

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Millard Sheets and the Inland Valleys

John Brantingham · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2020

It's impossible to get away from the artistic influence of Millard Sheets especially in the Inland Valleys. Sheets was primarily a watercolorist who grew up in the Pomona Valley and who worked and lived in this region as well. I first came to know his work as a child. I lived near a Home Savings Bank that had commissioned one of his murals. It is a tragedy that this mural along with many of his other bank murals have gone away as the banking industry has changed; however, his public work still exists and can be found all over the Inland Empire. It is world-class art, and in this time of COVID 19, you can see extraordinary work while socially distanced.

There is a lot of Sheets work around this area, but I am going to limit myself to three of them here. However if you want a more comprehensive understanding of his work, you should start with the Millard Sheets Arts Center. If you have lived in the Los Angeles area, you have no doubt passed by dozens of his public works. I choose these pieces for a purely personal reason. I am an inveterate walker, and these are parts of two of my favorite walks.

The first is the Shakespearean mural on the Garrison Theater in Scripps College in Claremont. It is a part of the Claremont Colleges, and although the college is closed and barred from entry for safety concerns, much of the college's art work is visible from the street, and I walk through the area weekly. The mural depicts scenes from Romeo and Juliet, Anthony and Cleopatra, and King Lear. When the college reopens you will be able to see exceptional work from James Turrell, Ellsworth Kelly, and Alfredo Ramos Martinez among many others. Here is a good description of the public art on the campus.



The second piece is Indians and Yucca on the Pomona First Federal Savings Building on the corner of Foothill and Indian Hill. The public art in and around this area is fairly powerful. You might remember the Christmas manger scene that featured Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus in cages and separate from each other. That was on the same block. There are sculptures and images on several of the buildings nearby, and it makes for an interesting morning of art.



The third piece is in the Pomona Arts District, which is packed with public art, and which I will discuss in a future article. You should absolutely tour the area and see the public art so many artists developed there. Here you can see a mural that he developed with Sue Hertel that depicts a loving family of the Pomona Valley.



If you learn more about Sheets, you will likely go down a rabbit hole exploring the work that he did across Southern California. His work is seemingly everywhere and influence is even wider. So many twentieth and twenty-first century artists developed their skills directly under his tutelage, and even more were influenced by his vision. I, who am not a visual artist, am no doubt influenced by him in my poetry and fiction, at least by his vision of the beauty California is capable of.

Early Pomona Family by Millard Sheets

Unpictured are the million little sacrifices
these parents have made to make
this moment of bliss possible.

And unpictured is the pleasure
of those sacrifices, little smiles turned
inward when they think of future joy.

And unpictured are all the dreams
unfulfilled that seem meaningless
in this moment when this is real.

*

Indians and Yucca by Millard Sheets

And unpictured
are yucca moths,
tiny white creatures
that make
this Californian
world possible
that make
yuccas possible
that make
this art possible.

And unpictured
are smallpox
and rifles.

And unpictured is
early Claremont
consuming the scrub
with orchards
and buildings
and tumbleweeds.

*

Three Scenes from Shakespeare by Millard Sheets

Unpictured is the spear carrier
you played in King Lear in college.

Unpictured is your perfect love
for the girl who played Cordelia.

Unpictured is that you made out
with her roommate

while she was on a date with Iago
and how much you yelled

and how you gave up acting
and how you laugh at yourself now,

steady on your feet with your family
and all you feel for that time is gratitude.

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