



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909

William Lees Judson (1842-1928) ~ The Artist Who Created Legacies

by Peter Adams

WILLIAM LEES JUDSON was a leader among early California plein air painters. Not only was he one of the first artists to live and work in Los Angeles, but he deeply cared about the surrounding landscape—and was in fact a crusader for clean air, winning battles for conservation and environmental concerns. Judson acutely believed in preserving the sense of freedom, natural beauty, and quality craftsmanship that was then the lifestyle of southern California at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. His endeavours succeeded to a large degree.

In 1897 Judson founded the internationally renowned **Judson Studios**, which continues making hand-crafted stained glass artworks in the Highland Park area after five generations. He also founded and served as the first dean of the **University of Southern California's School of Fine Arts**, which thrives today under the name of the **Roski School of Fine Arts**. In addition, Judson led the local Arts and Crafts Movement, which is presently undergoing a tremendous following and a new renaissance. Furthermore, he was one of the earliest members of the **California Art Club**, which is experiencing an active revival and is actually partnering this year with the University of Southern California's **Fisher Museum of Art** to exhibit its *102nd Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition* from June 2 to 23.

Childhood

William Lees Judson was born April 1, 1842 to **John Randle Judson** and **Elizabeth Ann Smethurst** in



The Arroyo, n.d.
Oil on canvas 25" × 30"
Collection of Karen Judson

a little town outside of Manchester, England, called Ashton-Under-Lyne. Although John Randle had been trained in the arts, he subsequently managed a cotton mill in Ashton. However, due to issues resulting from the Industrial Revolution, including insoluble labour and management disputes, John Randle left the cotton business and sailed for America in 1852 to find work.

Two years later, when William Lees

was twelve, he along with his mother and three siblings crossed the Atlantic to join his father. In 1857 John Randle, who by this time was "fed up" with working in industrial endeavours, learned that the Canadian government was granting free land to anyone willing to cultivate it. John Randle took his family to London, Ontario and three years later moved to a farm outside the neighbouring town of Thamesville.



William Lees Judson painting en plein air

of American Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

In 1866 Judson returned to Canada and to his parents' farm in Thamesville. His log book records the variety of work he did—a combination of chores and art. They include: "Painting houses, painting buggies, frescos, lettering, hauling timber, bagging apples, hauling manure, drawings, framing, hauling blocks, painting signs, siding, flooring, graining doors, planing lumber, hauling straw, setting glass, stained glass, tailoring, engraving plates, portrait painting, plastering, and building chimneys." At heart Judson was a true craftsman and always happiest when he was working or building something.

Married Life

Although only five-foot six-inches in height and very thin, his full wavy blonde hair and piercing blue eyes cut a striking figure—and caught the eye of **Maria Bedford** of Thamesville. The two were soon married in 1866 and would have seven children. Although money was tight, Maria came to understand that her husband's driving passion was his art.

In 1872 at the age of thirty Judson moved to New York to study with **John B. Irving (1825–1877)**, a history and genre painter who had studied under the great German-American artist **Emanuel Leuzte (1816–1868)**, the painter of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. In 1874 Judson returned to Toronto and later moved his family to London, Ontario where he opened a studio and began teaching. One of Judson's students and close friends, **Paul Peel (1860–1892)**, became arguably known as Canada's foremost painter of the late-nineteenth century. The two travelled to Philadelphia to see the **1876 Centennial International Exhibition**. They were very impressed with the artwork on display, and perhaps as a result, they both resolved to advance their art training by studying painting in Europe.

Studies Abroad

Peel and Judson travelled to Paris in 1878 to see the **Exposition Universelle**. Disheartened by the expensive living standards in Paris, Judson spent the majority of his trip in England visiting relatives, studying, and sketching. A few years after returning from England in 1881 he published a book entitled *A Tour of the Thames*, in which he wrote and illustrated under his pen name, "**Professor Blot**." The book has essentially become a collector's item.



PROF. JUDSON AND HIS ART CLASS.

Image from USC 1899 'El Rodeo'

Civil War Years

At the age of eighteen William Lees Judson was eager to leave the rural country life of his parents and strike out to make his own mark on the world. He travelled first to Xenia, Illinois, and because of the outbreak of the Civil War, he enlisted in the Union Army and was assigned to G Company under

the leadership of **Ulysses S. Grant**. At a reunion in 1886 Grant's widow presented a medal to Judson and seventeen other surviving veterans. The diary that William Lees Judson kept during the Civil War was quite remarkable—it was filled with personal sketches of soldiers, landscapes, and just about anything that caught his attention. The diary is now in the collection of the **Archives**

Back in London, Ontario Judson gained a good teaching position at **Hellmuth College**. In 1883 some of Judson's paintings were included in a Detroit exhibition titled, *The Art Loan Exhibition of 1883*. He relocated his studio to Detroit for a few months. At first he had success selling his art there, but soon became discouraged as the market dropped off. He returned to his family in Canada.

Being frail and prone to losing weight made it difficult for Judson to travel; he was never in the best of health, yet he was always good at selling his own paintings wherever he went. However, he decided that it was of paramount importance to his career to spend time studying in what was considered to be the art capital of the world, that is, the city of Paris.

In June of 1883 at the age of forty-

one William Lees Judson sailed back to England, and spent most of June and July selling artwork in London (mostly scenes of Canadian wildlife). He then spent the rest of the summer in France at Saint-Servan on the Brittany coast. He lived on a dollar a day while a number of his paintings sold for \$34 (Canadian dollars). That school year of 1883–1884 Judson spent studying at the **Académie Julian** under **Gustave Boulanger (1824–1888)** and **Jules-Joseph Lefebvre (1836–1911)**. He had mixed success in Paris, but was summoned home by his wife Maria's urgent plea. She was ill and taking care of six children alone. He returned after spending almost a year abroad and in April of the next year at age thirty-four Maria died two months after giving birth to their seventh child.

For the next five years Judson remained in Canada—raising his family,



Capistrano Gossip
Oil on canvas



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Aunt Pearl in the Arroyo, n.d.
Oil on canvas 17 1/2" × 29"
Collection of Karen Judson



The Bridge (Arroyo Seco), n.d.
Oil on canvas 15" × 25"
Collection of Douglas and Kathern Judson

painting, selling his work, and teaching. In 1890 he relocated his studio to Chicago and taught at the **Art Institute of Chicago**. But after two years he was so weak and exhausted and in ill health that his doctor told him that he should go to a warm climate and basically die.

Life in California

Judson's friend, **George Wharton James (1858–1923)**, suggested that for a

more healthful environment he should move to Pasadena, California. Judson heeded James' advice, fell in love with the area, and lived another thirty-five years. James was a popular author and lecturer on the topic of California and the American Southwest. Both men had much in common. Both came from England; both were Methodists (James was in fact an ordained Methodist minister); both were keenly active in

the Arts and Crafts Movement; and later both travelled the length of the Colorado River together (James wrote about their adventures in a 1906 book titled, *Wonders of the Colorado Desert*).

In 1893 Judson moved to Los Angeles. He started teaching right away and began boarding at 249 Marengo Place around the site where the **Julia Morgan YWCA building** (erected 1922) stands today. He sketched and painted every day and couldn't believe how wonderful the weather was in December. Although Judson took numerous sketching trips, his main interest was to paint his beloved Arroyo Seco, the picturesque canyon that is formed from the watershed west of Mt. Wilson and flows through Pasadena to the Los Angeles River. He also became involved with the local burgeoning art community and developed a friendship with leaders, **William Wendt (1865–1946)** and **Julia Bracken Wendt (1870–1942)**.

Judson's health improved and to his pleasant surprise he started gaining two pounds a week! He wrote to his family in December of 1893: "*This is the beginning of the realization of the dream of my life. If you were all here in a house of my own with a modest income I think I should be entirely happy. I have found a country where I could settle down without any desire or expectation to move again.*" Judson settled into a house in the town of Garvanza (part of Highland Park, adjacent to Pasadena) located on the banks of the Arroyo Seco, and in 1895 his two daughters and three of his four sons moved from the east to join him.

An Activist in Arts and the Environment

From 1896 to 1901 Judson was an art professor at the University of Southern California. During the summer months he often took his students to Catalina Island for some plein air painting experience. The Art Department flourished under Judson's leadership, and in 1901 he founded the **USC College of Fine Arts** where he served as its first dean until his retirement in 1920. The university's **Fine Arts Building** was constructed across the street from Judson's home in Garvanza. As a life-long Freemason and because of his connection with the Arts and Crafts Movement Judson felt that the architecture of the new building was of aesthetic importance. It was determined that the design would be heavily influenced by

the Vienna Secession Movement, which was based on geometric forms. For his students he wrote his second book, *The Building of a Picture*, which articulates Judson's aesthetic principles, describing the importance of art in society. The Fine Arts Building was used not only by art students, but also as a meeting place for the community.

Many of the meetings held in the Fine Arts Building were focused on saving the Arroyo Seco from commercial and industrial development. Perhaps the most vociferous meeting took place in late August of 1904 in protest of the noxious fumes that were emitting from a gas plant that had recently been built in the Arroyo by **Professor Thaddeus Lowe**. (Lowe was appointed by **President Abraham Lincoln** in 1861 as the Chief Aeronaut of the **Union Army Balloon Corps**. When he moved to Los Angeles in 1887, he continued experimenting with steam and charcoal to produce hydrogen gas). The *Los Angeles Times* reported Judson arguing: "*The Lowe Gas Company has falsified and maligned the citizens of Garvanza. We don't want them here. The Arroyo Seco should be a public park instead of a public nuisance.*" Judson won a settlement of \$750, and due in great part to his leadership the gas plant was torn down.

A Vision for Aesthetics

In 1909 Judson and George Wharton James founded the **Arroyo Guild for Fellow Craftsmen**, an organization of architects, designers, and craftsmen who would come together and discuss Arts and Crafts philosophies. The first floor of the Fine Arts Building was enlarged in order to accommodate the headquarters of the Guild. However, one night in 1910 the building burned down, probably due to an accident with one of the kilns, and Judson lost many paintings. Judson had been staying in the building and barely escaped with his life by leaping out of a window. It was probably around this time that Judson, who was enthusiastic about everything *Arroyo*, would have gotten involved with the **California Art Club**. The Club's first recorded meeting was on February 5, 1910 held in the studio of fellow artist **Franz A. Bischoff (1864–1929)** on the banks of the Arroyo in Pasadena (now South Pasadena). Judson exhibited in the second *Gold Medal Exhibition* in 1911 and in many subsequent exhibitions.



The Wendts at Laguna Beach (William and Julia)

Oil on canvas 15" × 25"

Courtesy of The Irvine Museum



Evening Glow

Oil on canvas 15" × 25"

Courtesy of The Redfern Gallery

A New Building and a New Wife

Judson commissioned architects **Robert Farquhar Train** and **Robert Edmund Williams** to design and construct a new cobblestone building to be built over the existing frame of the earlier structure. It is the building that still stands today and houses The Judson Studios.

In 1911 at age sixty-nine Judson shocked his family and friends by marrying thirty-three-year-old **Ruth Stuffern**. The marriage ended in a messy divorce in 1927. Apparently, Ruth had a proclivity for throwing wild parties—forcing the neighbours to call the police.

Despite his marital problems Judson still prospered as a painter.

At age seventy-three Judson won a bronze medal at the **1915 Panama-California Exposition** in San Diego; and in 1921 the **Southwest Museum** awarded him the Popular Prize. In 1920, the year that USC centralized its campus to its present day location near Exposition Park, Judson retired from teaching at the University. He continued to keep himself in great shape and painted and worked everyday. In 1927 he suffered a stroke and in the following year at age eighty-six he died.



Blessed are the Peacemakers (detail)
Our Savior Catholic Church USC
Gift of Engemann and Dedeaux family

The Judson Studio Legacy

Because of William Lees Judson's years of dedication to the Arts and Crafts Movement, he had developed a long career of designing stained glass art. It is thought that due to the advent of photography, he may have believed that the future of painting, particularly portrait painting, would diminish. He therefore educated his three sons, **Walter H., Paul, and Lionel** in the creation and production of stained glass as a means for their living. The three brothers also

apprenticed for a number of years in Toronto, Canada. In 1895 William Lees Judson persuaded his sons to move to California and established the **Colonial Art Glass Company** in Mott Alley near the Old Plaza and Union Station in downtown Los Angeles (now the Hollywood Freeway), and in 1897 they founded The Judson Studios, which is alive and flourishing today as one of the most preminent handcraft stained glass makers in the world.

Concluding Comments from the Great-Great Grandson, David Judson

"William Lees Judson is a daily presence in my life; I work every day in the rooms that he built; his paintings hang on my walls. As the great-great grandson of William Lees Judson, one who grew up around the family business he established, the 110 year old Judson Studios, I have been a part of the world of William Lees Judson created all my life. I am now running operations at the Judson Studios, the oldest stained glass studio in the country that is still owned and operated by the same family. Founded in 1897 by William Lees Judson and his three sons, the studios have created thousands of stained glass works in churches, homes, and commercial buildings in Southern California, and throughout the country and abroad." [Notable installations include Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock and Ennis houses, All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, and most recently USC's Our Savior Church.] *"...Perhaps little did Judson know what a legacy he would create. Who knows whether he would have imagined that the fifth generation of the Judson Studios would be [practicing and living] the realization of a dream that began in December of 1893. What he did know was that, as he wrote then on the brink of his most fruitful years, he had a home full of family, a modest income, and was entirely happy."* ☒

Notes:

Peter Adams is an artist and has served as president of the **California Art Club** since 1993.

The author wishes to thank the great-great grandson of **William Lees Judson, David Judson**, and The Judson Studios' Director of Marketing, **Zachary Wilson**, for their assistance in providing invaluable research materials.

Additional research sources for this article include the books: William Lees Judson: Artist, published in 2007 in conjunction with an exhibition celebrating the 110th Anniversary of the founding of The Judson Studios, curated by **Prof. Ronald E. Steen** with text provided by David Judson; and Arroyo Craftsman, reprinted in 1999 by The Judson Studios from the original October 1909 quarterly publication of the **Arroyo Guild**. For more information, visit judsonstudios.com.