



Today's Masterpiece: Jules Tavernier, [*Kilauea Caldera, Sandwich Islands \(Hawaii\)*](#), 1886. Oil on canvas. Museum purchase with funds provided by Kevin and Tamara Kinsella, 2002.35.



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Dr. Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is Jules Tavernier's captivating and dramatic landscape featuring the active Kilauea volcano on the island of Hawaii, known colloquially as the Big Island.

Tavernier was born in Paris to parents of English descent and spent much of his youth in London before enrolling at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts, later honing his plein-air painting practice in the Forest of Fontainebleau with the Realist artists of the Barbizon School. He was only twenty when he was first accepted to exhibit at the official Salon de Paris. This early success in the Paris art world was interrupted briefly by the Franco-Prussian War, in which he served as a soldier and correspondent. In the ensuing chaos and violence in Paris, he fled to safety in London, following the example of several fellow Barbizon painters and Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro.

Tavernier then set off for New York to seek a career as an illustrator for Harper's Weekly, the popular magazine that had published Winslow Homer's keen journalistic illustrations in the early 1870s. Tavernier accepted Harper's commission to sketch the cultures and landscape of the American West. Intended as a "pictorial record," his sketches documented westward expansion, the impact of the Transcontinental Railroad, and the forced relocation of Indigenous communities to government-instituted reservations. In 1874, he recorded in drawings and paintings his stay with the Oglala Lakota Nation, including his meetings with Chief Red Cloud and Sitting Bull in Nebraska.

After settling in San Francisco, where his artistic celebrity attracted followers and even a studio visit by Oscar Wilde, he founded the Monterey Peninsula Art Colony and continued to paint the natural wonders of the California mountain and coastal landscape.

In 1884, he embarked on a sketching tour of the Hawaiian islands, then in the waning years of self-rule before American annexation, writing later that he had found there "material here for a lifetime in the way of figures, landscapes, mountains, volcanos, etc..." He stayed in the Kingdom of Hawaii until his death in 1889.

Staying true to his Realist roots in Barbizon practice, Tavernier sought not to Romanticize the awe-inspiring volcanic activity but to document it as faithfully as

possible. His style, however, is unencumbered, attentive to detail and atmospheric but free and exuberant. At times, he even used his thumbs to manipulate the paint surface.

Whether riding in a hot air balloon, as he had done in California in 1875, or risking the heat and fumes on the summit of Kīlauea, Tavernier was resolutely immersive in his approach. He was also aware of the spiritual importance of the caldera to Indigenous Hawaiians, as the Halema'uma'u vent seen here is the mythological home to Pele, Hawaiian goddess of fire.

Compositions such as this one attracted the patronage of King Kalākaua of Hawaii and the Japanese imperial family, who had a diplomatic presence in Honolulu. Tavernier's paintings attracted not only tourists to the area, but also other artists from the mainland US, Australia, and Japan who became known as the Volcano School.

This has been Michael Brown – thank you for listening here at Virtual SDMA.



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