

RINALDO CUNEO
(1877–1939)

July's essay deals with a San Francisco artist of the early 20th century, Rinaldo Cuneo, who was dubbed "The Painter of San Francisco" at the inaugural exhibition of the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1935. (His nephew, Gordon Cuneo, was a member of Il Cenacolo and a great raconteur, who died in 2010. Always gracious and someone I really enjoyed conversing with at lunch, Gordon was Il Cenacolo's Man of the Year in 2009). Rinaldo was one of three brothers, the others being Cyrus (1879–1916) and Egisto (1890–1972); all became noted 20th century artists. Rinaldo was most famous for painting landscapes, city views, still life and murals; his artistic styles were Impressionism, Tonalism and Modernism.



Rinaldo Cuneo was born in San Francisco on July 2, 1877, thus this July 2 would have been his 139th birthday. He was part of an Italian-American family of artists and musicians, and was the second of Giovanni (John) Cuneo and his wife Annie Garibaldi Cuneo's seven children. His sisters, Erminia, Clorinda, Evelina, and Clelia were interested in music and opera, and were founders of the Tivoli Opera Company in San Francisco. (They also became important supporters of the San Francisco Opera after its establishment). The family lived on Telegraph Hill in North Beach. As an adult, Rinaldo's home and studio, on a cliff with unobstructed views of the bay, was just a block from his childhood home.

Cuneo enlisted in the navy at age twenty during the Spanish–American War, and served for three years aboard the *Oregon* as a gunner. Following the war, he worked at the family business, which was a steamship ticket agency, and began his art studies, taking night classes at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art (later called the San Francisco Art Institute) under Arthur Frank Mathews, Arthur Putnam and Gottardo Piazzoni. Among his classmates were Ralph Stackpole and Maynard Dixon. His art education continued in London and in Paris, at Académie Colarossi, from 1911–1913.

Perhaps best known for his oil paintings depicting landscapes of the San Francisco Bay Area and for his murals, Cuneo also painted cityscapes, marine scenes and still lifes. His first exhibition, in 1913, was in San Francisco at the Helgesen Gallery, and his work was also shown at the 1915 Panama–Pacific International Exposition, where his works were well-received. He subsequently exhibited also in virtually every major Bay Area art exhibit until his death.

A reviewer once wrote that Cuneo's paintings "leave a mellow glow in one's heart. They portray not merely places, but mood and atmosphere."

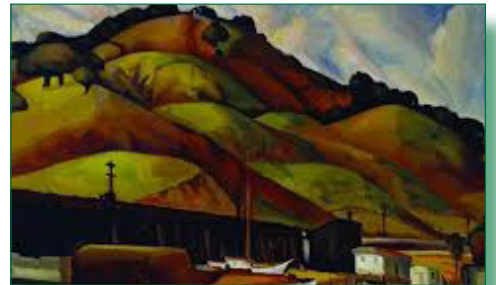


His early color palette reflected that of Tonalism, with earthy, dark, neutral hues. Later, he adopted the lighter pastel palette associated with the Impressionists. Still later in his career, he used a palette which "vibrated with low-keyed, intense colors and radiance." His painting style also evolved throughout his career, and he ultimately integrated innovations which he came across into his own personal style, which involved aspects of Tonalism, Impressionism and Modernism.

From 1916 to 1917, Cuneo worked for a tugboat service while living in San Anselmo, painting maritime scenes in his spare time. He also taught at the California School of Fine Arts during the summer sessions of 1920, 1925, 1935, and 1936.

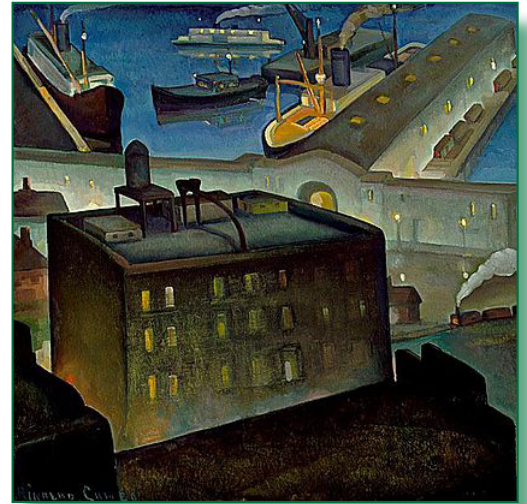
Arthur Millier of the Los Angeles Times wrote that Cuneo's landscapes "breathe the essential strength and poetry of his region." Another critic noted that "they are the very soul and essence of California materialized in line and color." In addition to his California landscapes, in 1928 he also painted scenes of the Arizona desert. Cuneo said that "a landscape should embrace volume, simplicity, unity, a good sense of color values, rhythm of line, and above all, light."

In 1934 Cuneo received a commission from the Public Works of Art Project, one of FDR's projects to alleviate the unemployment of the Great Depression. His commission was to paint two lunette murals of Bay Area Hills in the foyer of Coit Tower. A number of Cuneo's paintings were featured in the 1935 inaugural exhibition of the San Francisco Museum of Art. He had the most number of paintings displayed by any early California artist. One of them, "California Hills," was honored with the Museum's Purchase Prize award.



Cuneo's numerous solo exhibitions included ones in London, Paris, Rome, New York, and Los Angeles. His work was featured in exhibits at the Helgesen Gallery in San Francisco (1913), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1933), Museum of Modern Art (New York), San Francisco Art Association (1916-34), Golden Gate International Exposition (1939), California Palace of the Legion of Honor, and the de Young Museum.

Although he had been a popular artist with many well-received exhibits throughout his life, Cuneo had found that he was unable to successfully market his paintings due to the economic conditions created by the Great Depression. This led to feelings that he had failed. Herb Caen wrote that the artist's wife found "more than one hundred hitherto unseen Cuneo paintings, hidden in his two studios—in corners, in trunks, under books (some even hanging turned to the wall by the artist)." Many of these paintings were posthumously displayed in solo exhibitions: in 1940 at the San Francisco Museum of Art; in 1949 at the de Young Museum; and in 1961 at San Francisco's Gallery of Fine Arts.



A 2009 exhibit at San Francisco's Museo ItaloAmericano, "Cuneo: A Family of Early California Artists" presented a retrospective of the work of Rinaldo, Cyrus, and Egisto Cuneo. It was the first exhibit to display the work of the three brothers together, and it was very well-received.

His work is also in many museum collections, including Oakland Museum of California, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Sierra Nevada Museum (Reno), the de Young Museum, Laguna Art Museum (Laguna Beach), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Huntington (San Marino), and Museo ItaloAmericano (San Francisco).

After a brief illness, Cuneo died in San Francisco on December 27, 1939. A later critic in 1991 said that Rinaldo Cuneo "was a Cezannesque purist worth remembering." It was an impressive compliment paid to one of San Francisco's most famous Italian-American artists.



Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Ask Art website; Karges Fine Art website; Doris Maslach, A Life History with Doris Maslach, an oral history conducted in 2004 by Nadine Wilmot, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2007: http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/maslach_doris.pdf (Doris Cuneo Maslach was the niece of Rinaldo Cuneo and the sister of Gordon Cuneo); and Wikipedia.