

EXHIBIT REVIEWS

The San Diego History Center and The San Diego Museum of Art *Charles Reiffel: An American Post-Impressionist*, opened November 10, 2012.

Bram Dijkstra and Ariel Plotek, eds., *Charles Reiffel: An American Post-Impressionist* (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2012).

Reviewed by Molly McClain, Professor, Department of History, University of San Diego.

Charles Reiffel, described by some critics as the “American van Gogh,” produced emotionally expressive images of San Diego’s backcountry and waterfront. To celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth, the San Diego History Center (SDHC) and the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA) have collaborated to produce a comprehensive exhibit of his works ranging from sketches and lithographs to paintings and murals. The show reveals the career of an artist who developed a regional response to the challenge of modernism.

Bram Dijkstra and Ariel Plotek co-curate the exhibition that opened in November 2012 and continues through February and March 2013. Their catalogue, *Charles Reiffel: An American Post-Impressionist*, places the artist’s work in art historical context. Dijkstra, a scholar and collector who bought his first Reiffel painting about thirty years ago, writes, “Some of his paintings done on the West Coast are phenomenal—some of the best painting done in the country in the first half of the century,” he explains, “But he did not get the attention of the East Coast that he deserved.”¹

Charles Reiffel (1862-1942) began his career



*Charles Reiffel. New York, 1910.
Private collection.*

as a lithographer in Cincinnati, Ohio, producing theatrical posters, playbills, and other commercial designs. After two trips to Europe, he started working in watercolors and oil. He experimented with a variety of different styles before adopting Tonalism around 1907. In works such as *Early Winter* (ca. 1909) and *Railway Yards—Winter Evening* (1910) he used dark colors and heavy atmospheres to suggest the threat to nature by industrial and urban development. He, like many of his fellow artists, “saw the Luminists’ glowing tones, which symbolized the soul’s immersion in nature, fading into the darkness of lost faith.”²

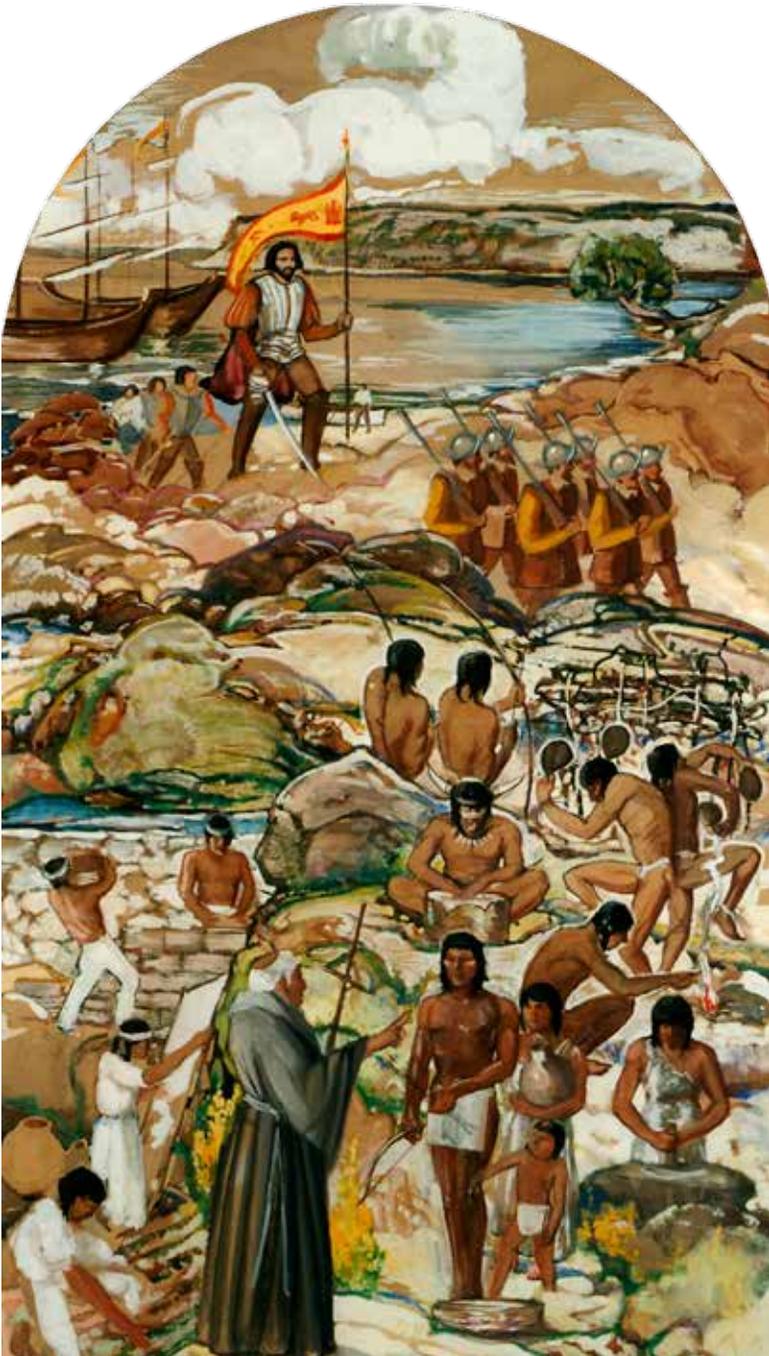
Reiffel and his wife Elizabeth moved frequently—from Cincinnati to Buffalo, New York, to Silvermine, Connecticut—seemingly unable to remain in one place for any length of time. He joined the New Canaan Art Club and founded the Silvermine Guild of Artists during his time in Fairfield County’s leading art colony. His wife, meanwhile, suffered from a manic-depressive disorder that grew worse over time.

In 1913, Reiffel attended the International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York, known as the Armory Show, where he saw works by *avant garde* European artists such as Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, and Duchamp. Inspired by their use of bright color and bold lines, Reiffel used “commanding verticals and electric hues” in paintings such as *Autumn Design* (ca. 1922). Like other post-impressionists, he came to believe that artists had a duty “to distill the essential truths of the natural world into works of art that would bring viewers closer to reality, to the ‘immanence of God in nature,’” Dijkstra wrote.³

The New York art establishment welcomed Reiffel’s bright new palette. Critic Charles Caffin praised his handling of oil paint in *Silvermine Valley* (ca. 1914) while artist Robert Henri invited him to send the work to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco.⁴ Reiffel exhibited his work at the Corcoran Gallery, the Art Association of Indianapolis, the Toledo Museum of Art, New York’s National Academy of Design, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, among other venues, and won a number of prestigious awards.

Reiffel continued to experiment with emotional effect. He placed figures in his landscapes to contrast wilderness and civilization in the manner of Childe Hassam. His *Nymphs of the Sea* (ca. 1923), for example, shows “a bevy of pale-skinned nymphs cavort or sit among Reiffel’s signature rocks and trees.” His best works, however, are partially abstracted landscapes that express “the elemental passions of the earth.”⁵

The artist left the New York art scene at the height of his career, moving to California in 1926. He and his wife settled in San Diego, enchanted by its chaparral, oak trees, and rock-strewn hills. By 1927, he had painted landscapes



Charles Reiffel, *History of San Diego—Colonial*, 1939. The San Diego History Center, gift of Donna Sefton.

depicting Grossmont, Mount Helix, El Cajon, the Cuyamacas, Alpine, Banner Gorge, and the San Felipe Valley. In San Diego's east county, Dijkstra explains, "The membranes of the region's primal earth were right there on the surface, waiting to be captured by the broad horizontal strokes and vermicelli verticals of Reiffel's brush."⁶

Reiffel quickly made friends among San Diego artists as he had "great charm and a personality that appealed to everybody," recalled artist Leda Klauber.⁷ He showed his paintings alongside California *plein air* artists Maurice Braun, Alson Clark, Charles A. Fries, Alfred R. Mitchell, and William Wendt, among others, and exhibited his work up and down the coast of California.

West Coast critics praised Reiffel. Arthur Millier, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, described him as "one of the greatest living American landscape painters," adding that his lyrical evocation of the landscape struck "a new note in California art." In his paintings, "mountains, trees, houses...share in a continuous flowing movement. Nothing is static."⁸ The land had a life force of its own.

The general public, however, did not appreciate the raw emotion in his work, preferring other artists' carefully composed versions of the same scenes. In a recent interview, Dijkstra stated, "He painted to express to others that there was this powerful, emotional, Godlike quality in the backcountry of San Diego. That scared off a lot of people. It's so raw, it's so fierce, and he would have said, 'Yeah, that's how nature is. This is what you're living with; you're living with something that is alive.'"⁹ As a result, Reiffel's paintings languished without buyers before and after the stock market crash of 1929.

Reiffel might have abandoned his career during the Great Depression but for the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that threw a lifeline to struggling artists. In return for a small weekly stipend, Reiffel produced some of his most celebrated works, including *Road in the Cuyamacas* (1933-34), now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In 1936, he painted two large murals for San Diego High School's Russ Auditorium, *San Diego Harbor* and *San Diego Backcountry*, which remain on permanent display at SDHC. He painted *Point Loma* and *Farm Landscape* (1937) for the auditorium of Memorial Junior High School and, later, a series of paintings depicting the history of San Diego for the City Council Chambers at the Civic Center.

Reiffel continued to send his paintings to various expositions, "often rubbing elbows with a much younger and far more 'modernist' crowd of artists." He experimented with wax crayons and became intrigued by the potential for the expression of emotion in even the most abstract paintings. Although most of his late works continued to depict nature in a realistic manner, a few like *Backcountry Scene* (1928) show an "almost electric intensity" and the beginnings of abstraction.

Dijkstra wrote, "In a very real sense, he was an Abstract Expressionist before his time."¹⁰

Living in extreme poverty, Reiffel returned in some of his last works to the Tonalist style that he had adopted as a younger man. Now, however, the darkness had become personal. In *The Street at Night—San Diego* (1939), a figure "finds himself alone in a world no longer his, a world whose warmth seems to be receding into the distance, even as the figure, which it is tempting to read as the artist himself, continues to forge ahead."¹¹ Reiffel died in March 1942 at seventy-nine years of age.

The exhibit's catalogue, *Charles Reiffel: An American Post-Impressionist*, argues convincingly that Reiffel should be considered a Post-Impressionist who elevated subjective experience over objective reality. It reconsiders the aims of American *plein air* painters in light of recent scholarship, suggesting that their "inward-looking regionalism" was, in fact, an important part of the modernist project. Plotek writes, "It was in this context of increased heterodoxy and rejection of imported styles in favor of those born of the land that Reiffel sought to carve his own niche within the American scene."¹²

This is the first monographic exhibit of Reiffel's work since the retrospective held at the Fine Arts Gallery (now SDMA) and the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 1942-43. This exhibit in San Diego, planned by former curators Derrick Cartwright (SDMA) and David Kahn (SDHC), has been realized by the directors and staff of both institutions. Keith Colestock, meanwhile, lent his extensive research materials on Reiffel and provided, in the catalogue, an exhibition history.

Essential to the success of the exhibition are collectors like the Dijkstras, Estelle and Jim Milch, Sharon and Albert Cutri, Colestock and others who began buying Reiffel's works before they received widespread recognition as masterpieces of twentieth-century art. The Milchs explain that they bought Reiffel's works at a time when "lots of kids were getting rid of Grandma's landscape paintings, and they were selling them for a song." The colors and the energy caught their eye. The Cutris also responded to the artist's "fluid, organic style."¹³

For the first time in decades, Reiffel's works emerge from private collections to take their place among the most inspiring works produced by early twentieth-century California artists. SDMA's exhibit runs through February 10, 2013, while SDHC's show concludes on March 10, 2013.



58. *Back Country Houses*, ca. 1935. Collection of Estelle and Jim Milch.



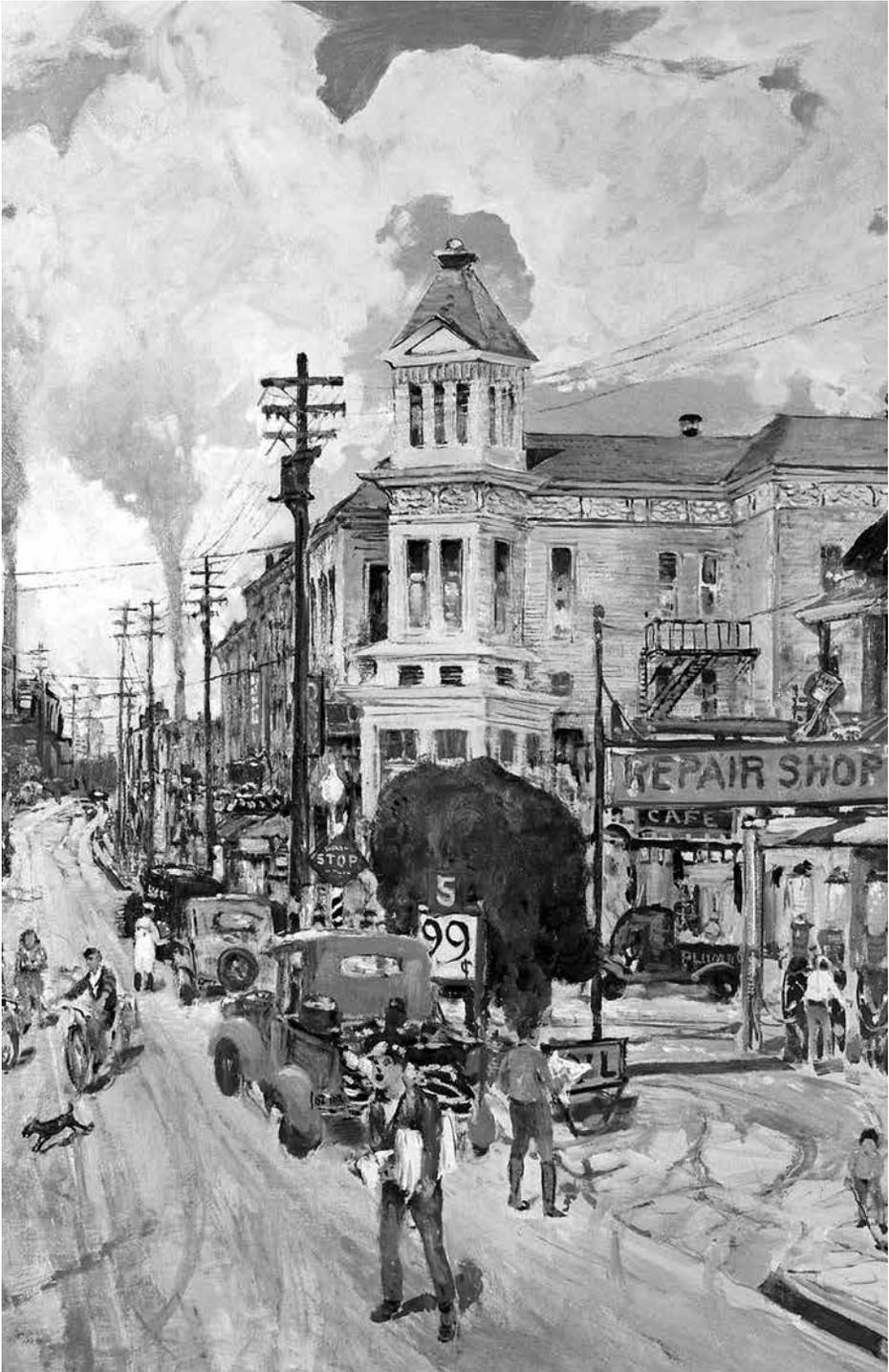
71. *Harbor Night*, 1937. On loan from the Fine Arts Program, Public Building Services, US General Administration, commissioned through the New Deal art projects. Courtesy of the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.



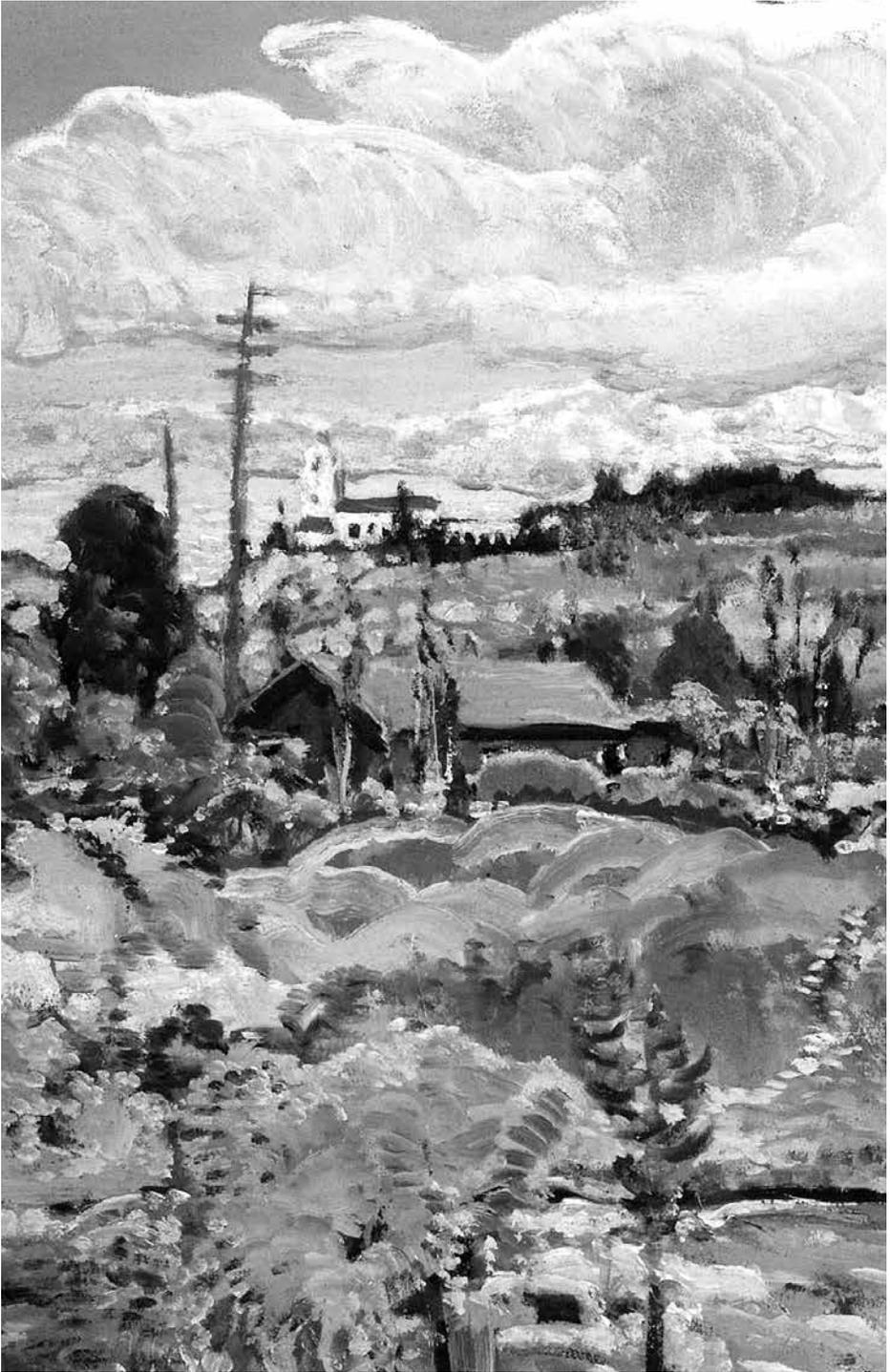
51. *La Jolla Shores*, 1931. Private collection.



67. *The Lumber Yard*, 1937. Collection of Estelle and Jim Milch.



77. *In the Street*, ca. 1938. The County of San Diego.



45. *Near Old Town, 1928. The Smith collection.*



62. *The Painting Lesson*, 1936. Collection of Estelle and Jim Milch.

NOTES

1. "Reiffel: No, You Don't Know Him," *San Diego Magazine* (November 2012).
2. Bram Dijkstra and Ariel Plotek, eds., *Charles Reiffel: An American Post-Impressionist* (San Diego: The San Diego Museum of Art, 2012), 29.
3. *Ibid.*, 34, 89.
4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. *Ibid.*, 48.
6. *Ibid.*, 51.
7. Leda Klauber (1881-1981), interviewed by Christine Oatman and Grace Miller, February 10, 1979, SDHC Oral History Collection.
8. Dijkstra and Plotek, eds., *Charles Reiffel*, 53.
9. "Reiffel: No, You Don't Know Him."
10. Dijkstra and Plotek, eds., *Charles Reiffel*, 58.
11. *Ibid.*, 61.
12. *Ibid.*, 13.
13. *Ibid.*, 173.