Exhibition of Paintings

By the Late

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The Art Institute of Chicago

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WILLIAM KEITH, ARTIST AND MAN.

(AN EXCERPT FROM AN ARTICLE BY R. W. MACBETH.)

FEW artists have had a more interesting career than Mr. Keith. He was born in Old Meldrum, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in November, 1839, a member of the Keith family that still owns a feudal castle in the highlands. His early boyhood was spent on this estate near Cowie, but when he was about 12 years old the family removed to New York. Here he at first had a position—much against his will, apparently—in a lawyer's office, and in his spare moments began the study of wood engraving. He soon decided to devote his entire time to his art, and after working for a year or two as an apprentice, he secured a position with Harper's Weekly and Harper's Monthly. He served these periodicals until 1859, when he went to California to live. Until the art of photo-engraving made his trade unprofitable, he was employed continually, but he soon found he could not compete with the cheaper and more rapid method of making reproductions, and began to turn his attention to outdoor work.

At first he made pencil sketches only, but gradually worked into water colors, and found such a ready sale for his sketches that in 1869 he was enabled to go abroad to study the foreign masters. For more than a year he studied in Dusseldorf, gaining valuable training in the fundamentals, and then crossed to Boston. But he continually heard the call of the West, and so he returned to California in the seventies. Since then he has repeatedly crossed the ocean, seeing almost all of the world-famous collections, and meeting many of the leading artists of all schools, but it was California that had originally stirred him to paint, and it was to California that he returned after each trip for new inspiration.

All artists and collectors who visited the coast felt their stay incomplete without a visit to the Keith studio, and they were all cordially welcomed—when he was in the mood.
George Inness lived at his studio during a rather protracted visit to the coast, and there are those who profess to see a change in Mr. Keith's work from then on. It is true that to some degree, at least, they both saw nature in the same way; but Mr. Keith saw it that way before Mr. Inness made his appearance in the West, and those who know Mr. Keith's work through its many phases, realize that it shows not a change, but a regular progression, getting more and more nearly to his ideal of what a picture should be with each succeeding year.

In the fire in 1906, not only was the Keith studio destroyed, but in it at the time were many of his paintings and sketches. He also lost a great number of personal gifts of his friends, and it was the loss of these that seemed to affect him most. One of his great brass bowls was rolled out into the street by some men who tried to save what they could from the flames. After the fire it was one of the first things that Mr. Keith searched for, and it was not until he had given up the search that it was discovered, blackened, but otherwise unhurt, in the middle of a street some distance from its home, where it had been abandoned.

Mr. Keith was not discouraged by the fire. He at once set about painting new canvases with a vigor and enthusiasm undaunted by nearly seventy years of constant effort, and some of the best paintings that now represent him in private and public collections owe their being to the few years that have elapsed since 1906.

"My subjective pictures," said the artist on one occasion, "are the ones that come from the inside. I feel some emotion and I immediately paint a picture that expresses it. The sentiment is the only thing of real value in my pictures, and only a few people understand that. Suppose I want to paint something recalling meditation or repose. If people do not feel that sensation when my work is completed, they do not appreciate nor realize the picture. The fact that they like it means nothing. Any one who can use paint and brushes can paint a true scene of nature—that is an objective picture. The artist must not depend on extraneous things.
There is no reality in his art if he must depend on outside influences—it must come from within. You don't like that picture?” he asked. “Well, I don't care; it's good, anyway—it's a crackerjack.” You say it's irritating, and that proves it is good, because it made an impression. If it didn't arouse any feeling in you at all, it would be worthless. And, I tell you, if you had that picture around all the time, and saw it every day, you would grow to like it—you couldn't help it.”

With such a philosophy it is natural that Keith's pictures are those painted in the studio, rather than in the open; but they are based on a long and intimate knowledge with the great California out-of-doors, and his subjects, in almost every case, find their ground-work in some beautiful spot not far from his Berkeley home. His mood, judged from his paintings, was variable, now quiet and dignified, and transmitted to us in those warm, soft greens, that are among the most delightful things that he ever did; and again, disturbed and turbulent, piling great white and amber clouds upon each other until his very skies reflected those emotions to which his brush gave utterance.
I—CALIFORNIA OAKS.

A SHEPHERD and his flock have invaded the virginal stillness of this splendid grove of oaks. On all sides the mighty giants raise their stately heads against the darkening heavens, and underfoot the rank, sweet grass is almost lost in the shadows of gathering dusk. Directly overhead hangs a great white cloud, lightening the gloom, while the greenish sky is but a few gradations removed from the deeper blue of night. A subdued hush broods over the scene which is painted in deep, rich tones of green, and the canvas is permeated with the haunting lure of twilight.

Height 20, length 26 inches.
Canvas No. R.
Harmony is the keynote of this exquisite canvas. Trees and grasses have been touched by the first visitation of young Autumn, and leaves and blades in their soft yellow garb blend in perfect accord with the subdued gray light of the early evening sky. To the right on a gently rising slope a slim, skeleton-like tree casts its bare, brown limbs in grotesque tracery against the yellowish foliage of the trees beyond, while the gray canopy above is ruffled by soft, fleecy clouds. In the wake of a little path which runs through the center of the picture, loiter a group of figures. The foreground is rich in swaying grasses and wild flowers, the detail being worked out to a minute degree. The “Quiet Hour” has been likened to a Corot, but while there is a suggestion of the great Frenchman in the soft, tonal quality employed, the strong individuality of the Californian has stamped the creation as unmistakably a Keith.

Height 20, length 26 inches.
Canvas No. 104.
SLIM, graceful trees border a placid stream whose waters are peopled with myriad shapes and forms of shadowland. At the foot of a slender sapling in the left foreground rest a man and a woman lost to everything save the transcendent beauty of the sun's departure. Like a blazing ball it hangs low in the western sky, its brilliant orange light spilling into the water beneath in a cascade of molten fire, while leaves and grasses catch the shining glow in points of flame. Across the stream a flock of sheep graze quietly in the shelter of the trees. The artist has plucked a golden jewel from Nature's changing crown and placed it, palpating, in a canvas setting.

*Height 30, length 30 inches.*
*Canvas No. 243.*
KEITH and sentiment were inseparable. In the enchanting make-believe of paints and brushes he reveled in every romantic phase of Nature, and, above all, he loved the mystic time of the twilight and the gloaming. In this scene he has caught the glamorous charm of the hour and set it down with irresistible appeal. A little dell deep in the heart of an oak grove lies shimmering in the moon's pale radiance. Great, hoary trees weave a canopy of interlaced branches overhead through which a vaguely grayish sky may be discerned. A tiny pool, its presence revealed by the tell-tale moonlight reflected from its surface, adds to the bewitching loveliness of the spot. Beneath a spreading tree sits a figure, while close by wanders another, both apparently enthralled by the beauty of their surroundings. In such a captivating glade Titania might well have held her fairy court.

Heights 20, length 30 inches.
Canvas No. 299.
5—AUTUMN.

In this canvas earth and sky struggle for supremacy in the intensity of their colors. A smooth, sweeping meadowland bordered by trees and spanned by a tranquil little stream, lies riotously ablaze with the rich reds and browns of autumn, while overhead the twilight sky flaunts the sun's farewell message in crimson-tipped clouds against a golden ground. In the middle distance the cattle pick their slow way across the stream whose surface is bright with reflected lights. Far away against the horizon appears a line of mountains, dimly purple in their remoteness, while the foreground with its thick carpet of weeds and grasses shows a careful exactitude in relation to detail. This is one of those strikingly brilliant landscapes in the painting of which Keith showed himself the master technician of color values.

Height 20, length 30 inches.
Canvas No. 352.
TURNING their backs on the open country stretching away in the background, a shepherd and his little band of sheep are threading their way through the woods. Stately trees meet and lock their boughs overhead, while the lengthening shadows forecast the approach of night. Underfoot the thick, brown grass proves a potent attraction to the four-footed wanderers, and progress is slow. In the distance a patch of blue sky touched by the last afterglow of sunset, may be seen through an opening in the trees, its delicate color in glowing contrast to the somber autumn foliage which enframes it. The charm of the painting lies in the simplicity of its handling and the atmosphere of restfulness which pervades the peaceful scene.

*Height 20, length 30 inches.*

*Canvas No. 253.*
TWILIGHT has wrapped this peaceful meadow in a mantle of slumberous quiet, the falling dusk intensifying the dark greenness of the grass and foliage. The fast fading glow of sunset lingers in a golden benediction on the warm clouds which roughen the surface of the blue night sky, and knee deep in the placid waters of a little pool the patient cattle stand and wait. Shadowy trees rise on all sides hemming in the restful spot, while one young sapling more ambitious than the rest, rears its graceful head, plume-like, against the heavens. The painting demonstrates a masterly knowledge of Nature and her varying moods.

Height 20, length 30 inches.
Canvas No. 300.
Piled up masses of gray cloud entirely overcast the sunset sky, their edges touched to a shimmering radiance by the hidden orb. Through the center of the picture a gentle river winds its way between banks of deep green grass and thickly crowding trees. A couple of figures, unmindful of the scowling sky, linger by the water's side, while in the middle distance a group of cows may be seen crossing the stream, their feet unfalteringly set in the homeward path. The canvas in its cool greens and grays is fresh and moist with the promise of rain, and one senses the hushed expectancy with which earth and trees and sky await the breaking of the storm.

*Height 20, length 30 inches.*
*Canvas No. 274.*
THE ineffable loveliness of the Lagunitas country has become a proverb. To Keith its spell proved a potent one, and his exquisite interpretations of its beauties have gone far toward making its fame world-wide. Here in the embrace of the mountains a little rivulet flows quietly on its way. Slender, branching trees rise from its banks, their leafy tops limned in delicate pattern against the warm firmament, while the limpid waters below faithfully reproduce them leaf for leaf. The greenish sky, its surface swept by soft, white clouds, blends with fine harmony into the tender golden browns of early autumn in which the scene is clothed, and the sleepy, contented cows in the cooling, shallow stream add the final note of rustic charm. The painting is strong in its appeal to the lover of Nature and carries the irresistible lure of the open.

*Height 20, length 30 inches.*
*Canvas No. M. H. H.*
A LUMINOUS crescent, the young moon hangs low in the evening sky, its fragile, graceful curves prinked out in a phosphorescent glow against a sunset of matchless beauty. Along the horizon line gleams a brilliant streak of light, while splendid orange-tinted clouds ride over a weird, green sky. The land beneath is deep in purple shadows, and through the quiet gloaming a shepherd is urging his flock of sheep. On every hand rise stately trees, and at the base of one of these sits the herdsman's sweetheart, blissfully anticipating the homeward stroll through the glamorous dusk. The romantic quality that pervades this canvas makes the picture one which grows on the beholder with each acquaintance.

Height 20, length 30 inches.
Canvas No. 298.
11—THE GLORY OF THE HEAVENS.

By many this is considered the great Scotchman’s masterpiece. On one hand a gentle, grassy hillside slopes upward into the protecting shelter of the trees and across its face a straggling baby path plays hide and seek with the slender stemmed, starry wild flowers. Along this path come a woman and a boy, hastening their steps to the waiting hearthside with true peasant indifference to the glories of Nature flung with a careless hand about them. The rapidly gathering dusk brings into bold relief the blazing colors of the sunset sky. At the horizon line a band of fiery red flings its challenge upward against a bank of billowing clouds. From crimson the light glows to gold, and the western sky seems broken into legions of marching red gold clouds against a sky of opalescent green, the whole a phantasmagoria of color rich as the heart of an Hungarian opal. Through the branches of the trees in the background the heavens appear lit with a mighty conflagration and the brown leaves of one stately oak fairly flame with the reflected glory. At the foot of the slope flows a little stream whose tranquil waters have been transformed into a river of molten fire. Rubies, topazes, sapphires, and emeralds in a setting of shadowy grasses blaze from the magic current. Across the stream wander a group of cows, their slow moving forms looming dimly through the gloom. The canvas is a poem in pigments, one of those rare poetic fancies, a song without words such as only a master hand and spirit can call from the spheres.

*Height 36, length 60 inches.*
*Canvas No. 363.*
12—HARVEST.

THIS canvas is quick with the lazy warmth of an autumn day. In the shelter of a group of trees in the foreground sits a woman keeping solicitous watch over the two small boys frolicking nearby. The western sky with its orange lined clouds is hung like a brilliant curtain in the background, screening the mysteries of the beyond, and against its glowing beauty the piled up hay wagon in the middle distance looms like a huge, dark blot. The farmer atop of his fragrant load is adding a last forkful before turning his team toward home. The ardent glories of autumn are shown in the rich russet tones of the foliage, while the even gloom beneath the trees forms a setting of indescribable beauty for the jewel-like little pool which flames forth in reflected light from its rim of bending grasses. Peace and plenty are joyously expressed in this charming rural symphony.

*Height 25, length 30 inches.*
*Canvas No. 315.*
13—MOUNT TAMALPAIS IN AUTUMN.

The grand old mountain has offered itself as inspiration on many occasions, but never, perhaps, with more satisfying results than in the present instance. Rearing its rugged crest high in the background, it stands boldly outlined on the yellowish gray sky, its uneven profile just topped by the white clouds which float lazily above. A little glade set between the encroaching lines of two thickly wooded groves occupies the foreground, and in the distance a village nestles at the base of the mountain. A lonely figure loiters amid the trees. Autumn in her most alluring garb has caught the artist's inclination here, and the scene is touched to life in rich browns and yellows. Underfoot spreads a thick carpet of sun-yellowed grass, its surface thrown into shadow by the trees on either side, and the crimson ivy twining its tendrils about the sturdy tree on the left, strikes a distinctive note in the surrounding color.

*Height 24, length 36 inches.*
*Canvas No. 1.*
14—SPRINGTIME.

THE rich, dark greens of the dense, protected woodlands mantle this painting, giving an effect of coolness that is singularly refreshing to the beholder. Deep in the rank, lush grass which is cast into gloom by the shadowing branches above, two little children are gathering the early wild flowers with which the turf is plentifully sprinkled. In the middle distance through a rent in the closely woven boughs the warm sunlight falls across the sward in a golden swath, while further away may be discerned a group of homely farmhouses and outbuildings huddled close in the shelter of towering trees. The tonal quality of this painting is true to the tender, luminous greens which Keith dearly loved to paint, and the brush-work while vigorous is balanced by the artist's delicately adjusted sense of poetic values.

*Height 24, length 36 inches.*
*Canvas No. 26.*
A LITTLE country path runs its even way through the center of the picture, its outlines merged into the shadowy dusk of the distant mountain slope. On either side grows a thicket of slender trees and tangled shrubbery whose leaves are stained with the bright, blending colors of Autumn's burning brush. In the foreground linger a couple of lovers, their fancies atune to the exquisite spell of the twilight, and against the far-away horizon a majestic mountain looms in lonely grandeur. The soft, yellow afterglow of sunset hovers transiently above its head. The brooding quiet and the haunting mystery of twilight so subtly expressed on the canvas, strike a curiously responsive chord of heart-ache and longing.

*Height 24, length 36 inches.
Canvas No. 344.*
CRADLED in the heart of the woods, a lovely, luring glade lies unveiled in all the tempting charm of the hour before sunset. Along the sloping hillside in its garment of autumn shades, travel two horsemen, their faces set toward the wondrous sky in the background. Over its greenish surface sweeps a radiant, billowing cloud, so full of buoyant grace that one is inadvertently tricked into belief in the reality of its motion. Through an opening in the trees on the right, a cascade of late afternoon sunlight pours, flooding the gentle slope with brightness and centering on the bluish green coat of one of the travelers. To the left a slender, crooked tree arises, and from its delicate, leafy cloister one can almost hear the lilting, liquid cadences of the nightingale's song, while out of the mysterious pool below comes the frogs' hoarse croaking. This is one of the artist's finest conceptions and reveals that innate love of the mystic with which his wonderful art was steeped.

*Height 24, length 36 inches.*
*Canvas No. 3.*
17—SETTING SUN.

THE sun is departing in a blaze of orange glory, its golden splendor lighting the scene beneath. At the foot of a spreading tree a man and a woman, in silent communion, watch the brilliant passing, their senses held in thrall by the sheer beauty and solemnity of the picture. Beyond in the middle distance graze a little flock of sheep, their keeper with his time-honored crook dimly outlined in the enshrouding gloom. Across the foreground stretches a tangled mat of golden brown grasses and wild flowers. This is another sunset poem, its undying theme moving rhythmically through the measures of glowing color.

*Height 24, length 36 inches.*
*Canvas No. 16.*
MOVED to inspiration by Sydney Lanier's beautiful poem, "Into the Woods," the artist with exquisite feeling and sympathy has portrayed the Savior as He wrestled with His anguish in the tangled wildwood of Gethsemane. Underfoot spreads a somber carpet of dark brown grass, weaving in and out between the grand old trees whose moss-grown trunks reveal their great age. Patches of dark green sky fit into the interlaced branches above with all the beauty of an ancient tapestry, and through a vista in the far distance a heavy yellow moon looms above the horizon. From directly overhead comes a flood of light, bathing the interior of the wood in a supernatural radiance and falling on the Master's bowed shoulders like a glowing benediction.

*Height 30, length 40 inches.*
*Canvas No. 318.*
ROLLING meadowlands and sloping hillsides in all the verdant charm of springtime lie disclosed to view. In the foreground a little path winds its devious course to the nearby farmhouse, while the fresh green turf, starred with tiny flowers, and the blossoming fruit trees in their pink and white fragrance reveal the presence of April. In the middle distance may be discerned a modest village, while further on a ribbon-like river winds a silver course along the base of the mountains. The cerulean blue of the sky is over-swept by banked-up gray and white clouds, through which the sunlight triumphantly spills onto the budding earth below.

*Height 30, length 46 inches.*  
*Canvas No. 306.*
ERRANT April smiles again from this charming piece. A level bit of grassland, embowered in thickly growing trees rolls away to the distant mountains. In the foreground which is bathed in dark shadow, two little children wander deep amid the luxuriant grasses, their arms full of fragrant wild flowers. A tiny mirror-like pool beams forth from its nest of surrounding green, and the very air is rife with the intoxicating lure of spring. Above floats a sky of incomparable beauty. Great masses of gray and white clouds are being put to flight by the escaping sunlight which streams in a golden flood down on the clustered farmhouses beneath, while through ragged rents in the cloud bank may be seen, here and there, patches of exquisite blue. Spring, fresh and sweet in all the glory of budding tree and blossoming flower, is set with unerring touch upon this canvas.

*Height 36, length 60 inches.*
*Canvas No. 56.*
AGAIN the lovely Lagunitas country is enchantingly revealed to the beholder. A quiet, peaceful stream spans the landscape, its placid bosom warm with a thousand fleetly changing reflections. To the right its bank lies clothed in the soft sun-kissed grass of summer, from the midst of which rise two splendid oaks. Hoof-deep in the cooling water stand a group of cattle, while under a tree near by their keeper rests in the grateful shade. Massing clouds of ominous tone, their edges touched with radiance from the hidden sun, are gradually obliterating the blue sky. The scene is permeated with the soft, palpitating warmth of a midsummer day, one of those perfect California days, plucked from its setting and transplanted to the canvas ere its beauty had time to droop.

Height 40, length 60 inches.
Canvas No. 57.
22—TWILIGHT HOUR.

A n undulating country closely carpeted with rank, soft grass sweeps back in the distance to where the last warm lights signal the sun’s passing. In the foreground towers a mighty oak beneath which sits a lonely figure absorbed in the approaching night. There is a droop to the shoulders, a touching wistfulness in the unconscious pose, a note of patient resignation in the bowed head, which bespeak the presence of heartache and the added pangs of memory; here rests a woman with soul keyed to all the aching loneliness of the solitudes, to whom the remote places make an irresistible appeal. Beyond the slim, scattered tree trunks to the right may be seen a thickly wooded stretch, its fastnesses already black with the shadows of night, and through the lacework of foliage above the blue-green night sky, swept by vagrant patches of golden clouds, casts a lingering light on the fast darkening scene. Under the trees dusk lies thick, obscuring the details of tiny grass blades and flower faces. The nocturnal quality is handled with rare sympathy and the appeal which it made to the artist is subtly conveyed to the beholder from the miniature glade on the canvas.

*Height 36, length 60 inches.*

*Canvas No. 364.*