

## ALLA CORRENTE

### Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso

Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso (1858-1918) was one of the most respected and popular artists in San Francisco during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was praised both for his individuality and high quality of his work, which depicted the quiet beauty of the Northern California landscape in both oils and pastels.



*Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso*  
(1858-1918)

Cadenasso was born near Genoa, Italy on January 2, 1858. His father was a tenant farmer on a large fig orchard. At the age of 9, in 1867, Giuseppe immigrated to the United States with his uncle, who had purchased a small vineyard in Capay, California. He did not like the rural life, and at the age of 18 he traveled to San Francisco where he found employment as a waiter at Coppa's Restaurant, which was located near the artists' colony that had formed on Sacramento Street.

From an early age, Cadenasso had always shown an interest in drawing. He soon began to develop this artistic talent while working at Coppa's by sketching on the walls of the restaurant and by drawing crayon caricatures of the guests for their enjoyment. His work soon attracted the attention of artist Jules Tavernier (1844-1889) who encouraged him and introduced him to veteran artist Joseph Harrington (1841-1900). Harrington agreed to instruct Cadenasso at no charge, and subsequently Cadenasso found employment in the studio of a local fresco painter. He soon lost this job, reportedly because his work was so much better than that of his employer.

Cadenasso was not discouraged, but decided to try his hand at another of his talents. He had a fine, although untrained, tenor singing voice and he found a position singing with the company of the Tivoli Opera House. It was while he was employed with the opera company that he met another semi-professional singer who was also employed by the Tivoli, Leah McKenzie, the daughter of a prominent San Franciscan, Col. John W. McKenzie. The two were married in 1884. During the early years of their marriage, Leah gave singing lessons and Giuseppe found work making crayon enlargements of photographs.

After saving enough money, Cadenasso enrolled in the California School of Design. He also studied under Arthur Mathews at the Mark Hopkins Institute. While he was studying there, he met and received encouragement from a fellow student, artist Granville Redmond (1871-1935) as well as Raymond Yelland (1848-1900) who was one of his instructors. It was during this period that he began exhibiting his work, and he sold his first painting, *The Gathering Storm*. In order to earn extra money, he often accepted a portrait commission, although he felt portrait painting to be "drudgery."

After several years of struggle, Cadenasso began to see successes. Art patron Hugh Tevis purchased \$1200 worth of his paintings in one afternoon, and Morton Mitchell, another wealthy art patron, praised him as "one of the few originals in landscape painting." With the improvement of their financial situation, Giuseppe and Leah built a home on Russian Hill



*"The Storm"*  
by Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso

## ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

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(17 Macondray Lane), which they called “The Sign of the Eucalyptus” because of all the trees that were located on and around the property. In 1890, their son, Leone, was born.

Cadenasso became a leader in the artistic community of San Francisco. His home became the scene of many gatherings of artists, musicians, and literati. Many of these gatherings also became impromptu concerts with both Giuseppe and Leah leading the singing. One visitor to his studio remarked that the music seemed to inspire Cadenasso’s art. He noted that while painting, Cadenasso would sing with dramatic flair a bit of some famous Italian opera.



*San Francisco Marshes*  
Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso

Cadenasso never followed many of his fellow artists to Europe in order to further artistic study. He remained in the San Francisco Bay Area throughout his career. His art therefore is purely Californian. He sought only to interpret the beauty of nature that he found in the Northern California landscape... in the woods, the fields, the marshes, and along the ocean shore. He depicted these with a sensitivity for light and atmosphere that ranged from the subdued, misty light of dawn to the muted tones of evening. He preferred to work en plein air (outdoors), painting small works that utilized his skills in using oils and pastels. Sometimes he would paint a larger canvas in his studio based on one of these smaller paintings. One of his favorite themes was the eucalyptus tree, and it was for his sensitive interpretations that he became known as the “Corot of California.” In some of his paintings, he included ethereal-like figures, usually women, in

order to enhance the dream-like effect of the work. His art could be seen as influenced by the Barbizon painters and the later work of George Inness who had exhibited with William Keith at the Morcom Galleries in San Francisco in 1891.

During the 1890s Giuseppe began to exhibit actively with both the San Francisco Art Association and the Bohemian Club, which he joined in 1896. He also was appointed Professor of Art and Chairman of the Art Department at Mills College in 1902. He served in this position until his death in 1918.

The 1906 earthquake and fire completely destroyed his studio on Post Street, although his home suffered no damage. He moved his studio to Oakland, and, in November he exhibited over 20 paintings and pastels at the James Hahn Galleries. The exhibit was a financial and critical success, as was another exhibition a year later at Schussler’s Gallery in San Francisco.

In 1909 Cadenasso moved his studio again, this time to Alameda County where he found new landscape scenes to interpret. That year his painting *Autumn* received the gold medal at the Alaska-Yukon Exposition in Seattle. The most impressive exhibit of his work was held at Helgesen Galleries on Sutter Street in 1910.

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## ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

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His work was often praised for its mystical, ephemeral, and atmospheric qualities. This praise tempered the criticism he sometimes received as being imitative of William Keith. Laura Bride Powers, the art critic for the *San Francisco Call*, defended Cadenasso's work, stating that he was not imitating other artists' methods, but rather was interpreting a similar mood in nature.



*"The Sign of the Eucalyptus"*  
Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso

Giuseppe Cadenasso died on February 11, 1918 from injuries suffered when he was struck by a car at Powell and Post Streets. He was returning home from seeing his son off to fight in World War I. (Four days earlier, the artist Ben Raborg had been hit by a cable car on the same street and had died immediately.) At the time of his death, he was working on a painting entitled *The Sign of the Eucalyptus*. His death was greatly mourned by the art world. The San Francisco Board of Parks Commissioners, as a memorial tribute to him, selected a group of eucalyptus trees in Golden Gate Park to be known as "The Cadenasso Group."

*Coda: Molte Grazie to Adolph Capurro for suggesting that I highlight this artist for this month's Alla Corrente, and especially for supplying lots of information about Cadenasso. He added one comment that I found interesting and I pass it on to you, the reader. The portrait shown at right was done by Bernita Lundy (1892-1989), a famous California painter, wood block artist and pastelist, while she was a student at Mills College. Cadenasso was having an exhibition of his paintings and commissioned her to do a portrait of him for the show. She did the portrait but wanted it back from him after the exhibit was concluded so she could add finishing touches to it. He died in the car crash before she could return the portrait to him, so she kept it. When she was 90, she gave the portrait to Adolph because of his interest in California art. (Also, Adolph's aunt, Delphine Capurro, was a close friend of Bernita's and worked on Christmas ornaments in her shop). Bernita told Adolph that Cadenasso was quite the ladies' man and once made a pass at her while she was in his studio.... so she escaped out a balcony fire escape and got away from his unwanted advances.*



Giuseppe Leone Cadenasso  
by Bernita Lundy

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Dominik, J.B. "Giuseppe Cadenasso" in Westphal, Ruth, *Plein Air Painters of California – The North* (1986); *American Art Annual 1918* (obituary); E. Hughes, *Artists in California, 1786- 1940* (2002).*