

## SAROYAN AS ARTIST

### Abstract

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Few admirers of the writing of William Saroyan (1908-1981) know that he was also an artist. For a while he even seriously considered art as a career and throughout his life had the highest admiration for artists. In his early twenties he was already making pencil drawings and looking for direction, even debating a career in art rather than writing. He was completely unschooled with no formal art training; this paralleled his writing career for which he was his own teacher.

Saroyan painted and drew all of his life with a break in the forties and early fifties, which he indirectly mentions, without suggesting why. These were the years of his greatest fame but also those of marriage and children. For him painting and drawing were an integral part of his writing, though not integrated into it visually. They were interconnected activities. In the last quarter century of his life, he painted regularly, whether in New York, Paris, San Francisco or Fresno. Often this was done daily and often he would record his feelings toward this work in his daily journals.

No inventory has been made or even attempted of his artistic production, but there are thousands of drawings and paintings, mostly watercolors, preserved in the William Saroyan Foundation Collection housed at Stanford University. He saved everything, never throwing out casual tracings or what one might consider failed paintings. Furthermore, he regularly commented on this mania of preservation.

There has been little serious study of Saroyan's art outside of the comments and reflections made by the artist himself. Therefore, such questions as influences and periods have been only casually discussed. The work is abstract, though Saroyan was capable of drawing people and things realistically. For the moment we can speak of two periods, the earlier one probably dating from the very late 1920s to the late 1930s, dominated by very precise geometric drawings and the later period, from the late 1950s until his death, when he worked in a rapid, spontaneous style mostly with watercolors. He was influenced in the early period by Kandinsky and the Russian constructivists and later by Klee, Miro, Pollack and the Abstract Expressionists.

William Saroyan did not show off his art, had no exhibits, never tried to sell any of it, but he did from time to time use drawings to illustrate books and articles, mostly memoirs. The first formal exhibit of his art was held in Fresno a few months after his death. Since then there have others in Paris, Tokyo, New York, Fresno, and San Francisco. His paintings are held by more than 40 public museums.

The illustrated presentation will document this aspect of the writer's creativity, while comparing Saroyan's painting to that of other well-known authors who expressed themselves as artists.