

Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery

Along El Camino Real: Edwin Deakin's Twenty-One Missions in Watercolor

By Kerry Methner, PhD / CASA

RELICS, RUINS, REMINDERS? THE SERENE BEAUTY OF THE OLD ALTA CALIFORNIA MISSIONS has come to light with the unveiling of a suite of paintings by Edwin Deakin that were in storage for most of the last 110 years. Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery will be hosting this group of 21 watercolors March 7th through June 30th in an exhibition titled, *Along El Camino Real: Edwin Deakin's Twenty-One Missions in Watercolor*.

"In some ways galleries make a contribution to history with every exhibit and artist they promote," shared Frank Goss, Co-Owner of Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery. "However, it is a real privilege to discover and resurrect a monumental, 100-year-old cycle of paintings of historic structures which have never been seen before. For an art dealer, it does not get better."

Completed between 1897 and 1899, by Deakin, known as the principal painter of the Missions, the series captures the missions just 100 to 130 years after their completion, but in varying states of repair, use, or decrepitude.

"He is often credited with being among the earliest to champion the 'Camino Real' and the aging Missions. At the time there was some debate about whether there should be any restoration. It was thought that the Mission, as they were, were spectacular artifacts and should not be repaired or restored," Goss shared.

The Alta California Missions were part of a whole system of missions running from Mexico to the north that were built about a day's journey apart and used to colonize the Pacific Coast of the Americas.

The Missions, which were built with the

conscripted labor of Native Americans, at first were community centers and places of worship. But, by Deakin's time, the Old Kings Highway was crumbling into non-existence. Soon the missions were crumbling too, many almost lost, except to curious folk who sought them out.

Deakin was one of those curious sorts. Already a professional artist when he located to California after the Chicago fire of 1871, he began to capture the landscape and architecture of the west.

"Deakin was one of a half dozen prominent painters who came to California to take advantage of the beauty of the largely unpainted West and the unfettered growth in wealth that occurred because of California's riches," Goss noted. "Ultimately several painters painted the entire suite of the mission at the turn of the century. Deakin is frequently credited with being the first professional artist to paint all the missions in 'exhibition scaled' oils. However, this is a wonderful example of the sexism that often passes for history. In many books there is a nodding acknowledgement of a suite of oils done around 1880 by Oriana Day who moved to California in 1877. Often the reference is simply a footnote because Mrs. Day...was a woman... Day completed images of all 21 Missions before she passed away in 1886."

Deakin's work can be found in many collections throughout California, including at the State Capital, the Crocker Museum in Sacramento, the LA County History Museum, and the de Young. When he arrived in San Francisco in the 1870s to make his way as an artist, he helped to create a vibrant arts community, and became famous for his landscapes, still lifes of grapes, and European architecture paintings before he committed to recording all 21 of California's historic Missions.

Deakin not only painted the missions once, he created three full sets of paintings, two in oil and one in watercolor. The first set in oil resides at the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History. The second set in oil, created in case the first was damaged, resides at the Santa Barbara Mission Archive Library.

The watercolors were intended to be published in a book, and towards that end, the



San Juan Capistrano, c. 1897, by Edwin Deakin (1838-1923), 8.5 x 11.5" | Watercolor on paper

"There is something incredibly beautiful about the patina of time," Frank Goss noted of the above painting. "In most of his paintings, the artist presents monumental structures bathed in radiant sunshine....with weeds and native plants providing the backdrop. Perhaps more than any of the other Mission paintings by Deakin, this structure, largely because the gaping apse is adjacent to the weed strewn courtyard, there is a sense of ennui - the boredom of abandonment juxtaposed to the magnificence of a grand architecture."

artist created a hand-done title page for each mission, a title page for the book, and a map illustrating the location of each on the Camino Real. All of the missions as well as these supporting works will be exhibited and offered for sale as a lot.

According to Sullivan Goss, in 1951, Santa Barbara resident Howard Willoughby was able to purchase this cache directly from the

descendants of the artist. They were eventually brought to the attention of Paul Mills, former director of both the Oakland Museum and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, who contributed foundational scholarship on Deakin and helped to shepherd Deakin's legacy into public collections. In 2008, his mission was realized when the Crocker Museum created a full retrospective with catalog. While part of Willoughby's collection helped build the Oakland Museum's collection of California art, the watercolors were held back, waiting to be published in book form, as per the terms of the original acquisition.

The Mission exhibition will also include historic works by Edward Potthast, Alexander Harmer, Henry Chapman Ford, Lockwood de Forest, Nell Brooker Mayhew, Anders Aldrin, Orpha Klinker, Wayne Lacom, and others.

Sullivan Goss is located at 7 E Anapamu St and is open daily 10-5:30pm. Visit them at sullivangoss.com or call 730-1460.



San Carlos Borromeo del Rio Carmelo, c. 1897, by Edwin Deakin (1838-1923), 8.5 x 11.5" | Watercolor on paper



Santa Barbara Virgen y Martir, c. 1897, by Edwin Deakin (1838-1923), 8.5 x 11.5" | Watercolor on paper

