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Tavernier's Doom

The small booklet by the Oakland Art Museum entitled "Early Paintings of California", and explaining and illustrating many of the paintings in the Robert B. Honeyman Jr. collection recently shown in the museum, contains a story of the life and work of Jules Tavernier, an artist who once lived in Monterey.

Jules Tavernier was one of the most Bohemian of San Francisco's and Monterey's early artists. A Frenchman, he was born in Paris in 1844. He was probably the best known of all French painters in the early days of the state. He had studied at the Beaux Arts before coming to the United States. It has been said that no other painter of his day in California commanded the prestige and the prices carried by his work. His studio in Monterey in the Stevenson House on Houston street, was the rendezvous of artists and writers. He counted among his friends and beneficiaries Jules Simoneau who helped Robert Louis Stevenson to life and fame.

In November of 1950, the French Centennial Committee held an exhibit of mementos of early days, manuscripts, books, paintings, lithographs, daguerreotypes, and photographs, as well as furniture, in the California Palace of the Legion of Honor to shed light upon the contribution of the French pioneers to the social, cultural and economic advancement of California. To this collection was added a number of valuable items from Monterey, including at least three Tavernier paintings.

Jules Tavernier had studied with Felix Barrias and had made something of a name for himself as an artist prior to the Franco-Prussian War. Paul Mills, who wrote the descriptive material for the Oakland exhibit catalogue, said that Tavernier may have been exiled after the war for his political activities; at any rate, he apparently went to England and from there to New York in 1871, where he was soon employed as an illustrator by Harper's Weekly and the New York Graphic, two great illustrated weeklies of that age.

"Interior of a Post Traders Store, Fort Laramie" is one of the few oil paintings Tavernier did during the trip to the West Coast. An oil sketch painted on a cigar box top; it appears to be one of two he did at the J. S. Collins trading post in 1874. As a painting, it is Tavernier at his best. It has the spontaneous brushwork characteristic of his finest things and a warmth of mellow color he never surpassed. As a scene, it depicts the interior of a crude store casually

and faithfully. The sun streams through the open door to light the plank counter and the high shelves piled with goods. A soldier leans easily against the counter behind the iron stove; a woman examines goods while two other figures converse over the counter in the background.

We have learned from the catalogue that Tavernier married in San Francisco, won many friends among the artists and others of the area, shared in the early days of the Bohemian Club and helped to found the Monterey art colony.

One of the most interesting watercolors from this period is "The Block's Farmyard, on Dry Creek near Healdsburg." According to an inscription on the back of the painting, which was exhibited in Oakland, the vineyard belonged to "Old Mr. Block . . . formerly chef of the old Poodle Dog. Jules Tavernier and his wife and Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Dakin had their Thanksgiving dinner there. Block was always delighted to entertain friends at the vineyard and the dinners at the long, uncovered table - guests at one end, ranch hands at the other - were something to dream about."

Tavernier must have left California for Hawaii the latter part of 1879 or early 1880, for we have a large pastel showing the volcano of Hilo and signed by the artist, with date 1880. A smaller oil painting, also hanging in Casa Soberanes, is dated 1879. His inability to keep out of debt had finally forced him to desperate measures. Financed by his friends, he and his wife moved to the islands. Here Tavernier became the leading artist of the day.

In Hawaii he rapidly accumulated new debts and the Hawaiian government sternly prohibited debtors to leave the Islands. His wife left him and returned to California. Tavernier began to drink heavily, and it was not long before his friends left him. His last paintings - black and red visions of fiery volcanic craters - seem to be predictions of doom. This is the type of picture which was returned to Monterey and is now in Casa Soberanes.

Tavernier died May 18, 1889. His Bohemian Club friends in San Francisco sent a "rough granite block to mark the grave of this talented and extravagant little Frenchman, who lived, painted and died by his own code of passionate intemperance."