

Paper Mache for October 10, 2025 by David Read

I always enjoy being pleasantly surprised by unexpected art experiences. This past week, we visited Sonoma and Napa with a few plans in place, but a generally open schedule. On a whim, we stopped in at the Napa Valley Museum on the grounds of the Yountville Veterans Home. If you haven't seen the Veterans Home, do yourself a favor and check out the gorgeous complex next time you're in the area. Built in 1884, it's a 600-acre gem and the Spanish Colonial architecture is breathtaking. And there, near the entrance is the wonderful museum which is showcasing an exhibition by an artist you've never heard of titled "Sophie Alstrom Mitchell: Wildflowers of the Napa Valley," featuring 64 delicate botanical watercolors created between 1882 and 1888. Many of these works are on public display together for the first time, offering a window into the region's floral heritage as seen through the eyes of a 19th-century artist. Born in 1858, Mitchell relocated to California in her youth and eventually settled in Napa Valley. She developed a passionate interest in the native wildflowers of the region, many of which she meticulously captured in watercolor, documenting over 150 species in her lifetime. Her husband, the Rev. James Mitchell, collected blooms from various parts of the valley and brought them home for her to render.

What was striking about Mitchell's work is her fusion of artistic sensitivity with scientific observation. Her paintings show fine botanical detail—veins in petals, subtle color gradations, and accurate leaf structures—yet they also carry a poetic quality that elevates them beyond mere cataloging. I wondered about the tiny, single hair paint brush it must take to paint a line that thin yet so clearly visible. Her technique gives her blooms an ethereal luminosity. My favorites were the flowers painted against slightly darker backgrounds. Mitchell's work serves as both art and botanical record, reminding us of Napa's past natural richness, how much the landscape has changed, and how art can help preserve memory.

In planning for the trip, I chanced upon a concert by a group called Los Cenzontles. I guess it caught my attention because of the name which means "the Mockingbirds," and is also the name of a book of poetry by the Yuba-Sutter Poet Laureate, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo. We attended the concert at the sparkling new Brannan Center in Calistoga which was part of the Center's grand opening weekend. Los Cenzontles is based in San Pablo and operates not only as a performance group, but also as a nonprofit cultural arts academy. Their mission is to amplify Mexican and Mexican American traditions through performance, education, and media, "grounding the past while fostering creative evolution." During the concert, the group wove together classic folk standards, regional son styles, boleros, and original compositions — all infused with depth, clarity, and a sense of living heritage. The ensemble also shared stories about the traditions behind the music, helping the audience appreciate not just the sound but the cultural roots. What sets Los Cenzontles apart is their commitment to intergenerational learning. Many of the musicians in the touring ensemble are in their teens and others are alumni of the academy. Sunday's performance at Brannan Center was more than a concert: it was a cultural bridge. In blending mastery, storytelling, and community roots, Los Cenzontles offered a musical journey that celebrated tradition while inviting new ears into the world of Mexican American folk expression. We are in talks with the parent organization to bring them to the Yuba-Sutter area in 2026. Sometimes the unplanned art encounters and experiences are the best and can yield unexpected joy.