



View of Donner Lake
1878
Hearst Museum, St Mary's College

William Keith

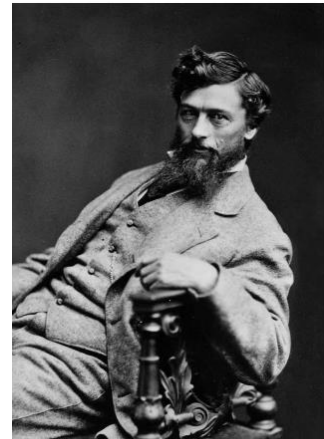
An important pioneer of NorCal painting, the man who cut the Sierra down to size, moving from awestruck depiction of the majestic Range of Light to evocation of its effect on the soul of the seeker: that's William Keith. He hiked the Sierra with John Muir; the Sierra Club was founded in Keith's studio by Muir, Keith and the presidents of the University of California and Stanford, in 1892.

Keith was born in Scotland, in 1838. After the death of his father, Keith, his mother and his sisters, emigrated to New York City, where he trained as a wood engraver. He sailed to San Francisco in 1859, set up an engraving business, and began studying painting and drawing. Ten years later, a big painting commission allowed him to give up engraving. Keith and his wife went to Dusseldorf, Germany, to study. He became interested in the Barbizon style of loose, painterly depictions of the quieter aspects of nature, but maintaining this style is a challenge when your subject is the mighty Sierra, which he began visiting with John Muir in the early 1870s.

In that decade, his immense (up to 8' x 10') landscapes of the grand Sierra graced the mansions of San Francisco's elite. In these stately tableaux, Keith sought to achieve both specific illustration (though he was not above moving a glacier to get the effect he wanted) and a kind of Transcendentalist spirituality—a style called Luminism. His interest in the spiritual continued to characterize his art practice; *plein-aire*, Impressionist-style painting, which he did try, was unable to provide it.

In the 1880s, art commissions dried up with the fortunes of Nevada's Comstock Lode silver mine, and Keith took another study trip to Germany with his second wife, Mary McHenry, the first woman graduate of Hastings Law School. His spirituality was renewed, and these later, looser, moodier works were well received at home, where he was revered as the dean of the local school. In the 1906 earthquake, Keith lost over 3000 works, including paintings of California's missions done on his honeymoon. But between 1906 and his death in 1911, he completed some 70 canvases.

The largest collection of Keith's works can be found at St Mary's College in Moraga. An early professor at the college, Brother Cornelius Braeg, collected and donated 100 of Keith's works to the college. He also wrote a 900-page biography of Keith. Published in 1942, the book provides insight into Keith and his art—and delightful details about wild times in turn of the century San Francisco.



To Learn More:

The Comprehensive Keith,
Carrie Brewster, editor,
Hearst Art Gallery, S.t Mary's
College of California, 2011

*Artists in California 1786-
1940*, Edan Hughes, Crocker
Art Museum, 2002

Early Paintings of California,
Paul Mills, Oakland Museum
of California, 1956

*Keith, Old Master of
California*, Brother Cornelius
Braeg, G.P. Putnam's Sons,
1942

To See More:

*De Young Museum, Oakland
Museum of California,
Crocker Museum, Cantor
Center for Visual Arts,
LACMA, Huntington Library,
National Gallery*