



California Dreaming — The Color Block Prints of Cal's Frances Gearhart

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Women's Faculty Club
University of California, Berkeley

Thursday, September 14, 2023

Frances H. Gearhart

1900 Graduation Picture
University of California, Berkeley

*Courtesy of the Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley*






A Note on Sources

I am indebted to the following sources and scholars:

Roger Genser, the Prints and the Pauper, a noted dealer in Gearhart's prints and the curator of the 2020 show **Frances Gearhart: Color Block Prints in Wichita** at the Wichita Art Museum. Roger's essay in the catalogue for the show provides new insights into Gearhart's development as an artist. My conversations with Roger over the past several years have been illuminating.

Harold Leitenberg, PhD, of the University of Vermont. Professor Leitenberg established and maintains a website displaying all of Gearhart's known prints and providing additional biographical information about, and sources on, Gearhart.

The catalogue for the Pasadena Museum of California Art's 2009 Gearhart retrospective, called **Behold the Day! The Color Block Prints of Frances Gearhart**, is also informative about Gearhart and the history of print making in California. The show was curated by Susan Futterman and Roger Genser.

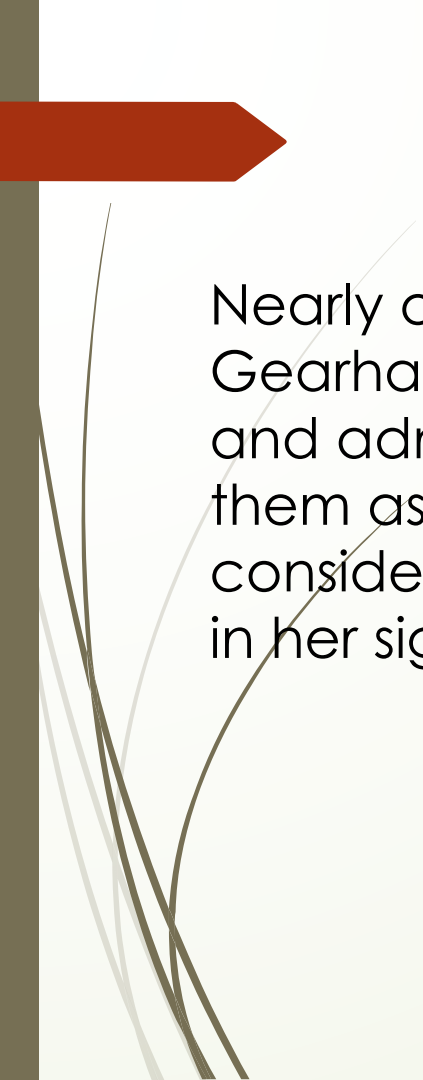


Frances Hammel Gearhart (1869-1958) of Pasadena was the most important Southern California Color Block Print artist of the first part of the twentieth Century.

— Pasadena Museum of California Art

Behold the Day

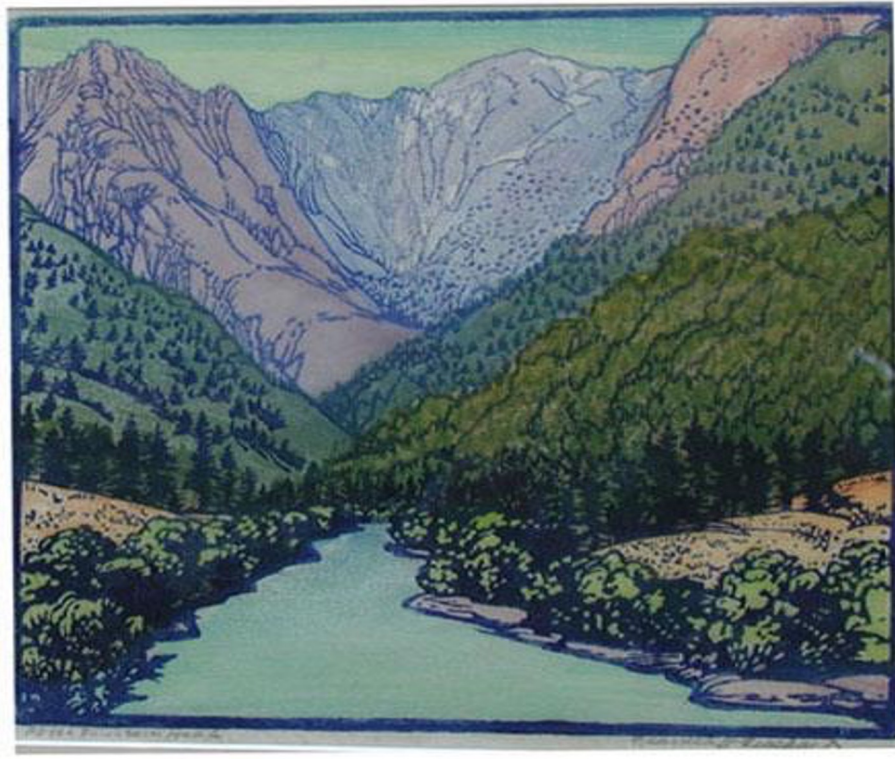





Nearly one hundred years after their creation, Frances Gearhart's color block prints remain objects of wonder and admiration. It is not an exaggeration to think of them as little jewels: each piece is a thoughtfully considered composition, each pristine vista is rendered in her signature saturated color palette.

*Nancy E. Green
Curator of Prints
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Cornell University*

At the Fountain Head





Gearhart was unique among California block printmakers, who had their heyday in the 1920's and 1930's. Her thick oil paints ... produced a sense of majesty and depth rarely equaled in American printmaking.

— *The Minneapolis Institute of Art*

Winter is Near

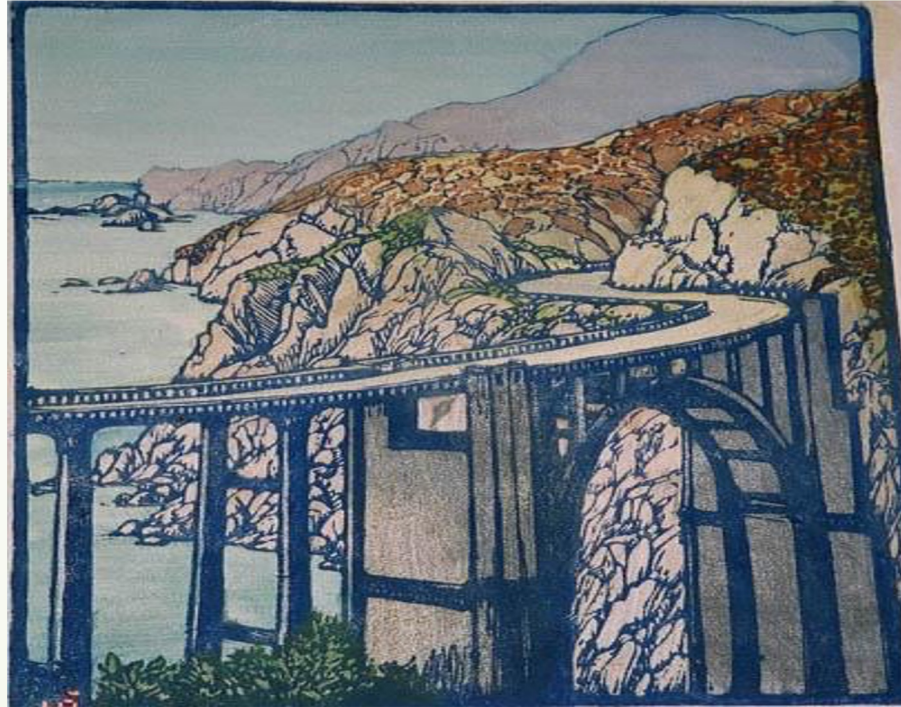


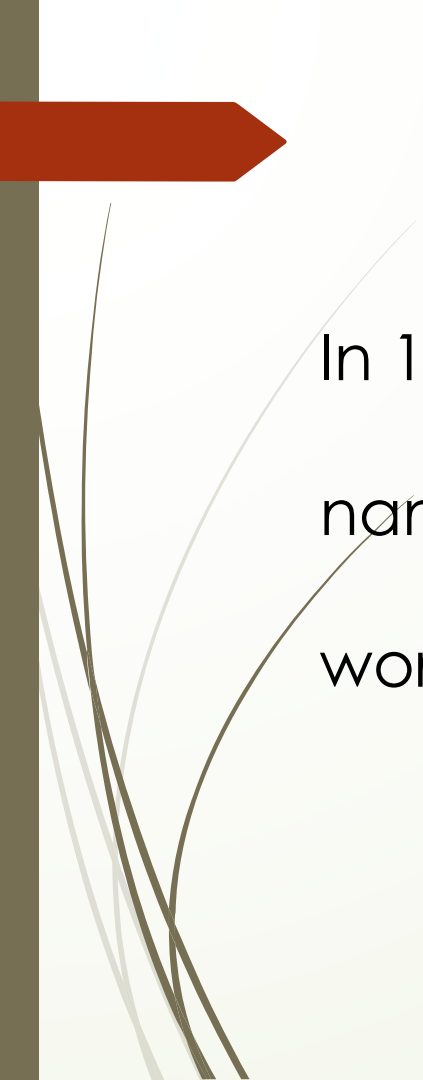


Between 1919 and 1942 Gearhart exhibited prints at over 120 shows.

In addition to shows throughout California, she exhibited in **New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Wichita** and **Phoenix**. These included shows at the Corcoran Gallery and the Smithsonian in Washington and a one woman show at the Grand Central Gallery in New York.

Bridge at Big Sur





In 1927 the American Federation of Arts names Gearhart as one of the 6 best artists working in color prints.



Holdings

Smithsonian Museum of American Art
Smithsonian Natural History Museum
Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco
USC Fisher Museum of Art
Minneapolis Institute of Art
Museum of the Arts and Crafts Movement
Boston Library Prints Department
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Pasadena Museum of California Art
Whitney Museum of American Art
Rhode Island School of Design Art Museum
Numerous private collections



As of March, 2023
212 known Block Print images.

*Harold Leitenberg, Ph.D
Frances Gearhart Website*



Obituary

Pasadena Star News: Frances H. Gearhart of 206 Palmetto passed away on April 6, 1958. A native of Illinois she had been a resident of Pasadena since 1890. She is survived by her sister Edna Gearhart of Pasadena. Private internment was held by the Lamb Funeral Home, 415 E. Orange Grove Ave.

No mention of her artwork.

Who was Frances Gearhart?






Frances Gearhart by the Numbers

Born: 1869 in Sagetown, Illinois.

Two younger sisters: May (1872) and Edna (1879).

Moved to California in 1888 with her family and settled in Pasadena (population 4,800 in 1890) with views of the Arroyo Seco and the San Gabriel mountains.



Father Stephen was a Civil War veteran who profited from some land speculation around Los Angeles and was varyingly listed as a farmer and apiarist.

State Normal School in Los Angeles (now UCLA): Frances and May received degrees in 1891 that permitted them to teach elementary school in Los Angeles/Pasadena.



The Gearhart Sisters at Cal

In 1896 Frances resigns from teaching and, along with Edna, enrolls at U.C., Berkeley. May moves to Berkeley, but teaches drawing in the Berkeley schools.

Frances joins the Gamma Phi Beta Sorority.

Graduates in 1900 with a B.A. in Philosophy and a University Teaching Certificate.

Edna graduates in 1901.

The years at Cal expose the Gearharts to the Northern California coast and the Sierra Nevada mountains.



The Gearharts Return to Pasadena

After graduating from Cal, Frances taught history and drawing at Merced High School.

In 1903 Frances returned to Pasadena and took a job teaching English history at Los Angeles High School, retiring in 1922.

Edna joined the faculty at Los Angeles High School, teaching art.



May became the Los Angeles City Schools Director of Drawing.

None of the Gearhart sisters married. Beginning in 1919 they shared a house together in Pasadena.

In the 1920's they purchased property in Fawnskin on Big Bear Lake in the San Bernadino National Forest. They built a cabin and Frances used the surrounding area as the subject of many of her prints.



Influences

Style results from the general connections arising between all the manifestations of creative thought in a given period.

Architect A.W.N. Pugin

Place is an undervalued determinant in creative output....To focus on place allows us to bring in the small details...that help us uncover why anything even gets made at all.

Prudence Peiffer, The Slip

Sister Power



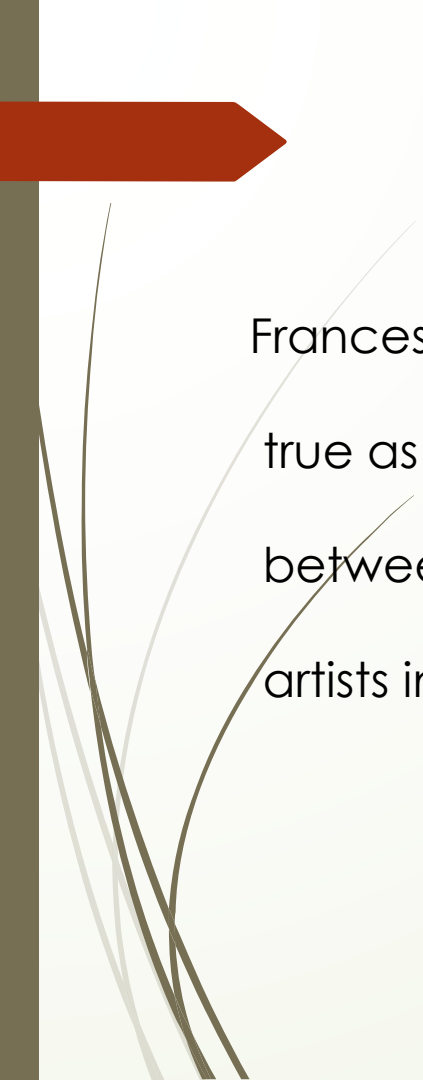
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Frances Gearhart is referred to as “untrained.” This is generally true as to formal training in block prints, but she spent summers between 1905 and 1910 studying painting with well-known artists in Maine and Connecticut.



While Frances was studying in Maine and Connecticut, May travelled to Ipswich, Massachusetts and studied under **Arthur Wesley Dow** a noted teacher of painting and block prints (More on Dow later).

Edna also studied with Dow, possibly at Columbia University.

In 1908 May attended the International Congress for the Advancement of Drawing and Art Teaching in London. Dow was a featured speaker.



May attended classes at the Art Institute of Chicago.


In 1930 May studied with **Hans Hoffman**, who was teaching a summer course at **U.C. Berkeley**. Hoffman moved permanently to New York where he became one of the most influential teachers and artists of the first half of the 20th Century. His students included Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner.



May Gearhart, *Morro Bay*, c. 1930 etching, 5 7/8" x 7 3/8"



The Sand Spit, 1930 color block print, 8 1/4" x 11 1/4"; Collection Bruce and Debbie Hinkley



In 1922 the sisters opened a gallery in their home called Gearharts. The gallery offered prints by Frances and May, as well as other print artists.

Between 1927 and 1929 the sisters worked together on a children's book titled **Let's Play**. The book contained 27 block prints attributed to "the Gearharts" and text written primarily by Edna. The book was never published in their lifetime, but was published in 2009 by the Book Club of California.



Plein Air Painting in Southern California

Between 1900 and 1924 the population of Los Angeles grew from 102,000 to 1.7 million.

Among the new residents of Southern California were many artists who had received formal training before moving to California, including at the **Art Institute of Chicago**, the **Art Students League of New York**, from **William Merritt Chase** at the Chase School (later the New York School of Art), the **St. Louis School of Fine Art** and the **Ecole de Beaux Arts** and the **Academie Julien** in Paris.

Many of the painters were committed to working “**en plein air**”, literally meaning out of doors, using the dramatic California landscape as their subject matter.



Plein Air Painting in Southern California

(cont'd)

Prominent artists include:

Edgar Payne
Hanson Puthuff
Benjamin Brown
William Wendt
John Marshall Gamble
Franz Bischoff
Sam Hyde Harris
Granville Redmond
Elmer Wachtel
Marion Wachtel

Brown, Bischoff and others lived in Pasadena.
Many used the Arroyo Seco and the San Gabriel mountains as their subjects.

Sierra Lake Scene

Edgar Payne



<https://www.edgarpaynegallery.com>

Pasture Grounds

Hanson Puthuff



<https://www.artnet.com/artists/hanson-duvall-puthuff>


John Marshall Gamble



<http://www.johnmarshallgamble.com>

Benjamin Chambers Brown (1865—1942)





Called the “Dean of Pasadena Painters” and the “Patriarch of Pasadena”, Brown was a noted plein air painter and print maker.

Brown was known for his colorful landscapes and for adding the word “California” beneath the signature on his paintings as a declaration of his California residency.

A 1912 article in the Los Angeles Times described Brown’s studio as attracting fellow artists, collectors and friends, with an environment of **“inspiration and generous help, of persiflage and fine philosophy.”**

San Gabriel Canyon

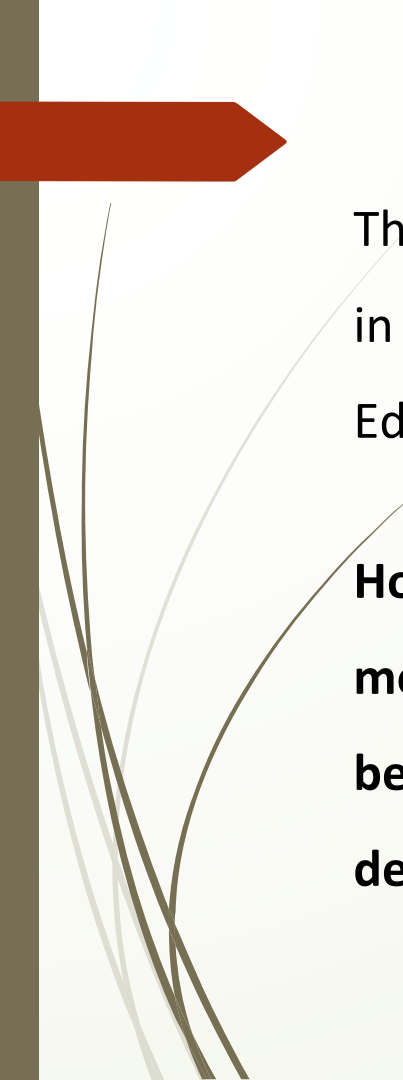


<https://www.wikiart.org/en/benjamin-brown>



Brown was actively opposed to modern art trends:

My antagonism to ‘modernism’ is because I believe that it is a transient fad and will pass away as did the extreme expressionism, impressionism, Whistlerism, pointilism, art moderne, and so forth. In the meantime, it injures students and public alike—setting up ‘self-expression’ as a student ideal when he needs real study, and bewilders the public.



The admiration the Gearhart sisters had for Brown is reflected in an article about Brown in the Overland Monthly written by Edna:


How much finer and more spiritual the vision, how much more unsparing the work when it is altruistic, when it becomes an integral part of the community's cultural development, and its civic consciousness.



Frances the Plein Air Painter

Frances' career as an artist was initially as a painter using water color. She painted in the plein air style and exhibited her work with a number of the major California plein air painters.

In 1911 she took a sabbatical year to paint and exhibited her work in a gallery in downtown Los Angeles. The art critic for the Los Angeles Times said:



Hitherto, Miss Gearhart has been known as a teacher of English history in the High School, but now we know her as a landscape painter of brilliant promise. Her work shows talent of a higher order—one that should not be neglected, even for the delights of history....Miss Gearhart's skies are full of movement, the clouds float, the winds blow, there is life and vibration...

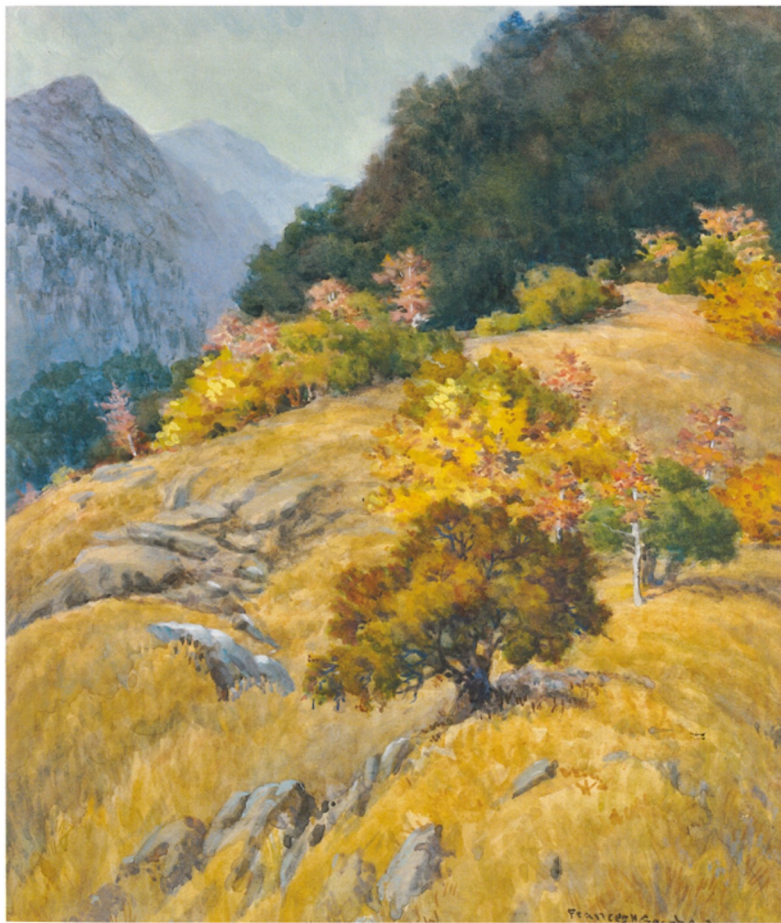


Later that year she participated in a group show with

Benjamin Brown, Hanson Puthuff and **John Marshall**

Gamble. A reviewer noted that “Fine things can be expected of her.”

Frances continued to exhibit her water colors at various shows until 1940.



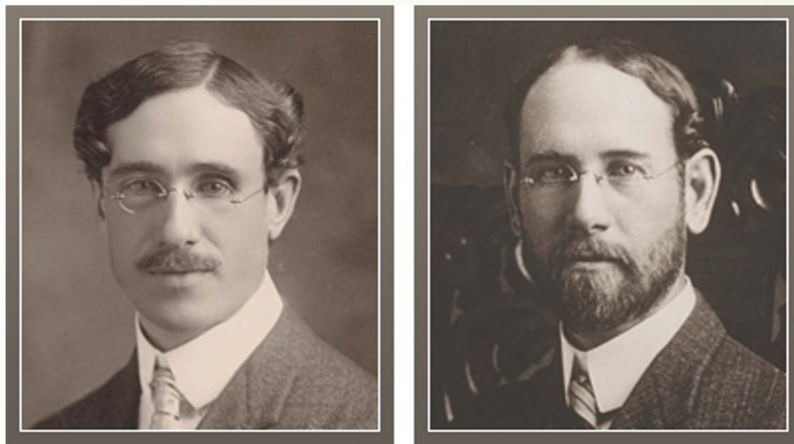
Crestline with Distant Mountains, c.1910-15 watercolor, 13 3/4" x 9", Collection of Roger Epperson and Carol Alderdice



The Arts and Crafts Movement

Francis Gearhart is typically associated with the arts and crafts movement, a movement that began in England as a reaction to the industrial revolution and mass produced goods. The arts and crafts movement emphasized a return to handcrafted furniture, ceramics and decorative arts. Architecture was also influenced by the arts and crafts philosophy.

Many artists that are identified as part of the arts and crafts movement were influenced by Japanese art and styles.



The architects Charles and Henry Greene, practicing as Greene and Greene in Pasadena, were contemporaries of the Gearharts. Like the Gearharts, they were born in the Midwest and moved to Pasadena in 1893 to join their parents.

Active as partners primarily between 1894 and 1916, the Greenes designed architecturally significant houses in Pasadena, including the **Gamble** and **Blacker** houses (both 1908), as well as commercial buildings and public spaces.

In Berkeley, the **Thorsen house** (1909) on Piedmont Avenue was designed by the Greenes.

Charles Greene, circa 1905

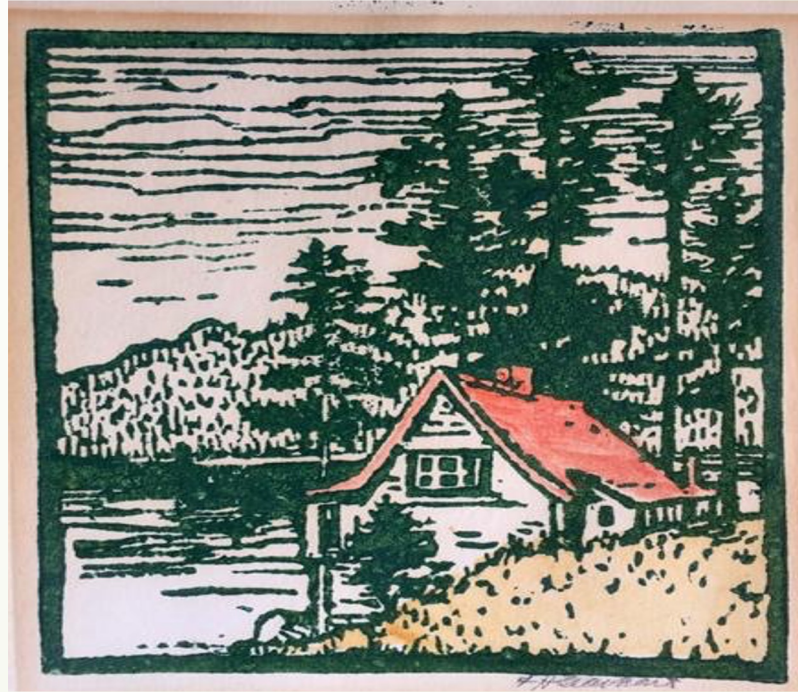


Beginning with the Tichenor house in Long Beach their work began to reflect Japanese styles that the Greens had seen at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts while studying at MIT and at the Louisiana Purchase International Exposition in St. Louis in 1904.


Gamble House



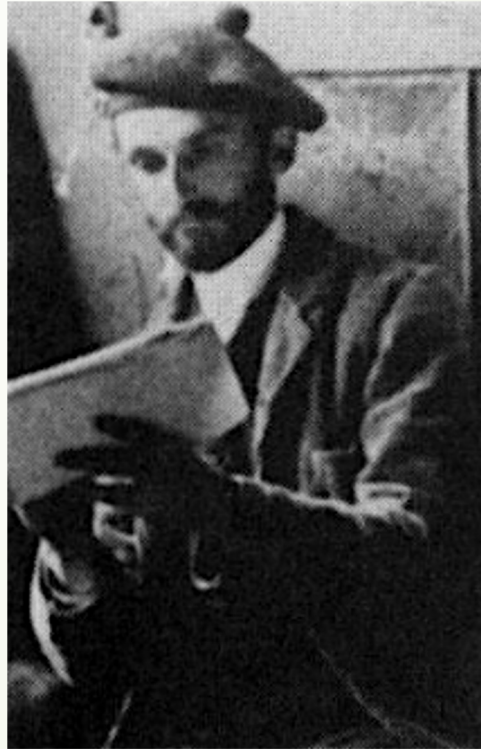
Transition to Printmaking




Cabin on Lake
1918



Frances' first known color block prints are dated 1918. There are alternative theories that she either learned the basics of block printing from her sister May, who had studied under Arthur Dow, or from Benjamin Brown, her accomplished Pasadena neighbor. Likely it was both.



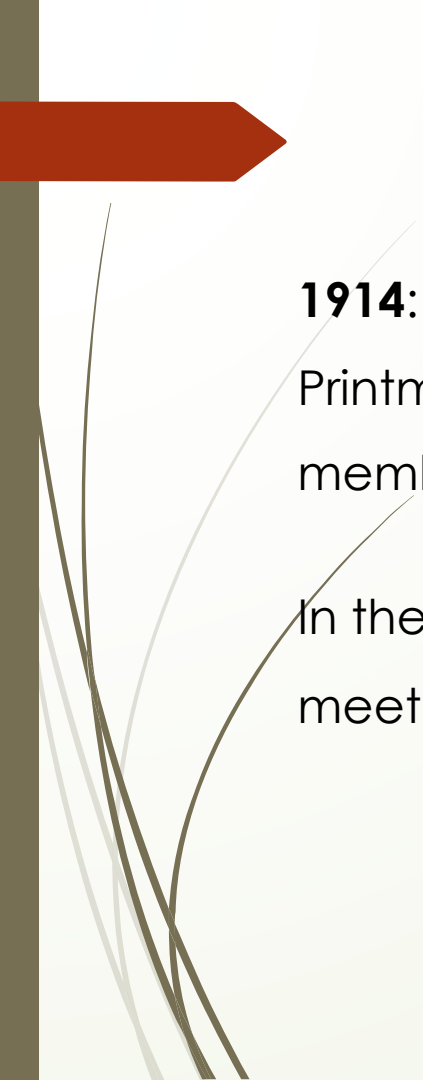
Arthur Dow trained in Paris and in 1893 became the Assistant curator of the Japanese Collections at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In this role, he was introduced to the art of Japanese wood block prints.



During the 1890's, Dow began making wood block prints using Japanese methods. He also published a book on Composition, a copy of which was owned by May.

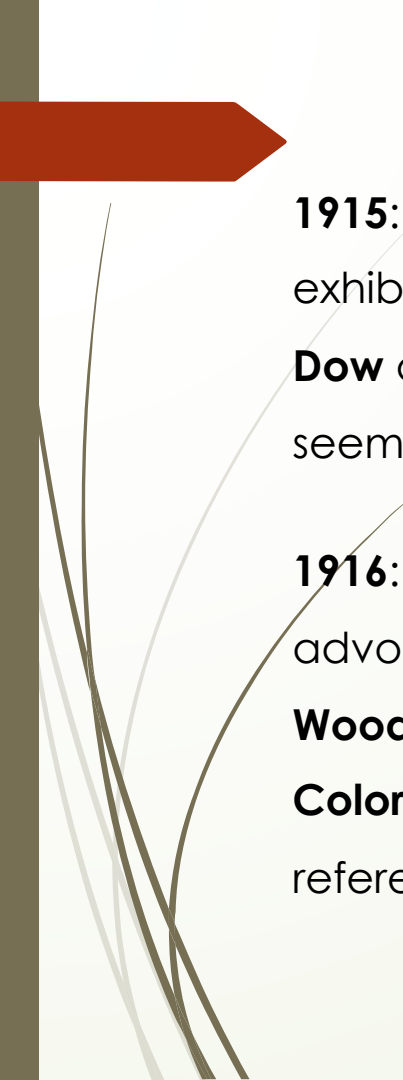
An influential teacher, he taught at the Pratt Institute and Columbia University, in addition to his summer courses in Ipswich. Among his students was Georgia O'Keefe.

Arthur Dow gave a lecture in Los Angeles in 1911 and Benjamin Brown attended. It is unclear if May or Frances attended.



1914: Brown and his brother Howell founded the California Printmakers Society. Frances and May would become active members of the Society.

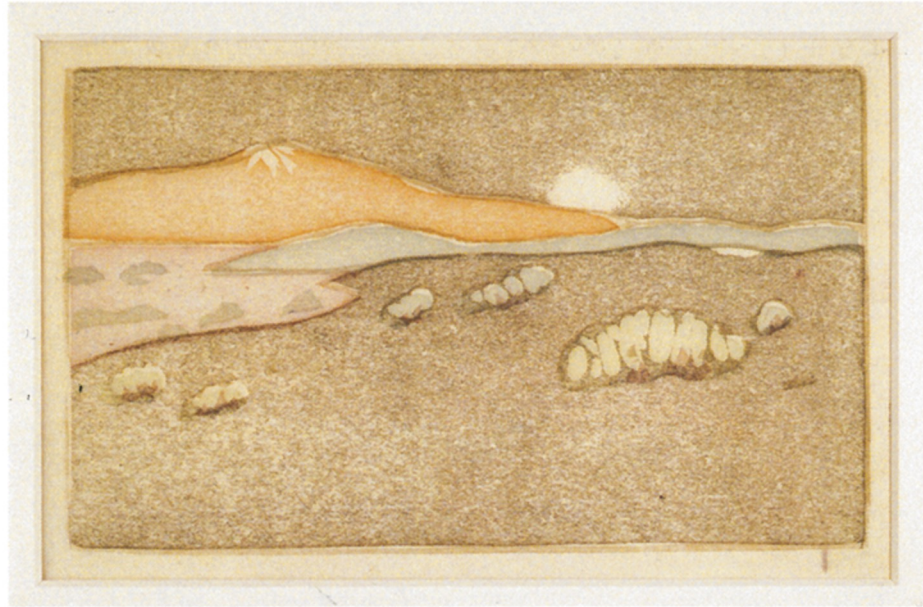
In the 1920's Frances would serve as Secretary/Treasurer and meetings of the Society were held at the Gearhart home.



1915: Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco exhibited over 2000 prints from artists around the world, including **Arthur Dow** and **Benjamin Brown**. Both Dow and Brown won Bronze Medals. It seems likely that the Gearharts attended the Exposition.

1916: Frank Morley Fletcher, an influential British educator and advocate of Japanese block prints, published a handbook titled: **Wood-Block Printing-A Description of the Craft of Woodcutting and Color Printing Based on the Japanese Process** that became a standard reference work.

1919: Arthur Dow spent the summer in Los Angeles. He gave a number of lectures and met with the Printmakers Society at Benjamin Brown's studio.




Arthur W. Dow, *Snowy Peaks - Los Angeles*, 1919 color woodcut, 3 ½ x 5 ½"



Making a Block Print

- Block prints are made using wood blocks or linoleum blocks. Gearhart preferred linoleum as its easier to work with.
- The artist makes a drawing of the scene that is the subject of the print.
- The picture is cut into the block in relief—all parts of the block not to be printed are cut away.

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- A “key block” is used to print the general outline of the scene, typically in black or blue.
 - Each separate color is printed using a separate block created just for that color.
 - Color is applied to a block and the paper is placed over the block. The artist uses a bamboo disk with a handle to press the paper to the block.
 - This process is repeated until all colors have been added.





Gearhart's Variation from Japanese Process

Traditional Japanese artists use water color; Gearhart used oil paints.

Traditional Japanese artists applied each color with a roller; Gearhart used a brush.

In Japan, making of the print utilized three different artists: one to draw the image, one to carve the wood and one to make the print. Gearhart performed all three functions.

Under the Wave off Kanagawa



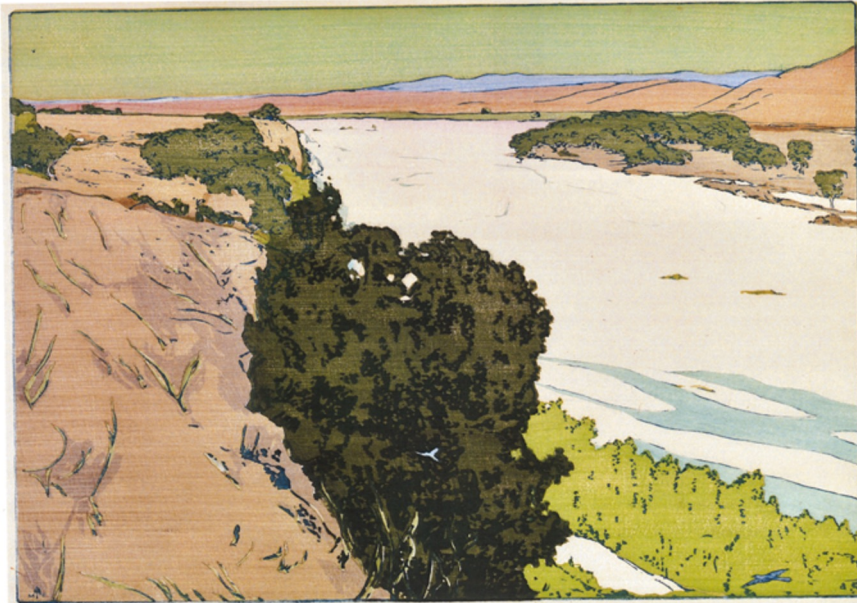
The Wave



Mother and Child



William Morley Fletcher moved to Santa Barbara in 1922 to become Director of the School of Fine Arts. Frances studied with Fletcher during the summer of 1923, dramatically affecting her approach to making prints.





Frank Morley Fletcher, *California I: Salinas River*, 1926 color woodcut, 12 3/4 x 17"



Series, Signatures and Dates

- Gearhart does not number her prints. There is some evidence that she would make up to 50 prints of a single image for more popular images. Many images were printed in small amounts.
- Prints vary. The same image may have different colors or shades than another print of the same image.

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- Most, but not all, prints are signed. Early prints are signed “FH Gearhart”. Later prints are signed “Frances H. Gearhart”.
 - Prints are not dated. Dates have been assigned based on when she displayed them at a show.