

Women Artists of California

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“Struggle” by Ruth Miller Kempster

New Reference Work Enables Fresh Appreciation

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By [Charles Donelan](#)

This lavishly illustrated four-volume encyclopedia from Schiffer Publishing represents the work of many decades for art historian Maurine St. Gaudens, and promises to promote significant advances in our understanding of the contributions women have made to the history of art in California. The books' large format, remarkably vivid full color illustrations, and St. Gaudens's thoroughly researched biographical sketches of the artists make for delightful browsing while also answering the scholar's need for accurate, up-to-date, and reliable information. As one reads through the entries, each woman's story seems more fascinating than the last, and certain patterns emerge.

For example, women were particularly quick to grasp the imperative to absorb art traditions from elsewhere on the Pacific Rim. Bertha Lum honeymooned in Japan in 1903 and never looked back, returning to that country many times with and without her husband and staying for as long as six months to learn traditional wood-block techniques. Emmy Lou Packard was so enthralled with the social activist vision of the Mexican muralist movement that she ended up living with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo for a year. Her “Brussel Sprouts Pickers in Half Moon Bay” is a stunning achievement. Ruth Miller Kempster, who lived her last years in Ojai and died in Santa Barbara, may be the greatest socially conscious magical realist painter of whom even the experts on California art have never heard. It will be a long time before the impact of this monumental work is fully absorbed, and that's a good thing.

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