



Art on the Beach

Provincetown People and Places

April Kingsley

Whether in summer or winter, there is a place where the Upper Cape turns and narrows magically into the Lower Cape with its special trio of towns — Wellfleet, Truro and Provincetown. As the mid-cape highway speeds from the mainland to Race Point, the buildings on either side of the roadway start to thin out, and the small wooden motels, signboards, and fragile sand dunes are like old familiar welcomes after the drive of several hours from the population centers of New York and Boston.

Opposite: Edward Hopper, House on Pamet River, 1934, watercolor, 19 3/4 by 24 7/8 inches. Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Right: Harry Callahan: Cape Cod, 1973. Courtesy the artist.



began, also saw the beginning of the nude beach in Truro. Before it was to close under a barrage of local pressure, Long Nook, and then Ballston's nude beaches saw museum curator and minister, artist and photographer, shrink and sinologist, dentist and hippie soaking up the sun in resplendent unity with the elements and each other. The art world was one with the literary scene — Justin Kaplan, Stanley Kunitz, Larry Shainberg, Marge Piercy, and Rochelle Owens, being only a few of the many writers one normally saw — and the parties at B.H. and Abby Friedman's modest mansion were one of the most elegant ways the two mingled.

Dorothy Seckler has concisely described the P-town "artlife" of the 60's in her most-thorough book, *Provincetown Painters*:

Beginning around 1957 and continuing for about a decade it was often possible to see as much distinguished art in eight or ten galleries on Commercial Street as one could making the rounds of 57th Street and Madison in New York on a typical Saturday afternoon.

On Friday evenings when most galleries opened a new show in the 1960's, groups of the local intelligentsia — dressed as colorfully as possible and wearing their most dramatic jewelry — usually began the gala tour around nine o'clock at the picturesque East End Gallery. Then, on foot of course, down to the posh HCE and on to a half a dozen more stops — sampling the wine and greeting friends all along the way. Until 1959 a stop at the Sun Gallery could

involve a poetry reading, with seating on the floor, in any case always a surprising change from the elegance of the HCE. Approaching Midtown it was time to join an animated throng down the Mews to the Group Gallery (after 1965), then time for a rest on the yellow bench outside the door of Tirca-Karlis before a tour of her upstairs and downstairs offerings. If the Chrysler Museum had an opening, one dashed across the street to join an even larger crowd before pressing on to the Cafe Poy-ant for refreshment and a look-in at the gallery under the Art Cinema (256, The New Gallery, then East Coast Gallery).

Hardy souls expected to make it before eleven to the Kessler Gallery at the extreme West End and, for a season, to Zabriskie. Some wound up at Reggie Cabral's "A" House (Atlantic House) for drinks, a good jazz band and free-style dancing. Collectors sometimes joined the Friday night trek but they then retired to the gracious comfort of the Seascope Hotel or the Colonial Inn (now both gone) and returned the following day for hard bargaining.³

Some of that hard bargaining might be by Joseph Hirshhorn, who bought out Budd Hopkins' 1961 show at Tirca-Karlis that way, or by J.P. Lannan, or Walter Chrysler for his museum on Center Street, now the Provincetown Heritage Museum. Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, Jack Tworok, and Mark Rothko bought houses in P-town during these years, making the Cape a summertime continuation of the active New

Artists, like lemmings, are habitually drawn to the sea. Monet to le Havre, Matisse to Nice, or Motherwell to Provincetown — they go for the light, the cleansing sea air, and the unpressured atmosphere. Artists feel, as George McNeil did each year when he came to Cape Cod, "rejuvenated by the first experience of the clean brilliance of the sand against sea and sky — as if that pure sensation had swept away the debris of city living."¹ The Cape's light is its strongest attraction for painters, and their response to that extraordinary light is the one thing that can be seen as a common thread running through their very disparate styles. Robert Motherwell describes it as Mediterranean, others link it more specifically to the Greek islands, but whatever it's comparable to, the light on the Cape, from the bend of its elbow at Orleans to the crook of its pinkie at Land's End, is the gods' special gift to American Art.

The eighty-plus year history of the Lower Cape as America's foremost art colony can be hardly split in half between the domination of Hawthorne and Hofmann, both of whom utilized its crystalline light as an essential part of their teaching and their art. Charles Hawthorne, who established a summer art school in 1899 identifying Provincetown as a teaching center, posed his models against dazzling sunlight so his students would be forced to paint broad masses of dark and light instead of details. John Frazier, when he set himself up as Hawthorne's successor during the 30's, carried on the idea that a painting is "marks, lines, spots, and smudges of tone and

color juxtaposed on the picture plane."² And although Henry Hensche established a rival school on the same pedagogical principles which is still going, Hawthorne's physical plant, and his position as the leading educational force in the community were actually taken over by Hans Hofmann when he arrived there in the mid-30's. Most of the area's artists who are not linked in the Hawthorne chain (like Edwin Dickinson, Philip Malicoate, Arthur Cohen) trace their lineage to, or align their loyalties with, Hans Hofmann.

There were, and still are, many other Cape art schools. The school on Howland Street that Leo Manso and Victor Candell ran until the latter's death (now the Longpoint Artists Space, the world's most prestigious co-op gallery) was one of the most popular private summer art schools in the country. Now, the Castle Hill Center for the Arts in Truro, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown have the strongest programs, but earlier in the 70's, New York's Pratt University, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the Massachusetts College of Art had fulltime summer extension schools in P-town. All three utilized the ramshackle converted studios of Days Lumberyard, where Charles Demuth painted his famous *Stairs, Provincetown* in 1920 (now in the MOMA collection) and where Helen Frankenthaler had her first P-town studio in 1961.

Any summer art school on the Cape has a vast natural resource in its artist population. An enterprising student can learn anything from the old-fashioned "how-to" of

Hawthorne at Hensche's school to Conceptual Art, the resident master of which — Douglas Huebler — travels from his chairmanship at Cal Arts to summer in Truro. Sidney Simon set up a bronze casting foundry at Castle Hill, and next summer, Fritz Bultman, Budd Hopkins, and Varujan Boghosian will be giving regular painting criticisms there — just the tip of the iceberg of opportunities.

The art colony of the Lower Cape is a microcosm of the art world at large in all its complexity, with all of its many levels and intertwined loyalties, condensed into the short space of three towns — Provincetown, Truro, and Wellfleet — along a 20 mile stretch of road. I came to it fresh from six years on the New York art scene, working in galleries and at the Museum of Modern Art, and it blew my mind. What I had been led to believe was a one track rail-line leading from the past by neat avant-garde stages into the future, with only a handful of noteworthy passengers, transformed itself over the course of one summer (1971) into a linear maze as intricate as the New York subway system, and nearly as crowded. The Pluralism I promulgated (along with a few other critics) during the rest of the decade began in the revelations of that summer. To just list "big name" artists who have been influenced by the Cape experience, or who have changed it, would take this whole page. However, I hope to convey some faint idea of what Bultman calls its embarrassing of riches by sampling the "artlife" of the Cape at 10-year intervals.

The summer of '71, when my Cape life

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Top: Hans Hofmann painting on the Cape.
Photo Herbert Matter.

Bottom: Fritz Bultman. Photo DENA.

York scene socially as well as financially. The Sun Gallery wasn't part of the marketplace phenomenon.⁴ Run by Dominic Falcone, who washed dishes to pay the rent, and Yvonne Anderson, who practically invented "happenings," it was a radical mix of expressionist figure painting, poetry, and performance, where Alex Katz, Red Grooms, and Claes Oldenburg first began to epater *les bourgeois*, and sales were as rare as hard edges.

A slightly more sober tone had prevailed at the start of the 50's thanks to the Forum '49 series of heavyweight weekly lectures, panels, and exhibitions organized in that year by Welden Kees.⁵ Old-guard Modernists like Karl Knaths and Blanche Lazzell engaged in political and esthetic discussions with the new — among them pioneer Abstract Expressionists Fritz Bultman, Adolph Gottlieb, and Elaine de Kooning. This milestone series marked the end of quiet personal isolation for artists on the Cape. Earlier in the decade, Fritz Bultman had helped architect-not-yet-turned-sculptor Tony Smith build an eccentric, polyhedral studio for him. Hofmann used it during construction to hold "crits" because he had lost the old Hawthorne place to Morris Davidson. Tennessee Williams came up to visit Bultman, and Lee Krasner brought Jackson Pollock up to meet her former teacher Hofmann at the same time. Such unlikely conjunctions are typical of the Cape.

A short while later, Hofmann lucked into the marvelous Frederick Vaughn house and barn on Commercial Street which was to become the vital center for so many young painters in the next 2 decades. Hofmann never learned to speak English well due to bad hearing, and he always sounded slightly oriental with his, "Ah! So, Ach! Ya." Few understood his words, but he got his message across anyway, usually through direct alterations of the students' drawings, much to their dismay. The weekly "crits" in the big barn drew large crowds of practicing artists as well as students. Each evening Hofmann would go out for a short hike on the dunes with a friend or some students to draw and to see the sunsets; he felt he had to be in daily touch with nature, working from it, even though he was highly reluctant to consider himself an artist (he was a teacher, he would insist) during those years.

During the 30's, isolationism was the dominant attitude in the world and its Lower Cape microcosm. Loren MacIver in her lonely North Truro dune shack; Ben Shahn, Henry Varnum Poor, and Edward Hopper forming a long-armed triangle in Truro; and Edwin Dickinson

on an empty salt-marsh in Wellfleet, not far from his friend Edmund Wilson. Later, after their separation, Wilson's former wife, Mary McCarthy, was to describe the complexity of intellectual Wellfleet woods existence in *A Charmed Life*. Once a year, Hopper would invite the Beachcombers, traditionally a rather bumptious artists' club since its formation in 1916, to tea. The profound and lasting silences for which Hopper was notorious were not broken on these occasions, nor was his wife Jo Hopper's rule of abstinence. The hello, tea, and the farewell handshake were about all the guests got for their long climb up the hill to his dune-top oversized saltbox. The house, designed by Hopper with the sparse clarity of one of his paintings, still stands, and the Beachcombers still meet with at least one original member, Reeves Euler, holding forth. For Hopper, whose expressed goal in life was "to paint sunlight on the side of a barn," the Cape offered a maximum number of subjects. He would use features from various buildings from Orleans to P-town, assembling them on the canvas, along with ancillary material such as animals or boats which he researched in the Truro library. Dinner, because his strong-willed wife often refused to cook for him, was frequently chicken-à-la-king at a family restaurant in Wellfleet at the end of a long work day. But no one except Robert Motherwell in his blue "Opens" and his *Beside the Sea* series, had ever been quite as responsive to the light of the Cape.

The art colony had been dramatically split during the 20's between the "moderns" — Ross Moffett, Karl Knaths, and Dickinson — and the Hawthorne-traditionalists — Max Bohm, John Noble (Art Association President) and George Elmer Browne. Founded in 1914, with a constitution and by-laws drawn up by the traditionalists, the Art Association broke into two warring factions shortly after the 1921 move into permanent headquarters on Commercial Street, where it is still located. The "moderns," or "young lions" as they were sometimes called, favored a structured quasi-Cubist approach to composition over the essentially academic, "dark Impressionism" of the traditionalists. It wasn't until 1927 that they won the right to hold separate "Modernist" exhibitions at the Art Association to make up for their lack of representation on the juries and the board. Later, when distinctions seemed to fade, the groups re-combined, but some of the old animosity to the new continues in the reluctance to admit mixed media, conceptually oriented work in recent years. Conceptualists Mary Shaffer,



Parade group, 1919. Photo A. Garland Hall.
Courtesy Provincetown Art Association.



Forum 49. Left to right: bench 1: B. Lazzell; bench 2: M. Davidson, F. Pfeiffer, P. Fine; bench 3: G. MacNeil, A. Gottlieb, W. Kees, D. Guilio; bench 4: L. Kupferman, R. Cobb Kupferman, L. Drake, unidentified, K. Campbell, J.

Rothschild. Along rear wall: B. Margo, unidentified, L. Manso, P. Busa, F. Bultman, J. Grillo, W. Freed. Photo Bill Witt. Courtesy Fritz Bultman.

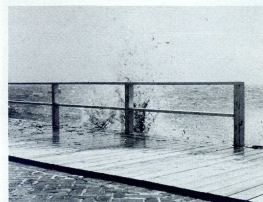


Longpoint Gallery members. Left to right: R. Klauber, J. Rothschild, R. Motherwell, N. Speyer, S. Fromboluti, V. Boghosian, L. Manso,

B. Hopkins, C. Cicero, T. Vevors, S. Simon, F. Bultman. Members not shown: E. Giobbi, P. Resika. Photo® Renate Ponsold.

Below: Spray against railing of Motherwell's
bayside deck in P-town. © Renate Ponsold.

Bottom: Robert Motherwell: Beside the Sea
#5, 1962, oil on rag paper, 29 by 23 inches.
Courtesy the artist.



Douglas Huebler, Donald Burgoyne, and Peter Hutchinson — all with major reputations — only recently gained the measure of acceptance indicated by an exhibition — "Art Ideas in the Year 1978."

Historically, the wildest years in P-town's past were the 'teens, especially during WWI. "The War went to our heads," one writer said.⁷ It caused tremendous social upheaval which manifested itself first among the creative, as it tends to do. Poets, writers like Hutchins Hapgood and Eugene O'Neill, painters such as Demuth, Maurice Sterne, Marsden Hartley, and Stuart Davis, socialite Mabel Dodge, political activists Jack Reed, Mary Heaton Vorse, and Max Eastman flooded onto the Cape, turning it into a substitute Greenwich Village and Paris left bank combined. Protests, plays, heated discussions of social, esthetic, sexual, and political alternatives, of Marx and Freud and women's suffrage, and parties, parties, and more parties — some chronicled by Demuth in delicate watercolors — set the pattern for P-town as a haven for those wanting an alternative to bourgeois life, where work and play could both be hard. Ever since the beginning of the colony when the artists there only numbered in the hundreds, and fish were given away free from the fleet, and ramshackle studios were to be had for \$50 a season, people have been saying that P-town is going downhill. But the honky-tonk atmosphere that had taken over by the 20's, and continues full-tilt to the present time, was, and seems still to be, a very relaxing ambience for the working artist. From

Caravaggio to Picasso or Goya to Beckman, the artist has tended to identify with, and enjoy the background music of society's more *outré* elements.

It's true Provincetown is no longer a sleepy little fishing village, but photographer Joel Meyerowitz finds plenty of picturesque material in its narrow streets. The brilliant navy blue sky above a row of tourist cabins glowing green from the street light; transparent aqua-colored water on the clam flats; a day-glo cerise sunset behind Dairyland's yellow fluorescent facade — he sees "things revealed in this light with the same kind of poignancy" as Edward Hopper.⁸ The mediums and means vary, but the concern with "Cape Light" is a constant.

It now takes three separate sorties to the galleries — Sundays to the Longpoint, Cottage, and Group Galleries; Friday nights to East End shows and the Art Association; and Saturdays for North Truro and Wellfleet — to see all the work on view, and there are usually two or three interesting talks, panels, book signings, or other cultural events a week to fit somehow into the round of benefits, brunches, and cocktail parties. One rarely has time for a movie, but the rich mix of people and interests is as rewarding now as it ever was. It may not be as nice a place for a short visit now as it once was, but it certainly remains one of the nicest places to stay for a summer, especially if you're an artist. When that glacier pushed this sand pile out so far into the ocean and dumped it, one thing was assured, there was and still is, the light.

- 1 Dorothy Seckler, *Provincetown Painters 1890's-1970's*, The Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, 1977, p. 80. This article could not have been written without the aid of this book.
- 2 John Robinson Frazier, *The Late Works*, (Introduction by Daniel Robbins), exhibition catalogue, Rhode Island School of Design, 1969.
- 3 Seckler, p. 80.
- 4 *The Sun Gallery*, (Introduction by Irving Sandler, text by Tony Vevers), exhibition catalogue, The Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 1981.



Above: Joel Meyerowitz: Truro, 1976, color photograph. Courtesy the artist.

Right: Joel Meyerowitz: Porch, Provincetown, 1977, color photograph. Courtesy the artist.

All postcards courtesy Hilary Bamford.

- 5 Cape Cod as an Art Colony, (Text by April Kingsley in collaboration with Fritz Bultman), exhibition catalogue, Heritage Plantation of Sandwich, Massachusetts, 1977.
- 6 Ross Moffett, *Art in Narrow Streets*, The First 33 Years of the Provincetown Art Association, 1914-1947.
- 7 Seckler, p. 33.
- 8 Cape Light, *Color Photographs by Joel Meyerowitz*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston & New York Graphic Society, Boston. Quote from an interview with the artist by Bruce K. MacDonald.

