



CALIFORNIA WOMEN ARTISTS DISCOVERED

A new museum show unveils dozens of previously obscure artists.

BY SCARLET CHENG

As an art conservator, Maurine St. Gaudens has spent over four decades looking at paintings both by the famous and the unknown. For some time she noticed quite remarkable work by women painters she hadn't known about, some of whom used only an initial for their first name. "They wanted to be genderless, they'd been so discriminated against," says St. Gaudens in her Pasadena dining room (and now office), the table stacked with books, papers and a model of the Pasadena Museum of History exhibition she is working on. That exhibition is based on the four-volume set of books she started on 10 years ago, *Emerging from the Shadows: A Survey of Women Artists Working in California, 1860–1960* (Schiffer Publishing; 2015).

St. Gaudens makes clear these women weren't Sunday painters. "These were professional artists," women who had had art training, exhibited their work in public, taught art and otherwise "pursued an art career for at least 15 years," she says emphatically. In 2012 she was joined in her work by Joseph Morsman, a collector specializing in prints and drawings who wanted to help with further research.

"When I came on board, I introduced a number of artists that Maurine wasn't familiar with," Morsman says from behind a computer, at the end of the dining table. "Then we went out to supplement the works that we already had, and we were talking

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**Evening, Ruth Miller Kempster,
1950, oil on canvas**



Maurine St. Gaudens

with collectors. We'd asked them if they had A, B or C in their collection. They'd say, 'But do you have E, F, and G in your book?' We said, 'Can we see images?' Then we'd fall in love, and we kept adding." They tracked down names and backgrounds through newspaper clippings and files at libraries, historical societies and museums — and sometimes even found surviving family members. St. Gaudens' original list of 100 women artists eventually exploded to 320, and ended up filling four volumes.

In collaboration with Morsman, St. Gaudens has curated an ambitious new exhibition inspired by the books: *Something Revealed; California Women Artists Emerge, 1860-1960* runs

through March 31, 2019, at the Pasadena Museum of History. It will include some 300 works, reflecting a wide variety of styles and subjects, by 160 artists; most are included in the books, but the show will also include a few artists they've discovered since publication. To present more works than the intimate museum can display at any one time, they will change out about 40 percent of the work midway through.

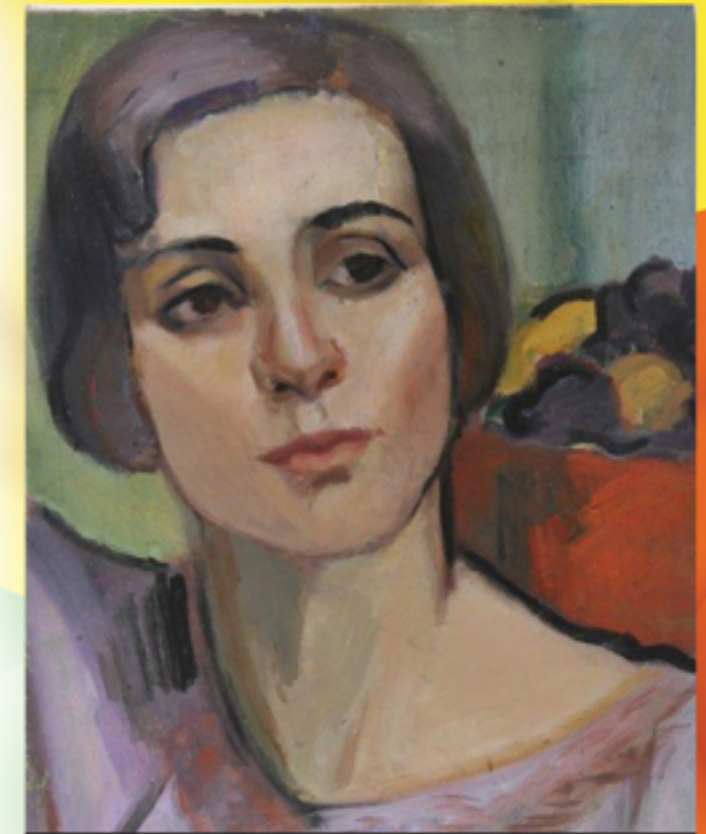
A number of the artists, such as Ruth Asawa, Helen Lundeberg, Ynez Johnston, Agnes Pelton and June Wayne, will be familiar to art aficionados. Many others will be little known, if at all — even if some of their art may be familiar, as in the case of Ada May Sharpless. Sharpless was the sculptor who created the Art Deco-style *Lady of the Lake* (1934) statue at Echo Park Lake, as well as the statue of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo (1933) at the Santa Ana Historical Museum (now the Bowers Museum).

One of the pair's proudest finds is Ruth Miller Kempster (1904-1978), whose painting *Housewife* (circa 1935) graces the cover of Volume 2 and will be a centerpiece in the exhibition. "It's one of the greatest discoveries of the book," says Morsman.

Housewife is a sublimely painted oil on canvas of a woman in a red dress under a white apron, standing at the sink washing dishes and looking out with tired eyes at the viewer. Already the gaze of the female subject makes it unusual; for centuries women were looked upon, the passive subject of the male gaze, while in this painting the woman looks out actively. In the background is a young daughter returning a cup to the cupboard, and further back, in the dining room, is the husband reading the newspaper after dinner. It is a snapshot of 1930s Middle America after dinner — after the woman has cooked the obligatory evening meal, she has to clean up also (a scenario that persists for many women). Her universe is the kitchen and the home, her day a series of chores from morning to night, while presumably he goes out to work during the day, then gets to enjoy dinner at home and scan the newspaper — keeping him in touch with the world outside.

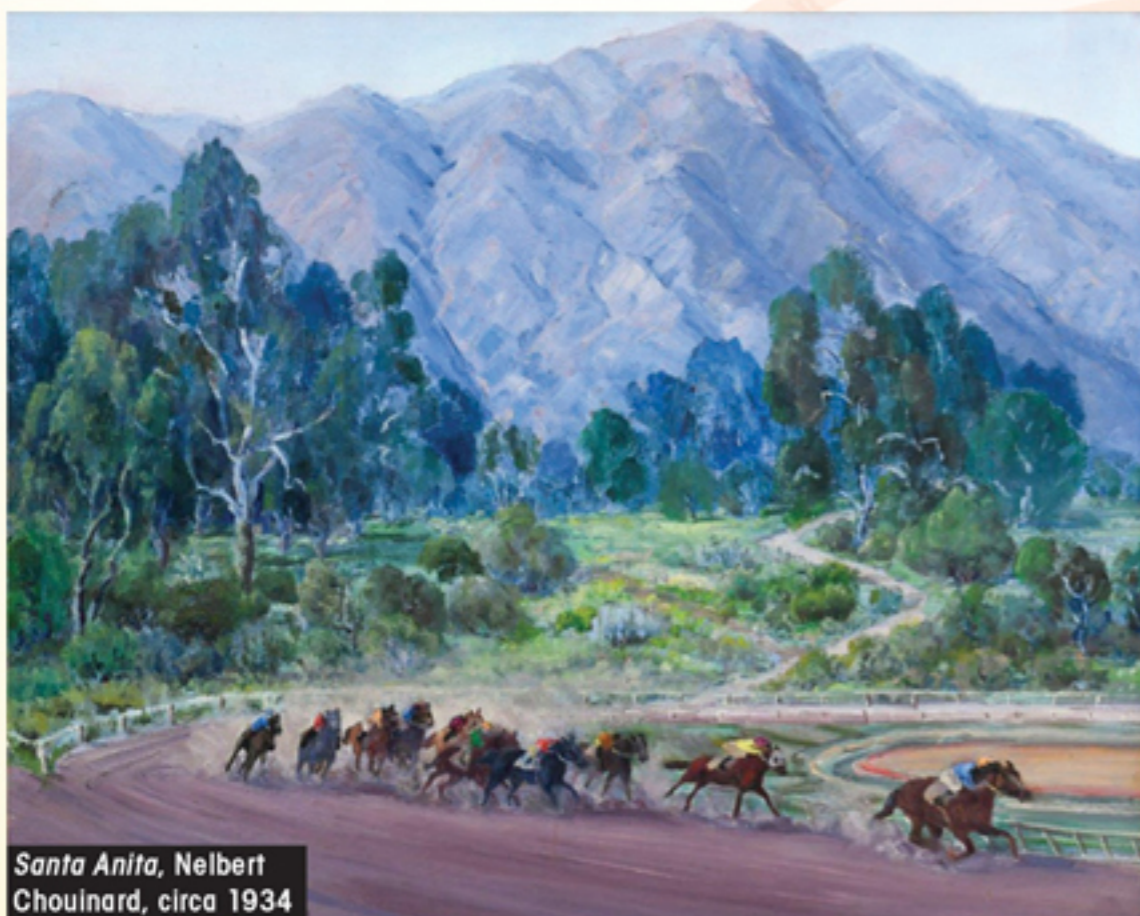
Born in Chicago, Kempster came to Pasadena with her family. She studied at the Otis Art Institute and later at the Arts Students League in New York City. Around 1925 she attended L'École des Beaux Arts in Paris and later lived in Florence, until she returned home with her parents in 1928. (Sounds like they had to bring her back!) Kempster painted in a spare room and submitted her painting *Struggle*, depicting a white man and an African-American man wrestling in an arena, in the fine arts competition for the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. The judges recognized her accomplishment and awarded her the Silver Medal in Painting. (The painting was recently acquired by the Huntington Library, Arts Collections and Botanical Gardens.)

One of St. Gaudens' favorite paintings from her own collection was once an unknown. Years ago she obtained a small painting of the Russian River, signed "C. A. Van Epps" in the lower right corner and dated 1902. "It took me two years to track her



Self-Portrait, Belle Goldschlager Baranceau, circa 1920s, oil on board

PHOTO: by Martin A. Folb, PhD



Santa Anita, Nelbert Choulnard, circa 1934



Evolution of a Freedom, Dorr Bothwell, 1942, oil on board and painted frame



Detail from The Evanescent, Helen Lundeberg, 1941-44, oil on canvas

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*Avalon Harbor (Santa Catalina Island),
Mary Stevens Fish, circa 1890, oil on canvas*



*Portrait of Gladys, Paula Zen,
circa 1938, oil on canvas*

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down,” says Morsman. “Epps was an Illinois artist, she was raised and educated in Illinois, and she didn’t come out here till about 1900, but I couldn’t find information about her in California. I ended up contacting a historian in Illinois. They gave me her early life, and I gave them her later life.” Epps spent the last 40 years of her life in Los Angeles, and the exquisite landscape showing a lazy stretch on the Northern California river will be included in the show.

“One of the problems is that in the time period, most of them married,” says St. Gaudens. “Sometimes they

married three, four, five times, so in some cases they had three, four, five names to trace. It was maddening.” A few women even changed their names completely, creating an artist’s persona. One painter in the show is still a puzzle; her work is the large, striking *Portrait of Gladys*, which was painted by “Paula Zen” and exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art in 1938. It is a large painting of a woman in profile, wearing a tall cylindrical hat and a voluminous coat. In her lap is a book and behind her a building that looks to be made of children’s building blocks — it may all signify something, but what? The painting is labeled on the back with the title and the artist’s name, and the researchers managed to find the exhibition brochure listing the work. However, they know nothing more about Zen and have no other examples of her work.

“Paula Zen is a true mystery,” says Morsman. “We’re hoping someone will say, ‘I have a Paula Zen at home’ or ‘I, too, have been researching this artist.’”

“She’s the only one we can’t find,” St. Gaudens adds, “and she was exhibited in this major exhibition.”

Which just goes to show that work like this is never done. “Part of the purpose of the book is to make people think, and to discover artists they’re intrigued by and to continue the research,” Morsman says. While they cut off the book project at 320 artists, they know there are more, many more woman artists, yet to be rediscovered and commemorated.||||

“Something Revealed; California Women Artists Emerge, 1860–1960” runs through March 31, 2019, at the Pasadena Museum of History, 470 W. Walnut St., Pasadena. Exhibition hours are noon to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday. Admission costs \$9, \$8 for seniors and students; free for members and children under 12. Call (626) 577-1660 or visit pasadenahistory.org.