



REFLECTIONS
THE ART OF PAUL WHITMAN
(1897-1950)

Cover Image
Coast and Cypress, 1946
Watercolor, 47⁵/₈"x60"
Collection of Mrs. Anita Whitman

Back Cover
Monterey Waterfront, 1928
Etching, 4"x6"
Collection of Monterey Museum of Art, 2000.7

Opposite
Self Portrait, c. 1940
Watercolor, 18"x23¹/₂"
Collection of Mrs. Anita Whitman



Paul Whitman was an accomplished and versatile artist who played an active role in the arts community of the Monterey Peninsula for twenty-four years. A founding member of the Carmel Art Association, Whitman worked in a wide variety of media that included etching, charcoal drawing, watercolor, oil, lithography, and sculpture. Whitman was born in Denver, Colorado in 1897, although his family later settled in St. Louis, Missouri. At a young age Whitman became interested in art and took up drawing. In his teens, he attended an East Coast preparatory school, intending to continue his education at Yale University. However, with the advent of the United States' entry into World War I, he set aside his plans in order to join the armed forces in Europe. Upon his return to civilian life in 1921, Whitman joined his stepfather's insurance business in St. Louis. Later that year he married a young woman named Anita Moll, and by 1928 their three children, Colden, Ann, and Paul, had been born. While several sketchbooks survive from Whitman's army days, during his twenties he had little time to devote to art. Despite this, his interest in being an artist persisted.

In 1926 Whitman made a major change in his life, when, at the age of twenty-nine, he moved to Carmel to pursue his dream of becoming an artist. By the time Whitman arrived, the Monterey Peninsula was home to an unprecedented number

of talented artists, including William Ritschel, E. Charlton Fortune, Armin Hansen, Gottardo Piazzoni, August Gay, Paul Dougherty, Francis McComas, Mary DeNeale Morgan, Charles Rollo Peters, and Percy Gray. Life on the Central Coast was relatively cheap, the climate mild, and its inhabitants tolerant toward artists. Monterey also offered the presence of the Hotel Del Monte, a noted venue for art exhibitions, where artists could sell works to the hotel's wealthy clientele. And, most importantly, the area was famous for its breathtaking scenery, which drew visitors from around the world.

Shortly after his arrival in Carmel, Whitman began to study etching with Armin Hansen (1886-1957), a native San Franciscan who relocated to Monterey in 1918. Primarily a painter of maritime scenes, Hansen had taken up etching in 1910 during his studies in Europe. By 1926, he was widely recognized for his mastery of this art, winning medals in competitions of national and international scope. Hansen was a patient and highly regarded teacher, known to encourage and inspire his many students without imposing rigid formulas.

Like Hansen, Whitman frequently depicted waterfront life in his etchings, as in *Monterey Waterfront* from 1928. However, this detailed depiction of rickety shacks perched unsteadily over the bay seems unlikely to have appealed to Hansen.¹ While Hansen tended to focus on the human activity of waterfront,

¹ However, the subject did appeal to August Gay, an earlier student of Hansen's. Between 1926 and 1929, Gay made thirty-two etchings, including several that depict Monterey's waterfront shacks.

Whitman gravitated toward intricate scenes of piers and wharves that challenged his considerable drawing skills. His images depict the wharf's buildings, their wooden pilings echoed in the water below, or skiffs hanging suspended from ropes and pulleys, poised above the waters of the bay. Unlike his teacher, whose etchings capture the bustle of wharf activity, Whitman's etchings evoke a mood of quiet reflection.

By 1928 Whitman was beginning to gain notice in the art world. He exhibited as a member of the California Society of Etchers and received a prize from the International Society of Etchers for his piece *Linemen*. Whitman also began to work in watercolor, and in 1929 the Smithsonian Institution hosted an exhibition of his work that included both etchings and watercolors.

In the late 1920s, California entered what San Francisco art critic Alfred Frankenstein would later call "a watercolor age." Led by Millard Sheets, several young artists in Southern California were generating national attention for their flowing, unstudied watercolors. Setting aside the precise control and delicate coloration of traditional watercolor, they created bright and expressive images descriptive of contemporary California life. Sheets was an extremely influential artist at this time; Whitman admired his work greatly, and they later became good friends.

While a number of regional artists depicted the realities of urbanization that were a major factor of American life in the 1930s, others, like Whitman, concentrated on the rural landscape. No matter the subject, his watercolors have in common a lyrical stillness, as horses graze timeless landscapes, cypresses stand silent watch along the coast, and figures pause in contemplation. Again and again, Whitman found inspiration in tree-shaded barns and scenes of farm life such as hay making and fieldwork. In the politically insular 1930s, such agrarian scenes were a phenomenon made popular by Thomas Hart Benton and other mid-western artists who responded to the call for an art that truly depicted the realities of America.

Late in 1937 Whitman traveled to Guatemala. There, influenced by the glowing colors and bright sunlight, he created some of his strongest watercolors. His simple scenes of people going about their daily lives—getting a haircut, going to church, selling their wares—are vibrant and dynamic. In *Selling Hats, Guatemala*, 1938, a street seller holds a straw hat toward two men, a sea of similar hats lying at their feet. The hats and the men's white cotton trousers glow against the shadowed street beyond. Through Whitman's eyes, an ordinary street scene is transformed into an image of timeless beauty.

Prior to his Guatemalan trip, Whitman had collaborated with his friend Armin Hansen on a series of murals for the Hotel Del Monte. Painted on canvas, these murals were removed from the former hotel, and are now in the collection of the Monterey Museum of Art. Whitman's interest in exploring new media also led him to work on a number of wooden sculptures, most of which now belong to members of his family. One public work consists of a pair of bas reliefs created for the imposing façade of the new Bank of Carmel building in the 1930s. Although now partially hidden by trees, the reliefs can

still be seen on the front of the building, located in Carmel at the corner of Ocean and Dolores.

Lithography, an older technique that became increasingly popular during the 1930s and 1940s, is another medium Whitman explored in depth. Whitman's lithographs mainly focus on his interest in fishing and duck hunting, subjects he also explored in charcoal, watercolor, and oil. His images of duck hunters scanning the sky or carrying their catch, silhouetted against dark skies, combine the sense of quiet reflection found in the etchings with the depiction of simple day-to-day life developed in his watercolors. Created during a somber period in history, the solitary figures and stormy skies of his lithographs are darker and more dramatic than his earlier work.

Whitman's career, like that of many of his compatriots, was disrupted during the war years. From 1942 to 1945 Whitman served with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in San Francisco, using his talents as an artist to help create effective camouflage. During this period, his work sometimes took him north to the rural area around Santa Rosa, where he kept his hand in by painting some of the barns that dotted the countryside.

After the war Whitman returned thankfully to his art. It was during this later period that Whitman painted his finest watercolor, *Coast and Cypress*, 1946, an enormous and beautifully executed painting of cypresses, their twisted limbs framing a view of sea and sky. In the last years of his life, Whitman worked as a consultant to the State Department of Education and created a large oil painting for Abercrombie and Fitch. He also received commissions to illustrate two books, one by Pulitzer Prize winning author and fellow Pebble Beach resident, Martin Flavin. Whitman was working on the illustrations for another book when he died suddenly at the age of fifty-three.²

The closely-knit arts community mourned Whitman's untimely death in 1950 and publicly memorialized him as an unselfconsciously endearing man with great heart and a strong interest in helping others. Whitman's paintings are held in many private collections, and, thanks to the interest of his family,³ his prints are included in the permanent collections of the Monterey Museum of Art, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Additional works are held in the collections of Stanford University and the California State Library, Sacramento. Whitman and Hansen's murals were the focus on a 1974 exhibition at MMA, and, more recently, Whitman's prints were featured in a 1997 exhibition at the Carmel Art Association.

While Whitman's career was cut tragically short, the devoted efforts of his friends and family have helped to ensure that he will not be forgotten. *Reflections: The Art of Paul Whitman (1897-1950)*, the first large-scale exhibition of Whitman's work, would not have been possible without the valuable assistance and encouragement of Whitman's daughter, Ann Whitman Chapman, and his grandson, Christopher Paul Chapman.

Mary Murray, Curator

² While this project was incomplete at the time of his death, Whitman's son Colden was able to finish the illustrations and the book, a textbook on Mexico, was published in 1953.

³ Whitman's widow still lives in the Pebble Beach house they shared, and all three of their children have residences in the area.



Skiffs, 1937
Conte-Crayon, 28³/₄"x35³/₈"
Collection of Ann and George Chapman



Red Barn, c. 1930
Watercolor, 20^{5/8}"x24^{7/8}"
Collection of Ann and George Chapman



Salinas Lettuce Field, c. 1935
Watercolor, 18"×24"
Collection of Diane and Walter Chapman



Horses on Hillside, c. 1935
Watercolor, 19" x 23 3/8"
Collection of Paul Whitman



At Pasture, 1938
Watercolor, 20^{3/8}"x26^{3/8}"
Collection of Monika and Chris Chapman



Ducks Landing, c. 1940
Charcoal, 48"x52"
Collection of James Glaser



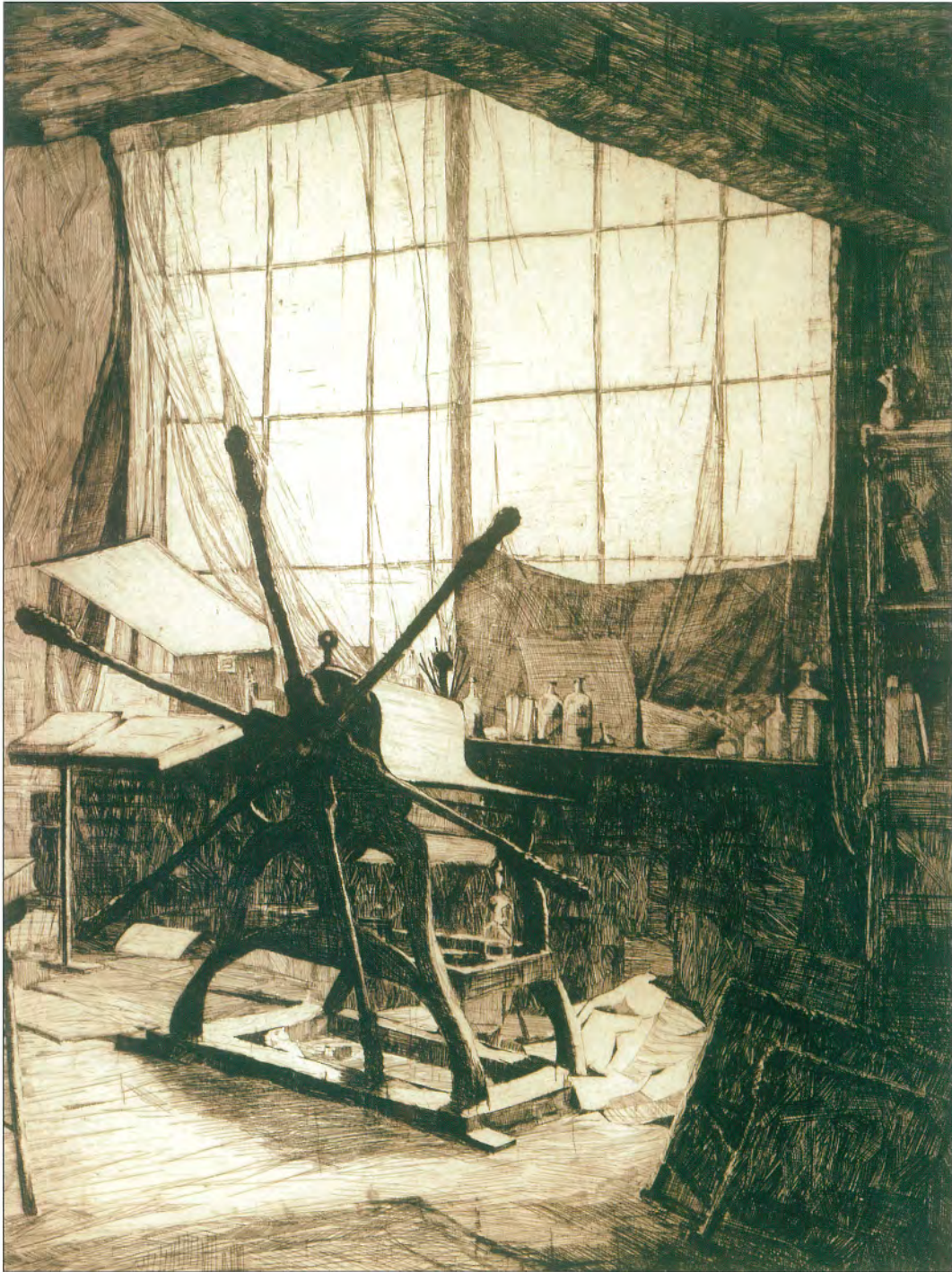
Surf Fishing, c. 1930
Watercolor, 16"x21^{5/8}"
Collection of Betsy and Colden Whitman



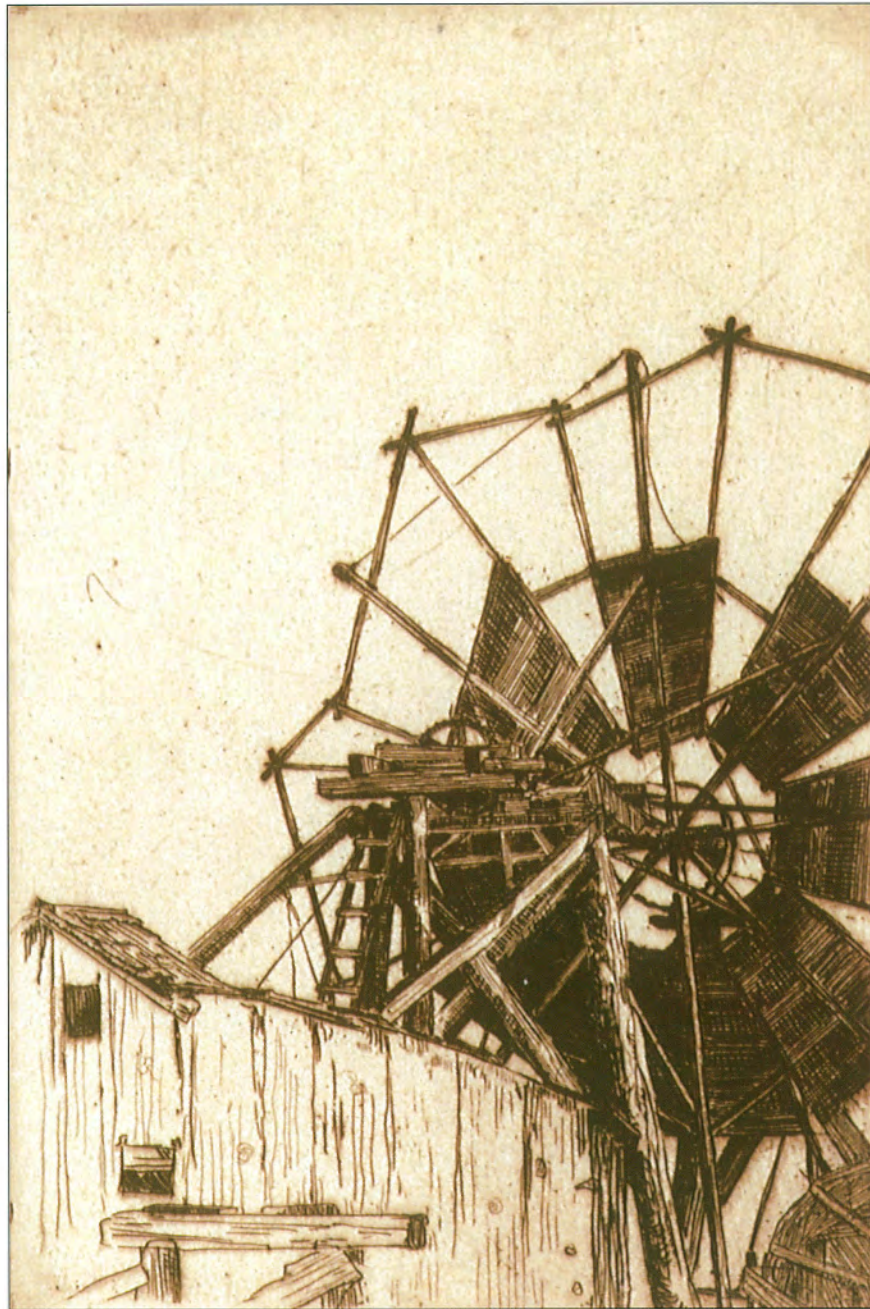
Church Steps, Chichicastenango, Guatemala, 1938
Watercolor, 17½"×23½"
Collection of Betsy and Colden Whitman



Selling Hats, Guatemala, 1938
Watercolor, 16" x 20 5/8"
Collection of Mrs. Anita Whitman



Armin Hansen's Studio, 1927
Etching, 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ "x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
Collection of Betsy and Colden Whitman



Moss Landing Windmill, 1931 .
Etching, 6'x5"
Collection of Monterey Museum of Art, 2000.8



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