

A FANCIFUL WORLD
Jessie Arms Botke

LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

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CONTENTS

- 3 **Forword**
- 4 **Jessie Arms Botke**
- 6 **Jessie Arms Botke and Albert Herter: An Unsung Collaboration**
- 7 **Painting Techniques**
- 8 **Critical Reception**
- 9 **Plates**
- 36 **Staff list**
- 37 **Acknowledgments**

Forword

Laguna Art Museum is pleased to offer this digital catalog created on the occasion of the exhibition *A Fanciful World: Jessie Arms Botke*. We recognize that this approach to documenting a museum exhibition is unconventional. Then again, so was the approach to developing this exhibition, which came together in only a few short months.

The museum's annual Art & Nature program traditionally has focused on a performance or public artwork created by a living artist. But 2021 was a year to re-think this major event, and thus came the idea to present a secondary exhibition reinforcing that art, nature and environment have always played a strong role in the work of California artists.

Jessie Arms Botke was a prolific artist who found her niche in the artworld by painting birds and flowers. Her devotion to a life in the arts began at a young age and her drive to be an artist never ceased. She took risks by moving to New York for work, taking on grueling large-scale mural commissions across the country, trading artwork for train passage to California and buying in to the development of the arts colony at Carmel-by-the-Sea. By the time she moved to Southern California in 1929, her painting had developed stylistically so that there was no mistake you were looking at a Botke. She had made invaluable connections across the country that would lead to a life of steady commercial success, even when trends in art changed.

This exhibition only scratches the surface of Botke's accomplishments. It does not include her early impressionistic work, etchings or watercolors nor does it include her paintings of sea life or studies of American landscapes. A closer examination of Botke's oeuvre is needed.

Our sincerest gratitude goes to the lenders of this exhibition who were trusting enough to help bring this exhibition together. Members of the Historic Collectors Council, an important support group for the arts, galvanized in many ways to assist in this endeavor. The project provided the opportunity to continue the much appreciated relationship with Janet Blake, Laguna Art Museum Emeritus Curator of Historical Art who provided the texts. Art Historian Jean Stern brought the exhibition to life through his thoughtful lecture for an eager public here at the museum. And finally, we are thankful to our exhibition sponsors John Moran Auctioneers, Kevin and Renee Vlitos Rowe, the Hilbert Collection, Simon K. Chiu, and OC Fine Art Storage / Display.

Julie Perlin Lee, Executive Director

Jessie Arms Botke

In 1948, Jessie Arms Botke mounted an exhibition at the Chicago Galleries, her first in that city in many years. Critic Eleanor Jewett remarked: “. . . the mere mention of her name brings to life magnificent pictures of peacocks, ducks, and geese . . . beautifully painted . . . against a background of superb flowers.”

Born in 1883, Jessie Arms expressed an interest in drawing and painting at a young age. She began taking classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago when only fourteen, enrolling as a full-time student in 1902. She studied there for nearly eight years, while working various jobs as a decorative artist. In 1906, like many other artists at that time, she bartered several paintings for a trip to the West on the Santa Fe Railroad. The train terminated in Los Angeles, and after her return to Chicago, she exhibited seven paintings at the AIC. Of those, two were watercolor paintings of the San Gabriel Mission and two were simply identified as “*Note for decoration*” and “*Decorative frieze*,” titles which attest to her interest in the decorative qualities in her work.

After a months-long trip to Europe in 1909, Arms returned to Chicago enlightened and stimulated by what she saw in the great museums of Europe. In the winter of 1910, she likely visited the crafts exhibition at the AIC, which featured work by noted New York portraitist and muralist Albert Herter. The following year, she moved to New York and began working as an intern for Herter, one of many in his atelier—Herter Looms. She was soon recognized for her ability to paint detailed renderings of birds, both domestic and exotic. Her work with Herter continued through 1914, which included assisting with important projects in San Francisco.

In 1915, Arms married Dutch-born artist Cornelis Botke, a fortuitous match that lasted until his death in 1954. A truly modern and enlightened couple, they agreed that it would be her burgeoning career as a decorative artist to provide income, while he would concentrate on developing his own work and reputation. Shortly after their marriage, Jessie received a commission to do a large mural for the Kellogg’s Company in Battle Creek, Michigan. Cornelis assisted her with the execution of the mural, which was designed by her. It would be the first of their many collaborations. Another important mural was created for Noyes Hall at the University of Chicago. The Botkes decided to move to California in 1919, first settling in Carmel. However, like other artists who relocated to California from Chicago, they continued to be active in exhibitions there and elsewhere in the Midwest and in New York City. Over a ten-year period—from 1917 to 1927 Botke participated in many exhibitions at the AIC, serving on the jury of selection and securing numerous prizes. In November 1918, she was awarded the Martin B. Cahn purchase prize for her painting *Geese*, which is still held in the AIC Collection (*Geese and Hollyhocks*, 1917).

The Botkes decided to move to California in 1919 and lived in Carmel for several years. In June of 1923, the family—including their son William, who was born in April 1916—traveled to Europe, a sojourn that lasted two years. They returned home to Carmel, but in 1927 relocated to Los Angeles. A photo of the couple was featured in the *Los Angeles Times* in May 1927, which announced their joint exhibition at Stendahl Galleries, one of several to be held there. Soon, however, they discovered an idyllic rural area near Santa Paula, called Wheeler Canyon. It was there that they built their ranch and studio; it became their lifetime home. In 1941 they added an aviary to house the many birds that she studied. She had blue peacocks, silver pheasants, golden pheasants, pigeons, and ducks. However, no cockatoos; they required steel wire to contain them.



The Botke aviary



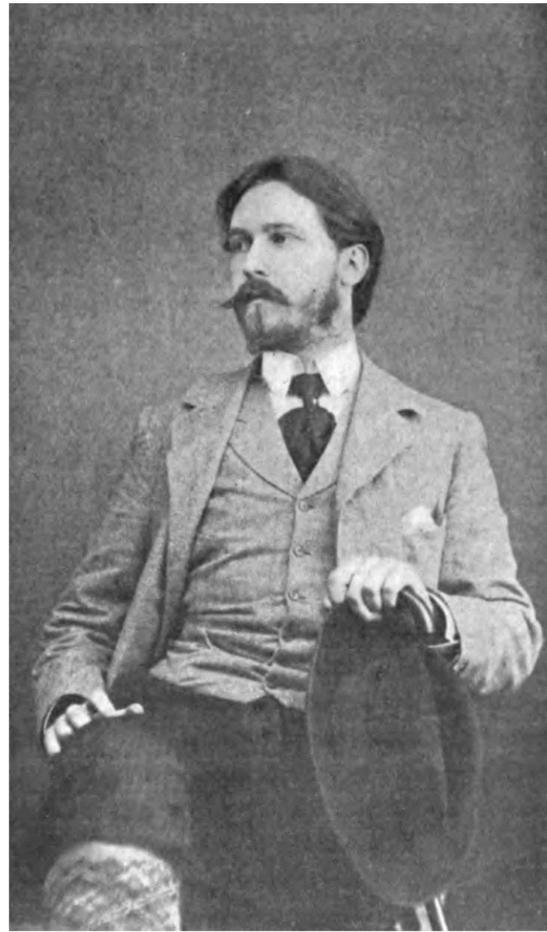
Botke’s studio and barn

The Botkes contributed much to the arts community of Santa Paula, where they were held in high regard. They were founding members of the Santa Paula Chamber of Commerce Art Exhibitions and of the Artists’ Barn in Filmore (closed in 1962). A show in her artist’s studio—located in a converted barn—was attended by over 800 people. They continued to work on joint projects, the most important of which was a commission for a large mural at the cocktail lounge of The Oaks Hotel in Ojai. It

would be the last joint project for the couple; Cornelis died shortly after its completion. Botke continued her busy life of painting and travel until 1967, when a stroke left her unable to paint. She died on October 2, 1971.

Jessie Arms Botke and Albert Herter: An Unsung Collaboration

In 1911, Jessie Arms moved to New York where she began working as an intern for famed portrait and mural artist, Albert Herter. She was one of many interns and assistants in his busy atelier—Herter Looms—where she prepared cartoons or detailed drawings for weavers. She was soon recognized for her outstanding talent in rendering birds—both domestic and exotic—and Herter exploited those abilities with multiple assignments. Herter planned for white peacocks to be incorporated into the mural they were painting for actress Billie Burke's home, so he sent Arms to see one at the Bronx Zoo. Peacocks became one of her favorite subjects. In 1913 she went to San Francisco with Herter, where she assisted him with murals for the café at the St. Francis Hotel, painting floral decorative borders that also featured peacocks. The murals were introduced to the public in January of 1914; however, there was no mention of her contributions in the press. Around the same time, Herter received a commission to paint murals in the home of prominent San Francisco attorney Sidney Ehrman. In July of 1916, Anna Cora Winchell, writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, described what she called the "most important work. . . . A vast hall or gallery has on either side four great panels, whose general scheme is that of white peacocks. Their background of silver sends forth a reflection of brilliance, which acts to some degree as a lighting effect, the ensemble being remarkably beautiful." The following year, images of the murals were published in the journal *Art World: A Monthly for the Public Devoted to the Higher Ideals*. Virginia Robie wrote: "There is a good deal of Persian feeling in the 'white peacock' decorations recently placed in a California house, yet the rendering is entirely Herter." Herter however, had no hand in the rendering of the peacocks. They were, in truth, entirely executed by Jessie Arms Botke. Unfortunately, it was not unusual for Herter to fail to acknowledge the work of his interns and assistants. Botke exhibited a painting of white peacocks at the Art Institute of Chicago's *Twentieth Annual, Artists of Chicago and Vicinity*, in the winter of 1916, which was illustrated in the catalogue. Its strong similarity to the Ehrman murals further confirms that the Ehrman murals, indeed, were also by her hand.



Wikimedia Commons: File: Portrait of Albert Herter.jpg

Painting Techniques



White and Blue Peacocks, Oil with gold leaf on board, c.1935
Courtesy of Mike Kilroy

The June 1949 issue of *American Artist* magazine featured an article on Botke, which provided insight into her painting preparation and methods. She admitted that before her work for Albert Herter, she had been a "slapdash kind of painter." Soon, however, she discovered what she called "her decorative bent." Fine detail in the depiction of birds was needed for Herter's weavers, and it was while working for him that she developed a love for white peacocks. "The texture and pattern of the lacy tail . . . breaks the harshness of the white mass without losing the simplicity of form." Botke studied other birds, "acquiring an amateur knowledge of ornithology." She executed studies in watercolor of both birds and flowers, and was always "thrilled" to find new ones. These studies became her "notes." She would not use her notes until they had cooled off, the images becoming more abstract in her mind so she could use them more creatively. Her studio was located in a barn on her property in Wheeler Canyon, the large barn doors converted into windows, providing excellent light. At the time of the article, Botke was working on a large peacock painting with a background of real gold leaf. She began incorporating gold leaf into her paintings in the 1930s, obtaining it from a gold beater in Orange. During the war, it became difficult to obtain, but she managed. Her process involved drawing an initial design with charcoal or pencil, which she lightly fixed. She worked on a hard surface. Initially this was canvas stretched over board. She began using Masonite in the late 1930s. She then painted with tempera—her own formula—and applied gesso for the application of gold leaf (and sometimes silver leaf). Finally, she painted with oils.

Critical Reception

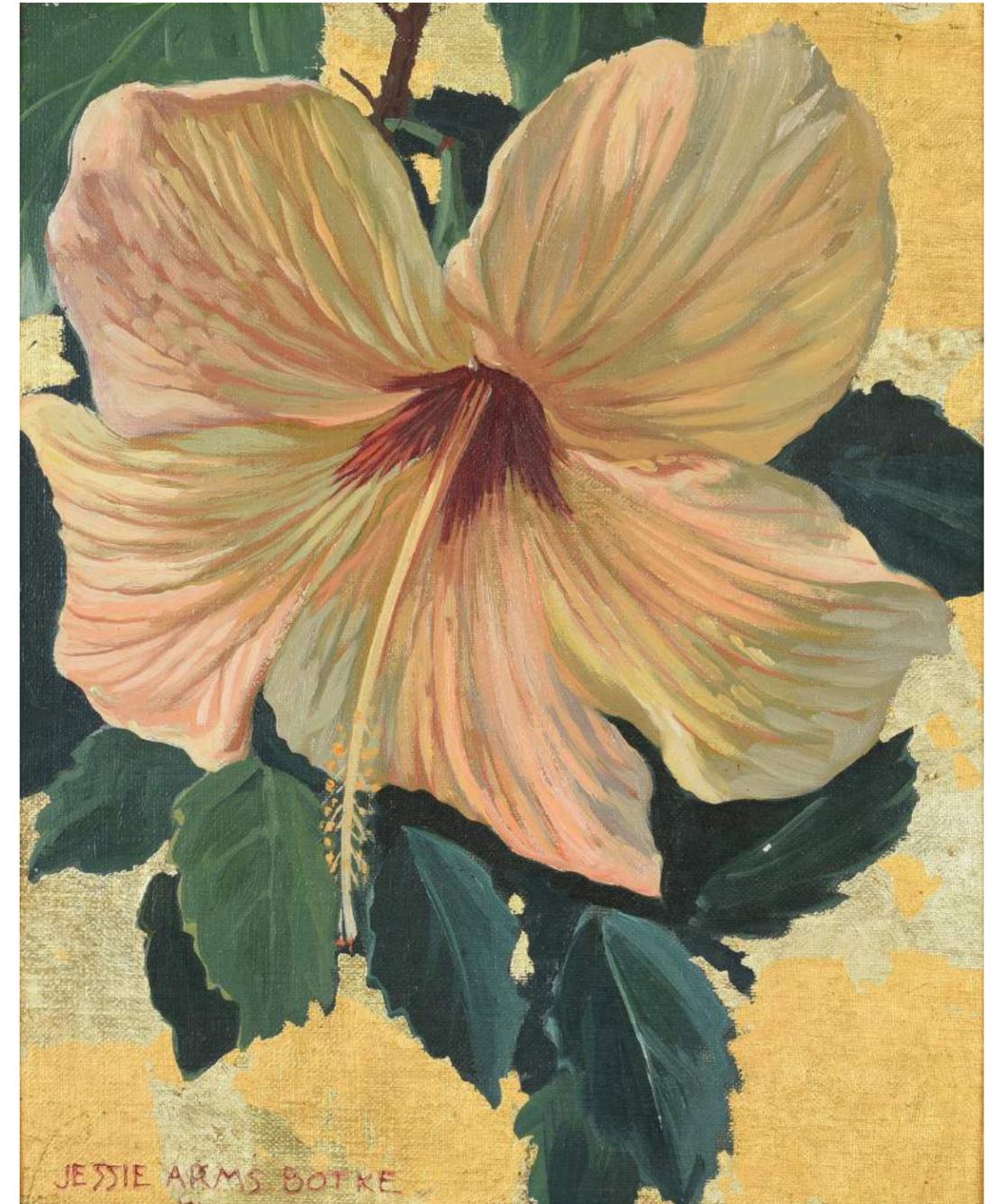
Botke's reputation was solidified as early as 1920, and laudatory comments would be written throughout her career. Of her four works at a 1920 exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, Eleanor Jewett wrote that "lovers of her work have come to instantly recognize as hers. They deal with birds, mostly, and flowers as accessories after the fact." Reproduced with the article was the artist's subtly humorous painting *The Break in the Fence*, depicting a rather haughty goose who has escaped from the garden. In 1927, Emily Grant Hutching in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* said that Botke "translated nature forms into fairy-tale decoration."



Crowned Pigeons, Oil on board, c.1925
UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

In 1921, shortly after their move to California, a joint exhibition was held for them at the Friday Morning Club. Antony Anderson wrote: "Her sense for decoration is a very delightful one . . . the birds are painted with punctilious exactitude. . . . Her flowers, too, have often the same approach to realism, and they are always exquisite in color, contrasting or harmonizing perfectly with the birds of her pictures, whether these be geese, pheasants or white peacocks." She remained true to her calling despite the rapid changes taking place in the art world with a move away from realism. Eleanor Jewett reviewed a 1940 exhibition at the Chicago Galleries. Botke "gives us another gleaming, brilliant page of contemporary painting."

Her decorative pictures of flowers and birds are magnificent; she is another of the too small group of contemporary painters who still find beauty a necessity. Nor does beauty detract from the strength and power of her painting. It has depth, virility, distinction. . . . another must see exhibit." Many years later—in 1954—artist Claude Buck referred to Botke as "the greatest living master of decorative mural and easel pictures, where exotic birds are exquisitely painted."



Hibiscus

Oil with gold leaf on board, c.1930
The Hilbert Collection



Black Swans

Oil with gold leaf on board, n.d.
Courtesy of Mike Kilroy

White Necked Cranes

Oil with gold leaf on Masonite, n.d.
Rowe Collection





Demoiselle Cranes

Oil with gold leaf on
fabric-lined board, n.d.
Barbara & Tom Stiles Collection



Ducks

Oil on board, n.d.
Joanne and Donald Heath Collection



Crowned Pigeons

Oil on board, c.1925

UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art,
Gift of The Irvine Museum



Crowned Pigeons

Oil on Masonite, c.1930

Laguna Art Museum
Promised gift of Nancy Dustin Wall Moure



Cockatoos and Easter Lily Vine (Beaumontia)

Oil on panel, 1961

Rowe Collection



Hidden Kingdom

Oil with gold leaf on panel, c.1939

The Hilbert Collection



Untitled mural from the Oaks Hotel in Ojai, California

Oil on stretched canvas, two panels, 1955–56

UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

In October of 1955, Frank Keenan, owner of the Oaks Hotel in Ojai, commissioned Jessie Arms Botke to create a large mural for the dining area. Her elaborate design of exotic birds in a lush tropical setting was painted with the assistance of her son, Bill, and grandson Johnnie. The completed mural—installed in February of 1956—measured six-and-a-half by thirty feet and featured cranes, flying ibis, toucan, and flamingoes. This was Botke's second mural for Keenan, who was in the process of remodeling his hotel. The first mural, completed in 1954, was made for the hotel's barroom. It featured cockatoos, macaws, parrots, and parakeets with a background of tropical leaves. The 1954 mural was the last mural that Botke worked on with her husband Cornelis who died on September 16 of that year. The 1954 mural was removed in the 1970s and purchased by Sara Bayless who later gave it to the Ojai Museum. The 1956 mural was removed in 1992 and gifted to The Irvine Museum.



Leadbetter Cockatoos

Oil with gold leaf, c.1930s

The Hilbert Collection



Love in Paradise

Oil with gold leaf on Masonite panel, n.d.

Atighi Family Collection



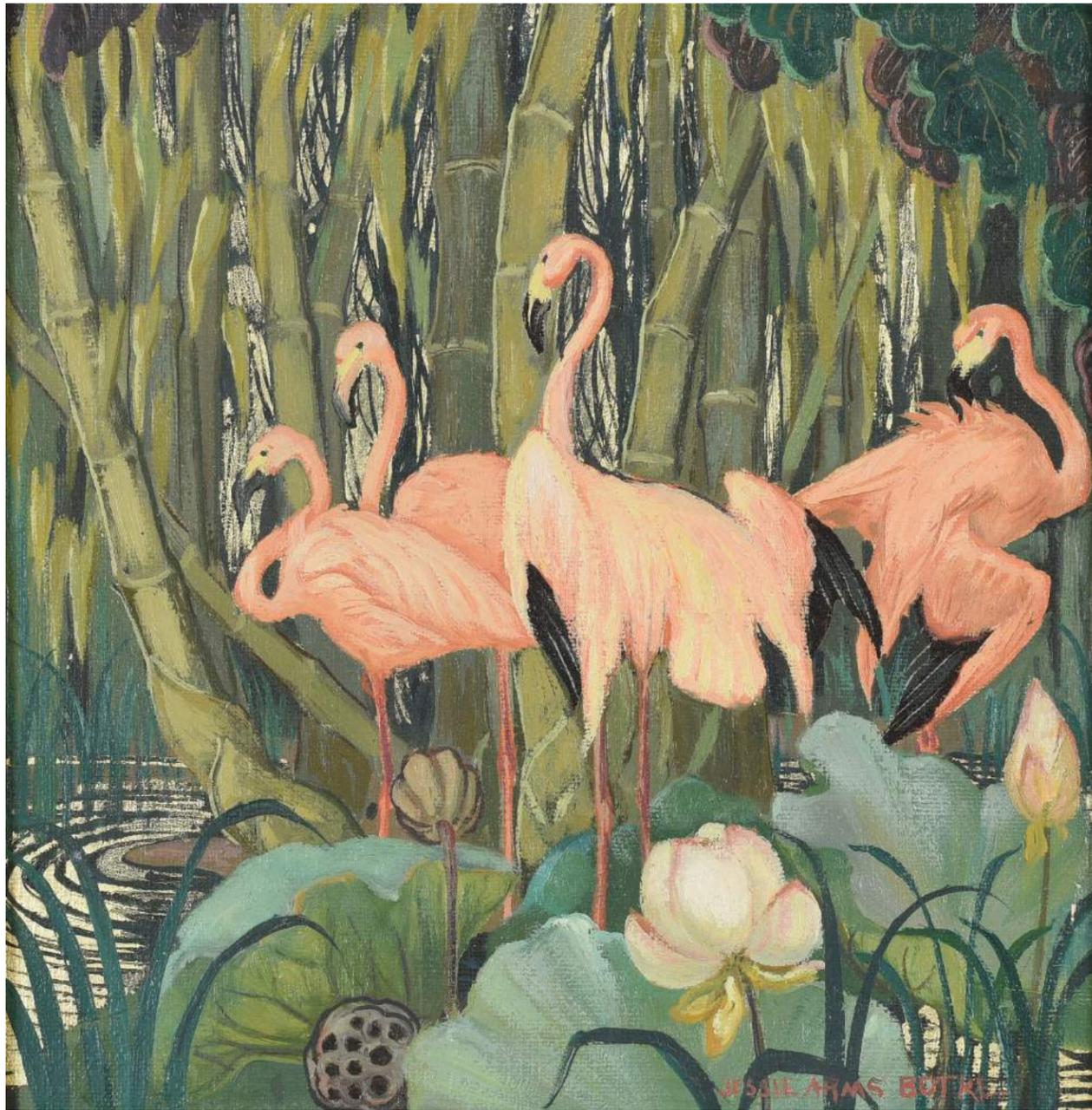
Macaw and Cockatoos

Oil with gold leaf on canvas, mounted on panel, 1926
UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art,
Gift of The Irvine Museum



Moluccan Cockatoos

Oil with gold leaf on board, n.d.
Courtesy of Mike Kilroy



Pink Flamingos

Oil with gold leaf on fabric-lined board, n.d.
Barbara & Tom Stiles Collection

Untitled (Flamingos)

Oil on canvas mounted on board, 1926
UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art,
Gift of The Irvine Museum





White Peacock - Spring

Oil on canvas on Masonite panel, c.1930

Rowe Collection

Japanese Peacock and Magnolia

Oil with gold and silver leaf on canvas board, n.d.

Private Collection



Peacock and Hollyhocks

Oil on linen mounted on board, 1926

UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art,
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Peacocks and Hibiscus

Oil with gold leaf on board, n.d.

Anonymous





White and Blue Peacocks

Oil with gold leaf on board, c.1935

Courtesy of Mike Kilroy

A FANCIFUL WORLD Jessie Arms Botke

Jessie Arms Botke (1882-1968) was a prominent American painter and naturalist. Her work is characterized by its detailed and vibrant depictions of tropical birds and landscapes. Botke's art is a testament to her deep knowledge of the natural world and her exceptional skill as a painter. Her works are highly sought after and are considered some of the finest examples of American naturalist art.

Botke's most famous work is "The Great Egrets," a large-scale painting that depicts a lush tropical landscape filled with various bird species. This work, along with her other paintings, has earned her a reputation as one of the leading artists of her time. Her art is not only a visual feast but also a celebration of the natural world's beauty and diversity.

Botke's work is a testament to her deep knowledge of the natural world and her exceptional skill as a painter. Her works are highly sought after and are considered some of the finest examples of American naturalist art.





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Barbara & Tom Stiles Collection

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Laguna Art Museum Collection, Promised gift of Nancy Dustin Wall Moure

Private Collection

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The Hilbert Collection

UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

CURATORIAL CONSULTANT

Janet Blake

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All photographs courtesy of Christopher Bliss Photography.

