The Wondrous World of Anna Knapp Fitz

Let’s Explore the Art & Life of California Painter Anna Knapp Fitz!

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Who is Anna Knapp Fitz?

Annie Knapp was eight years old when she moved with her family to an eight-acre farm in Los Altos in 1921. She attended Los Altos Grammar School on San Antonio Road, and then graduated from the old Mountain View High School in downtown Mountain View.

She worked in local canneries and later became a telephone operator for the phone company. In 1938, she married Joseph Fitz, who worked for her father on the farm.

Annie began sketching and drawing as a child, but it wasn’t until 1971 that she began painting. Later in life, Annie donated 212 paintings of life in early Los Altos, Palo Alto, and Mountain View to the Los Altos History Museum.

She gave us the gift of history!
What is Annie doing?
What is a self-portrait? What would you be doing in your self-portrait? Show us!
What are some interesting things you see in this painting?
What is Annie thinking about?
Do you think this is night or day? Why?
Can you guess who is in the picture frames? How many people are there? Why did Annie put them there?
What colors do you see?
What is Annie doing?
How do you feel about this painting? What are some emotions you feel?
The Knapp family lived in a two-story tank house. Downstairs there was a living room and kitchen and upstairs there were two bedrooms. A water tank was on top of the roof. The house did not have electricity or running water. Soon after the Knapps moved to Los Altos, a severe storm struck. There was a lot of wind and heavy rainfall during the night. The whole house shook! The next morning, Mr. Knapp said that he was afraid that the 60,000-gallon tank would collapse because of lightning and wind, so he moved the tank to the far end of the property and dug a new well, then put the tank up on a platform.
This painting shows Annie and her mother in their 1920s tank house kitchen. When Annie washed the dishes, she would look out the window and into the farm that she loved so much.

Since they had no electricity, they would burn wood in the cast iron compartment next to the oven door. Notice the bucket of firewood next to the stove. Can you find the kerosene lantern on the table? Without electricity for lights, they would light the room with a kerosene lantern. This is where the girls did their homework and where the family ate their meals.

Notice there is no faucet on the sink! They had no plumbing at this time, so the water had to be pumped from the well and carried in buckets to use inside. Water would then be heated on the wood burning stove to get hot water for washing dishes.
Hmmm....
Let’s Think About it!

How would your life be different today if you didn’t have electricity?
J. Gilbert Smith House
By Anna Knapp Fitz

J. Gilbert Smith came to the area from Oregon to attend Stanford University. He planted the orchard on this property after he left school in 1899. He began building his Craftsman style home in 1901 and finished in 1905. He used wood from redwood trees in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The wood is from trees that were over 1,000 years old! Redwood was a good choice because termites don’t eat redwood.

The shingled home now sits behind the Los Altos Library on San Antonio Road. Gilbert and his wife Margaret sold their home and surrounding 10-acre apricot orchard to the city in 1954. The J. Gilbert Smith History House has been a museum since 1977 and is furnished as a typical 1930s farmhouse.
Let’s Take a Deeper Look Together!

Think about it: It took Mr. Smith five years to build this house. Why would it take so long?

Think about it: The house is a Craftsman style house. Most houses in that time were Victorian style like the older homes in San Francisco. Why do you think he chose a Craftsman style?
Boxcar Depot
By Anna Knapp Fitz

A double boxcar served as a temporary ticket and freight depot at First and Main Streets from 1908-1913. Boxcars were often the first depot at any train station until a permanent one was built. Train tracks were built in 1907. The roadbed for the tracks was partly built with some of the rubble from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco.

Not only did people need the train to get around, it was also used to ship the fruit to the canneries in Sunnyvale. The farmer and his wagon pictured here may be bringing his crop to ship on the train. The building in the background is a livery stable. It was where you could “park” your horse and buggy while you were in town. You could also “rent” a horse, just like we rent a car today.
Let’s Take a Deeper Look Together!

Think about it:

Can you imagine driving a horse and buggy around Los Altos today? How would that make daily life better? How would it make daily life more difficult?
Los Altos founder Paul Shoup wanted the city to have the finest railroad station on the Peninsula, and as vice president of Southern Pacific, he was able to deliver. This Craftsman style passenger depot was built in 1913, replacing the double boxcar depot. Two parallel train lines, one steam, and the other electric (for a trolley), ran along the west side of the building on land that is now Foothill Expressway.
Leo Reddington was the trainmaster in charge of the depot during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. At the peak of rail service, 12 steam trains came through Los Altos daily.

The train tracks were taken out in 1962, and the expressway was built in 1964.

The train depot is still in Los Altos today. It has served as home to many businesses such as a bank, an antique shop, and restaurants. You can see it on First Street next to the Chevron gas station.
Think about it:

How would life be different today if we still had the train instead of Foothill Expressway?
First Fire Equipment in Los Altos
By Anna Knapp Fitz

Thomas Woodworth was an important businessman in early Los Altos. He was born in Kansas in 1874 and by 1920 had settled in Los Altos. Woodworth ran a fuel and feed business on First Street, and he and his wife Edna lived next door. His store was where early Los Altans went to buy wood, coal, hay, grain, roofing cement, lime, and other necessary materials.

Woodworth expanded across the street, opening a warehouse conveniently located next to the train depot. This warehouse also served as the first location of the Los Altos volunteer fire department from 1922-1931. The first fire-fighting machine in Los Altos consisted of a tank that held acid and ash, which smothered flames.

Today, you might see helicopters dropping clouds of similar acid and ash to smother ground fires. When a fire alarm sounded, Mr. Woodworth’s Model T Ford pulled the rig to the fire scene. He is pictured here behind his store. The Telephone Company building and the Los Altos Grammar School are in the distance.
Think about it:

What businesses do you like to go to in downtown Los Altos?

How do you think Downtown Los Altos is different than it was in the 1920s?
Now, it’s Your Turn!

Here are some fun activities inspired by Annie!

- Get inspired by Annie’s paintings! Draw a picture of your house or backyard. Try to include as much detail as possible, so that future generations can imagine what life was like in Los Altos in the early 21st century.

- Make a list of your favorite places in town. What are your favorite memories of these places? Why are these places special to you?
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