

## PERSONAL PROFILE

### *Rollin Pickford* *Master of Light*



Rollin Pickford concentrates on painting his favorite native California foliage.  
PHOTO BY JOEL PICKFORD

For the past 79 years, Rollin Pickford's life has been subject to a powerful compulsion - the compulsion to create art.

"When I was four, I used to lie on the kitchen floor and copy the Sunday funnies on a big sheet of wrapping paper," he said in a recent interview at his Old Fig Garden home. Now, at 83, he continues to paint every day. "I think about painting all the time," he admits. Recent works include a dazzling vision in blue and white watercolors of a great galaxy, reflecting his fascination with the possibilities of discovering extraterrestrial life. Rollin Pickford, as always, is looking ahead.

His son, Joel, however, is looking back. Joel Pickford, a Vancouver filmmaker, writer and musician, is writing a retrospective book about his acclaimed father with the working title, "California Light: The Watercolors of Rollin Pickford 1940-1995." The book is expected to be released in 1997, to coincide with an exhibition of Rollin

Pickford's works and a video from the television documentary he is co-producing with public television station KVPT-18, "Let the Water Do It." Shooting has already begun on the film.

The retrospective will encompass what Joel considers the five stages his father's prolific works have undergone during the past half century, as Rollin Pickford was influenced by impressionists, California watercolorists, modernists, Oriental artists and minimalists. "I once figured," Joel says, "that, since 1946 or 1947, Dad has averaged one water color painting every day, plus thousands of figure drawings, hundreds of oils and acrylics and some experimentation with sculpture."

Rollin Pickford was born in a modest home on the site of what is now Dickey Playground in downtown Fresno. He received his bachelor's degree in fine arts at Stanford University and has taught art at Fresno State College.

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He supported his family for many years by working as a graphic artist, finding time to work on his creative art during weekends. Still, his work was shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and in New York, New Orleans and many other cities, as well as in Fresno. His most recent retrospective exhibit was held at the Fresno Art Museum in 1989, when he was artist-in-residence. Twice his paintings have been the theme of the Blossom Trail promotion in the springtime.

Joel recalls the frequent painting trips the family took together. "We used to draw and paint," he says. Dad would teach us techniques, but mostly the art of seeing. Mom would read aloud works by such writers as Tolstoy or Dickens." The four children, Jeff, Loren, Joel and Melissa, would learn how to compose haiku poetry from early childhood and how to fold origami. All four children excel in the arts, from painting to music.

Of Glenna, Rollin comments, "She's a scholar. She writes poetry and has recently translated a book from French to English. She still reads aloud to me."

Pickford enjoyed teaching and applied the same concepts to

instructing his students as he did to influencing his children. "I tried to take a student where he wanted to go and not in the direction I wanted him to go," he said.

Over the years, Rollin Pickford has developed a kind of philosophy of his art and of life. "I'm very sensitive to the day and the hour and the environment," he says. "I paint the specific feeling of the certain hour of the certain day." His favored medium, watercolor, he describes as "unforgiving."

With a wry smile, he said, "I think painting is a form of self-deception. You start out with this wonderful vision. You stumble and fall and get up again, and you come in below your perception, but it's the trying that's the experience."

His experiments with sculpture began in the 1980's, when he took some courses in it at Fresno State. "I've tried clay and plaster, string, wire, stone," he said.

Trying something new is typical for Rollin Pickford. He says young by continuing to learn. And he and Glenna maintain their physical fitness and alertness by a six-day-a-week regimen of water aerobics and swimming for an hour each day. "My main thrust is keeping in shape is to be able to paint," he said.

Often his daily activity still involves going out into the city or country and setting up an easel on

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the scene which intrigues him. During this past summer, which he spent at the coast, he painted the sea, the pines and the Victorian homes of Pacific Grove. Now his own Fig Garden property is often his subject, with its majestic silver maple casting shade over flowers,

shrubs and plants.

His gracious home, with a high ceiling letting in outside light, is a gallery for his art. Besides the many landscapes, figure paintings and still lifes on the walls, there are stacks of paintings awaiting their turn to be displayed.

Such a heritage of work from the heart surely has made up for the "torment" Rollin Pickford describes, as he says, "My life's been dominated by painting."

*written by Ann F. "Conky" Norment*

*circa 1995 ~~1996~~*