

Tonalism in California Art

Tonalism is an aesthetic of landscape painting that began to develop in America in the 1880's and was strongly influenced by the French Barbizon School and the Aesthetic Movement, particularly James McNeill Whistler. The name was first applied in the 1890's. Tonalists, in common with the Barbizon School artists, shared a desire to convey the emotional or spiritual response to the landscape, emphasizing this goal over the faithful description of topographical reality, and often working in the studio rather than outdoors. This focus on poetic effect and the meditative qualities evoked by the landscape was conveyed through simplified compositions with elements reduced to essentials, sometimes carrying economy of detail to an extreme, and each element seamlessly contributing to the whole. Achieving atmospheric effects with soft, smoky edges and thin glazes of paint, the Tonalists usually favored a cool, dark palette of harmonized tones, many times emphasizing grays, based on a neutral ground.

The taste for Barbizon-influenced Tonalism developed in Northern California in the late 19th century. Cultured San Franciscans at this time did not fully embrace Impressionism, even as it began to dominate the art markets on the East Coast. Among the first artists in California to adopt a more generalized, introspective approach was William Keith, who until the 1880's had created mostly descriptive, brightly lit scenes of topographical landmarks. During the 1870's, inspired by Swedenborgian philosophy, he had started to infuse his works with a greater emphasis on spirituality, and by the 1880's this shift was even clearer, as his paintings grew darker and more suggestive, showing a very strong Barbizon influence. This shift was in keeping with a contemporary national trend, of which George Inness and William Morris Hunt were major proponents, along with John LaFarge, Ralph Blakelock, Birge Harrison, and Thomas Dewing. Inness's visit to California in 1891, during which he traveled to Yosemite and Monterey in Keith's company, had a profound effect on the local art scene, and helped popularize the approach among artists in the state.

The dominance of a Whistlerian strain of Tonalism in Northern California in the first two decades of the 20th century can be chiefly attributed to Arthur Mathews, who wielded great power as director of the Mark Hopkins Institute of art from 1890 to 1906 and a judge and juror at most of the important art exhibitions through the 1910's and 20's. His California Decorative Style, as it has come to be known, influenced by Japanese art and filtered through Gauguin and Puvis de Chavannes, with whom he studied, emphasized simplicity and harmony in keeping with the Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Mathews sought to preserve the flatness of the surface in both his murals and easel paintings, compressing forms into flat shapes arranged in decorative patterns. He celebrated the ornamental qualities of nature, creating an "art for art's sake";

Mathews spent a great deal of time in the Monterey/Carmel area, an area that proved an especially nurturing environment for artists working in the Tonalist style. Tonalism was ideally suited to capturing the melancholy feel of the place, with its poetic coastline and rolling hills, the foggy atmosphere with its soft, diffused light and the naturally soft, subdued colors. The romantic history of the area, reminders of which survived in the adobes and ruined missions, also appealed to artists with a poetic vision. Jules Tavernier was among the first artists to settle in Monterey in the 1870's. Other artists soon began to visit the area, including Keith, Julian Rix, and Elizabeth Strong. Charles Rollo Peters, who specialized in nocturnes, settled in Monterey in the 1890's, and the colony attracted many more artists after the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed so many homes and studios in San Francisco. Mathews's pupils, Gottardo Piazzoni, Francis McComas, Xavier Martinez, and Giuseppe Cadensso, as well as Manuel Valencia, are a few of the artists whose work exemplifies the Monterey-area Tonalism of the following generation. Piazzoni's paintings are particularly, one could say radically, reductive and darkly monochromatic, revealing a profound reverence for the local landscape, full of mystical overtones. Because of these qualities, these artists are often credited with helping to pave the way for the abstract art movement in the Bay Area. The watercolorists Percy Gray and Sydney Yard, meanwhile, adhered to a more traditional technique of multi-layered washes and to Barbizon-style compositions, while adhering to Tonalist color and softness of light.

The aesthetic did not have nearly as firm a grip on Southern California as it did in Northern California. Southern California artists overwhelmingly preferred their own muscular form of brightly colored Impressionism, perhaps because of the brighter light in the South. Elmer Wachtel is one of the few Southern California artists who worked with a Tonalist sensibility, though as his career went on he adopted a brighter palette. Granville Redmond, a lifelong friend of Piazzoni, painted Tonalist works while he lived in Northern California and in the early years of his residency in Los Angeles. The brighter Southern California light and subject matter may have been a factor in his adoption of the brighter color and broken brushwork that are hallmarks of Impressionism. His exuberantly colored poppy field paintings brought more

money than his quieter Tonalist works, though he is said to have preferred the Tonalist works. Maurice Braun, who is primarily associated with San Diego, also occasionally painted in a Tonalist style.

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