

AT HOME IN THE HEARTLAND; A LOVE AFFAIR WITH PLACE:

A STUDY OF THE VISUAL ARTS AND LITERATURE

OF THE GREAT CENTRAL VALLEY OF CALIFORNIA

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perspectives on Dawson's work. Three other books, A Doubtful River (2000), A River Too Far: The Past and Future of the Arid West (1991), and Arid Waters: Photographs from the Water in the West Project (1992), though unavailable for this study, further reveal Dawson's concern for environmental problems. Had these been available, the hope was that the photographs in these volumes might have shown how his work in the Central Valley specifically had carried over into later work, a theme that I had originally considered developing with the six primary subjects of my thesis.

Unfortunately, I was unable to secure lecture material or writing by Dawson in conjunction with the photographic exhibit Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream that has toured California since 1999. He continues his environmental activism and his "Letters to the Editor" have appeared in some issues of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Rollin Pickford

Though Rollin Pickford has been dubbed "Poet Laureate" of the Great Central Valley, and despite the fact that his work has been shown and well-received outside California, little has been written about either him or his work. (A review of periodical literature in The Reader's Guide and New York Times Index on Pickford from 1940 to the present discovered but one small analysis of his early work.) A very private person, he prefers to let his work speak for itself in lieu of discussing his muse or his method. Nevertheless, some close investigation has proved fruitful.

Of primary benefit to this study is California Light: The Watercolors of Rollin Pickford (1998), selected by his son Joel and complemented by insightful essays by Mark

Arax. The Joel Pickford essay provides significant biographical detail, while tracing Pickford's artistic career and placing him in the "California Style" tradition of twentieth-century watercolorists, while the Arax interview and essay emphasize Pickford's close connection to and love for the San Joaquin Valley landscape which is the subject of the vast majority of Pickford's oeuvre.

Complementing the above source is Rollin Pickford: Master of Light (2000), a documentary video produced, again, by son Joel, which provides a more personal study of Pickford and includes useful commentary by his family and fellow artists. The video shows Pickford at work outdoors in the environment where he speaks more freely of his creative process. Furthermore, Joel made available to me files of articles and other material that he used in his work, including transcriptions of his interview notes as well as his father's journals, sketches, quotes, and anecdotes, all of which were invaluable in the full development of my thesis.

Finally, a number of newspaper articles, primarily drawn from Valley newspapers such as The Sacramento Bee, The Modesto Bee, and The Fresno Bee discuss Pickford's work in some detail. As some of these go back into the 1980s, I found them to be useful in tracing the progression of Pickford's connection to the community and culture of the Heartland and his response to the changing face of the Valley landscape.

Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel

Ample sources, more primary than secondary, have been identified for Wilma McDaniel. She has authored at least forty books and chapbooks dating to 1973.

Unfortunately, many of these are out-of-print, and some of the publishers no longer exist,

CHAPTER 8

ROLLIN PICKFORD

Nearly a half century ago Fresno Bee writer Bette Tambling dubbed Fresno watercolor artist Rollin Pickford the "Painter Laureate" of the San Joaquin Valley. Judging by the acclaim he has received, the quantity of his work that resides in both public and private institutions, and the numerous important exhibitions that have showcased his work, he is surely most deserving of such a distinguished title. An occasionally diffident and typically unassuming man, ninety-three-year-old Pickford's influence and importance is perhaps best appreciated when looking at his life and work in terms of the Heartland, rendered with loving care in the vast majority of his work. If ever an artist held dear his home and sought to faithfully reflect, if not celebrate, its aesthetic wonders, it would be Fresno native Rollin Pickford.

Rollin Pickford's love affair with place is, first of all, demonstrated in his close personal bond with, not only the landscape, but also the people of his region, people who often share his affinity for their Heartland roots and a love for its simple, yet sublime, charms. In her essay "Bread Upon the Water," Brenda Peters describes her own connection to place as one of "belonging." Significantly, she considers the dual connotation of "belong": in one sense to "*be long* in one place is to take deep root like other settled folk, or like the trees themselves, the Standing People [. . .]." She continues: "There was also that elegiac and open-hearted *longing*," that desire to be bonded, profoundly and perhaps mystically, to a place (A. Stine 105).

Rollin Pickford's family members have consistently referred to this man as a patient, quiet, kind, and compassionate, as well as passionate, human being. Wife Glenna says, "Far from neglecting anybody, Rollin is a homebody. His son Loren perhaps best expresses the positive influence the elder Pickford had. Of a visit home he recalls, "That's really why I came home this time, to go painting with him because then *I remember who I am* [my italics] [. . .] and what I'm trying to do." Pickford's colleagues, as well, have responded in kind to his open heart. Fellow watercolorist and member of the Tuesday Group, Adelia Shellenberger echoes the feelings of many, saying, "He was so encouraging, always finding one little thing about what you did and remarking on it [. . .]." By way of thanks she adds: "I've grown old admiring Rollin Pickford's paintings" (Hale, "The Pickford Paintings").

Many others, young and old, have been honored by contact with Pickford. Daughter Melissa comments of her greatest treasure, a book given her from her father, Tot Topics, which was a compilation of thirty years of daily journals and included conversations not only with immediate and extended family members but also "with children that he met, maybe one afternoon, and never saw again." Such chance meetings and things children have said, Pickford confides, have been incorporated into ideas for his own work (Pickford, Master of Light). Columnist Eli Setencich affectionately reflects on a painting Pickford created especially for him, representing a family home on the Illyrian coast of Greece: "He did it with watercolors from a photograph I had taken of the place. He did it with hand and eye but mostly with heart and soul." Thus, Pickford

brings *places to people* with a "talent that never fails to make me feel the warmth of the sun" (Setencich, "Art Felt").

Of particular note is the long friendship between Rollin Pickford and William Saroyan, six of whose books Pickford has illustrated. Interestingly, the watercolor titled I got books from the Fresno Public Library (Appendix D, Fig. 50) today hangs on a wall in that very library, a reminder of the collaboration between artist and writer who were further connected by a close friendship situated in a beloved place in their respective pasts. Clearly, Pickford felt a natural affinity with Saroyan. Both are native Fresnoans, both are extremely dedicated to their craft and tireless in their pursuit of excellence, and both are extremely knowledgeable of and intimate with their subject matter. Indeed, Pickford has stated, "Saroyan had a great love for the San Joaquin Valley just like I do" (Master of Light), a sentiment often repeated in conversations reflecting "our mutual love," not only of the Valley, but also "of Fresno's early days" (Pickford, California Light 243).

A love for the Central Valley has long abided in Rollin Pickford's heart. Gerstmeier observes with regard to Pickford's aesthetic response to the landscape of his early home: "[As a youngster] his first response to nature was when he wandered the valley as a child, fishing and hunting. When fishing was bad, he would set up his watercolors and paint whatever he saw in the area, giving him, he said, 'something to take home'". Pickford has noted that the San Joaquin River is the outstanding feature of the Valley; he reflects on particular experiences there: We used to dive off the oak trees into the river, swimming, and I was very friendly with them and since I've started to paint

I found it to have many moods. [. . .] It's such a peaceful setting." Speaking of the larger Central Valley of his youth he notes: "It was really a paradise. [. . .] It was a small town and pure, clear air. [. . .] And the seasons were so sharp and so delineated. [. . .] It was really wonderful." Later on, fishing replaced swimming, which eventually led to his real avocation: watercolor painting. Such experiences have evolved, over the years, into a rootedness, a belonging, that Pickford dearly cherishes: "Well, the old saying is, 'Home is where the heart is.' If you've been born and raised in a location such as I have, in the San Joaquin Valley, it will always be home to you. [Notwithstanding changes] it's still home. And in a way, it's the closest thing to you emotionally." This emotional bond can be further understood with reference to a recollection of Loren:

Most people don't blend in with the landscape like those guys do but I was always seeing dad under a canopy of red trees or yellow trees. And I said, "You know, he blends with the landscape. He's been outside. [. . .] He's literally spent his whole life outside when you think about it.

And I saw him the other day standing very still [. . .] and he wasn't ten feet away from a huge golden eagle [. . .] but it was just kind of watching dad like this and dad was kind of watching the eagle, but very quiet. He moves very quietly through that landscape.

As both person and artist, Pickford has long perceived his dear relationship to place in quasi-religious terms: "The blossoming orchard is my church, the painting is my religion. A self-described pantheist, Mr. Pickford admittedly feels "an intense response to nature:

Nature, in its orderly rhythms, in the cycles of the seasons, in intricate designs down to the tiniest leaf, reflects the supreme order of the Universe.

One of the challenging responsibilities of the artist is to illuminate and clarify this high order. [. . .] The broad, fertile fields of California's San Joaquin River bottom are a rich manifestation of Man's interrelationship with Nature as he seeks livelihood from her soil and water.

Thus, the valley becomes a symbol of viable, ordered nature" (Gerstmeyer 6). Edmund Ladd's assertion that "All our prayers in the morning, in the evening, start with the word 'here'" underscores Pickford's spiritual connection to place (Lippard 21).

Responding to the negative effects of growth and development, Pickford echoes the feelings of disorientation and discontent with the contemporary landscape of the Valley, sentiments shared by many who live there. He himself seems emotionally adrift, or frozen perhaps in an idyllic past: "In a word, my painting country has been covered with condominiums and convenience stores and it hurts me very much. And they often wait until an orchard is in full bloom before they knock it down with a bulldozer. [. . .] I don't know where I am any more. I have to look at the street signs in a country where I've painted all my life, just to tell where I am [. . .]." Though he has found inspiration in coastal landscapes, he nevertheless concludes: "My heart is here, but it's become so polluted and crowded. It just breaks my heart, it's not the paradise it was as a small town" (Hale, "The Pickford Paintings" 3).

Such disenchantment with change has become, comments Hale, a "leitmotif of the paradise-lost theme," one which can be seen in at least two complementary works. Dusk

(Appendix D, Fig. 51), a rural scene from 1970 in a format dominated by a towering sky, and Last Ditch (Appendix D, Fig. 52), a view of a meandering canal at Nees and Millbrook. "Besides their bucolic nature, the most striking commonality of the scenes is that both are flooded with the golden-brown light of the lowering evening sun" (Hale, "The Pickford Paintings" 3). Of Last Ditch, Pickford explains, "The title rather symbolizes the attitude of the property owner. Once a large landowner, she has held fast to a patch of rural acreage, defying encroaching suburbia. This is still the last uncovered ditch in the neighborhood, surrounded by the roofs and satellite dishes" (Hale, "The Pickford Paintings" 3). Pastures of Winter (Appendix D, Fig. 53) further demonstrates Pickford's sorrow, and patent anger, at environmental degradation. Here, black lines bleeding with the wetness of the paper, cut up and into the muted gray brown of the San Joaquin winter, suggestive of tension (Pickford, California Light 245).

Joel Pickford begins California Light quoting Marcel Proust: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in finding new eyes." In spite of changes for the worse, Pickford's artistic eye continues to transcend the negative or common: "Most people consider the Valley an ugly place [. . .] dismissing such visual delights as the blooming orchards or the rhythms of the land. I see a certain beauty. The sky is so open and so huge. You stand out there and you get the wonderful feeling of spaciousness and flooding light" (Hale, "The Pickford Paintings" 3). Notable examples since 1970 of this optimism include Dusk, Pumpkin Dusk (Appendix D, Fig. 54), and Wind and Wheat (Appendix D, Fig. 55). Essentially, then, Rollin Pickford has been able to locate "what few small oases of rural Fresno remain untouched"—old farmhouses and

vineyards, for example, or his own backyard, the locale of his "Persimmon Tree Studies," or the Shin Zen Gardens where he works in vertical half-sheets format, recalling Asian scroll paintings and evoking the moods of Haiku poetry: "brief, simple, with always a seasonal reference" (California Light 260).

In addition to a personal affinity with the Heartland, Rollin Pickford's artistic method similarly reflects the love bond with place. Artist Ken Robison remarks that Pickford's works "show an affection for the subject matter and a wanting other people to feel that affection" too. This passionate concern can be seen in his detailed preparation for painting, in the motifs and themes he develops, and in his unique style.

Rollin often approaches the subject of his painting, the landscape, obliquely. He credits Lanson Crawford for educating him in the skill of observation, specifically encouraging a view of the subject from multiple perspectives. Pickford typically begins with a leisurely stroll into the painting scene. His advisement: "Walk around to get a feeling for the environment. [. . .] All your senses [. . .] contribute to a painting made on the spot in nature [. . .] [which] has qualities that no studio painting can. [. . .] Such a walk can inspire in revealing the courage of the blossoms of the trees in the spring confronting harsh weather, wind and hail." Fellow Tuesday Group artist Ara Normant Jr. describes a typical Pickford process, traveling far beyond the group including himself and Robin Gay McCline "to find the best spot to paint from. [. . .] He'd always be walking in all directions to find a little different angle, a little better view." Son Jeff marvels at his dad's grinding determination "to get the perfect scene," climbing fences or mountains, crossing pastures, walking for miles [. . .] "he looks and he looks and he looks until he

finds it. Writing in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Viking Penguin, 2000) Rebecca Solnit observes about this particular aspect of the artistic process Rollin favors:

The increased speed of transportation binds people to more diffuse locales rather than liberating them from travel time. [. . .] The decline of walking is about the lack of space in which to walk, but it is also about the lack of time—the disappearance of that musing, unstructured space in which so much thinking, courting, daydreaming, and seeing has transpired.

Machines have sped up, and lives have kept pace with them (Benson).

Happily, Pickford maintains his own deliberate pace at land level. Loren further suggests the romantic aspect of this preparatory step to painting: "Dad [. . .] walks the landscape to let himself be brought to something."

Clearly, the slowed pace exposes Mr. Pickford to a profound interaction with the landscape. Again, his respect for William Saroyan's wisdom surfaces. Advising patience, Saroyan has said, "Write a book a chapter a week; at the end of a year you will have your book." Like Pickford, Saroyan was noted for his long excursions, where he would "walk the city to relieve writer's block" (Pickford, "Cry of the Peacock")³ Pickford admits, however, a fault with his intense attention to detail and depth: "I get seduced by the subject matter and I start painting all the little nuances of nature and I don't paint as spare as I should" (*Master of Light*). On occasion, Pickford is even seduced by the audience as well. He notes of his flexible method: "Frequently I'm surrounded (by spectators) on the coast of a street corner and my painting changes from abstract to representational. I'm reacting to the people around me" (Robison). Even more

to the point, he adds, "So many things influence me. If somebody says *blue* to me, I'll paint something blue." Pickford seems not to mind such "intrusions" on his work, however, and is typically accommodating. His flexibility of method actually widens his aesthetic. Responding to criticism that he over paints the mundane, Pickford answers: "I'm a different artist every time" ("The Pickford Paintings").

Wilbur comments on the affinity between place and artist with reference to the patient observation of landscape, adaptation of method, and "internal discovery of what the scenery might disclose" as criteria for making art happen, all of which begs the question: "Could one not as well say that the desert [or any locale] in requiring of the painter a fresh self, had in its own good time imagined him?" (26) The sense here is that Rollin Pickford places himself in just such a unique relation to his subject, freeing the landscape of the Valley to fully disclose her unique characteristics. Essentially, Pickford's bond with his method and process is "a kind of labor of love, a work of heart, brush strokes of attention for the old pile. [. . .]" (Setencich, "From the Heart"). Quoting Picasso, Pickford has noted, "You have to start with nature," while admitting that nature has actually "captured him," even as the artist would attempt to capture the landscape on canvas (Robison).

As with his method, Rollin Pickford's themes typically reveal the depth of his love for the Valley. His exhibition statement written in the mid-1990s is noteworthy: "Painting is a means of communication, independent of language, which enables me to share vital experiences with others. I try to use nature as metaphor for human values."⁴

For example, much of the work which Fresno Bee arts writer David Hale refers to as

Light 258). This Valley atmosphere is indeed imbued with an especial air and light, considered with eloquence by Jane Watts in "Shaping the Valley Light":

I am more aware of the drama of light, which illusively shifts in particular ways, [. . .] the light that saturates the mind and spirit and that speaks of the life here [in the Valley]. It is this pervasive collective sense of light on the land of California's San Joaquin Valley that creates a sense of centeredness, that etches a power of place on the human spirit" (Watts i).

As the "San Joaquin Valley is a landscape defined more by changing skies and seasons than topographic features and [harboring] secrets that are well-guarded, revealing themselves briefly during seasonal transitions or in a fleeting moment when the light is just right," an artist with the patient and loving spirit of Rollin Pickford represents the ideal medium to bring these mysteries to canvas. As one comes to know, appreciate, and revere another person, so does Pickford respect "the subtext" of the story of the landscape, knowing "just when to add another stroke and when to stop" (California Light 231). Such an intimacy can be traced to Pickford's early watercolor work under the tutelage of Crawford, with whom he shares such attributes as "perfect skies and a strong sense of place." In addition, Pickford's passion for place was enhanced in later work with Tom Valiant who "lit a fire under Rollin that still burns" (California Light 231). Finally, Loren aptly expresses his father's intimacy with place:

When he paints at home there's some intimacy with the atmosphere that you kind of can't define [. . .] with the smells and the exact light and nobody has ever really painted the San Joaquin Valley in all of its

subtleties.[. . .] It's an intimacy with a place that goes beyond just the craft of painting it.

Seasonal change is a third major theme often explored by Pickford. Joel has noted a shift in the focus of his father's work "from the spatial rhythm of orchards and fields to the temporal rhythms of the changing seasons" (California Light). Seeking to reveal the multi-faceted charm of the Heartland, Pickford typically looks to the striking varieties in light, weather, and color. The Enterprise Canal is one of his favored settings for evoking the mood of a season, developed in such representative examples as Fig and White Heat (Appendix D, Fig. 59) or the cold of a late fall frost as in Frozen Leaves (D, Fig. 60) where he literally "paints around" intricately shaped white areas. Watercolorist William Rose speaks of the watercolor painting November Glow, a gift from Rollin and one of many paintings with titles suggestive of seasons, as exhibiting a "freshness of landscape that can only be accomplished by an artist who paints on location [. . .] [giving] November a glow [and creating] mood and meaning with a stroke of the brush."

Rollin Pickford's method has been almost codified into a style of its own, what Robin Gay McCline refers to as the San Joaquin Valley Style of California watercolorists. This technique involves a "looking" process in which the scope is limited to landscapes close to home. McCline states that it has "evolved by not having thousands of great views" [and having to] "find closer things in to paint." Of Pickford he notes, "He has learned to paint the Valley better and better [. . .] I think that influences the rest of us." In practice, this has resulted in Pickford's maintaining very specific lists of places as potential subjects, with the resulting pattern of staying close to home. His backyard, the

Chaffee Zoo, the fall trees of Woodward Park, Enterprise Canal—all have increasingly become beloved subjects of study for the Tuesday Group. Patience is often rewarded in the serendipitous moment when the fog (or smog) dissipates and the Sierra Nevada Mountains rise as a background for a watercolor. Without doubt, this pioneer style is in part a direct response to suburban sprawl that continues to wipe out huge landscapes, which were once prime painting territory. Ken Robison further associates Pickford with the San Joaquin Valley style: "Rollin always loved to do the landscape, that was always his thing and he did it so beautifully. And his things gave us the feeling of the San Joaquin Valley. I think more than anyone else."

Rollin Pickford continues to be saddened to see his Heartland gobbled up by commercial development. While not an overt theme in his paintings, it represents a cancer that has elicited from him an occasional comment. In particular, he has expressed his concern for the beloved San Joaquin River, "the fragile [but still] outstanding geographical feature of the Valley that is endangered and is certainly worth saving."

Rather than dwell, however, on the negative, Pickford takes an optimistic stance, lingering in the parks and fields and painting, as if to remind others that areas of undisturbed bucolic tranquility still exist in the Heartland. Peter King comments that though Pickford "might be melancholy about the past, he has not quit on the present, though he admits it does take a little more work." A shrunken vineyard of six rows of unkempt grapevines, doubling now as a graveyard for junk cars, is still a worthy subject—"I just leave out the cars," he notes. So too does a little stretch of green canal

cutting across an old orchard provide large inspiration to the artist. King describes Pickford musing within this bittersweet setting:

"This is the dear old Enterprise Canal. Or what's left of it. They buried the rest underground in pipes. Sometimes, I tell my wife that when I die they should just throw my ashes in the enterprise Canal. I must have painted it 100 times." He stands and watches the water run. He points out the yellow oxalis flowers on the far bank. "Aren't they beautiful?" he asks. He examines the fruit on a fallen branch. "Isn't it wonderful," he says, "to have an oasis like this?" When at last he turns to go Pickford walks slowly, stealing peeks over his shoulder [. . .].

Clearly evident here are juxtaposed emotions: agony and ecstasy. Given such conflicting feelings, one wonders that Pickford can even summon his hand to put brush to palette.

It may be, however, that at present Rollin Pickford is resigned to the fate of the Valley to be the victim of environmental degradation. Nonetheless, his enormous body of work remains a window into the past of Fresno, the San Joaquin and Great Central Valleys, and "in a sense into a way of life that is essentially gone forever" (Hale, "The Pickford Project"). And, with reference to his video documentary and art book, Joel Pickford says, "It was important to my father that we document the rapidly disappearing rural landscape of the San Joaquin Valley" (Hale, "More Honors Planned"). Finally, long-time Valley resident Mark Arax puts into perspective the impact of Pickford's watercolors of place:

For a half-century, except for stays on the Central Coast or occasional travels abroad, Rollin has never looked for a muse outside the Valley. If I was wanting an answer to my question about Fresno and the world, it was right there in his work. Like the poet Thomas McGrath who grew up on his father's North Dakota farm, Rollin didn't fret about what his small landscape did or did not share with the big world.

"All time condenses here. Dakota is everywhere.

The world

Is always outside this window" (California Light 273).

I close this chapter with son Loren's recollection of his dad, which ultimately and fittingly places Rollin exactly where he has always been, and belongs—in his hometown and home valley. After 12,000 watercolors produced in any and all kinds of weather Rollin Pickford can say, "I'm not going to die, just walk on over this hill and blend into the landscape" (Pickford, Master of Light).