Immigrant’s Art Provides Texas Historical Record

By Andrew Gustafson

This feature, sponsored by the Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art (CASETA), explores the state’s art legacy and spotlights the works of Texas masters.

Julius Stockfleth (1857–1935) was born in Germany and came to the United States in 1883 at the age of 26. He moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, to join his brother, Peter, who had lived there for more than a decade. Two years later, the entire family relocated to Galveston Island, where Julius became a portrait artist.

Though few examples of Stockfleth’s portrait work survive today, four canvases, renderings of his mother, brother, local architect Alfred Muller, and his wife Emilia, serve as records of the immigrant’s artistic abilities. His body of work, however, was not limited to the human subject.

Often found sitting on the docks of Galveston’s harbor, Stockfleth captured the ships arriving at the busy port. Tugs, steamers, rowboats, and schooners—each a representation of an actual ship—were depicted with waves lapping against their hulls and wind in their sails and flags. In addition to marinescapes, the artist also produced watercolor landscapes and house portraits, including a depiction of one of the city’s extinct dairy farms, and another of the Virginia Point residence of Judge William Jefferson Jones. Stockfleth painted all these Galveston subjects—humans, ships, and houses—during a period that lasted 22 years and was impacted by a great natural disaster.

On September 8, 1900, a ferocious hurricane made landfall on Galveston Island, resulting in a 15-foot storm surge and the deaths of more than 8,000 residents. Stockfleth’s family was decimated: 12 relatives were lost, including his sister Debora, sister-in-law Johnie, and 10 nieces and nephews. His brother Peter survived only by clinging to a floating utility pole, which carried him across Galveston Bay and onto the mainland. The artist was devastated. His sunlit paintings with splashing waves were replaced with dark, somber canvases. For one of his best works, a scene of downtown Tremont Street (above), Stockfleth painted on a black canvas to represent both the night of the deluge and the confusion of those dismal hours.
Immediately after the hurricane, Stockfleth created some of his best-known works of art. At least four depicted Galveston during the great storm, and another (magazine cover image detail) shows a survivor camping amidst the wreckage (said to be a self-portrait of the artist). In the ensuing years, his canvases returned to their pre-storm subjects, although Stockfleth's landscapes often included the canals dug to raise the grade of the island or the newly constructed sea wall.

It is unclear how many paintings Stockfleth made in Texas. The total is estimated to be fewer than 100, although the hurricane likely destroyed many. The artist returned to Germany with his elder sister Leonora in 1907. He continued to paint and sketch, and the locals reported that as an elderly man, Stockfleth agitatedly wandered up and down the town's dike when storms approached, watching the waves.

Although the 1900 Storm took much from Stockfleth, the artist left an impressive local record, depicting Galveston's busy harbor, portraits of the island's houses and people, and haunting images of its devastation wrought by nature's fury.

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Editor's Note: The Bryan Museum, which has several works by Julius Stockfleth on display, occupies the 1895 Galveston Orphans Home. The original imposing Gothic-style structure, designed by architect Alfred Muller, was severely damaged during the 1900 Storm. Remarkably, though, approximately 60 children, matrons, and neighbors who sought refuge there survived.

Two years after the hurricane, the orphanage reopened with structural alterations that reflected a Renaissance Aesthetic style, designed by restoration architect George B. Stowe. The Galveston Orphans Home remained in operation until 1984. Twenty-nine years later, the abandoned building became the location for the privately funded museum.

All paintings by Julius Stockfleth. Opposite page: Tremont Street, Galveston, during hurricane of September 8, 1900, oil on canvas, 18 X 25 inches. Courtesy of Ray Simpson. This page, top left: The S.S. City of Berlin, undated, oil on canvas, 22 X 36 inches. Courtesy of The Bryan Museum. Top right: Portrait of artist Julius Stockfleth. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107. Bottom right: Portrait of Alfred Muller, undated, oil on canvas, 20 X 16 inches. Courtesy of the Rosenberg Library. This page, bottom left: The Bryan Museum showcases 70,000 items related to the history and art of Texas and the American West. Courtesy of The Bryan Museum.