

Amanda Petronella Austin

Among the vast collection of artwork at the Crocker Museum in Sacramento are two pieces of sculpture by Amanda Petronella Austin who once lived in Applegate. Although she was an accomplished artist, working with clay and oils and watercolors, she has been forgotten. At one time the Crocker only knew the artist as A. P. Austin and thought "he" was a young French man who died in the First World War.

Amanda's story is one that is unlikely to be replicated today when talented young women can make their own way in the world relying on their own resources. When Amanda was coming of age and ambitious to follow her dream of becoming an artist, compromises had to be made.

She was born in 1860 in Carrolton, Missouri, one of eight children. As a teenager, her talent was already evident and she became the pupil of George Caleb Bingham, the Missouri artist best known for his realistic works depicting the American frontier. Her goal was to go to Paris, the Mecca of artists, to study.

A step in the direction of answering her dreams came in 1879, when she was 19, with a proposition from her millionaire great uncle, Jefferson Wilcoxon, in California. He offered to pay for her art studies in return for her promise to care for him in his old age.

Amanda arrived in California when she was twenty years old. She kept her promise and Jefferson kept his. She was able to pursue her studies in Sacramento and studied at the San Francisco School of Design. She even spent some time in Paris studying at the Academies Delecluse and Colarossi. While she was there, some of her work was accepted at the prestigious Paris Salon.



Amanda P. Austin

Returning to Sacramento, she opened a studio on the corner of 9th and K streets. There was a price to pay however. Wilcoxon considered her paintings to be his property. At one point he sold a house and all its contents without even consulting her, a great many of her paintings were hanging in the house. Jefferson thought the bargain they made entitled him to run Amanda's life. Not allowing her much of a social life, allegedly he even forbade her attempt to marry.

At the end of his life, Jefferson came to rely on Amanda's attentions almost

exclusively. She practically gave up her art to care for him for the last five years of his life. Jefferson always acknowledged Amanda's care and claimed that his own child could do no better. The millionaire knew that his relatives would likely squabble over his estate especially if he left Amanda more than the rest. Jefferson's ill-fated solution to this problem, which he told several people about, was to leave an envelope filled with \$150,000 in cash in a safe with Amanda's name on it. He assumed that his heirs would honor his wishes. When he died in 1898, Amanda had spent nearly twenty years of her life honoring her part of the bargain.

While several people knew of Jefferson's plans for Amanda and knew the location of the safe and the story of the money, when the heirs opened the safe they claimed there was no cash at all in the envelope with Amanda's name on it, but instead a few shares of stock that amounted to very little.

Amanda sued the estate for the \$150,000. The trial was a huge sensation in Sacramento, not only because of the size of the claim but for the attorneys involved. Amanda hired John M. Fulweiler (a founding member of the Placer County Historical Society-editor note) of Auburn and Grove L. Johnson, the noted Sacramento attorney and recent representative to the U. S. Congress.

The Wilcoxon estate hired White & Seymour of Sacramento and Hiram Johnson, son of Grove Johnson. Hiram Johnson would later become governor of California and then running mate of Theodore Roosevelt on the Bull Moose ticket.

Held in Sacramento, the trial with its sensational testimony lasted two weeks. Many testified that Jefferson spoke of "taking care of Amanda" and "insuring her future." One witness even saw the money in the envelope. The whole trial seemed to boil down to the terms of the "bargain." The judge wanted to see the now twenty-year-old letter from Jefferson to Amanda proposing the terms of their relationship but it had been destroyed many years before the trial.

Those supporting Amanda suspected that the heirs who opened the safe had removed the sizable amount of cash. The judge ruled that without the letter, Amanda was only due some compensation for her "nursing duties." She received \$20,000.

After the trial, Amanda retreated to Applegate. One of her brothers lived there and she bought a two story Victorian on Crother Road. Amanda continued to create art and at least one of her paintings was shown in an exhibit in Paris in 1910, it was acclaimed by a reviewer who said, [she} "triumphed in a field seldom successfully invaded by women."

About this time in her life she met E. Lee Allen. Some accounts say they met in Paris, some that he followed her to Paris, some even suggest he was a "childhood sweetheart." Handsome and cultured "Dr." Allen turned out to be an accused abortionist and a "gigolo par excellence."

While she was in Paris she met a Sacramento friend, Mrs. Florence Coleman, the widow of banker, state senator and naturalist William P Coleman. Mrs. Coleman was anxious to have a marble fountain sculpted and placed in Sacramento's City Plaza. She, informally, hired Amanda to create the work. It would be quite monumental in size and scope and likely the culmination of Amanda's career. Yet again, the failure to "get it in writing" came to haunt her. They both returned to Sacramento where Mrs. Coleman unexpectedly died. Without proof of Mrs. Coleman's wishes the project was in limbo for several years.

She was finally designated as the artist to fulfill the commission and went to Paris to begin work. Almost as soon as she arrived, she felt unwell. She was diagnosed with cancer and her physician advised her to return home. She got as far as New York but was too ill to travel further. "Dr." Allen shows up at this point. Whether he traveled with her to Paris or joined her in New York is not known. Literally on her deathbed, Allen convinced Amanda to marry him and sign a will leaving all her property to him. She died a few weeks later on March 25, 1917.

Her family was able to contest the will to some extent and though Allen received the Applegate property, her paintings and sculpture were divided up, thus effectively scattering her artwork and leading to her work falling into obscurity. Her two works at the Crocker, entitled *Miss Quinn* and *Remorse* are both very striking. Her works has been described as "bold, ambitious, powerful and strong."

The *Placer Herald* reported in December of 1918 "Doc" Allen married a wealthy widow who lived in Sacramento.

The William Coleman Memorial Fountain by Ralph Stackpole, in Caesar Chavez Plaza, was not dedicated until 1927.

--April McDonald-Loomis, June 2015

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