



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

PARTNERS IN ILLUSION: WILLIAM AND ALBERTA BINFORD McCLOSKEY

Although there are a few noteworthy examples of husband and wife artist teams, the occurrence is unique indeed — even more unique is their ability to work together on the same projects.

by Elaine Adams

AN EXHIBITION AT THE BOWERS MUSEUM OF CULTURAL ART

ACCORDING TO CONTEMPORARY marriage/divorce statistics, one of the most frequent arguments experienced between a married couple is what program to watch on television. Imagine how incredible it must be for a couple with individual creative currents to decide what to paint together on the very same canvas. Somehow the McCloskeys, components of the **Victorian Age**, were successful at channeling in on the same artistic wavelength.

The exhibition, rightfully entitled *Partners in Illusion*, conjures up ideas of a team of supernatural performers in the art of deceiving the eye. However, the "deception" in the case of the McCloskeys is more than mere momentary "sleight of hand". The artistic talents of both William and Alberta are, to this day,

effectively and timelessly magical.

William Joseph McCloskey was born in Philadelphia in 1859. He studied for four years under **Thomas Eakins** (1844–1916) at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. **Alberta Binford** was born in Missouri around 1855. She was self-trained as a sculptor, pianist, writer and an amazingly accomplished painter. In 1882 the two met in Denver, Colorado at a *soirée* at the Opera House. The reason Alberta moved to Denver is unknown, but William had arrived there as a teacher of life

drawing and painting at the newly formed **Denver Academy of Art**. The following year, the couple married, and a year later, their daughter **Eleanor Alberta** was born. Two months after the birth of Eleanor, they moved to Los Angeles where, for the next year and a half, their work gained them an esteemed reputation as superior artists.

The active New York art scene managed to catch the attention of the McCloskeys' aspirations, particularly those of Alberta's, who seemed to be the more ambitious of the two. From 1886 to 1892, the couple lived in New York where they kept a studio in the center of the bustling art district. It is during these years in New York that the McCloskeys experienced their evident artistic growth.

In 1889, their son **William, Jr.** was born. From mid-1892 through mid-1893 the



William J. McCloskey

Untitled (Still Life, Tangerines) c. 1912 oil on canvas, 10" × 17"
Collection: Bowers Museum



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McCloskey family travelled to Europe and resided in both London and Paris where their works were exhibited and well received. During their stay in Paris, they became acquainted with Eakins' teacher, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) who honored the McCloskeys by presenting them with a letter of recommendation. After Europe, the McCloskeys returned to the United States.

Although it is clear that the couple painted many portraits together, as these paintings are signed "W.J. + A.B. McCloskey", there seems to be no evidence that they painted still-lives together. However, even the paintings they worked on independently look so stylistically alike that unless the painting is signed, it is very difficult to determine whose work it is. Alberta was actually more proficient in still-life painting than William, who had to adjust to it.

In 1888, two special paintings by William McCloskey appeared on exhibit at the National Academy of Design. They were the first of an important series by William and Alberta that would later be recognized as the McCloskeys' signature works of art. These paintings of tissue paper-wrapped oranges are, to this day, fresh in their content and so real-

istically appetizing that one is compelled to reach in and pull out a nice ripe sample. This dynamic duo discovered they had a talent for simulating certain textures, causing the eye to believe that something is real.

The McCloskeys were talented at painting various subject matter, including portraits and genre, (only two landscape paintings are known to exist, both by William). However, it is their still-life paintings that seem to be particularly desirable by today's public. Recently, in 1994, an oil painting by William McCloskey entitled *Oranges and Wrappers*, measuring 8 x 18 inches, appeared at auction through Butterfield & Butterfield in Los Angeles. The painting did not sell at the estimated value of between \$100,000 - \$150,000, rather it sold at a record price of \$425,000.

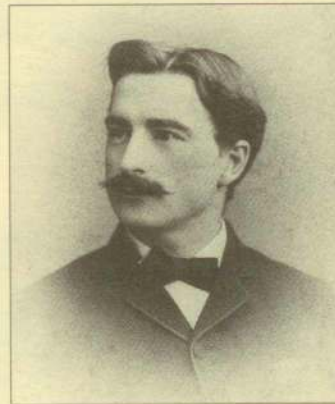
One is tempted to speculate on why the subject of tissue

paper-wrapped oranges would appeal to the McCloskeys, and why these paintings have endured with today's art viewing public? William was raised in Philadelphia where the masterful still-life paintings of the 18th century Peale family were well renowned, and may have contributed to his influence. Or, perhaps the McCloskeys' interest in fruit came from their year and a half spent in Los Angeles where they undoubtedly became acquainted with the booming citrus industry of the time. New York City, being a far cry from an orange grove, may have induced the McCloskeys' into daydreaming over Southern California's Edenic image.

Why should some of the McCloskey oranges be wrapped, while others are not? The obvious answer to this is that the textural variations between the crinkly paper and the skin-like surface of an orange would chal-

lenge any academic artist to prove his/her range of technical and interpretative skills. Upon further speculation, recalling that the Victorian Age was an era of modesty and piety, perhaps the intent of these wrapped and semi-wrapped oranges was to subtly seduce the audience into a higher consciousness.

In 1897, the cou-



Carte-de-visite photos of (left) Alberta Binford McCloskey, Photo by O.E. Tyler; and (right) William Joseph McCloskey, Photo by A.E. Rinehart. Photos courtesy of Bob Canete

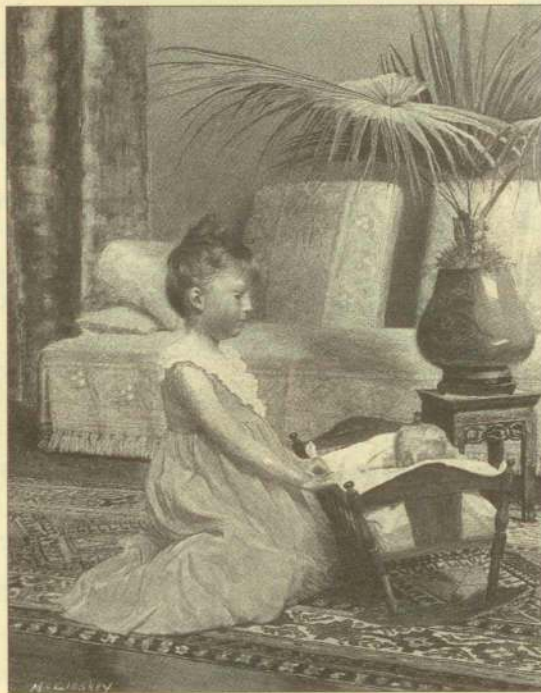


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ple returned to California settling in San Francisco where they earned a good living painting portraits (many together) of San Francisco's elite. In 1898, the couple surprisingly separated. The real reason for their separation remains a mystery. Nevertheless, it is a sad case that two creative minds who literally did most everything together would result in separate lives.

Alberta remained in San Francisco with their son and daughter, and continued to paint portraits and still-lives until 1906. In 1907 she became paralyzed, possibly due to her childhood spinal deformation. It is suggested that Alberta remained in her daughter Eleanor's care in Los Angeles. In 1911, Eleanor took Alberta to Jamaica, British West Indies, for her health, where she died suddenly a few months later.

After the marital separation, William suffered an emotional collapse and was admitted to a sanitarium in Michigan. After he was released, he spent three years at his family's home in Philadelphia. Several years remain unaccountable, but William did return to Los Angeles in 1915 to be with his son. William McCloskey continued to paint, although not as prolifically as before. Sadly, the works he created during his later years were refused by major exhibitions due to his traditional



Maternal Cares
(Attributed to Alberta)
watercolor, 19 1/2" x 15 1/2"
Collection: Bowers Museum

style, then considered *passé*. William died in 1941 at the Orange County Hospital.

In the 1970s, Eleanor McCloskey Gretmore Russell presented the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art with forty paintings by her parents. With this gift, the Bowers Museum is recognized as owning the largest collection of works by this husband and wife painting team. The William and Alberta McCloskey paintings will be on permanent exhibit in the museum's Mary M. Muth Gallery.

This exhibition is curated by the eminent California art histo-

rian, Dr. Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, who provided the museum with extensive research and biographical material on the McCloskeys. Previous to Dr. Moure's written material, there was virtually very little information available on these artists. Only Dr. William Gerdts, American art expert and historian, recognized the significance of the McCloskeys' works and included them in his 1976 book publication on American still life painting.

When viewing the McCloskey exhibition, Dr. Moure suggests that in order to truly appreciate these paintings one must "...proceed through the show, mentally stepping back into the era of horse drawn carriages, electric trolley, leg-o-mutton sleeves on dresses, and Victorian home furnishing. Then look upon these paintings and you may live for a moment in those times."

The author would like to thank Dr. Nancy Dustin Wall Moure for generously supplying biographical material and verbal information on the life and works of William and Alberta McCloskey. Dr. Moure's findings on these artists will be published in Partners in Illusion: Alberta Binford and William J. McCloskey published by the Bowers Museum in conjunction with the opening of this permanent collection.