

The Museum Of San Diego History

Museum Exhibit, San Diego Historical Society, Exhibition Review, *Belle Baranceanu: The Artist at Work*, opened September 16, 2006.

Bram Dijkstra and David Swanson, eds., *Belle Baranceanu: The Artist at Work* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 2006).

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Belle Baranceanu: The Artist at Work gathers together lithographs and paintings from the San Diego Historical Society (SDHS) and important private collections. It is the first major museum exhibition since 1985 devoted to the painter and muralist. The accompanying exhibition catalog edited by Bram Dijkstra and David Swanson provides insight into the art world of the 1930s and 1940s as well as a personal account of Baranceanu's life.

Belle Baranceanu (1902-1988), one of San Diego's most important artists, worked between 1925 and 1975. In her early paintings, she experimented with linear expressionist modernism, what Dijkstra in his essay describes as "a cubist-inflected use of razor-sharp outlines in the representation of form and by the emphatic delineations of planes of subtle color." In time, however, she developed a personal style that integrated abstraction with "realistic" representation. She remarked in 1932, "Just how much abstraction will be accepted and understood, and whether it will be the only means of pictorial expression I do not know."¹

Baranceanu may be best known for the depression-era murals that she created for federal programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) between 1933 and 1940. She painted *Scenic View of the Village* (1936) for the La Jolla post office, *Building Mission Dam* and *Portolá's Northern Expedition* (1937-38) for Roosevelt Junior High School Auditorium, and *The Seven Arts* (1939-40) for La



Belle Baranceanu embarked on one of her finest large-scale works, The Seven Arts, for La Jolla High School in the summer of 1940. ©SDHS # 94:19243-2.



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The *Seven Arts* was destroyed in 1975 after an earthquake assessment doomed the La Jolla High School auditorium. ©SDHS #94:19243.

Jolla High School. The latter covered 575 square feet and required the construction of four levels of scaffolding to reach the top of the thirty-six-foot-high proscenium.

SDHS's exhibition provides a rare glimpse of *Building Mission Dam* and *Portolá's Northern Expedition*, saved from demolition in 1975. The former shows a procession of Native Americans carrying stone to the site of Mission Dam while the latter depicts Gaspar de Portolá departing San Diego Bay with the first expedition of Spanish soldiers headed north. The exhibition also provides the best available glimpse of *The Seven Arts*, destroyed after an earthquake assessment doomed the La Jolla High School auditorium. One of her largest murals, *The Progress of Man*, can be viewed at the Balboa Park Club while *Scenic View of the Village* remains in La Jolla.

Baranceanu also produced beautifully-composed portraits of women. Notable are *Virginia* (ca. 1926), *The Yellow Robe* (ca. 1930), and *The Johnson Girl* (ca. 1930). The latter, painted shortly after Baranceanu's fiancé died in an automobile accident, is characterized by Dijkstra as "one of the most moving psychological portraits in twentieth-century American art."²

The artist felt strongly that the nude human figure should be liberated from the restrictive rules governing polite society. She refused a teaching job at the Bishop's School in La Jolla when she learned that she would not be allowed to wear sandals. She also showed her disdain for contemporary racial attitudes by portraying nude African American subjects "honestly and straightforwardly, as if daring her viewers to confront the universals of human beauty."³ *Seated Nude* (ca. 1931) is among one of Baranceanu's most beautiful works.

In 1935, Baranceanu was hired to design covers for a curriculum project



In 1935, Baranceanu painted *The Progress of Man* for the California Pacific International Exhibition in Balboa Park. Eleanor Roosevelt, who visited San Diego in 1935, described the mural as “one of the best she’d ever seen.” The mural remains on display in the Balboa Park Club. ©SDHS #89:17364.

developed by the San Diego City Schools. One series, devoted to animals, utilized her linoleum-block prints of deer, lions, skunks, mice, and rabbits. Later, she created her own limited edition relief-woodblock prints. *Deer* was accepted for the International Print Show at the Art Institute of Chicago while *Foxes* was purchased by the Library of Congress.

In 1946, Baranceanu took up a teaching position at Francis Parker School where she was allowed to wear her sandals and multicolored gypsy-style skirts. She continued there until her retirement in 1969. Swanson, co-editor of the exhibition catalog, remarked that Baranceanu “shared her passion for murals with the students.” She also taught them self-reliance, frequently using the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves.” She added, “That’s the *only* way you’ll learn.”⁴

In 1950, Baranceanu was elected president of the San Diego Art Guild. She continued to paint though she produced few major works. Artistic tastes had changed, bringing abstraction into prominence and devaluing the socially conscious work produced by WPA artists.



Baranceanu displays her limited edition relief-woodblocks, 1944. ©SDHS, UT 19440:6.



Her woodblock print, Deer, 1937, was accepted for the International Print Show at the Art Institute of Chicago and, along with Foxes, purchased by the Library of Congress. Block print, 12 x 11 in. San Diego Historical Society, gift of the artist.

Baranceanu's work as a teacher also absorbed much of her time. In 1960, she told a reporter from the *La Jolla Light* that she was "constantly torn between teaching and the things I like to do. If someone dangled a mural in front of me I think I'd drop the whole business and paint."⁵

SDHS's former curator, Bruce Kamerling, preserved many sketches, lithographs and paintings by Baranceanu. In 1980, he initiated the process of transferring her Roosevelt murals (along with four by Charles Reiffel) to SDHS's new museum in Balboa Park. He also encouraged the artist to donate her letters, photos, sketches, newspaper articles, and teaching notes to the Society's archives. Private collectors Dijkstra, David Swanson, and Estelle and James Milch also preserved many treasures.



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In 1937, Baranceanu was assigned to create two twenty-six-foot-high murals to flank the stage at Roosevelt Junior High School. In *Building Mission Dam*, a procession of Native Americans carry stone to the site of Mission Dam. ©SDHS #83:14637-1.



Portolá's Northern Expedition shows Gaspar de Portolá departing San Diego Bay with the first expedition of San Diego soldiers headed north. Baranceanu's murals for Roosevelt Junior High School will remain on view as part of the core exhibition on San Diego history in the San Diego Historical Society's galleries. ©SDHS #83:14637.

The catalog that accompanies the exhibit, co-edited by Dijkstra and Swanson, explains the historical context in which Baranceanu and other WPA artists worked. Large color photographs illustrate works produced during her most creative period, the 1930s and 1940s. The catalog also provides insight into the artist's personal life. Swanson knew her as a child. He writes that she "chose her works deliberately, as precisely as she cut into woodblocks with a knife blade. I never associated Belle's manner with her art at the time, but she was meticulous in her appearance and demeanor, much the way most of her art appears today—all carefully considered."⁶

Baranceanu exhibited her work at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, the American Federation of Arts, the Denver Art Museum, the California Pacific International Exhibition, the Golden Gate International Exhibition, the National Academy of Design Painters and Sculptors of Southern California, the San Diego Art Guild, the Escondido Annual Art Exhibition, the Illinois Academy of Fine Arts, the University of Nebraska, and the Silvermine Guild of Artists, among other venues.

The first major show of Baranceanu's paintings and murals was held in 1980 at the San Diego County Administration Center. In 1985, University of California San Diego's Mandeville Gallery mounted a larger retrospective exhibition. Dijkstra played an important role in bringing Baranceanu's works before the public and encouraging art historians to reevaluate her work.

SDHS's exhibition displays paintings, woodblock prints, sketches, and ephemera rarely seen by the public and never before presented together in one show. According to Executive Director David Watson, the twenty-six-foot-high murals for Roosevelt Junior High School—*Building Mission Dam* and *Portolá's Northern Expedition*—will remain on view as part of the core exhibition on San Diego history in the Society's galleries. The visual success of the exhibit owes much to the curatorial team led by David Krimmel.

The exhibition is located in SDHS's museum in the Casa de Balboa, Balboa Park. The museum is open to the public every day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, contact SDHS at (619) 232-6203 or see their website, <http://www.sandiegohistory.org>.

NOTES

1. Bram Dijkstra, "Belle Baranceanu and Modernism in San Diego," in *Belle Baranceanu: The Artist at Work*, eds. Dijkstra and David Swanson (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 2006), 8-9. See also Dijkstra, "Belle Baranceanu: The Artist at Work," *American Art Review* 18, no. 5 (2006): 152-159.
2. *Ibid.*, 22.
3. *Ibid.*, 24.
4. Swanson, "San Diego's Belle: The Artist and Teacher at Work," in *Belle Baranceanu*, 49.
5. *Ibid.*, 50.
6. *Ibid.*