

California Women Artists Emerge, 1860-1960

by Maurine St. Gaudens
& Joseph Morsman

Discovery and subsequent recognition is the lifeblood of the art world. Without this activity, galleries and museums are forced to recycle a select and sometimes limited body of work and no growth or awakening is achieved. With discovery comes selection. A lucky few are deemed “the chosen”; they become popular, desirable, sought after and a success.

Something Revealed: California Women Artists Emerge, 1860-1960 is on view through March 31, 2019, at Pasadena Museum of History, 470 West Walnut Street, Pasadena, California, 91103, 626-577-1660, www.pasadenahistory.org. The exhibition is an extension of Maurine St. Gaudens’ published four-volume book *Emerging from the Shadows: A Survey of Women Artists Working in California, 1860-1960* (Schiffer Publishing, 2015).

This success depends on numerous elements, not the least of which is the size of the oeuvre (the amount of work created by an artist over a lifetime).

Something Revealed: California Women Artists Emerge, 1860-1960 offers a new ap-

preciation of the artists who defied gender and expectation in an era of inequality. Over 250 works by 150 artists through an eclectic array of styles and media from traditional to abstractions are presented in the exhibition. Although some of the featured



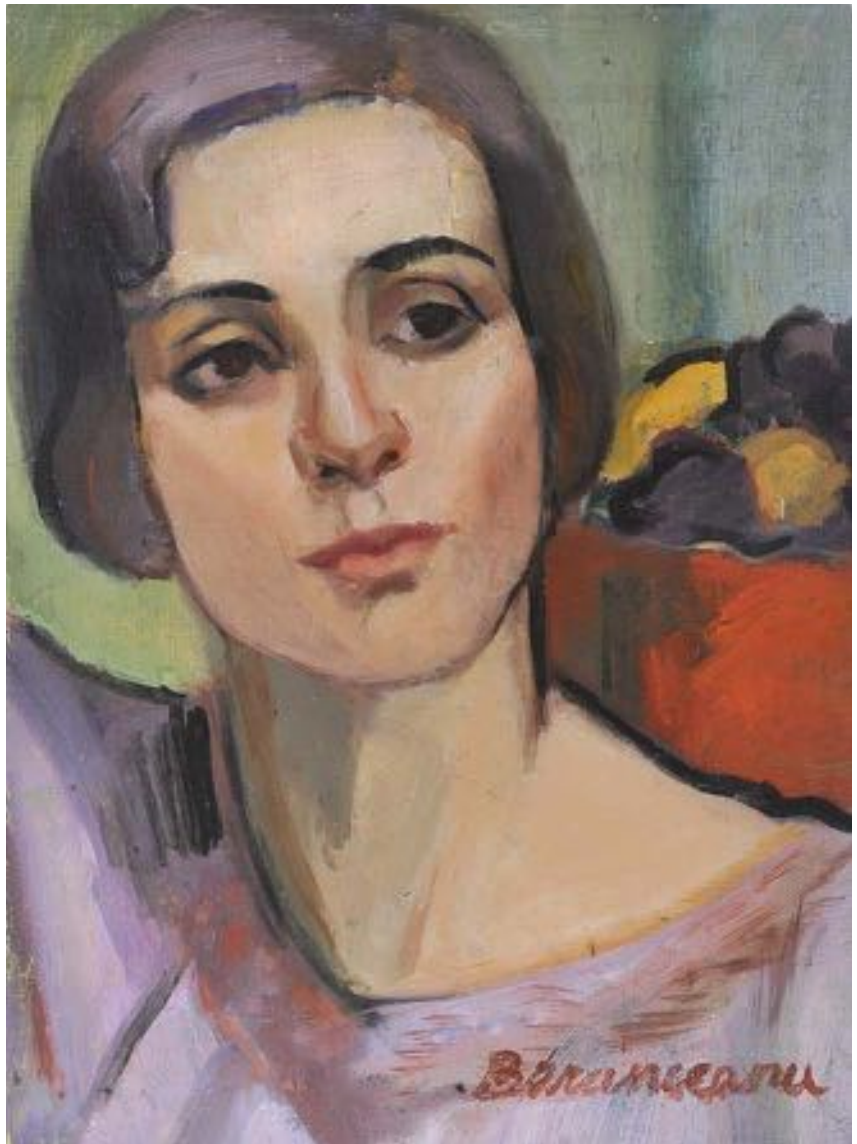


ABOVE: Elizabeth Borglum, *Untitled (Seated Woman Reading by Lamp)*, o/c, 33 x 25 1/2, private collection.

ABOVE RIGHT: Abigail Tyler Oakes, *Untitled (Alameda County, California)*, 1859, o/c, 26 x 36, The Baumhoff-Macon Collection, Kevin Stewart.

RIGHT: Belle Goldschlager Baranceanu, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1920s, o/board, 12 x 9, private collection.

LEFT: Vera C. M. Staples, *Olvera Street, El Pueblo de Los Angeles (with Los Angeles City Hall in the background)*, c. 1935, o/c, 20 x 24, Michael Kelley, courtesy Kelley Gallery.



artists have achieved name recognition, the focus is primarily on historically important yet unknown and underappreciated California artists that contributed to the evolution of style and technique and the role they played in shaping the arts and culture in California spanning 100 years.

Some of the artists presented in this exhibition were quite prolific. Their work, style, and their names are recognized. However, most of the women artists here are not as well known, in fact, they have never been heard of. One reason for this besides the obvious genderless and androgynous name phenomenon is marriage: the female replaces her last name with her husband's, or adds the husband's name to her own, or proceeds in some cases to exhibit under a hyphenated version.

Another problem for continued recognition for women artists was in some cases "inactivity": family, child rearing, education, or travel sometimes necessitated huge breaks from their artistic production. Many



ABOVE: May Hamilton (a.k.a. Diane May Hamilton de Cause), *Untitled (sometimes referred to as "Two Women Plaque")*, c. 1927-1930, glazed earthenware, 23 3/4 x 12 3/4 x 3/4, Steven and Debra Soukup.

ABOVE LEFT: Agnes Pelton, *Meadowlark's Song, Winter*, 1926, o/c, 25 x 20, Maurine St. Gaudens.

LEFT: Vivian F. Stringfield, *Landscape (Magical and Colorful Landscape with Lake, Trees and Structure)*, c. 1924, o/c on board, 20 x 24, Stringfield family.

ABOVE RIGHT: Helen Lundeberg, *The Evanescent*, 1941-1944, o/c, 36 x 60, Harry and Miriam Carmean, ©The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation.

RIGHT: Anya Fisher, *Untitled (Southwest Landscape)*, o/c, 36 x 36, private collection.



of these artists were born elsewhere and came to California at an early age with their families due to financial needs or as young women seeking educational opportunities. Many became known artists while working in California, and then towards the end of their lives they left for a variety of reasons. Thus, their obituaries are often printed in a local paper in a different area from where they worked, and their works are now scattered or forgotten.



The final reason they are lost to us is death; family members or friends take the mementos of an aged artist and frequently put them in the attic or basement, where the works are largely lost to the world.

Regardless of their relative obscurity, each of these women had a story to tell. Like so many of the artists throughout the late nineteenth and the early to mid-twentieth century, many existed outside the reach of posterity, thereby giving us an opportunity to write (and in some cases clarify) the stories of their lives, and to narrate their vital place within the history of women in the arts. The purpose behind this exhibition and the four-volume book *Emerging from the Shadows: A Survey of Women Artists Working in California, 1860-1960* was to present a pictorial representation of art created by women, plus concise biographies of the artists, with special attention being given to the women (and their work) who had eluded recognition.

Vera Clarice Milborough Bush was born in 1883, in Bath, England. She immigrated to the United States with her mother in 1891. It is unclear when the family actually settled in California, although it is assumed that they were living on the West Coast soon after their arrival. In 1904 Vera



married Edward P. Carter in Los Angeles, and for the next twenty-five years, even after her husband's death in 1911, she was

known as Vera Carter, Vera C. M. Carter, or Mrs. E. P. Carter. As early as 1913, she was listed as an artist and/or china decora-



LEFT: Virginia Woolley, *From the Hill—Taos*, 1929, o/board, 12 x 16, private collection.

BELOW LEFT: Ruth Miller Kempster, *Death of a Christmas Tree*, 1941, o/c, 33 1/4 x 25 1/2, Constance Crawford.

RIGHT: Ruth Miller Kempster, *Housewife*, c. 1935, o/c, 27 x 21, Constance Crawford.

tor in the Los Angeles city directory under the Carter surname. A 1926 *Los Angeles Times* newspaper advertisement noted that from her studio she sold her prize-winning, hand-painted china as well as works of art executed in enamel and that she offered “lessons in all branches of china painting.” In 1929 Vera married Robert Martin Staples, a noted music instructor and violinist who was a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic from its inception. Robert died in 1939 and for the remainder of her life she was known as Vera C. M. Staples or Mrs. Robert Staples.

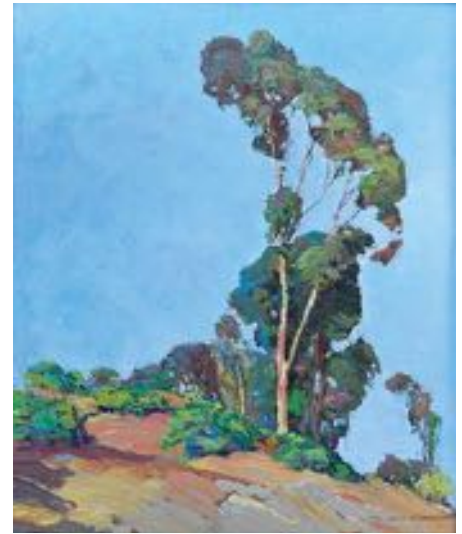
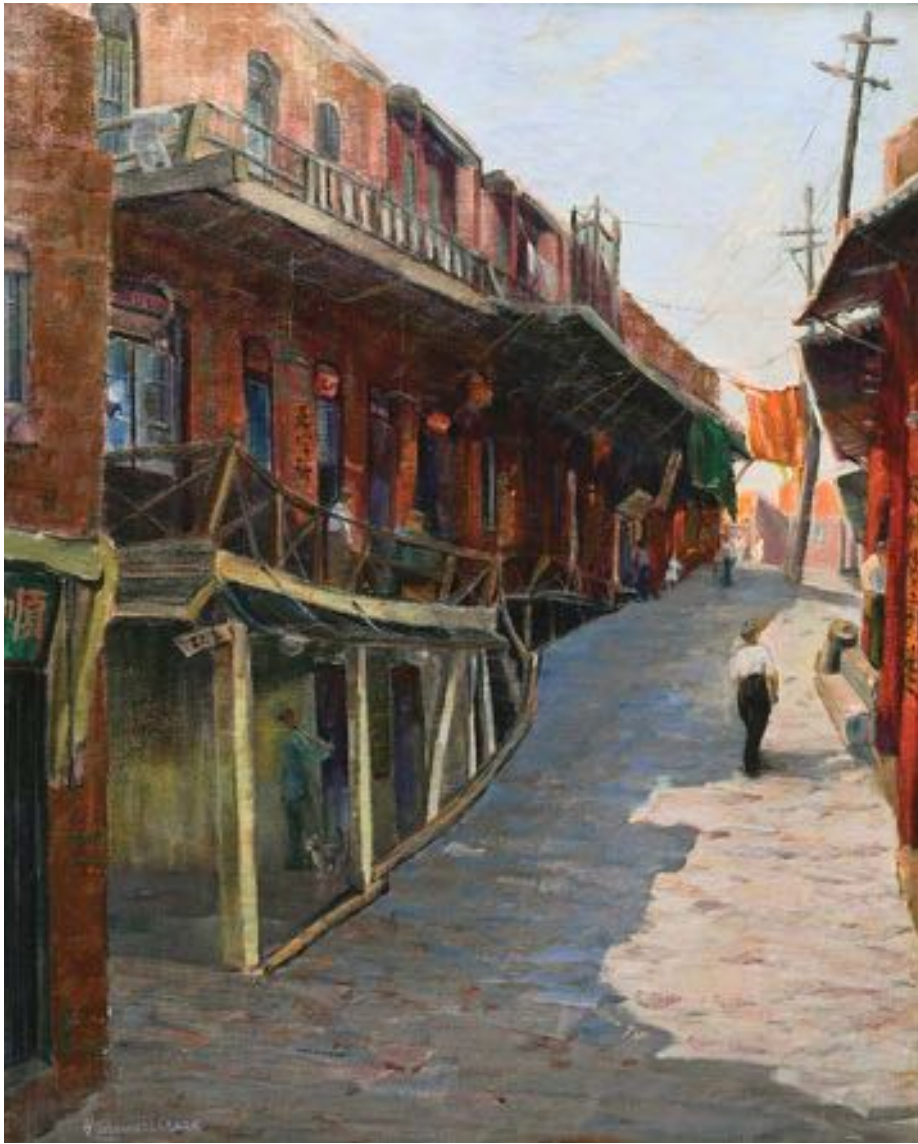
Early in her career, Vera maintained an artist studio on South Broadway Avenue in Los Angeles, not too far from where she painted *Olvera Street, El Pueblo de Los Angeles*. A gifted landscape and genre painter, she was a longtime member of and frequent exhibitor with the Women Painters of the West, the Long Beach Art Association, the Los Angeles Art League (past president), and the Southland Art Association. Her paintings were included in art exhibitions at the El Segundo Women’s Club and the South Ebell Club and the Los Angeles County Fair. Vera C. M. Staples died on June 17, 1954, in Los Angeles.

Born in 1904, in Chicago, Illinois, Ruth Blanchard Miller was the third and youngest daughter of Kempster B. and Antha (Knowlton) Miller, a couple who valued education. Ruth was interested in art as a child, and while she was in high school her father bought her a correspondence course in art basics from the Kansas City Art Institute, which she eagerly completed.

In 1922, the family were residents of Pasadena, California, and Ruth began her studies at the Stickney Memorial Art School in Los Angeles, California, and continued at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. To further her studies Ruth moved to New York and enrolled at the Art Students League, where she studied sculpture, along with painting and lithography. When she was twenty-two years old, Ruth went to Paris and enrolled at L’École des Beaux-







ABOVE: Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, *Untitled (landscape with tree)*, c. 1916, o/board, 24 x 20, Pasadena Museum of History, gift from the family of Nelbert M. Chouinard.

LEFT: Hazel Coldwell Clark Pletsch, *Old Chinatown, Los Angeles*, c. 1928, o/c, 30 x 24, private collection.

BELOW LEFT: Mary L. Pottenger, *Untitled (Fauvist Landscape)*, o/board, 10 x 14, Olman Family Trust.

BELOW RIGHT: Zeta Behné (Richardson), *Untitled (High Sierra Lake)*, c. 1890, o/board, 14 1/2 x 17 1/2, private collection.

Arts. Disappointed the the Beaux-Arts did not allow unmarried female students to work from the nude model, which she had enjoyed in New York, Ruth took a trip to Spain and after that went to Italy. She spent a year or more in Florence studying mural and fresco techniques at The Florence Academy of Art. Ruth was happy in Florence, and while there, she met a young Italian artist and eventually she moved with him to Rome. After her parents arrived in 1928, she and her family returned to California, without the Italian artist.

In 1931 Ruth married Henry Fracker, an electrical engineer from Pasadena's California Institute of Technology. From 1934 to 1950, she exhibited under her married name, Ruth Miller Fracker. She regularly appeared in group shows and won awards, earning a reputation as a realist painter. In 1934 she did six murals based on nursery rhyme themes for the children's ward at Pasadena Hospital (later renamed Huntington Hospital) in Pasadena.

The beginning of World War II brought an ironic and gloomy response





ABOVE Mary A. Lewis, *Untitled (Haystacks in the Moonlight)*, c. 1915, oil on wood panel, 7 1/2 x 10 1/2, private collection.

from Ruth, best demonstrated in her work *Death of a Christmas Tree*, which shows a Christmas tree in the trash along with newspapers announcing “This is War.” Perhaps too explicitly, the painter shows the mockery that war makes of Christian symbols, though she herself was not very religious.

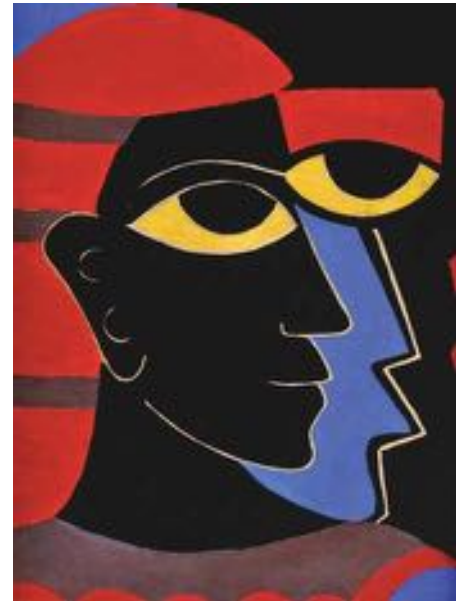
The war also brought an immediate move for the couple. Henry was drafted to do classified research at Bell Laboratories in New Jersey. They returned to California shortly after the war and took an extraordinary trip driving through Mexico, Central and South America, into remote parts of Peru, and finally to Chile. When they returned, Henry’s security clearance was under investigation by the FBI. The full story was never completely revealed, but apparently, he was gay or bisexual, and until then, extremely closeted. In 1950 the couple divorced.

For years, Ruth Miller Fracker had been known as an accomplished painter. But now, divorced and on her own, she re-





BELOW: Paula Zen, *Portrait of Gladys*, c. 1938, o/c, 40 x 34, Maurine St. Gaudens.



ABOVE: Thelma Johnson Streat, *Two African Kings*, 1935, o/paper, 14 x 10 1/2, The Melvin Holmes Collection of African American Art, courtesy of Thom Pegg, Tyler Fine Art.

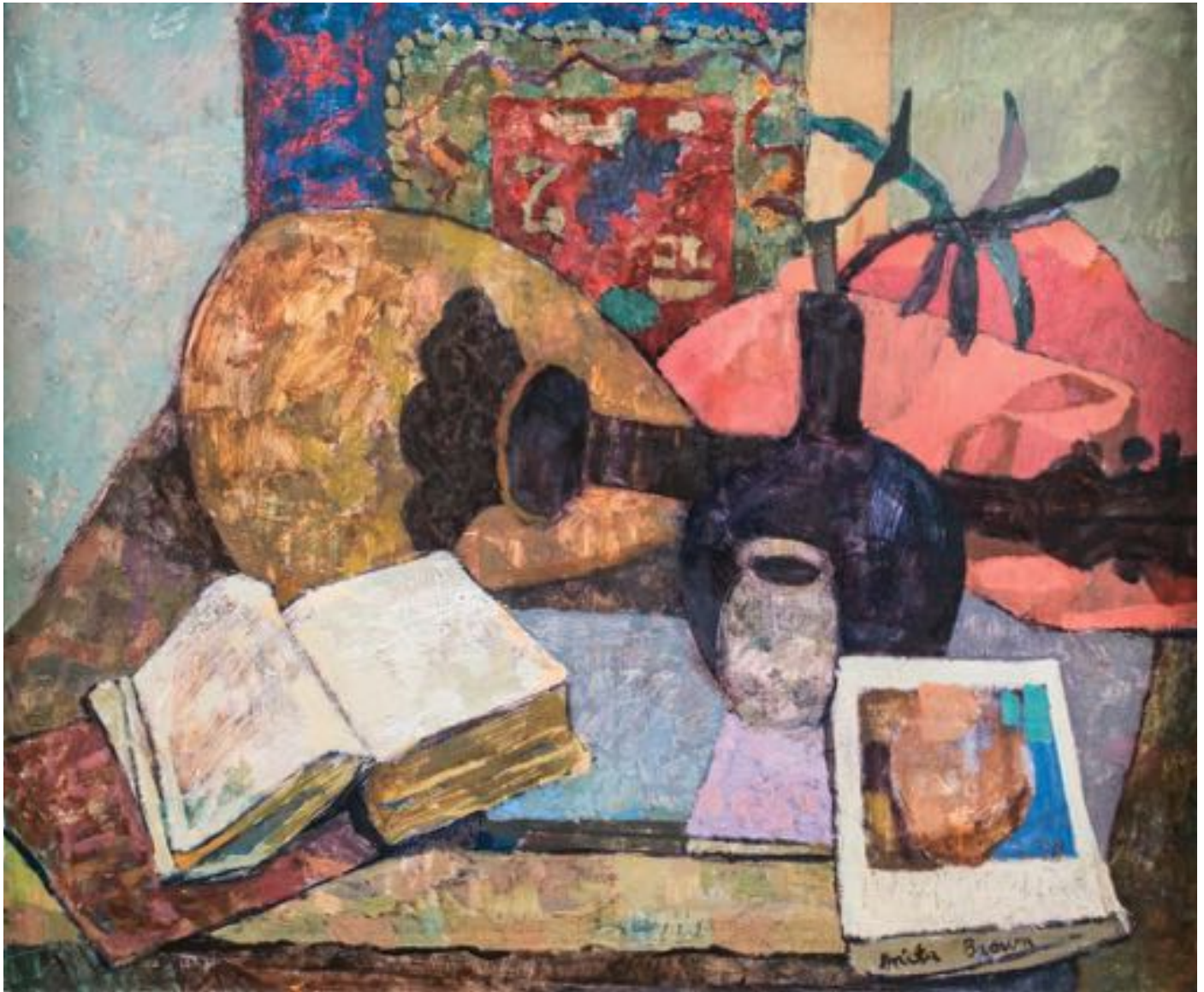
ABOVE LEFT: Ella Moen (a.k.a. Ella Moen Odorfer), *Untitled (Abstract Interior)*, o/board with incised detail, 17 x 23, private collection.

RIGHT: Anita Brown, *Still Life with Lute*, o/c, 24 x 27, private collection.

BELOW RIGHT: Ruth A. Lindsay, *Untitled (Mexican Street Scene)*, oil on artist board, 16 x 20, private collection.

named herself, taking her beloved late father's first name, Kempster, for her last. She also re-signed all her old work with the new name, a somewhat unusual step since name recognition sells paintings. She re-signed even the gift tag on *Death of a Christmas Tree*: "Merry Christmas from Ruth Kempster." On many of Ruth's canvases, a ghostly "Fracker" remains under a layer of more recent paint. To her, the fresh identity was worth whatever it cost.

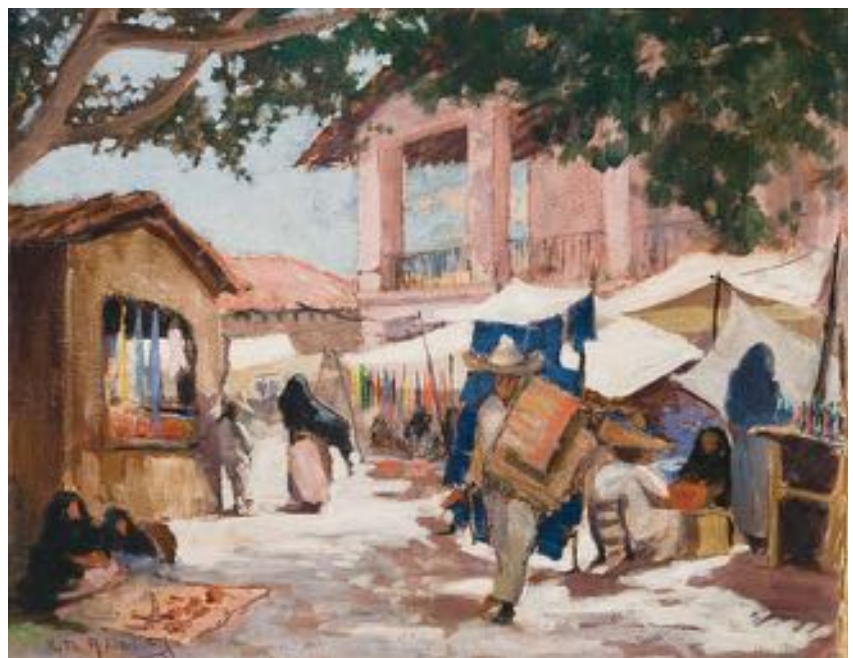
Early in her career, Ruth was invited to show at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco and at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. She received prizes at group exhibitions at the California State Fair and the Pasadena Society of Artists. In 1953, Ruth had her first solo exhibition at the Pasadena Art Institute, and rather than attend, she left on a six-week volunteer tour to wartime Korea with the Armed Forces Far East Com-



mand. A small group of artists, including a couple of Disney Studio cartoonists, entertained soldiers in hospitals and rehabilitation centers by drawing and giving away portraits of the men.

In 1959 she met Fred Clapp, a Los Angeles lawyer, and a year later they were married. The couple moved to Ojai, California. She didn't quit painting, but she never again showed her work in any major venue. She learned pastels and signed her work Ruth Kempster Clapp. In 1970 she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a radical mastectomy. After some years, the cancer recurred, and in 1978, Ruth Kempster passed away at the age of seventy-four.

At the time of Anita Brown's birth in 1912, her father, a sugar chemist, was employed with United Fruit Company (UFC) in the sugar-mill town of Preston, in





LEFT: Mary Darter Coleman, *Los Angeles, Calif. (Landscape—Looking from the area of Chavez Ravine toward the iconic Los Angeles City Hall)*, c. 1928, 25 x 30, Valerie Lardner.

BELOW LEFT: Belle Goldschlager Barancanu, *Road Near Mt. Wilson, California*, 1927-1928, o/c, 20 x 24, private collection.

RIGHT: Rose Schneider, *Untitled (Artists Painting in Nature—possibly a group of students with artist/teacher Charles Reiffel)*, c. 1935, o/board, 20 x 23 1/4, private collection.

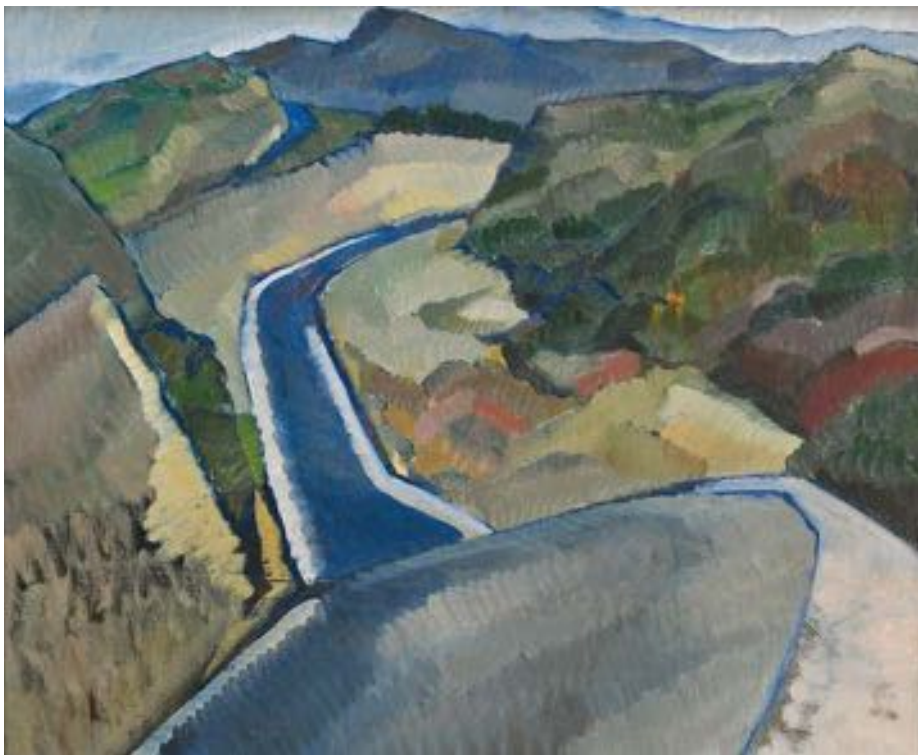
later continued her association with the academy by working in their visual education department.

Anita had a number of oil paintings to her credit by the mid-1930s when she formed a partnership with artist Eugene Taylor, becoming the first studio artists-in-residence at San Diego's Spanish Village in historic Balboa Park. From their shared studio, which they called "Eugenanita," in addition to their individual work, came jointly executed murals for local theaters (The Fox and The Fairmont), hotels, restaurants, the Chula Vista Chamber of Commerce, and other public buildings in the San Diego area.

In June of 1938, Anita traveled to Europe as part of an educational program sponsored by the Columbia University (New York) Fine Arts Group. Upon her return, she married Harrison E. Amos, in San Diego, on October 2, 1938. She continued to work in her studio at the Spanish Village into the 1940s and then maintained a studio in her home. Anita worked in all mediums, including oils, watercolor, woodblock, and ceramics. In the late 1930s and early 1940s she worked with Dr. Paul and Hazel Wedgewood, the first clay artisans in San Diego to use a pottery kick-wheel for making hand-thrown ceramics.

A member of, and frequent exhibitor with, the Los Sureños artists' club, Chula Vista Art Guild (past president), Associated Conservative Artists, the Southwestern Artists Association, and California Federation of Women's Clubs, she continued to produce prize-winning canvases into the 1980s until a debilitating illness halted her ability to paint. Anita Brown Amos died in 1997, in Chula Vista, California.

Sara Rose Schneider and her twin brother Edwin were born in 1895 in La Grange, Missouri. In 1898, the family left



Cuba's Oriente province. Anita was a child when the family returned to the United States, where her father continued his work with UFC in New Orleans, Louisiana, before coming to California. Although they continued to divide their time between her father's various work locations, by 1918

the family made California their permanent home. The family settled on a ranch, establishing a lemon orchard in Chula Vista, California. After high school Anita studied at the San Diego Academy of Fine Arts under Pauline DeVol, Otto Henry Schneider, and the noted artist Alfred Mitchell, and



Missouri and moved to San Diego, California, where her father established himself as one of the city's early pioneer merchants. Rose was artistically inclined from an early age. It is unknown at what age she seriously began her art studies, but by 1930 she was studying locally with the artist Charles Reiffel, and she continued to work with him for a number of years. Rose may have also studied with San Diego artist and teacher Maurice Braun.

Rose was a longtime member of the San Diego Art Guild. She first exhibited with them in 1930 and continued for the remainder of her life. Also in 1930, her work was shown in a group exhibition at Von Briesen's (furniture gallery) in San Diego. This was a frequent exhibition

space for many of Reiffel's students. An active participant in many local San Diego gallery exhibitions, her work was included in shows at Holzwasser's Gallery, 1932, 1933 and 1934, and Pieter Smoor's Gallery (solo exhibition) in 1934. She was also included in the Annual Art Exhibition at Santa Cruz (California), 1934; California Pacific International Exposition, San Diego, 1935; Golden Gate International Exposition 1939; and California State Fair, 1934 (third prize), 1939 (third prize), 1940 (honorable mention), and 1947. Her work is in the permanent collection of the San Diego Historical Society.

Primarily she worked in oils, mostly painting and sketching the environs of San Diego County and Southern California.

Her non-art-related associations included the San Diego Council of Jewish Women and the Theosophical Society, each of which served as venues for exhibitions of her work. For many years, she was a frequent lecturer on a myriad of topics (art and non-art related) with the Theosophical Society. Rose never married and spent many years living with her unmarried elder brother Harry. She died in 1976, in San Diego, California.

—Adapted from Maurine St. Gaudens' essay "The Beginning of Emerging," Joseph Morsman's essay "The Journey of Discovery," and additional artist biographies in the four-volume book *Emerging from the Shadows; A Survey of Women Artists Working in California, 1860-1960*.