

## California Scene Painting: The Illustrative and Highly Skilled Art Movement

(A slightly different version of this article was published in the California Art Club Newsletter, Winter 2017.)

The signature painting in *Narrative Visions*, an exhibition at the Hilbert Museum of California Art, is *San Dimas Train Station*. Depicting a 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden train depot with a sloping roof, it was completed in 1933 by influential Los Angeles artist Millard Sheets. The painting includes a man reading a newspaper and a second man, illuminated by a narrow-beam light, standing several feet to his left. As a poignant and lonely setting that we might have seen in an old movie, it is a classic example of California Scene Painting. This movement, a reflection of American Scene Painting, emerged from California's evolving culture nearly 100 years ago. Its style visually relates stories about people's everyday lives as they gathered together for work and relaxation, at a time when our state was growing rapidly. Its predominantly figurative style is infused with color and harmonious composition.



Millard Sheets, *San Dimas Train Station* (1933)  
Watercolor on paper, 15 x 22 inches

### ***Inaugural Exhibition***

*Narrative Visions: 20<sup>th</sup> Century California Art From the Hilbert Collection*, the inaugural show at the Hilbert Museum in Orange, California, opened in February 2016. For this exhibition, curator Gordon McClelland selected 106 California Scene Paintings from Mark and Jan Hilbert's 1,000 plus painting collection of this genre. These carefully rendered oils, watercolors and gouaches feature landscapes, cityscapes and rural scenes as backdrops for people at work and at play; the paintings' general characteristics are familiar subject matter, passion in execution, skilled illustration and generally vibrant colors. McClelland wrote for the exhibition's wall didactics: "Art can serve as a window to the past. This is particularly true when referring to paintings where the artist chose to visually tell a story or capture a scene of everyday life. Through the years, a large

number of California artists have shared this vision of producing narrative art.” A significant portion of this art also relates stories about California’s growing multicultural population at that time, which included people from Mexico, other Latin countries, China and Japan. As California Scene Painting evolved over the years, its works absorbed elements of expressionism and cubism, but not the edgier aspects of modernism and abstraction.

### ***Study of California Scene Painting***

Mark and Jan Hilbert, the Hilbert Museum’s founders, lovingly collected the paintings in this exhibition (and many more to be in future exhibitions) over a 25-year period. To amass this singular collection, the couple researched 20<sup>th</sup> century California art through extensive reading, discussions with art historians and travel to the world’s art capitals. They went on many trips to Europe, perusing the works of old masters, and training their art collecting eyes to understand the importance of color, line, composition and subject matter. After extensive study of these paintings, they concluded that California Scene Paintings compared favorably in quality to the work they were viewing on the continent; and the California paintings were far more affordable.



**Mary Robinson Blair, *The Circus* (1940s)  
Watercolor, 14 x19.5 inches**

The paintings featured in *Narrative Visions* focus on culturally relevant settings in California, primarily from the 1930s through the 1970s. They illustrate people in cities and towns, harbors and ranches, cafes, gas stations, theaters and schoolhouses, at work and at play. They also depict how landscapes, architecture and lifestyles have evolved in California throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. McClelland explains: “California has gone through many radical changes in commerce, culture and physical appearance. It has transitioned from a largely agrarian society to one built around the marketing of ideas and products.” He adds, “Small cities have grown into huge cities, and rural towns are now linked by sprawling housing tracts instead of orange groves. During that time, California was also a matrix for the birth of many sub-cultures, including the bohemians, the beat generation, surfers, hippies and hipsters.”



### ***Film Studio Influences***

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the movie studios, especially Disney, employed so many people in animation and backdrop painting that thousands of artists moved to Southern California to work in this industry. And many of these artists created their own artworks in their spare time, adding to the large number of California Scene Paintings. Some of these artists employed in their works the dark visions from the movie genre known as Film Noir or the jubilant look of Disney cartoons. In addition, as art historian/curator Susan M. Anderson writes in the book, *American Scene Painting: California 1930s & 1940s*, "They eschewed realistic detail and preferred well-defined outlines, undulating curves and serpentine lines... and relied on representational clichés and compositional schemes. The artists were also masters of characterization and the depiction of action or movement." Several paintings in *Narrative Visions* reflect these film influences.



**Lee Blair, *Mary by the Sea* (1934)  
Oil on canvas, 34 x 48 inches**

### ***Retelling the History of California Scene Painting***

*Narrative Visions* provides the opportunity to retell the story of California Scene Painting, which was previously told in periodic exhibitions and books. This story is further elucidated in the coffee table book, *Windows in Time: California Scene Paintings from the Hilbert Collection*. As Mark Hilbert writes in the book, "We recognized that this important art movement had been largely overlooked, so we studied the period...we discovered the works of Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel (1525-1569). His paintings depicted everyday life in the sixteenth century, but the parallel with California Scene Paintings was unmistakable."

Regarding the evolution of watercolor painting, Hilbert writes, "They pushed the development of art, especially watercolors by using large formats, stronger colors, and bold, sweeping brushstrokes...when the first California watercolors were shown at an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, they had to be displayed in a separate room from watercolors from the rest of the country, because they would completely overwhelm them if exhibited together."

Jean Stern, Irvine Museum Executive Director, who contributed the main essays to the Hilbert Museum book, writes: “Paintings with urban settings depict people walking down the street or riding in cars and buses. There are people at picnics, parades, circuses, and street fairs—even riding a carousel. Paintings of rural areas portray activities associated with farm life: haying, planting, harvesting dairy cows, or riding tractors.”



Preston Blair, *Bunker Hill* (1938)  
Watercolor on paper, 22 x 29 inches

### ***Many Industrious Artists***

While *Narrative Visions* includes more than 100 artworks, descriptions of 11 of them, below, reveal its richness and variety in subject matter and painting style. Several of these artists worked in the film industry, and their paintings were influenced by the animation and preparatory work they did for the movies.

Mary Robinson Blair's *The Circus*, a watercolor painted in the 1940s, was conceived of and possibly sketched while the artist was on location for the Disney movie *Dumbo*. This moody vision of a circus includes tall banners and people shrouded in darkness. The artist apparently took license to convey the darker, behind the scenes view of a circus that few of us ever see.

*Mary By The Sea* (1934) by Mary's husband Lee Blair demonstrates his admiration for his wife, and conveys the relationship of the artistic couple. They often worked together in the film studios and exhibited their oils and watercolors together. This lovingly executed portrait shows Mary on lunchtime break, examining a painting she is working on, while enjoying the fresh ocean breezes at her back. It recalls a peaceful time between the two world wars, before Southern California's population exploded.

Preston Blair's *Bunker Hill* (1938) is a dark moody watercolor of the once elegant Los Angeles Bunker Hill neighborhood. Painted at dusk with the sun setting in the distance and one Victorian



home lit up, it evokes a turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Blair was painting this work, the neighborhood had begun to decline and artists were moving in. This is a nostalgic illustration of a classic wood and stone building from a bygone era—replaced by towering steel and glass in the now downtown L.A.



**Phil Dike, *Plaza on Sunday* (1942)**  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

***Reproduced in Fortune Magazine***

The 1939-42 *Sunday Afternoon in the Plaza de Los Angeles*, a large oil by Phil Dike, is a lush tree-filled scene of a downtown L.A. plaza. Hundreds of people fill the many benches or lounge on the green grass. Some are returning from a day's work, while others, such as a mother holding her baby, are simply relaxing. This egalitarian scene, painted in the wake of World War II, brings the viewer to a seemingly simpler time. It was also reproduced in full color in the 1940s in *Fortune Magazine*.

Fletcher Martin's oil painting *Lad from the Fleet* (1938) illustrates a boxer from the U.S. Navy in a match in the Port of Los Angeles in Long Beach. This depiction of the boxer during momentary rest between rounds recalls some of the classic American Scene Paintings by artist George Bellows. Martin had been a lightweight boxer in the navy in the 1920s.

*Strolling down Washington Street* (1946), a watercolor by Chinese American Dong Kingman, is a fanciful and jubilant scene of two men, accompanied by two bears. The odd quartet is strolling down a San Francisco street behind a flock of roosters. They pass by a clunky old car, a pool hall, a fish market, a sign that reads, "Hungg Fungg Kungg Tungg," and another that reads, "What Nuts Rooms Hotals." (Spellings are just as they are in the painting.) Completed just after World War II ended, this cartoonish style painting offers a respite from the dark mood that this country was still experiencing.



**Dong Kingman, *Strolling down Washington Street* (1946)**  
Watercolor on paper, 16 x 21 inches



**Fletcher Martin, *Bucolic* (1938)**  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 52 inches



Another Martin oil painting is *Bucolic* (1938), of a couple relaxing on the ground in a rural setting. This painting's theme is more generic than most artworks from this movement. Yet its formal structure and carefully drawn figures exemplify the artist's skills, while evoking the figures in the Mexican murals. In fact, the artist worked with the Mexican muralist Alfaro Siqueiros.

### ***A Carousel in L.A.'s Lincoln Park***

Barse Miller's 1937 oil, *If I had the Wings of an Angel*, is a close-up of a carousel in L.A.'s Lincoln Park. The carefully drawn jubilant horses and riders, along with the carousel's rococo influenced architecture, contrast with the brooding young man and his girlfriend in the foreground. This work, painted during the Great Depression, contrasts people enjoying themselves with others who are undergoing difficult times.



**Barse Miller, *If I had the Wings of an Angel* (1937)  
Oil on canvas, 26 x 36 inches**

*Toonerville* (1946) by Dorothy Sklar is a colorful watercolor of a small amusement park funhouse and adjoining attractions, located in Santa Monica. The cartoonish drawings of buildings, pathways and children enjoying themselves bring the viewer to a time when simple pleasures were easily attainable. That the artist is said to have painted this scene from her parked car, with an easel attached to the steering wheel, adds to its charm.

Burr (Berenice) Singer's *Touch-up* (c. 1943) illustrates a young African American woman, applying her lipstick in a Los Angeles nightclub. With its controversial subject matter, considering the racial unrest in the area at that time, it demonstrates the diverse themes employed in this genre, as well as the freedom that artists claimed to choose their own themes.

When the Hilbert Museum opened its doors, the art cognoscenti took note. Soon after *Narrative Visions* inspired 1,000 plus visitors a month to see the show. And art lovers have

developed a new appreciation for California Scene Painting—a style portraying California life during a time of rapid growth and change. These paintings have stood the test of time and have helped propel the Hilbert to its ranking as a five-star rated art museum. As Jean Stern explains, “The Hilbert Museum is of immense benefit to the people of California, particularly to those of us in Orange County, as it affords the opportunity to see and understand art of the mid 20th century. There is no other museum anywhere that has dedicated itself to this remarkable period of California Art.”

*A 336-page catalog, Windows in Time: California Scene Paintings From the Hilbert Collection, published by California Scene Press, written by Mark Hilbert and Jean Stern, includes 80 percent of the images from Narrative Visions and has 250 images in total.*

Liz Goldner: <http://www.lizgoldner.com>

California Art Club: <http://www.californiaartclub.org/>

Hilbert Museum of California Art: <http://www.hilbertmuseum.com/#california-art>



**Dorothy Sklar, *Toonerville* (1946)**  
**Watercolor on paper, 21.5 x 27.5 inches**





Burr (Berenice) Singer, *Touch Up* (1943)  
Oil on canvas, 22.5 x16.5 inches