

THE DAVIS COLLECTION

A WILDCATTERS DREAM: ART, OIL AND WILDFLOWERS

THE SAN ANTONIO ART LEAGUE & MUSEUM



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This catalog accompanies the San Antonio Art League & Museum's TriCentennial exhibition, *A Wildcatter's Dream: Art, Oil and Wildflowers*. During the years 1926-28, the San Antonio Art League & Museum held the Texas Wildflower Competitive Exhibitions, spearheaded by oilman and Texas art lover Edgar B. Davis. The competitions brought in hundreds of artists' submissions, and the Edgar B. Davis Collection began to take shape. Davis' Texas Wildflower Competitive Exhibitions, awarded more than \$53,000 in total prize money for paintings of Texas wildflowers, ranch life, and cotton farming. This extraordinary collection put the San Antonio Art League's influence and importance on the national map.

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THE SAN ANTONIO COMPETITIVE EXHIBITIONS AND THE DAVIS COLLECTION: GEMS OF A TEXAS ART LEGACY

In **A Wildcatters Dream: Art, Oil and Wildflowers**, the San Antonio Art League proudly celebrates the 300 year anniversary of the San Antonio community, embracing the city's unrivaled position as the cradle of Texas art and culture. In showcasing their ensemble of prizewinning paintings from the fabled San Antonio Competitive Exhibitions (the Davis Wildflower Competitions), the League also underscores its own organizational legacy as a foremost contributor to the city's fine art fortunes. Set among the plethora of outstanding exhibitions associated with the city's three-century milestone, this display of the League's Davis Collection offers the perfect visual communion through which to commemorate the notable twentieth century artistic achievements of San Antonio and its oldest arts organization.

Founded in 1912, the San Antonio Art League had already forged a decade and a half of arts leadership and statewide notoriety before oilman Edgar B. Davis joined forces with League President Ethel T. Drought to create the San Antonio Competitive Exhibitions. A tripartite series of juried art exhibitions occurring in 1927, 1928 and 1929, the Davis Competitions, as they came to be known, literally blossomed into the state's first true art extravaganzas, presenting sensational art "happenings" that served to synergize nascent and far-flung arts communities across the state and catapult Texas art into the national spotlight. Bolstered by ultra-generous prize purses—the largest cash purchase prizes ever offered in American art to that point—Davis and his Art League colleagues sought to encourage the best of Texas artists as well as distinguished American counterparts to try their hand at putting Texas on canvas. For this grand series of national competitions, the Art League invited artists to first brandish the glories of Texas wildflowers and then subsequently to render scenes heralding Lone Star ranching and cotton farming traditions. The collective efforts of the participating artists were submitted to the Art League and therewith impartially judged for exhibition and prize eligibility by panels of prominent national art authorities. The finalist paintings were ceremoniously presented with great fanfare at the newly opened Witte Museum and the winners then toured broadly across Texas with a final exhibition in New York City. Meanwhile, the artists were feted with parties and glamorous balls and showered with glowing reviews by an adoring statewide press.

Through their efforts, Davis and his Art League compatriots were successful in engaging the participation of the foremost Texas artists of the day as well as attracting many of the nation's most prominent painters and arts leaders to San Antonio. Over the three-year course of the exhibitions it is estimated that over 1,500 Texas paintings were submitted for judging, with over 300 prime Texas images selected for exhibition and prize eligibility. The 300 exhibited paintings represented the works of 125 artists from 19 states, the District of Columbia, and Mexico. The indelible imagery of Texas landscape and working lands left on canvas by these artists have, in turn, informed and inspired generations of Texas art and artists.

Fortunately, Davis and his Art League partners had the foresight to pioneer the “purchase prize” as their methodology for distributing their generous cash awards. Thus, not only did Edgar B. Davis lavishly underwrite exhibition expenses as well as related events and galas but, by wisely rendering his prize monies as purchases and then generously donating winning works to the San Antonio Art League, he also afforded the financial means through which to establish the state’s first great institutional collection of Texas art. The roster of prizewinning paintings contributed by Davis reads like a “who’s who” of elite early twentieth century artists. San Antonio stalwarts such as Jose Arpa, Dawson Dawson-Watson, Peter Hohnstedt, Xavier Gonzalez, and Rolla Taylor hang alongside notable American Masters such as Herbert Dunton, Oscar Berninghaus, Elliot Clark, and Millard Sheets. These works comprise the corpus of the San Antonio Art League’s fine collection today and are shown here not only as a feast for the eyes but also as a lasting testament to the vision and generosity of Edgar B. Davis and the continuing arts leadership of the San Antonio Art League.

Thus, by any measure, the Davis Competitions were hallmark events in the city’s art history, hoisting San Antonio to new heights as a major arts center in the American Southwest and placing the San Antonio Art League at the apex of regional leadership. Even in a city rich with three-hundred years of cultural achievements, these magnificent events along with their stunning Texas imagery, remain among the most notable gems of San Antonio’s art legacy, all subjects worthy of high praise and celebration. *Enjoy!*

William E. Reaves
May, 2018

William E. Reaves is a retired educator, devoting a 35 year career to various leadership roles in public and higher education. He holds an undergraduate degree in Psychology as well as Masters in Counseling from the University of South Alabama in Mobile, Alabama, and PhD in Educational Administration from The University of Texas at Austin.

Along with his wife, Linda, he has been an active collector and avocational historian of Texas art for over forty years. He has previously served as a member of the Board of Directors of the San Antonio Art League Museum and was founder, Board Chairman and Executive Director of CASETA, the Center for Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art. From 2006 to 2017, he was President and CEO of William Reaves | Sarah Foltz Fine Art in Houston, one of the state’s foremost purveyors of early, midcentury and contemporary Texas art.

Dr. Reaves has written extensively on Texas art including authoring, co-authoring or editing four books with Texas A&M University Press—Texas Art and A Wildcatter’s Dream: Edgar B. Davis and the San Antonio Art League (1998), Of Texas Rivers and Texas Art (2016), Sense of Home: The Art of Richard Stout (2017) and the forthcoming A Book Maker’s Art: The Bond of Arts and Letters at Texas A&M University Press (2018). He and Linda are now independent art researchers and currently serve as General Editors of the Joe and Betty Moore Series on Texas Art at Texas A&M University Press, the state’s oldest endowment devoted exclusively to publishing in the field of Texas art.



W. Herbert Dunton, The Horse Wrangler

Oil on Canvas, 25" x 20"
Honorable Mention, 1928



Rolla Taylor, Blue Fields

Oil on Canvas, 24" x 32"
Honorable Mention, 1928



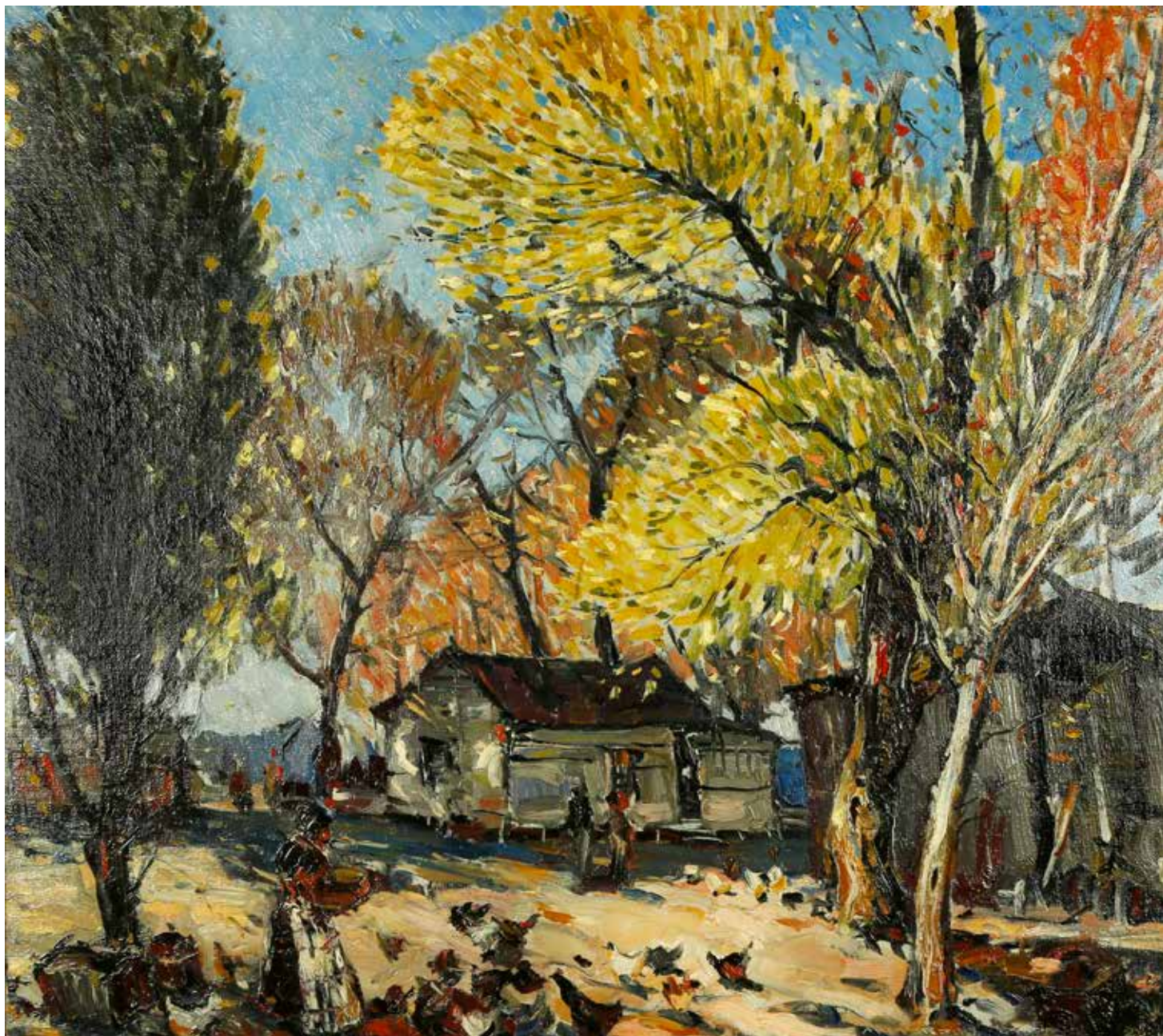
Audley Dean Nicols, West Texas Wildflowers

Oil on Canvas, 20" x 30"
Honorable Mention, 1927



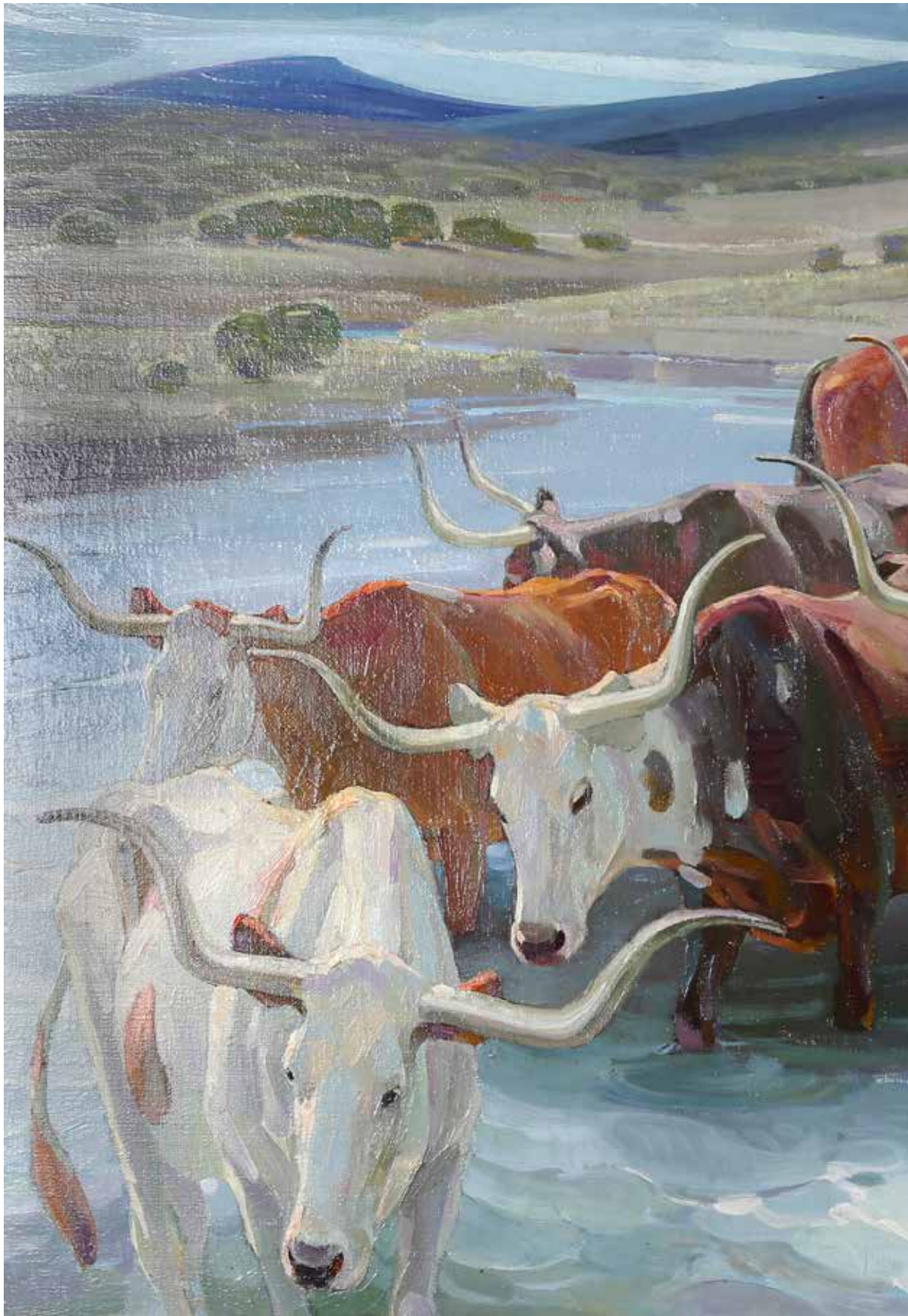
Oscar E. Berninghaus, Winter in the Panhandle

Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40"
Honorable Mention, 1928



Millard Sheets, The Old Goat Ranch

Oil on Canvas, 32" x 36"
Second Prize, Group Two, Ranch Life, 1929





W. Herbert Dunton, Old Texas

Oil on Canvas, 28" x 39"
Fifth Prize, Group Two, Ranch Life, 1929



Isabel Branson Cartwright, Wild Poppies

Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40"

Fourth Prize, Group One, Texas Wildflowers, 1929



Jose Arpa, Picking Cotton

Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40"
First Prize, Group Three, Cotton Fields, 1929



Dawson Dawson-Watson, The Bouquet

Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40"
First Prize, Group Four, Texas Wildflowers, 1929



Henry Keller, Ranch Life, Western Texas

Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40"
First Prize, Group Two, Ranch Life, 1928



Ella K. Menhinney, Shadows

Oil on Canvas, 16" x 20"
Honorable Mention, 1928

ANNOTATED LIST OF ARTISTS AND THEIR WORKS IN THE SAN ANTONIO ART LEAGUE & MUSEUM'S EDGAR B. DAVIS COLLECTION

Jose Arpa (1858-1952) San Antonio

Arpa was an internationally known painter from Spain who won the Prix de Rome three times. The prize enabled him to study in Rome for six years before moving to Mexico, then on to San Antonio in 1923. Arpa was known as 'the sunshine man' in art circles due to his ability to portray heat and light. Notes on paintings:

"Verbena" (1927, first place for an artist residing in Texas) - Depicting a bed of verbena near Helotes, Arpa used a strong diagonal to move the viewer's eye across the painting.

"Cactus Flowers" (1928, third place winner) - The use of a strong diagonal is also used in this painting

"Picking Cotton" (1929 first place in the cotton field category) - A clear example of Arpa's ability to evoke heat and light.

Oscar Berninghaus (1847- 1952) Chicago/New Mexico

Berninghaus was a founding member of the Taos Society of Artists. He was mainly self-taught.

"Winter in the Panhandle" (1928 honorable mention) - The only painting of the 1928 competition that depicts a winter scene. The barbed wire fence moves the eye to the snow covered buildings.

"Cotton Picking" (1928 second place prize in the cotton category) - The expanse of the Texas landscape is contrasted with the human form, animals, and the wagon.

"Peaceful Life on the Ranch" (1929 third place award in the ranch life category)

Maurice Braun: (Carmel, California)

"Texas Fields" (1929 third place winner in the ranch life category)

"Live Oaks and Bluebonnets" (1929 Honorable Mention)

Adrian Brewer (1891-1950) Arkansas

Brewer came to San Antonio with his artist father, Nicholas Brewer, during the spring of 1928 to do field studies of bluebonnets

"In a Bluebonnet Year" (1928 first place winner in wildflowers. category) - Depicts bluebonnets in a Texas Hill Country scene. It uses a wide expanse of blue with Texas sunlight in the middle and distant landscape.

Nicholas Brewer (Arkansas)

"The Cotton Harvest" (1929 fourth place) Father of Adrian Brewer

Isabel Branson Cartwright (1885-1966) Philadelphia / Texas

Cartwright studied in Philadelphia where she won a fellowship to study abroad. In 1910, she marries and moved to Texas

"Cotton Picking Time" (1928 first place winner in the cotton category) - Exemplifies her training in portrait painting. The boy in the upper corner fixes his gaze on the viewer, which serves to encourage the viewer to interact with the painting.

"Wild Poppies" (1929 fourth place award for wildflower category) - Cartwright magnifies the flowers using contrasts of light and shade along with bright hues.

Eliot C. Clark: (New York City)

"Red- Bud and Wild Plum" (1929 Seventh place winner, wildflower category) - Though this is not a wildflower scene it received a prize in the Texas wildflowers division.

Dawson Dawson-Watson: (1864-1939) England/USA/Texas

Dawson-Watson was born in England and studied in Paris from 1886 to 1888. After spending part of each year in San Antonio from 1914 to 1926 Dawson-Watson made San Antonio his permanent home. He was already a renowned artist and teacher when he moved to San Antonio. In 1927 he won the largest prize ever awarded in the first Edgar B. Davis Competition with his painting "The Glory of the Morning". It is in the collection of the Luling Foundation in Luling, Texas. "Spring" (1927 purchase award) - This work is atmospheric with a subtle sense of shimmer and movement "The Bouquet" (1929 First prize – wildflower category) - This impressionistic painting renders the background landscape in a somewhat misty and ghostlike manner while bringing the beauty of the cactus flower to the forefront. "Early Morning" (1929 Fifth place cotton category)

W. Herbert Dunton (1878-1936) Maine/New Mexico

Dunton was a founding member of the Taos Society of Artists. He was an illustrator for Field and Stream and spent time as a 'cowpuncher'. To assure the accuracy of his work he often drew in the field.

"The Horse Wrangler" (1928 honorable mention) - He places the orse in the central position of the foreground which gives visual prominence to the cowhand who is looking over his shoulder. It is illustrative of the western panorama.

"Old Texas" (1929 fifth place winner) - Using the device of one point perspective Dunton focuses the viewer's gaze with the activity in the foreground of the restless longhorn cattle, rider, and horse fording a river. .

Edward G. Eisenlohr (1872-1961) Texas

Eisenlohr studied under two prominent Texas painters, Julius Onderdonk and Frank Reaugh who were impressionistic in their style.

"When the Year is Young"(1928 Honorable mention) - Evidence of the impressionistic style of his teachers is seen in this work with the use of warm colors and broad brush strokes.

Xavier Gonzales: (1888-1983) Spain/Mexico/Texas

Gonzales studied at the Art Student' League in Chicago. He was the nephew of Jose Arpa.

"Twilight" (1929 purchase prize) - Considered one of the most powerful images in the Davis collection.

The bowed heads of the figures give a sense of ambiguity as to whether they are bowing their heads in prayer or despair. The image of the bowed heads takes visual power over the theme of the cotton harvest.

E. Martin Henning: (1886-1956) Chicago/Taos, New Mexico

Henning was a member of the Taos art colony.

"Thistle blossoms" (1929 first prize in the Texas wildflower category) - depicts wild poppies as the dominant motif of a landscape.

Peter Hohnstedt (1897 – 1957) Ohio/Texas

"Evening Shades"(1929 fifth prize - wildflower category) - Strong use of a dominant deep blue shadowed foreground while the background is bathed in a soft light.

"Sunshine and Shadow" (1929 second place Texas resident wildflower category) - The artist separates the colors with large brush strokes. This painting is meant to be viewed from a distance allowing the viewer 's eye to blend the tonal graduations as well as the depth of perspective.

Marie Hull: (1886-1956) Jackson Mississippi

"Texas Field Flowers" (1929 second place in the wildflower painting category) - A rendition of Spanish daggers

Frank Tenny Johnson: (1874-1939) Californi

"Texas Night Riders" (1929 fourth place in ranch life category) Depicts two horsemen approaching an evening camp. Johnson painted a rare night view of ranch life. The horsemen and their horses appear to be lit from an unseen campfire. He was also known for his night paintings illuminated by moonlight. This painting was based on his visits to the SMS (Svante Magnus Swenson) Ranch near Stamford Texas.

Henry Keller (1870-1949) Ohio

"Ranch Life, Western Texas" (1928 First prize in ranch life category) Keller uses a stylized motif to create his composition. There is a strong imagery to the right and left of the composition, which is intersected with the vertical image of the trees and the horizontal orientation of the mountains and river making an almost abstract landscape.

Theodore Morgan: (1872-19??) California/Texas

"Mexican Heather and Salt Cedar" (1928 First place Texas artists/wildflower category) - The artist chose to paint the Gulf Coast using a hazy screen through which the flowers and forms emerge. He wrote a regular art column for the local newspaper.

Ella Mewhinney: 1891-1975) Texas

"Shadows" -(1928 Honorable mention – wildflower category) - A strongly impressionistic work with the use of the trees as a strong vertical intersected by the horizontal aspects of the landscape. The flowers are rendered in an impressionistic manner while the trees are depicted in strong defined lines.

"Texas Wildflowers" (1929 Third place Texas resident /wildflowers category) - This is the only still life in the collection. She chose to arrange the composition with flowers in a vase against the backdrop of a window ledge with a white curtain and the shadows of a window frame.

Audley Dean Nichols (1874-1941) Pennsylvania/Texas

"West Texas Wildflowers" (1927 Honorable mention-wildflower category) - Depicts the expansive desert and mountains of West Texas. The background evokes the dry heat of West Texas while the foreground depicts the lushness of the land. An endless horizon creates a unique landscape.

Julian Robert Onderdonk (1882-1922) San Antonio*

Julian was the son of San Antonio artist Robert Jenkins Onderdonk. In 1901 he went to New York where he studied under the American Impressionist William Merritt Chase who had also taught his father, Robert Onderdonk. Chase encouraged Julian's talent as a landscape painter. He was regarded as the father of the 'bluebonnet painters' who exemplified the landscape tradition of the Texas experience. He was a great supporter of the San Antonio Art League. He and his father, Robert, were among the founding members.

Three of his paintings were loaned to the White House at the request of President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush. In addition to the San Antonio Art League Museum his works are included in the collections of The Smithsonian, American Art Museum, Dallas Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

In 2008 one of his painting sold at Christie's for \$326,500. It sold far above the pre-auction estimate.

Robert Jenkins Onderdonk (1852-1917, Father of Julian Onderdonk) New York/Texas*

Studied at the National Academy of Design where he eventually became dissatisfied with the curriculum. He and other disaffected students formed the Art Students League of New York, which was later led by William Merritt Chase. He moved to San Antonio in 1879 where he painted and taught. He was one of the founders of the San Antonio Art League. His daughter, Eleanor Onderdonk, became the Art Curator at the Witte Museum in 1928.

Louis Reynaud (18?? – 1941) New Orleans/Chicago

Reynaud was known for his cotton genre, the figure, and the landscape.

“Picaninnies in Cotton”(1929 Third place in the cotton category) - This work is not ‘politically correct’ in today’s times. However, it should be viewed as a work within its era. The artist chose to depict the stereotypical idea of African-American field workers with two young girls in the foreground.

S. Millard Sheets (1907-1989) California

“The Old Goat Ranch” (1929 Second prize, ranch life category) - Other ranch life paintings usually present us with an expansive view. Millard Sheets chose to paint an intimate view of ranch life and some of its activities. He was a promising artist when he painted this work at the age of 21. He used his prize money to further his study in painting.

Rolla Taylor (1872-1970) Texas

Taylor studied with Robert Onderdonk, Jose Arpa and Theodore Gentilz. He then traveled to France to continue his study.

“Blue Fields” (1928 Honorable mention) - Taylor’s painting of Texas Hill Country landscape is executed in subdued tones, presenting a different interpretation of the Hill Country.

**Note: Even though they are not a part of the Davis collection, paintings by Julian Onderdonk and his father Robert are important pieces of the Art League collection and relate in genre and provenance to those in the Wildflower Competitions.*

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THE SAN ANTONIO ART LEAGUE & MUSEUM

ROUNDING UP ART FOR SAN ANTONIO SINCE 1912



When the San Antonio Art League was officially formed on March 13th, 1912, its stated purpose was to celebrate, preserve and share the unique cultural diversity of our city through exhibitions, lectures, and classes, and the acquisition of one or more art objects each year. After 106 years, those Art League goals are still alive and relevant to San Antonio culture in the 21st century.

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