

UNDERSTANDING CALIFORNIA – THE CALIFORNIA COLLECTIONS

First, the place we call California was a natural environment. Millennia before recorded history, lakes, rivers and ocean shores, broad fertile valleys, vast mountain ranges, and arid deserts formed along the far edge of a continent. The first humans lived here thousands of years ago, creating stable hunting and gathering ways of life within a complex of varied cultural traditions. Newcomers poured into California. Some were dreamers intent on gold or opportunity; some were clams from China on the hull of a ship, or artists seeking a special quality of light, or refugees seeking safety. This place called California offers a haven – full of challenges and failures but strong with the dream of success. The flow of immigrants brings with it a diversity of habitat adaptations and cultural and artistic traditions, which jostle one another in antipathy, synergy and evolution. The result is California.

It is this dynamic diversity that the California Collections represent – the roots of California's natural and cultural environments as well as the continuing impact of immigration. The collections preserve the pristine and document the melded. In this fast changing environment, the California Collections are a steady record, preserving our ability to see where we have come from and to imagine where we are going.

THE FOUNDING COLLECTIONS

The California Collections are the heart of The Oakland Museum of California (1969). The California Collections combine the collections of three predecessor museums: the Oakland Public Museum (1910), the Oakland Art Gallery (1916), and the Snow Museum (1922). All three were museums established in Oakland. At the turn of the 20th Century, Oakland was blessed with a far-sighted Progressive mayor – Frank K. Mott, who was sworn into office in 1905. Inspired by the “City Beautiful” movement, many civic improvements were accomplished under his direction including new parks, new libraries, and new museums. Beginning in 1907, Mott acquired the first collections for the city: the Bryant ornithological collection and the Dagget anthropological collection. And then he secured for the city both the Wilcomb ethnographic collection and Charles Wilcomb himself as the first curator of the Oakland Public Museum.

The **Oakland Public Museum**, founded in 1910, was the first of the three museums that now comprise the Oakland Museum of California. This was an auspicious beginning. It's first curator, Charles Wilcomb, was a leader in the emerging American Association of Museums, and had a very clear vision of what museum collections should be. “The test applied to each [object] when its admission to the museum was contemplated has been: Is it interesting? Does it move thought and appeal to the higher reaches of the imagination, or in a word, is it educational?”

Wilcomb was a strong believer in the ability of collections to teach us about the past. Fearing the disappearance of the past and loss of knowledge, he

amassed one of the most comprehensive collections in the nation representing California's Native American cultures. His efforts also focused on collections representing the traditional cultures of immigrants to California from New England and cultures from the islands of the Pacific. His untimely death in 1915 cut short a brilliant collecting career and cultural interpretation of California far ahead of its time. His vision for the OPM as a teaching museum lived on. For example, its Colonial Bedroom and Colonial Kitchen were two of the earliest period room exhibits in the country, showing collections in cultural context. There was a designated Children's Room designed especially for younger audiences. The innovative school cases, which brought the collections to classrooms, continued circulating from the museum's founding years through the 1960s.

See [Natives and Settlers, Indian and Yankee Culture in Early California](#), Melinda Young Frye, The Oakland Museum, 1979

[California, A Place, A People, A Dream](#), Claudia Jurmain and Jim Rawls, Chronicle Books and The Oakland Museum, 1986.

As well as many exhibition catalogues that incorporate the California Collections in thematic groupings.

The **Oakland Art Gallery**, founded in 1916, was the second of the three museums that now form the Oakland Museum of California. The 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) in San Francisco was a cultural catalyst in California. Interest in the arts soared in response to the work of both international and local exhibitors at the fair. Building on the surge of public interest, the Oakland Art Association formed under the leadership of Dr. William S. Porter, and the Oakland Art Gallery opened its doors in the recently constructed Oakland Auditorium. The critical success of California artists at the PPIE insured that California art as well as other American and European art would be a focus of the Gallery. But World War I realigned priorities in the city budget, threatening to close the fledgling Art Gallery. Dr. Porter and his own art collection came to the rescue. He gave his collection, over 50 paintings, to the city in return for a guarantee that the city would continue financial support of the Gallery. His generosity, the leadership of curators such as William Clapp, and the support of the artist community ensured that the art exhibitions and annual art competitions would flourish at the Oakland Art Gallery.

The arrival of Paul Mills as curator in 1953 gave new impetus to collecting art, particularly the art of California. As Mills said in 1983, "The history of art in California, with its missions, its Gold Rush illustrators, its nabob art patrons and its fine artists was exciting.... It is hard today to understand what a vibrant, radical idea specializing in California art, especially in its historic phases, was then." Mills' visionary approach to collecting art has endowed the California Collections with a rich assemblage of art ranging in time from 1816 to the present, reflecting the liveliness and breadth of the visual and plastic arts in California. Under his leadership, the Art Gallery acquired a wide range of works by, for example, Louis Choris, Alfred Sully, William Smith Jewett, Anne Brigman, Charles Christian Nahl, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Hill, William Keith, Joseph Raphael, Xavier Martinez, Arthur and Lucia Matthews, Maynard Dixon, Edward Weston, E. Carleton Fortune, Margaret DePatta, Richard Diebenkorn, Imogen Cunningham, David Park,

Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, the Society of Six, Wayne Thiebaud, and many others representing the diversity and excellence of California art.

See [The Art of California, Selected Works from the Collection of the Oakland Museum](#), Christina Orr-Cahall, The Oakland Museum, 1984

As well as many published catalogues that highlight the California Collections in exhibition groupings.

The **Snow Museum**, founded in 1922, was the third of the three museums that now comprise the Oakland Museum of California. The initial natural history collections were acquired as part of the Oakland Public Museum (OPM) - the Bryant ornithological collection, fossils, minerals, mounted specimens, insects, and shells. The second floor of the OPM was devoted to natural history exhibitions, including a Hall of California Birds and exhibits of local, native wildflowers, gathered weekly. An educator was hired to provide innovative school programming in natural history subjects, or "nature study".

But space in the OPM's quarters in a converted Victorian house on the shore of Lake Merritt was in short supply. In 1917, John Rowley, renowned for his work at the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, was hired as museum director. The attraction in Oakland was the opportunity to lead the widely supported effort to build a new museum complex to provide facilities for the city's art, history, anthropology and natural sciences collections. Among the strong supporters of this goal was Henry A. Snow. The dream of a new museum complex was pushed, quietly, all through the years of World War I. After the war, influential supporters mounted an active campaign to secure city funding or bond measure funds in support of the new museum project.

As part of the promotion for the museum complex project, big game hunters Leslie Simson and Henry Snow were dispatched by the city on expedition to Africa to collect big game specimens for the new museum. But during the two years the hunters were collecting in Africa, the city refused to provide funds to build the museum and failed to put a bond measure on the ballot. As a result Simson abandoned Oakland in 1920, sending his collection to the Los Angeles County Museum and wooing Rowley to take a position there as well.

Henry Snow remained loyal to Oakland and the dream of a new museum. "Build me a museum and I'll fill 'er up", he boasted. His collecting efforts in Africa resulted in 169 mammals, 1,500 birds, 5,000 bird eggs, and 40,000 insect specimens the museum, which were shipped to Nydine Snow, his daughter and an employee of the Oakland Public Museum. When Snow returned to Oakland from Africa in 1921, he was greeted by Mayor Davie and a tidal wave of publicity. The city purchased an estate on the edge of Lake Merritt as temporary quarters to house and exhibit the African collection, as well as natural specimens moved from the OPM, while they sought funding for a more permanent museum building. In June 1922, a chance to see the collection drew huge crowds for what was intended to be a temporary exhibition and promotional event in support of the museum building campaign. But the temporary installation of natural specimens in the home on the estate was so successful that it became

permanent; in 1923, the city named the museum and allocated a formal budget to the "Snow Museum of Natural History." Despite Snow's efforts to use collecting expeditions to the Arctic to rekindle public and political enthusiasm, the drive for a new museum combining now three existing city museums waned. The stock market crash in 1929 was the death knell for the hope of a new museum complex in Oakland. In the following decades, popularity of the Snow Museum grew, and by the 1950s, its current quarters were overwhelmed as both collections and visitors filled every nook and cranny.

See [Henry A. Snow and the Snow Museum of Natural History](#), Michael R. Waiczis, Unpublished manuscript available in the Natural Sciences Dept. of the Oakland Museum of California, 1983

THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA IS BORN

The roots of the **Oakland Museum of California** lie in the three predecessor city museums. All three struggled through the Depression and World War II. And then in the 1950s, the dream of a new museum center was revived. A support organization, the Oakland Museum Association, was founded at a meeting in the Art Gallery in 1953. Tireless promotion by all three municipal museums, the Association, and a supportive press, ultimately secured the passage of a six million dollar bond measure in 1961 to build the new Oakland Museum. The bond measure launched an intensive planning effort to create the museum based on a radically new model for collecting and presenting multi-disciplinary collections focused on California.

A new building was a critical need, one which could link the three municipal museums into one. Following an international architectural competition, Kevin Roche of Roche and Dinkeloo was chosen as the architect, producing a design described by Arthur Drexler, Curator of Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as "the most brilliant concept of an urban museum in America." During the mid-1960s, with the building under construction, a far-reaching decision was made to focus the new museum on California: its art, history, and ecology. It was a tumultuous time of fundamental change for all three institutions; hopes were both crushed and created as the three merged into a single museum overseen by one director. The new museum saw itself building new social and disciplinary frameworks, creating a fresh center. Historian Carey McWilliams has called California "the great experiment". The new Oakland Museum of California took up the challenge of collecting and interpreting the California experiment, the place, its people and their aspirations. It is the only museum in California to present such a broad disciplinary approach – California art, California cultural history and the California natural environment.

See [The Oakland Museum, A Gift of Architecture](#), Walter E. Ousterman, Oakland Museum Association, 1989.

The **California Collections** have grown out of the strengths of the three predecessor museum collections. After 1961, they experienced energetic new growth defined by the museum's California theme. The Oakland Art Gallery had long been collecting California art under the leadership of Paul Mills. Those

collections remain essentially intact as part of the California Collections and have grown dramatically since the creation of the Oakland Museum of California. Acquisitions made by Paul Mills and his successors have included paintings, works on paper, photographs and crafts by George Inness, Gotardo Piazzoni, Alson Clark, Frederick H. Rhead, Knud Merrild, Dirk Van Erp, Helen Lundeberg, Rupert Garcia, Edward Corbett, Guy Rose, Raymond Saunders, Michael McMillen, James Budd Dixon, William Wendt, Ron Nagle, Lorser Feitelson, Sam Maloof, Robert Arneson, Anthony Hernandez, Dalbert Castro, Richard Misrach, Masami Teraoka, Joan Brown, Robert Colescott, Peter Voulkos, Larry Bell, and many other artists working in California.

The Oakland Public Museum had substantial collections relating to California cultural history. It also had significant collections from beyond California that have acquired new meanings for California's waves of immigrants, seeking evidence of their roots. The collections from the OPM remain intact as part of the California Collections. They were augmented by massive collecting efforts throughout California as the new museum was being created. California's early history was well served by these collecting efforts, but California's 20th Century cultural history was woefully underrepresented. It was the museum's chief curator of history, L. Thomas Frye, who began in the early 1970s to focus on the recent past. He launched public collecting campaigns, combing California to find and collect evidence of contemporary California and its people. In 1973, following a statewide media appeal, the museum collected nearly 25,000 20th Century objects, and many stories of the people who made or used them. Frye wrote in 1987, "Ordinary people from minority and majority cultures, including the elderly, women, children, and even recently arrived immigrants, all increasingly expect to find something of themselves and their history in our museums. We are a multicultural, multinational, and multilingual society, and it is only through the respectful presentation of the whole fabric of society that we can comprehend both the shared cultural expressions of our people and rich diversity of our region or nation."

For the California collections, the tools of a skilled local carpenter tell as great a story as the elegant marble topped desk imported from Europe for a mansion on Nob Hill. The play clothes of a California child teach about life at a time and place, as do the gowns of a president's wife or the embroidered denim jacket of an anti-war protester. A rural settler's enameled coffee pot or the plastic dinner plates from a backyard barbecue are as important to our understanding of Californians as the silver urn presented to Senator E. D. Baker urging support of the transcontinental railroad. The vision of photographers, capturing the present for the future, has endowed the collections with detailed hindsight as well as visual documentation of change. A plow, a spinning wheel, a doll, an electric generator – all part of the California collections, telling different stories about California.

The Snow Museum collections, however, had suffered greatly from inadequate storage and display conditions. And the ethics of scientific collecting and display have changed greatly in the decades since Henry A. Snow had used his

collecting adventures in Africa and the Arctic to promote the idea of a new museum in Oakland. Much of the original Snow Museum collection has been transferred to other institutions, sold at auction or discarded due to poor condition. The California specimens from the Snow Museum collections have been retained, including some of the original Bryant ornithological collection, the California study skins, birds, geology specimens and shells.

In the 1960s, an active program of new field collecting was launched in support of the "Walk Across California" exhibition for the Natural Sciences gallery of the new Oakland Museum of California. In general, collecting has been focused on exhibition development rather than on assembling research collections. Some exceptions include the trade of the extensive Snow collection of bird eggs for a complete collection of California bird eggs. Curators of entomology and botany at the new museum created study and research collections of California insect and plant specimens. These collections are all part of the California Collections, truly a walk across natural California.

Building on the foundation of its predecessor institutions as well as the guidelines of the California initiative, the Oakland Museum of California continues active collecting, enhancing the rich resources of the Californian Collections. At the turn of the 21st Century, the California Collections represent the great diversity of California's art, cultural history, and ecology. Included are 17,000 works of art, 111,000 historical artifacts, 14,000 scientific specimens and over a million photographic images. The museum has been a leader in charting new collecting initiatives, particularly in its innovative definition of region in collecting art and in the pioneering parameters it established in collecting contemporary history. The result is rich representation of California's diversity, preserving our ability to see where we have come from and to imagine where we are going.

The purpose for creating the California Collections is to educate, to preserve, to document and to inspire learning. Visit the Oakland Museum of California near Lake Merritt in Oakland to see the California Collections in a wide array of engaging exhibitions. Major gallery changes and new educational experiences are planned to enliven your visits over the next several years. Visit the museum to gain virtual access to the California Collections via computer interface or visit the museum's website to explore parts of the California Collections online. A new California Collections and Research Center is in the planning stages. Its goal is to greatly improve preservation of the growing California Collections and to create opportunities for new programming and for expanded research and public access to the collections. Watch the museum's website for updates on these new initiatives and to plan your visit to the Oakland Museum of California and its California Collections.

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