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A look at California's impressionists

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The light in the paintings says "California." It's as if it comes from somewhere behind the canvas - and radiates a West Coast atmosphere imbued with coastal warm air.

The paintings were created at the turn of the 20th century by a lesser-known group of California Impressionist painters, in a show now at the Katonah Museum titled, "All Things Bright and Beautiful: California Impressionist Paintings from The Irvine Museum."

What's surprising is that most folks here in the Northeast are unfamiliar with this body of work that seems to have jumped across the ocean from Europe and taken on a life of its own, rippling out an eye-opening genre. According to the 200-page catalog, the French Impressionists of the late 1800s had a tremendous influence on the California artists, many of whom studied in France.

But the California Impressionist era was short-lived. Starting in the early 1900s, artist colonies cropped up in visually inspiring locations such as Laguna Beach, San Diego and Monterey. The California Impressionist style peaked in the 1920s but faded by the end of the decade because of the Great Depression and the sweeping new art movement of the Modernists.

The Katonah Museum show is a traveling exhibition from the Irvine Museum's private collection featuring 59 paintings and one Bischoff vase; the works date from 1890-1930.

The work is commanding, slowing visitors for pensive viewing.



William H Clapp- Country Road-1943

In "Country Road," by William Clapp (1879-1954) the sweeping curved road shimmers off into infinity, dipping into a valley of thick paint nudges of pale lavender and green.

In Meta Cressey's (1882-1964) "Under the Pepper Tree," two women - one close, one far - languish under a gnarled pepper tree whose limbs are like arms enfolding the effervescent garden. The scene, set for afternoon tea, vibrates with an electrified flourish of lines and brush strokes.



Meta Cressey - Under the Pepper Tree, c 1927

"Mission San Juan Capistrano" by Channel P. Townsley (1867-1921) has a single hooded monk walking on a white path that parts rows of red, green and blue flowers. The silence in this piece is impressive. Visually it stands up spectacularly from afar as well as to "nose-to-canvas" scrutiny. Blending in with the hazy but pointillist dabs of paint are a small group of people in the background, almost fading into the shadowy, blue arches of the church.



Channel P Townsley -
Mission San Juan Capistrano, 1916

As the richly clad woman in "The Oriental Shop" by Joseph Kleitsch (1881-1931) looks away, she is engulfed and thickly swathed by a florid, textured dress. A scarlet scarf flows from the woman's neck to the floor, cascading through the vibrant blues and violets of her dress. The floor of the room is deep siennas and dark mahogonies; it relinquishes a heavy energy to lighter yellows and whites in the upper half of the canvas, pinpointing a subtle sparkle from an orange lamp.



Joseph Kleitsch - The Oriental Shop, 1925



Donna Schuster - On the Beach - 1917

The signature piece for the show, "On the Beach," was painted by Donna Schuster (1883-1953). According to the catalog, Schuster studied with William Merritt Chase, the American Impressionist painter who lived from 1849-1916.

Schuster's work captures a young red-haired girl under a midnight-blue parasol, facing the viewer straight on but glancing off to the side. Sun gleams off her arm and shoulder and brashly highlights her hair. You can almost hear the surf in the background rolling onto the pale yellow sand.

One of the real show stoppers is "The Pool at Sundown" by John Frost (1890-1937). A small, illuminated pond reflects tall trees with surreal bark of slate-blues and lighter purples. The tranquil valley locale is framed by distant blue mountains. Yellow and green leaves are lively pats of color loosely and energetically painted. It's a place you want to be and this painting can dreamily get you there.



John Frost - The Pool at Sundown - 1923

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"All Things Bright and Beautiful: California Impressionists" runs through Oct. 5 at the Katonah (N.Y.) Museum, 134 Jay St. Call (914) 232-9555 or visit www.katonahmuseum.org.