The Comprehensive Keith
The Hundred Year History of the Saint Mary’s College Collection of Works by William Keith
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# Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments ................................................. 1
*The Art of William Keith, Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.* ...................... 3
  Introduction .................................................................. 5
  Chapter 1  *Childhood, Schooling, Career as Wood Engraver, Early Works* 8
  Chapter 2  *Düsseldorf to Munich, Keith’s Early Maturity* .......... 22
  Chapter 3  *Munich, Portraits, Late Period Landscapes* .......... 54
*William Keith Chronology, Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.* .................. 88
*William Keith and the Conservation of His Paintings, Andrea Rothe and Jeanne McKee Rothe* 99
*The Art and Conservation of Gilded Frames, Julian Billotte* ....... 107
Catalog of the William Keith Collection of Saint Mary’s College of California ........................................... 114
Abbreviations Used in the Catalog and Essays ......................... 200
Biographical Information on the Contributors ......................... 201
Traveling Exhibitions and Individual Loans of Works by William Keith from the Saint Mary’s College Collection ................................................................. 202
Cross-Reference of Works by Title ............................................. 207
Cross-Reference of Works by Accession Number ....................... 212
Index ............................................................................ 217
Introduction

More than twenty years have passed since *William Keith: The Saint Mary's College Collection* was published, and the time has come to take a new look at the career of one of the San Francisco Bay Area’s leading nineteenth-century artists. In the intervening years, some new paintings have come to light and more scrutiny has been given to the artist’s relationship with two of his most influential friends, John Muir and Rev. Joseph Worcester. Muir was the cheerleader for the paintings of Keith’s early maturity that depict nature’s grandeur, and Worcester helped Keith find a new aesthetic in his later, more subjective exploration of spiritual values underlying natural appearances.

In 1988, disappointment was expressed at the absence of a Keith exhibition organized by a major museum, and sadly, twenty-three years later, we still await such an event. As this is written, however, several Keith paintings are on display in the American galleries of San Francisco’s de Young Museum, which was not the case in 1988, and appreciation for mainstream American landscapes of the late nineteenth century has gathered steam over the last twenty years. It is only a matter of time before Keith comes into his own.

As was noted in the first book, Californians are sensitive to the fact that they live far from the cultural mainstream, which leads them to overprotect themselves from the charge of provincialism. Californians think of themselves as citizens of the world, but an unfortunate byproduct of that attitude is the neglect of significant homegrown talent, itself a form of provincialism. This question is worth raising at the beginning of an essay on Keith, because the artist himself was victimized by this provincial disdain for local culture. “When a great man is wanted,” he wrote in 1895, “California looks eastward for him… California has lost the faculty of seeing the wealth at her own door, even as the East long ago began to look still further east for its wants in arts and literature…”¹ And yet Keith himself was constantly looking—and traveling—eastwards, not only to New York, but also to the art centers of Europe. He was eager for his paintings to stay abreast of art fashions. The various changes seen in his work, particularly the shift from a topographical to a subjective emphasis in landscape, were in conformity with general art trends of the period. The same transition can be seen in the works of Keith’s friend, George Inness, and in the changing styles of other leading artists of the period like Homer Dodge Martin and A.H. Wyant.²

Throughout his career, Keith was influenced by the strong art personalities of his environment—in the early days by San Francisco’s leading painters of the 1860s, Charles Nahl and Frederick Butman and paintings in the Hudson River School style by Albert Bierstadt. After his first trip to Europe, Keith injected elements of the Barbizon aesthetic into Hudson River School subjects, like sublime mountain scenes, creating an original and distinctive hybrid style. As mountains faded from popularity along with the artists who painted them, Keith focused his attention on more humble and generic or “subjective” scenes—peacefully grazing cattle surrounded by California live oaks that resembled the oaks of the Forest of Fontainebleau. Both cows and oaks, seen in the gloom of early evening, were the stock-in-trade of the Barbizon painters. In the 1880s and 1890s, landscapes in the Barbizon style were at their peak of popularity in America. All through his career, both in his mountain scenes and subjective paintings, Keith had a genius for evoking an emotional response from his audience through the manipulation of light. Nineteenth-century critics often praised his works for being “poetic,” an adjective that meant “emotionally appealing” when applied to paintings. Many of us today, in a vastly different and more secular cultural context, continue to be moved by his vision of nature. His paintings have passed the test of time.

² Compare Martin’s and Wyant’s early and late works in *Fifty-eight Paintings by Homer D. Martin* by Dana H. Carroll, New York, 1913; in *Sixty Paintings by Alexander H. Wyant* by Eliot Clark, New York, 1920.

William Keith was born November 21, 1838, in the small village of Oldmeldrum, not far from Aberdeen in northeastern Scotland. His father, who had become prosperous as a draper and cloth merchant, died several months before the birth, and his mother found herself unable to cope with the new baby.

Keith was raised by his maternal grandparents, named Bruce. His grandfather was a pillar of the church at Craigdam where they lived and was sufficiently well off to feed elderly farmers in need of charity every Sunday. Brother Cornelius characterizes Grandfather Bruce as “gruff and really stern and solemn—a typical old-time Presbyterian,” while Grandmother Bruce was a soft-hearted woman who liked to spoil young William. Life with his grandparents must have been somewhat happy for the boy, since he ran away from his mother to rejoin his grandparents when he was brought to live with her at age eight.

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4 Many sources give 1839 as Keith’s birthday, notwithstanding the fact that he celebrated his seventieth birthday in 1908.
6 Ibid., p. 2.
7 Ibid., p. 3.

Chapter Two

Düsseldorf to Munich, Keith’s Early Maturity

Keith left San Francisco in early September of 1869 “to perfect his knowledge of art”\textsuperscript{101} by visiting New York and Paris and studying in Düsseldorf. In October he was in Maine “studying the beautiful autumnal effects, before offering any work in New York or going to Europe.”\textsuperscript{102} The Keiths, with son, Charlie, and their daughter Mary Hortense (“Tennie”), born in 1868, were visiting with Lizzie Emerson Keith’s family in Damariscotta. The exact date of the departure for Düsseldorf is not known, but they were definitely settled in that city by February of 1870.\textsuperscript{103}

By 1870, Düsseldorf was fading as the leading art city in Europe. In its heyday, the 1850s, Emmanuel Leutze had presided over the American art colony there, where such talented young painters as Albert Bierstadt, Worthington Whittredge and Sanford R. Gifford had come to study. Keith was probably mindful of the central role Düsseldorf had played in the training of these artists, and his friend, Charles Nahl, must have urged him to study there. Also, the Düsseldorf Gallery had been a celebrated part of the New York art world when Keith was growing up in that city.

Typical Düsseldorf-style paintings feature meticulous, detailed images with a high degree of “finish,” paint very thinly applied.

\textsuperscript{101} “Local Art Items,” \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, Sept. 10, 1869, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{102} “Local Art Items,” \textit{San Francisco Bulletin}, Oct. 12, 1869, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{103} Tennie Keith was born on January 4, 1868, according to entry dated “May 11, 1934” in “Brother Fidelis Cornelius Braeg, F.S.C. Collection Detail Sample of Correspondence Content,” Saint Mary’s College, Moraga, CA, p. 21. For Keith’s presence in Düsseldorf, see “Art Matters,” \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, Feb. 17, 1870, p. 3.

Chapter Three

Munich, Portraits,
Late Period Landscapes

By the end of the 1870s, art patronage in San Francisco had shrunk, and artists were hard-pressed to make a living. Also, as noted before, landscape art, especially grandiose mountain scenes in the Hudson River School style, were increasingly seen as outdated relics of the past. William Keith was aware of these circumstances and decided that he needed to expand his repertoire in order to survive. There always would be a market for portraits. San Francisco native, Theodore Wores, a young artist who had returned from studying in Munich, rented a studio next to Keith’s in the Mercantile Library Building, and filled Keith’s ear full of stories of Munich. Keith decided to go there to learn figure painting.224

In September of 1883, the Keiths traveled to New York and then to Connecticut and the Berkshires in Massachusetts before going to Washington, D.C. At the Corcoran Gallery, Keith found little to admire among the American paintings on display, dismissing Kensett as showing “a great deal of labor thrown away,” Church as “mock heroic” and Bierstadt as “theatrical and false.”225 The Hudson River School stars no longer commanded respect. Later on in the trip in Paris, Keith signaled his allegiance to the Barbizon School, praising Jules Dupré’s landscapes as “so soft and yet so strong” and dismissing the academic style of Jean-Leon Gérome as “cold, hard and finicky.”226


William Keith Chronology

1838  William Keith born in Oldmeldrum, Scotland. (Some twentieth-century sources erroneously give his birthdate as 1839. Although no birth certificate has survived, the artist celebrated his seventieth birthday in 1908).

1850  Moves to New York with his family. Attended school in New York City.

c. 1855  Works briefly in lawyer’s office in New York.

1856  Apprenticed to William Roberts, New York City, to learn the trade of wood engraving.

c. 1857  Employed as a wood engraver by Harper Brothers.


1859  Moves to San Francisco to pursue the trade of wood engraving.

1862-63  Forms partnership with wood engraver and watercolor artist Harrison Eastman. Eastman and Keith’s offices at Montgomery and California Street, San Francisco. Keith’s dwelling at 1123 Clay Street.

1863  Takes lessons in oil painting from Samuel Marsden Brookes.

1864  Marriage to Elizabeth Emerson. Dissolves partnership with Eastman. Dwelling at 1018 Powell Street, San Francisco.

1865  Forms partnership with wood engraver Durbin Van Vleck. Offices at 611 Clay Street, San Francisco. Dwelling at 20 Clarence Place near Townsend Street. Son Charles Van Vleck Keith born.

1866  Visits Yosemite in July. Exhibits watercolors for sale at Roos Gallery.

1867  Moves to Oakland, offices remain at 611 Clay Street, San Francisco. June trip to Donner Summit, paints near Cisco.


1869  August: holds exhibition and auction sale of 33 paintings to raise money for European trip. Paintings sell for $1517.50. September: goes to Maine and New York City. Departs for Düsseldorf, Germany.


Right: *Hetch Hetchy Valley*, 1907-1910, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches. Collection of the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary’s College of California. 0-177.
As a master landscape artist of the 19th century, William Keith’s techniques were generally of such high standards that, in the 143 years since he began to create his paintings, his works have survived well. However, even the most carefully executed painting can succumb to the ravages of time and ill-handling. Regardless of how well a work is technically painted initially, the environment in which it is displayed or stored and the care it receives all have an effect on its later condition. Over time, some paintings will inevitably require cleaning or repair to damaged areas and a thorough understanding of the artist’s materials and techniques is required before a conservator can begin to work on a painting in need of care.

Materials and Techniques Used by Keith in Making a Painting

**Supports Used**

The most common support Keith used for his oil paintings was a piece of canvas that was stretched onto a wooden framework or stretcher. Stretchers have wooden “keys,” or wedges that, when placed into slits in each corner and hammered slightly, expand the stretcher and keep the fabric taut (Photo 1). If tautness is not maintained in a canvas, many cracks can form in the paint film as it ages. In addition to stretchers with wooden keys, Keith also used stretchers with metal keys designed by Aaron Draper Shattuck in 1883 (Photo 2). These were in production until 1917—a useful piece of information when attempting to determine the date of a painting.

An accomplished and successful painter, Keith was able to afford to buy his canvases from various commercial canvas makers. On the reverse of many Keith paintings you can see their names in the form of a stamp. Canvas makers named M.D. Nile (Photo 3) and Snow and Roos were the two most commonly used by Keith. They provided pre-stretched canvases covered with a ground, or primer, that coated the fabric so that it would not absorb the oil paint and created a smoother surface for the pigment. In his later paintings, Keith would paint a dark brown or dark green layer over this ground. This established a middle tone that would allow him to paint just the lights and darks to quickly block out a landscape.

In his studio, Keith preferred to paint on canvas but would occasionally use a wooden panel. While working outdoors, he often painted on canvas but also made quick, small studies on the lids and bottoms of wooden cigar boxes (Photo 4). Wanting to capture the moment quickly, Keith
The application of a thin layer of gold to the surface of an object is known as the art of gilding. The earliest known examples of gilding were Egyptian, though many texts worldwide referred to objects being overlaid with gold. The use of gilding, until relatively modern times, was religious and reached its height in the European altar pieces of the Renaissance. The technique of gilding has changed little in 5,000 years. Even today, the gilded frame is primarily crafted by hand. Gilding’s main modern applications are on picture frames and architectural enhancements.

The frames surrounding each of the paintings in the Keith Collection at Saint Mary’s College exemplify the popular styles of the mid 19th and early 20th centuries, from the opulent splendor of the Gold Rush city of San Francisco in the 1870s to the mellow tones of the Arts and Crafts movement in the Bay Area at the beginning of a new century. The original frames on Keith’s earlier landscapes were generally big and bold. The gaudy styles of the late Victorian era demanded wide and heavily decorated frames. The gilding was as bright as possible so as to reflect the light from gas lamps and illuminate the surface of the painting. Carved areas of the frames were accentuated with contrasts of matte and burnished areas of gold. Design influences were drawn from all parts of European culture; some shops produced more stylized designs while others leaned towards the more traditional. Over time, as craftsmen mixed styles from the Old World and combined them with new American stylistic trends, a uniquely West Coast style slowly emerged.

The ornate frames of the 19th century were primarily constructed of wood and plaster. Sometimes, surface embellishments were created with castings made from a composition material called “compo,” a mixture of rabbit-skin glue, chalk and resin. When this material was warmed, usually with steam, it became pliable and was formed easily into detailed ornamentation that was glued to the base frame. The ornate frame was brushed with a thinned liquid made from rabbit-skin
Biographical Information on the Contributors

Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.


Andrea Rothe

Andrea Rothe received his training at the Uffizi Restoration Laboratories in Florence, the Bavarian State Galleries in Munich, and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. He became the head of the Conservation Group in Palazzo Pitti, working mainly for the Italian State in churches and museums for the regions of Florence, Siena, Arezzo, Urbino, and Naples. During the summer months, he became teaching assistant to the painter Oskar Kokoschka as well as instructor of painting techniques at the Summer School of Vision in Salzburg. After moving to the United States, he became head of the Paintings Conservation Department and later was named Paintings Conservator for Special Projects at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu and Los Angeles, where he retired after twenty-one years. Presently he is self-employed, working together with his wife Jeanne McKee Rothe for various galleries, museums, and private collectors in the Bay Area. Andrea Rothe has lectured, and is the author and co-author of various publications, on painting techniques.

Jeanne McKee Rothe

Jeanne McKee Rothe trained in art conservation at the Art Conservation Program in the Winterthur Museum, University of Wilmington, Delaware, and received an M.S. degree in Art Conservation, majoring in painting with a minor in paper. Previously, she held the position of Associate Curator at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena CA, and was responsible for the examination, condition, and conservation treatment of all works of art including all paintings, Degas pastels, and outdoor sculptures such as those by Rodin and Maillol. Presently, Jeanne is a self-employed art conservator in San Francisco and San Mateo, working primarily on 19th and early 20th century paintings for institutions such as Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley, the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Arts Center for the Visual Arts at Stanford University, the Society of California Pioneers in San Francisco, Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, and for many galleries and private collectors. She is currently working on 14th century gold-ground paintings with Andrea Rothe, and doing authentication and research of important American and European paintings for various buyers and sellers.

Julian Billotte

Julian Billotte has been a gilder and conservator of gilded objects for twenty years. Since 1994 he has owned and operated Capricho Studios. He trained with Joel Hoyer at the Louvre Frame Shop in San Francisco and studied wood carving with Agrell and Thorpe in Sausalito. In 1997, he traveled to Mt. Athos in Greece to study Icon Restoration with Fr. Paul Politis at the Skiti of Saint Andreas. In 2000, he was invited back to gild an altarpiece for the monastery of Dionysou. Since then, Capricho Studio has completed many large jobs, including gilding the dome of the Church of All Russian Saints in Burlingame, the Governors’ Ballroom at the Academy Award Complex in Hollywood, and most recently, the restoration of 40,000 sq. ft. of the ceiling at the historic Anza Branch of the San Francisco Public Library. Since 2004, Julian has worked to maintain the frames for the Keith Collection at Saint Mary’s College and, in 2006, he was guest curator for an exhibit highlighting the frames and frame conservation of the Keith Collection. Other clients have included the City and County of San Francisco, SFMOMA and San Jose State University, as well as galleries and private collectors.
Traveling Exhibitions and Individual Loans of Works by William Keith from the Saint Mary’s College Collection

1907 Exhibition
Macbeth’s Gallery (New York, NY)
0-34 Golden Evening

1940 Exhibition
World’s Fair, Treasure Island (San Francisco, CA)
0-147 Polemics

1958-74 Extended Loan
Oakland Museum of California (Oakland, CA)
0-165 Moonlight Near San Rafael
0-166 Stinson Beach

1961 William Keith’s 50th Anniversary
Oakland Museum of California (Oakland, CA)
de Young Museum (San Francisco, CA)
0-12 Mount Lyell, California Sierra
0-18 Klamath Lake
0-32 Memories
0-34 Golden Evening
0-63 End of Day
0-71 Napa Valley, Springtime
0-80 Misty Morning Near Sitka
0-90 Sierra Forest Stream and Sunny Peaks
0-91 High Sierra Canyon
0-98 Klamath Lake
0-112 Dazzling Clouds
0-116 Sunrise, Columbia River
0-131 Moonrise Among the Oaks
0-147 Polemics
0-165 Moonlight Near San Rafael
0-177 Hetch Hetchy Valley
0-268 Shasta All in Snow
0-282 Silver Gray Sky Near Munich
0-528 After the Storm: Nature Refreshed and Revived

1968-83 Extended Loan
LaSalle College Art Gallery (Philadelphia, PA)
0-528 After the Storm: Nature Refreshed and Revived

1972 The Color of Mood, American Tonalism, 1880-1910
California Palace of The Legion of Honor (San Francisco, CA)
0-165 Moonlight Near San Rafael

1976 Exhibition
Sonoma County Museum (Santa Rosa, CA)
0-44 Mount Tamalpais, Golden Morning

1976 A Selection of American Paintings
Mission San Francisco Solano (Sonoma, CA)
0-19 Glacial Meadow and Lake, High Sierra (Tuolumne Meadows)
0-99 Sketch: San Francisco Bay
0-147 Polemics
0-178 Yosemite Valley with Bridal Veil Falls

1978 George Inness Landscapes: His Signature Years, 1884-1894
Oakland Museum of California (Oakland, CA)
0-111 Twilight Hour

1979 Exhibition
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Downtown Center
(San Francisco, CA)
0-47 Dr. Charles Blake
0-101 High Sierra, Yosemite
0-178 Yosemite Valley with Bridal Veil Falls
0-477 The Sweep of Tuolumne Meadows with Lembert Dome and Mounts Dana and Gibbs

1981 Exhibition
Hastings College of the Law (San Francisco, CA)
0-17 Woodland Scene with Cows and Pond
0-47 Dr. Charles Blake