

# California Paintings 1910 - 1940

by Ann Harlow

The core of this exhibition is a group of paintings collected by Mills College, Oakland, California, for the opening of its Art Gallery in 1925. With the addition of other works by California artists painted within fifteen years of 1925, these oils and watercolors provide a cross-section of art activity in the state with an emphasis on Northern California during an

active and eclectic period. Since the selection was limited to the Mills College Art Museum collection, it is of course not comprehensive, and it has a Northern California emphasis. But it does include many of the most prominent California artists of the period—along with some lesser-known but also interesting talents.

More than half of the works were donated either by Albert M. Bender or by one of his many artist friends. Bender, a gener-

ous patron of artists and institutions, was a key figure in the Bay Area art world for years. He donated art and funds to Stanford, UC Berkeley, and what are now called the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco Art Institute, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. As a trustee of Mills College, he was instrumental in the building of the gallery as well as the college collections—not only California paintings but also prints and drawings,

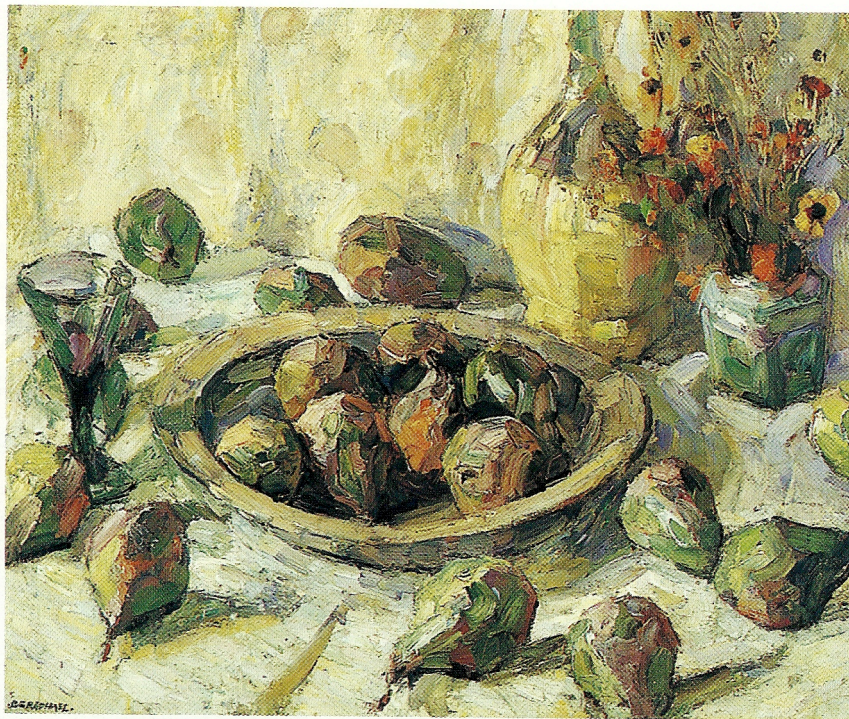


*California Paintings, 1910-1940: Selections from Mills College Art Museum* is on view through September 30, 2000, at the Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California, 310-338-2880. The exhibition continues from October 21 through December 30, 2000, at the Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, California, 92660, 949-759-1122; January 13 through April 8, 2000, at the Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, California, 831-429-1964; and from February through March 2003, at the Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, California, 510-420-2164. An eight-page color catalogue published by the Mills College Art Museum accompanies the exhibition. All illustrations are from the Mills College Art Museum.

RIGHT: Joseph Raphael, *Still Life*, c. 1920, o/c, 25 1/2 x 31, gift of Albert M. Bender.

BELOW RIGHT: Xavier Martinez, *Water Carriers*, c. 1915, o/c, 24 x 20, gift of Dr. William S. Porter.

LEFT: Maurice Braun, *Mesa Grande*, c. 1920, o/c, 30 1/8 x 36 1/8, gift of Charlotte Braun Loring and Ernest Braun.



Asian art, and rare books and manuscripts.

Two other notable examples of Bender's leadership in the realm of contemporary art in California in the 1920s are: his advocacy and fundraising for the Gotardo Piazzoni mural commission in the San Francisco Main Library, and his purchase of works by Diego Rivera and other Mexican artists well before Rivera arrived in California and became a nationwide celebrity. In the 1930s he helped launch the San Francisco Museum of Art in the Civic Center Veterans Memorial Building, donating so many works that the annual exhibitions of Bender gifts soon occupied as many as fourteen galleries.

Bender, an insurance broker, was not as wealthy as some art patrons, but he believed firmly in the value of art and artists to society. Artist Anne Bremer, his cousin and close companion, helped instill this belief, introduce him to the art community, and educate his eye as a collector. Bremer was considered one of San Francisco's most talented and "advanced" artists. When she died prematurely in 1923, Bender inherited her unsold works; when he died in 1941, Mills came into possession of more than a dozen of Bremer's paintings.

Joseph Raphael is well represented in



the Mills collection due to his friendship and correspondence with Bender. Diego Rivera, photographers Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, sculptors Beniamino Bu-

fano and Jacob Epstein, dancer Ruth St. Denis, and writers Mary Austin, William Saroyan and William Butler Yeats were among other frequent correspondents with

Bender. He often held social gatherings of local and visiting friends in his apartment in the Studio Building at 1369 Post Street. Bremer's studio in the same building has also been described as a great gathering place for artists and intellectuals.

The San Francisco Bay Area had an impressively dynamic art scene in the 1920s, considered by some to be second in this country only to that of New York. The Palace of Fine Arts, built for the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition, had continued to be used for San Francisco Art Association shows. The level of public interest in art that had been stimulated by the Exposition continued through the economic boom of the twenties. From 1927 to 1929 San Francisco even had its own art magazine, *The Argus*. M.H. de Young donated his museum to the city in 1921. That same year the new San Francisco Museum of Art was founded under the auspices of the San Francisco Art Association, although it did not open in the Civic Center until 1935. The Art Association also operated the California School of Fine Arts, which built its new quarters on Chestnut Street in the mid-1920s. Rudolph Schaeff-

LEFT: Granville Redmond, *Marin County*, c. 1915, o/c, 22 1/4 x 34, gift of Albert M. Bender.

BELOW LEFT: Francis McComas, *Seascape*, c. 1925, w/c, 20 3/4 x 26 1/2, gift of the artist through Albert M. Bender.

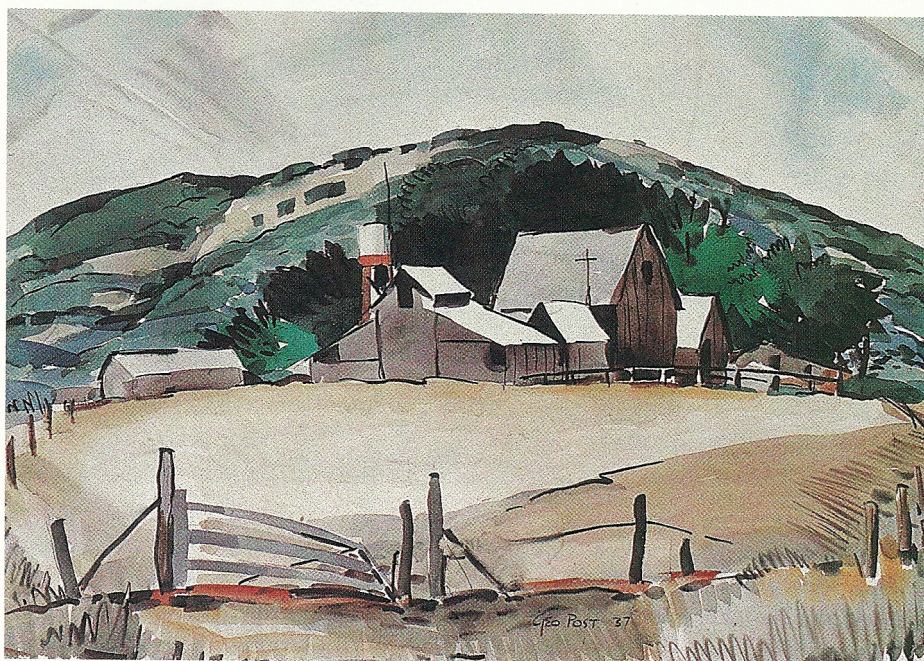
RIGHT: Anne Bremer, *Carmel*, c. 1920, o/c, 28 3/4 x 23 3/4, gift of Albert M. Bender.

BELOW RIGHT: George Booth Post, *Barn and Water Tower*, 1937, w/c, 22 1/2 x 30 1/2, Mills College Collection.

fer opened his School of Rhythmo-Chromatic Design in 1926. The California School of Arts and Crafts moved from Berkeley to Oakland in 1922, and UC Berkeley overcame years of resistance and created an art department, chaired by Eugen Neuhaus, in 1923. The California Palace of the Legion of Honor opened in 1925 with a tremendously popular exhibition of modern French art. Works by local artists were also exhibited at the Legion in its early years.

Other contemporary art exhibitions took place at the Bohemian Club, East West Gallery, Paul Elder Gallery, Galerie Beaux Arts, Gump's, Helgeson Galleries, Hill Tolerton, Modern Gallery, and San Francisco Print Rooms. In the East Bay, the municipal Oakland Art Gallery, the Berkeley League of Fine Arts, Casa de Manana, and Claremont Hotel all held art exhibits. Many Bay Area artists also painted and exhibited on the Monterey Peninsula. Maynard Dixon, Xavier Martinez, Eugen Neuhaus and other artists in the Mills collection were actively involved in the gallery at the Hotel Del Monte in Monterey. A few of the artists in this exhibition spent much or all of their careers in Southern California, which also had several burgeoning art communities during this period of rapid growth and prosperity.

The Beaux Arts gallery was apparently the first sales gallery on the West Coast devoted to modern art. Maynard Dixon took the lead in working with Beatrice Judd Ryan to turn her failing craft shop and piano studio on Maiden Lane into this showcase for new art. It was organized as an artists' cooperative. Artist members would contribute a painting a year, and patron members would buy a painting for \$75. Among the Beaux Arts artists who are also in the current exhibition were Rowena Meeks Abdy, Gertrude Albright, Ray Boynton, Dixon, Helen Forbes, Gottardo





Piazzoni, and Lee F. Randolph. Roi Partridge, director of Mills College Art Gallery, and his wife, photographer Imogen Cunningham, also exhibited there. It

was open from 1925 to 1933, sometimes under the name Club Beaux Arts.

Throughout these decades, and especially in the twenties, there was animated

discussion among artists, critics and the public of the pros and cons of "modern" art. Unfortunately, one could never be sure that any two people meant the same thing by "modern." There was virtually no work being produced in the Bay Area that would now be considered particularly avant-garde for that time. The Society of Six, who exhibited together at the Oakland Art Gallery several times between 1923 and 1928, are often described as modernists, along with Bremer, Dixon, Piazzoni, and a few others. It is odd that none of the Six were included in the collection gathered for Mills by Albert Bender. Some of their work more closely approached abstraction than the paintings Mills acquired, but they were working with essentially the same kinds of formal issues and subject matter (mostly landscape) as the artists included here. The Six were probably just not in the same social circles as Bender and his artist friends, in part because they were younger, in their thirties and forties, while Bender and most of his artist friends were over fifty by 1925.

William Clapp, curator of the Oakland Art Gallery and member of the Society of Six, grappled with the diversity of views on modernism by establishing a three-jury system for the gallery's annual exhibitions. Se-

FAR LEFT: Helen Forbes, *Julia, Paiute Indian*, c. 1930, o/c, 29 7/8 x 24, gift of Dr. Hans Barkan.

LEFT: Elinor Ulman, *Portrait of the Gardener*, c. 1940, o/c, 41 1/2 x 33 1/2, gift of the artist.

BELOW LEFT: Gertrude Partington Albright, *Landscape Sketch*, c. 1925, o/c, 19 1/2 x 23 1/2, gift of the artist through Albert M. Bender.

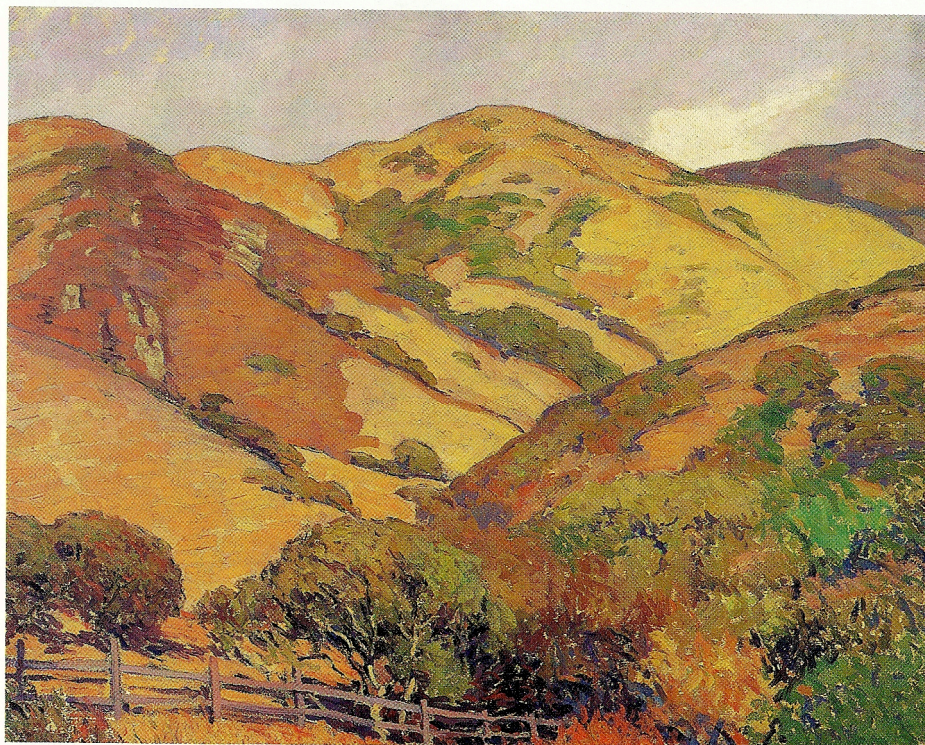
RIGHT: Gene Frances McComas, *Still Life*, c. 1925, o/c, 23 x 26 1/8, gift of the artist through Albert M. Bender.

BELOW RIGHT: Lee F. Randolph, *Hills in Autumn*, c. 1925, o/c, 28 1/4 x 35, gift of the artist through Albert M. Bender.

lections were made by a Conservative, a Progressive and a Radical jury so that each of these broad categories of art would be fairly represented. Interestingly, in 1928 both Clapp and fellow Society of Six member Maurice Logan were designated Progressive, while Piazzoni was considered Radical. It may have been Piazzoni's public rhetoric that placed him in the Radical camp, more than his own painting style. Worth Ryder, newly teaching at Berkeley and preaching the gospel according to Hans Hofmann, joined Piazzoni on the Radical jury, along with John Emmett Gerritty and, as alternate, Bernard von Eichman of the Society of Six.

By the late twenties there had been a whole series of schisms and reorganizations among Bay Area art schools and associations, with artists who were at one time on the leading edge soon considered old-guard. Controversies arose not only over style but also over subject matter: the nudity in the Oakland Art Gallery's 1927 Annual caused such a stir that the city insisted a "jury of reconsideration" be implemented the following year to review the selections by the artist jury. United by their opposition to such censorship, East Bay artists formed the Oakland Art League. The 1928 Oakland Art Annual was relocated to Mills College Art Gallery at the invitation of the liberal-minded president of Mills, Aurelia Henry Reinhardt.

Had it not been for President Reinhardt, there might well never have been a grand new museum opening at Mills in 1925. Since her arrival in 1916 she had transformed and reenergized the college, revising the curriculum, building national and international visibility, and tripling enrollment. She recruited Eugen Neuhaus to teach art history beginning in 1918—in ad-



dition to his duties at Berkeley, his very popular public lectures, his own art work, and his ongoing writing projects (he authored at least seven books).

An article by Neuhaus in the April 1918 *Mills Quarterly* predicts that the col-

lege will soon have an art gallery as envisioned in the architectural master plan that had been created by Bernard Maybeck. He concludes, "It is not an idle fancy or an unrealizable dream which pictures the Mills campus not only unique in its natural beau-



ties, but unique also in its possession of a shrine for all art lovers who visit the Pacific Coast.” Neuhaus suggested printmaker Partridge to direct the new gallery, designed by Walter H. Ratcliff, Jr., which finally opened more than seven years later. In May 1929, when *The American Magazine of Art* published a California issue, Mills College Art Museum was featured as one of the important art institutions in a state that was “prepared to take her place

and part in the forefront of American cultural development.” Between 1920 and 1940 the Mills art department continued to grow with the addition of several distinguished faculty members including Partridge, Florence Minard, Warren Cheney, Anna Cox Brinton, Rose Berry, Alfred Salmony and Alfred Neumeyer. Summer sessions in the arts featured such prominent names as Alexander Archipenko, Lyonel Feininger and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

For the sake of simplicity, and because of the public’s ongoing love affair with Impressionism, many of the artists in this exhibition are now often called California Impressionists. However, their diverse styles have more in common with Post-Impressionists such as Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and the Fauves than with Monet, Renoir or Pissarro. Two other “isms” can be used loosely to categorize some of the other artists—Tonalism for Cadenasso, Xavier Martinez, Piazzoni and Will Sparks, and Regionalism for Albert Barrows, Forbes, Katharyn Hole and Elinor Ulman.

But these labels do more to obfuscate than to illuminate. The artists were less concerned with allying themselves with specific movements than with experimenting in ways to make their work more expressive: intensified or subdued color, loose or broken brush strokes, simplified or distorted forms, flattened perspective, compositional devices. In the usage of the day, they were neither Conservative nor Radical, but Progressive. Both Progressives and Radicals were considered modern.

Truly avant-garde modern art such as Cubism, Futurism or near-abstraction was still a curiosity in San Francisco in the mid-1920s. The huge art exhibitions during and after the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition had given Californians their first extensive exposure to Impressionism (both French and American) and Post-Impressionism. There was also a gallery of Italian Futurism, but very little from France or Germany due to the First World War. By 1925 most California artists still seemed to be digesting and adapting the ideas of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism—as, indeed, were most artists in the United States other than those being heavily promoted in New York by Alfred Stieglitz.

There were numerous artistic points of contact between the Bay Area, Southern California, New York, and Europe in the twenties. The majority of the artists in this exhibition had studied art in Paris. Lucien Labaudt, a Parisian who emigrated to San Francisco in 1911, organized exhibitions and presented lectures on modern French art as well as showing his own cubist-influenced work. Walter Pach, an influential proponent of modernism, taught at UC Berkeley summer sessions during World War I and became friendly with Bender, Martinez and Rivera. Raphael and Jules Pages were expatriates in Europe during

LEFT: William Wendt, *Wandering Shadows*, 1925, o/c, 25 1/8 x 30, gift of Mills College Club of Southern California.

BELOW LEFT: Maynard Dixon, *Study for "Migration,"* c. 1923, o/c, 20 x 30 1/4, gift of the artist through Albert M. Bender.

RIGHT: Anne Bremer, *Across Carquinez Straits*, c. 1920, 24 x 32, estate of Albert Bender.

BELOW RIGHT: Anne Bremer, *Ravenlocks*, c. 1920, o/c, 30 1/2 x 25, estate of Albert M. Bender.

the years that Gertrude and Michael Stein and so many other artistically oriented Americans chose to live abroad.

Galka Scheyer, based in the Bay Area from 1925 to 1929 and then Los Angeles, was actively promoting shows of the "Blue Four"—Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky and Klee. Between 1926 and 1931 there were Blue Four shows at the Paul Elder Gallery, Oakland Art Gallery, Stanford University, California School of Fine Arts, California Palace of the Legion of Honor and again Oakland. Scheyer gave a lecture on modern art and showed Blue Four works in Mills College's Alumnae Hall in February 1926. The Oakland Art Gallery also presented important exhibitions in the late 1920s of Constructivism, Synchronism, and German Expressionism.

It was clearly a matter of choice, not ignorance, that kept California's artists painting recognizable subjects, usually the beautiful and varied landscape of their state, in styles that were considered modern in their own regional context. In many cases the artists expressed in their work a strong spiritual connection with nature or an admiration for the indigenous peoples of the region who lived in a closer relationship to the land.

Mills College Art Museum is fortunate to have these works, along with others too numerous to include in this exhibition, as a kind of time capsule of California art, circa 1925. Many of them have not been exhibited in years, so it is a great pleasure and a fitting celebration of the museum's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2000 and the sesquicentennials of Mills College and the City of Oakland in 2002 to "open" the time capsule and give the public around the state an opportunity to see this fascinating group of paintings.

—Adapted from the accompanying exhibition catalogue.

