



Fig. 2: José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Old Church*, Deya, Majorca, circa 1922. Oil on canvas, 43 x 43 inches.

# From Spain to California

by Marianne Elliston

## The Life and Art of José Drudis-Biada



Fig. 1: José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Untitled male nude*, before 1913. Sienna conte crayon, 14½ x 9½ inches.

History tends to run in cycles, and trends from the past often reemerge. Such is the case with the popularity of the California plein-air painters who were influenced by the principles of French Impressionism. Favoring strong color harmonies and the use of quick brushstrokes to convey fleeting light and the action of a moment, this school of artists captured the mood of California in a style that was distinctively their own. The movement's fullest expression was between 1900 and 1915; by the mid-1930s it was largely eclipsed by subsequent art movements. Over the ensuing decades the talented artists of this school faded into obscurity until about thirty years ago when people began to rediscover the artists and their work.<sup>1</sup> This is the story of one such painter.<sup>2</sup>

José Drudis-Biada was born in Avinyo, near Barcelona, Spain, in December 1890. One of at least two brothers, his was an economically and culturally privileged Catalan family. His maternal grandfather was national hero Miguel Biada, the man who brought the first railroad to Spain.<sup>3</sup> Drudis's father, Juan, was a doctor and a gifted musician. He nurtured his son's aptitude for art by encouraging him to enroll at the University of Barcelona, where he studied under, among others, José Ruiz, the father of Pablo Picasso. There, he was taught in the classical style, with an emphasis on draftsmanship, at which, as the study in figure 1 shows, Drudis excelled.

Drudis was on the art scene by 1910 when his work was accepted by the Barcelona Exposition, at which he continued to exhibit through 1921. After graduation in 1913, Drudis toured South America, though it is not known what he may have painted there. He was back in Spain by 1918, and in Madrid that same year he held his first solo exhibition. 1918 also marks the first of his three color magazine covers: Madrid's *La Esfera* magazine, followed by Bilbao's *Hermes* in 1920, and *ABC* magazine in 1922. He continued to exhibit widely, with one-man shows in Palma de Mallorca and Barcelona. At some point before 1923, he cofounded the Water Color Society of Catalonia, a group invited by the Société des Artistes Français to exhibit at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1923.

Drudis's painting style is illustrated by *Old Church, Deya, Majorca* (Fig. 2), probably executed prior to his leaving for the U.S. Evident in this plein-air landscape is his use of the broken





Fig. 3: José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Fall. Maple Tree near Boston Mass. (verso)*, circa 1929. Oil on wooden panel, 9¼ x 11½ inches. Private collection. Photography by D. Baxter. Purchased in Oregon in 1998. This was likely shown at either the Boston City Club or the Architectural Club in Boston. Courtesy of DeEllen Baxter.

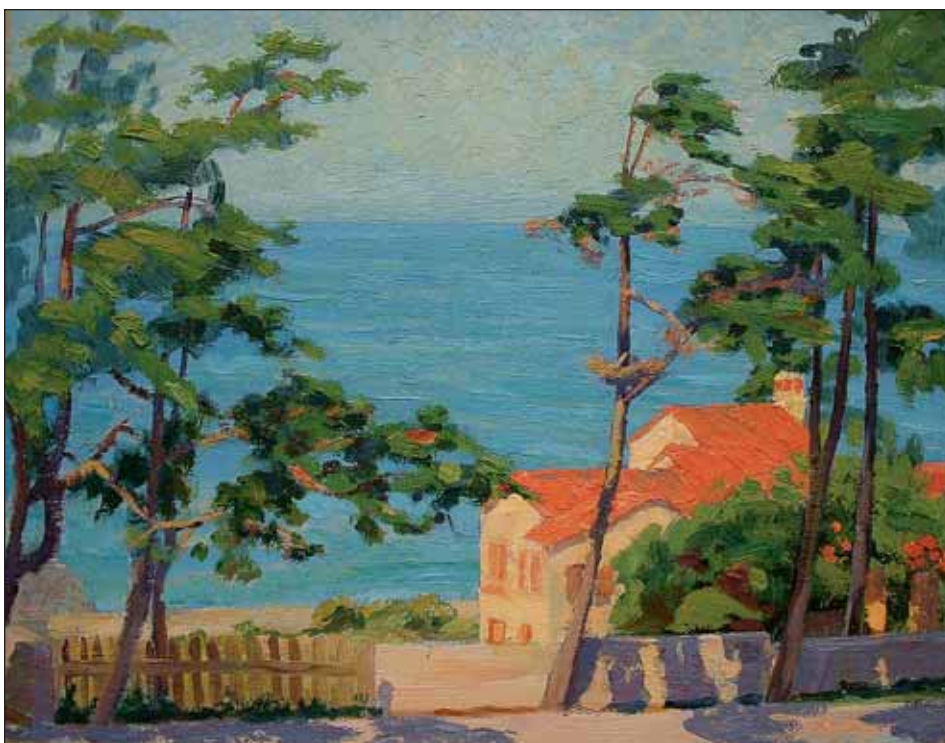


Fig. 4: José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Untitled coastal scene, n.d.* Oil on wooden panel, 9¼ x 11½ inches. Private collection. Photography by D. Baxter. Purchased in Oregon in 1998. Likely painted after Drudis's arrival in California in 1930. Courtesy of DeEllen Baxter.

brushwork of the impressionist style. He was particularly adept at capturing the subtle color and textures of stone. In fact, he painted village scenes and stone buildings so well and so often it might be safe to say they were his favorite subjects.

Although we don't yet have an exact date for Drudis's arrival in America, we do know he entered through Cuba instead of taking the customary route through New York. Perhaps he had a desire to explore the country where his esteemed grandfather first saw a railroad, but other than a documented one-man show in Havana in 1924, nothing else is known about his Cuban years. Drudis first turns up in the United States exhibiting at the Ralston Galleries in New York in 1927.

Whether he prospered during the Roaring Twenties is uncertain. He had seven shows in the last three years of that decade: the one at Ralston Galleries; two shows in Boston (Fig. 3); two in Illinois; one in Vermont, and one in Pennsylvania. By the time of the 1930 census, Drudis was living in a Chicago boarding house. When he arrived in California later that year, family members say he had little money. But his luck would soon turn.

Drudis met his first wife, Amelia, when he was renting a bungalow on the grounds of Dr. Gregorio del Amo's grand home on Westchester Place in Los Angeles. Del Amo's wife, Susana, was Amelia's aunt and an heir, along with Amelia's mother, to Juan José Dominguez, recipient of the first California land grant in 1784. (The Dominguez heirs still own a large portion of the Los Angeles basin, including the oil fields.) The del Amo family was wealthy from oil and real estate, and Gregorio had served as the first consul general from Spain to the City of Los Angeles. Though the Drudis and Biada families in Spain were apparently well-off, Amelia contributed to Drudis's financial security here in the U.S.

Recently widowed, Amelia Carson Atherton (1867–1958) had closed her home in Redondo Beach to stay with her ailing aunt. During that time she apparently became



enamored of Drudis and despite their considerable age difference (she was 63 and he 40), they began a romance. (She later confided in a friend that to avoid her uncle's disapproval, she would visit the bungalow on the premise of taking him food.) They were married in February 1932 in Redondo Beach, where they lived a number of years before moving to their Spanish-style home in Sierra Madre in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains.

Aside from its idyllic setting, Sierra Madre may have been chosen for its proximity to Pasadena, which was then home to a colony of plein-air painters. Benjamin Brown, Alson Clark, Jean Mannheim, and Marion Wachtel all kept studios in Pasadena. Drudis, who was close in age and shared a similarity in painting style and subject matter, had a lot in common with these artists and could easily have made their acquaintance through their exhibitions and mutual associations with the Pasadena Art Institute and the Los Angeles County Art Museum. Drudis's connections also expanded to the California Art Club, among other organizations.

With his marriage to Amelia his financial burdens eased, and Drudis was able to focus on his painting. By the 1930s, impressionism was being overshadowed by subsequent movements, but Drudis and a number of his colleagues still took pleasure in depicting the beauty of the natural landscape in the California art style. Although Drudis was quite prolific, his habit of rarely dating or identifying his subjects makes it difficult to establish a chronology (Fig. 4). Nevertheless, a few clues can be gleaned from other sources.

Drudis's only known painting to have a provenance features his favorite subject of buildings. Reminiscent of Sam Hyde Harris's hillside village compositions, *Through the Cherry Trees* (Fig. 5) was presented to the Los Angeles County Art Museum in 1931, in celebration of the city's 150th anniversary. In 1966 it went through the museum's deaccessioning sale. We do not know why or how, but it came back into Drudis's possession. Considered one

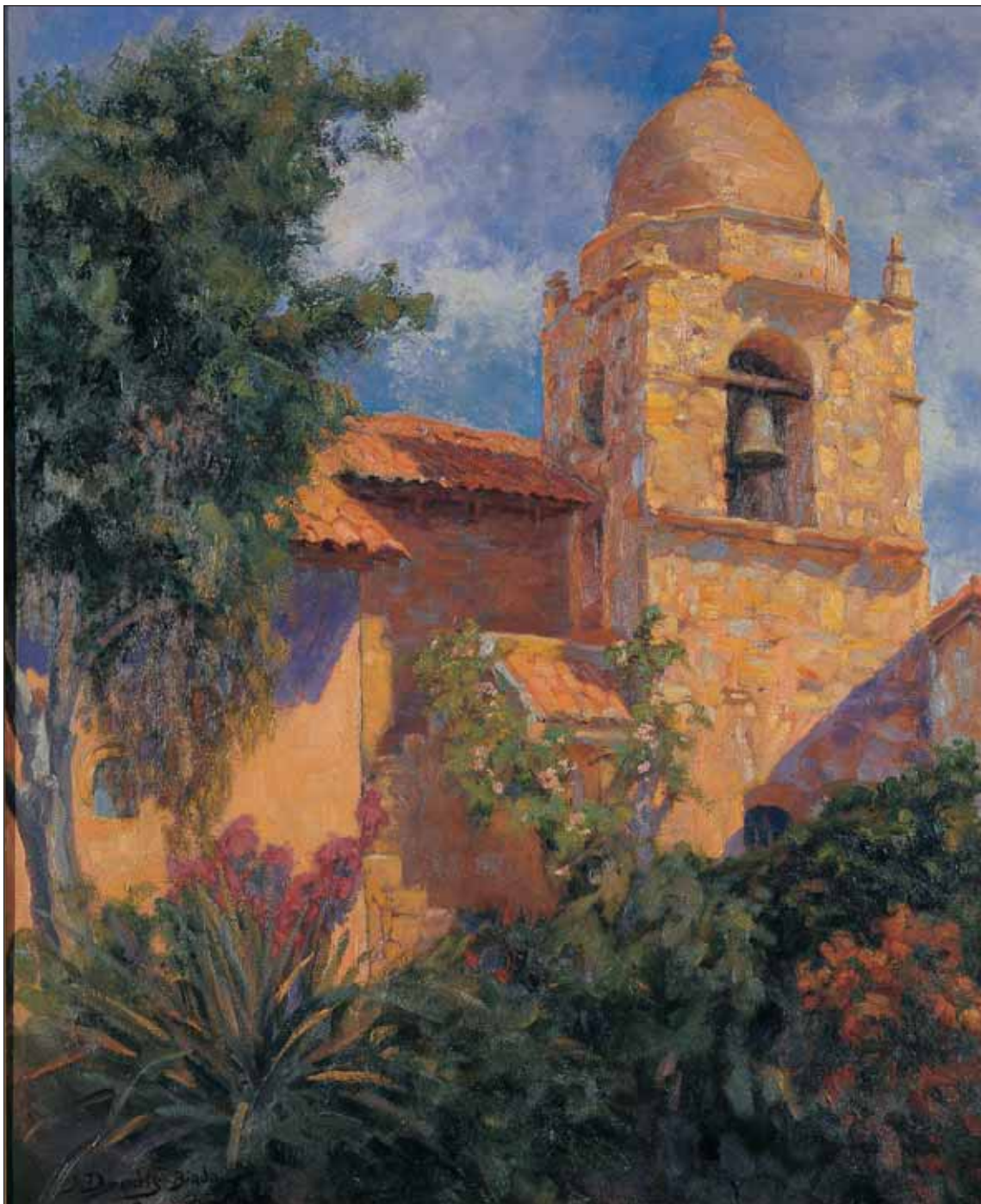


Fig. 5: José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Through the Cherry Trees*, Majorca, before 1931. Oil on canvas, 57 x 63 inches.



Fig. 6: José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Country Road*, Paso Robles, circa 1938–1944. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 inches.





**Fig. 7:** José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Tower, Carmel Mission*, circa 1948. Oil on canvas, 26 x 22 inches.

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**Fig. 8:** José Drudis presenting his portrait of Gregorio del Amo to the Claretian Fathers at their seminary, now Casa Claret. n.d. (Left to right): Father Frank Ambrossi, José Drudis, Father Louis Bossi. *Gregorio del Amo*, circa 1932–1958. Oil on canvas, 35 x 29½ inches. Photography courtesy of Farther Pat McPolin, curator, Dominguez Adobe Museum.

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**Fig. 9:** José Drudis-Biada (1890–1985), *Susana del Amo* (Detail), circa 1932–1958. Oil on canvas, 35 x 29½ inches. Photography courtesy of Dominguez Adobe Museum.

of his best works, it and other works by Drudis are now on permanent display in an historic mansion on the Doheny campus of Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles, California. Furnished with sumptuous antiques, this Victorian landmark has only recently been opened to the public and guided tours are offered throughout the summer.

One of Drudis's favored painting destinations was Paso Robles. In the spring, he and

Amelia would drive—in their Cadillac (later a Rolls Royce fitted with a roof rack to accommodate his supplies)—to paint the almond trees in bloom. On an excursion in 1938 the couple purchased an almond grove, which they kept until 1944. Although the Drudis ranch is now a vineyard and its almond grove and one hundred rose bushes are now gone, the unique home Drudis built over an underground spring still remains.

Based on comparisons with the landscape, the period of ownership helps to provide an approximate date range for *Country Road, Paso Robles* (Fig. 6).

Like so many artists drawn to California, Drudis wanted to capture the splendor of the state's national parks and landmarks. During many of these painting trips, Anna Schürmann, a friend of Amelia's from Sierra Madre, kept Amelia company. Sometime in about 1948 she



accompanied the couple to Yosemite and to the Grand Tetons, and may have been along when Drudis painted *Tower, Carmel Mission* (Fig. 7). Amelia also wrote letters in 1941 from Mexico City and Klamath Falls, Oregon. Although she gives no details, in her letter from Klamath Falls she mentions Drudis out painting at Crater Lake, for which unrecorded images may someday be discovered.

Most of Drudis's work is in private collections that have yet to be traced. But several paintings, including portraits of Gregorio and Susana del Amo (Figs. 8, 9), hang at Casa Claret, at the Rancho San Pedro Adobe Museum. Located in the city of Compton, the old adobe is the ancestral home of Amelia's grandfather Miguel Dominguez and is now a California Historical Landmark. In his portraits, Drudis exhibited a different painting technique than that seen in his land- and seascapes. Probably to capture a more accurate image, he usually rendered his figures in a more realistic style.

Sometime in the 1950s, the Drudises took up residence at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, where José kept a studio and where he frequently exhibited at the hotel's Dalzell Hatfield Gallery. This was an active decade, with Drudis receiving gold medals, awards, and honors from, among other sources, the


Scandinavian-American Arts Association (1955); the Ebell Club, Los Angeles (1956, 1957, 1958, 1959); and the mayor of the city of Mataro, Spain (1958). In 1955 and 1959 he won first place at the California Art Club's Annual Gold Medal Exhibitions with a landscape called *Evening in Castilla* and a seascape entitled *Evening Along the Hudson*.

Drudis was still at the Ambassador in 1958 when Amelia passed away, and in 1961, when he married Herminia Yberri de Ruffo (?–1980), a professional dancer and friend. The two were together for the next twenty years until her passing in 1980. Though Drudis does not appear to have done much painting after his first wife, Amelia's, death, he remained active in the art world. From 1959 to 1960 he served as president of the California Art Club.

In 1972 Drudis received a request from Mount St. Mary's College. In 1961 the college's art building had been among those destroyed by the huge Bel Air fire that originated in the Santa Monica Mountains. Since then the college had struggled with a lack of classroom space. An instructor suggested the college approach the José Drudis Foundation established in 1956 to support educational, religious, and charitable causes. When their application for a grant was accepted, Mount St. Mary's not only acquired a lovely new building but it also came to house in its permanent collection the work of an artist who may otherwise have been forgotten. On May 22, 1983, 93-year-old José Drudis-Biada was driven to the college in a limousine and made his last public appearance as a guest of honor at the tenth



anniversary of the opening of the college's José Drudis-Biada Hall. He died two years later in 1985.

It was Drudis's generosity that prompted president Sister Magdalen Coughlin to write in the anniversary show catalogue: "His life has been rich with friends and achievement... [He has] an eye that instinctively seeks depth and beauty...and hands that can shape its expression...[José Drudis] is a man and an artist of rare quality...." 

*Marianne Elliston is a painter, genealogist, and freelance writer. Her mother was the niece of Anna Schürmann and the Drudises were family friends.*

The author wishes to thank Dominguez Rancho Adobe Museum, Compton, CA, and Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles, for their help in providing information about the life and career of José Drudis-Biada. Also Norman Schwab, former head of the art department at Mt. St. Mary's; Judson Grenier, author of books on the Dominguez family; Father Joseph Daries, Casa Claret, Mrs Frances Morehart and other Dominguez family members; Eric Merrill, historian for the California Art Club; and Nancy Moure for her advice on early California art.

*All paintings courtesy of Mount St. Mary's College unless otherwise noted.*

<sup>1</sup> One of the major influences in this rediscovery was Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, who became interested in Southern California artists when working in the fledgling American Art department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art after graduating from college in 1968. In her efforts to assist people seeking information on early local artists, she discovered virtually nothing on the subject in the museum's reference files and began gathering materials. Her research eventually led to articles, books, and exhibits, and today she is considered a major authority in the field.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the information presented here is gleaned directly from the Drudis family. The Drudises were friends of the author's family through her mother's aunt.

<sup>3</sup> In later life, Drudis commissioned his friend Philip Paval to make a bronze wreath to be placed on his grandfather's monument in Mataro, and in 1974 a commemorative stamp was issued in his grandfather's honor. The two-peseta stamp, which depicts a steam locomotive, is now a collector's item.