

# Scattered Jewels From a Gifted Clan

## THE HOWARDS

First Family of Bay Area Modernism

Oakland Museum

Until July 31

BY ALLAN TEMKO

No family did more to make the Bay Area a civilized place — a home for the arts — than John Galen Howard (1864-1931), architect of the University of California at Berkeley from 1901 to 1924, and his four tall sons and their gifted wives.

Between them, as painters, sculptors and still another architect, they brought advanced ideas of the great world beyond the West to a provincial community that had little to show in the arts (except for architecture) until after World War II.

The Howard children and their wives were part of the post-war flowering. Indeed, they prepared the way for it in the late 1920s and 1930s when, by precept and example, they combined almost every strand of Modernism — from puristic abstraction to surreal metaphysics — to bring innovative ideas from Paris and New York to San Francisco.

What is most striking in the welcome exhibition at the Oakland Museum is the *knowingness* of this extended clan. There is a cosmopolitan diversity that probably no other family of artists, in America or Europe, has matched in recent times. And if none of the sculpture or painting belongs to the very top level of the Modern movement, here or abroad, and the work of a couple of wives hardly belongs in a museum at all, there is an abounding strength and charm in the shared idealism of these brotherly and sisterly artists who were all born within a few years of 1900.

They were thus each a little older or

younger than the 20th century, and after tentative beginnings they hit their strides as Modern artists in their own 30s and 40s, when the local cultural establishment remained embedded in 19th-century cultural values. But the Howards, often characterized as "aristocratic bohemians," were born into that establishment.

To an even greater degree, so was the sculptor Robert Boardman Howard's wife, fellow-sculptor Adaline Kent of the baronial Kents of Kentfield in Marin, who made the lordly gifts of Mount Tamalpais and Muir Woods to the state and the nation.

This dynastic alliance, on both sides, included a number of prominent California families as relatives and friends; and it brought Bob Howard and Addie Kent, as she was always called, to boards and advisory groups. They had a beneficent influence on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 1935, as well as the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), where both Bob Howard and the abstract surrealist painter Charles Howard taught in the 1940s.

What counts most, however, was their personal achievements as artists. In the end, Addie Kent turned out to be a more powerfully original sculptor than her husband, good as he was. Perhaps after a look at Alexander Calder's mobiles, Bob in the 1940s broke free of ponderous pictorial imagery (for instance, the much-loved whale fountain at the Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park), and he produced ingenious, articulated sculptures, some standing, some suspended, some zoomorphic, some altogether abstract.

Compared to Calder's elating weightlessness and gaiety, Bob Howard's kinetic structures retain a certain gravity, even an earnest clumsiness. Nonetheless, they work tellingly as objects in space. An array of these gently moving pieces, fabricated of wood, metal, fiberglass, gypsum, resins and other composite materials, their dark surfaces tellingly picked out in acrylic color, introduces a note of controlled playfulness, but also of sober purpose, at the entrance of the exhibition.

They are strangely complemented by Charles Howard's suavely ordered tableaux, oils and gouaches, which although virtually nonfigurative and seemingly festive, like the Mirós from which they derive, impart a surreal inquietude. Abstract intimations of building structures and bonelike organic forms, strung together by thin lines or connected by fluid pools of color, extend in anxiety perspectives that Charles Howard, who spent most of his career in England and Italy except for a wartime interlude in San Francisco, at least partly borrowed from de Chirico and Tanguy, Dali, Arp and Masson.

Never mind. These are accomplished paintings that justly earned Charles Howard an international reputation, and exhibitions in New York and abroad, while the rest of the family was scarcely known outside of the Bay Area. It's only when his work is seen close to Addie Kent's that he seems too constrained because she, too, early fell under the spell of the great Europeans. Brancusi



John Galen Howard designed the Hearst Mining Building at UC-Berkeley

clearly influenced her polished little bronze bird, chirping in the cylindrical bronze tree of "Printemps," done in 1929 — a year before she married Bob Howard — after she enjoyed five halcyon years in Paris, where he had studied for three years after serving in the Army in World War I.

It took some time for this diminutive, athletic woman, who did not come up to her husband's shoulder, to find "the click of authenticity" — a phrase from her notebooks, which are far and away the best things any Californian wrote about art during that period of Modern exploration. She steadily eliminated trivial motives from her forms, so that they became wholly nonfigurative, shorn of literary associations; and from the time she did a maquette of a colossal, space-embracing, curvilinear "Monument for Heroes" in 1943, the work acquired mighty scale, whatever its size.

"I see no reason for a thing to be big — just so it is capable of being big," she wrote; and she proved the point in a totemic sculpture of 1950, rightly called "Presence," which with "Finder" (1953) is one of the glories of the show. Molded in magnesite, an inexpensive industrial compound used in construction, these unique sculptures have the immediacy of improvisation and the permanence of stone.

There are innumerable sources for these accomplishments, including Giacometti and Ernst (who also affected her husband, Bob), but here the various strands of imported Modernism have become altogether her own. One wonders what she might have achieved if she were not killed in a car crash in 1957, a few months before her 57th birthday.

She is altogether the most interesting artist in the show, with the youngest and only surviving brother, John Langley Howard — known to family and friends as Langley or "Lang" — who at 86 continues to

develop his exquisite, visionary art in San Francisco.

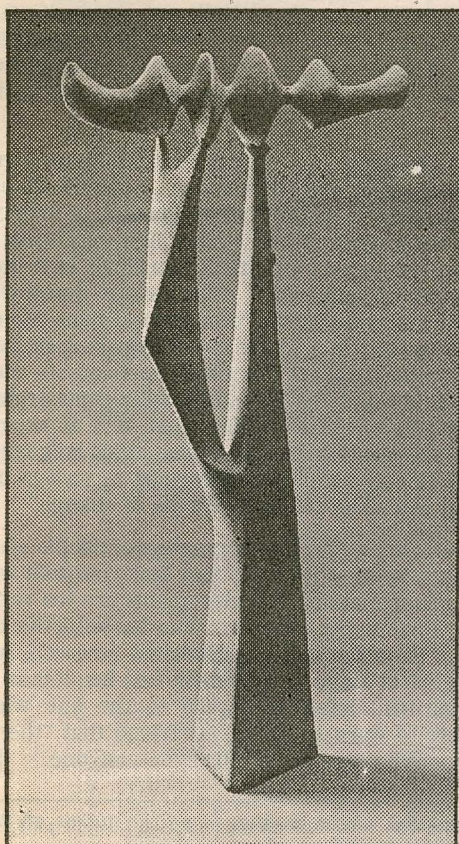
Tall, erect, still devilishly handsome and brimming with insights into the threatened natural world and a technological society unsure of its needs and aspirations, Lang has always been the most radical of the Howards in social commitment. He is also the most meticulous and inspired craftsman among the painters. For want of a better term, he has been likened to the Magic Realists, but his later work is impossible to characterize except as a cosmic vision in which, like Thoreau, he can perceive the universe in a drop of water, and then shift his gaze to remote hills.

There is mystery in all this, but it has a rational basis: a personal religion of humanity and the earth. After an early period of left-wing "Social Realism," done with a far lighter touch than the heavy-handed propaganda of many of the artists whose murals accompany his at Coit Tower, this largely self-taught artist developed brushwork of such refinement, in watercolors as well as oils and acrylic, that it is not exaggerating to compare his perfect surfaces and extraordinary details to northern Renaissance paintings, even to Brueghel's.

That is how I see his triptych of "The Rape of the Earth" (1951), with its panels depicting the stormy formation of the Earth, its despoliation by machines, and the Earth returning to nature, scarred and befouled, but eventually to be healed. In this connection, there's much to be learned from the sampling of the marvelously lucid paintings he did for covers of *Scientific American*, where his son Sam Howard — carrying on the family's commitment to humanism in still another generation — is art director.

Compared to art on this level, it's necessary to descend several notches, to the half-barbarous hammered and welded metal

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'Finder,' in magnesite by Adaline Kent



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sculpture of Lang's second wife, Blanche Phillips, who died in 1979. Blanche was one of the vivid personalities of Telegraph Hill in the days when artists could still live there, and she attacked hard, unyielding materials with fierce sincerity. Perhaps if she continued in ironwood, as in "Mother and Child" (c. 1945), she could have produced a deeply affecting anecdotal humane art, like the art of Kathe Kollwitz. As it is, her metal pieces lack coherence.

The works of two other wives in the exhibition are valuable mainly for biographical purposes. Madge Knight's surreal gouaches are superficially so similar to those of Charles Howard, her husband, that they could be taken for his rejects. Jane Berlandina, married to the architect Henry Howard, was primarily a decorator, born in France and a student of Dufy. Apparently, her lost stage sets for the San Francisco Opera Company were gems of the 1930s, but the exhibition contains only a couple of splashy, floral still-lives, plus photographs of her nicely drawn murals of happy family life at Coit Tower, on which her husband, Henry, worked as a designer in the office of the fine old classicist Arthur Brown Jr.

**H**ow much Henry Howard had to do with the Moderne form of Coit Tower, no one can say. Like many sons of celebrated architects, he has been eclipsed by his father, John Galen Howard, who, besides designing lavish Beaux-Arts monuments such as the Campanile, Sather Gate, Doe Library and Wheeler Hall for the University of California, produced other major buildings such as the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco.

Unfortunately, photographs and drawings of work by both father and son are squeezed into the end of the exhibition, almost as an afterthought. They get nearly their due in Sally Woodbridge's essay in the catalog, which complements the other essays by curator Stacey Moss, but one is left with the feeling that the architectural part of the show will have to be redone some day in larger format.

For one thing, the presence of John Galen Howard will have to be more amply justified in an exhibition devoted to the advent of Modernism in California. The staunch New Englander, whose first Pilgrim forebear landed in Massachusetts in 1623, was essentially a poet of history.

In regional redwood buildings, such as the old School of Architecture of 1904 (now the Graduate School of Journalism) on the UC campus, he was as direct and unaffected as his contemporary Bernard Maybeck; and even in Beaux-Arts works such as the Hearst Ining Building of 1905 at Berkeley, the exposed steel framing of the skylit atrium was as advanced a functional design as anything else on the Pacific Coast.

**W**hat's more, he was generously encouraging to his children as they set out on their own careers. Like many architect's families, the Howards, although never rich, had what used to be called "advantages." If there was no money for shoes, his daughter Janette Howard Wallace has recalled, there was always money for books. There was never any question that they should be educated and professionally trained.

He rejoiced when Henry decided after World War I to stay in France and study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, as he had, but Henry — a talented designer — never got to build much on his own, either here or in New York, where he spent most of his career. In California, he produced only three buildings: a delightful shingled house (1933) in Santa Cruz for his sister Janette Howard Wallace and her family; a pristine International style townhouse (1936) at 2944 Jackson Street, all whiteness and clean lines, and airily spacious within; and, above all, the twin studios of 1939 for Bob Howard and Addie Kent at 521-523 Francisco Street in North Beach, which are as close as anything we have to Parisian ateliers, done in regional redwood.

It was in these high-ceiling spaces, where Addie Kent swung through the air on gymnast's rings with the greatest of ease, that she and Bob entertained as no one else in the city.

The invitations to their legendary Christmas parties suggested "Old Clothes." The band of the School of Fine Arts, with David Park at the piano, Elmer Bischoff on the trumpet, Douglas MacAgy at the drums, and countless other artists subbing over the years, blasted out jazz. Even after Addie died, Bob kept up the parties. A very young Joan Brown, like Bettie Boop, sang "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." To anyone who was young then, the Howards have never grown old.