

Late artist's impressions see light again

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IT'S TEMPTING to paint Lillie May Nicholson as an impassioned artist-feminist whose leftist life-style took her from a Watsonville teaching career to trekking the coast of Monterey Bay, canvas and easel in her small satchel.

The fact she suddenly and completely stopped creating her *en plein-air*, Impressionist-style works, and took a job as an aircraft engine mechanic in Alameda adds tantalizing mystery to the Watsonville woman whose works now hang in the Art Museum of Santa Cruz County.

The clues Nicholson left through her 421 catalogued works hint at a woman independent, but not quite revolutionary. The clarity of purpose and lack of quirks in her paintings tell us she was someone with little use for ceremony — her passions, if any, were her ritualistic



Lillie May Nicholson

walks through forests and coastlines — moments she set down on canvas and left, possibly by accident, to her growing and grateful audience.

Lillie May Nicholson, 1884-1964, was clearly her own person. She brings to mind American artist Mary Cassatt who wrote some 20 years before Nicholson was born, "Oh, I am independent! I can live alone and I love my work."

The words are also fitting for Nicholson who contentedly spent most of her time in her own company, but always kept contact with her relatives, many who still live in Watsonville.

Breaking social mores at the turn of the century, Nicholson traveled abroad without escort, living and teaching first in Honolulu, then in Kyoto, Japan from 1912 to 1915. In 1921, she went to Europe and the Far East, where she studied art and was greatly influenced by the Impressionists, notably Monet.

Her return home in 1923 wasn't to the Watsonville schoolhouse she'd left. Instead, she set up a studio in Pacific Grove and began recording in oil the Monterey Bay and its people.

She borrowed Monet's blues and rosey hues to paint dozens of coastline and wharf scenes. Nicholson crystalized but never lapsed into sentiment. The coastline, trees wading in lupin and mustard, were unquestionably beautiful — and she depicted them that way, using short, horizontal brush strokes and lavish amounts of paint. But Nicholson probably never meant for the works to bring a tear to the viewer's eye.

This holds true for her numerous wharf scenes, with fishermen tending their nets and boats. Nicholson monumentalized neither the men or their work; rather, in the Impressionist style, she caught a moment of life, distilling its light, hue, shape and action. Her people were important for their form in the composition, not their personality. Even her few beach scenes with children, while spontaneous, resist cuteness.

Nicholson painted few women and children. Her works were almost exclusively of the out-of-doors. She stayed away from crashing surf in favor of a tranquil, sun-speckled and lapping

ocean for her seascapes. Some of her most successful paintings are landscapes of trees and wildflowers transformed into thick and rich patterns of color by coastal gusts.

"Blue Landscape" is a highlight in the Nicholson show (see photo page 1), striking in its wind-beaten pines and carpet of violet-blue blossoms. A serpentine of gold flowers draws the eye back to the pools of shadows beneath the trees, to the muted green and blue-gray background. The artist successfully pulls off a violet sky where sullen-looking clouds threaten the foreground light. The painting is beautifully arranged and full without being cluttered. Nicholson's sense of rhythm and action is at its best in this piece.

Most of Nicholson's paintings are small, few are more than 16-x-20 inches, perhaps because she walked to her locations and had to carry her equipment with her.

Her grand-nephew, Don Henrichsen (who operates John's Shoe Store on Main Street), agreed the limited size of her works was probably more for economy and handling ease than choice. She also painted both sides of many of her canvases. Nicholson was also known to paint on wood.

The artist stayed with academic arrangements she'd learned in Europe but did some experimenting within her own style. Nicholson didn't stretch the possibilities of her medium; her works were safe in technique, subject and size. Her definitive, short brush strokes, using generous amounts of paint, make for her most pleasing works. The least successful were isolated works Nicholson may have felt she "ought" to paint, including a couple of portraits and a painting of a woman seated on a chair. She was artistically and spiritually in her element in the landscapes and wharf paintings.

While some believe she painted from photographs, it's unlikely Lillie May Nicholson would have incarcerated herself inside her studio that long.

NICHOLSON AVOIDED commercialism, perhaps deliberately; Henrichsen said his great aunt was no self-promoter. She probably had steady cus-

REFERENCE



Kurt Ellison

Lillie May Nicholson recorded everyday moments like these.

tomers in her Pacific Grove studio, but she did little to advertise.

"I don't think she was ever a successful artist, financially," Henrichsen said.

By the time Henrichsen was 10, Nicholson had stopped painting. She packed her works away in trunks and put them in a storage shed at the family ranch near Watsonville where they remained until Nicholson was "re-discovered" in the late 1970s.

"She probably thought she'd just tidy up, clean up what she'd left around the home," said Diane Henrichsen, who married Don about 10 years before his great aunt's death.

Mrs. Henrichsen said there was little family discussion of Nicholson's art, even though some of her paintings hung in relatives' homes. She said she doubts family members remembered Nicholson's paintings were in the trunks, and that they left the cases alone because they were "Aunt Lillie's things."

Mrs. Henrichsen's husband remembers Nicholson for the way she rescued him when he was a child, from "adult talk" at family dinners. She too would quickly tire of after-dinner visiting and would round up her grand-nephew, taking him for long walks on the family ranch property. She'd point out trees or blossoms and tell the

youngster, "Now, that would make a nice picture."

But Nicholson had long-since stopped making pictures. The reason is unclear. Henrichsen said she was hit in a crosswalk by a speeding car about the time she abandoned her easel and paints, but he can only speculate that was the reason. He doesn't think her eyesight was affected, but she may have lost her self-confidence as a result of the trauma. He stressed he's only guessing; nobody, it seems, really knows why she quit.

When other women were finishing child-rearing or, in rare cases, careers, Nicholson had moved to Oakland where, at age 59, she trained as an aircraft engine mechanic at the U.S. Naval Air Station in Alameda. She had lived in Oakland between 1934 to 1937, and returned there during World War II in 1943, where she completed 368 hours of training and became a successful engine mechanic and inspector. She had stopped painting and in 1947, reportedly tried to burn the remaining works she'd put in storage. The Henrichsens believe she was simply trying to do away with what she considered clutter. They don't think it was an artist's fit of temperament.

Except for her marriage in 1926, a relationship that didn't last the year, Nichol-

son remained single. After 1943, she lived in Oakland until her death at age 80. She's buried in Watsonville's Pioneer Cemetery.

Some say she'd have made an excellent Sierra Club member, while others feel she would have been a natural for the women's rights movement of the 1970s.

Perhaps, but Nicholson might have balked at club functions or political rallies where crowds grew large and noisy.

People who were close to her say an exhibit of her paintings would have pleased Nicholson.

"If she's 'around,' I think she's enjoying this show very much," said Henrichsen on the opening Sunday of the Art Museum exhibit.

"And you know," added Mrs. Henrichsen, "She'd come on a Sunday afternoon when there aren't too many people."

Seventy-eight works, "Lillie May Nicholson: A California Impressionist," will be on exhibit through May 4 at the Art Museum of Santa Cruz County, located upstairs in the Santa Cruz Public Library, 224 Church St.

Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, with evening hours 6 to 9 p.m. every Thursday. Group tours can be arranged by calling 429-3442.



Works displayed

"Blue Landscape" is one of the paintings of the late Lillie May Nicholson now on display in the Art Museum of Santa Cruz County. Nicholson, who

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was born on a ranch near Watsonville, was a prolific artist, but only in the last few years have her works become widely known. See Page 4.