

WILLIAM KEITH

California's Poet-Painter

by Ann Harlow

William Keith was the leading artist in San Francisco at the end of the nineteenth century. His combination of artistic genius, business acumen, strong personality, and hard work enabled him to build a prestigious reputation and a financially successful career. The *Argonaut* reported in 1907 that "Keith's income will soon be \$100,000 a year." Although he was best known in California, his achievements were noted in East Coast newspapers as early as 1872, when he had a studio in Boston for several months, and as late as April 1911, when New York art dealer William Macbeth published "Memories of William Keith" in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

A prominent New York art collector, architect Charles F. McKim, met Keith in

1905. According to the San Francisco *Wasp*, he said,

My visit to the studio of this San Francisco artist furnished me the surprise of my life. I had heard of Keith, of course, and knew that he did good work, but I was wholly unprepared for what I saw. As I glanced around the studio I was amazed and puzzled, for I observed pictures that at the first cursory glance suggested Daubigny and Corot and Miller and other acknowledged great masters of the poetic moods in landscape painting. But none of the pictures were in the slightest degree copies of those famous artists. A new master had arisen who could touch all the keys with which they were so familiar and use them in his own way to impress his individuality on his work. And such perfect and ad-

mirable work! Well, I bought \$15,000 worth of it in ten minutes.

According to Brother Fidelis Cornelius Braeg, who taught art at Saint Mary's College of California, established the Keith Collection, and wrote a 900-page, two-volume biography of Keith, it was the great naturalist John Muir who called William Keith a "poet-painter" in 1875. Muir would have been referring to a poetic quality in Keith's art, not to Keith as a writer of poetry (although he did occasionally write humorous verse). Landscape paintings were often compared to poetry in the nineteenth century, with a variety of meanings.

In retrospect, most people today would see Keith's later works, like the ones

William Keith: California's Poet-Painter will be on display through December 18, 1994, at the Redding Museum, 56 Quartz Hill Road, Redding, California, 916-225-4155. It continues at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art from January 8 through February 26, 1995, and at the Edison Community College Gallery of Art, Fort Myers, Florida, from March 19 to May 7.



McKim saw in 1905, as more “poetic” than the more realistic, recognizable landscapes Muir admired in 1875. Like contemporaries George Inness, Winslow Homer, Ralph Blakelock and Albert Pinkham Ryder, Keith turned gradually from the objective to the subjective, from accurate depictions of specific places to the use of landscape elements to express and evoke feelings.

A common thread throughout Keith’s painting career, and one of several bonds between him and John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club and “father” of the National Parks system was a deep love of nature. In 1872 Keith, a fellow Scotsman, arrived at Muir’s Yosemite cabin with a letter of introduction and a lifelong friendship quickly developed. Muir’s concern with scientific accuracy probably reinforced Keith’s early training as a wood engraver, encouraging him to reproduce the exact topography and details of a landscape.

Keith began his artistic career as a commercial wood engraver, first in New York and then in San Francisco, where he settled in 1859. In 1863 he took some lessons in oil painting from Samuel Marsden Brookes, but no Keith oil paintings from before 1868 are known. His first exhibition of watercolors in 1866 quickly received praise in the newspapers. *Sunrise, Columbia River* and *San Anselmo Valley Near San Rafael* are examples of Keith’s early style. Both demonstrate a great degree of competence for an artist so early in his career, but their style is very different from the way he painted only a few years later.

Although there was a general trend in Keith’s work from tightly worked detail and bright sunlight to broader brushwork and twilight scenes, his path was not a simple, straightforward one. It reflected a waxing and waning of various influences, including his personal predilections and moods, art market forces, an interest in the “old masters” (especially Rembrandt), and allegiances to friends of different persuasion about art.

All illustrations by William Keith from the Saint Mary’s College Collection.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Gray Rain Cloud, Cattle in Meadow*, late 1880s, watercolor on paper, 12 x 18½.

RIGHT: *San Anselmo Valley near San Rafael*, 1869, o/c, 24 x 36¼.

LEFT: *Sunrise, Columbia River*, 1869, o/c, 24 x 36.



By the fall of 1869, Keith had sold enough paintings to finance a trip to the East Coast and Europe. He wanted to study art in Düsseldorf, where Bierstadt, Worthington Whittredge, Sanford Gifford and other Americans had trained. After a few weeks in Düsseldorf, Keith wrote an enthusiastic letter about the art around him, especially that of Andreas Achenbach, and said, “I am astonished to find that suggestive painting is the thing here,” rather than “niggling detail.” The precise, intricate approach typical of the Düsseldorf Academy and Hudson River School artists (and Keith himself, prior to the trip) had

been supplanted by a broader, more expressionistic landscape.

Keith was even more impressed when he visited Paris. He wrote, “The modern school of French landscape I like very much and I have got some ideas that I never could have got here in Düsseldorf.... if there is anything I want to be it is to be original, and when I came back from Paris and saw my pictures, and the ones here in the galleries, I saw that I had been unconsciously falling into the German style that I am going to get rid of and the only way to do that is by studying nature.”

By “the modern school of French land-



LEFT: *Yosemite Falls*, 1870s or early 1880s, o/c, 24¼ x 17¾.

BELOW: Photograph of William Keith, early San Francisco days.

RIGHT: *Polemics* ("Ideal Head of Junipero Serra"), circa 1884, o/c, 17¾ x 14⅝.

BELOW RIGHT: *Woods and Meadow, Three Cows Wading*, 1874, o/c, 12½ x 23.

it so in reality? Accuracy of drawing is held by figure painters to be one of the chief things in art, and accuracy of drawing in landscape leads to hardness and stiffness. But there is a quality of drawing in landscape, which only a landscape painter of long experience knows the difficulty of; and that quality is truth to the nature of the thing represented. Landscape painters try to draw accurately at first, but they find, if they progress, that it is this truth of quality which they must seek for.

A sketch, with its varyings and uncertainties, is often much more interesting than when carried into detail, and it is this thing of mobile, palpitating life that you must seek for in art, and which makes it valuable.... The facts as facts are too much thought of in art, and when it is so, it is no art.

Mr. [Theodore] Wores two weeks ago said, in his talk about Japanese art, that the Japanese artists were astonished at the time spent by European artists on the details of their pictures. They (the Japanese) thought of what they wished to represent until they were full of it,



scape" Keith probably meant Corot and many of the artists now referred to as the Barbizon School, forerunners of the Impressionists in both subject matter and style. On a later trip to Europe in the 1880s, Keith's letters praise Corot, Dupré, Rousseau and others. A stay of several months in Boston on his way back from Europe in 1871-72 probably reinforced Keith's interest in Barbizon art. William Morris Hunt, an influential Boston artist, teacher and collector, "singlehandedly waged a public relations campaign on behalf of the Barbizon school. As a result of his efforts, Boston became the first major world market for these paintings."¹

Back in San Francisco, most of Keith's major paintings of the 1870s were mountain landscapes, often of Yosemite and other High Sierra locations. These must have been in high demand, whether on an "epic" scale like many of Bierstadt's mountain scenes or the more modestly sized works typical of the Saint Mary's collection. But a painting like *Woods and Meadow, Three Cows Wading* suggests that Keith was already exploring the kind of subject matter that was characteristic of both the Barbizon school and most of Keith's oeuvre after about 1890.

A lecture Keith gave at the mid-point of his career in 1888 expresses the evolution of his attitudes about art.²

When I began to paint, I could not get mountains high enough nor sunsets gorgeous enough for my brush and colors. After a considerable number of years' experience, I am contented with very slight material—a clump of trees, a hillside and sky. I find these hard enough and varied enough to express any feeling I may have about them....

A blue sky is a beautiful thing to look at; so are flowers beautiful, but artists do not love to paint them. The mountains are inspirations of everything that is grand, but I don't know of any famous landscape painter who paints them from choice, for it is only by the grossest exaggeration that the impression of them can be given....

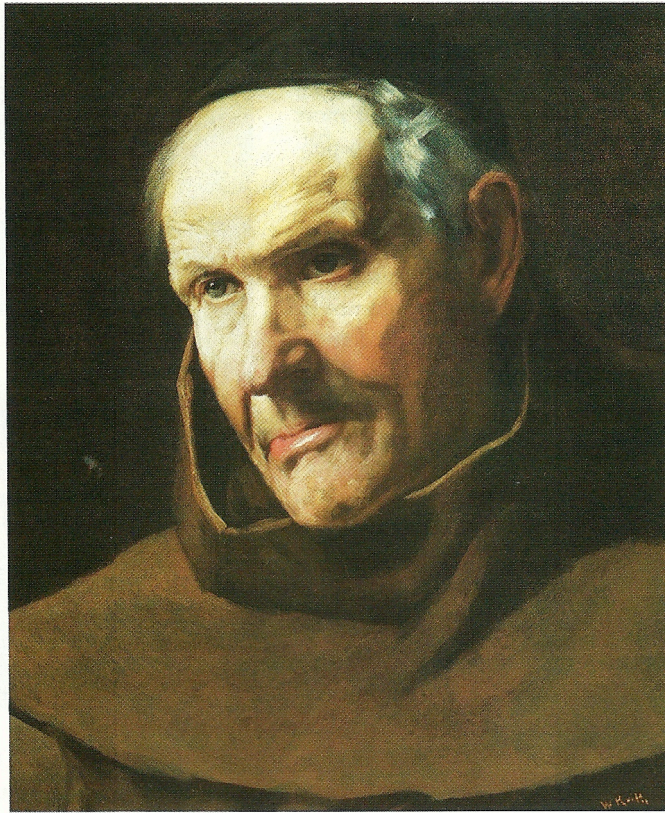
There have been many pictures painted of Yosemite, but have you ever seen "one" that gave the true impression of size and color?...

I know that it's the general impression that landscape is the easiest kind of painting to do, and figure painters think so as much as the general public; but is

and then, with one impulse, they did their work.

A practiced landscape painter, even when sketching from nature, can tell whether he is going to make a successful sketch or not by the sense of being able to surround his subject. And so with the old masters; they knew when to stop, and were satisfied to interpret, whereas we want to make the thing itself. Understand me: I don't want to ignore the necessity of getting the facts; by constant and hard practice from nature you must have them, but after you have got them, you must control and not be controlled by them.

Some time ago, I was in New York, and in the Metropolitan Museum I saw two pictures side by side.... The first of them repelled me on the instant; it seemed dauby and without much detail; in other words, was clumsy. I looked in the corner for the name. It was Corot, of whom I of course had read a good deal. I could see very little to admire in it (remember, I



was looking at it closely). The one adjoining was by a well known name [identified in a later, private lecture as William Hart]. With that I was very well pleased; it was finished; viz., it had plenty of detail, and was worked up

with a good deal of care. I looked at them for some time. At last, I stepped back about halfway across the room. The whole picture which I had first looked at seemed to grow and expand; it looked big, and you could breathe its air! On looking at the other one beside it, it was simply a mass of colors and hard lines. It was some time before I grasped the full meaning of it. To be brief—the Corot picture made me think of nature, and the other of the workman. Now here is where you have to settle with yourselves which is the more valuable thing, this intellectual and sympathetic impression of nature or the handiwork of the painter. Many artists, the public generally, and art dealers, (and in knowledge I class them with the public) side with the handiwork, but there are a few who value spirit more than form....

The difference between the two classes of work is the difference of aim. On the dealers' part, they know what the public wants, and so practically they are the judges, and many an artist is compelled by hard necessity to sacrifice



the best that is in him. Take, for instance, a portrait painter—and I mean not a retoucher but a man who can paint a portrait from life. He finds that the sitter has his ideas of himself, and each of his friends have their ideas. Now, how can a man work in freedom and give you his impression of the sitter? He must either give up in disgust, or in disgust make a photographic caricature.... The only men who are left in freedom in that way are those from abroad and with a reputation. They can practice and experiment to their hearts' content, sure of their work being acceptable. Their sitters dare not express themselves as dissatisfied. They pay their money and point with affected pride to their pictures by So and So....

An artist ought to go to nature as a poet goes, selecting and combining in order to make his impression the stronger. If he finds lines or colors in the landscape which interfere, he subordinates them, and exaggerates everything that tends to the unity of the whole....

It would be a good thing for the cause of art if artists could and would talk and write more about their work, but the most of them feel it to be a hopeless task; they are placed too often in the position of pupil. A painter is painting a picture for someone, who occasionally comes in to see its progress.

After the painter fondly thinks it finished, it is suggested to him that the putting in of more detail would be beneficial, especially in the foreground. An elaborate explanation is given by the painter, why one part should not be unduly expressed at the expense of the whole. The owner is confused, but rallies with the timeworn expression of: "Oh, yes; something must be left to the imagination; but do you not think a little more detail, etc., etc.?"

These remarks are very revealing of how Americans were talking about art in the 1880s, and of the frustration Keith sometimes felt in trying to pursue his own artistic goals. It is interesting to note that he uses the word "impression" repeatedly in this lecture, and even seems to refer to himself as an "impressionist" painter. Having visited Paris in 1885, Keith was probably aware of the radical young artists now known as the Impressionists, but was not inspired to paint much like them. In fact, in about 1895, after another visit to Paris, Keith said,



The moment that you become too scientific—that moment you step from art to science, just as in the case of Monet, the impressionist; he goes to work with a scientific idea of color and the limit is soon reached.... I have often said and thought that the idea held today by the so-called foremost school of art, viz., the French,—I say that I think they are on the road to ruin as far as the best qualities of the artistic mind are concerned, for they never work without the model—here the model and here the picture.... I claim that this constant reference to the model destroys the imaginative quality of the mind....

What a landscape painter wants to render is not the natural landscape, but the state of feeling which the landscape produces in himself."

Thus Keith became ever more convinced that art should be poetic—that it should reflect feelings, impressions, even a very spiritual attitude toward nature. Art is "just as serious as religion," he said. Linking art, nature and religion had been common practice in the United States since mid-century. The evolution in how Keith



ABOVE: *Girl in Folk Costume*, 1884, o/c, 32 x 28.

LEFT: *Dazzling Clouds*, circa 1895, oil on composition board, 16¼ x 20¾.

RIGHT: *Donner Lake*, circa 1878-79, o/c, 24 x 14¾.

expressed religious beliefs through landscape painting reflected a broader development in American aesthetic thought and practice over the latter part of the century. Keith has often been compared to George Inness, and many of Keith's late paintings seem to reflect the influence of Inness, especially after the latter's stay in California in 1891. Inness was one of the most highly regarded artists in the country at that time. Interacting directly with this famous, older artist, with whom Keith shared an involvement in Swedenborgianism and French Barbizon influences, seems to have reinforced a direction in which Keith was already inclined.

On Keith's second study trip to Europe in 1883-1885, he concentrated on learning to do portraiture, quite probably because he was not sure he could continue to earn an adequate living with landscapes alone. *Polemics* and *Girl in Folk Costume* are examples of the portrait studies he painted in Munich. Keith was later commissioned to paint portraits of various prominent Californians, but his mainstay continued to be landscape.

In the 1870s Keith had established his reputation in part as a painter of grand panoramic landscapes, often of the High Sierra or other mountainous country, and sometimes as large as six by ten feet. This type of painting could serve both as a document of a specific locale and as an homage to divine creation in the form of the impressive American wilderness. By the 1890s, Keith was typically painting forest glades at sunset, with other kinds of religious overtones. Keith, encouraged by the Swedenborgian minister Joseph Worcester, believed that his late, dark, indistinct works better suggested the spiritual reality that lay beneath the surface forms of nature.

It was probably the spiritual qualities of Keith's works, as well as a shared love of California's varied landscape, that led Brother Cornelius to make Keith the subject of much of his life's work. The paintings he acquired for Saint Mary's College continue to inspire viewers spiritually as well as aesthetically.

The Hearst Art Gallery at Saint Mary's College of California, located in Moraga (just east of Oakland), is the home of 150 William Keith paintings. At the end of its tour *William Keith: California's Poet-Painter* will have traveled to eleven museums nationwide. *William Keith: The Collection Comes Home*, an expanded exhibition of

about 100 Keith paintings with a new video tape about the artist, will be on display June 10 through September 17, 1995, in the Hearst Art Gallery, 1928 St. Mary's Road, Moraga, California, 510-631-4643.

¹ Charles Movalli in *William Morris Hunt on Painting and Drawing*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976.

See also Sally Webster, *William Morris Hunt, 1824-1879*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

² This lecture is reprinted in full, along with a later one and two essays by Keith, in a new, expanded edition of the catalogue, *William Keith: The Saint Mary's College Collection*.

