



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

EVERETT GEE JACKSON (1900–1995)

To Pick the Top Crop

Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 32 in.

Signed and dated (at lower left): EVERETT GEE JACKSON

Painted about 1932

RECORDED: *32 Works* (Beverly Hills, California: Steve Turner Gallery, 2006)

EXHIBITED: [possibly] Galerie Beaux Arts, San Francisco, 1932, *Exhibition of Paintings by Everett Gee Jackson*, no. 12 as “Top Crop, E. Texas” // San Diego Museum of Art, California, 1984, *Everett Gee Jackson, Dean of San Diego Painters* // Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, October 13–November 19, 2016, *Everett Gee Jackson, 1900–1995: Modernism Without Apologies*, pp. 13 illus. in color, 23 no. 11

EX COLL.: The artist and by descent in his family until 2002; to private collection, until the present

To Pick the Top Crop is one of only a handful of major works by Everett Gee Jackson to have come on the art market. For more than half a century Jackson and his wife, Eileen Dwyer Jackson, occupied a place at the very center of cultural life in San Diego, California. From 1930 until he retired in 1966, Jackson served on the faculty of San Diego State College in California (now San Diego State University), chairing the art faculty and teaching painting and pre-Columbian art. A member of the Contemporary Artists of San Diego as well as a founder of the San Diego Museum, in 1937, he also began a career as an illustrator, adding a substantial income source to an already comfortable life. Eileen Jackson presided for many years over San Diego society in her role as society editor of the *San Diego Union*. Trained as a journalist, Eileen Jackson also wrote for the *San Diego Sun*, the *San Diego Tribune*, and the *San Diego Journal*.

As the present work bears witness, Jackson was more than a beloved teacher and pillar of his community. He was, in fact, a first-rate artist whose paintings served as a major conduit for the introduction of Mexican modernism into American art. It is a common irony that financial security often works to the detriment of artistic reputation. Such has been the case with Jackson, a regional celebrity who remains little known outside San Diego and perhaps his native Texas. Jackson's work rarely surfaces. The bulk of it is still held by patrons in the San Diego area and by the artist's Texas and California families. Over a long career, Jackson produced images in a modern idiom that was accessible, but never sentimental. (The literature on Jackson is sparse. He is mentioned in a number of texts, but apart from the catalogue cited above, there is no art-historical monographic discussion of his life and art. The artist himself wrote and published three autobiographical volumes: *Burros and Paintbrushes: A Mexican Adventure* [College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1985], *It's a Long Road to Comondú: Mexican Adventures Since 1928* [College Station, Texas:

Texas A & M University Press, 1987], and *Goat Tails and Doodlebugs: A Journey Toward Art* [San Diego, California: San Diego State University Press, 1993].) Scott Atkinson's *Everett Gee Jackson: San Diego Modern, 1920–1955* (exhib. cat. [San Diego, California: San Diego Museum of Art, 2008]) is the major source for the information in this essay and the reference for all page numbers. Additional biographical information is available in Jerry Williamson, *Eileen: The Story of Eileen Jackson As Told by Her Daughter* [San Diego, California: San Diego Historical Society in association with Kales Press, 2000].)

To Pick the Top Crop offers clear testimony to Jackson's impressive mastery of technical skill combined with a keen aesthetic sensibility. In October 1927, Eileen Jackson published an article on "The Mexican Movement" in the journal *Creative Art*. Writing (for obvious reasons) under her maiden name, Eileen Dwyer, she reviewed the work of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros, among others, and then described Everett Jackson as "the most interesting of the American group" resident in Mexico. She went on to say that "the mass, not the line plane, interests him. Before other elements his work has this 'weight dimension'" (as quoted and cited in Atkinson, pp. 30, 54 n. 42). In 1930, Jackson wrote his own manifesto, "Modernism Without Apologies":

The beauty of modern art has to do greatly with logical structure. . . . Form is the material of modernism, primarily and it is with that [the artist] builds. . . . Each object or shape in [the] picture must be related structurally to every other shape and there must be nothing superfluous (as excerpted, quoted, and cited in Atkinson, pp. 40, 55, n. 61).

To Pick the Top Crop illustrates both Dwyer's and Jackson's observations about his style and aesthetic agenda.

Everett Jackson's career began in his hometown of Mexia, in eastern Texas. The artist's great-grandfather, Frederick Stith Jackson (1809–1863) was a Virginia planter who moved south and west to Tennessee, south to Alabama, and then west again through Mississippi and Louisiana to the rich farmlands on the banks of the Trinity River in northeast Texas. In 1854, he bought a substantial tract in Anderson County, establishing a plantation where the slaves he had transported from Virginia grew cotton and corn. Jackson was a wealthy and prominent figure in the county. Numerous descendants remain in the area today and the family still owns 400 acres of the original property. One of Frederick Stith Jackson's grandsons, Walter Benjamin Jackson (1858–1932), farmed and ran a local cotton gin. He married Fanny Eubank and the couple had seven children, including Everett Gee Jackson. Jackson had a happy childhood, a country boy surrounded by a large and extended land-holding family. After high school, he enrolled at Texas A & M, planning to study architecture. A drawing instructor, however, struck by Jackson's natural artistic ability, urged him to develop that talent. In 1921, Jackson went to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he learned to paint in the academically ascendant style there, American Impressionism.

Jackson returned to Texas and painted, but, in 1923, decided to go to San Diego, California, to study at the San Diego Academy of Art. In San Diego, on a blind date, he met a local girl, Eileen Dwyer. Still footloose, Jackson returned to Texas, where he had arranged to meet a fellow art student from Chicago, Lowell D. Houser (1902–1971) to travel to the Sabinas Mountains in Mexico, just across the Texas-Mexico border. Jackson's first trip to Mexico was brief, but decisive. He returned to Texas and planned a return to Mexico, again with Houser, this time going deeper into the country to Guadalajara, with no fixed date of return. Fanny Eubank Jackson was supportive of her son's ambition and funded this trip with proceeds from oil that had been recently discovered on a piece of

her family land. In summer of 1923, Jackson and Houser went first to Coahuila State and then to Guadalajara. Returning to the United States periodically, Jackson remained in Mexico until early 1927. All the while, Jackson had maintained a correspondence, punctuated by occasional visits, with Eileen Dwyer, who was studying journalism in Tucson at the University of Arizona. The two married in July 1926 and returned to Mexico.

While Jackson was at home, courting Eileen, his friend Houser had been “discovered” by Anita Brenner (1905–1974). Brenner was the daughter of Latvian Jews, who had immigrated to Mexico. She was born in Mexico, and educated in San Antonio, Texas, and New York City. She became a journalist, anthropologist, and writer of children’s books, with connections in Mexico, Texas and New York. In 1929, Brenner went back to New York to earn a doctorate in anthropology at Columbia University, where she and Margaret Mead were both mentored by famed anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas had studied Eskimos, the indigenous people of arctic North America, while Brenner took as her topic the indigenous people of Mexico. When Brenner accidentally met Houser in 1926, she promptly recruited him to join an archeological expedition being organized to excavate Mayan ruins in the Yucatan Peninsula. Brenner was a pivotal figure in Mexico, linking literary and artistic figures of the Mexican cultural renaissance with sympathetic and similarly involved Americans.

Through Houser, Brenner extended her acquaintance to Everett and Eileen Jackson. In 1926, shortly after the Jacksons had married and settled in Mexico, Brenner became a long-term houseguest, recuperating from an appendectomy at the Jackson’s home. A steady stream of visitors came to see Brenner, plunging Everett and Eileen Jackson into the center of Brenner’s not-yet-famous circle of

friends, including the journalist (and future governor and Senator from Alaska) Ernest Gruening, and artists Jean Charlot (1898–1979) and José Clemente Orozco. Charlot, in particular, exerted an enormous influence. The son of a French father and a Mexican mother, Charlot had trained as a painter in France. After the death of his father, he returned with his mother to Mexico, where he worked with Diego Rivera, applying the knowledge of fresco technique that he had learned in Europe to the projects of the Mexican muralist. Charlot critiqued the work of Jackson and Houser. Both American artists revisited the murals of Rivera and Orozco in Mexico City and found them transforming. Jackson wrote of his visits to the murals: “Seeing them again, I was surprised to find the people represented in the paintings seemed to me to be quite true to the people I was seeing in the streets of Mexico City” (as quoted in Atkinson, pp. 28, 54, n. 38 from Jackson, *Burros and Paintbrushes*, p. 117).

The influence on Jackson’s art was profound. He turned his back on the impressionist style that had shaped his early work and proceeded to develop a style of his own heavily indebted to the Mexican muralist movement. Jackson found a natural affinity for painting Mexico’s indigenous peoples, building on his early interest in the Negroes who farmed the lands his extended family owned in Texas. A bout of malaria at the end of 1926 drove the Jacksons back to Texas. Everett soon recovered sufficiently to begin a period of energetic painting, concentrating on Texas and Mexican subjects. His style, by this time, was described as “ultra modern” (Atkinson, p. 32).

When he returned to Texas, Jackson embarked in earnest on a program of sending works to high-profile exhibition venues, a first step toward establishing a national reputation. In 1927, Jackson sent *The Charcoal Burners: Ajijk, Mexico* to the annual exhibition of the Art Institute of Chicago. In

1928, he exhibited a Mexican street scene at the Biennial Exhibition of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. In 1929, '30, and '31, he was represented by works he exhibited works at the Carnegie Institute's International Exhibition, Pittsburgh. These Carnegie pictures mirror the progress of his life. In 1929 he showed *August, East Texas* (Atkinson, illus. in color, p. 72, pl. 15). The following year he showed *Eileen and Jerry*, his wife and daughter who was born in 1928. In 1930, he sent two pictures, *California Girl* and *Spring, San Diego*, reflecting his move to California. At the same time, Jackson was active closer to home. His first monographic exhibition took place in 1926, while he was still living in Mexico, a show at a San Diego gallery likely arranged through the intermediary of Eileen's mother. That show traveled to Dallas. In 1927, Jackson managed a series of shows at the High Museum, Atlanta, Georgia. At the beginning of 1928, there was yet a second show in Dallas. For this show, Jackson commented that Mexico was "the center for the Americans in the matter of Modernism," while the art critic for the *Dallas Morning News* boasted "Dallas is fortunate in having this exhibition of ultra-modernism, one of the first in the state" (as quoted in Atkinson, pp. 37, 55 n. 53). A traveling show, with pictures changing as they were sold and replaced by new works, went to the Newhouse Galleries in St. Louis, and then the Houston (Texas) Museum of Fine Arts. Along the way Jackson garnered a number of awards. In 1927, *The Charcoal Burners* was recognized at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1929, *Zapotecas* (Atkinson, p. 74, pl. 17) won the Anne Bremer Award at the Fifty-first Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association at the California School of Fine Arts. In 1928, Jackson won a prize for a Texas subject, cotton pickers, at the Bohemian Club (San Francisco) Figure-Composition Exhibition.

The Jacksons moved to San Diego in 1927 so that Eileen could have the support of her mother in anticipation of the birth of their child. Jerry Gee Jackson was born in 1928. Though Jackson was

offered a faculty position at a school in Texas, the couple chose to remain in San Diego, a decision that was soon rewarded when Jackson assumed a faculty position at San Diego in 1930. After he took up his teaching position in San Diego, Jackson appears to have stopped the pursuit of a national reputation. He seems never, for example, to have attempted to exhibit in New York, although through his connection with Anita Brenner, he might well have gained entrée into New York circles.

In 1931, Jackson was featured in a three-person show of local artists at the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery (later the San Diego Museum of Art). Katharine Morrison Kahle, writing in the *San Diego Evening Tribune*, praised one of Jackson's paintings, *August in East Texas* (Jackson family collection, pl. 15, p.72):

a painting with a simplicity that has no thought of technique and an emphasis upon certain elements that produce a super-realismIt is by means of abstract line, form, and color that the artist sought to express his reaction to nature,. And because his interest is in composition rather than subject matter, his paintings become patterns in which each part is carefully studied in relation to the picture as a whole. Cylindrical forms are the structure of the arms and necks of the figures (as quoted in Atkinson, pp. 39, 55 n. 60).

Scott Atkinson echoes this assessment, looking both at *August in Texas* and *Zapotecas* (p. 74, pl. 17):

These two paintings summarize succinctly his stylistic development and preferred subject matter to date: due to their geometric design and the high contrast of light and dark, the figures in both works are particularly solid, with torsos, limbs and features broadly conceived and as rigidly chiseled as an ancient sculpture. In the subsequent decade, the simplicity and solidity of his forms would become the observable hallmark of Jackson's style as he assumed the identity of San Diego's first modern painter.

Jackson's work eludes easy labels. Certainly at the time he forsook impressionism (no longer an *avant-garde* style by the time it was adapted by Americans) for Mexican modernism, there is no

doubt of the direct influence of the Mexican modernists and of Diego Rivera in particular. The Mexican influence, however mediated with time, and as befits a cosmopolitan artist, a variety of other label and tendencies can be seen reflected in Jackson's art. The San Diego critic uses the phrase "super-realism." He has been mentioned in the context of realism, and as the leader of a school of San Diego regionalism. In his devotion to blocks of color, one can go back to the American neo-classicism of John Stuart Copley. Indeed, in the stiffness and geometric quality of his figures, one can find echoes of Pablo Picasso's neo-classical figures of the early 1920's. All of this is a reminder that as non-objective art increasingly gained ascendancy as the defining modern style, there remained a group of artists who were equally modern and equally concerned with formal qualities in their art without ever giving up understandable subject matter.

While there is no doubt that the underlying rhythm and structure of Jackson's paintings makes them visually compelling, it is also the case that his works of the 1930s was as much about San Diego as his paintings of the 1920s were about Texas and Mexico. The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., owns Jackson's *Serra Museum Tower, San Diego* (1929, p. 75 pl. 18). In the 1930s decade Jackson also returned repeatedly to the subject of sailors whose presence in San Diego served as a constant reminder of the importance of the United States Navy base in the port town.

The subject of *To Pick the Top Crop*, which was probably painted in San Diego about 1932, relates to the group of works Jackson painted during the time he was back in Texas recuperating from malaria in 1927–28. This crucial transitional period of a little over one year, when Jackson adopted wholly the lessons from the Mexican muralists, was also a highly productive one, with Jackson producing a number of major oils of East Texas subjects. Writing about one of the most important

canvases of this period, *Cotton Pickers of East Texas* (1927, private collection; see Atkinson p. 69 pl. 12), Atkinson observes several aspects of Jackson's Texas subjects that are equally true for the present picture:

A closer scrutiny of *Cotton Pickers of East Texas* reveals another characteristic Jackson borrowed from the Mexican modernists: the absence of any apparent compositional integration between landscape and figures. . . . Jackson had encountered this "disconnect" between figure and setting in the murals of Guadalajara, and again in Mexico City. This artistic device places more emphasis upon the collective experience of the figures—for example, misery, rebellion, celebration—than on the setting in which they are placed. Jackson adapted the method to convey his own interest in a general yet sympathetic treatment of the working people he saw in Mexico and Texas. Like those in the Vasconcelos-sponsored murals, Jackson's figures are portrayed heroically, appearing as monuments frozen in time (pp. 32–33).

To Pick the Top Crop likewise echoes Eileen Jackson's 1927 description of her husband's work. "The mass, not the line plane, interests him. Before other elements his work has this 'weight dimension.'" Jackson's palette here is limited and muted, the paint applied thickly and roughly on the canvas, giving it a dry affect similar to a fresco mural.

To Pick the Top Crop is related to a group of several works by Jackson depicting East Texas subjects painted in 1927–29, including *Dinner Time* (1927–28, Bill and Mary Cheek Family Collection; see Atkinson, p. 70 pl. 13), *August in East Texas* (1929, Jackson Family Collection; see Atkinson, p. 72 pl. 15), and *Fall, East Texas* (1928, Hirschl & Adler Galleries), as well as the aforementioned *Cotton Pickers of East Texas*.