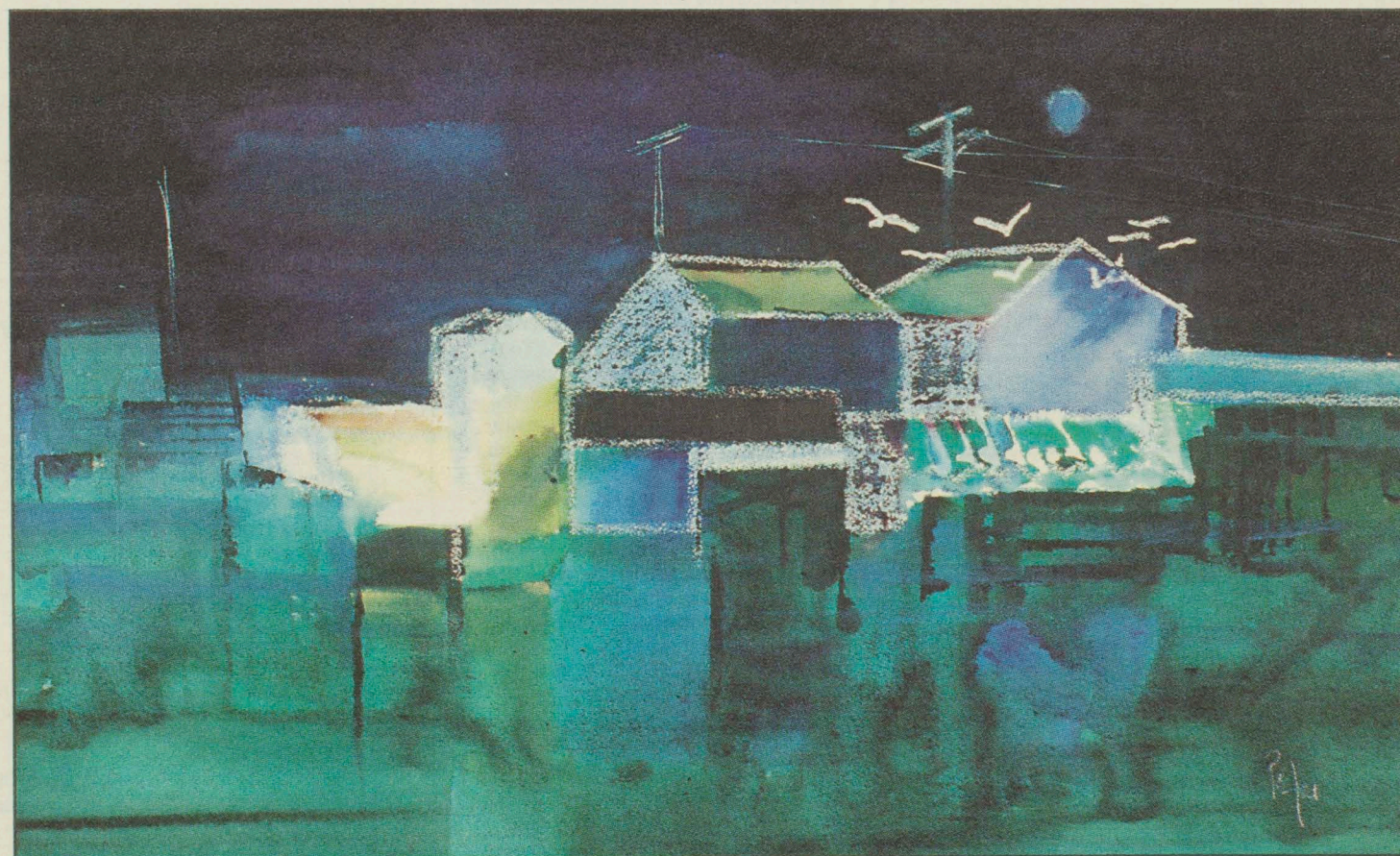


ALTA VISTA

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Light, rhythm and watercolor

*Rollin Pickford's six decades
of painting California*

PLUS: HIGH TIMES IN HOLLYWOOD



ROLLIN PICKFORD: Feeling the rhythm of watercolor

I don't believe one can ever actually own a place. At most, we can have stewardship over it.
— Rollin Pickford

BY LISA CRAWFORD WATSON
Special to the Herald

Rollin Pickford studied a Peninsula seascape from his collection with the eye of an artist who has total command of his craft. "I think if I were cast on a desert island with only one medium," he said, "watercolor is, as my son has said, the only through road. It's an unforgiving medium, but the challenge to overcome all obstacles is great. For instance, watercolor dries lighter than when wet, so I have to force the values to get rich color."

"Being an aqueous medium, it goes where it will, like an unbridled horse. The only way to overcome that is to paint thousands of them."

Having painted more than 12,000 watercolors, Rollin Pickford knows of which he speaks. Because he was born and raised in Fresno, the San Joaquin Valley provided a rich canvas of the fleeting natural landscape he grew to know as one truly understands

home.

"When he paints the coast," said his son, Loren, "he paints the sand and surf and jagged shore; but when he paints the San Joaquin Valley, he paints the air."

At the same time, Pickford cherishes the mystery and majesty of the Monterey Peninsula, which he began visiting during his first year, with his grandmother.

"Pacific Grove was still almost a church camp then," he said. "We'd stay in some little Victorian on 16th or 17th or 18th Street, and my grandmother would take me to the beach. I love small towns where you get to know people. I've always felt a great affinity for Pacific Grove; it's just my speed, 25 mph."

"My father has been painting the California landscape for over 60 years," said Melissa Pickford, assistant director of education at the Monterey Museum of Art. "Nearly every day of the year, outdoors, in all kinds of weather, he works assiduously to capture the light and atmosphere of a place. As he paints, sitting among dune grasses or crouched behind sea-sprayed rocks, he

experiments tirelessly with watercolor.

"His paintings are never entirely literal, nor are they purely non-objective. In each one, the watery feel of his medium is present. He has spent nearly all of his 84 summers on the Monterey Peninsula, a place he calls his spiritual home."

Pickford recalls first drawing at the age of 4; by 8 he amused himself by lying upon his stomach on the kitchen floor, copying the Sunday funnies in full color on the back side of wrapping paper.

His graduation from Stanford University with a bachelor of fine arts degree ushered him into the depths of the Great Depression. "My four colleagues went on to Disney," he said, "but I couldn't see working in a mouse factory. I shied away from the urban scene, opting instead for a mountain setting and the manual labor that accompanied it."

After the principal of a photographic engraving company caught sight of his work in the Fresno State University annual, he offered Pickford a job covering all aspects of the graphic arts and reproduction business. This inroad led to a 40-year career as a free-

lance graphic artist for all forms of print media, from newspapers and magazines to advertising campaigns.

In the meantime, Pickford worked as most frustrated artists do, painting his way through weekends and holidays, or whenever he garnered an emotional response to a subject.

"I'm addicted to outdoor painting," he said; "it's an obsession, a compulsion. Any spare time I had, I would paint. Picasso once said it's like drifting down a river. Occasionally you get snagged on something here and there. I respond very much to nature; fortuitous circumstances come together just asking to be painted."

When speaking about production, he's apt to liken it to writing and refer to his colleague, William Saroyan, the prolific writer whose stories he illustrated.

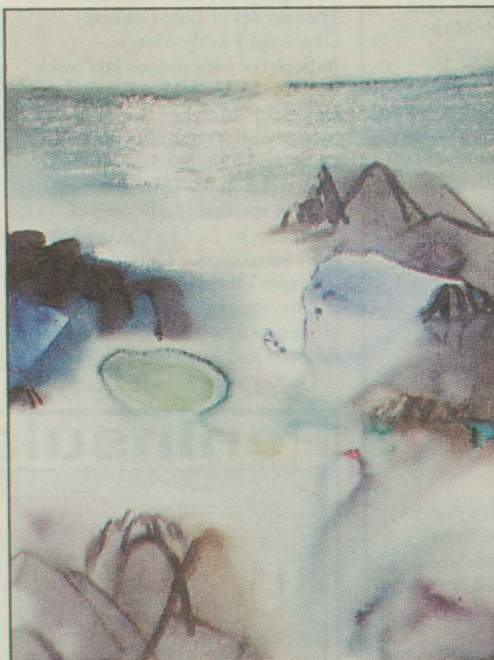
"When I was working with Saroyan, he told me this: 'I sit down and just start to type anything — the quick brown fox . . . It runs out of me for a while like rusty water from a



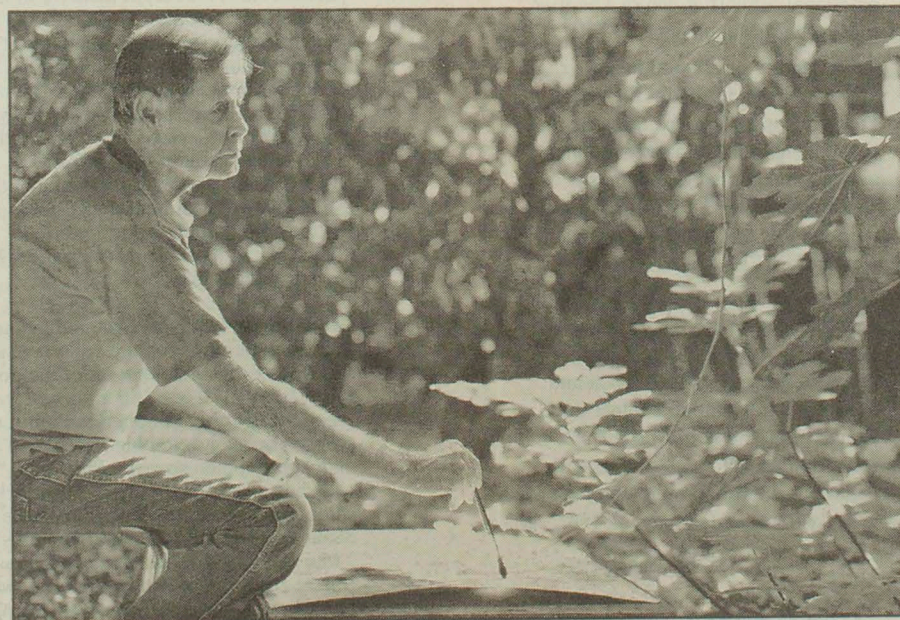
SCENES FROM THE PAST include "Last Lonely Road, 1947," now the site of a Fresno shopping center, above. At right, Pickford as a senior at Fresno Technical School at age 17.



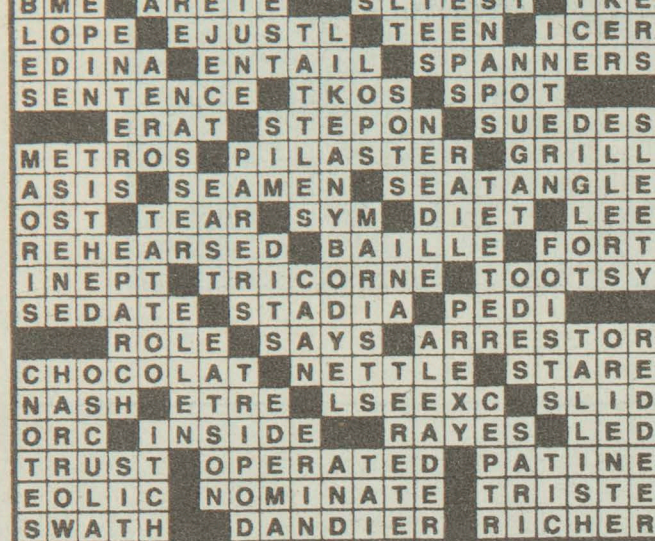
FROM THE VALLEY to the sea: Right, "Point Joe, 1995," which hangs in the Monterey Museum of Art; above, "Last Ditch, 1975," a view of the San Joaquin Valley's Enterprise Canal; above right, "Del Monte Pines, 1974."



CALIFORNIA SCENES made magical by the touch of Rollin Pickford's brush include January Moon, 1979, at left; at right, the artist in a contemplative mood at the easel.



WITH SUPPORT of his wife, Pickford was able to pursue his art, above. At left, "Orchard, 1962," from his valley days.



they wouldn't stray
and i warned them of the
hunter
and i thought about the hawk. (Kent State)

Poet/philosopher Ric Masten also is well-known as a public speaker, humorist, artist and musician. He lives in the Palo Colorado area.

PICKFORD FROM Page 5

faucet, eventually becoming clear into the story.' "

"That's called action painting in this trade," Pickford said. "The abstract impressionists in the '50s really capitalized on that; they just started painting. When I paint, there's always a dialogue between the artist and the canvas; it begins to talk to me. It usually comes out a different way than I intended; it has a way of coming into its own. Water will always run downhill, go where it will . . . Watercolor is sometimes a happy accident."

In discussing the topic of technique, Pickford revisits it like an old friend he hasn't thought about in years; someone he remembers well, and keeps safe in the old school yearbook.

"Technique becomes indoctrinated in you, second nature, in your hands," he said. "Then you no longer have to think about it; you can just go with the emotion of the subject."

This skill is not unlike that of a jazz musician, for whom the score lies in his fingers, forcing him to play by rote, by feel, working with the elements as they come to him, as long as he maintains rhythm.

"When I'm painting with my musician son, Loren," Pickford said, "he speaks of art in musical terms; 'Look at the rhythm; there's a crescendo in this.' He's a better painter than I am, at times."

"Rhythm," he continued, as he gazed up at a pattern formed of leaves against the skylight, "is the principle of art. Opposition, transition, dominance, balance and unity are the important elements; by repeating these patterns, you get rhythm. Even a row of fence posts creates rhythm."

Pickford's selection and juxtaposition of color suggest a special relationship to the quality; a richness and depth accessible only through a clear perception of California light.

"I don't know if I see it any differently than anyone else," he said, "but I was painting on Lighthouse Avenue one day and someone said, 'Oh, what a beautiful color; where did you get it?' I pointed to the flowers and said, 'It's right there.' People are often indifferent to their environment. I can be indifferent to noise and distraction, but I focus on line and color, shape and texture, dark and light, and pattern — all things that comprise a painting."

He continued, "If only I could solve the mystery of the blossom of spring," he said, "I'd be forever happy. Those wonderful white almond blossoms are a white I haven't discovered. But life is a mystery, and painting is an attempt to probe into it. Every painting should have an intense area, a rest area and a mysterious area. If you can even achieve those three things, you'll have a pretty good painting."

For Pickford, painting is a means of communication, independent of language, which allows him to share vital experiences with others.

"I get some wonderful advice when I'm out painting," he said. "What's always interested me is how people relate to art, always making some personal reference: 'I can't paint a straight line'; 'My grandmother was an artist'; 'I've always wanted to paint.' Even in Europe, people cluster around; we don't speak the same language, but painting is a universal language. It's a wonderful way to relate to people."

Of all the people who have influenced his work, Pickford honors his family, particularly his wife of nearly 50 years.

"Glenna makes it all possible," he said. "She runs interference for me, takes care

of what a friend calls the tyranny of trifle. Over the past few years she has also taken on the documenting, sorting and selling of my work. Glenna gives me a lot of emotional support; if you're a painter, that's what it's all about."

Currently represented in more than 3,000 public and private collections, Pickford's work has won more than 300 regional, national and international awards, and has exhibited on four continents. In 1985, his award-winning painting was selected for the United Nations UNICEF greeting card.

His son, photographer and filmmaker Joel Pickford, is producing "California Light: The Watercolors of Rollin Pickford," a retrospective book and exhibition of his father's finest work, as well as "Let The Water Do It," a 30-minute television documentary on the artist's technique and philosophy. Both book and video will be available by fall 1997. ■



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