

Circles of Influence



Stanton Macdonald-Wright's *Untitled (Vase of Flowers)* (1924-25)

"Circles of Influence" at the Orange County Museum of Art in 2000 explored Southern California's early 20th century artistic evolution, particularly how that development was influenced by East Coast artists and by modernism. Subtitled, "Impressionism to Modernism in Southern California Art, 1910 to 1930," the exhibition of 71 paintings elucidated just how California artists were inspired by national and international modern art movements of that period to create their own regional art style.

The exhibition also revealed that art movements and influences were more circular than linear, as the working artists both learned about painting techniques and styles from each other and taught each other, while expanding their own creative perspectives.

OCMA Assistant Curator Sara Vure wrote in the exhibition catalog, “These artistic and organizational efforts of Southern California painters in the first three decades of the twentieth century made significant accomplishments that contributed to the aesthetic and intellectual life of the city...this astonishing array of brilliantly colored and dramatically expressive paintings is a testament to the diversity of influences and creative energy of Southern California’s early twentieth-century artistic circles.”

Stanton Macdonald-Wright’s *Untitled (Vase of Flowers)* (1924-25), adorning the exhibition entrance, demonstrated the artist’s evolution from impressionism to modernism, while displaying the influence of Cézanne and cubism. The catalog explains that he returned to California from Paris in 1919, brimming with knowledge of European avant-garde styles.

Soon after returning home, Macdonald-Wright, along with his colleague Morgan Russell, introduced to the art world a movement they called Synchronism. The movement — that the two artists created in Paris — was based on the arrangement of colors into scales, while combining the geometric structures of cubism with vibrant fauve colors. Synchronism was said to mimic visually the way that a symphony is structured to produce harmoniously arranged art compositions.

Macdonald-Wright’s four other Synchronist paintings in the show were *California Landscape* (1919), *Chinese Valley Synchrony* (1923), *The Muse* (1924), a sensual nude, and *Self-Portrait* (1926-27).

Among the artistic mentors whose work was displayed in “Circles” were Robert Henri who spent the summer of 1914 painting and teaching in La Jolla (see below), and William Merritt Chase who taught summer art classes in Carmel.

Other paintings in the show depicted women at leisure, children at play, California landscapes, home interiors and still-lives. Landscapes by Childe Hassam and Channel Townsley were reminiscent of work by French painters Corot and Courbet.

Several paintings illustrated interiors. These included John Hubbard Rich’s *The Idle Hour* (1917) of a woman with a fan, and William Cahill’s *Three Generations* of a family of women relaxing. On loan from the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana was the exquisite *Marguerite* (1918) of a young exotically attired woman, painted by Guy Rose.

Swiss émigré Conrad Buff’s *Decorative Figure* (1923) was described in the catalog: “Although best known for his dramatic Western landscapes, Buff’s *Decorative Figure* exemplifies this compositional strategy in its juxtaposition of boldly delineated shapes, simplified forms, and clear, bright color.” The painting

depicts a woman in a red dress relaxing under a tree. The artist's southwestern-inspired *Yuccas* (1928) illustrates white desert flowers against a dark blue sky.

Other modernist artists represented in the exhibition were Mabel Alvarez, Benjamin Berlin, Nicholas Brigante, Lorser Feitelson, Peter Krasnow, Knud Merrill, Henrietta Shore and Edouard Vysekal. They exhibited influences of post-impressionist, cubist, post-surrealist and ashcan school styles and movements.

Vure explained in the exhibition catalog, "Out of this passion to create, early twentieth century Southern California painters developed their art from impressionism to modernism, an evolution that coincided with the building and expansion of Los Angeles itself. As the 1930s ushered in the Great Depression, this period of devastating economic hardship, and the government-sponsored art programs of which Feitelson and Macdonald-Wright were regional directors, would dramatically change the character of the art world throughout the nation.

"While the city's status as a world art center had yet to be established, there was considerable growth and development in the Los Angeles art community between 1910 and 1929 and progressive artists explored their individuality through paintings of expressive color and brushwork... Simultaneously, a small group of artists promoted modernism and established a beachhead in the region, paving the way for true acceptance of the radically avant-garde in the post-World War II era.

"These artistic and organizational efforts of Southern California painters in the first three decades of the twentieth century were significant accomplishments that contributed to the aesthetic and intellectual life of the city. As the contemporary art world becomes ever more global and often a virtual community, the concerns of previous generations with issues of regional provincialism seem to fade. But this astonishing array of brilliantly colored and dynamically expressive paintings is a testament to the diversity of influences and creative energy of Southern California's early twentieth-century artistic circles."

Robert Henri, founder of the early 20th century Ashcan School for his portrayal of gritty New York City scenes, was also a traditionally trained portrait artist, as seen in the exhibition, "*Robert Henri's California: Realism, Race, and Region, 1914-1925*," at Laguna Art Museum in 2015. During the artist's 1914 visit to La Jolla, he sought out for his exquisite portraits ethnically diverse young people, including Native Americans, those of Chinese and Mexican descent, and Negroes (the polite terminology of the time). In this show's accompanying catalog, he is quoted: "I was painting a beautiful little Chinese girl, in Chinese costume today. She is only eight years old ... and poses as well as anyone could." He also wrote, "I have a good portrait of a Negro boy laughing ... I had him sitting like the prince of Africa ..." The artist's belief in "the dignity of life" informs his blend of academically oriented and early modern influences. "*Tam Gan*" depicts a little Chinese girl outfitted in lavender Asian garb and set against

expressive orange brushstrokes. "Tom Po Qui (Water of Antelope Lake/Indian Girl/Ramoncita)" is an Indian woman in Native American attire and jewelry. The artist describes her as, "... young, perhaps 18, a powerful indian (sic) type, deep copper color, wide cheek bones, straight nose — and the look of the sphinx." Two gestural paintings of an African American boy are "The Failure of Sylvester," presenting the boy asleep in an elegant high-backed chair, and "Sylvester Smiling," a compassionate close-up that exemplifies the artist's motto, "art for life's sake." While in La Jolla, Henri also painted two portraits of his beautiful, young wife Marjorie: "The Beach Hat" and "Mrs. Robert Henri," both depicting the subject in a deep magenta shawl with similarly colored lips and hat band. These colors may well have been influenced by European Fauvism. Commissioned portraits of upper-class Los Angelenos, painted during Henri's subsequent visits here in 1918 and 1925, include "Portrait of Miss Louise Getz." These later paintings, diverging from the show's earlier theme and expressive style, return to the artist's classical training and attention to detail.