



Source: Eric Meyer

The Early Art Colony

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Morro Bay as a Magnet for Artists

The years between 1920 and 1940 were marked by depression and upheaval. California was emerging as the cutting edge of American culture and growing fast. Morro Bay was beginning to change from a tiny farming and commercial backwater into a more dynamic but still tiny part of the California miracle. One part of this flourishing community was its attraction to artists. By 1940 the *Daily Telegram* would claim

Morro Bay this year is becoming firmly established as one of the Coast's outstanding art colonies ranking with Carmel and Santa Barbara in importance if not in size... (September 6, 1940)

Who were these artists? Why did they come to Morro Bay?

The first widely recognized artist to arrive in Morro Bay was Charles H. "Robbie" Robertson. He came from St Louis in 1920 with his mother Mary when he was already 58 years old and an experienced artist. He worked in many media but was best known then and now as a water colorist. His typically small paintings were scenes from every place within 20 miles of Morro Bay, mostly landscapes that capture aspects of local history in beautiful details about space and light.

During his time in Morro Bay up to his death in 1945, Robertson was the social and artistic center of a community of painters, writers, sculptors and craftspeople of all sorts who lived in Morro Bay or visited to make art. He held solo exhibits; participated in joint exhibits; taught art students from all over the west; led classes on art appreciation in schools at almost every grade level; served on community committees. He was one of the local leaders of the "recreation" program set up by the Works Progress Administration as part of the New Deal to bring culture to everyone.

Robbie was not alone. Four other artists are frequently mentioned in news of the time: A Harold Knott; Aaron Kilpatrick; and the Skinners, Charles and Charlotte who all lived in Morro Bay full time after about 1930. Other people who lived here and participated in the art colony activities and exhibits included Nadine Richards (of the Little Red House fame) who painted in oils and Miles Castle who was a weaver (and did plumbing work for Nadine).

Harold Knott and Rachel Thayer Knott moved from Carmel to Morro Bay in fall 1927 and purchased a house at the corner of Kern and Ridgeway which still stands. Aaron Kilpatrick and his wife Mary, who had commuted from Los Angeles to paint, purchased land for a house in 1928 and built at the corner of Olive and South Main (the house still stands).

Many other artists visited Morro Bay to practice their craft after Robbie arrived. A March 1934 article in the *Daily Telegram* titled "Poetry of Morro Bay Transferred to Canvas by Colony of Artists" mentions William Ritschel (who actually arrived in Morro Bay just "a few days" before Robbie), William Wendt of Laguna, Walter Cheever of Glendale, Frances Gearhart and her sister Marie of Pasadena; Cadwallader Washburn whose etchings hung in museums of France and Great Britain; and many others.

The spirit of the old art colony lives on in the Art Center located on Main Street in old town Morro Bay on the same block parcel where European founder Franklin Riley built his little house. Art is alive and well on the Central Coast.

