



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909

Sam Hyde Harris (1889–1977): A World of Colour and Atmosphere

by Elaine Adams

SAM HYDE HARRIS WAS A MAN OF DICHOTOMIES. HE WAS RAISED IN A WORKING-CLASS FAMILY, yet was comfortable in the social arena. He was a leading commercial designer for the transportation industry, but did not know how to drive an automobile. In his commercial work Harris often used bold colours with dramatic contrasts, however, his finest landscape paintings are known for their subtleties and tonal atmospheric effects. Altogether, his strength was in combining his own personal observations to create connections with audiences in ways that captivate the mind and stimulate emotions.



Blue and Orange, c. 1932

16" × 20"

Private Collection

Samuel "Sam" Hyde Harris was born on February 9, 1889, in Brentford, Middlesex, England. His father was **David Remnant Harris (1854–**

1919); his mother was **Eliza Hyde Harris (1859–1892)**, his father's second wife. Sam was the fifth of seven children and the oldest child from the second marriage.

His mother passed away when he was only three years old, leaving his father to raise a large family alone.

In his teens, an elderly neighbour befriended Sam and encouraged the boy to follow his natural talent for making art. Sam pursued his passion, and at age fourteen began working as a commercial artist for the London-based photoengraving firm of **Andre & Sleigh**. He had worked there for less than a year when he was presented with a letter of recommendation that stated, "We have the pleasure in stating that Samuel Harris has given every satisfaction during the eight or nine months he has been engaged in our Artist Department." The reference letter allowed Sam to pursue his future art career in America.

In the fall of 1903, the Harris family embarked on the Atlantic liner *The Cedric* from Liverpool and arrived at New York's Ellis Island on November 27. The family settled in Los Angeles in 1904, where Sam's father and half-brothers began a slate tile and roofing business. Sam began his commercial career three years later in 1906 with **Charles R. Mogul** and **Aaron E. Kilpatrick**, for whom he worked as a billboard painter, as well as a letterer and sign painter for the exteriors of buildings as high as



six stories. Kilpatrick was a renowned landscape artist who studied under prominent California landscape painter and founding member of the **California Art Club, William Wendt (1865–1946)**.

In 1906, at the same time that he began employment as a sign painter, Harris enrolled in evening art classes taught by plein air landscape artist **Hanson Puthuff (1875–1972)**, which were held in Puthuff's studio on Avenue 52 in Eagle Rock. Puthuff and *Los Angeles Times* art critic **Antony**

LEFT:
Sam Hyde Harris

BELOW:
Phoebe Mulholland Harris and Sam Hyde Harris in Costume, circa 1940
Photograph collection of Harris Family



Anderson (1863–1939) founded the **Los Angeles Art Students League**, which was located in **Blanchard Hall** on Hill Street, where Harris also studied. His association with Puthuff inspired Harris' fine art career and the two artists became life-long friends. Harris' early works particularly show a strong influence from Puthuff, with their similarities in fluid brushstrokes and plein air subject matter.

Approximately five years later, Harris enrolled at the **Henry W. Cannon Art School**, also located in Blanchard Hall. There, he studied under California Impressionist painter **Frank Tolles Chamberlin (1873–1961)**. He would later also study with avant-garde painter and colour theorist **Stanton McDonald-Wright (1890–1973)**. It was McDonald-Wright who advised Harris to think before putting paint to his fine art canvas by focusing on composition and colour in a small area, rather than regarding the overall work, as he would with his commercial work.

IN 1913, AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-FOUR, Harris returned to Europe where he spent five and a half months travelling through England, France, and Belgium visiting art galleries and museums and studying the works of the Old Masters. He was particularly inspired by the paintings of two British artists of the Romantic Movement who were also members of the Royal Academy, **John Constable (1776–1837)** and **J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851)**. Constable distinguished himself as an artist who emphasized "feeling." According to the 1998 biography by **Ronald Parkinson** titled *John Constable: The Man and His Art*, Constable expressed his passion for landscape painting in a letter to his friend **John Fisher**, "...painting is but another word for feeling." Prior to Constable, landscapes were typically used as backgrounds to set off the more important figural or historic subjects. Turner, on the other hand, succeeded in emphasizing the landscape as his primary subject with his unique and imaginative approach to utilizing a high-key colour theory and mysterious atmospheric effects. Upon examining the works of Sam Hyde Harris, with their reliance on emotional intensity, strong colour, and



Canyon Walls, c. 1920s

Oil on canvas panel 16" × 12"

Private collection

Courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts

atmospheric effects in landscape painting, one can sense the admiration he had for Constable and Turner. After Harris returned to Los Angeles, he continued his commercial art business, however, it was with increased fervour to develop his own fine art.

Harris strongly believed that dedicated training was essential. He wrote, "... natural talent is highly overrated. The maxim in painting is correct training and a heck of a lot of application. A person can dig it out for himself, but if he does, he'll waste a lot of valuable time learning the preliminary mechanics. You've got to study before you go on your own, that's very important." Harris eventually taught painting privately and, in 1935, began teaching at **Chouinard School of Art** in Los Angeles, as well as at various other art organizations. He emphasized composition to his students as the "backbone of art" and stressed to "keep it simple." As an avid plein air painter, Harris stated, "I love the outdoors. I don't belong to any church, but I approach my work with reverence. You have to want to paint landscapes, you must love the outdoors and you have to be willing to sweat."

The six-foot-three Harris was known to enjoy martinis and cigars, and he had a quick sense of humour. Although from humble beginnings, Harris was self-assured and sociable, but never a braggadocio. In an article featured in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 30, 1952,



Silhouette, c. 1920

Oil on canvas mounted on board 16" × 20"

Private Collection



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Barn in the Fog, c. 1925
Oil on canvas mounted on board 16" × 20"
Private Collection



Arroyo Seco, c. 1930
Oil on canvas 25" × 30"
Private Collection

the writer described Harris as, "...the most 'unarty' painter around. He never goes off into aesthetic burbles about mysterious objectives. He is as 'depressed' about modern art as the next guy. And he works unaffectedly in a mechanic's smock with a dead cigar in his mouth."

ON JANUARY 15, 1917, HARRIS married **Phoebe Katherine Mulholland (1896–1978)**, whose uncle was **William Mulholland (1855–1935)**, the self-taught civil engineer who designed and built the 233-mile-long Los Angeles aqueduct to bring water from Owens Valley to the San Fernando Valley, thereby propelling Los Angeles into becoming the most populated city in California and the second most populous city in the United States. When the aqueduct project began in 1905, Los Angeles' population was just over 201,000. After its completion in 1913, the city grew rapidly, adding some 1 million residents by 1930.

At the time of Sam and Phoebe's marriage, the Mulholland name was famous in Los Angeles and frequently in the news, although at times controversial. Sam and Phoebe had an active social life and mingled with L.A.'s haute society. In a circa 1940 photograph taken at the Annual Otis Art Institute Costume Ball in which the theme was the deep sea environment, Phoebe and Sam are standing posed in elaborate costumes in which Phoebe is a mermaid and Sam appears to be some type of fanciful flying fish. A year after their marriage, their first son **Donald Hyde (1918–1997)** was born, followed by **Samuel Hugh (1919–2018)** and **Bruce Richard (1921–1944)**.

Harris developed a reputation for doing excellent commercial artwork, and opened his own studio at 113 W. 6th Street in Los Angeles, which he named the **Sam H. Harris, Posters, Art Titles, Letterings**. His business began to flourish and in 1919 he moved his office to 631 S. Spring Street on the 6th floor of the **Realty Board Building** where he remained until a 1938 fire destroyed the building.

In 1920 Harris was hired by the **Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Company** to work on their poster advertising campaign. His roster



Morning Glory, c. 1938
Oil on canvas 30" × 36"
Private Collection

of prestigious clients included **Southern Pacific Railroad, Union Pacific Railroad, Santa Fe Railway, and the Pacific Electric "Red Cars."** As the artist never learned to drive, he relied on the Red Cars for his Los Angeles-area transportation and was certainly eligible to design their promotional campaigns extolling passenger benefits. Harris' prolific work for the railroads was recognized in 1997 when the **California State Railroad Museum** in Sacramento held an exhibition titled *Sam Hyde Harris: Railroad Advertising Artist*. He also worked for several non-transportation businesses, such as **Van de Kamp Bakeries**, for whom he created the famous Dutch blue windmill trademark and lettering.

As his commercial business was increasing, Harris felt freer to begin exhibiting his plein air works. His first recorded exhibition was in 1920, the same year he joined the California Art Club. He exhibited *Sand Dunes* at the Club's *11th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition* held at the **Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art** in Exposition Park (now **Natural History Museum of Los Angeles**

County). From that time on, he exhibited his work and won numerous awards. Harris created many paintings of his immediate surroundings in the San Gabriel Valley and nearby San Pedro Harbor. In the 1920s and 1930s, he and Hanson Puthuff went on numerous painting trips together, particularly to pristine areas of Arizona and California. Harris also painted scenes of working-class life, especially when such scenes were popular during the Depression era, a subject familiar to him from his early upbringing.

Unlike in his commercial work, Harris did not create his fine art to win mass appeal. Nevertheless, his fine art achieved popular acclaim and sold well, and received abundant recognition from his peers. He was the recipient of more than 100 awards and purchase prizes from colleges, community organizations, and leading art associations. Over the years, he became involved in several art organizations, including **Artists of the Southwest, Mid-Valley Artists Guild, San Gabriel Fine Arts Association, Glendale Art Association, Valley Art Guild, and San Fernando Art Association**. His

involvement in the art community, in addition to his jovial personality and leadership skills, garnered him the role of president of three organizations, **San Gabriel Artists Guild, Laguna Beach Art Association, and Whittier Art Association**. His special honors included recognition as a fellow of the **American Institute of Fine Arts** and life membership in the California Art Club.

THE 1930S BROUGHT ON THE Great Depression and Modernism. Modernist art was beginning to show up in prominent exhibitions, and many artists were indignant in what they saw as a decline in art. In 1936 the **Society for Sanity in Art** in support of representational art forms without overt social commentary was founded in Chicago by **Josephine Hancock Logan**, a poet and leading patron of the **Art Institute of Chicago**. The society's branches grew around the country and Harris became a strong advocate. In the February 16, 1971 issue of the local publication *Alhambra Post-Advocate*, the eighty-two-year-old outspoken Sam Hyde Harris expressed, "The modernists rule the roost now. I won't even enter



Sam Hyde Harris and Marion Dodge Harris



Wash Day, Sunset Beach (San Pedro Harbor)
Oil on canvas mounted on board 12" × 16"
Private Collection

some of my paintings in their contests. I've seen some I liked, but most of it is non-understandable. There are three criteria for judging a painting. What did the artist have to say, did he say it and was it worth saying. If an artist can answer those three questions, then he has a work of art."

Although the modernist movement began dominating art circles, Harris' traditional paintings continued to receive positive attention from the press. In a review published in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 31, 1941 of Harris' solo exhibition held at **Armand DuVannes Gallery** in west Los Angeles, art critic **Arthur Millier** described some of the works from the exhibition and, thereby, provides us with insight today: "Harris' finest piece is *Rain*, a scene of hills under cloud and sun. It achieves dignity through fine space composition and variety through color and atmosphere. This Southland painter knows trees as the poetic *The Grove* and *Arcadia* testify. His best pictures present broad effects. When he over crowds with details the results are less distinguished. Harbor and city provide subjects which he paints descriptively and poetically?"

In his later years, Harris mentored California Art Club artist **Frank Ordaz (b. 1956)**, who at the age of thirteen

began getting advice from Harris. Ordaz recounts, "Mr. Harris was eccentric and quirky, but was very lovable, kind, and generous with his time. He typically had a cigar or tobacco stick in his mouth with tobacco juice dripping down his

chin onto his neck. When I saw him, he was usually dressed in a bathrobe and bedroom slippers, and didn't comb his hair. He was completely focused on his art and telling stories, and he always stressed the importance of painting out of doors in natural light. A few years after he passed away, I painted a portrait of him. It is a work I dearly cherish and will never sell?"

IN 1944 AT THE AGE OF FIFTY-FIVE and after twenty-seven years of marriage, Sam and Phoebe Harris divorced. On August 28, 1945, Sam married **Marion Dodge (1904–1998)**, a librarian at the **University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)**, whom he had met at one of his evening art classes. He moved his home and commercial art business from Los Angeles to 222 Hidalgo Street in Alhambra in an area known as "Artists' Alley."

In its heyday, Artists' Alley attracted leading Western-genre motion picture celebrities and fine artists, including **Tom Mix (1880–1940)**, **Will Rogers (1879–1935)**, **Charles M. Russell (1864–1926)**, **Edward Borein (1872–1945)**, **Maynard Dixon (1875–1946)**, and **James "Jimmy" Swinnerton (1875–**



Arroyo Grove, c. 1940s
Oil on Masonite panel 16" × 20"
Courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts



Desert Design, c. 1945
Oil on canvas 30" × 40"
Collection of Gardena High School
Class of Summer 1945

1974). In the 1930s and 1940s, the area was home to western landscape artists **Jack Wilkinson Smith (1873–1949)**, **Clyde Forsythe (1885–1962)**, **Frank Tenny Johnson (1874–1939)**, and animal sculptor **Eli Harvey (1860–1957)**. During the summers, the renowned *Saturday Evening Post* artist **Norman Rockwell (1894–1978)** stayed and painted at Artists' Alley as well. The artists shared many painting trips to California's Mojave Desert. Harris became friends with Swinnerton, who inspired him to paint desert scenes. In addition, the Arroyo Seco, Chavez Ravine, and San Pedro Harbor became favourite Los Angeles-area locations of inspiration for Harris to paint. The spirit of the Old West and the tradition of landscape painting at Artists' Alley was conducive to Harris' own interest as an artist. In 1950 after the passing of Jack Wilkinson Smith, Harris purchased Smith's studio located at 16 Champion Place and became the last artist to reside at Artists' Alley.

Howard Burke, the art editor of the *Los Angeles Examiner*, described Harris' unique charisma in an article dated June 5, 1960, titled *Harris' Brush Imparts Drama*: "This debonair artist has a sunny personality that is transmitted directly to his paintings, reflecting

the light, atmosphere and cheerful California scene to the fullest." Just twelve days before Sam Hyde Harris's passing on May 30, 1977, a retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the **Alhambra Community Hospital**. The *San Gabriel Sun* wrote, "With his strong compositions and subtle colors, Sam Hyde Harris captured a time and a feeling long past in a motorized and suburbanized southern California. . . . The past lives on in the eloquence of his paintings."

Sam Hyde Harris reflected his own multifaceted character in his work. His paintings are at the same time rugged and refined, bold and subtle, controlled and spontaneous. He often pushed the horizon line to exaggerated levels that resulted in unusual panoramic perspectives. Altogether, Harris' interpretation of the world he saw was complex, beautiful, and well-rounded. Through his work, Sam Hyde Harris continues to compel us to have a fascinating and enjoyable visit with him and his art. 📖

Notes:

Elaine Adams is Executive Director and CEO of California Art Club, as well as the Editor-in-Chief of the California Art Club Newsletter.

Sources for this article include:

Who Was Sam? The Art of Sam Hyde Harris by **Marian Yoshiki-Kovinick**, published in 2007 in conjunction with the exhibition of the same title held at the Pasadena Museum of History

Sam Hyde Harris: A Retrospective edited by **Maurine St. Gaudens** with essays by **Marian Yoshiki-Kovinick** and **Gary Lang**, published by Schiffer Publishing Ltd., Atglen, PA in 2007

The Paintings of Sam Hyde Harris: A Retrospective Exhibition edited by **Jean Stern** with articles by **Ruth Westphal** and **Jean Stern**, Published by Petersen Publishing Co, Los Angeles, California in 1980

Sam Hyde Harris, The Atmosphere of the Southland by **Jeffrey Morseburg**

Distinguished Artist Series by **Ruth Westphal**

Pioneers of Artists' Alley by **Elaine Adams**, published in California Art Club Newsletter, summer 2007

California Art Club Historical Membership Roster

Traditional Fine Arts Organization, Inc., an online art history research source developed by **John Hazeltine**



Frank Ordaz (b. 1956)
Portrait of Sam Hyde Harris
Oil on linen 20" × 16"
Collection of the artist