to pose for him. One of his most beloved *Post* covers, titled "Doctor and Doll," features Eli Harvey as the doctor and little **Libby Beam**, another Alhambra resident, with her sick doll.

The Rockwells continued to make New York their home base, but they often travelled to Alhambra, sometimes spending entire summers there. The Barstows eventually built an addition onto their home in 1935 to accommodate the Rockwell family visits.

In addition to living in a communal environment, the artists took group painting trips. A photo in the Johnson Collection shows the Johnsons, Forsythes and Smiths camping in the Sierras. Their mutual love for the western landscape was being satisfied. When asked about California, Smith responded, "Why go



Biltmore Hotel from Pershing Square, circa 1939
Photo collection of Los Angeles Public Library



Norman Rockwell (1894–1978)
Doctor and Doll
 Oil on canvas 32" × 26 1/4"
 Saturday Evening Post Cover, March 9, 1929
 Private Collection

Models for this work were Artists' Alley sculptor, Eli Harvey, and local girl, Libby Beam.



Eli Harvey (1860–1957)
 working on his sculpture, "Alaskan Brown Bear."
 Photo courtesy of Clinton County Historical Society

elsewhere? Where are mountains nobler than the Sierras? Where are seas bluer than off the California coast? Where are forests to compare with our own?" Indeed, he said, "Whatever I have seen elsewhere I have found in California, and more glorious. It is all here." And Forsythe declared, "The Golden State is so different in climate and geography from other portions of the country that she exercises an influence over her painters which they cannot escape."

FORSYTHE, JOHNSON AND Smith were making transitions with their work, if not breakthroughs. Certainly, familial support would have been important, but, more encouraging would have

been the support of their colleagues. Johnson put it well when he said that "each work of art is an experiment, and the knowledge gained by each individual in his effort at expression, is often times of greater value to one's fellow artists than that gleaned from books." The three surely must have been exchanging opinions and sharing views in collegial fashion at this point.

Critical art reviews were generally positive, but on occasion a critic would take a derogatory jab at the artists' illustration background. **Arthur Millier**, one of southern California's most important critics with the *Los Angeles Times*, reviewed a Forsythe exhibition at the Biltmore Salon that fea-

tured mainly desert scenes. "In these," said Millier, "the light and colour are both convincingly true and harmonious. Many of these will wear exceedingly well, for into them the artist puts his considerable knowledge of the desert." But just the next year, commenting on another Forsythe exhibition, Millier remarked, "The large portraits or story-telling pieces would be better as reproduced illustrations than as framed paintings."

The same was true even of Frank Tenney Johnson, whose canvases had gained popularity both locally and nationally. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Fred Hogue commented, "Frank Tenney Johnson has won with his brush a place in the front rank of contemporary

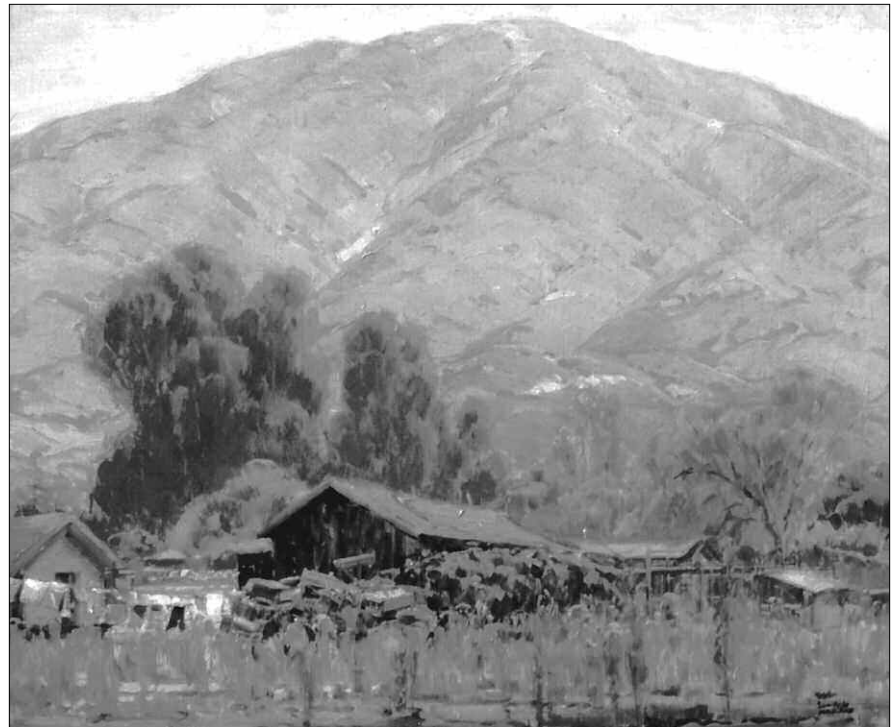


artists. His best is equal to the best in any company.” And art writer **Everett Carroll Maxwell** declared, “This artist stands alone in his ability to depict an incident in the life of the Old West, or the West of today, without losing sight of mood—the mystery of haunting night, or the stinging heat of desert noonday.” But then Maxwell went on to add, “It is this mystery that saves Johnson’s pictures from being illustrations and makes them fundamentally works of art.”

Jack Wilkinson Smith experienced similar treatment. Writing about an exhibit at the Biltmore Salon, Arthur Millier said, “Smith makes a convincing demonstration of his essential poetry and his ideals of craftsmanship.” Nevertheless, Millier added, “When Smith introduces figures into his pictures they tend to become illustrations at the expense of art.” Four years later Fred Hogue was not so equivocal. “Jack Wilkinson Smith is the premier painter of California sunlight,” he said. “He may violate the classic canons of art, but the canvases he creates may cause future critics to revise the accepted canons.”

Critics aside, many collectors liked what the three artists did. Vinnie Johnson kept a record of Frank’s sales, and in 1933, the year the Great Depression was at its worst, his paintings grossed over \$12,000, of which a substantial percent came from the Biltmore Salon—an astonishing amount in that day.

THE SELF-MADE BUSINESSMAN **Amon G. Carter Sr. (1879–1955)** was actively acquiring the finest examples of western art, primarily Remingtons and Russells when in 1938 he attended Johnson’s exhibition at the **Grand Central Art Galleries** at New York’s Biltmore Hotel and bought out the entire exhibition. Carter’s collection became the impetus behind the **Amon Carter Museum**, which opened in 1961 in Fort Worth, Texas. Johnson must have been in a celebratory mood. Shortly after his successful exhibi-



Sam Hyde Harris (1889–1977)
Morning Glory, c. 1938
Oil 30" × 36"
Photo courtesy of Jean Stern, The Irvine Museum
Collection of Paul and Kathleen Bagley

tion, he attended a party on December 19, 1938 in Los Angeles, gave a social kiss to a pretty girl and fell ill the following day. On January 1, 1939 Frank Tenney Johnson died of meningitis. His last painting, *Somewhere on the Range*, was still on his easel waiting for his signature.

Erstwhile illustrators they may have been, but Johnson, Smith, and Forsythe were all honoured by their peers as fine artists in various ways. The **National Academy of Design** awarded Johnson associate status in 1929 and full membership in 1937. Few other Californians had been so recognized. The **California Art Club** elected Smith its president in 1920 and 1921. He rightly claimed a role in establishing the organization “as a strong civic cultural influence in Southern California.” The California Art Club chose Johnson president four times—1935 through 1938—and

he thought that during his tenure there should be featured “amongst other things of interest to Artists, such activities as would tend to increase their knowledge of materials, methods, and means of producing the best expression possible in the different lines followed.” In 1939 a painting by each of the three men was among those shown at the **Golden Gate International Exposition** in San Francisco.

With the death of Frank Tenney Johnson in 1939, followed by Jack Wilkinson Smith in 1949, much of the glory days of Artists’ Alley had passed. However, in 1950 a new resident arrived, **Sam Hyde Harris (1889–1977)**. Harris and his wife bought 16 Champion Place—Jack Wilkinson Smith’s old home and studio. Harris was born in England to a middle-class family. When he was fifteen he and the family moved to Los Angeles. The follow-



ing year, he began studying painting with **Hanson Puthuff** (1875-1972), and in 1920 began exhibiting with the California Art Club. His first wife was **Phoebe Mulholland**, the niece of **William Mulholland**, superintendent of the **Los Angeles Water Company**. After twenty-seven years of marriage and three sons, Sam and Phoebe divorced. In 1945 Sam met U.C.L.A. librarian **Marion Dodge** at an evening art class and they soon married. In keeping with some of the tradition of Artists' Alley, Harris travelled to the desert with Jimmy Swinnerton.

Artists' Alley's peaceful setting with its wispy eucalyptus trees and magnificent view of the San Gabriel Mountains was often referred to as "the Little Bohemia, the Greenwich Village, and the Montmartre of the Southwest." And like so many Bohemian settlements, Champion Place had its own tragedy.

In 1957 Vinnie Johnson's sister, **Evalyn Francis Ash Van Wormer**, was found strangled in her home at 22 Champion Place—Frank Tenney Johnson's home. The house was willed to Evalyn and her son **James Ash** in 1956. Evalyn had been living there by herself since 1952,

when she divorced her husband, **Clarence**, a janitor for the Monrovia school district. The house was filled with paintings by Frank Tenney Johnson, but nothing was missing and the case was never solved.

All three pioneers of Artists' Alley, Forsythe, Johnson and Smith found their inspiration in interpreting the West, and in so doing they reflected the public's sentiment. The West—or rather the *Frontier West*—somehow assumed a life of its own in America's mind. That life was mythic in many ways, tending to neglect the variety of folk who really occupied the frontier or the hard conditions they often faced. But Forsythe, Johnson and Smith grew up with the phenomenon, drew from it, and helped sustain it. At age sixty-seven Forsythe fulfilled his childhood bond to the Old West by painting *The Fight at OK Corral*, complete with his parents' store, *Chandler and Forsythe*, in the background.

To create, artists have a need to belong to a society that nurtures creativity in an environment that promotes an exchange of knowledge and inspires new ideas. Artists' Alley was just such a place. ■

Notes:

This article was adapted from David T. Leary's essay, "Three Creators of Artists' Alley." Dr. Leary is a southern California native. He completed his undergraduate work at Stanford University and received a doctorate from the University of Southern California. Dr. Leary taught at Pasadena City College for many years with a special interest in California history. For his research on "Three Creators of Artists' Alley" and requisite permission to quote, Dr. Leary especially wishes to acknowledge: The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley for their papers on Jack Wilkinson Smith; The McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center for their papers on Frank Tenney Johnson; and The Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art for items pertaining to Clyde Forsythe (there is no single repository on Forsythe). To read Dr. Leary's original, unedited text with detailed attributions, visit www.californiaartclub.org/home/history.shtml



Jack Wilkinson Smith (1873-1949)
In the Canyon
Oil on canvas 40" × 50"
Private Collection



Victor Clyde Forsythe (1885-1962)
Two of a Kind
Oil on canvas 17" × 20"
Private Collection