

Joseph Kleitsch (1882-1931) - a 'Zillascher' in California

Joseph Kleitsch, born June 6, 1882 in Deutschsanktmichael, Banat was one of the most important portrait and outdoor painters of California Impressionism.

His parents were Marianne and Adam Kleitsch. His mother died when he was three and a half years old, and his father remarried a year later. His stepmother recognized his artistic talent early on and provided him with drawing materials to develop his talent. At fourteen he began training as a mural and sign painter with Lanjarovics in Timisoara, which he completed within eighteen months and became a freelance artist.

His portraits in oil were in such demand at the time that he was able to open his own studio and hire an agent. Furthermore, he was able to travel to Munich for study purposes. When he returned to Timisoara, his success was so established that he was called "little Munkácsy" after the most prominent Hungarian painter of the time, Mihály von Munkácsy (1844-1900). Preserved from this period are portraits (charcoal drawings) of his cousins from Timisoara. At the age of eighteen he had painted "The Flight into Egypt" for his aunt Barbara Kleitsch, an oil painting which she had donated to the church in Zillasch. The whereabouts of this work are unclear today. His family encouraged him to approach the Diocese of Timisoara to further support his career. Upset with the behavior of the diocese and the negative reaction of Bishop Alexander Dessewffy not to call off commissioned artworks that he had already completed, he decided to emigrate to America.

In 1902 Joseph Kleitsch emigrated to the USA via Hamburg, arriving in New York on the SS Columbia on May 3 with the aim of finding a new home in Cincinnati, Ohio. He lived and worked in the "Over-The-Rhine" neighborhood, where many Germans settled after leaving Europe after the Revolution of 1848.

In Cincinnati he kept his head above water by doing commissioned work, essentially portraiture. He met Emma Multner, a German-born Protestant who worked as a teacher and probably also as a doctor. She was born in 1857 in Zanesville, Ohio. Twenty-five years older than the young, dynamic Joseph Kleitsch, she is said to have appeared not necessarily attractive, but rather matronly. Both married in 1904 in Denver, where they lived until 1907. Inspired by the connection to the local art scene as well as by demand, he created his first still lifes, which became trend-setting for his further work due to their vivid colors.

The following years brought him to Kansas and twice to Mexico, where he painted portraits of Mexican President Francisco Ignacio Madero and his wife in 1912. These works brought him great recognition and, after his return from Mexico, many assignments from the local rich and powerful.

Chicago (1910-1920) was a crucial transitional station for his artistic work as well as for his life. This city was one of the most important economic and cultural centers of the United States at the time. As an established portrait painter, Kleitsch moved in influential circles, he taught at the Art Institute of Chicago (1914-1919) after being awarded the Gold Medal by this institute, and he later became a member of the Palette and Chisel Club Chicago, which supported the art scene and promoted it with

exhibitions. He was able to exhibit and promote his paintings, in which he depicted interior views in a new style, mostly with people in front of the window.

In 1913, Emma Kleitsch died suddenly in Chicago as a result of kidney disease; she was buried in her family's grave in Cincinnati. Due to this personal loss, little is known about his artistic output in that year.

In 1914 he met Edna Gregaitis, an art teacher, born in Michigan in 1890 and with Lithuanian roots. They married in July 1914 and their son Eugene was born in 1915.

In 1920 Joseph Kleitsch moved with his family to Laguna, California, south of Los Angeles. This rustic coastal town with its Mediterranean flair characterized by diverse landscapes, the Pacific Ocean and brilliant light was at that time a small artists' colony for Californian Impressionists. He and his wife founded there the Kleitsch Academy; he continued to work as a freelance artist. Kleitsch was a bold colorist with a bravura brushstroke. His fascinating open-air paintings around Laguna, here especially those of Laguna Beach and the former Spanish Mission San Juan Capistrano, still bring the 1920s to life in an impressive way.

In 1926 Joseph Kleitsch returned to Europe for two years, he visited France, Spain but also Munich, Rome, Florence, Vienna, Budapest as well as cities in Romania and England. Whether he was visiting Timisoara or Zillasch is not known. In Europe he continued to work. Under the influence of the European post-impressionist art scene, his previous painting style of the late 19th century had changed: the brushstroke and color palette now became lighter. Upon his return, he brilliantly translated this into his now-favorite open-air works, a result of his many working excursions even as far away as San Francisco and Carmel to capture the local mood of gardens and coastlines as well as street scenes. His works found their way to the prestigious Stendahl Galleries of Los Angeles and to solvent clients.

The onset of the economic crisis had only a minor impact on his artistic output and on the success of his exhibitions. The changing spirit of the times - representations of nature became less and less interesting - and the effects of the economic depression led from 1930 onwards on the one hand to criticism of his artistic style, and on the other hand to difficulties in collecting the money for paintings already sold and delivered. The great agitation and worry caused by the increasing financial difficulties, as well as the decline in sales of his works, ultimately led to his fatal heart attack on November 16, 1931, in front of the Santa Ana, California courthouse.

Joseph Kleitsch lived to the age of 49. He is buried in Angeles Abbey Memorial Park Cemetery in Compton, California. His wife Edna continued to live in Laguna, where she died in 1950 at the age of sixty.

I came across Joseph Kleitsch in 2010 during my initial internet research for this homepage. Early 2017, while in California, I picked up leads on him in Laguna, Irvine and Capistrano. On the one hand, I am impressed by the inspiring personality of Joseph Kleitsch and by the richness of his work, as well as that after several decades of being forgotten, he has now found a very valuable place in the art scene of the USA, and that the identification with him and his work in Laguna and on the Southern California coast is very strong and well established. On the other hand, I am proud and grateful that through his origins he is also one of us: a man from Zillasch.