

## California Style Watercolors

The California Style, also known as the California School, was an important part of the enormously influential American Scene movement, which developed in the mid 1920s and focused on regional subjects. The artists who worked in this style favored watercolor as the ideal medium for spontaneously capturing the movement of people engaged in everyday activities in urban, industrial, agricultural and recreational settings. The boldly stylized, illustration-like depictions often feature calligraphic outlines with little or no under-drawing, broad, transparent washes of bright color and strategic use of the white of the paper as an integral part of the composition.

Artists such as Millard Sheets, Hardie Gramatky, Lee Blair, Rex Brandt and Phil Dike were part of a group that studied at the Chouinard Institute and became the core of this growing California watercolor movement. They were taught by Clarence Hinkle and Frank Chamberlin, and studied examples of watercolors by Cezanne, Sargeant, and Winslow Homer, as well as watercolors from Persia, China, and Japan. Many of them joined the California Watercolor Society, and became the leading forces within it by the mid-1930's. The Society fostered the style's dissemination across the country with highly successful annual traveling exhibits.

While the California Style remained true to the traditional California preference for representational art, it was a bold departure from the previously dominant California Impressionist style in its looseness and informality, both in technique and subject matter. Southern California was growing rapidly at the time, and this growth provided a wealth of subjects for the new generation of artists. Industrial scenes, transportation, farms, ordinary people engaged in labor and recreation were the everyday sights of a new era, sights that for the most part would have been considered too mundane as fine art subjects by the more nostalgic, romantically escapist California Impressionists, who had consciously avoided representations of industry and progress and human activity in general. Emil Kosa, Jr. painted a series of trucks, heavy machinery and oil wells, and chronicled the demolition of Victorian houses in downtown Los Angeles and the building of freeways and highrises in their places. Millard Sheets painted gritty scenes of tenement life and migratory camps in the early part of his career. The chronicling of the hardships of the Depression was an important facet of the early California Style movement, though generally Southern California artists focused on positive subject matter rather than hard-core social commentary. Phil Dike painted particularly charming beach and harbor scenes, using unusual bird's-eye viewpoints. The beaches became very popular subjects as they were made more easily accessible by the new freeways, and the crowds frolicking on the shores, sunbathing, fishing and boating were, again, admirably suitable for the casual-appearing painting approach.

Other artists prominent in the movement in Southern California included Milford Zornes, Phil Paradise, Barse Miller, Ralph Hulett, Thomas Craig, Standish Backus, Jr. and Richmond Kelsey. In Northern California, Dong Kingman, Maurice Logan, Gerald Gleeson, Nat Levy, John Haley, Erle Loran, Harold Gretzner, Jade Fon, James March Phillips and George Post were all based in the San Francisco Bay area. They tended to focus on San Francisco and Oakland cityscapes and port scenes, and documented the building of the Bay Bridge. They exhibited at the Bohemian Club and the San Francisco Museum of Art. Haley and Loran, along with Mine Okubo, Doris Miller Johnson, and Karl Kasten were leaders of the Berkeley School, which was known for a textural look achieved with outlines of objects painted over layers of both opaque areas of saturated pigments and transparent washes.

Notable for their abundant work in motion pictures, commercial art, and book and magazine illustration, many of these artists promoted the idea of the integration of fine arts and commercial arts, seeing the traditional distinction between the two as artificial. Many of the Chouinard graduates worked for movie studios, particularly Disney Studios where they created Regionalist style animated films that defined the idyllic Disney image and in turn influenced other artists worldwide. Artists employed by Disney included Dike, Blair, Gramatky, Charles Payzant and Elmer Plummer. Disney encouraged them to emphasize in their work strong construction, depth, solidity, expressive action, and simplicity of design, and these qualities can also be seen in their "fine" artwork.

By the 1940's, partly because of the film industry, California had become the national center of watercolor painting, and the medium grew in popularity throughout the 1940's and 50's as a result of the California School's success. Workshops and schools such as the Brandt-Dike Summer School of Painting were founded to keep up with the demand for classes. Many of the California School artists taught in colleges and universities, ensuring that they passed their basic precepts along to future generations even as the style's popularity declined in the

Post-war era and as these artists' own work continued to evolve in different directions. Collectors today are rediscovering these works, increasingly drawn to the refreshing charm and to the sophistication that underpins their deceptively simple look.

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