

Hans Meyer-Kassel

Artist of Nevada

By the time Hans Meyer-Kassel (1872-1952) settled in Nevada in 1935, he was sixty-three-years-old with a lifetime of experience and artistic accomplishments to his credit. Born in Kassel, Germany in 1872, Hans Meyer left home in his teens to study fine art at the University of Munich. As an active and renowned artist, and founding member of the International Art Society of Munich, his alma mater bestowed upon him the honorary title of Professor. His native city of Kassel followed suit, granting him the honor of adding the city's name to his own—after which Hans Meyer proudly assumed the moniker Hans Meyer-Kassel. It was the name he brought with him when he immigrated to the United States in 1921.

Drawn to the American West by way of New York and Massachusetts, Meyer-Kassel and his wife Maria, eventually relocated to Reno and then Carson City, before settling in the small town of Genoa, Nevada, on the eastern slope of the Sierra. The rural town became his home base as he traversed and explored the Nevada landscape. Meyer-Kassel loved his adopted home state from the time of his first visit. Over the next two decades, built his reputation as one of the most prolific and successful artists in the region.

From Germany to America

“Ever since I was a boy, I wanted to be a painter,” Hans Meyer-Kassel once said of his desire to become an artist. In 1892, at the age of twenty, he withdrew from law school (a pragmatic field chosen by his father) to pursue his artistic studies. He enrolled at the University of Munich where he received formal academic training in the art department. The young artist was gifted with skills as a portrait painter and soon began taking portrait commissions—a lucrative practice he continued while also painting German landscape scenes.

By the age of forty, Meyer-Kassel was accomplished in his field and became a member of numerous German arts organizations. In 1915, he was ordered to join the ranks of the German army during World War I. His mission was to do pictorial reporting on the front lines. Life became difficult for the artist after the war and he sought work wherever he could find it. In 1921, he was summoned to a German estate in Altenburg, Germany to paint portraits of a military general’s family. That is where he met Maria Magdalena Hesse, the family’s nurse who was 26 years younger than him. As both would tell it years later, it was love at first sight.

In 1922, Hans and Maria immigrated from Germany to the United States, arriving at Ellis Island in New York. Hans joined fellow artists at the Central Studio House in Manhattan and took work where he could find it. He was largely unknown in America and had to start over to rebuild his reputation as an artist. During this time he took portrait commissions and painted cityscapes and harbor scenes bustling with activity.

After residing in New York for a decade, Meyer-Kassel was invited to become a guest artist and lecturer at Massachusetts State College (now the University of Massachusetts Amherst). He and Maria lived in Amherst until 1935, until new prospects eventually called them to the West.

Between the Wars: Looking Inwards

Like many artists who immigrated from Germany to America between the World Wars, Meyer-Kassel had witnessed the best and worst of humanity. After serving in and surviving injury on the front lines during World War I, he left Germany in 1921 just as Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party began their rise to power. He endured the Great Depression in America while living on the East Coast. In 1935 he moved to Nevada. It was from the distance of his new Nevada home that Meyer-Kassel witnessed the World War II obliteration of Kassel and Munich—the two German cities that had informed and shaped his intellectual and artistic worldview. Meyer-Kassel left behind a disparate series of psychologically and socially charged paintings suggesting the sociopolitical and historical traumas he witnessed during his lifetime.

A Move to the West

Hans Meyer-Kassel made his first trip to the western United States in 1935 and never looked back. Having been invited to exhibit his paintings in Pasadena, California, he had an opportunity to visit Reno. Soon thereafter he sent word to his wife Maria asking her to join him.

The Meyer-Kassels moved into an apartment in downtown Reno at 228 Virginia Street, atop the Nevada Club. It included a studio for Hans, but little in the way of furniture. That need was remedied by a strong German-American community in Reno that pitched in to furnish their home. The German families became very close and often socialized in large groups with great camaraderie.

After eight years in Reno, Hans and Maria moved to Carson City in 1942. They took up residence and set up a studio in the former Bliss Mansion at 710 West Robinson Street. Although Meyer-Kassel had taken a job with the state highway department as an artist, his primary work at this time was to restore and repair portraits of past governors inside the Nevada State Capitol building.

Three years later, the Meyer-Kassels settled permanently in Genoa. The home they bought, nicknamed "The Old Gray House" by local residents, had been abandoned for thirty years. They purchased it from the previous owner for \$500—and a painting. Hans resided in Genoa until his death in 1952.

In the Garden: Floral Still Lifes

For the most part, Hans Meyer-Kassel painted his floral still life compositions at his studio in Genoa, Nevada, where he lived for the final six years of his life. In Genoa, Meyer-Kassel found what he had been searching for his entire life—a place where he could focus solely on his art. As his wife Maria said in a 1976 interview, “My husband was very happy because he found the tranquility he needed to paint.” Genoa was, she said, their personal Shangri-la, “a place we could live forever.”

In Genoa, Meyer-Kassel’s impressionistic painting style mellowed into an exquisite painterly refinement. The evidence of this is an abundance of astonishingly beautiful still life paintings of simple floral arrangements from neighborhood gardens. To view Meyer-Kassel’s still life paintings is like taking a walk along the quaint main street of Genoa, where local gardens overflow with seasonal blooms.

A Portrait as a Work of Art

Portraiture was always at the heart of Hans Meyer-Kassel's artistic practice, and portrait commissions were the commercial backbone of his life as an artist. He took portraiture as seriously as anything else he did. "I don't think a portrait is only to give a likeness, but it should be a work of art," Meyer-Kassel said in an interview in the 1930s. "It shouldn't be necessary to know the man; the portrait should have such interesting qualities that they alone attract one to it."

Wherever he resided, Meyer-Kassel took portrait commissions. Upon his move to Nevada, he painted many prominent local residents and several people connected to the University of Nevada. In late 1936, he was commissioned to paint the late Nevada Governor Fred Balzar. It was the first of four Nevada governor's Meyer-Kassel would paint for the state, all of which are still on display in the Nevada state capitol building. The other three include Richard Kirman, Edward Carville and Vail Pittman. Meyer-Kassel also painted California Governors C.C. Young and James Rolph. At the time of Meyer-Kassel's death in 1952, he was just completing a portrait of California Governor Earl Warren.

In 1943, Meyer-Kassel was hired by the state of Nevada to do conservation treatment on the governor's portraits hanging in the state capitol. Seven years later he was contracted by the state of California to clean and repair the portraits in the California state capitol. The twenty-two California portraits were shipped to his home in Genoa, Nevada and he was paid \$4,950 to complete the job. At least one Meyer-Kassel portrait also made its way to the nation's capitol in 1941. The painting of Nevada U.S. Senator Key Pittman was shipped to Washington, D.C. at the request of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt who wished to display it at the White House after his untimely death in 1940. *The New York Times* reported, "The portrait was painted by Hans Meyer-Kassel, a friend of Mrs. Roosevelt."

While Meyer-Kassel painted many wealthy, famous and powerful citizens, he painted far more portraits for regular folks. Each received his utmost attention.

Nevada Landscapes

From Nevada's Ruby Mountains to the shores of Lake Tahoe, and every place in between, Hans Meyer-Kassel aimed to capture the scenic beauty of northern Nevada through his impressionistic paintings. Upon his move to Nevada in 1935, Meyer-Kassel found everything for which he longed—community, opportunity, and unlimited subjects to paint. The landscape paintings he left behind read like a set of impressionistic picture postcards sent from every corner of the state.

Meyer-Kassel painted until the very end of his life. Three days before he died, he completed a large painting of the Neddenriep Ranch in Carson Valley (which hangs in this exhibition). On August 29, 1952, he finished a portrait and laid aside his brushes and palette to take a nap before returning to work on an unfinished landscape of the Carson Valley. He never woke and died on the morning of August 30.

Hans Meyer-Kassel's landscape paintings are recognizable and familiar even to viewers today and reinforce his place as a respected and treasured artist of Nevada.

Washoe County Courthouse Murals

While most of Hans Meyer-Kassel's paintings are in private collections or held as cherished family heirlooms, two of his paintings have been seen by tens of thousands of people since they were first put on public display in late spring of 1940. These are the murals that hang outside the courtroom doors on the second floor of the Washoe County Courthouse in downtown Reno.

In November 1939, Mrs. Vera Sale, representing the United States Works Progress Administration, appeared before the Washoe County Board of Commissioners with a modest proposal to have two murals painted by Hans Meyer-Kassel in the upstairs lobby of the county courthouse. The proposal was part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program that aimed to put artists back to work during the Great Depression. A year earlier the commissioners had considered having the murals painted, but said the estimated cost of \$300 was too high. At the time, much of the country was still in the grips of the Great Depression and Nevada was not immune. This time, Sale asked only for the county to furnish the materials to complete the murals, estimated at \$32.40.

The Commissioners approved and Meyer-Kassel painted the murals in time for their dedication in May 1940. One painting depicts a sweeping landscape from the Truckee River canyon east of Reno. It shows the snow-capped peaks of the Carson Range and the flowing Truckee banked by willows. The other mural looks south from Reno, showing Little Washoe Lake, Slide Mountain, a glimpse of Mount Rose and the foothills.

The murals have hung in the courthouse for the past seventy seven years.

