



COVETED COLLECTION

BY MADELEINE TURNER

Local collector brings work of the late painter Andrew P. Hill into the light

Currently housed in New Museum Los Gatos is a widely forgotten piece of local history, and a true feast for the eyes. The exhibit, *Art & Environment: Paintings of Andrew P. Hill*, located on the ground floor of NUMU's '60s-era modernist building on Main Street, displays a slice of the life work of Andrew P. Hill, who lived from 1853 until 1922.

Open through April 15, this special curation came into being thanks to collector Chuck Bergtold, who began seeking Hill's work after reading *Grand and Ancient Forest*, a 1978 biography of Hill by Carolyn de Vries.

"He's an individual who preserved a great deal of the past through his paintings and photographic images," says Bergtold.

Through oil painting and photography, Hill recorded the landscape and people of Santa Clara Valley at the turn of the century. And through his work, he forged vital relationships between influential citizens—relationships that became the basis for a local conservation movement.

The exhibit features three phases in Hill's life, starting when Hill studied at the San Francisco California School of Design, where he developed into a proficient portrait painter. In 1878, he moved to a studio on North First Street in San Jose, where he would cultivate a successful portrait business with his former teacher, Louis Lussier.

Over two decades, Hill accrued an impressive range of clients, from senators and Gov. William Irwin, to members of Stanford University and Santa Clara College.

Twelve oil paintings cover one wall of the exhibit, while the adjacent wall features photographs that Hill took later in his career. One photo is a rare shot of Hill's studio, which was destroyed in a fire following the 1906 earthquake. Visitors might notice similarities between the exhibit and the old studio: in both set-ups, paintings hang "studio-style," meaning they're staggered above and below each other, covering the entire wall.

The exhibit's third wall contains a series of sepia photographs. In them, minute figures perch at the base of gargantuan redwood trees—a representation of Hill's legacy. In 1899, a seemingly innocuous magazine assignment altered his life work: while he was photographing coast redwoods at Big Basin, a property owner approached him and demanded his plate-glass negatives. In an act of defiance, Hill vowed to permanently protect Big Basin redwoods from the whims of private owners.

Garnering support from the same circles that he encountered during his art career, Hill formed Sempervirens Club. The group lobbied state legislature for two years, until a parks bill was passed. Big Basin Redwoods State Park, the first redwoods park in California, opened in 1906. And Sempervirens Club (now Sempervirens Fund) remains active today.



Maria Grusauskas

'Indian Headwaters of the American River,' oil on canvas, 1889, by Andrew P. Hill. Courtesy of Charles Bergtold.

"When I was 5 years old, standing in Big Basin, looking at the trees, I didn't understand that this may not have been here," says Bergtold. "Hill's main objective in life was to preserve Big Basin, and he went to extremes to do it." ♦