

LOUIS SLOSS, JR., COLLECTION

OF

California Paintings

By JEAN MARTIN



*Mid golden clouds of sunset fanning up
From everlasting censers of the West
Set to thy lips mine unbetraying cup,
And send thy soul on an immortal quest!*

George Sterling, California to the Artist



Louis Sloss, Jr.

SAN FRANCISCO

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

APRIL AND MAY, 1958

THE COLLECTOR

These paintings have been placed on deposit with the

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

by the

SAN FRANCISCO ART ASSOCIATION

WHEN Louis Sloss, Jr., died in 1933, he bequeathed to the San Francisco Art Association his collection of fifty-one paintings by thirty-six artists, mostly identified with California. Mr. Sloss was the son of a San Francisco pioneer who had made a fortune in the Alaska fur trade and in mining. Conscientious of the responsibilities of great wealth, he and his family were active in many of the charitable and cultural organizations of San Francisco, including the San Francisco Art Association. Among other services to the Association, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Sloss were on the reception committee of its annual Mardi Gras ball in 1897, and the son took part in the staging of the 1904 ball.

The San Francisco Art Association was founded in 1871. With the idea that art was not receiving enough support or recognition, artists such as Virgil Williams and Samuel Marsden Brookes rallied their friends and formed the group. It was felt that there were not enough artists in San Francisco at that time to support such an association and its projected exhibitions and school, so membership was offered to non-artists, as "lay members." Since the Association soon became fashionable, its continuance was assured. It took hold and became a force in San Francisco, along with the Bohemian Club, which was at that time devoted to art and artists.

Following in the footsteps of his father, Louis Sloss, Jr., joined both these organizations and eventually became a patron of art and a collector. His interest in art was in no way professional; he was an amateur collector. An interest in the past is clearly evident in his collection, but so is an interest in contemporary artists. To satisfy the former interest he purchased Tavernier, Hill, and Keith; for the latter, Pages, Wores, Hudson, and Peters. Since

the artists represented sold their works only through G. Gump's Galleries, apparently Mr. Sloss dealt with this firm. He was acquainted with A. L. Gump.

There are two noticeable tendencies in the collection: Mr. Sloss bought paintings chiefly of the smaller sizes and chiefly by California artists. He was not interested in the large, heroic canvases being painted. Mr. Sloss was realistic about his collection, and knew that it was not the very best that could have been made. He knew that as time passed some of his pictures would no longer be considered of major standing, but he felt justified in leaving the entire collection to the San Francisco Art Association with the idea of its forming the nucleus of a permanent collection. He was alert to quality, and some of his canvases are among the most refined pictures painted in California during this period.

THE COLLECTION

The paintings of the Sloss Collection are from an exciting period in the history of California art. They encompass the time when art in California was undergoing a profound change. From the school of picturesque California scenery, painted for patrons intensely interested in that scenery, it moved outward toward a widening horizon. The men who first painted in California painted the land as if it were the eighth wonder of the world; their descendants painted it from the point of view of art as an autonomous activity in which subject matter was of secondary importance.

The Sloss Collection begins in the late 1870's with men like Thomas Hill and Jules Tavernier. These two artists are from the old school; they were enchanted by the grandeur of California scenery. Though these men were not born here, their paintings are among the finest made in California at that time. They came West and painted California with an intensity that seeing some-

[2]

thing for the first time can bring out in an artist. The landscape gripped the artistic imagination, and pictures were frequently made for people in the East who could not or did not wish to make the long trip West.

Although the taste of the times did not permit private homes to display on their walls full-blown European nudes of Cleopatra or Delilah (because, presumably, they were not suitable for the eyes of women and children), the saloons and restaurants were covering their walls with these European beauties. It has even been said that the first art galleries in San Francisco were these establishments. European art was being imported continually, but there was at the same time a movement for an art that was nearer the people of this area. The California Art Gallery reports in its first issue of 1873,

There has recently been a growing disposition on the part of the wealthier classes of our population to adorn their residences with works of art, and our local artists, notwithstanding their numbers, are beginning to command a more intelligent appreciation, and a more liberal patronage than ever before. Those of them who have been so fortunate as to win recognition (a circumstance which does not always depend exclusively upon talent and professional merit) obtain good, though seldom extravagant prices for their works. The skill of the upholsterer is no longer considered all that is needed to adorn the homes of the prosperous; and pictures are not—generally at least—purchased as mere articles of parlor furniture. Neither is it now accepted as an article of popular belief among us that a copy from the galleries of Rome, or Paris, or Munich, must of necessity be worth a higher price than a picture by a California Artist.

It was at this time that the wealthy men who had made fortunes in the bonanza years realized that it was possible for good art to be produced right here in their own state; up to this time it had been fashionable for the more prominent citizens to purchase huge paintings of classical subjects, imported from Europe. Railroad and banking barons gave recognition to art in Califor-

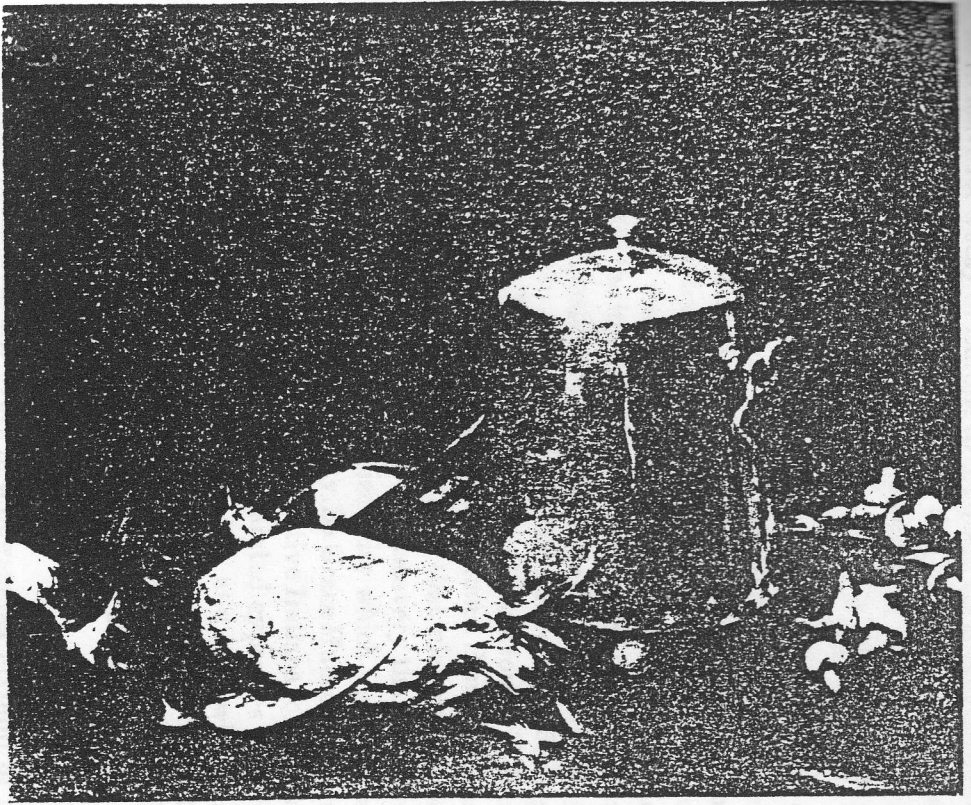
[3]

might have large paintings of Yosemite Valley and Mount
They were willing to spend a small fortune for an early
of Thivernier or Thomas Hill. The artists of the West Coast
in the 1870's and 80's could have confidence in finding a market
for their paintings where they painted.

During the next twenty years a change took place in California
art. Painters looked once more at the hills and valleys of the state.
They renewed their image of the land and made it a vehicle for
their art. Before this, patrons of art bought literary paintings of
the West Coast; to these men they served as travelogues, journal-
istic reports of places they had once seen and wished to remember,
or where they could never go. But as traditions of art in California
grew, factual representation of localities of the state became less
important, and by 1890 the artist demanded that his picture be
a work of visual art and not mere painted scenery.

One man who in his own career illustrated this change was
William Keith. He began painting in California, and in his first
period he followed the method of Thivernier and Hill. His early
paintings, depicting such splendors of California as "The Head-
waters of the San Joaquin," are literal transcriptions of nature
onto canvases. Well done, certainly, but they are completely with-
out the artistic and aesthetic self-awareness which was to become,
as the forty-odd years of his creative life passed, the dominant
quality of his art. These early works are objective paintings, done
with a cool reserve on the artist's part; they are made by a man
who is like a camera before a scene whose might and primeval
strangeness he can encompass and portray only through reserve
and self-sufficiency. Space is clear and deep in them, the air usu-
ally crystalline, like the color; forms are accurately drawn, fully
realized in volume, and simply organized within the space of the
picture. Most of these early works were developed from sketches
of particular scenes and they ring with the particularity of place
and of time that Eakins has, or Canaletto.

Later, during what could roughly be called his middle period,
Keith lost some of the specificity of place. Although his hand-



Emil Carlsen, 1853-1932

STILL LIFE

scapes still bore such titles as "Mt. Tamalpais," the true subject has shifted from the aspects of the land, its hills and rivers and how they turn and are colored, to a more subjective phenomenon perceived by the artist with his emotional rather than his anatomical eye. Thus this "Mt. Tamalpais" becomes a lyric of the atmospheres. Forms have stronger movements in his pictures now, the color is harmonized more on a pervasive single tone, and the pictures tend to be smaller. The artist now mixes himself with his subject and begins to find his picture in his soul. It was to this search that the last of Keith's work was devoted.

From the last period of Keith's life comes the "Summer Showers" of the Sloss Collection. Places and events now have become mere recollections, pretexts for form. This picture and most of his other late works may be turned sideways or upside down and be viewed almost as meaningfully as in their usual positions. Keith has now come at last to find his picture almost exclusively in his soul. Although he continues to sketch external nature, he sees there only the image he sees in himself. This image has become one in which light and darkness endlessly entangle and exchange their places and in which the figures of women, solitary or with a few companions, await beneath great oaks, in a last dim ray from a late sun, the death of day. Keith's art and its evolution is the epitome of all art in California during this time. It is also the summit of that art because, insofar as an artist strove toward value in those years, he strove in the image of Keith, shifting slowly as Keith had, working in the relationships between artist and subject that Keith developed.

* * *

In the 1870's, with the development of the California School of Design (later the California School of Fine Arts), training in art became available on the West Coast. The two types of artists who had made up the first period of American art in California, the self-taught primitive and the New York-trained professional, whose interaction upon one another through art organizations

...of the buying public had created something of a
...style, began to disappear from the scene. By 1880 the
...artist was one who had received his training at the Califor-
...School of Design under European-trained teachers, and would
...leave for a stay in Europe to complete his training. Because
...of this, art in California began at this time—and continued
...throughout all ensuing periods—to mirror the conception of art
...held in intellectually advanced circles throughout the Western
...world.

Fostering the development of the cosmopolitan artists was the
existence in San Francisco of the cosmopolitan collector. The rich
began to become cultured, the cultured to travel in Europe, and
everyone to realize that beauty was not merely a matter of place.
Beauty, it was felt, was an emanation, an attitude, an emotion.
It was a matter of the individual who experienced it, not so much
of the object which inspired the emotion. Artists like Jules Pages
stayed many years in France and painted French life, finding a
ready market in San Francisco. Theodore Wores found in Japan
subjects which delighted romantic Californians. Simultaneously
with the discovery by California patrons that pictures of some
other place could be beautiful came the discovery that their own
scene, painted in the advancing subjectivity which was the mark
of the age, could have an equal beauty. So Grace Hudson returned
to her home in Ulkiah and painted the native Indians for cultured
San Franciscans. Francis McComas painted cypresses and des-
erts infused with a sense of nature, poetry, and style which har-
monized with the homes and lives of the culturally-minded of the
turn of the century. Maynard Dixon roamed about the West
painting cowboys, Indians, and the desert for stay-at-homes.

* * *

In 1933 Junius Cravens wrote in a newspaper account of the
Sloss bequest, that considered as a whole the Collection "is inter-
esting chiefly as a cross-section of California art during the late
years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twenti-

[6]

eth century. Such names as Keith, Tivernier, Hill, Pages, and
Peters were among the most important ones of their day and still
hold their places." He began his next sentence, "though consist-
ently old school." From the standpoint of the social realism of the
1930's these paintings must indeed have seemed "old school," but
from this slightly further remove they do not suggest one old
school but many diverse individuals, each reacting to a tide that
was to affect all. During these years art in California grew, broke
the bounds of provincialism, and began to move into the stream
of national art.

[7]