

The life and Legacy of a California Artist

Jane Gallatin Powers

(1868-1944)

by Erin Lee Gaffill

At the beginning of the 20th century, Jane Gallatin Powers was one woman who seemed to have it all. Endowed with beauty, brains and wealth, she was both a celebrated artist and a beloved wife and mother and enjoyed a privileged childhood in the palatial house of her father, Albert Gallatin, built in Sacramento in 1877, which later become home to 13 California governors.

Working side by side with her husband, San Francisco attorney Frank Hubbard Powers, Jane's love of the arts combined with Frank's entrepreneurial spirit to forge an artist's haven that became Carmel-by-the-Sea. She studied with some of the art luminaries of her day – Impressionist William Merritt Chase, Modernist Andre Lhote – and her paintings were shown in museums during her lifetime.

Yet her last days were spent alone, in a small apartment in Nazi-occupied Rome. Cut off by war from family and friends, her only means of support were occasional boxes of food sent by a friend in the Red Cross. She died shortly after Rome was liberated from

Nazi rule, impoverished and alone, and almost four decades would pass before her luminous oil paintings were seen again.

Her riches to rags tale is a story right out of Grimms' fairy tales - with a tragic ending. Yet the legacy of her art lives on, both in the enduring spirit of her beloved Carmel, and in the artistic vision of her descendants.

Jane Gallatin Powers was born in Sacramento, March 24, 1868, to Albert Gallatin of New York and Clemenza "Nemie" Rhodes of Michigan. She had a younger brother Albert "Bertie" and a sister, Grace.

Jane was nine years old when she moved into the house on H Street. A pioneer developer of hydro-electric power in California who arrived in Sacramento with only \$5 in his pocket, Albert Gallatin's rapid rise in fortune enabled him to put more than \$75,000 into furnishing his mansion at a time when homes were selling for \$700, and allowed Jane to travel frequently in Europe, where she developed a passion for art.

In 1881, Nemie divorced Albert and moved East with Grace. A year later, Albert remarried, a beautiful 20 year-old Sacramento girl and schoolmate of Jane's, Malvena Robbins. 10 years later, Jane Gallatin met and married Frank Powers, a successful San Francisco attorney and avid outdoorsman. Together, they set about looking for a place to call home.

The Founding of Carmel (Carmel, CA 1900-1920)

Albert Gallatin must have been a tough act to follow. But in Powers Jane found a man with a hearty spirit and an entrepreneurial vision who could certainly hold his own. Though Powers was already prospering in his San Francisco law practice, it seems that he was restless for new territory to explore. A chance payment of land in lieu of cash brought Frank and Jane to Carmel for the first time around 1899. Frank liked what he saw in the undeveloped pine forest and by 1901 had bought up most of what is now Carmel-by-the-Sea, including the sites where the Sunset Center, the Forest Theater, and the Harrison Memorial Library now stand.

Clearly in Carmel the Powers had found a place to call home. But instead of a fancy mansion, they chose to live simply in a rustic log cabin complete with a dirt floor, though it is true that at one time Jane had the place spruced up with over 20 chandeliers. They called their new home "The Dunes" as it was perched on the northern edge of the Carmel Beach then graced with sand dunes 15 to 20 feet high.

In 1902 Powers founded the Carmel Development Company and brought in J. Franklin Devendorf to manage the growing concern.

In 1906, the San Francisco Call devoted a full page to the "artists, poets and writers of Carmel-by-the-Sea," noting that "Mrs. Frank Powers the artist is revamping the

old log ranch on San Antonio into a livable residence, and the log barn into a studio," Carmel's first artist studio.

By 1907, Frank and Jane had three daughters - Grace Madeleine "Madel", Marian Hubbard or "Polly", and Dorcas Jane, and one son, Gallatin.

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Jane's advocacy for the arts played no small role in the development of the artistic character for which Carmel is famous, for it was she along with her husband who convinced many of their artist friends, left homeless by San Francisco's great fire of 1906, to give Carmel a try.

Among other artists and bohemians of her day, Jane Powers' guest list included artist William Merritt Chase, photographer Arnold Genthe, writer George Sterling, a friend of Frank Powers from the Bohemian Club, and writer Mary Austin. An active member of the San Francisco Sketch Club, Jane had co-founded the San Francisco Spinner's Club and wanted something similar in her new home. In 1905, she joined Wellesley College teacher Elsie Allen in founding the Arts and Crafts Club of Carmel, and was elected vice president. The now defunct club's summer school contributed greatly to the further development of Carmel as an art center, and in 1910 the San Francisco Call reported that "60% of Carmel's houses were built by citizens who (were) devoting their lives to work connected to the aesthetic arts.)

After returning from Mallorca in 1913, where he had been sent to represent the State of California at Father Junipero Serra's 200th birthday, Frank Powers was on fire with dreams of restoring the then decaying missions, and bearing seedling trees from Petra. According to Powers' grand-daughter Joy Powers, Frank and his son Gallatin planted the trees down the center of Ocean Avenue. The Powers worked to establish a theater in Carmel, in which their children had occasion to perform minor roles, and spearheaded the building of the town's first library.

Jane and Frank's dreams for Carmel were far-reaching indeed. In the 1914 publication, *Monterey, Cradle of California's Romance*, writer Grace McFarland quotes a "tall, shrewd, forceful Yankee lawyer," as saying, "Any man who is producing sentiment (using the word in its best sense) either with tongue or with pen, by clay or by brush or by gut, can have as much of my land to use for one dollar a year as he wants...in a climate that never gets cold and never gets hot and never prevents him from working at his best. The goal being in McFarland's words to create in Carmel "an artist's empire of the soul."

Bonfires and Voyages (Europe 1920-1929)

Then, from a story credited to Anya Seton, author of historical fiction and Jane Power's niece, Jane traveled east to visit her sister Grace in Old Greenwich, Connecticut,

and became enamored of a painter named Funk. According to Seth Ulman, Jane Powers grandson, when Jane returned to Carmel the association was never spoken of - - at least not within hearing of the children. The story goes that Frank acted as though nothing had happened, and it was believed that the couple had reconciled.

But in 1914 Frank Powers rewrote his will, settling on his wife only a fixed monthly allowance and the right to homestead either their San Francisco home or Carmel cabin.

Who was this Funk? In 1909 a portrait of Jane Gallatin Powers was commissioned from an artist by the name of Wilhelm Heinrich Funk. Perhaps the painter fell in love with his subject, and his affection was returned. With family memories contradicting one another, we have only the rewritten will and the luminous portrait to guide our thoughts.

In 1920, Frank Powers died of chronic uremia at the age of 56. Within months, Jane set sail for France with Polly, Dorcas Jane, and Gallatin. Madeleine, their eldest child, had by this time married and set up housekeeping in the Powers' San Francisco home and so did not accompany her mother on the voyage.

What became of her studio in Carmel? Six months before Frank Powers' death he sold "The Dunes" and the 80 plus acres on which it stood to James Allan and Maud MacKenzie of San Francisco.

And her paintings? According to Jane's grand-daughter Lolly Fassett, Madel's eldest child, who was nine years old the year Jane Powers set sail for Europe, Jane burned them all in a bonfire on Carmel beach.

Once in Europe, Jane settled Gallatin in a French school and resumed painting, setting up studio in Paris, Rome and Capri. In the late '20's Lolly joined her as traveling companion as served her a frequent model. Lolly spoke often of her time in Europe with her grandmother. One story remembered by Lolly's son Kaffe Fassett, now a world renowned designer, was that Jane Powers had her own doorknobs installed in whichever hotel they visited. They seemed to make her feel more at home?

Why did Jane Powers never return to Carmel? Perhaps part of the answer lies with her children. In 1925, Polly married Marino Dusmet de Smours, the son of a Neapolitan duke himself the podesta (or "governor") of the island of Capri. Marino and Polly set up housekeeping in a home on the fabled island appropriately known as Villa Paradiso.

And in 1927, after a three-week courtship, Dorcas Jane married Roberto Penazzi Ricci, an elite army officer. Tragically, Dorcas Jane died of fever in 1929 only days before her 29th birthday, leaving a young daughter, Roberta. Perhaps in the environment of Capri itself, Jane Powers found a kindred spirit to Carmel, for photographs of the island show a seaside terrain uncannily reminiscent of the Carmel Highlands.

Jane Powers was not one to look back. Having left Carmel and California Impressionism behind, she turned to the art forms of the day and began working with Andre LHote, one of Cezanne's pupils and famous as an artist and teacher. In 1929, her work was exhibited in Paris at the Salon des Tuileries and the Salon des Independants in Paris, the Galerie Guillot, and the Galerie Zak, and in private galleries in Rome and Capri.

A Humble Settling (Rome 1929-1944)

Then came the Crash of 1929, and subsequent Depression. Powers' monthly allowance was reduced to less than a third. With her children suffering from financial hardships, she even attempted to sell off some of the rugs of her San Francisco home, to no avail.

And then came World War II, and with it the Nazi occupation of Rome, the city where she had at last hung up her traveling shoes and settled. Polly and her family had relocated in 1936 to Ethiopia, where the winds of war trapped them in Addis Ababa. Gallatin joined the US Navy and began his tour of duty in the South Pacific. Attempts to reach Jane Powers on behalf of family members in the states during this time were fruitless.

By 1942, her funds were completely cut off, and with essentials almost impossible to obtain, one needed friends outside the city to bring in such luxuries as mild, eggs and fruit. The streets of Rome were rampant with rumors that the Gestapo was making house calls, shooting on sight many who were suspected of being Allied sympathizers.

In San Francisco, Madeleine grew increasingly desperate for information about her mother's well being. In 1942 word had been received that Jane Power needed a copy of her birth certificate, without which she could not prove she was of Aryan descent to the Fascists or obtain a ration card to purchase goods. The necessary documents never reached her.

But there was some hope that Madeleine's son, Seth Ulman, then a 24 year old medic with the US Army, could get through to the city and find out if his grandmother was still alive. He had his chance shortly after the liberation of Rome

"I was in the city the day Rome was liberated from the Nazis," Ulman told me in an interview a few years before he died. "I remember the gates opening, streams of soldiers coming through. I saw German snipers in the windows of apartment buildings and frantic women throwing themselves on top of my Jeep. Men ripping rose bushes out of the ground and hurling the flowers in the air.

"I knew that Jane Powers was in the city," he continued, "but of course, I could not leave my platoon." At last his petition for a three day leave was granted, and he was able to return to Rome to find the grandmother he had never met. "We were all worried

sick, after the years of anxiety, wondering is she alive? Yet when at last I found her, she seemed quite unconcerned with her fate.”

What Ulman found was a 76 year old woman living in a cocoon of ritual, her existence a paradox of poverty and elegance. Living in a tiny apartment furnished with 14th-century antiques, the walls hung with her oil paintings, and with a servant to set the table, she prepared a scant meal from the remnants of food obtained through dubious means.

"We ate dried plants, some unnamed vegetable," Ulman remembered. "No meat."

Each day of his visit, they went for a walk down the same street looking in the windows of the same shops, but never buying anything. To “shaker her up,” Ulman hired a carriage to tour the Borghese gardens. She remained aloof until it came time to pay the driver. Then, in fierce Italian, she sprang to life, convincing the driver to accept half of what he was asking. “You must learn Neapolitan gestures,” she chided her grandson.

Yet still, she seemed morose, unreachable. On their last day together, Ulman purchased some art prints from a local shop. Together they pored over the images. In this, at last, she seemed authentically interested, “telling me what worked, and what didn’t, and why.” Ulman recalled. She was no longer painting, but there remained within her a glimmer of that past life.

Just before leaving her, there was one moment of pure pleasure that Ulman recalled with delight. “One afternoon we stopped for tea, as was her custom. And from her purse she withdrew a matchbox of sugar, hoarded from aid sent over by the Red Cross. She dipped a cookie in her tea and then rolled the cookie in the sugar. Gingerly, with great delicacy, she lifted it to her mouth and tasted the sugar. It was the one great pleasure of her day.” Perhaps the cocoon of routine was Jane’s protection from brutal reality.

On Dec. 18, 1944, shortly after her grandson's visit, Jane Gallatin Powers died. The cause of death was thought to be advanced arteriosclerosis.

And her paintings?

When her eldest daughter Madeleine died in 1980, dozens of Jane Gallatin Powers' Italian paintings were unearthed in the basement of her Carmel home. They had been stored, sight unseen, for more than three decades. Incredibly, most of the paintings survived unscathed, and many have been restored. In 1983, San Francisco's prestigious Maxwell Gallery mounted a retrospective of California's early women painters, and included three of those pieces.

Though the bulk of her paintings were not shown until almost 40 years after death, Jane Powers’ artistic vision lives on through her descendants. Her son Gallatin returned to California after his service in the war and founded two successful and famous

restaurants: Gallatin's Grub and Grog (later called the Crocodile's Tail) at the Bixby Bridge in Big Sur, and Gallatin's, in the historic Stokes Adobe in Monterey (now a restaurant, Stokes Adobe.) Jane's grand-daughter Lolly returned from her six years abroad to create, along with her husband Bill Fassett, the now legendary Nepenthe restaurant, known since the late 40's as a watering hole for such latter-day bohemians as Henry Miller, Man Ray, and Eric Barker.

Jane Powers would be pleased to know that her great grandson Kaffe Fassett won the prestigious Salamagundi Prize for painting and in 1968 began a revolution in knitwear with his extraordinary use of color. Other artistic descendants include painter Holly Fassett, textile artists Dorcas Owens and Kim Rowe, fine art photographer Heidi McGurkin, actor Thyme McGurkin, and painter Chi Birmingham, named one of "20 under 30" emerging artists to watch out for in the Fall 2007 South West Art Magazine.

And her beloved Carmel-by-the-Sea? In this seaside resort now world famous for its fog-shrouded pine trees and European charm, artistic and cultural values introduced by Jane and Frank Powers continue to be debated to this day.

In 1990, a walkway in Carmel between San Antonio and Palou was named after Jane. It is the only place in Carmel where either Powers is officially recognized. In 2003, an exhibition of her life and work was displayed at the Governor's Mansion in Sacramento, now a State Park House Museum. In 2006, her work was included in Crocker Museum's Artists at Continents End Exhibition.

At a time when it was uncommon for women to do so, Jane Gallatin Powers chose art and love as her guiding values. Yet she was also a real partner to her husband for almost two decades, together creating a city renowned to this day for its artistic and cultural charms. Together, they reared four children in whom she inspired heartfelt devotion. It is ironic that her art, which was celebrated in her own lifetime and for which she sacrificed so much, has been virtually neglected since her death.

Today, many of her paintings have been restored and hang proudly on the walls of her descendants' homes, providing a glimpse of another time, another place, through the eyes of an extraordinary woman.