

From the Shadows to the Spotlight: Masterworks by California's Unknown Women Artists

Meher McArthur | January 7, 2019



Vera C. M. Staples, "Olvera Street, El Pueblo de Los Angeles (with Los Angeles City Hall in the background)," c. 1935, oil on canvas | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

In the painting of Olvera Street currently on view in the exhibition "Something Revealed: California Women Artists Emerge, 1860-1960" at the Pasadena Museum of History, the symbolism of masculine dominance may have been unintentional, but it is extremely poignant considering the subject of the exhibition. The old cobbled street is shown on a quiet morning. A saleswoman perches uncomfortably on a stool in front of her terra cotta pot

stall and gazes over at two men browsing the pots across the way. Behind her, another shopkeeper stands in her doorway beside a display of ceramic vases and jars as a woman in a headscarf strolls along the sidewalk. In front of the seated woman, a small child approaches a dog who appears oblivious to them all as he busily scratches an itch. Above them all in the center of the painting and thrusting into the sky is the tower of the Los Angeles City Hall, a building completed in 1928 – the only clue that dates the oil painting. At the bottom right-hand corner is the artist’s signature “V.C.M. Staples” – a genderless mark that reveals next to nothing about the artist who painted this masterful portrait of the heart of Los Angeles.

V.C.M Staples was Vera C. M. Staples, and like many female artists working decades ago, she hid her gender, and her life story and work disappeared into the shadows of the art world. Revealing the identities of artists such as Staples and redressing the imbalance in our understanding of the art history of California became the professional and personal passion of Pasadena-based art conservator and curator Maurine St. Gaudens over a decade ago. St. Gaudens' efforts has resulted in the four-volume book “Emerging from the Shadows; A Survey of Women Artists Working in California, 1860-1960,” and the artwork uncovered and presented in the book is the basis for the exhibition. During her work as a conservator, she handled many fine paintings signed with only initials and a surname that turned out to be by women who worked in California for many decades of the state’s history. Her curiosity about these mysterious and highly talented women drove her to find out more about them, and soon she realized that a whole section of California’s artistic and cultural heritage had been lost.



Exhibition Curator Maurine St. Gaudens and Co-Curator Joseph Morsman with Vivian Stringfield's painting "Monterey C"
Pasadena Museum of History | Photo by Meher McArthur

As the project grew beyond her own capacity, she reached out to independent researcher and historian Joseph Morsman who was delighted to join her in her quest to rediscover these women. “Many of these women married and changed their names or moved across the country, so finding biographical information about them was very challenging,” he explains. Like St. Gaudens, Morsman was relentless in his search for their stories. In the case of Cora A. Van Epps, he explains, “I spent two years searching for her. I discovered that she had moved from Illinois to California and with the help of

a fellow historian in Peoria, I was able to trace her early life in Illinois, her initial visits to California in the early 1900s until she eventually settled in Los Angeles where she remained until her death in 1947.” The artist who painted Olvera Street, they discovered, was born Vera Clarice Milborough Bush in England in 1883. She moved to the U.S. in 1891 and married Edward P. Carter in Los Angeles. For the next twenty-five years, she was known as Vera Carter, Vera C. M. Carter, or Mrs. E. P. Carter. In 1929, she married Robert Martin Staples, an original member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Known in her later years as Vera C. M. Staples or Mrs. Robert Staples, she was a gifted landscape and genre painter with a studio on South Broadway and was active in many Los Angeles art associations until her death in 1954.



Pauline Powell Burns, "Untitled Still Life," c. 1890, oil on canvas | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

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Morsman's research revealed many exciting facts. He tracked down a single still life painting by Pauline Powell Burns (1872-1912), acknowledged as the first African American artist, male or female, to exhibit her work at a California exhibition (the Mechanics' Institute Fair in San Francisco) in 1890. Another interesting discovery were the bronze bells that line El Camino Real, the route that connects California's 21 Spanish missions, were originally designed and cast by a woman who went by the name A.S.C. Forbes (1861-1961). Forbes, a historian who sketched and documented the history of the missions, is the first known female metal forger in the United States. They also discovered that the sculptor, Gutzon Borglum (1867-1941), who created the Mt. Rushmore National Monument, was actually taught to draw by his first and often unacknowledged wife Elizabeth Borglum (1848-1922), a highly talented artist, whose sensitively painted California landscapes are included in the exhibition.

Together, the two intrepid researchers have documented hundreds of forgotten female artists, their lives, work and contribution to the state's cultural heritage in the four-volume set of reference books. Now, many of these works are the focus of the exhibition "Something Revealed" at the Pasadena Museum of History through March 31, 2019. The exhibition features more than 260 artworks by 130 women artists who worked in California and is divided roughly chronologically into works dating from 1860-1925 in the South Gallery and works from 1925-1960 in the North

Gallery. Both galleries are packed with artworks that represent the styles and movements that shaped the arts in California, and the sheer volume of high-caliber works of art is overwhelming. But that is the point of this exhibition – to demonstrate how much of the state’s artistic history has been lost by ignoring the works of female artists. It also redefines how we must perceive women artists and their creative scope.



Zeta Behné (Richardson), "Untitled" (High Sierra Lake), c. 1890, oil on board | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

“We have traditionally thought that it was only the men who went out into nature and painted California’s landscape and women painted children and small animals,” says St. Gaudens, “But there were many women artists who also hiked out to Yosemite and other wild places and captured these rugged landscapes beautifully.” Zeta Behné (Richardson)’s painting of a lake in the High Sierras is a spectacular example of the quality of landscape painting done by women in California over a century ago.



Vivian F. Stringfield, "Landscape," c. 1924, oil on board | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

These artists lived lives full of talent, curiosity, determination and occasional public recognition, and many taught art themselves, exhibited their work, won awards and were commissioned by individual collectors and public institutions. They worked in a range of media from oil paintings, etchings and drawings to sculpture, ceramics, metal craft and folding screens, and depicted a rich variety of subject matter that spans a century of life in California. As the exhibition highlights, the artists mastered a broad range of artistic styles. Artist Vivian Stringfield's (1881-1933) vivid, flattened style was strongly influenced by the Japanese woodblock prints being collected in Europe and the United States in the early 20th century. Her contemporary, Nelbert (born Nelbertina) Chouinard Murphy (1879-1969), better known for founding the Chouinard Art Institute in 1921 (that later became the California Institute of Arts), was also an accomplished painter. She similarly depicted the richness of the California landscape in styles that ranged from plein air to bold semi-abstract.



Rose Schneider, "Untitled-Shacks," San Diego Harbor, 1935, oil on canvas | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

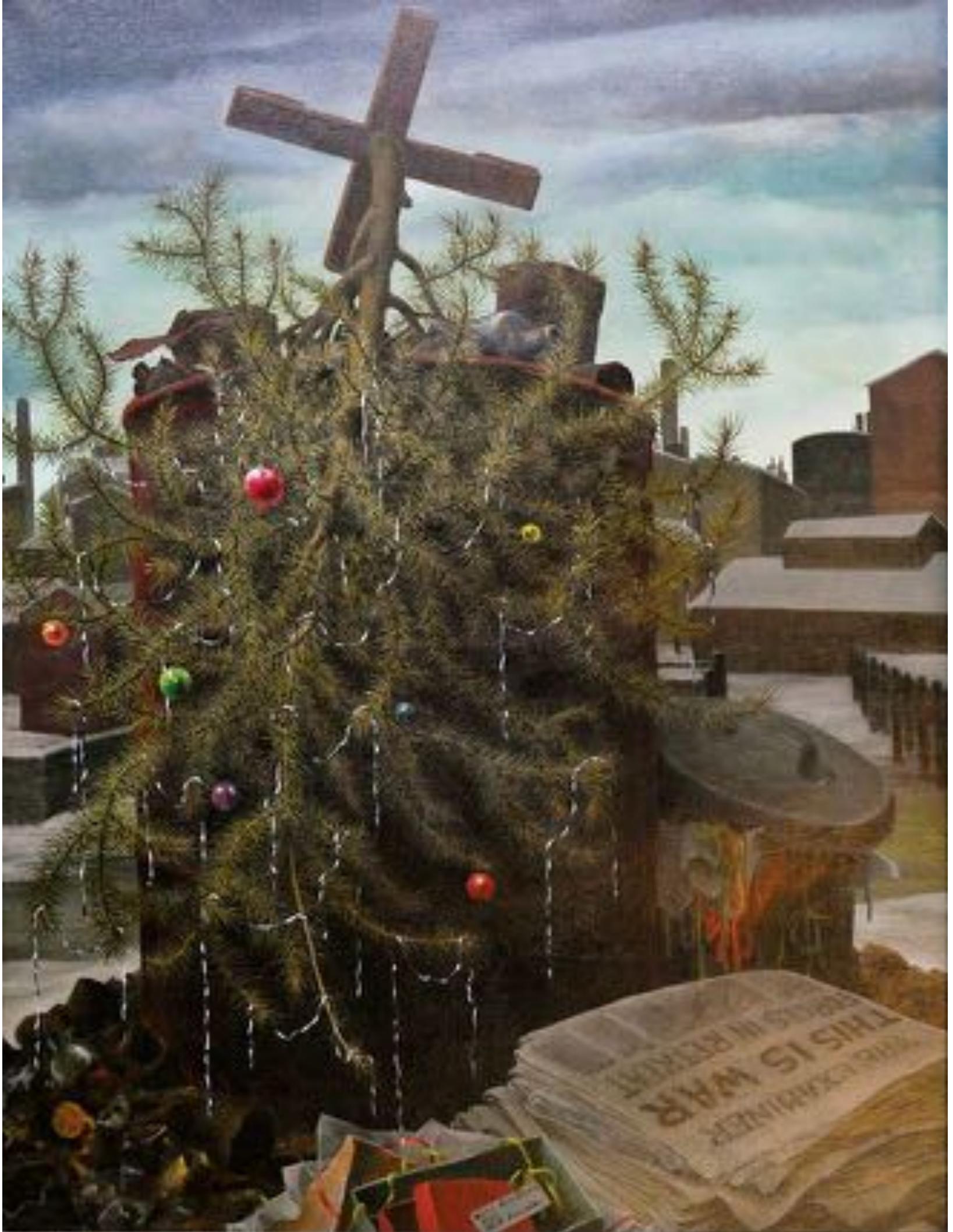
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“But these women were not only drawn to beautiful natural landscapes,”

points out St. Gaudens. “Some of them chose to paint less comfortable urban landscapes with subjects that were far from romantic.” In Southern California, two striking examples of these are Daisy M. Hughes' (1883-1968) oil painting “Wrecking Old Chinatown,” painted on March 11, 1951 and annotated by the artist (a historical fact that was corroborated by Morsman’s meticulous research), a poignant document of the changing faces of Los Angeles over the century. Similarly, Julia S. Gunnison Porter (1867-1952) painted “Untitled-Building a Road in San Diego” around 1925, an oil painting depicting horses pulling rocks along the ground, while Rose Schneider (1895-1976) captured a view of the rickety wooden homes and daily lives of Japanese fisherman in San Diego in 1930s in her painting, “Untitled-Shacks, San Diego Harbor.”



Ruth Miller Kempster, "Death of a Christmas Tree," 1941, oil on canvas. | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

One remarkable artist whose light shone boldly but has long been extinguished was Ruth Miller Kempster (1904-1978). An exceptionally

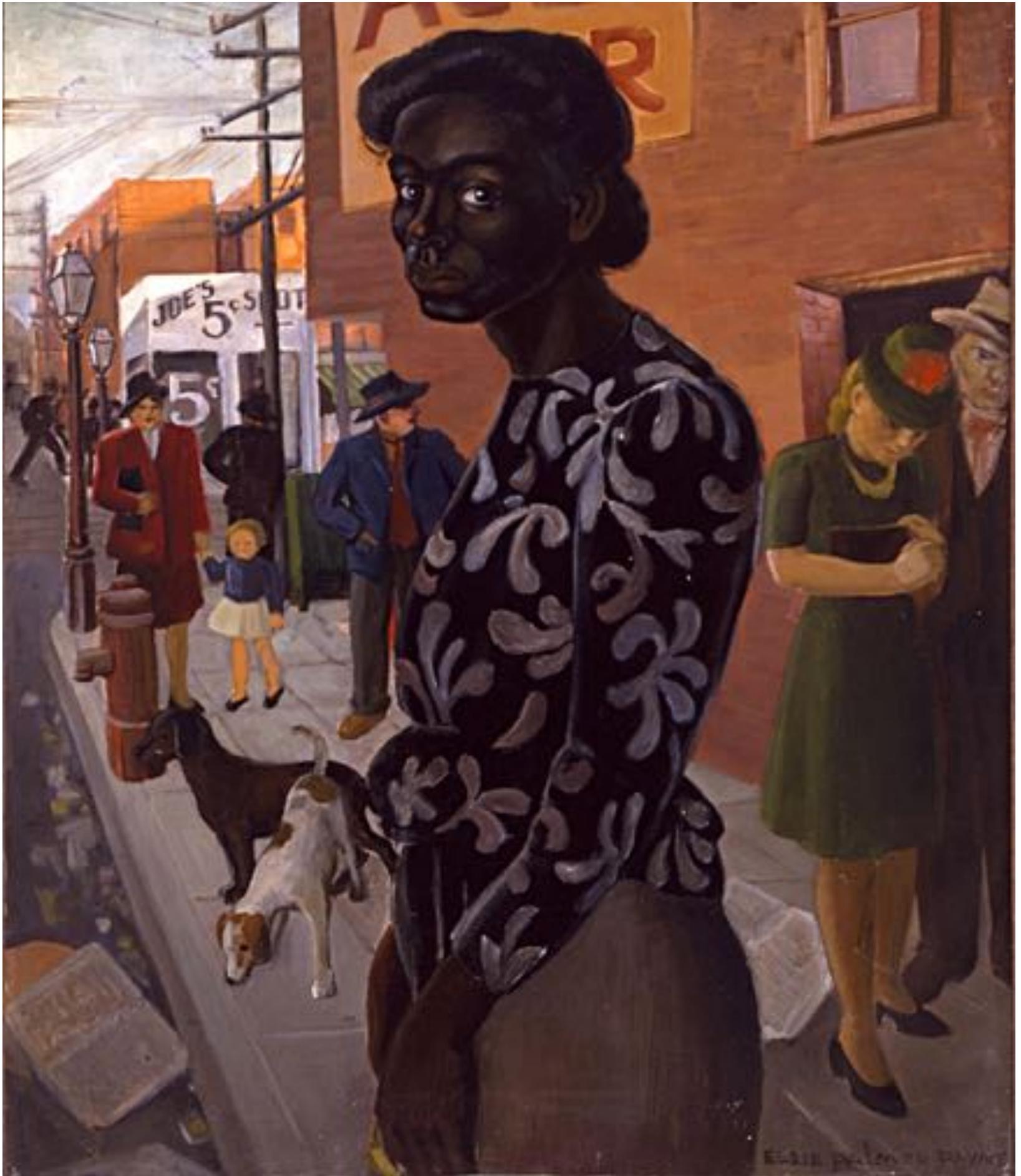
talented painter born Ruth Blanchard Miller in Chicago but raised in Pasadena, she attended the Stickney Memorial Art School in Los Angeles, California and the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. She continued her studies in New York and the L' École des Beaux Arts in Paris. She left Paris because the school did not allow unmarried female students to work from nude models and moved to Florence, where she studied mural and fresco techniques and met an Italian artist who she followed to Rome. Her parents frowned on her unconventional lifestyle and brought her back to California, where she was soon married to Henry Fracker and took his name. She continued her painting (as Ruth Miller Fracker), gaining a reputation as a realist painter, earning significant local commission and even winning the silver medal in art for a painting exhibited in competition at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Her paintings are not only exceptionally well rendered but her subjects often unusual and depicted with great intelligence and biting wit, such as her 1941 painting "Death of a Christmas Tree," which shows a decorated tree dumped upside down in a trash can next to a pile of discarded newspapers that announce that start of World War II. The cross at the top of the scene created by the tree's wooden stand suggests that Christian values have been trashed along with the tree itself.



Ruth Miller Kempster, "Housewife," c.1935, oil on canvas | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

Her powerful 1934 painting, "Housewife," may reflect her own sense of emotional and social entrapment and distress, but the deep sadness

apparent in the eyes of the housewife in the painting suggests that she saw this as a much more universal predicament for talented ambitious women. After divorcing her first husband in 1954, she took her father's first name Kempster becoming Ruth Miller Kempster. In 1953 she had her first solo exhibition at the Pasadena Art Institute, her last public exhibition taking place in 1958. Although she continued to paint until her death in 1978, her work has surprisingly not been shown publicly since 1958.



Elsie Palmer Payne, "Bus Stop," 1943, oil on canvas | Courtesy Maurine St. Gaudens. Photos Martin A. Folb

A similar painting whose strong female subject demands attention is the 1943 work of Elsie Palmer Payne (1884-1971). An accomplished artist whose work was overshadowed by that of her husband, the artist, Edgar Alwin Payne (1883-1947), she spent much of her life painting, often with him in Laguna Beach, Carmel-by-the-Sea and on their travels throughout the U.S. and Canada. They separated in 1932 for 14 years, during which time Elsie painted the dramatic work "Bus Stop" (1943) in which an African American woman turns and stares directly at the viewer. Her look is one of exhaustion and perhaps exasperation. Within the context of this exhibition, the image takes on great significance, possibly representing a plea on behalf of all the talented female artists that you look at their work and invite it into museums and galleries, where their male counterparts have had the walls to themselves for a very long time. In the current #MeToo era, an exhibition that illuminates the significant artistic contributions of female artists is long overdue and very welcome.

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Originally from the UK, Meher McArthur is an independent Asian art historian, author and educator based in Los Angeles. She has two exhibitions currently touring the U.S.: "Folding Paper: The Infinite Possibilities of Origami" (through 2015) and "Above the Fold: New Expressions in Origami" (through 2017). She worked for many years as Curator of East Asian Art at Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, has collaborated with several Southern California museums, and advised for the V&A Museum in London.

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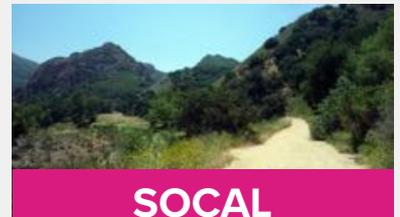
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