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THE WEEK AHEAD IN ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# ART & LIFE



Exhibition celebrates the remarkable Rollin Pickford.

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## COVER STORY

## PICKFORD'S GIFTS

Noted Fresno watercolorist, his collectors featured.

By Donald Munro  
The Fresno Bee

When an exhibition is devoted to the works of an artist the caliber of Rollin Pickford, Fresno's famed watercolorist, the inclination is to put all the focus on him and his glorious art.

And that is what most people will do when they visit "Rollin Pickford: An Artist and His Collectors," which opens Saturday at Fresno State's Madden Library.

But as the title of the show suggests, there's another dimension to consider.

Collectors are an integral part of the artistic process. When they buy, the artist eats. Through the decades, the prolific Pickford always appreciated the people who supported him (and his family) by buying his art.

The artist's son Joel, who curated the show, tracked down 21 watercolors from 21 different collectors for the exhibition, held in the library's Leon S. Peters Ellipse Gallery. Here's a rundown:

**The artist:** Rollin Pickford helped develop a regional variation of the California watercolor style that one observer dubbed "the San Joaquin Valley School of Watercolor." A dedicated plein air painter, he felt most at home in the fields and wide open spaces of the Valley. He produced roughly 20,000 works, including drawings, sketches and paintings, during his lifetime. He died in 2010 at age 98.

**The works on display:** Many of them have never been exhibited before. You get a chance to view some of his earlier work painted in the 1940s (for example, a fresh and crisp 1948 view of the unfinished Friant Kern Canal — is the air ever that clear any-

**Art preview**

"Rollin Pickford: An Artist and His Collectors," Saturday through Jan. 16, Leon S. Peters Ellipse Gallery, Henry Madden Library, Fresno State (559) 278-2595. Free

more?) and later works through the decades. There are still lifes, fig trees and old copper mines. A big work "Omaha Beach: Gathering Storm," painted in Normandy, France, on one of his rare trips out of the country, is a triumphant study of menacing clouds. (Loaned by the Fresno Art Museum,



Joel Pickford

it's only been publicly displayed once.) Pickford could veer toward abstraction as well, with his "Beginnings," painted in 1974 at Friant and Alluvial avenues, a bold statement of form and color.

**The rest of the exhibition:** Along with the watercolors, you'll be able to look at examples of the detailed journals Pickford kept. Various ephemera from his life — paints, brushes, his beloved straw painting hat — are on display, along with original magazine articles (including one by William Sa-royan) with Pickford's illustrations.

**The donation:** There are 10 more Pickford works on display in the upstairs balcony, all donated by the Pickford family to the library's Special Collections Research Center. They're a small part of a major gift made by the family to the library. Appraised at \$2.2 million, the gift includes paintings, notebooks, diaries and memorabilia. The gifts will be delivered in increments over the next 20 years, and the first batch was received in December. The library eventually will provide access to the entire collection in an online digital repository.

**The collectors:** Joel Pickford notes that few of the people who bought his

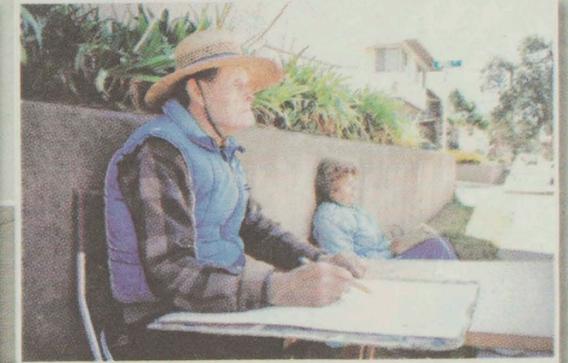
father's works fit the profile of well-heeled collectors buying works at Sotheby's and Christie's at auction. Instead they were school teachers, contractors, musicians, small-business owners — local people who wanted to hang on their walls reminders of the San Joaquin Valley and Central California coast. "These are the people who sustained my dad," he says. "My dad sold a heck of a lot of paintings at affordable prices for people around here. He carved out a niche that almost doesn't exist in the art world — where regional artists can sell at affordable prices in large quantities."

**The age range:** The youngest collector in the show is Shelley Joyer, 35, who loaned "Blue Glass Bowl & Blossom." The oldest is Gaylore Stearns, 101, who loaned "Old Sanger Schoolhouse."

**The takeaway from the show:** Here's one thing to consider. Rollin Pickford was keenly aware in the later part of his career that he was documenting a rapidly changing Valley. Many of the scenes depicted in the exhibition simply aren't there anymore, replaced by urban sprawl. It's somehow comforting to think of his thousands of works hanging in various homes and offices, carrying a message from the past forward.

**Don't miss:** Take the time to read a page or two of Rollin Pickford's detailed journals, in which he noted the location and offered notes for each painting he made. Sometimes he just mused about art and life. In an entry dated Dec. 22, 1975, in his notes for his 315th painting that year, completed on Chestnut Avenue near Herndon Avenue, he wrote: "I feel a close affection to my fields now. Neither of us will be here for very much longer." Pickford would live for another 35 years, but time is fleeting. Thanks to those who collected his work, Pickford's many gifts remain.

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Rollin Pickford's watercolors and his hat and brushes are part of a new exhibit at Fresno State curated by his son Joel.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS/  
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