

C R O S S C U R R E N T S

PROVINCETOWN

The Art Colony and the Art Association

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It is said that Provincetown's virtues for the artist—Mediterranean light, colorful, picturesque scenery, and an easy-going lifestyle—were first discovered in the 1870s by one Marcus Waterman, a Boston painter of lions and Arabian ladies, camels and caravans, who was looking for a local substitute for North African desert settings. He told his pals at the Boston Paint and Clay Club about the magnificent, blindingly white dunes at the tip of the Cape, where the sands were always shifting and the light was like that of Algiers. By the mid 1880s a number of Boston *pleinairistes* and Barbizon-style painters were also seeking picturesque motifs there and becoming in turn part of the local color. The railroad reached Provincetown in 1873 and, just as Thoreau had predicted, the area had already become a summer resort. Then, as now, that is no drawback for artists who derive no less inspiration from the clear blue light or the spray of sea water against a pier because thousands of tourists are pouring onto the beaches and through the town's narrow streets.

Waterman may have been more interested in the sand than he was in the light, but from the Impressionist invasion of the 1890s to the present, light, and painting out of doors in the light, have been the primary preoccupations of the Provincetown art colony. Charles Webster Hawthorne started it all in 1899 when he came to Provincetown and was "captivated by the jumble of color in the intense sunlight accentuated by the brilliant blue of the harbor and the small forest of stunted pine

and oak, black against the brilliant sand," as he described it in his first brochure for the art school he opened that summer. Hawthorne literally had a dark side to his Impressionism, largely as a result of his study of the Dutch masters in Europe the previous summer. It produced the broadly painted, almost Ash Can style realism of *The Crew of the Philomena Manta* and other studies of local fishermen for which he was well known in his day. But Hawthorne's Impressionism also had a light side that came from his years of study with William Merritt Chase, and this is the way he taught his students to paint. Chase's art school in Shinnecock Hills on eastern Long Island, which featured outdoor painting demonstrations and marathon weekly group criticisms, became the model for Hawthorne's Cape Cod School of Art.

Both Chase and Hawthorne encouraged their students to apply color broadly and quickly, to have fun with pigment and to paint with enthusiasm, like savages who had just discovered the medium. Aside from his demonstration pictures, however, Hawthorne's light Impressionist paintings tend, like *Girl Sewing*, to be fairly tight and finished-looking. It's only in his late watercolors that he really lets loose and paints with the free-wheeling, near-abstract expressiveness and high-key color he demanded of his students.

Hawthorne may have been the dominant force in Provincetown until 1930, but he wasn't the only Impressionist. Childe Hassam, Elizabeth and William Paxton, Reynolds Beal and Richard E. Miller pro-

duced much work there, though they were not fixtures on the scene. Oliver Chaffee and E. Ambrose Webster developed post-Impressionist styles that bordered on expressionism. Issac Caliga, one of the first to heed Waterman, was a Tonalist, while William Halsall and Frederick Waugh painted waves and bleak beach scenes in a darkish academic manner. They, Max Bohm, Gerrit Beneker, Gifford Beal, George Elmer Browne, John Whorf, and William Bicknell created their own blends of academicism and Impressionism, and

OPPOSITE:

Charles W. Hawthorne's painting class, c. 1920. Hawthorne is in straw hat, at easel.

BELOW:

Hans Hofmann's class, 1947.



big barn, built out of beams from sailing ships by the sea-loving painter Frederick Waugh, and the fabulous flower garden Hofmann and his wife created in their front yard, were local landmarks until very recently. His presence attracted many of the young modernists, including Lee Krasner, Nicholas Carone, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Robert De Niro, Wolf Kahn, George McNeil and Fritz Bultman, who were also studying in his New York art school. A few, like Bultman, went on to establish themselves as full-time residents. During the forties Bultman was painting in a fully Abstract Expressionist style derived from Hofmann, but largely in black and white; only later did he create the enormous, free-form collages and organic bronze sculp-

tures for which he is so highly respected.

After the war membership soared, and the Art Association did a thriving business in sales of paintings, becoming practically a commercial gallery under the directorship of Donald Witherstine. The problem was that the best artists in town were dropping out, or had never bothered to join the Art Association at all. Moses and Raphael Soyer and expressionist painters such as George Grosz, Paul Burlin, Henry Varnum Poor, and Loren MacIver did not exhibit their work at the Art Association, even though they spent many summers in the area during the thirties and forties.

Mediocrity continued to dominate the Art Association until the end of the fifties, when Robert Motherwell and Byron

Browne became involved and double juries, "traditional" and "modern," selected the summer show in 1957 and 1958. With only a few exceptions—Hofmann and Bultman, James Gahagan, Weldon Kees and Kenneth Campbell among the newcomers, and some of the old regulars like Dickinson, Gordon Peers, William and Lucy L'Engle, and Myron Stout, who had been a year-rounder since 1945—the best painters had been staying away from the annuals. Adolph Gottlieb, who summered on the harbor between 1946 and 1958, found inspiration in the bay scenery for his breakthrough "Imaginary Landscapes" and "Bursts," but refused to submit his work to the juries. Peter Busa, William Baziotes, Giorgio Cavallon and Judith Rothschild can also be

George McNeil, 1948



Perle Fine, 1946



numbered among the leading abstractionists of the forties who had little use for the Art Association. Many of these artists played a part in Forum 49, an avant-garde exhibition and series of panel discussions and film showings which was held in the 200 Gallery in 1949 and signalled the renewal of hostilities between modernists and traditionalists.

The struggle for supremacy was thus essentially a replay of the split during the twenties, but this time it centered around Hofmann and Abstract Expressionism and was not really resolved by the separate jury system. Franz Kline and Mark Rothko, who also bought houses in Provincetown, never became involved with Art Association activities. There were numerous galleries in which established New York artists might show if they wanted to, galleries which would usually do quite well selling their work. As the next generation emerged from studying with Hofmann and his peers, they joined the Provincetown art scene, but not the Art Association, at least not until the sixties. Helen Frankenthaler, Angelo Ippolito, John Grillo, Edward Corbett, Ed Giobbi, Henry Botkin, Leo Manso, Nassos Daphnis, Steve Pace, and Budd Hopkins were among the abstractionists who showed at one or another of the various high-quality commercial galleries in town during the fifties and sixties—Kootz (later HCE), Zabriskie, Tirca Karlis, and Gallery 256. Milton Avery spent four summers in Provincetown between 1956 and 1960, showing at the Tirca Karlis Gallery and serving as an important role model for



Adolph Gottlieb outside his fisherman's shack/studio, 1949



Long Point Gallery artists, 1979

younger painters—just as he had been many years before for Gottlieb and Rothko—but his presence was not felt at the Art Association.

Gandy Brodie, Wolf Kahn, Jan Müller, Red Grooms, Larry Rivers, Emilio Cruz, Alex Katz, Tony Vevers, Marcia Marcus, Nanno de Groot, Lester Johnson, Bob Thompson, Robert Beauchamp and other figurative expressionists often showed at

the innovative Sun Gallery, where outrageous “happenings” were the order of the day. Much more modest abstractions by William Freed and Irving Marantz, more traditional figurative work by Jack Coughlin, James Lechay, and Mischa Richter, and much gentler landscapes by Lily Harmon, Bruce McKain and George Yater were on view at the Art Association. Between all the openings of one- and two-week exhibitions

at the galleries; the events at the Chrysler Museum, where Walter Chrysler and his curator showed Picassos and Matises along with new acquisitions by Hopkins or Beauchamp; the many art schools, including Hofmann’s famous establishment and new ones, like the excellent Victor Candell/Leo Manso school—and the Art Association—the art scene in Provincetown was still managing to keep pace with the honky-tonk tourist scene in sheer excitement.

Sculpture has always played a minor role at the Provincetown Art Association, though that seems to be changing now. William Boogar, who operated a bronze foundry in town for many years, was the foremost traditional sculptor in the area before the arrival of Chaim Gross, who has long been active in the Art Association. Eddie (Reeves) Euler worked in both painting and sculpture, as did Fritz Bultman, Irving Marantz and, later, Lila Katzen. Sidney Simon works in many media, whereas Jack Kearney has been identified with the use of chrome-plated steel. Recently, the younger generation has tended to mix media, making assemblage-paintings as Jim Peters does, and, like Paul Bowen, Richard Smith and Elspeth Vevers, using objects found on the beach. Sand, pebbles, and bits of beach detritus are transformed into geometric and poetic works of art. Many of the artists working this way originally came to Provincetown on fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center. Founded in 1968 as an extension of the Art Association, from which it later separated, the center, with its winter residencies for writers and visual

artists, became a major force in the year-round esthetic life of the town, particularly as many Fellows have remained in Provincetown. Living costs are so high in the summer that the artists have learned to be consummate scroungers for materials. Another source for the current attitude may be Elise Asher's poetic assemblages of words and pictures created through her dual involvement with painting and poetry.

Some of the younger artists—residents involved with the Art Association, such as Ray Elman, James Hansen and Peter Macara—feel a strong sense of commitment to the concept of Provincetown as a vital art community, an attitude shared by the cooperatives such as the Group Gallery and the Long Point Gallery. Artists consider it their civic duty to maintain high levels of artistic quality both inside and outside the Art Association's walls, and they have made these institutions highly professional. As the Art Association has improved, more of the finer summer artists are participating in its exhibitions. Beautiful paintings of the flora and fauna, the ponds and marshes, by such artists as Nora Speyer, Paul Resika, Peter Watts, and Sideo Fromboluti, are emerging from deep in the Truro and Wellfleet woods. Expressionist figurative paintings by Selina Trieff and Carmen Cicero, much talked about in Manhattan, are finding their way to the Association's walls as well.

The light that has attracted artists to Provincetown and environs these many, many years remains a powerful magnet, for photographers as well as for painters. Joel Meyerowitz's *Cape Light* is a booklength



Fellows and friends of the Fine Arts Work Center

paean to it, but over the years Harry Callahan, Rachel Geise, Gloria Nardin, Khristine Hopkins, and numerous others with very diverse purposes have focused their lenses in its clear silveriness. Arnold Newman posed Edward Hopper outdoors against the windowed façade of his Truro "saltbox," and Renata Ponsold portrayed her husband, Robert Motherwell, against the weathered boards of his bayfront deck

in the wonderful, all-discovering light of the lower Cape.

Cars may now clog the streets where lobster pots once blocked what traffic there was, and shiny plastic psychedelic kites may be getting caught in the trees that once snared flying fish, but Provincetown is still the most colorful art colony in America, and artists are still very busy painting in its narrow streets.