The wonder, mystery of William Keith at St. Mary's

Jesse Hamlin, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, November 10, 2011

In 1908, Brother Fidelis Cornelius Braeg, a Swiss-born art professor and mountain climber who later joined the faculty at St. Mary's College in Moraga, called on John Muir at the great naturalist's Martinez home. That's where he first saw the majestic Sierra panoramas and pastoral Bay Area landscapes of Muir's close friend William Keith, the celebrated California painter whose spiritually imbued pictures thrilled him.

"I found them nearest to expressing the quality, mystery and wonder of any paintings I had ever scene," wrote Brother Cornelius, who began collecting the paintings that form the core of St. Mary's peerless Keith collection, and would write the definitive biography of the prolific Scottish-born artist who helped found the Sierra Club.

More than 80 of the paintings Brother Cornelius acquired are on view in "The Comprehensive Keith: A Centennial Tribute," a rich retrospective at the recently expanded St. Mary's College Museum of Art, formerly called the Hearst Art Gallery. It features 106 paintings by the masterly colorist whose precisely rendered landscapes of the late 1860s and '70s - which were encouraged by Muir and influenced by the dramatic Hudson River School painter Albert Bierstadt - gave way to moodier, subjective and more abstract images that reflect Keith's love of French Barbizon painting and his embrace of the spiritual teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg.

"Keith came to the conclusion that no artist could ever re-create what a Supreme Being had made, so the artist should try to suggest how nature made him or her feel," says Heidi Donner, St. Mary's resident Keith expert. The museum's education and publicity manager, she organized this show, which was designed and installed by museum Director Carrie Brewster.

Over the years, Keith's poetic landscapes - many painted in his San Francisco studio from sketches he made in the Sierra, around the Bay Area, in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska - have been displayed in small thematic shows in the Keith Room of the Spanish-style gallery, which was built in 1977 with funding from the Hearst Foundation. The current retrospective fills the main 2,000-square-foot exhibition space, which has been augmented by two new galleries that provide about 50 percent more space.

Brewster's ambitious plan to build a new 25,000-square-foot museum was stymied by the
recession. But she was able to create much-needed gallery and storage space by enclosing an adjacent exterior corridor and converting a chunk of an art department classroom. One of the new spaces is showing highlights from the college's fine collection of African and Oceanic art - including a compelling coming-of-age mask from the Congolese Suku tribe; the other features Stanley Truman's Edward Weston-like photographs. Those galleries will be used to show contemporary and historic works by Bay Area artists.

The Keith show commemorates the centennial of the artist's death, at his Berkeley home, in 1911, a few years after his last trip to Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley with Muir. Reverting to the more realistic style of his earlier work, he portrayed the beauty of the great glacial valley in paintings intended to garner public support for Muir's unsuccessful campaign to save Hetch Hetchy from being flooded and turned into a reservoir for the city of San Francisco.

Nearly 40 years earlier, the painter had made his first trek into the Sierra wilderness with his fellow Scotsman, who urged the young artist to render the grandeur of nature with scientific precision (trained as a wood engraver, Keith was attuned to fine detail). That trip resulted in such beautiful pictures as "Mount Lyell, California Sierra" from 1874, with its dark autumnal tones, Indian camp and glowing glacial peaks.

"These works epitomize Keith's ability during this period to inject a note of melancholy into subjects that, in the hands of Thomas Hill and Albert Bierstadt, were merely joyous celebrations of mountain sublimity," writes Alfred C. Harrison in the recently published "The Comprehensive Keith: The Hundred Year History of the Saint Mary's College Collection of Works by William Keith."

The works on view include restored paintings that haven't been seen in years, and some new acquisitions, among them a pair of Keith pictures donated by the descendant of an old San Francisco family who preferred anonymity. One of them, "Bay Area Landscape," painted in 1874, depicts a bucolic Marin scene with a wagon making its way past a stand of redwoods, the bay visible in the distance. A man in the golden meadow carries a red bundle tied hobo-like to the stick. Harrison relates the red accent to the French painter Camille Corot's practice of adding a dash of red in his muted landscapes to catch the viewer's eye.

The influence of Corot and other Barbizon painters, whose work Keith had studied in Europe, along with that of the old masters, became more pronounced in Keith's work in the late 1870s. "His brushstrokes get looser, and the paintings become more atmospheric and much more subjective," says Brewster, standing in front of "Stinson Beach," an impressionistic picture from the late 1870s or early '80s made with patches and streaks of beiges, blues and white.

Keith criticized the French Impressionists for focusing on surface effects rather than on what he saw as the spiritual essence of nature. "What a landscape painter wants to render is not the natural landscape, but the state of feeling which the landscape produces in himself," he wrote.
A feeling of mystery and profound stillness pervades dark, dreamy images like "Woodland Scene With Cows and Pond," circa 1890-1900, and "Glowing Sunset Behind Dark Trees," 1900-1911, painted with olive green, browns and burnt orange. "Moonlight on Bay at Sausalito," from the late 1880s or even later, suggests a Whistler nocturne.

Keith's move away from realism rankled his old friend Muir - "Why in the deuce don't you imitate nature?" Muir complained - but it produced some marvelous paintings.


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This article appeared on page F - 6 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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