The Sincerest Form of Flattery: Grace Hudson’s Little Mendocino and Its Many Copies

by Karen Holmes

A fall autumn turned to winter in 1895, something of a scandal brewed in San Francisco’s art world. The public became aware of it via an exposé in the December 8 issue of the San Francisco Chronicle. Entitled “An Imitation of ‘Little Mendocino,’ It Makes Trouble in Art Circles,” the article appeared in the window of “A Grand Avenue store” was an oil painting by a 30-year-old artist from California named Grace Carpenter Hudson, whose star was on the rise. Her 36” x 26” canvas was called Little Mendocino. It portrayed a snug Mendocino County Pomo Indian baby sobbing with palpable misery, laced in its traditional cradle basket and propped against a redwood tree. The painting bore a $1000 price tag and was owned by “Colonel” Marcus H. Hecht, a prominent San Francisco businessman and civic leader, who had presumably put it up for sale. 

The scandal arose from the fact that alongside Hudson’s original Little Mendocino, there had been a nearly identical copy created by an unidentified painter, priced at a mere $150.

As the newspaper article pointed out, the artistry of the city was angered “over what they regard as unjust treatment of one of their number by a local exhibitor and dealer.” It was explained that other “exhibitors, quite a number of them, seem to think the grievance a just one, and are rather curious in their criticisms.” The juxtaposition of the copy with the original at a fraction of the price was considered an insult to Hudson, who first portrayed the rather unusual subject matter and brought it to fruition in a masterly way. Those in San Francisco’s artistic community felt that to undermine the original with a copy at a lower price was “a gross breach of the proprieties.” After complaints were made, the original was removed from the store window. With a hint of intrigue the article continued, “The identity of the imitator and how he obtained the opportunity to make a copy of the picture is questions that naturally would like to have answered. The dealer knows, but does not care to tell.”

An Artistic Life Begins
Grace Hudson, née Carpenter, was born on February 21, 1865, in Potter Valley, California, some 130 miles north of San Francisco in rural Mendocino County. Grace entered the world with a twin brother, Louis Grant Carpenter (known as “Grant”), and together they joined an older sister named May. Grace’s parents, Helen McCowan Carpenter and Aurelius Ormando “A.O.” Carpenter, were enterprising and creative. Grace keenly observed these cultural artifacts and the people who made them, building visual memories and social connections that would serve her well in the years to come.

At age four, Grace moved with her family to the county seat in nearby Ukiah, where a final Carpenter child, Frank, was born. While Helen and A.O. ventured jointly into a new profession—studio photography—Grace finished grammar school and devoted a good portion of her spare time to drawing with noticeable skill. As no high school existed in Ukiah in the late 1870’s, the Carpenters sent their children elsewhere to the county seat in nearby Ukiah, where she lived throughout her student days. She continued this practice during school vacations and holidays back home in Ukiah, where she also picked up ideas about lighting and composition by observing the workings of the family photo studio.

Though Grace’s art school records did not survive the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco, it is likely that her attendance there ended with the final term of 1883. She returned to Ukiah in December of that year under somewhat strained circumstances. She had fallen in love with William T. Davis, a real estate and money broker, who was 15 years her senior and the father of a child. As her parents became aware of the seriousness of their daughter’s relationship, they increasingly showed their disapproval. They did not encourage her 18-year-old Grace to return to school.

Grace Hudson, Little Mendocino, (5), 1892, oil on canvas, 36” x 26”. California Historical Society, Gift of the San Francisco Art Institute, the Bridgeman Art Library.

The Carpenter family, circa 1873, Aurelius O. Carpenter. Standing at rear, May Carpenter, Seated, left to right: Helen, Grant, Frank, Grace, and Aurelius Ormando Carpenter. It was further explained that other “exhibitors, quite a number of them, seem to think the grievance a just one, and are rather curious in their criticisms.” The juxtaposition of the copy with the original at a fraction of the price was considered an insult to Hudson, who first portrayed the rather unusual subject matter and brought it to fruition in a masterly way. Those in San Francisco’s artistic community felt that to undermine the original with a copy at a lower price was “a gross breach of the proprieties.” After complaints were made, the original was removed from the store window. With a hint of intrigue the article continued, “The identity of the imitator and how he obtained the opportunity to make a copy of the picture is questions that naturally would like to have answered. The dealer knows, but does not care to tell.”

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Late on the morning of 9th August 1865, the staid and uneventful town of Ukiah, California, witnessed the nuptial ceremony of John Wilz Napier Hudson and Grace Carpenter. Little is known about the groom or the bride, save that Hudson was a physician from San Francisco and the daughter of a local Indian basketry artist. The couple’s brief wedding took place in a local Methodist church, attended by a select few, including the couple’s friends and business associates.

The Hudsons moved to Ukiah shortly after the ceremony, settling into a modest home on McGee Street. John Hudson soon found work as a physician, while Grace began to focus on her growing interest in the local Indian culture and basketry. Her artwork was collected by the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and she became renowned for her portraits of Indian life. Hudson Museum & Sun House, Ukiah, California. Karen Holmes photo.

Hudson Museum & Sun House, Ukiah, California. Karen Holmes photo.

Anonymous, Little Mendocino copy, circa 1896, oil on photographic reproduction adhered to panel, 6½” x 4½”. This particular copy has a heavy application of paint around the baby’s eyes. It is inscribed “Copyright 96” in the lower left corner. Photo courtesy of the Grace Hudson Museum & Sun House, Ukiah, California. Karen Holmes photo.

Anonymous, Little Mendocino copy, circa 1896, oil over photographic reproduction adhered to panel, 6½” x 4½”. This particular copy has a heavy application of paint around the baby’s eyes. It is inscribed “Copyright 96” in the lower left corner. Photo courtesy of the Grace Hudson Museum & Sun House, Ukiah, California. Karen Holmes photo.

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Above all, he repeatedly urged her to let him know as soon as possible if she was interested in the response to his work. The Mechanics’ Institute had teamed with the California World’s Fair Commission to sponsor and advertise the fair as a dress rehearsal for the state of California’s entry in the World’s Fair to be held in Chicago that coming May. The World’s Fair, also known as the Columbian Exposition, was planned as a commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in America. A good showing at the Mechanics’ Fair in San Francisco would smooth the way for exhibition in Chicago. The World’s Fair also dictated the timing of the 1893 Mechanics’ Institute Fair. In order for its exhibitors and producers to fully prepare for the Columbian Exposition, the Mechanics’ Institute moved its own event from its customary opening in the fall to an earlier date in January.1

As a young painter at the start of her career, faced with stiff competition and high expectations, Hudson was not confident that her work would be accepted at the Institute Fair. She arrived in San Francisco from Ukiah the beginning of January, leaving behind in her studio the recently completed canvas, Little Mendocino, with its paint still slightly wet. She knew she could not wait for the fine arts division to permit her to submit her new “perfectly dry” painting to the San Francisco art supply shop of Sanborn, Vail & Co., and send it to the fair. Her husband, John, took care of the paperwork. Grace’s photographer father took several photos of the painting, various dates. Grace Hudson Museum & Sun House, Ukiah, California. Karen Holmes photo.


John responded, “Your letter pily wrote that the latter was passed over, she halted. Mrs. Hudson’s already famous picture was moved from a neglected corner of the exhibition gallery to a prime location better able to accommodate the throngs always viewing it. The San Francisco Call termed it a “distinct success” and praised its uniqueness. It is a fine example of the basket-making materials at its feet, struck them as representative of the everyday life of many of the Pomo people they knew. John and Grace hoped that Grace would secure “the best genre painting” award—a silver medal and its accompanying prize of $25. Although the prizewinners in the fine arts division were not to be announced for several weeks, the Hudsons were increasingly optimistic about Grace’s chances as it became clear that Little Mendocino was proving very popular with critics and the crowds at the fair. Family friend Mary Curtis Richard, E.O. Smith, on the California Building. San Francisco socialites, collectors, and the managers preparing California’s entry for the World’s Fair, John, who was hoping to find buyers for their basket collection, now began to view his wife’s vocation and his own avocation of ethnography in a new light. How much I would like to be with you now sweetheart,” he wrote to Grace from Ukiah. “Go to your booth every night and watch the people and meet new faces, talk baskets and art.... From what I saw in the art gallery in front of your picture I feel you have made a reputation worth thousands to any artist even if you don’t get a prize and a crown.”...I agree of course with general opinion that you have made a reputation and you should profit by it in all these respects and propositions. Six months ago either of us would gladly accept any of them, but now both our exhibits are known, admired and sought after so that we can make the conditions not they.2

As the days of the fair passed, the Hudsons began discussing Grace’s next career move. Interest in displaying both Little Mendocino and The Interrupted Bath at the Chicago World’s Fair came from two women prominent in the organization and management of exhibits of women’s work there. Mrs. Frona Eunice Wait, on the National Board of Lady Managers for the World’s Fair, desired that the paintings be shown in the California Room of the Woman’s Building, while conversely, Mrs. E.O. Smith, on the California State Board of Lady Managers, envisioned them in a room of the Woman’s Department of the California Building.3 Grace put off deciding where she would place her paintings, but the competition over future exhibition of her art only increased the Hudsons’ expectation that Little Mendocino would bring home an award.

When the fine arts winners were announced, however, their hopes were dashed. Young Ernest C. Pexotio secured the prize for best genre painting in oil, the judges having deemed that Grace’s work was actually a genre painting but a figure painting. Mary Curtis Richard won in that category. John fumed, “Don’t feel hurt at losing a prize but for being misjudged through ignorance or design. Your picture cannot be a figure painting, only the face is seen.... Perhaps after all dear they may give you a special medal—don’t bother if they don’t.”

There was indeed a provision in fair’s rules, set before the fair began, which allowed for “any meritorious article on exhibition” to be considered for awards, even those not falling within the approved prize categories.4 With this in mind, and with the close of the fair only about eight days away, Grace swallowed her initial disappointment and concentrated on the future. She knew from the overwhelmingly positive response to Little Mendocino that the likelihood of her being able to sell that work was good. John suggested that she place both Little Mendocino and The Interrupted Bath at the Post Street galleries of art dealers Morris & Kennedy after the close of the fair while he decided where they were to go...
were a surprising number of other Mendocino copies in existence.

As referred to earlier, some details about the early reproduction of Little Mendocino are known. Grace Hudson's family has relayed the oral history that they or their associates made a few copies before it was lost. The copies of Little Mendocino are a surprising number in relation to the number of copies of Grace's works generally available. There are two similar works that are very interesting as to their exhibition and sale. One is a small postcard of a similar title, but with the word "Mendocino" painted out. The other is a small postcard of a similar title, but with the word "Mendocino" painted out.

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in Langley's San Francisco Directory for the Year 1895 as an importer of mirrors and frames, a purveyor of artists' materials and moldings, a manufacturer of picture frames and looking glass frames, and most importantly, a dealer in pictures and engravings. Its address was 19 Grant Ave, and it was a center for the furthering of art and the promotion of artists, particularly in the area of photo reproductions and prints.

The article also included a photograph of Little Mendocino, which could have aided and inspired copyists. Photo courtesy of the Grace Hudson Museum & San Jose, Ukiah, California.

Grace Hudson, circa 1897, Aurelius O. Carpenter, photographer. This photo illustrated the article “The California Indian on Canvas,” in Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, April 1897, pp. 280-283. It was described as one of the most important works of art by local historians and art enthusiasts.

The decisions in both cases hinged on the presence or absence of the copyright notice—the word copyright followed by the date of registration and the name of the copyright holder. In the first case, it was decided that this notice was not needed on an original painting (or its copies) for legal purposes, as long as it was registered before the original was sold. However, in the second case, an appeal by the defendant in the first case, overturned the first ruling with respect to originals. That is, from 1896 forward, statutory copyright was valid only for registered images bearing the notice. This decision was based on the 1896 amendment to the Copyright Act, which broadened the rights of the copyright holder.

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Though long described as one of the earliest American painters to file copyright applications for their paintings, Hudson had not been noted until recently for her work in this area. However, it is now known that Hudson was actively involved in the copyrighting of her work as early as 1897. The article indicated that Grace Hudson was the source of inspiration for the creation of Little Mendocino, and her career. The article also included a photograph of Little Mendocino, which could have aided and inspired copyists.

The “copyright ’96” designation, then, does not seem to reflect any legal registration of copyright for the original or the copies of Little Mendocino. Nonetheless, Grace Hudson would have been aware of the necessary steps to take in the copyright process, for the search through the archives of the Library of Congress indicates that one of her friends, photographer Florida Green, and her own father, A.O. Carpenter, copyrighted photographs in 1896.

The concept of a painter copying another’s work evolved slowly. The original U.S. Copyright Act, passed by Congress in May 1790, essentially defined copyright as the right of the author to make copies of his or her work and to assign these rights of publication and sale to another.

Though long described as one of the earliest American painters to file for copyright protection of their work, Grace Hudson may have had a more complicated relationship with copyright law. The article points to Hudson’s impact on the field of Native American art, and the significance of her work in documenting the complex relationship between Native Americans and Euro-American colonialism.

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appreciation for Grace Hudson’s skill in depicting a particular Pomo bobby. They also allowed her to develop a unique view of the indigenous peoples of the United States—from cytokinesis to a vanishing race—and the ability to capture them in a way that might be capable of being preserved and exploited. There is also a sense that Hudson’s combina-
nation of a maternal subject with a Native American theme struck members of the community as a necessary step in their desire to have prisons that they wanted access to themselves. Copies would have capitalized on this desire as a means to glorify the Hudson the sincerest form of flattery—imitation. Ultimately, though the defini-
tive origin and purpose of the copies may never be known, it is apparent from the presence of the title on her canvas and its copies today that after all these years Hudson’s unique California baby still captivates our imagination.

Endnotes

1. All quotations are from “An Imitation of ‘Little Mendocino Troubles in Art Circles.’ A Local Dealer’s Scheme,” San Francisco Chronicle, 8 December 1895.


3. Although the Pomo peoples were usually referred to as “Pomo” throughout this period, there were distinct linguistic and cultural groups. Historically they populated what are today northern California’s Lake, Mendocino, and Sonoma counties.

4. In May 1878, Grace graduated from Ukiah’s grammar school at age 13. By the fall of that year she was living in San Francisco, presumably attending a standard high school and receiving private art lessons. By February 1879 it seems she was enrolled in art school. Her mother wrote to her of a hoped-for introduction to painter William Keith through a family friend, adding, “People inquire a great deal more about you than as you were going to an ordinary school.” See Helen McCown Carpenter to Grace Carpenter, 9 February 1879, Oscar Kunath to Grace Carpenter Hudson, 6 January 1897, and GCH correspondence.


6. Oscar Kunath to Grace Carpenter Hudson, 6 January 1897, GCH correspondence.

7. Jeff Gunderson, San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) librarian, e-mail correspondence, November 2008 (SFAI Documents Center: the current incarnation of the San Francisco School of Design).

8. Various letters from Grace’s San Francisco friend, landlady, confidante, and go-between, Maggie Kirk Reilly, are particularly revealing regarding the Davis/Carpenter romance. See, for example, Maggie Kirk Reilly to Grace Carpenter Hudson, 15 December 1883; and Maggie Kirk Reilly to Grace Carpenter Hudson, 18 January 1884, GCH correspondence.

9. After the turn of the century, artists such as Elbridge Ayer Burbank and photographer Edward Curtis would become particularly revealing regarding the Davis/Carpenter romance. See Maggie Kirk Reilly to Grace Carpenter, 14 December 1883; and John Hudson to Grace Carpenter, 10 November 1883, p. 90-91. For fine arts prizewinners see Mechanics’ Institute, Report of the Twenty-Seventh Industrial Exposition, pp. 90-91. For Hudson’s reaction see John Hudson to Grace Carpenter Hudson, 10 February 1893, GCH correspondence.


11. “Local News,” Dispatch and Democrat, 6 July 1894, Little Mendocino Mirror. Grace did her lifetime’s work in her painting diary that it received a “1st prize ($40 – & certificate of superiority”) at the Mechanics’ Institute Fair in San Francisco in September of 1895. However, the final report of the cash awards for oil paintings that year lists her prize-winning work as “An Indian Basket,” which is expanded upon in her diary of the same year. See Mechanics’ Institute, Report of the Twenty-Seventh Industrial Exposition of the Mechanics’ Institute of the City of San Francisco Held at the Mechanics’ Pavilion from the 13th of August to the 14th of September 1895, Inclusive (San Francisco: [Hinton Printing?]; 1895), p. 121.


13. As Hudson listed only one oil and a few bitumen works in her painting diary, it is assumed that this miniature was done in oil. It is also assumed that this work was on canvas or board, as differing surfaces were otherwise specified. In addition to this miniature, in 1893 Grace completed 11 works, three of which she termed “miniature,” though it is unknown what dimensions that might entail.

14. Grace’s illustrations for Overland Monthly included those for articles by untenable Eames (aunt of Charmian Kittredge, the future wife of author Jack London); Grace’s mother, Helen Carpenter; Grace’s husband, John Hudson; and Overland editor Charles S. Greene. For digitized copies of all issues see: University of Michigan, “Making of America,” Overland Monthly, (www.lib.umich.edu/mssaj/browse.journals/over.html).


18. The Hudson’s interest in Indian basket collecting had dovetailed with the growing nationwide middle-class hobby of acquiring and decorating with Indian artifacts. John Hudson did his best to nurture this trend, in part by displaying his own collections in the fair, thereby establishing an “Art Basket Maker,” in the June 1893 edition of Overland Monthly. (Vol. XXI, no. 126: pp. 561-78.) The fair featured numerous illustrations by Grace Hudson.


21. For fine arts prizewinners see Mechanics’ Institute, Report of the Twenty-Seventh Industrial Exposition, pp. 90-91. For Hudson’s reaction see John Hudson to Grace Carpenter Hudson, 10 February 1893, GCH correspondence.


23. See note 19.

24. William Morris to Grace Hudson, 7 March 1893, GCH correspondence.


26. See note 19.


28. The Hudsons sold their highly regarded Pomo Indian basket collection in 1899 to the Smithsonian Institution, where a representative of the Department of the Interior supervised its shipment to Washington. See Painter & Co., Langley’s San Francisco Directory for the Year Commencing April, 1899, pp. 392, 1587, 1590, 1720-21, 1732, 1740-41. This print bears the words “Copyright 99, Herrman Cohen, SF Cal” in its lower right corner (the man or the firm) was producing and distributing related prints within a few years after showcasing Reichard’s Little Mendocino Mirror. The title is “Baby.”


30. Winnie Yeung and Janet Howard, California State Parks curatorial staff, phone conversations, November 2010.


33. Cheryl Maslin, California Historical Society Registrar, e-mail correspondence, June 2011.


38. Cheryl Maslin, California Historical Society registrar, and Amy Scott, Autry National Center curator of visual arts, e-mail correspondence, May 2011.

39. Because of discrepancies in her painting diary in its final year (1935) and the numbering on the backs of some of her canvases, it is unclear exactly how many numbered oils Hudson produced. It is safe to say that 683 to 685 numbered oils left her brush. John Hudson passed away on January 18, 1936, and it appears that Grace did not paint again after his death. She followed him 14 months later, on March 23, 1937.