

Mt. Kilauea, the House of the Everlasting Fire



Ambrose Patterson,
1877–1966
Born Australia, active
Hawaii/United States
*Mt. Kilauea, the
House of the
Everlasting Fire*, 1917
Oil on canvas
43 x 72 in.
(109.2 x 182.9 cm)
Partial purchase and
partial gift of the
Scudder Gillmar Trust,
2004 (12,980.1)

and downtown
Honolulu.

Like so many
artists before him,
Patterson was

JOHN DOMINIS & PATCHES DAMON HOLT GALLERY

The Academy is pleased to announce that with the generous assistance of the Scudder Gillmar Trust it has added to its Hawaii collection its first major canvas by the Australian expatriate painter, Ambrose Patterson (1877–1966). Now on view in the John Dominis and Patches Damon Holt Gallery, this large-scale depiction of Kilauea crater is startling in its colorism and bold application of paint, and represents a modernist extension of volcano subjects made familiar at the end of the nineteenth century by members of Hawaii's Volcano School.

Born in Australia, Patterson studied art in Melbourne and then in Paris at the Académie Julian, the École des Beaux-Arts, and the Académie Colorossi. In 1903 he exhibited in the first Salon d'Automne and the following year in London at the Royal Academy. After several more years in Europe, Patterson returned to Australia in 1910, where he established himself as a landscapist recognized for his Impressionist-influenced, plein-air work. Infused with a sense of light, color, and atmosphere, his paintings placed him at the forefront of the Modernist movement in Australia.

En route to New York, Patterson disembarked in Honolulu in early 1916 and remained for eighteen months. His eye was caught by the light, color, and landscapes of Oahu, as well as the vibrancy of its cultural diversity. In oil, watercolor, and pastel, he rendered island landscapes such as those of Nuuanu Valley and the Waianae Mountains and found inspiration in the colorful pageantry of human life observed in Chinatown

interested in the fiery drama of Kilauea Crater, his discovery of it probably occurring in late 1916. He devoted color woodcut prints and paintings in oil to the subject, the Academy's canvas being one of his most monumental. Measuring six feet across, the work follows in the tradition established by painters such as Charles Furneaux, Jules Tavernier, and D. Howard Hitchcock with its nocturnal view over the crater rim into the glowing caldron of roiling lava below.

Although couched in a pictorial format popularized almost forty years before, Patterson's work is remarkable in its modernity of approach. Patterson heightened the nightmarish effect of the burning pit with its reflections of phosphorescent purple and blue as well as the more traditional red and orange on rising steam and smoke and on the far wall of the crater. Patterson evoked the turbulence of the lava lake as it crusts over, splits open, swirls around, and spews up veils of magma by depicting it with broadly gestural brushwork and even delicate skeins of liquid paint poured or dripped onto the surface of the canvas. Such individualism in palette and spontaneous use of liquid paint stem from Patterson's commitment to art as a vehicle for personal expression, a hallmark of modern art. It has been said that Patterson's use of poured paint prefigures the same technique adopted thirty years later by action painters such as Jackson Pollock.

Patterson left the Islands in 1917, sailing for California and settling in Seattle the following year. A member of the art faculty at the University of Washington, he founded the School of Painting and Design. Patterson remained in Seattle until his death in 1966.

Photograph by Thor Frantz, © 2001 Honolulu Academy of Arts

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