



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909

Jules Tavernier: Artist and Adventurer

by Scott A. Shields, Ph.D., and Claudine Chalmers, Ph.D.



A Balloon in Mid-Air, 1875
Oil on canvas 30" × 50"
Private collection

AN ILLUSTRATOR, PAINTER, adventurer, and visionary, nineteenth-century French artist **Jules Tavernier (1844–1889)** was one of the American West's foremost talents, with a natural ability that many believed was second to none. For a brief time in the late 1870s and early 1880s, there were few others who commanded similar prices and prestige or could count a greater number of the West's prominent citizens as clients. To those who knew him, the "little

Frenchman" was a marvel. As described by **Jerome Hart**, editor of *The Argonaut*: He could do anything with a brush—or without a brush, for he could paint with his spatulated thumb. His brain worked like lightning, and when he was taken in travail with an idea, his wonderful hands—for he sometimes painted with both of them—strove to keep up with his electric brain. (March 2, 1907, *The Argonaut*)

The April 16, 1911, issue of the *San Francisco Call* included a piece written

by **Ida L. Brooks** in which she described Tavernier as being the quintessence of the true Bohemian: "Free born, unconventional as the wind, ignorer of public opinion, generous, interesting, erratic, improvident, high strung—all of these things he was in the superlative." Innocent and childlike in his enthusiasm, he was also nervous and excitable. He had a penchant for making speeches and when agitated spoke a curious mixture of English and French at a rate, jokingly estimated by one reporter, of three-hundred words a



Photo of Jules Tavernier
Collection of Terry and Paula Trotter



On the Way to New Diggings—Halt in a Rough Pass of the Rocky Mountains, May 1, 1875
Wood Engraving 13 5/8" × 20 1/4"
Created for *Harper's Weekly*
Private collection

minute. His rules for the simple life were these: "never to permit business to interfere with pleasure, never to do today what could be put off until tomorrow, and never to put off until tomorrow what could be put off until next week." Unfortunately, this impatience with mundane matters made him careless about paying his debts. In addition, his years as a student in Paris's Left Bank left him with little patience for the bourgeoisie. The literary column, "Arthur McEwen Discourses Delightfully of Art and Politics" that appeared in the November 15, 1890, publication of the *Los Angeles Evening Express* noted that Tavernier was "given to raising both hands to high heaven, shrieking out contemptuous blasphemy and ordering intending ignorant patrons" from his studio. Often plagued by money woes and hounded by creditors, he engaged in bouts of drinking that periodically slowed his progress, and he kept many pictures only in his head and heart—places where others could not assume ownership. Others he painted in the air with his thumb, growing enthusiastic over their value but making them tangible only when material necessity absolutely required it. Despite these failings, he was productive, courageous, and much beloved.

Childhood and Youth

Jules Tavernier's father was an Englishman named John Taverner, who married a French woman, **Marie-Louise Rosalie Woillaume**, in 1842. The young couple became well known in Parisian society in the mid-1880s, as John Taverner had become one of France's leading confectioners (candy makers and distributors). Coincidentally, Marie-Louise's mother's maiden name was *Tavernier*, and since they were living and working in France, the couple changed the family name to Tavernier. Jules was born in 1844, the first of four children. When Jules was three the family moved back to England, but he returned to Paris by himself when he was only twelve to study art and live with relatives.

Tavernier began four years of art training in the atelier of the noted mural, historic, and religious painter **Felix Joseph Barrias (1822–1907)** in 1861. By 1865 he had progressed enough to have two paintings accepted into the Paris Salon. He exhibited at the Salon again in 1866, 1869, and 1870. At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), he enlisted as a volunteer in the "Artist's Brigade," a group of young idealists who fought for France. He became close friends with the Prix de Rome recipient **Henri Regnault (1843–1871)**, and they

fought together side by side. Tavernier witnessed Regnault's heroic death at the battle of Buzenval. The loss of this great young painter was an unexpected blow to all of Paris. The composer, **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)** dedicated his *Marche Heroique (1871)* to Regnault's memory. Tavernier also painted a work in memory of his dear friend, and hauntingly even included some of Regnault's most famous pictorial images into his painting, which were suggested in the patterns and shapes of smoke caused by gunfire.

Shortly after the battle, Jules Tavernier left Paris, and after spending a few short months in London working as an illustrator, followed London engraver **Allen Measom** to New York. He landed in New York on August 29, 1871, and never returned to Europe.

In America

In New York, Tavernier painted a local view of Fort Lee but spent most of his time illustrating genre and landscape scenes for various periodicals, including the New Jersey section of *Picturesque America*. In 1873, with fellow artist and Frenchman **Paul Frenzeny (1840–1902)**, he accepted a transcontinental assignment to produce wood engravings for *Harper's Weekly*; travelling west for a

year, the team made one hundred illustrations of frontier life. The dramatic results would make Tavernier's reputation, and the sketchbooks he kept, especially the ones depicting Indian activities at the **Red Cloud Agency** in Nebraska, served as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the rest of his life.

Living Among the Native Americans

Tavernier travelled to the newly formed Red Cloud Agency in Nebraska in the summer of 1874 without Frenzeny in order to witness the activities surrounding the Sioux Sun Dance, a yearly ritual gathering of nearly 15,000 to 20,000 Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. Few outside observers had ever seen this ceremony, and Tavernier risked his life in doing so, as a violent thunderstorm arose during the climactic Sun Dance, which many believed was caused by the presence of outsiders, thus hastening Tavernier's departure.

After leaving Nebraska, Tavernier journeyed through Utah and continued to San Francisco where he reconnected with Frenzeny. San Francisco society lauded the artists as celebrities, and the two were among the earliest illustrator-painters inducted into the newly formed **Bohemian Club** (est. 1872). On September 9, 1874, in front of a cheering crowd, they also accepted the opportunity to ascend in **Etienne Buislay's** hot-air bal-

loon. The ascent was a disaster. The balloon crashed on takeoff into a roof and chimney, and one of the occupants, a newspaper editor, suffered a broken arm. Undaunted, and with crowds in attendance, the two thrill-seeking artists later made a successful flight in the company of *Monsieur Buislay* on October 4, 1874. The painting *A Balloon in Mid-Air* (1875) resulted from this experience.

Home in California

Once settled in California, Tavernier focused on easel painting, limning genre scenes with figures, architectural subjects, and interpretations of the landscape. He worked in a variety of media, including oil, watercolour, and pastel, and employed techniques ranging from densely layered glazes built up in the manner of the old masters to the swift, fresh strokes of the Impressionists. His landscapes were a decided departure from the grandiose scenes of the Sierra Nevada then in vogue in California; instead they were inspired by his experiences and the paintings he produced in the rural village of Barbizon, near the forest of Fontainebleau, south of Paris. He adapted the Barbizon school aesthetic of moody, informal landscapes to California.

Until Tavernier, California's premier landscape painters—**Albert Bierstadt** (1830–1902) and **Thomas Hill** (1829–1908)—celebrated the grandeur of the



Indian Sun Dance—Young Bucks Proving Their Endurance by Self Torture, January 2, 1875
Wood Engraving 13 5/8" × 20 1/4"
Created for *Harper's Weekly*
Private collection



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SUMMER-FALL 2014

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Red Cloud's Camp at Dawn, 1874

Oil on canvas 17 1/2" × 29 1/2"

Courtesy of the Courthouse Museum, Shasta State Historic Park, and California State Parks

state, creating awesome panoramic vistas of the Sierra that equaled the most majestic views of Europe and the American East. Their paintings conveyed a pride and optimism that matched the national expansiveness of the age. Tavernier had little interest in promulgating this West Coast variant of the Hudson River School and felt that the Yosemite Valley, then the most popular subject among the state's painters, was too abnormal a departure in nature to be successfully realized in pigment. Though he sometimes painted the great valley, it was always a challenge. **Isobel Field (1858–1953)**, stepdaughter of **Robert Louis Stevenson**, described Tavernier's encounter with Yosemite in her 1937 memoirs, *This Life I've Loved*: "This thing," the artist ranted, glowering at the canvas, "shows everything and tells nothing! It drives me mad to work on it!" He preferred more intimate and evocative views of nature rendered with a free and spontaneous handling of paint. His favorite subjects were simple—wooded glens, weathered buildings, and scenes of the coast. Within these, a human presence, either direct or implied, can typically be felt. Humanity, by extension, is most often shown in harmony with nature or in direct interaction with it.

Tavernier aimed to depict California terrain that other artists had not exploited, and thus he turned to the then-remote Monterey Peninsula. Although scenes of the San Francisco Bay Area and regions

farther north were also becoming popular, between 1875 and 1880 the unique terrain around Monterey came to epitomize what artists, critics, and the public perceived as a new style—one that embodied modernity in California painting and became a pictorial alternative to Yosemite. Yet the shift was not immediate. As late as 1880, a journalist for the *Californian* and co-founder of the Bohemian Club, **Daniel O'Connell (1849–1899)**, noted the continuing lack of enthusiasm for subjects that were less than awe-inspiring, stating that artists had so long "feasted upon the grand and massive that they no longer have a relish for nature in her quiet and more lovely aspects." The article continued: "Every spring we read of long pilgrimages to the Sierra and Oregon in search of subjects for pictures, yet a half hour's walk in any direction from our metropolis reveals subjects that **Corot** and the great French landscape masters would grow enthusiastic over."

In late 1875, Tavernier decided to make his home in Monterey, and there he became known for his scenes of the coast and visionary views of the terrain. At the same time, his recollections of the Red Cloud Agency remained vivid, and he continued to depict Native American subjects drawn both from his time on the Great Plains and, now, from his experiences in California. He also portrayed California pioneers and scenes of Monterey, representing its Spanish and Mexican heritage and blending these

cultural elements into his interpretations of the California landscape. His presence and paintings soon attracted other artists to the sleepy little town, establishing the foundation of the Monterey Peninsula art colony that flourished well into the twentieth century and beyond.

Critics and viewers at the time questioned and sometimes rejected the new trail that Tavernier and his California followers were blazing, with most concluding correctly that the approach was French in inspiration, thus explaining Tavernier's attraction to it. Also attributed to Tavernier's heritage was the fact that he sometimes exaggerated the truth. "Like most painters of the French School," wrote a *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewer (June 3, 1875), "Mr. Jules Tavernier produces landscapes and wood interiors in a style which may be said to go beyond nature; like a highly wrought novel founded on facts, there is a little of the natural with a good deal of the fantastical in his pictures."

Volcanoes and Nature's Magnitude

To be sure, Tavernier aimed to paint what was in his soul, not just his mind. Although the Monterey Peninsula served as the inspiration for many of these scenes, he frequently enhanced the setting's inherent drama to communicate both its ethereal beauty and its sublime and darker mysteries. At times in these paintings, as well as in his later depictions of Hawaiian volcanoes, he strayed significantly from topography, venturing into visionary realms to convey glimpses of nature's awe-inspiring power and grandeur, its *terribilità*.

When Tavernier left Monterey to return to San Francisco in 1879, he moved into a studio that he modeled in part after Félix Barrias's Paris atelier. The aesthetic exoticism of this "Heart of Bohemia" provided an atmosphere conducive to creative work and became a place where artists could meet, take classes, exhibit, and celebrate visiting luminaries. From there, Tavernier, like other artists of the period, went on sketching tours to California's scenic destinations. Although he painted a handful of views of the Yosemite Valley, he found greater inspiration in California's magnificent trees, especially in the redwoods of Sonoma County. A prolific painter, he



Artist's Rêverie, Dreams at Twilight, 1876

Oil on canvas 24" × 50"

Collection of Oscar and Trudy Lemer, long-term loan to the Capitol Art Program

returned from a six-week stay on the Russian River in 1883 with more than thirty landscapes, which included views of tree-lined ravines, quiet river scenes shimmering with sunrise or sunset reflections, and depictions of weathered cabins in the woods.

Tavernier's insatiable appetite for adventure eventually led him to exotic Hawaii, which offered a "new field—one that has not been touched by anyone." Moved by the beauty and power of nature, he painted oils, watercolours, and pastels of Hawaii's lush valleys and fiery volcanoes. Once again, his charisma and passion for new subjects inspired others to follow his lead. The Volcano school of painting that he founded lived on long after his death.

Conclusion

Tavernier died in Honolulu in 1889 at age forty-five without returning to the mainland or going home to France. Although his career was brief, during his fifteen years in California and Hawaii his intense creative energy spawned works unlike those of any other artist. In his pursuit of these and other "untouched" motifs, he changed perceptions about what was considered paintable, frequently inducing others to follow his example. His impor-

tance, therefore, should be judged not only for his achievements as an illustrator and as a painter but also for the extent of his influence. The transcontinental illustrations he made with Paul Frenzeny enhanced awareness and understanding of the American continent, bringing images and details of natural wonders and daily life into American parlours everywhere. In Monterey, he found and

advanced new subject matter, leading followers away from grandiose vistas toward a more intimate and emotional portrayal of nature that he had learned in France. In San Francisco, he became the center of artistic life and led the city's arts organizations. In Hawaii, he broke aesthetic ground by founding a new school of painting. For any one of these accomplishments, Tavernier deserves a place as



Carmel Mission on San Carlos Day in the Olden Time, 1875

Oil on canvas 18" × 29"

Collection of Bill and Merrily Karges



New Lake—Volcano of Kilauea, 1887
Oil on canvas 20" × 36"
Collection of Linda and Ron Borgman

an important nineteenth-century figure. For all of them, he is rightfully considered one of the West's most accomplished and adventuresome artists. 📖

Notes:

Author **Scott A. Shields, Ph.D.**, received both his master's degree and doctorate in art history from the **University of Kansas**, and is Associate Director and Chief Curator of the **Crocker Art Museum**.

Author and co-curator **Claudine Chalmers, Ph.D.**, received her master's degree in American Art and her Doctorate in American Civilization from the University of Nice, France. Her recent publication, *Chronicling the West for Harper's: Coast to Coast with Frenzeny & Tavernier in 1873–1874* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), details Frenzeny and Tavernier's adventurous cross-country sketching tour of the frontier for Harper's Weekly.

Additional research sources include: **Gene Hailey**, editor, *Jules Tavernier*, California Art Research Monographs 4 (San Francisco: Works Progress Administration, 1937); and **Betty Lochrie Hoag's** master's thesis *Jules Tavernier: Monterey's Knight of the Palette*, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1967. 113.

The exhibition **Jules Tavernier: Artist and Adventurer** features nearly 100 works of art by Tavernier and was organized by the **Crocker Art Museum**, where it was initially displayed from February 16 to May 11, 2014. Following the Crocker, the exhibition travelled to the **Monterey Museum of**

Art where it is on view until October 19. A 172-page hardcover colour catalogue, published by Pomegranate Communications, Inc. and the Crocker Art Museum, with essays by Claudine Chalmers, Scott A. Shields, and Alfred C. Harrison Jr. accompanies the exhibition.



Sunrise over Diamond Head, 1888
Oil on canvas 11 3/4" × 17 3/4"
Courtesy of the Honolulu Museum of Art. Gift of Frances Damon Holt in memory of John Dominis Holt, 2001 (9500.1)