

## BAY AREA PRE-RAPHAELITISM

What, if anything, is definably "American" about our cultural traditions? The definition of national identity is always problematic; but for a nation which is still relatively young, diverse in geography and cultural origins, and often regional in its attentions, the problem is greater still. Certainly the problem is not new. In fact, artists themselves from colonial times forward have frequently sensed a discomfort bred of their provincial distance from Europe and its cultural vitality. As a result, it is difficult (if not foolish) to attempt an assessment of our national past without recognizing the many points of contact with European tradition. Sometimes these links were literal, in that our artists studied in Europe in order to acquire the fruits of European learning. On other occasions, this trans-Atlantic concern was one of attitude, and maintained at a distance. Sometimes, an artist might work from a deliberately anti-European stance.

Located on the farthest Western edge of the continent, California artists have been peculiarly aware of their distance from the major centers of culture in the East, as well as from Europe proper. But the more independent-minded of them felt this to be a strength of their situation, rather than a deficiency, believing that they might draw freely upon the values of older traditions, yet re-invigorate them with a vitality bred of pioneering energies. At the turn of the century, a number of artists working in the San Francisco Bay Area consciously adopted this view. The writers Jack London and Joaquin Miller, and Xavier Martinez, a painter, sought to unite the old and the new, American and European, East and West. The story of their efforts might well begin with the opening of Jack London's Martin Eden.

Martin Eden has just entered the home of a new-found friend, Arthur Morse, and finds himself in an alien world. Eden's chaotic and coarse life as a merchant seaman has left him unprepared for the comfortable elegance of the Morse living room. In this unfamiliar room, Eden fears that he cannot avoid the destructive lurch into either a table stacked with books or a piano -- though the two are separated by an ample space. He begins to get his bearings only when his eye catches a painting, a seascape:

An oil painting caught and held him. A heavy surf thundered and burst over an outjutting rock; lowering storm-clouds covered the sky; and, outside the line of surf, a pilot-schooner, close-hauled, heeled over till every de-