

Mary Porter Sesnon

AND PINO ALTO

An exhibition celebrating the life of Mary Porter Sesnon (1868–1930) and her influences on the arts in Santa Cruz County, originating with her historic home, Pino Alto.

Born in Santa Cruz in 1868 to Benjamin F. Porter and Kate Hubbard, Mary Sophia Porter was the sole survivor of two children. She grew up in Santa Cruz and was tutored in the arts. In 1890, her father built her a studio on the property, a place of solace for her throughout her life. She witnessed a changing California landscape in the late 1800s and married William T. Sesnon in 1896. Together they built their summer home, Pino Alto, and hosted cultural salons from 1911 to 1927. Pino Alto, named after a tall pine tree near the driveway, is now called the Sesnon House and serves as headquarters for the culinary arts program and restaurant for Cabrillo College in Aptos.

The exhibition contains many sketches and watercolors from a scrapbook made during these salons, calligraphy by Ms. Sesnon, along with paintings by California artists Will Sparks, Ferdinand Burgdorff, Haig Patigian, Frank Unger, Charles Dickman, Margaret Rogers, Leonora Penniman, and Cor de Gavere. The work of Ms. Sesnon's great-granddaughter, Molly Porter Cliff Hiltz, and other Sesnon family members is included in the exhibition. Geoffrey Dunn, a prominent California historian, provides a catalog essay tracing the Porter family's history. The Porter-Sesnon family has always been a generous supporter of UC Santa Cruz and its mission. In 1968, a gift from Barbara Sesnon Cartan established the Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery, in memory of her mother. The Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery and Music Room opened its doors in 1971 with the first student curator, Philip Brookman. Other gifts have provided scholarships and grants for Porter undergraduates. Years later, a timely and exceptional gift of seventy acres of land from Porter Sesnon, Barbara Sesnon Cartan, and William T. Sesnon Jr., in honor of their grandfather Benjamin F. Porter, created the endowment for the fifth college at UC Santa Cruz. College Five was founded in 1969 and was renamed Benjamin F. Porter College in 1981.

Background: View from Pino Alto, Ferdinand Burgdorff, 1914. Insets: Signature page of first house salon at Pino Alto, 1911; Pino Alto with driveway, 1917 (Sesnon House on Soquel Drive).

