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Liquid poetry



The wonder of watercolor landscapes

Rollin Pickford's "Mountain Mist," 1958, is part of the artist's largest exhibition of his career, on display through May at the Fresno Art Museum. The Bee's David Hale takes a detailed look at the exhibit.

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Lover of the landscape

By DAVID HALE
Bee arts writer

In the 1970s, especially in sophisticated art centers, painting the landscape was considered a bit like reinventing the wheel. Lately, the tradition has been making a comeback — except among more conservative enclaves like the Society of Western Artists, and certainly not in Fresno. Here, the landscape always has been the focus of painters.

One reason is the area's multitudinous watercolorists — including, to be chauvinistic, an extraordinary number of talented ones — for whom the farming-centered San Joaquin Valley, the Sierra and the Central California coast have provided endless sources of material.

They're all taking to *plein-air*, it seems, in

an effort to preserve on canvas and paper aspects of California's past — the fast disappearing bits of idyllic landscape, Victorian houses, decaying barns and rusting automobiles as picturesque icons of our heritage.

Nobody in these parts has been at this honorable task longer than Rollin Pickford who is represented by the largest exhibition of his career through May at the Fresno Art Museum. (The artist will be "in residence" at the museum, May 9 to June 4, demonstrating his approach to watercolor art).

We haven't seen much local evidence of Pickford lately. Fans will recall that he took "Best of Show" at the Fresno District Fair Fine Art Show in 1983, and there was an exhibition in Wilson Gallery a few years before that. A few months ago, Stanford University — Pickford's alma mater — presented a show of the Fresno artist's coast-oriented paintings. But there hasn't

been a major "non-commercial" show locally in years, not since the early 1970s at the Fresno Art Museum.

Now after 40-odd years as a painter, Pickford, at 76 the patriarch of local watercolorists, is getting a show he richly deserves. It is a "retrospective," or about as close as one can expect considering that all of the approximately 100 paintings were drawn from Pickford's family (three sons and a daughter) collection.

Inevitably, considering the nature of the lending source, not all the best paintings are here. Only a few pieces, for instance, date back as early as the 1940s, and conspicuous by its almost complete absence is evidence of the artist's work in the abstract expressionist genre.

What was available to the museum, however, is sufficient to reaffirm Pickford as one of the most eloquent landscapists of the Pacific Coast.

Everywhere the viewer looks there is a painting marked by a sense of comfy, tasteful beauty, proving that while Pickford may be out of the public eye, he hasn't been languishing. He's been out there painting, demonstrating that areas of undisturbed bucolic tranquility still exist in our frantic state.

Predominant in the show are paintings which might be labeled "Vintage Pickford." Yes, they are landscape paintings — or more specifically paintings of buildings juxtaposed to nature — in the valley and the Central Coast, and their overall theme may be seen as the continuity and harmony of nature.

Pickford doesn't do merely literal translations, though one's immediate impression of an old house, a barn or a concrete canal irrigation gate may suggest as much.

His most distinctive contribution to the

painterly history of the valley, to this eye, comes through his focus on atmospheres and light, hazes and fogs, as in such pictures like "Old Town Spring," "Burn Day" and "Star and Moon," or in pastoral scenes, lush after a spring rain, such as "Blossom Trail," featuring an orchard of pink and white blossoms.

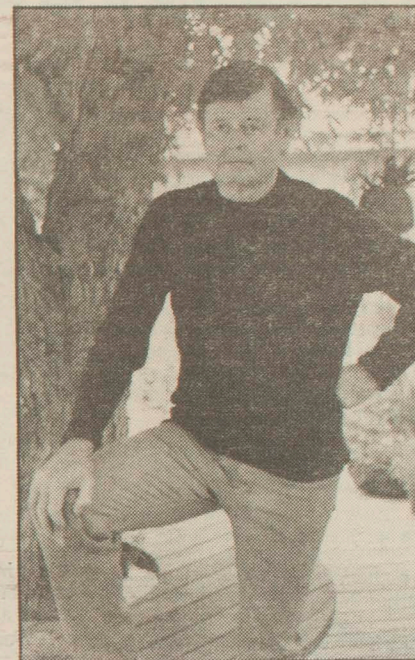
Usually the anchoring details in such scenes are minimal, commonly veiled ghosts of spare, simplified trees, vines or nondescript farm building. Combinations of pearly grays and orange-pinks (usually employed so economically they resonate) are the artist's chromatic forte.

True, foggy days are the routine stuff of everyday life in the San Joaquin Valley, but Pickford imparts to routine subjects such a feeling of time, place and atmosphere that the image transcends reality. One notices instead the sense of mystery the artist imparts to the ordinary through his resilience in his handling of color, light and form.

This viewer's own favorites of the type depart from Pickford's usual territory: In "Two," a romantic seashore scene from 1974, the setting is a panorama of seemingly empty beach shrouded in the mist, as if seen from a cliff, careless viewers are apt to miss the almost subliminal presence of two huddled figures walking at water's edge.

A metaphor for the temporal nature of life seems to be the point of another impressionistic exercise, "Intonation," also from 1975. The rock-bound solidity of a cathedral is juxtaposed to the passage of the seasons, epitomized by fiery autumn leaves drifting through the mist.

The increasingly expansive nature of the artist's style, as he matured, is evident enough, traceable in the change from Pickford's early work (late 1940s, early 1950s),



Rollin Pickford.

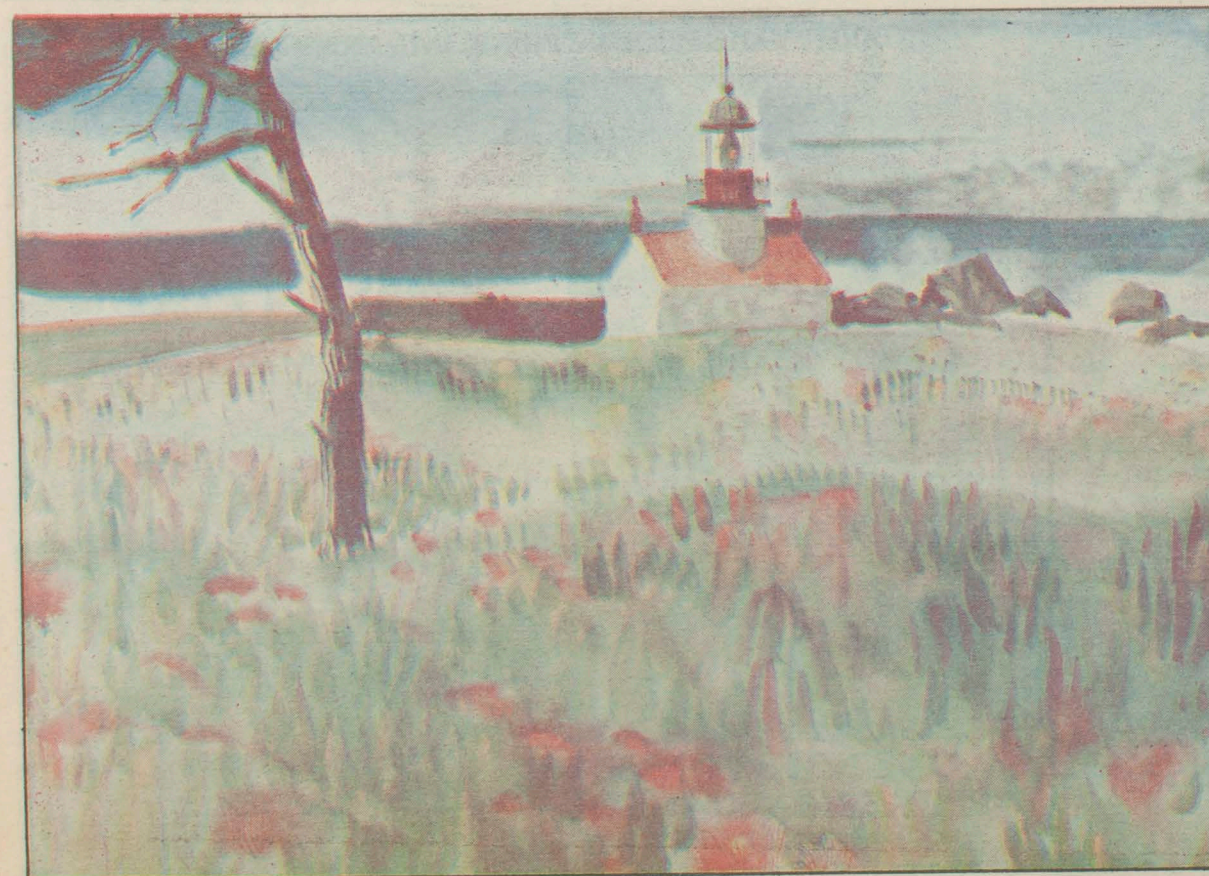
with its rather tight, pinched format and descriptive style, to the work of the 1970s and 1980s, which is marked by large formats, strong colors, bolder washes and prominent geometric shapes.

Paintings such as "Box," where the focus

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Rollin Pickford's "Star and Moon," 1984.



"March to the Sea," 1978.



"High Sky," 1983.



"Pazzini's Place," 1954.

cal photographer has won a top prize in the camera club's Fresno International Salon of Photography, conducted the past 33 years.

Sharp's prize picture, Gold Medal winner in the contest's pictorial slide category, will be among the examples the club will screen at 8 p.m. Friday in the music room of Northwest Church.

The print division, including Gold Medal winners Gabi Rea of Redlands and Charlie Isaac of Bakersfield, will be represented in an exhibit March 26-April 8 in the Manchester Mall.

Rea earned the gold for her monochrome print, "My Calla Lilies," and Isaac received her medal for "Brazilian Steel," a still-life featuring a pair of sewing scissors on a red velvet background.

Winning the Gold Medal, according to Sharp, "is kind of overwhelming."

"It's hard to find the words to express how exciting it is. I realize the odds are awesome," said Sharp, a Fresno dentist who joined the Fresno Camera Club two years ago.

"I just entered for the experience. I felt I had no chance of winning anything. I feel this is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but it's an honor just to have your work accepted."

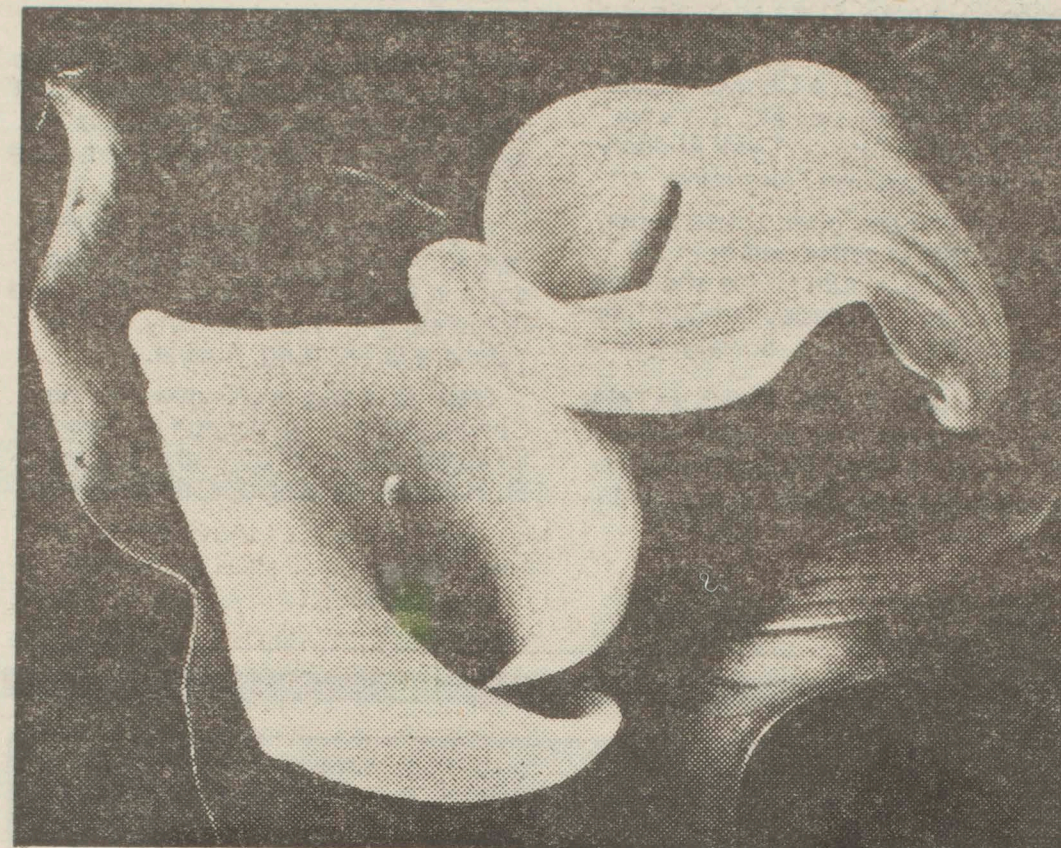
he said. "A lot of people heading for the hills are turned off by having to put on chains, but a real photo hobbyist doesn't mind that chore. Not when a big snowstorm has just hit."

"So much of good photography is a matter of being in the right place at the right time. This was one of the best snows I've seen in 10 years. It was a cold storm, so the snow held well on the trees and the rocks, and it had that beautiful fresh, fluffy look."

"The trick is go catch it at just the right moment, and it was awesome just standing there looking at El Capitan. I had a sense of something special, but you had to work fast. It was 4:30 or 5 in the afternoon, and I wanted to get the last light on the cliff."

"It remember it was very cold. I had a thermometer with me, and it measured 24 degrees. My hands and feet were freezing, but I got so busy [he recalled he took 24 shots] I forgot all about how cold it was."

Louise Stull, general chairman of the salon competition, was present earlier this month when the jurors (Joyce Kilmer of Sacramento, Theron L. McCuen of Bakersfield and Betty Randall Potts of Coarsegold) critiqued some 2,000 slides (each flashed on a screen and scored electronically).



"My Calla Lilies," monochrome print by Gabi Rea.

"It was the total impact of the picture that so impressed them," Stull said. "Everybody takes pictures of El Capitan, but it takes someone who has good equipment and knows how to use it to get the best shot."

"There was just the right texture and shadow in the foreground, a

perfect rosy afterglow about El Capitan and a little glow of pink on the range to the right. It takes experience and understanding to recognize that kind of perfection."

Sharp used his Nikon camera loaded with Fuji Chrome film, set (he thinks) at approximately F.8 and one-60th of a second.

"I always use a tripod, for the sharpest image," he said. "You'd be surprised the difference just a heart-beat can make."

Sharp is largely self-taught as a photographer, though he admitted to a number of models and influences, including his experience in the camera club.

"We have a club competition every two weeks. We all enter it, and our work is judged by people who have won awards, so there's an opportunity to really learn. I wasn't able to put it all together until the camera club."

The fact that photography is "just fun" shouldn't be taken to mean Sharp doesn't take the art seriously.

"I feel a certain urgency about recording the passing scene," he said. "Who knows what might happen in this world? Of course, El Capitan isn't going to move."

Sharp considers winning the International Salon of Photography, sanctioned by the Photographic Society of America, the ultimate honor. Whatever the odds, he said, "It's tempting to keep trying." He believes it's in his favor that he lives in Sanger. He doesn't travel much, so the valley and Sierra are his main sources for landscape photography.

Pickford

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is on a large nondescript box; "Under," a junction of irrigation canal gates, and "Apple Barn," where the format is filled by the upper reaches of an old barn, might seem odd subjects, but Pickford's eye for accidental geometrics makes them fine, generous examples of the style which gave the traditional watercolor medium a bold, new look in the 1950s.

A number of other examples depart from the strictly representational. A most notable exception is "He," a mixed-media abstract resembling the tail of a meteor, undated, incorporating candy wrappers, bits of plastic, an ice cream stick, a feather and other organic matter.

Others are "Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23," in which Pickford recorded a shorthand representation, in dark and mysterious profile, of players, conductor and soloist in a performance of the Fresno Philharmonic Orchestra, and "Pumpkin

Dusk," a Gay McCline-like exercise in color gradations with minimal allusions to landscape.

Other samples apt to stop the viewer in mid-stride: two which come to mind are "High Sky," in which malevolent-looking storm clouds appear on the verge of swallowing a cluster of farm buildings (calling to mind the Kansas tornado in "The Wizard of Oz"), and "Old House," a light-filled scene of dusk at the beach that captures an after-the-season solitude.

Solitude and emptiness have never been exactly negative con-

cepts to Pickford (as they patently are not to other painters of California, the never-never land), but a couple of other beach scenes have a particularly un-Pickford like ambience, at least to this viewer. There is a Whistler-like style in draftsmanship and absence of detail.

A feeling of palpable silence resonates (if such is possible) in the show's largest piece, "Omaha Beach: The Gathering Storm," a juxtaposition of storm-black clouds and strip of unspoiled landscape that represented one of the great

battlefields of World War II. It is at once a grand painting and a shot of poignance in an otherwise emotionally cool exhibition.

Is the painting intended to be a rare statement from a quiet man? The title would suggest as much, though there is not a flag or a flash of gunfire to be seen. However, installed as it is at the gallery entrance, viewers anxious to get inside will more likely see "Omaha Beach" as eye-catching icon than as a message about peace, love and nature, and the danger war poses to living things.

Caldwell St. Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Tulare County benefit bowling tournament. Bowlers may contact local Big Brothers, Big Sisters office to participate. Details, 734-2227 (Visalia), 268-2447 (Fresno).

★ AMATEUR CHESS TOURNAMENT — 10 a.m.-2:30 p.m. today, Shagnasty's Big Play Cafe, 210 W. Center St., Visalia. Sponsored by Visalia Chess Club. Spectators welcomed. Details, 734-2784.

AUTORAMA — 11 a.m.-10:30 p.m. today, Fresno District Fairground, Chance Ave., Agriculture and Machinery buildings. 1 p.m. beauty pageant finals. 2 p.m. bench press championship. Tickets \$7, \$3 children 6-11, free for children under 6. Free parking. Details, 251-2705.

PORTUGUESE FUN DAY — 11 a.m. today, CPDES Hall, 172 W. Jefferson Ave., Easton. Featuring Portuguese food and dancing, games for children. Tickets \$6 adults, \$3 children. Details, 441-1225.

★ EASTER BUNNY — 1-6 p.m. today, continuing through next Sunday, Blackbeard's Family Fun Center, 4055 N. Chestnut Ave. Easter bunnies will pass out Easter eggs to children up to age 11. Group special for children 1-11, in groups of 10 or more, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday: private Easter egg hunt following golf and tennis coloring contest. Ticket groups: 10-30, \$3.25 a person; 31-99, \$3; 100 or more, \$2.50. Reservations required. Hours in advance. Details, 292-9000.

WESTERN SWING — 2-7 p.m. today, Butler Park Hall, 4675 E. Butler Ave. Western Swing Music Society. Tickets \$3 members, \$5 for membership. Details, 435-4624.

WINE EXTRAVAGANZA — 4 p.m. today, Centre Plaza Holiday Inn, 2210 Ventura Ave. Wine from 70 California wineries, and hors d'oeuvres provided by valley restaurants. Host is wine writer Jerry Mead. Proceeds to Easter Seals Society of Central California. Tickets \$25, will be sold at door.

SMOOTH DANCERS — 4-8:30 p.m. today, Alex's Studio, 650 N. Fulton. Sponsored by National Smooth Dancers Club. Ballroom dancing and recreation. Two-hour group lessons. Admission \$7.50 non-members, \$3 members. Details, 431-1289.

★ RAM TAP SPRING HORSE TRIALS — 8 a.m. Thursday-next Sunday. Herndon cross-country course, 73-

F18 Sunday, March 19, 1989

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F12 Sunday, March 19, 1989

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