



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

DOCUMENTING CALIFORNIA'S TRADITIONAL ARTS HERITAGE

William Wendt: Nature Undefined

by Will South, Ph.D.

IN 1911, WILLIAM WENDT WAS elected as president of the California Art Club, and, in many ways, he represented the essential nature of California Impressionism both stylistically and ideologically. No other California Impressionist so consistently essayed the sweeping, romantic grand landscape view as Wendt or painted them nearly so well, and no other painter so strongly equated his work with the ideology of Nature as Creation, and Nature as a spiritual path. Wendt was sincere and straightforward in his aesthetic pronouncements. Dapper, distinguished, and much admired by his followers in the Club, Wendt functioned as a visible example of what an artist should aspire to be. His ongoing career summarized the nineteenth-century idealism that was the foundation of early twentieth-century painting in the Southland.

William Wendt was born on February 20, 1865 in the small agricultural community of Bentzen in the Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, now part of Germany. His parents were Williamina Ludwig and William Wendt, a livestock trader. There is also record of a younger sister, Anna Wendt (later, Kasdorf).

As a boy, Wendt apprenticed to a local cabinetmaker, where he may have worked on painted furniture. At age fifteen, he received funds from one of his uncles to immigrate to the United States. He settled in Chicago, most likely among the German population living in the North Side, and was hired as a "staff painter" for a commercial art firm. A self-taught painter, he became a great technician through his power of observation.

At age twenty, Wendt enrolled at

the Bromley School of Art where he studied briefly under the epic landscape painter, John Franklin Waldo (1835-1920). Waldo was primarily a self-taught artist, but received some professional training at the Chicago Academy of Design under one of its founders, Henry Chapman Ford (1828-1894), who was known as "the first professional landscape painter in that city."

In 1889 William Wendt met the young Irish-born sculptor Julia Bracken (1871-1942) who had a studio in the same building on Wabash Avenue, directly across the

hall from Wendt's studio. The two quickly became good friends. Julia attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was the studio assistant of renowned sculptor Lorado Taft (1860-1936). Wendt also attended the Art Institute of Chicago, attending its evening classes. Both Julia and William continued to have strong ties to the school throughout their lives and held many exhibitions there.

Also at the Art Institute, Wendt met Chicago-born artist George Gardner Symons (1863-1930). The two became lifelong friends and



Sycamores Entangled, 1923
oil on canvas
32" × 36"
Collection of Joseph L. Moure



made several trips together, including to Europe and southern California between 1894 and 1906. Wendt was so captivated by California that after he and Julia developed a romantic relationship and married, the two decided to move to Los Angeles in July, 1906. Two months later they purchased a house at 2814 Sichel Street from artists **Elmer Wachtel (1864-1929)** and **Marion Kavanagh Wachtel (1876-1954)**.

At the time of their arrival, Wendt's technique and style were fully grounded in established landscape traditions in American art, amended by Barbizon and Impressionist approaches. He was not a rote follower of any one of these three main paths; his art was singular and confidently so. Wendt's vision, style, and expression would change little during his California years. Indeed, it was the combination of his confidence, experience, and impressive painting skills that almost instantly made Wendt the leader of southern California's emerging visual arts culture. From the outset, his authoritative landscape paintings of vistas that were familiar to southern Californians celebrated solidity, cleanliness and truth. The straightforwardness of his art related to Wendt's audience of mostly white, Christians in a way that modernism never could.

THE WENDTS BECAME ACTIVE members in southern California's burgeoning art community and in March of 1911, William Wendt was elected the second president of the California Art Club. During his six-year tenure he expanded the organization's audience and reputation by providing educational programs and added art exhibitions, including sending exhibitions to San Francisco. Wendt's tremendous prestige attracted nearly every professional painter and sculptor in southern California and even many artists from around the country to join the California Art Club.

In 1912 Wendt moved his studio to the Laguna Beach art colony, the same year he was elected Associate



William Wendt (1865-1947)
Photo by George Hurell (1904-1992)

member to the **National Academy of Design**. In 1918 he co-founded the **Laguna Beach Art Association**, which was comprised mainly of members of the California Art Club.

WENDT'S ART, AND THAT OF his peers, has been loosely—and imprecisely—bundled under the rubric of “California Impressionism.” This broad approach to landscape painting, once critically unquestioned and regionally preeminent, claimed less and less exhibition space in the post World War II era until nearly disappearing in the maze of 1950s hard-edge painting and abstract expressionism, 1960s pop and funk art, and the deluge of kinetic and performance art forms of the 1970s. To say that California had merely changed physically and socially would be to fall drastically short of describing the Golden State of the late-twentieth century—it had transformed. Decades of uncontrolled growth erased the emptiness of immense stretches of beach, poppy fields, and valleys, and the once-Arcadian landscape passed into legend.

During the past two decades there has been a resurgence of interest in California's early. This phenomenon may have less to do with their now coveted status on the commercial art market as it has to do with a nostalgia for a physically healthier, cleaner, and less frightening environment. Indeed, the current fascination with a pristine California may have largely to do with the collective recognition of the very simple and well-known

dictum that one does not know what one has until it is gone—and, the old California is gone. Though, to reduce Wendt's art to romantic artefact—to pretty pictures of a bejewelled, bygone era—is to drastically misunderstand both his art and his era. His paintings flowed from a genuine spiritual attachment to and respect for nature, feelings that underpinned his aesthetic and his expressive ambitions.

The art of William Wendt is alternately monumental and intimate, yet always architectural and geometrically stable with a sense of design elements emphasizing aesthetic shapes. His subject matter does not evoke the transient, his forms do not dissolve, and his finished pictures do not conjure the ephemeral either physically or philosophically. In short, his art is not Impressionist by any stretch of the professional imagination. The proof is simply in the looking. The Impressionists painted parasols in the sun, people in the street, trains and boats moving to and fro, and the occasional dispossessed café habitué immobilized by absinthe, all in shimmering, swift, evanescent strokes. In point of view and painting practices, they embraced the common and the fleeting, the mundane and the mortal.

By contrast, Wendt always took a metaphoric high road and painted with his eyes lifted to the hills, ever searching for the elevated and the permanent, the extraordinary and the eternal. The Impressionists welcomed the modern world while Wendt saw painting as meditation

by way of the naturalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) on the sanctity and peace inherent in the wooded pond. Though a painter of the twentieth century for most of his career, Wendt did not look at the modern world of machines, planes, and skyscrapers except to avoid it. Wendt's firm views on art and its relationship to nature were expressed in a 1901 letter he wrote to fellow artist Samuel Harkness McCrea (1867-1941) after visiting New York galleries:

While in New York I saw pictures until my brain reeled and my feet were worn and sore from 5th Ave. pavement. God, but I was tired of pictures such as I saw. Away from the unwholesome, unhealthy productions of so many painters, with nature undefiled, I hope to take courage again and trust that my mind may be normal enough to interpret her sanely.¹

Typical of Wendt's work at that time is *Arcadian Hills* of 1910, a painting that summarizes his artistic

personality: the image is clear, linear, rhythmic, and imbued with a sensitively controlled palette (one retaining vestiges of his Tonalist origins). The composition is an elegant matrix of intersecting curves, yet the net effect presents a unified, dynamic earth against a clear sky. For Wendt, a sense of enormity could be implied rather than dictated, that is, he did not go the route of Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) or Thomas Moran (1837-1926) and attempt to represent epic grand-scale landscapes; Wendt made the simple into the big. How fully conscious Wendt was that he was rejecting the expectations of his admirers, or even his fellow artists, was made clear in his own words in 1914:

The true artist does not paint to please the public—but he holds the interest of all who think, for a work of art expresses the mind of its workman. In it are clearly reflected his vices and his weaknesses, as well as his virtues. He may deceive men, perhaps, but not inspiration, which will not



Arcadian Hills, 1910
oil on canvas
40" × 45"

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be duped by hypocrisy.

The painter or interpreter of nature loves nature, and approaches her with reverence. The painting of a simple hillside, a tree, a stream, or a quiet brook, means as much to him as an awe-striking “scene.” He finds new secrets in simple things, and toils long in his search for the message, which is for him alone.¹¹

INDEED, WENDT’S RELATIONSHIP to earlier American landscape painting can be summarized this way: he substituted humility for the grandiosity of the Hudson River School. Instead of **Frederic E. Church’s** (1826-1900) *Niagara Falls*, Wendt gives us a marsh; instead of Bierstadt’s *Sierra Nevada*, Wendt gives us rolling hills near his home. His penchant for finding the Sublime in the less than spectacular was the result of a complex intellectual debt to his Swedenborgian-tinged spirituality believing the Divine was everywhere. The precedents for artistic intimacy were set by Tonalism; and the idea that subject matter could

be taken from everyday life was best exemplified by French Impressionism. Wendt extended the ideological core of early American landscape painting—that divinity and nature are linked—without duplicating the strategies of those artists, and without surrendering his own artistic identity to either Tonalism or Impressionism.

The essence and lucidity of Wendt’s art in 1915 is fully present in his large-scale work *The Silent Summer Sea*. At forty by fifty inches, it is most likely a painting that was preceded by outdoor sketches, and then finished in the studio. It is a painting of remarkable angularity, sharpness, and vivid contrasts. The shore is warm yellowish-brown, almost wholly uninterrupted except for a few clumps of greyed green, set in front of a flat sea of blue. The ocean’s horizon is pressed close to the top of the large canvas, allowing room for the characteristic Pacific sky of pale green and violet. The water hardly moves, the surf is barely audible in the few small upswings of white paint. The stillness, distance, and overarching quiet are

the hallmarks of Wendt’s most personal expression—nature is where respite is. Open, vast, and serene, *Silent Summer Sea* is a homage to natural grandeur, a sensual success in terms of sheer colour, and an object lesson in-what he felt should be left out of the painting.

WILLIAM WENDT HAD AN illustrious career and his innovative style of landscape painting won him many awards. However, with the advent of modernism in the 1930s and 1940s, California landscape painting fell into decline.

On June 22, 1942 Julia Bracken Wendt passed away at their Laguna Beach home. Shortly after his wife’s death, Wendt’s own health began to fail, though he continued to show his artwork in several exhibitions, including at the **Cincinnati Art Museum**, Laguna Beach Art Association and **Pasadena Art Institute**. Perhaps sensing his mortality, in March of 1946 Wendt converted to his wife’s religion, Roman Catholicism. In mid-December he suffered a heart attack and less than two weeks later he died of complications. Wendt was buried alongside Julia at the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Orange, California. In August of the following year, the Laguna Beach Art Association held a duo-memorial exhibition for the man known as the “Dean of California Art,” William Wendt, and fellow Laguna Beach Art Association Founder and California Art Club President, **Edgar Payne** (1883-1947).

We continue to be compelled by William Wendt’s paintings because of how he made them special: through discipline, hard work and refinement of his craft. We find them pleasurable for their sensitive orchestrations of rhythms, shapes, colour and light. We prize them for their relative rarity, as few artists share his level of technical and poetic accomplishment. Most important, though, we are moved by them spiritually and intellectually because Wendt endows his subject, the landscape, with formal grandeur in such a way that we rec-



Arcadian Hills, 1910
oil on canvas
40" × 45"



The Silent Summer Sea, 1915
oil on canvas
40" × 50"



Seaside Cottages, c. 1930
oil on canvas
30" × 36"
Private Collection

ognize the paramount status of the environment, its importance and centrality to our lives. While this message is not tied to any ideology of the past, its spiritual and intellectual significance is germane to us today, and will continue to be in the future.

More than one hundred years ago the philosopher **John Dewey** (1859-1952) recognised that our experiences provide us with a wealth of knowledge that is connected and applicable to all our other experiences. For example, to see a picture of a mountain is one aesthetic experience, while physically walking up that same mountain is another—the second is inseparable from the first, as each experience informs the other. As we appreciate the beauty of Wendt's painted surfaces, we feel and know this beauty to be intrinsic to our own environment. As we act to protect and keep our environment as special as William Wendt saw it, we reconfirm his art, his beliefs, and our own—all inseparable, each one informing the other.

Notes:

*The author, Will South, Ph.D., is chief curator at the Dayton Art Institute, and author of several art publications, including: **Guy Rose: American Impressionist**,*



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*The exhibition, **In Nature's Temple: The Life and Art of William Wendt**, is on view from November 9 through February 8, 2009 at the Laguna Art Museum and is accompanied by a 320-page book, published in partnership with The Irvine Museum. See Exhibitions Listing.*

¹ Wendt to McCrea, 5 May 1901

² ntitled Statement, William Wendt, *Western Art*, August 1914, 20.