

They Built a League and Gallery

By Margaret Koch

Santa Cruz had art long before it had an Art League and a Gallery.

The Ohlone (Costanoan) Indians made ornaments of abalone shell and other small sea shells they shaped and drilled: their woven baskets were works of art, sometimes ornamented with quail feathers and tiny, hand-drilled beads made of shells. The baskets, alas, are all too rare today.

The Franciscan Padres didn't realize when they and the Indians built the California Missions that they were contributing to the world of art, but they were.

The early American settlers were too busy for art for a few years. They had more urgent need of plows, hammers and saws, and shovels. But when affluence caught up with them and life became easier, they too made their contribution -- the wealth of great Victorian homes that gave Santa Cruz its charming New England atmosphere.

There also was art instruction, as such, in the area before Frank Heath began his classes with the students who, with him, went on to establish the Santa Cruz Art League.

The Society of Decorative Arts was founded June 1, 1885, after Fred A. Hihn sent out invitations that brought 25 men and women to a meeting.

Miss A.M. Wells had been conducting a private art school in her home on Soquel Avenue. She also gave watercolor and drawing lessons at Calvary Episcopal Church, using a Sunday School room.

The newly formed Decorative Arts society was created to "promote art" in Santa Cruz, furnishing both paid and free classes in all branches of the arts. It also was founded for the establishment of "a depot where artistic products might be displayed and sold." Between 1885 and 1891, the society maintained an embroidery class for 25 girls and a sewing class for a group of 60 small girls.

In October of 1891, a Woman's Exchange was opened where artistic needlework, painting and drawings were sold.

In the 1870s Mary Hallock Foote was in Santa Cruz for several years. She taught painting and while here she recorded historic Santa Cruz scenes for a magazine.

Emily Bartlett was another early artist and art teacher who taught for about 25 years at Holy Cross School; the nuns as well as the students received painting lessons from her.

Art and painting lessons were given at Mrs. Gamble's Seminary on Walnut Avenue. Mrs. Gamble's nephew, John Gamble, was a well-known artist of that day.

Lillian Richardson taught china painting; Mrs. L. James gave watercolor lessons. Lillian Howard, who took lessons from Frank Heath, went on to become an art teacher at Santa Cruz High School. She also gave private lessons in her home on Highland Avenue, and went about recording local scenes of historic sites and buildings that were disappearing.

But art in Santa Cruz took its greatest leap ahead when Frank Heath returned from San Francisco where he had attended Hopkins Art Institute (California School of Design.) he traveled and painted on the East coast and throughout the U.S. and he taught at Hopkins for several years before coming home to Santa Cruz to open a studio in the Heath family home on Beach Hill.

Heath and Margaret Rogers, one of his students, organized the Santa Cruz Art League, which developed out of an earlier group he formed that was called the Jolly Daubers.

The league was formally instituted in October of 1919 with Heath as president and Margaret Rogers as vice president.

For a number of years, the Art League displayed its work and had its meetings in the Santa Cruz Museum which was housed in the former William Tyrrell home in Seabright. Margaret performed the tasks of curator and caretaker, and lived in the house also, although she owned two houses she rented out, on Plum Street. Later, when the Tyrrell home was demolished and the present museum building was built for library purposes, she purchased a small house at the corner of Alhambra, and lived in it.

Margaret had a fabulous collection of paintings by artists who visited Santa Cruz to display their work in the annual Statewide Art Shows, sponsored by the local league. She would trade one of her paintings for one of the visiting artist's—they were mainly small paintings because her house was small, a friend recalls.

For her own paintings she would go down to the beach and study the water for hours at a time. In the winter she made rag rugs—which wore so well that a friend is still using two of them today.

"They have been washed and washed over the years," says Dorothy Miller who is the friend. "I don't think they will ever wear out!" Dorothy's rugs were made in 1928.

Margaret usually wore black dresses that covered her from "her ears to her feet," in Dorothy's words, and although she didn't like hats, she felt she should wear one and did. She had an assortment of floppy velvet hats she disliked intensely, but wore to the statewide shows because she felt it was more dignified to appear in headgear.

Remember—these were women raised in the Victorian tradition.

Cor hated housework and was fond of saying shyly, "A little dust is becoming." She almost always wore a soft shade of blue, and while she wasn't painting, which she did almost every day, she knitted a lot.

Cor made one painting that a friend, Jo Stapp, wanted very much, but Cor wouldn't sell it.

"I loved it but I never expected to own it because she wouldn't part with it," Jo recalls.

But Jo got it -- after Cor had died, miles away in Holland.

"One day, Margaret Rogers came to see me and she had the painting," Jo said. "She said she was giving it to me, because she knew I had wanted it so badly."

Jo says she still doesn't know why she was privileged to become a friend of such a fine person as Cor de Gavere. And she still treasures the painting.

One time when Margaret and Cor were out on a painting trip in the County, they left a painting to dry for awhile, planning to return and get it later. When they went back for it, it was gone.

In later years, Margaret told a friend she regretted the super-strict rules they had set up for the local Art League...and she was instrumental in starting the annual shows that brought artists from all over California.

Working with her on the statewide shows was Leonora Naylor Penniman, who, with Margaret and Cor were known as "The Santa Cruz Three."

After Frank Heath died in 1921, his wife Lillian continued to paint china, tapestry and watercolors and to work for the establishment of the league's own gallery.

Lillian Heath lived a rather formal life, and it was at her Beach Hill home, "The Studio," that I—as a small girl—was introduced to the custom of finger bowls at the dining table. (My other relatives, hardy mountain pioneers, were more at home with rifles and shotguns.)

Today, if anyone should bring out finger bowls, the guests would probably think it was some kind of new exotic drink, but years ago, I remember being enchanted with the crystal bowls with rose petals floating in them.

Other artists who made their mark in the world of Santa Cruz art came to town. They included Addie Kleist, Mabelle Fulmer, Lillian Mae Huebner, Maud R. Keever, sculptor Katherine E. Wallis, Warren Chase Merritt, Clarence Taubenheim, Dr. John D. Fuller, Hazel Rittenhouse, Ellen Hill, Marion Ross, high school art teacher Nelle Fischer, Wilda Reed, Myrtle Kester, Marie Imhof, Will Frates and potter J. Wilbur McCutchan.

Today [1974], so many years later, the works of some of them may still be seen locally, some at the Art League gallery, 526 Broadway. Frank Heath's work also is at Santa Cruz Public Library; Lillian's is at First Methodist Church, 250 California Street; Cor's paintings are at the main library in its current exhibit. Leonora Penniman's work may be seen, a few of them at least, at Penniman Title Company office on Pacific Garden Mall, the family business she helped her husband found.

Many of these early artists are gone today. But what they worked to establish in Santa Cruz lives on as their memorial for years to come.

Sources

- *This article originally appeared in the Santa Cruz Sentinel September 1, 1974, p. 7. ©1974 Margaret Koch. It is used here by permission of Margaret Koch.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.