Maurice Braun (1877-1941), a founding member of the La Jolla Art Association, enjoyed a national reputation for his impressionist landscapes of Southern California. He is seen here painting on the Mesa Grande Indian Reservation, 1920. ©SDHC #86:15900-960-1.
The Little-Known Drawings of California Impressionist Artist Maurice Braun

By Nicole M. Holland

The legacy of Southern California Impressionist painter Maurice Braun (1877-1941) is enriched by the publication of a massive trove of drawings of varying dimensions and media made by the artist and kept by him throughout his life. Few drawings by Braun have been exhibited or published, and the existence of such a sizable family archive of more than three hundred works on paper was first revealed to the public in 2007, in an exhibition at Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

Braun’s leadership in the cultural life and artistic development of San Diego is well known through his association with the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society in Point Loma; the founding of the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery, which would become the San Diego Museum of Art (Fig. 1); his extensive teaching practice; and, in general, the promotion of the young city as a mecca for a good life in mind and body. Less well known is the role of drawing in the career of this Hungarian-born and New York-trained painter. Braun was a double-immigrant and cultural denizen, bridging

(Fig. 1) The Prado [House of Hospitality] at Balboa Park, “The Prado Group” (named for a group of drawings which are similar in technique), charcoal on paper, 5 x 8 in. Private collection.

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Washington, color pencil on paper, 17½ x 20 in. Private collection.

Mountain Lilac, 18½ x 20 in. Private Collection.
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Harbor Scene, color pencil on paper, 20 x 18½ in. Private collection.

Beach Scene, color pencil on paper, 18½ x 20 in. Private Collection.
the Old and New Worlds of Europe and America, and the U.S. East Coast and rising West Coast. Indeed, he was “known as the painter of the East and of the West,” according to Reginald Poland, director of the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery, writing in 1928.² This short article proposes, first, to describe this remarkable corpus with regard to media, size, subject matter and chronology; second, to offer some preliminary observations on the meaning and purpose of the drawings, including the significance of Theosophical practice; and, third, to consider the relationship of the drawings to the large corpus of oil on canvas paintings for which the artist is best known.

The family archive of drawings consists of nearly 350 works on paper that were made by Maurice Braun over a thirty-year career in San Diego. None of the drawings suggests—either in style or subject matter—that they were made before his move to the West Coast. The artist worked in a variety of drawing techniques and formats throughout his life, from the small pencil notations (Fig. 2) or quick pen-and-ink sketches (Fig. 3), and a few watercolors, to the several dozen, larger finished color pencil compositions (Fig. 4). It is easy to see that drawing provided a constant and crucial vehicle for Braun’s consumption—spontaneous or contemplative—of the rural, urban, or marine landscape motif. Braun sketched in the San Diego back country (Figs. 5, 10, 16) or Balboa Park (Fig. 1), at the beach (Fig. 6) or while traveling on family automobile trips through...
the California mountain ranges (Fig. 7). He worked tirelessly while taking railroad company-provided *gratis* cross-country train trips, with the obligation to draw or paint beckoning landscape views as a marketing component of the burgeoning railroad tourist culture (Fig. 9), or while seeking respite in the art colonies of the East Coast (Fig. 19). Braun was clearly never without a leaf or two of paper tucked into the pocket of the elegant suit in which he worked indoors or *en plein-air* (outdoors), often working frugally from sheets folded from larger leaves into surfaces no more than two inches in height (Fig. 2). The backs of gallery exhibition invitations (Kanst Art Gallery, Los Angeles, and Babcock Gallery, New York), hotel stationery or train handbills, all provided handy supports for quick notations. This poet of landscape visuality also worked comfortably within the format of the finished
color pencil drawing, using tools purchased from H.G. Daniels Art Supply, San Diego.

Braun could not function without drawing, evidently with medium always at hand, grabbing what he could to record the silhouette. More, he clearly never tired of the intense company he kept throughout his life with the natural scene. His imagination fused motifs from different locales: contours drawn from the California landscape combined with abstractions of Spanish missions to produce fanciful renderings of castles on hills (Fig. 11), while automobiles on San Diego streets passed towering cliffs more familiar in Yosemite (Fig. 18). His eye was fresh and scrupulous, even anthropomorphizing the view, as Reginald Poland, director of the San Diego Art Institute and colleague of Braun, commented in writing about the artist in The Theosophical Path, the regular journal of The Theosophical Society: “He loved to draw the distinct personalities among the many trees.”

Drawing was language for Braun; even the content of letters to his young daughter Charlotte consists of images of birds or animals in pen-and-ink (Fig. 12), with a loving salutation and closing signature. The family archive, then, may be viewed as a corpus of personal responses across a variety of media—from the quick note to the finished composition—to the subject that became the focus of his near exclusive preoccupation. While there are three extraordinary portraits of his wife Hazel, two close-up in pencil or pen-and-ink (Fig. 13), and one view of
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her in a garden, the landscape throughout the changing seasons is the principal subject of these works made over a lifetime.

The practice of drawing dominated the instruction of the nineteenth-century European academies and the American schools influenced by them: drawing was synonymous with design. An émigré in the waning days of the Dual Monarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the young Braun studied at the New York Academy of Design with professors who had trained in the rigorous practice of the fundamentals of drawing. Following sustained study and drawing after plaster casts of antique statues, students were judged ready to progress to the next level of drawing, the life model. It was only in the early twentieth century that courses in painting or printmaking began to be offered at the National Academy of Design. In New York, Braun won a medal for his work in portraiture, and was highly regarded as a figure painter. Thus, Braun's habitual response to the
landscape through the lens of drawing is rooted in his early academic training. What was not taught in the academy, however, was the subject matter of landscape, considered a lower tier of subject matter, and for that Braun spent a year working with the renowned American Impressionist painter William Merritt Chase before moving to join with The Theosophical Society in San Diego in 1909. Chase had studied at the Munich Academy, a bastion of European academicism. In Chase’s studio, Braun was also exposed to the French-Impressionist-influenced *plein-air* landscape that the master practiced during his summers on Long Island. Braun carefully learned how to construct a solid framework: specifically, he learned to distinguish receding planes as well as raise important staffage framing devices of brush or tree at right and/or left of the composition. Most significantly, he took away from Chase a unifying device that I choose to call the “gangway”: a central path in the composition leading from foreground to middle ground that analogizes the viewer’s entry into the landscape (Fig. 14). Works by Chase that feature this device include *Near the Beach, Shinnecock*, The Toledo Museum of Art, c. 1895; and *The Homestead*, San Diego Museum of Art, c. 1893.

In his landscapes, Braun adhered to academic practice, producing pencil, charcoal or pen-and-ink sketches, as well as the more complete color pencil
sketches, which economically captured the silhouettes of foreground, middle and distant planes. Methodically recording the scaffolding of the many views he encountered, he consumed craggy outcroppings contoured against curtains of gently sloping mountains, mountain valleys, farms and ranches silhouetted against luminous scallops of hills and peaks, or the compelling close-up detail (Figs. 15, 16). The repetitive nature of his engagement in drawing and in paint tantalizes the viewer with one key question: why did landscape become the central focus of his art following his early success in New York as a figurative painter?

Poland notes the importance of California’s natural beauty for Braun, and its role in the development of art practice in San Diego: “Southern California will rise to a place of decided leadership as an American center of art. There is no doubt of this in his mind; the beauty of the country in time must dominate and develop a demand for beauty, in man-made creations.” According to Esther Megan Brush, Braun reveled in the freshness and optimism of California as captured in its art. He wrote, “for here we are in a country in the freshness of early youth…it smiles upon the world, happy in its sunny optimism. Its scenery is majestic.” The gently sloping silhouettes of landscape, in general, can suggest the contours of the reclining nude, and indeed in the imaginary of Braun’s virgin landscape of the
(Fig. 10) Mountain Lilac, 18½ x 20 in. Private collection.

(Fig. 11) Castle on Hill, “Hotel Alexandria” Group, named for a group of drawings that are similar in technique one of which appears on a piece of Hotel Alexandria stationery, pen and ink on paper, 5½ x 8½ in. Private collection.
young country of California. This similarity may be relevant for this late Victorian academy-trained artist who produced no painted reclining nudes. Indeed, Braun dressed formally as he worked en plein air, addressing the view as he would a portrait sitter.

But we must search for a richer significance for the deeply spiritual Braun, and for this we turn to consideration of the Theosophical movement and Braun’s own comments on the spiritual practice and its meaning for him. Founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky in the 1870s, the hybrid religion of theosophy found a wide audience in Europe and in the United States, engaging leading avant-garde artists including Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian painter who wrote Concerning the Spiritual in Art in 1911, as well as the Dutch Neo-Plastic artist Piet Mondrian. Fusing western and eastern religious traditions, Blavatsky also experimented in the paranormal, a widespread practice in late nineteenth-century Europe and America. According to the artist’s daughter, Braun, too, believed in and may have participated in paranormal experiences at times, “to explain what isn’t seen, what is beyond our sensibilities.” Katherine Tingley moved the International Theosophical Society to Lomaland in Point Loma in 1900.

Maurice Braun equated the experience of landscape with philosophical encounter, comparing the artist’s discovery of “a view” of such compelling beauty and character to experiencing for the first time the principles of Madame Blavatsky. He believed that the practice of art and the spiritual path of Theosophy both led to a central truth: “that all things share divinity and immortality…the art student finds in Theosophy a clear, bright light by which, with true vision, fully alive to the real issues, his best efforts may come to their proper maturity.” Braun further attributed great powers to theosophy: “One’s outlook upon life generally, its effect even upon one’s professional or vocational activities, is enhanced and
glorified...After all, what greater joy can there be than the consciousness that we are being trained for service.”14 His philosophy reflected an American tradition reaching back to famed landscape artist George Inness (1825-1894) whose work he passionately admired.15 A devotee of Swedish eighteenth-century mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, Inness had also sought correspondences between nature and the divine.16

Braun first encountered theosophy in New York, where Madame Blavatsky had installed a chapter; he moved to San Diego in 1909 to be near the international headquarters.17 This is the same time period of Kandinsky and Mondrian’s engagement with the practice in Europe. The former linked colors to emotions and spiritual drives, as did Theosophist Annie Besant in her book Thought Forms. It is tempting to assign Braun’s colors some spiritual symbolism.18 For example, a golden path or valley marks several of the color

(Fig. 14) Landscape Study, color pencil on paper, 18 x 21 in. Private collection.
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drawings, suggesting a pool of light possibly with special meaning, perhaps the theosophical light that he writes about as the “glance of the divine” (Fig. 17). Braun said, “It only remains for those who have a little more light to hold on to it and to see that it shines more and more brightly in the hope that it may help illuminate the way.”¹⁹ Indeed, the luminous high key of the drawings, consisting of pinks, yellows, soft greens, lavenders and so forth, temptingly suggests the bright radiance of divine light shining on the natural “view” as he called it. Braun said, “I cannot paint in a low key.”²⁰

The question naturally arises regarding any connecting relationships between drawings and oil canvases and, at this point, only a few links may be convincingly suggested. Harbor Scene (Fig. 19), dated approximately 1925-30, is either a finished preparatory drawing or the record of a painting(s) done either in the Bay Area of California or during one of Braun’s summer east coast stays.²¹ Mountain Lilac (Fig. 10), with its glorious blue bouquet, may be a preparatory sketch for the c. 1920 canvas Mountain Lilac-Palomar.²² Finally, the lavender hues and soft radiance of The Moon, Colorado (Fig. 20) are seen, as well, in the canvas Moonlight.²³ Pinpricks suggest that this drawing was tacked to the artist’s easel as a guide. Other torn sheets suggest, too, their use in the studio as models for painted motifs. A

(Fig. 15) Ranch, Riders Mounted, color pencil on paper, 18½ x 14½ in. Private collection.
(Fig. 16) Ranch House, charcoal on paper, 17 x 20½ in. Private collection.

(Fig. 17) Yellow Fields, color pencil on paper, 9 x 9 in. Private collection.
tentative chronology for the drawings can be constructed on the basis of these few relationships, though the situation is made much more complicated by the existence of only a few dated canvases. Nonetheless, working with the scant available dates and the evolution of Braun’s signature, it is possible to suggest that three distinct periods emerge.

The earlier works capture the natural motif with a regular and uncomplicated, indeed earnest outline, filled in with colored pencil or shading (Figs. 4, 14, 21). The recession of planes—foreground, middle and background—is informational

(Fig. 18) Downtown San Diego with Automobile, pencil on paper, 5½ x 5 in. Private collection.

(Fig. 19) Harbor Scene, color pencil on paper, 20 x 18½ in. Private collection.
(Fig. 20) Moon, Colorado, color pencil on paper, 17 x 14½ in. Private collection.

(Fig. 21) Eucalyptus, pencil on paper, 10 x 12½ in. Private collection.
rather than persuasive or masterful. The hesitancy, even the uncertainty, of the artist working to subsume his subject is reflected in the early signature, which consists of a tight, Arts and Crafts-style block manuscript.

Works from the middle period evince a surer command of the linear contour, contrasting fine details with broad, sweeping arcs to generate a more unified pictorial space, seamlessly melding foreground and background (Fig. 4). The late works, finally, betray characteristics of many older artists: clearly defined, dense and highly fluid serpentine lines; less subtle and more vivid colors, and a flatness of receding planes, all of which evidence the artist’s “handprint” on the land he has made his own (Fig. 8). There are, no doubt, many more connections to elucidate that must await the publication one day of a catalogue raisonné. For now, students and collectors have the opportunity to assimilate the drawings on their own terms and to reflect on the centrality of drawing to Braun at the crucial conjunction of viewing and appropriation. For Braun, indeed, drawing is the instrument that binds perception and representation.

NOTES

1. The author extends deep appreciation to Jennifer and Jonathan Braun, grandchildren of the artist, for their ongoing support of the research and organization of the exhibition, and for their permission to publish the collection. Warm gratitude is extended to Lynda Claassen, Director of Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego for her tireless support in the research and development of an online catalogue as well as the installation of the exhibition Maurice Braun: The Hidden Treasure, on view in Mandeville Special Collections Library April 14-June 29, 2007. The Braun Cataloguing Team of The Bishop’s School, La Jolla, California—a voluntary group of students led by Nicole Holland and Bridget Wright—prepared the catalogue and research for the descriptive essays accompanying the privately published exhibition brochure, with the gracious support of Michael W. Teitelman, former Headmaster of The Bishop’s School; John C. Welchman, Professor, University of California, San Diego; and Michael A. Bernstein, former Dean of Arts and Humanities, University of California, San Diego, who generously provided funding. I also wish to thank Professor Molly McClain, University of San Diego, for her support of this publication. Finally, tribute is paid to the late Dr. Charlotte Braun White and Ernest Braun, children of the artist, who maintained the archive of drawings over a fifty-year period and who enthusiastically supported all aspects of this project.


6. Chase’s home/studio was a cultural haven, as would be Braun’s Silvergate residence in Point Loma. In fact, Braun’s life and work afford compelling reflections on the social and private histories of the city of San Diego where he and his wife Hazel played so prominent a part. Luminaries in the evolution of San Diego cultural life, the artist and his wife Hazel drew
renowned Swedish art historian Osvald Siren and other erudite international visitors interested in the movement. Missouri-born Hazel was an arts columnist for the San Diego Union. Together, the couple lived a life exceptionally sited at the junction of powerful vectors in the early formation of the region. In very few other locations on the West Coast at this time did the twin threads of an Edenic paradise and refined Eurocentric culture interweave in the performance of the self-renewing and ever-perfecting self. Braun held great belief in the potential of the San Diego region for artistic and spiritual development: “Neither Greece nor Italy surpasses southern California for artistic atmosphere...our sky is bluer, our waters have more colors, and our trees and flowers are brighter. It is indeed an Eden for those who seek the beautiful in Nature.” Cited in Esther Mugan Brush, “A Master-Brush of Point Loma,” The Theosophical Path 14, no. 1 (January, 1918), 16. Reginald Poland, writing in 1928, said: “Southern California will rise to a place of decided leadership as an American center of Art. There is no doubt of this in [Braun’s] mind.” Poland, “The Divinity of Nature,” 474.

8. Brush, “A Master-Brush of Point Loma,” 15. Brush quotes Braun: “I have heard many painters remark that our tree life, shrubbery, and other elements in California, are much like those of certain countries, but to my knowledge no one has yet made an absolute comparison. It is just this peculiarity of atmosphere, hill formation, verdure, quality of soil, which most attracts me... Here the immensity of the open spaces are themselves an inspiration. Here, even a gray day vibrates luminosity.”

13. Ibid.
17. Braun maintained a physical and emotional distance from the headquarters. Though his two children attended boarding school on the campus, which included the Raja-Yoga School and College, the Theosophical University, and the School for the Revival of the Lost Mysteries of Antiquity, Braun was never required to live on Lomaland property and opened a school for artists in downtown San Diego.