



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

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

William Keith (1838 -1911): SEEKING THE UNSEEN SPIRITUAL SENSE IN NATURE

by Elaine Adams

AMERICA IN THE MID-19TH century was rapidly becoming a major economic force, and with its new-found wealth came the pursuit for culture and refined living. After all, this was a young nation with plenty of imagination and drive, but an undeveloped sense of aesthetics and nascent cultural roots.

The concentration of prosperity was skewed on the eastern seaboard and radiated closely from where the

nation was first colonized in 1620 in Massachusetts. By contrast, much of the western territories were rural and remote. Described as the "Wild West," California was not part of the United States until it was ceded by Mexico on February 2, 1848 in accordance with the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**, which ended the **Mexican-American War (1846-1848)**. Interestingly, just nine days prior to signing the treaty, gold was discovered on January 24, 1848 in

Sutter's Mill in Coloma, thirty-six miles northeast of Sacramento.

Gold Rush

NEWSPREAD OF THE GOLD RUSH spread and launched one of history's biggest immigration explosions. By 1849 San Francisco's harbour was teeming with ships carrying passengers referred to as "forty-niners." They were also called "Argonauts" for braving the adventurous five to eight month sea



Mount Shasta from Strawberry Valley, c. mid-1890s

Oil on canvas 29 3/4" x 50"

Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California

Gift of Allan Green in memory of Charles E. Green

voyage from New York and around the tip of South America, skirting icebergs along the way. Another approach from the East Coast was by sailing the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama and then, riding canoes and mules for one week through the Panama jungle, finally reaching the Pacific side of the Isthmus to board the next sailing ship bound for San Francisco. Others would travel by land, crossing the Appalachian Mountains to Pennsylvania where they would catch a riverboat to the Missouri

River and then, take a wagon train along the Oregon and California Trails. Still, others would travel by wagon train over the rugged Rockies and then, over the hostile Sierra Nevada Mountains. Each route had its own risks.

The following year San Francisco swelled from a small population of approximately 1,000 settlers to a boomtown of 90,000 gold prospectors. By 1855 there were 300,000 fortune-seekers of various sorts that flooded into the area. Infrastructure was overwhelmed

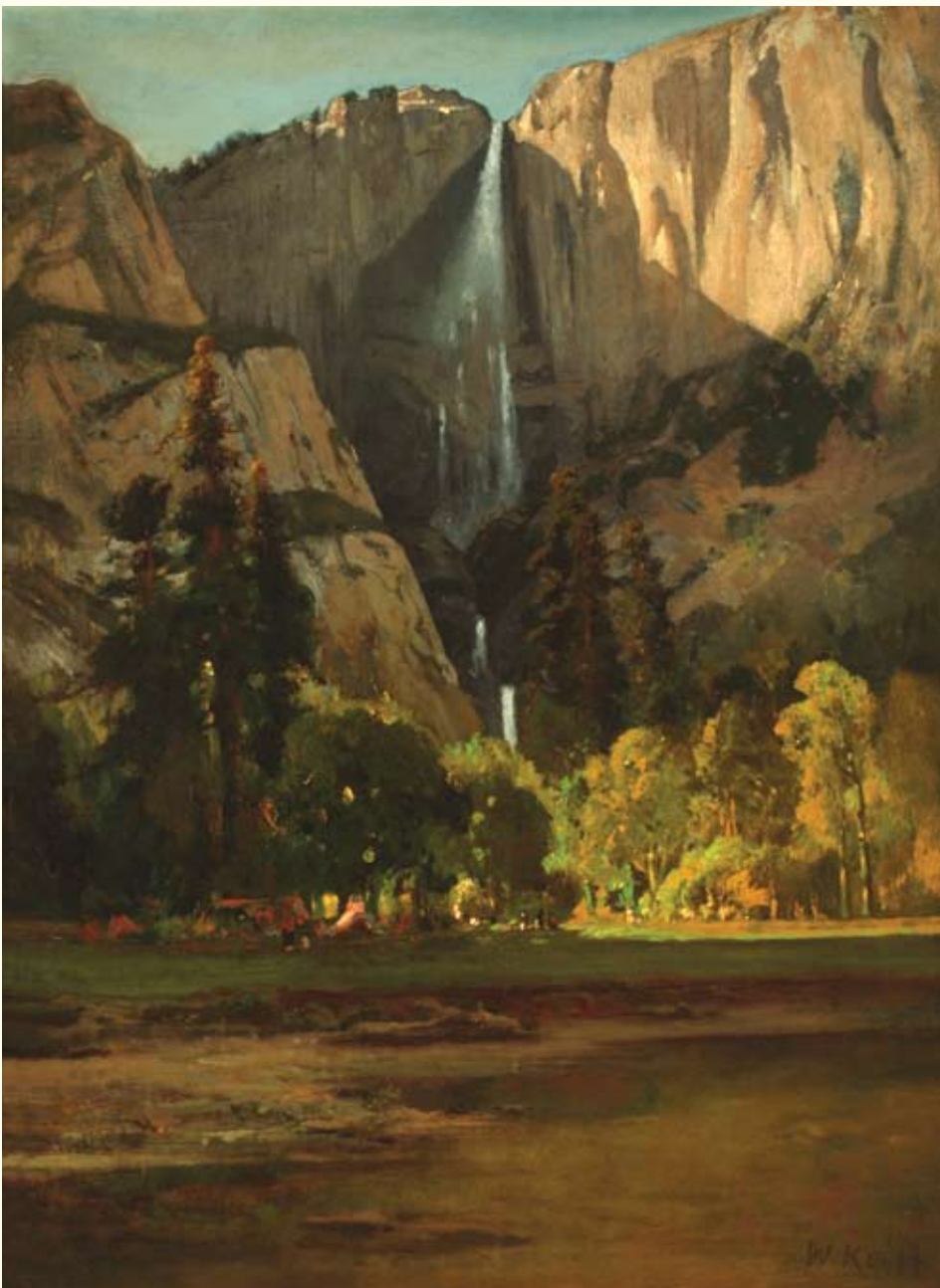
and severely compromised—and lawlessness was rampant. Miners hastily set up camps and proclaimed them with tell-tale names such as “Rough and Ready” “Whiskeytown” and “Hangtown.” With the discovery of gold, California was accelerated into statehood, and on September 9, 1850, **President Millard Fillmore** officially made California the thirty-first state.

The rush for gold created a society of anonymity that wielded a sense of freedom and lack of conventionality. Cultural and social pursuits consisted of patronizing saloons, hurdy-gurdy houses (dance halls), backroom brothels and gambling “palaces.” Goods and services were difficult to come by, prices were inflated, and everything was paid for in gold. Money was measured by reaching into a pouch of gold dust and pinching an amount between the thumb and forefinger, sometimes moistening the thumb for a bigger pinch. An employer would value a clerk based on the amount of dust he could “raise in a pinch.”

Lola Montez

ADVENTUROUS ENTREPRENEURS flocked to the gold country to get their share—one way or another. The internationally celebrated **Lola Montez (1818-1861)** arrived at San Francisco in May of 1853 where she performed her infamous *Spider Dance*. She was also notorious for her multiple marriages and affairs, including with composer, **Franz Liszt**, novelist **Alexandre Dumas**, and **Ludwig I, King of Bavaria** who bestowed on her the title of **Countess of Landsfeld**. Montez was an institution of her own, and referred to herself as a “Spanish Dancer,” although in reality she was born **Eliza Gilbert** from Limerick, Ireland.

After performing in Europe, Australia and New York, Montez fled to California to start a new life and to escape possible bigamy charges. Once in California, she was briefly married to local newspaperman **Patrick Hull** and settled in Grass Valley. She remained in Grass Valley for nearly two years—long enough to inspire a young neighbour, **Lotta Crabtree (1847-1924)**, who sang, danced and played the banjo at mining camps. Eventually, Lotta became known as “Miss Lotta, the San Francisco Favourite,” and was one of the wealthiest and most popular American entertainers



Yosemite Falls, 1870s or early 1880s

Oil on canvas 24" × 18"

Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California
Gift of Mrs. Annabelle Rose



Portrait of William Keith, 1870s, printed 1945
Photograph
Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery,
Saint Mary's College of California
Gift of Brother F. Cornelius Braeg FSC

of the late 19th century, earning the title, "The Nation's Darling." It was in this mixed atmosphere of treasure hunters, eccentrics, mavericks and rebels that the twenty-five-year-old gentle soul, **William Keith, Jr. (1838-1911)**, arrived in 1859 as an engraver, but would eventually be heralded as the "Dean of California Painters."

William Keith's Early Days

BORN ON NOVEMBER 21, 1838 in Oldmeldrum, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, William Keith had a tragic beginning. His father, a successful merchant linen draper, never lived to see the birth of his son. William's mother found it difficult to raise a new-born baby on her own and decided to leave her son in the care of her parents. His maternal grandparents, by the family name of **Bruce**, raised William as a devout Presbyterian.

At the age of eight William Keith was reunited with his mother and three older sisters. Four years later in 1850 the family immigrated to the United States. Although Keith had a penchant for painting, his mother explained that "the two P's—painting and poverty—go together." To please his



Lola Montez
Daguerreotype detail, 1851
Southworth & Hawes
Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art

mother, he compromised by accepting an apprenticeship in 1856 to **William Roberts**, a wood engraver in New York.

Keith In San Francisco

IN 1858 KEITH WAS EMPLOYED BY *Harpers Magazine* to engrave illustrations, and travelled on assignment for the first time to the American West. He briefly moved to England to work for the *London Daily News*, but then, travelled back to California where he settled in San Francisco in 1859. There, he went into business as an engraver and soon opened a shop with a partner. But his earlier love for art drew him in 1863 to study with the local English immigrant artist, **Samuel Marsden Brookes (1816-1892)**.

Brookes was nationally renowned for his still life paintings of fish, flowers, fruit and birds, as well as for his portraits. His paintings sold to prominent San Francisco art patrons, such as **E.B. Crocker** and **Mrs. Mark Hopkins**, for prices as high as \$10,000. It seems that San Francisco, in its new found wealth, was now aspiring for a sophisticated image and cultural roots.

Brookes gave painting lessons at his studio located at 611 Clay Street, which



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Contents

- Cover William Keith (1838-1911):
Seeking the Unseen Spiritual
Sense in Nature
by Elaine Adams
- 7 Mian Situ: A Modern-Day
Master
by Molly Siple
- 11 Cathey Cadieux—Cover Girl
by Molly Siple
- 14 100th Annual Gold Medal
Juried Exhibition
by Beverly Chang
- 15 California Art Club
Celebrates a Century of
Landscape Paintings with
a Series of Art Exhibitions
throughout the Golden State
by Beverly Chang
- 16 Membership Programs and
Events
- 17 Collectors' Circle Corner
- 18 Corporate 100
- 19 Call for Entries
- 19 Chapter News and Events
- 20 News Briefs
- 22 Donations
- 23 Museum/Gallery Exhibitions
and Lectures
- 29 Membership News
- 30 In Memoriam
- 31 New Members

Advertisers

- 10 No Boundaries Art
Workshops
- 17 American Legacy Fine Arts
- 17 Randy Higbee Gallery



Sunlit Oaks and Meadow, 1898

Oil on canvas on board 12 1/4" × 16"

Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California

Gift of Mrs. Allan Green

he shared with another well-known artist and English immigrant, **Edwin Deakin (1838-1923)**. Brookes is credited as being a founding member of both the **San Francisco Art Association** (founded 1871) and the **Bohemian Club** (established 1872). Keith also received training in watercolour painting from artist, **Elizabeth Emerson (1838-1882)**, whom he married in 1864. "Lizzie" was a distant cousin of the American philosopher, poet and writer, **Ralph Waldo Emerson** whose philosophies on the spirituality of nature would later be exemplified in Keith's paintings.

In 1868 Keith gave up his engraving business to pursue his passion for art, and soon received a commission from the **Northern Pacific Railroad** to paint landscapes along its tracks for promotional purposes. Lizzie encouraged her husband's art, and in September of 1869 the Keiths with their two children, **Charles** and **Hortense**, travelled to New York and Maine, where the children were left in the care of Elizabeth's sister, while William and Lizzie set sail for Europe.

The Keiths in Europe

THE KEITHS SPENT SIX MONTHS travelling through France, Italy and Germany, studying the "great masters." A decade earlier, Dusseldorf was an instrumental centre of the European art world and a number of notable American artists studied there, including **Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902)**, **Worthington**

Whittredge (1820-1910) and **Sanford R. Gifford (1823-1880)**. Dusseldorf training emphasized solid draughtsmanship, technique, and precise detail. However, during the Keiths' visit to Paris, they became acquainted with a new art movement that emphasized broadly painted "suggestive" landscapes. This style became known as the **Barbizon School** and was distinctly recognized by its dark and moody landscapes that often portrayed the ancient oak as a symbol of strength and longevity. These works particularly impressed William Keith, and upon returning to northern California, he found artistic inspiration in the Alameda oaks.

Swedenborg and Mary McHenry

AFTER THEIR EUROPEAN TRIP and with fresh inspiration, Keith's paintings were successfully selling for \$2,000, a very respectable price at the time. Sadly, on March 8, 1882 at the age of forty-two Elizabeth Keith died of heart failure. William Keith was stricken with deep remorse. He was comforted by a friend and admirer of his work, **Joseph Worcester** who was a Swedenborgian minister. Followers of **Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)** believe that within the literal meaning of the Bible lies a spiritual sense that is unseen by ordinary humans. This "unseen spiritual sense" would become the inspiration to Keith's later symbolic and imaginary



Glacial Meadow and Lake, High Sierra (Tuolumne Meadows), 1870s or early 1880s

Oil on canvas 14" × 26"

Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California

Gift of Dr. William S. Porter

landscape paintings.

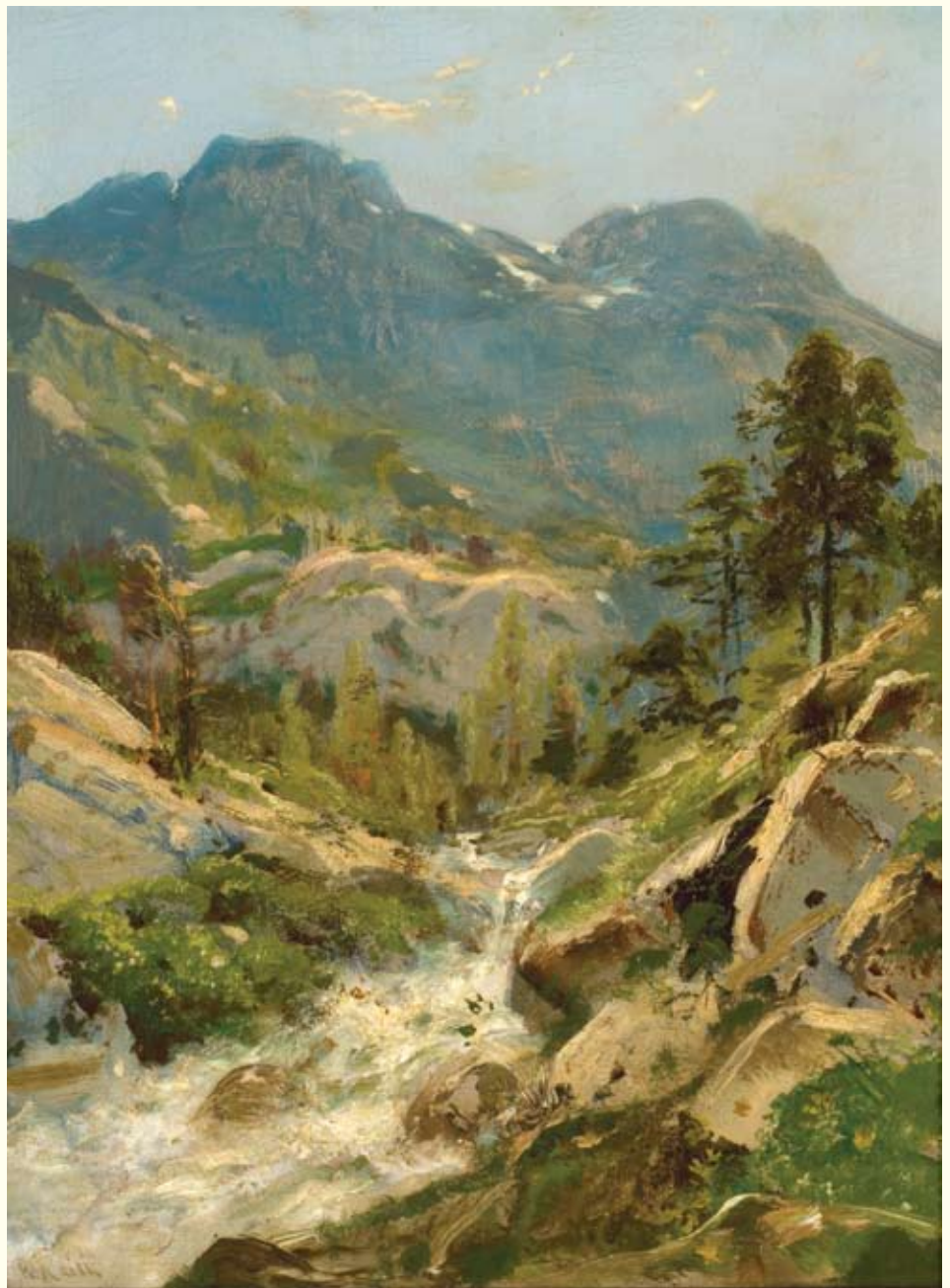
Three months after Lizzie's death, Keith went on a sketching trip to the Santa Cruz Mountains with a group of amateur lady painters. Among the party was **Mary McHenry (1855-1947)**. Keith had met Mary as a young girl and encouraged her to study wood-engraving, which she did at **Harrison Eastman's Studio** in San Francisco, located just a block away from Keith's studio.

The McHenry family was prominent in San Francisco. Mary's father, **John McHenry**, was of Scottish ancestry, born in Raleigh, North Carolina, and raised on his family's plantation in Tennessee. As a judge, John McHenry served on the First Municipal Court of New Orleans. **President Martin Van Buren** offered him the post of Minister (Ambassador), to Spain, which he declined in order to "go west," as so many did during the Gold Rush. In San Francisco, he served as a judge in the County Courthouse.

Although the McHenry's were Episcopalians, Mary was enrolled at a Catholic boarding school in San Jose because of the school's scholastic reputation was considered superior. Mary McHenry was an avid reader and read her father's law books in their home library. In fact, she became so knowledgeable about law that she has the distinction of being the first woman to graduate from **Hastings Law School**.

William Keith and Mary McHenry were married in 1883 and spent their honeymoon visiting the missions of southern California. And naturally, like most artists on their honeymoon, Keith spent a great deal of his time painting. Eventually, he painted a complete set of California's historic missions.

Although Mary practiced law successfully for one year, after marriage she closed her practice and became a devoted wife. She continued her dedication to women's independence by actively participating in the **Suffragist Movement**, and was even good friends with its leader, **Susan B. Anthony**. Still, she remained supportive of her husband's work and particularly encouraged his illusory landscapes, which continued evolving from his ties to the Swedenborgian Christian faith. Although Keith went to church faithfully every Sunday for the rest of his life, his wife did not attend any church.



Mountain Sketch, c. 1880

Oil on canvas 15 1/2" × 11"

Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California

Gift of Arthur and Jane Barrett

Return to Europe

IN NOVEMBER OF 1883 THE KEITHS travelled to Munich, where they stayed for two years while William studied figure painting. He rented a small studio and hired models to pose for him, and occasionally Mary would pose. Keith never enrolled at the **Munich Academy**, rather, on occasion, notable artists from the Academy, **Carl von Marr (1858-1936)** and **J. Frank Currier (1943-1909)**, would

come to his studio to critique his work.

Upon returning to California the Keiths bought a home in Berkeley, from where the artist commuted daily by ferry to reach his studio in San Francisco. For a few years, William Keith gave painting lessons to women, rarely to men. He apparently enjoyed the company of women, and although his works sold well, giving lessons was a good way to secure his income.

John Muir and George Inness

WILLIAM KEITH WAS AN AVID outdoorsman and a passionate nature enthusiast. In October of 1872, while on a painting trip to Yosemite, Keith met his soul mate in the celebrated nature conservationist and fellow Scotsman, **John Muir (1838-1914)**. Muir led the artist to remote mountains beyond Yosemite. The meeting between these two nature lovers resulted in a long friendship which included several years of travelling together.

Both Muir and Keith shared an appreciation for nature's vastness and resplendent detail. However, under Swendenborgian sensitivities, Keith's landscapes were becoming increasingly less identifiable and more tonal. In an article that appeared in the *San Francisco Call* on June 13, 1897, it was reported that upon seeing the beauty of nature Muir would comment: "You never saw a sunrise like that, Keith. Why in the deuce don't you imitate nature?" William would goad Muir by responding, "Look here now, John, if you'll go out early tomorrow morning and look toward the East you'll see nature imitating my sunrise . . ."

In the spring of 1891, one of America's most celebrated landscape artists of the day, **George Inness (1825-1894)** came out west to the San Francisco area. A fellow artist and Swendenborgian, William Keith wanted very much to meet Inness. In Monterey the two artists developed a friendship, and upon their return to San Francisco, spent time together painting in Keith's studio and travelling to Yosemite. They held a joint exhibition at **Rabjohn and Morcom's Gallery** in San Francisco.

This exciting visit from Inness completely rejuvenated and reconfirmed Keith's beliefs in interpreting nature's spiritual essence. Inness' method of painting inspired Keith to rethink his techniques. In a letter to Worcester, Keith wrote, "I have painted too solidly, laying down the heavy material and so my pictures lack colour and are black and white. I must paint more thinly and transparently.."

William Keith kept aware of the latest artistic movements, and would occasionally experiment with them. *Bullfrog Lake in Sierra*, circa 1902, exudes the high-keyed palette reminiscent of



Bullfrog Lake in Sierra, c. 1902

Oil on canvas 14" × 20"

Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California

Gift of William E. Colby

works by the burgeoning Southern California Impressionists of the time. He depicted only a few landscapes in this higher palette, he preferred the sombre spiritual moods better characterized through the Old Master palettes of **Velasquez** and **Rembrandt**, two artists whom he greatly admired.

1906 Earthquake and Fire

AFTER THE TRAGIC 1906 SAN Francisco earthquake and fire, many artists lost their studios, and Keith was among them. He was known to have painted nearly 4,000 oils of which 2,000 were destroyed in the fire. Artist **Arthur Mathews (1860-1945)**, who had become a strong influence in the new Northern California Art Movement, headed a committee for distribution of relief funds for San Francisco artists. Mathews also designed and built the first artists' studio complex in the city's reconstruction plans. The building provided studios for both Arthur Mathews and William Keith.

William Keith's personal success as an artist and his influence on younger artists of his day earned him the title of "Dean of California Artists" and "California's Old Master." From 1890 until his death in 1911, Keith was

recognized as the most prominent artist in California and an important teacher. Two of his students emerged as significant artists, **Bertha Stringer Lee (1869-1937)** and **Mary DeNeale Morgan (1868-1948)**. It is also believed that Keith may have introduced **Marion Kavanagh (1870-1954)** to her future husband, artist **Elmer Wachtel (1864-1929)**.

Keith's Final Days and Legacy

IN THE LAST DECADE OF WILLIAM Keith's life, he and Mary became more immersed in their respective passions—he with his paintings, she with her campaign for women's rights. However, there were occasional opportunities, when their interests would combine. One such example took place in the summer of 1902 when together they organized a successful Sierra Club program that included a suffrage meeting and attracted an influential audience from all over the United States. As the wife of a renowned artist and a noted suffragist, Mary enjoyed a celebrity status and was the subject of dozens of articles, including a cover piece in the 1907 issue of *Western Woman Magazine*.

Towards the end of 1910 William

(continued on page 10)

WILLIAM KEITH

(continued from page 6)

became seriously ill with heart and kidney trouble. Mary spent nearly every hour with her husband, but his situation became more critical. On April 13 William Keith passed away in his home in Berkeley. His death made national news and Mary was inundated with condolences letters. The **Berkeley Chamber of Commerce** proclaimed that William Keith had “honoured our city and our state.” The leaflet distributed at his funeral noted: “...he was always a true and gentle knight.”

Four years after his death, William Keith was memorialized with a retrospective of his later paintings at the **1915 Pan Pacific Exposition** in San Francisco. However, shortly afterwards and with the onslaught of Modernism, Keith's contributions sank into oblivion, and many art critics and historians considered William Keith as a minor regionalist painter.

Had it not been for the acumen and dedication of **Brother Fidelis**

Cornelius Braeg, professor of art at **Saint Mary's College** in Moraga, California, Keith's works may have dissipated into obscurity. From the 1930s until his death in 1963, Brother Cornelius collected Keith's work and memorabilia at a time when his style of painting was considered old-fashioned. It was Keith's artistic sensitivity along with his Christian faith that inspired Brother Cornelius into amassing his work; a collection which resulted in 135 paintings, several unsigned drawings, and various personal memorabilia. (Currently the collection consists of more than 175 paintings.)

In 1934 St. Mary's College opened the **Keith Gallery**, and in 1956 the **Oakland Public Library** opened the **William Keith Memorial Gallery**. In addition, streets in Oakland and Berkeley are named after William Keith. As a testimony to Keith's artistic immortality, an allegorical mural in the **San Francisco Public Library** by **Frank Vincent DuMond (1865-1951)** depicts William Keith as the symbolic representation of California art. ■

Notes:

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 Exhibition, William Keith: 100th Anniversary Retrospective will be on view at the **Hearst Gallery at St. Mary's College** from **October 2 to December 18, 2011**, and will be accompanied by a newly published catalogue.

Sources for this article include: An Uncommon Journey: Reflections on the Life of Mary McHenry Keith, article by **Noel Wise** for *Women's Legal History Studies* under **Professor Barbara Babcock**, published 2002, **Stanford University Law Library**; William Keith: The Saint Mary's College Collection by **Ann Harlow** with a text on William Keith by **Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.**; Land of Golden Dreams by **Peter J. Bloodgett**, published 1999, **Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery**; and Rush for Riches by **J.S. Holliday**, published 1999, **Oakland Museum of California**.