

Preface

Almost forgotten today, Jennie Vennerström Cannon (1869-1952) was an extraordinary woman and an exceptional artist. Just the facts of her life would provide sufficient material for an inspiring biography, but when combined with her voluminous correspondence, diaries, daybooks, autobiography and hundreds of published art reviews on the Carmel and Berkeley art colonies, a new chapter opens on the art history of the American West. For the first time many of Cannon's descendents have given *unrestricted* access to her personal papers and photographs which has allowed this writer to flush out the complex history of the artist and her society.

Jennie escaped a level of poverty in rural Minnesota that we now associate with the worst third-world countries. Through unrelenting hard work and with unbreakable determination she became the first student to earn a master's degree in art from Stanford University. She studied with some of the best painters of her day in New York City and London, including William Merritt Chase and Frank Brangwyn. Cannon contributed significantly to the advancement of art and received numerous awards. Her unique creations in oil, watercolor and lithography, which the broad tenets of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism influenced, were exhibited throughout the West with remarkable frequency from 1899 thru 1946. Collections of her work traveled to venues across the United States and even appeared in Europe. In 1903 she was the first professional woman painter to settle in Tucson and her desert scenes alerted artists in California to the scenic potential and spiritual inspiration to be found in the Southwest. Shortly thereafter she located her summer studio-home in Carmel. It was there in 1914 that she persuaded William Merritt Chase to open his summer school which converted that sleepy village into the most important art colony of northern California and gave Impressionism its final flowering on the world stage. Not only did she participate in the founding of the Laguna Beach Art Association, but she also conceived the Carmel Art Association and was instrumental in shaping its by-laws and practices. By 1919 she had established her winter studio-home in the Berkeley hills and became a driving force in the formation of that city's second art colony. With her strong academic background in art history she strove to educate the "citizens-at-large" through public lectures and weekly featured reviews in regional newspapers. Her incessant and very public campaign on behalf of women's equality in the arts compelled many museums, galleries and art clubs to guarantee equal representation on juries and in exhibitions. She unselfishly promoted the work of her fellow artists and christened a group of her inspired friends in Oakland "The Society of Six." In 1926, when the State of California published its official history in five volumes, a few artists, such as Maynard Dixon, William Keith and Arthur Putnam, were given the honor of biographies with other prominent residents. The biographer of the *only* female painter chosen for inclusion in that history listed some of her accomplishments and added that "Jennie Vennerström Cannon . . . has achieved permanent distinction in her field, and many critics rank her among the best without respect to sex."¹ In 1934 Cannon was included in the select group of "Twelve Women Who Have Helped Immortalize Carmel" in the arts.²

How has an artist with such a sterling reputation become a mere footnote in the recent annals of art history and why have some of her accomplishments been credited to others? One answer has to do with the sources on her life which require considerable effort to locate. Among the most important and problematic is her autobiography. In 1942 at the age of seventy-three she

began to compose her memoirs and insisted on privately publishing the manuscript in an edition of fifty. Jennie bore the sole responsibility for their distribution and merely sent them to acquaintances across the United States; one was donated to the Carmel library. As a result, only two copies of her autobiography can be found today in all the libraries of the University of California.³ She entitled this work *Watershed Drama: Battle Lake Minnesota* and placed in its brief Foreword references to the Scandinavian settlements in the 1860s and 1870s. This has led art historians to eschew the publication or to list it as a mere bibliographical reference. While its primary focus is the history of her early life, the vignettes on her maturation as an artist, especially in Carmel and Berkeley, are of vital importance. Her narrative is without an index and flows in a charming “stream-of-consciousness” style that requires some patience. These memoirs, which teem with folksy aphorisms on the value of hard work and education, also reveal with penetrating insight and bright self confidence her personal philosophy for happiness and belief that all human progress is achieved through the arts. To the casual reader it may seem that she exercised more than poetic license in recreating a saga of almost insurmountable privations in rural Minnesota. It would be understandable for even a sympathetic reviewer to be dismissive were it not for the fact that the settlements of Scandinavian immigrants in that area are well documented.⁴ Their stories are so tragically poignant and historically profound that the Swedish government financed two epic films, *The Emigrants* (1971) and *The New Land* (1972), which received international acclaim for the depiction of these American pioneers.⁵ The autobiography of Jennie Vennerström Cannon was incorporated into those films.

The tedious and *extremely* time-consuming task of carefully reviewing dozens of newspapers and periodicals from the period of Cannon’s artistic life has yielded a well-spring of information. Her surviving diaries from 1910 thru 1914, now deposited at the Arizona Historical Society in Tucson, are, to say the least, a challenge. On a single page there may be entries written in a hurried cursive from five different years. These diaries are filled with factual notations on daily events and provide a tender introspection into her personal struggles. Jennie’s correspondence at the same archive has never been catalogued and requires great patience to separate the grocery lists from the historically important. These holdings, as well as the many private letters and daybooks made available to me by her descendents, proved immensely valuable for recreating her life and the history of the Carmel and Berkeley art colonies.

Another factor that explains Jennie’s sudden disappearance from the public memory has to do with her personality. Prior to the acrimonious separation and divorce from her botanist-husband, William Cannon, Jennie could be described as the quintessential conservative Victorian. The public humiliation of suing her spouse for abandonment in 1917 and then having to support her two sons on the earnings of an artist dramatically altered her personality. She was driven not only by the ambition to succeed financially on the public stage, but also by the desire to better society through an appreciation of art. Some of her contemporaries, both men and women, openly criticized what they believed was her stubborn, aggressive, and opinionated style. Jennie was not a decorative Bohemian. Unfortunately, liberated women at this time were frequently ostracized. Even members of her own family despised Jennie and intentionally exposed her to embarrassment. At one point she severed all contracts with her eldest son, Milner, and disinherited him as well as his family. It is now suspected that Milner’s wife intentionally destroyed many of Jennie’s paintings immediately after her death. In 1990 the long-deceased William

Cannon was the subject of a short biography in which there was not a single mention of Jennie despite the fact that his life story is based almost exclusively on correspondence where she is constantly mentioned.⁶ These letters are deposited in the Arizona Historical Society of Tucson and many of the admitted gaps in William's life could have been filled easily by consulting Jennie's diaries which ironically rest a few feet away from his correspondence. Coincidentally, the catalogues of the Arizona Historical Society record holdings of Jennie's diaries that date from 1915 thru 1919 (covering the period of her separation and divorce), but these mysteriously disappeared before I was able to consult them.

And finally, Jennie's reputation was in one case the victim of small-town xenophobia. From the very beginning the permanent residents of Carmel always viewed themselves as somewhat more important than the "seasonal" residents, like Jennie, who lived there from May thru September. As the reader will learn in the ensuing narrative, the evidence of Jennie's contribution to the development of that art colony has been systematically suppressed by local historians who believe that their fame was strictly autochthonous. Carmel's local paper failed to run an obituary or memorial notice on Jennie's death and the local library has lost the copy of her autobiography which was *publicly* donated by the author.⁷

The reader should be forewarned that my history of J. V. Cannon and her art colonies is unorthodox. This is not the typical coffee-table publication where the ratio of glossy plates far exceeds the summary text and perfunctory notes, nor is it an exhibition catalogue laboring under an obligation to glorify the subjects. My approach is a reflection of my training. I earned a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley in the interdepartmental program of Ancient History and Mediterranean Archaeology with a secondary field in Art History. I have devoted my entire academic career to the careful publication of the architecture and art in the late antique and medieval Levant.⁸ Until this last decade I had not dealt professionally with a subject that dated after the 16th century. However, for most of my adult life I have nourished a passion for the art of California by reading from my growing library and viewing exhibitions. My retirement from active field work and teaching has allowed me to pursue new research.

This book had its genesis in the convergence of three events within seventy-two hours. In the fall of 2002 I lunched in Berkeley with two visiting scholars from the Atlantic coast, one a curator at an important museum and the other a tenured Professor. Both were specialists in North American art. During our discussion I mentioned that two very credible authorities on California painting, Deborah Solon and Will South, had just published a survey of "American Impressionists" in which they repeatedly decried the lack of interest and respect given by East Coast art historians to Pacific Coast artists and their colonies.⁹ To my amazement the two visitors indignantly declared that "California art" has never been established as an academic discipline and consequently is a dubious pursuit. Proof rested in the fact that this subject possessed not a single professorship in any of the art history departments of California's numerous universities nor a single scholarly journal. What they repeatedly stressed was that private art dealers controlled this field for the purpose of making money. My colleagues claimed that the existing scholarship on California art was decidedly inferior. When I demanded specific examples, one mentioned that the most commonly cited dictionary of artists in California was superficial and its few specific references lacked page numbers to facilitate research. The other related his experience at one New York auction house where he was asked to evaluate the work of two California painters, Mary Herrick

Ross and Jennie Vennerström Cannon. After examining the publications from California he was appalled by the lack of the most rudimentary research on the lives and milieu of these talented women. I silently admitted my ignorance of both painters. With my patience wearing thin I cited a few reference works produced in California on regional artists that are comparable to the best publications anywhere in the world, specifically those authored by Ellen Halteman Schwartz, Nancy Dustin Moure and the Kavinicks. In my rebuttal I mentioned the names of several art dealers who were especially knowledgeable on the art of the American West. I left that lunch deeply annoyed but determined to visit a local antiquarian bookstore. By chance in a partially unpacked box of books I discovered an autographed copy of Jennie V. Cannon's autobiography and marveled at the valuable references on the lives of California artists. The third event two days later occurred at Butterfield's auctions in San Francisco. I habitually visited the previews not with an eye to purchase, but to view an essentially poorly curated exhibition of California art. In an area packed with over a hundred vibrant canvases one bluish-gray seascape placed near floor level repeatedly grabbed my attention. The work was signed "J. V. Cannon."

My first inclination was to write a short scholarly article on the life and art of Jennie Cannon. Preliminary research led to the Vennerström-Cannon descendants and eventually access to the vast family archive with its treasure trove of untold history. The only way to understand Jennie as an artist is to merge her biography into a comprehensive history of the Carmel and Berkeley art colonies. In this volume Chapter One traces her youthful years in the Midwest before her arrival in California. In Chapters Two and Four her story is interwoven into the early record of the Carmel settlement. The account of Berkeley's first art colony in Chapter Three appears to interrupt Cannon's life because her presence there consists of one very lengthy visit. However, she provides us with our most exhaustive narrative on that community and the lessons she learns from its tragic collapse had a profound impact on her efforts to help establish the second art colony in Berkeley and to develop the Carmel Art Association. Berkeley and Carmel are joined not merely for the convenience of a narrative on Jennie Cannon, but out of historical necessity. At the turn of the century the two founders of modern Carmel, Frank Hubbard Powers and James Franklin Devendorf, met in Berkeley, where they resided with their families, and devised a scheme to sell seaside property to their neighbors. In the beginning a substantial majority of the literati and artists, who became long-term residents of Carmel, migrated from Berkeley and the adjoining portions of northern Oakland and Piedmont – areas that collectively formed the cultural center of the East Bay. The reader will discover that the two colonies shared on a seasonal basis many of the same artists. This cultural exchange continued through the 1930s with regular summer extension courses offered by U.C. Berkeley in Carmel. So many East Bay residents summered at the seaside hamlet that *The Oakland Tribune* ran a regular Sunday column on events in Carmel society. Unlike previous accounts my history is not censored by the desire to glorify Carmel. On the contrary, I devote Chapter Five to the visit of William Merritt Chase, the brutal murder of one of his students and the inexcusable racist response by Carmel's highly educated inhabitants. Chapter Six focuses on the breakup of Jennie's marriage and her move from Palo Alto to Berkeley where she quickly rose to prominence. Chapter Seven is dedicated entirely to Carmel and her involvement with that art colony. The seven chapters in Volume Two complete the history of Jennie Cannon and the colonies into the 1950s. As explained in the Introduction more than half of

each volume consists of the detailed biographies of her fellow artists whose lives are vital to our understanding of this milieu. This book is a reference work as well as a history and memoir.

My study is revisionist in nature because I employ the very pragmatic career and writings of Jennie Cannon to challenge the pervasive notion that the painters of California were on a romantic crusade to immortalize God's last unspoiled paradise. She would have found the suggestion that artists had a "sacred duty" to make pilgrimages to a "scenic mecca" ridiculous. Every artistic soul requires inspiration, but a painter who produces nothing but unsold canvases will perish. The marketplace not only determined the subject matter, but also the artistic styles and even the size of the canvases. This explains why critics and the buying public welcomed the return of artist Eugen Neuhaus to Tonalism after his brief and "uncomfortable" experiments with the Impressionist aesthetic in 1906-07. The widely-accepted belief that the cool foggy conditions of northern California induced painters to adopt the gauzy-gray atmosphere of the Tonalists is contradicted by Mary C. Brady, Evelyn McCormick, Selden Gile, August Gay, Cannon herself and countless others who interpreted the identical geography in bright splashes of contrasting colors. The Barbizon school of France and its Tonalist offspring were dominant before 1915 because that is what the very conservative San Francisco buyers demanded. For this very reason the art photographers at that time habitually created hazy portrait images of their clients.

My motives in writing this book are purely altruistic. I have no affiliation with the Vennerström or Cannon families, nor am I of Scandinavian descent. I am not an art dealer, have never sold a work of art, nor do I expect to profit from my research on Jennie Cannon. This monograph is not *the magnum opus* on the Carmel and Berkeley art colonies. I assume that some of my conclusions will be challenged and revised. This process is not only healthy, but also required if the study of California art is ever to reach the level of sophistication of its East Coast and European counterparts. My work is a "crossover publication" in that the narrative and biographies are easily accessible to the general reader while the copious notes, commentaries and appendices should satisfy any academic.

R.W.E.
June, 2012

Endnotes – Preface

- ¹ Hunt, pp.270f.
- ² CPC, May 4, 1934, p.12.
- ³ Single copies are in the libraries on the University of California campuses at Davis and Los Angeles.
- ⁴ John W. Mason, ed., *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota*, 2 vols., Indianapolis, 1916; George D. Dixon and Carol V. Dixon, *The Vennerstrom Family: Descendants of Ole Vennerstrom*, Leawood, Kansas, 1990.
- ⁵ These films were directed by Jan Troell and starred Max von Sydow and Liv Ullmann. Both were dubbed into English and shown extensively in the United States and Europe.
- ⁶ Bowers, pp.6ff. Janice Bowers' biography of William Cannon would have been greatly enhanced had she also consulted the local Tucson newspapers.
- ⁷ Wilma Cook, an editor for *The Carmel Pine Cone-Cymbal*, wrote a highly flattering review of the book at the time of its donation to Carmel's Harrison Memorial Library (CPC, August 24, 1945, p.3; cf. TOT, September 5, 1943, p.B-3).
- ⁸ Two examples of publications by Robert W. Edwards are: *The Fortifications of Armenian Cilicia*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 23, Washington, D.C., 1987, pp. i-xxxi, 1-288, plates 1a-302c; "Settlements and Toponymy in Armenian Cilicia," *Revue des Études Arméniennes* n.s. 24 (1993), pp. 181-250.
- ⁹ Deborah E. Solon, Will South et al., *In and Out of California: Travels of American Impressionists*, Exhibition Catalogue of the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, 2002, pp.19ff. In the past decade this refrain has been echoed by other art historians of the West. Linda Jones Gibbs noted that there are "persisting prejudicial attitudes" in the East against western art in part because "much of the art in the West had not been subjected to rigorous art historical methodology" (Linda Jones Gibbs, *Escape to Reality, The Western World of Maynard Dixon*, Exhibition Catalogue of Brigham Young University, Provo, 2000, p.13).