

## Marketing Summer in New England: The Peabody Essex Museum's Paintings Show

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Peabody Essex Museum

The thought must have crossed some other market-oriented minds, just as it did ours, when we saw the paintings. If only this were an auction preview instead of a museum exhibit. What a lineup—Homer, Hopper, Bellows, Fitz Henry Lane. Ah, well. Experts we consulted agree that, while not every museum show makes an impact in the marketplace, there will be a traceable, bankable one at the auction houses and in the galleries lucky enough to have for sale some works by the top names represented in *Painting Summer in New England*, on view at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, through September 4.

As for the artists whose works traditionally do not bring millions, the consensus is that their reputations, and consequently their values, will benefit as a result of their proximity to those in the upper price tiers.

Although attendance tallies won't be in until close to summer's end, the show early on had at least one earmark of a blockbuster. Even before it officially opened on April 22, it enjoyed good word of mouth. Michael March of Blackwood/March Auctioneers & Appraisers, Essex, Massachusetts, said, "I heard it's a rave-upt." A what? "That's a young person's term, not that I know what young people say." We looked it up (on the Internet, of course) and learned that the first definition is "a wild or vigorous musical performance," and the second, chiefly British, is "a raucous party or gathering."

In the weeks leading up to that opening, we saw its publicity in print, heard it on radio, and on television. The museum seemed to be selling the show as vigorously as auction houses promote their most noteworthy offerings. Only works by the big names were being mentioned in the promotions; everyone would have to wait and see which lesser-known artists' works had been chosen to hang alongside them.

Prior to the opening, we also learned of multiple tie-ins in the form of events at the museum and elsewhere on the North Shore of Boston, where the museum is located. All summer long there would be demonstrations of watercoloring and drawing techniques, a painting workshop, nature walks, guided "journaling" opportunities, day trips to other museums and galleries, to beaches and parks, and a ride on a schooner.

Soon we got invited not only to a press preview, which included a sit-down lunch, but to an evening preview party for donors and lenders in the museum's spacious first-floor sky-lit atrium. We read in the museum's bimonthly magazine, which featured the exhibit on its covers for its March/April and May/June issues, that two other previews would be held, one for "Ambassadors" (the museum's corporate donor category) and one for museum members, before the doors opened to the public.

It all added up—if not quite to a rave-upt, then to a lavish, celebratory launch worthy of the first large-scale exhibit of paintings to go on view at the museum since the completion of its major building expansion and renovation in June 2003.

What we saw in the exhibit space was not at all what we expected. It was much better, in its own idiosyncratic way. The wall paint still smelled faintly fresh as we and other previewers streamed in to see 112 paintings in six galleries by 83 artists from 70 public and private collections. The chronology of the works ranged from the mid-19th century to the present. A view of Castine, Maine, by Fitz Henry Lane (1804-1865) was the earliest, painted in 1856. Alex Katz (b. 1927) and 14 other living artists created the latest ones in the past couple of decades. But the show was not arranged chronologically by its guest curator, Trevor Fairbrother. He hung the Lane in the last gallery and one of two Inge (20' across) Katz works in the first. In between he put several paintings of young, elegant Edwardian women, who look beguiling in their summer white dresses. There is also the painting of the Maine-based artist Brett Bigbee (b. 1954), *Joe (Self-Portrait)*, 1994-99, in which he has pictured himself holding his infant son on his knee while wearing nothing but white boxer shorts.

"It could have been a simple show, but I wanted to complicate it and make it intellectually stimulating," Fairbrother said. There is barely an American painter of note who hasn't painted summer in New England. So how were his choices made? It's a difficult question to answer. Many of his selections, it seemed clear, were guided by intuition and his own quirky sensibility. It is a strongly autobiographical show. But the short official answer that he gave is that his choices were inspired by the diversity of New England's terrain and climate and by his wish to include as many different styles of painting as possible.

The most abstract work in the show is Hans Hofmann's large (60-1/8" x 72 3/4") *Summer Bliss*, 1960, lent by the University of California at Berkeley. Its blue part and its green part are perhaps meant to correspond to sky and land. Otherwise it's a rave-upt of reds, oranges, and yellows. Hofmann (1880-1966), who lived in New York City and opened a famous summer art school in Provincetown on Cape Cod in the 1930's, was described by Fairbrother in his gallery tour for the press as "a very physical kind of guy, swashbuckling." He added, "So is the painting."

Could anything be more different from the Hofmann work than *Tacht Race off Boston Light*, circa 1880, by James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894)? It's a little (15 1/2" x 20 1/4") sparkling spot of marine realism from the Peabody's own collection. Nonetheless, there were the two of them, Hofmann and Buttersworth, cheek by jowl.

With obvious pleasure Fairbrother acknowledged the mischievousness of this and other points of contrasts in the show. In a slide talk for the donors and lenders, which he repeated twice on their preview night because the crowd could not fit into the auditorium all at once, he used two projectors to emphasize the juxtapositions. "I wanted to include the wealthy along with the people who work hard for a living," he said, showing Edmund C. Tarbell's portrait of his daughter, *Mercie Cutting Flowers*, 1912, together with Allan Rohan Crite's *Cambridge, Sunday Morning*, 1934. The locus of the former was the well-to-do Tarbell's summer home in New Castle, New Hampshire, and the latter shows the world of African-American street life during the Great Depression in urban Massachusetts.

Despite the mix-and-match approach, reminiscent of the propensity of today's collector to put objects from every era and school together, the show is unified by a single idea. "There is such a thing as New Englandness," Fairbrother said. "You can't get it anywhere else in the country."

The galleries progressed from darkness to light, aided by the wall colors, each one getting brighter. In the daytime at least, there was gradually less and less reliance on artificial light. In the first gallery we were plunged on deep once into the Maine forest with a painting called *Late Light*, 1978, by Neil Welliver (1929-2005). The land in Lincolnville belonged to the artist. He purchased it in 1961 and moved there permanently in 1970. Very dark, also was one of the two Winslow Homers in the show, *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog*, 1894. About a third of that canvas is black. A chilly day on Prout's Neck, Maine, was captured in that evocation of a place.

Fairbrother admitted that his working definition of summer was "loose," extending from late spring to early fall. "If there were leaves on the trees, and they weren't red, that was fair game," he said. The children in *The Confab* by Eastman Johnson (1824-1906) are banded up against the cold. One of them is wearing a woolen hat. That pick is a stretch, some would argue. But who among us cannot remember certain New England summer days when we had to get a parka from the closet or light a fire in the fireplace?

Lighthouses? Sea gulls? They're here but seen freshly by these artists. *Highland Light*, circa 1925, by Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872-1930) is a very unusual depiction of the Provincetown lighthouse. *My Hill Raising*, Sea, 1941, painted by John Marin (1870-1953) just outside his home in Addison, Maine, includes a group of unique shore birds. Unprecedented too are the gulls in another Maine scene, *The Harbor at Herring Gut*, 1925, by N.C. Wyeth.

Summer is a time for family, and Fairbrother chose works by several artists who share blood ties. Besides the work by the elder Wyeth, the two younger generations are represented in the show. Andrew Wyeth's *Northern Point*, 1950, an icon of stoic New England, shows the view from the roof of a lobsterman's house on Teal Island, Maine, a lightning rod decorated by a glass float in the foreground with the sea in the background. *The Snow Goose*, 2003, shows a lighthouse near Tenants Harbor. It is a recurring motif in the Maine pictures of Andrew's son and N.C.'s grandson, Jamie Wyeth.

There are also linkups between friends and summertime neighbors to be made in the galleries. While Frank W. Benson's splendid *Summer*, 1909, is the unmistakable centerpiece of the show, on a wall across from it there is a view of the same spit of land in *Ebbing Tide, Version Two*, 1907, by Willard Leroy Metcalf (1858-1925). Metcalf painted the coastal view while staying with the Benson family in Maine, and, according to Fairbrother, when he showed the painting back in New York and was asked what locale it represented, he said, "That's Frank Benson's backyard."

In 1916 George Bellows (1882-1925) and Leon Kröll (1884-1974) rented neighboring houses in Camden, Maine. That year each artist painted scenes inspired by those months together. *Summer Days, Camden, Maine, the Bellows Family* by Kröll shows Bellows, his wife, their elder daughter, and their family servant holding their second daughter in her arms. *On a Rowboat* by Bellows depicts an incident that occurred when a morning boat trip took a dramatic turn in a sudden squall. The painting shows Bellows, his wife, Emma, their daughter Anne, and Kröll rowing, as black clouds gather in the distance. With Kröll handling the oars, Bellows was free to study the effects of nature for his future canvas.

Kröll summertime on Cape Ann, in the vicinity of Rockport and Gloucester, Massachusetts, after he bought property there in 1932. Bellows painted in Maine for a total of five summers, in 1911 and 1913 to 1917.

That first trip by Bellows to Maine was prompted by an invitation to join his teacher Robert Henri (1865-1929) on Monhegan Island. Henri's small (8' x 10") but spectacular *Monhegan*, 1903, is in the show, as is Bellows's 1916 painting of another island nearby, Matineus.

Then there are married couples' works, a still life by Marguerite Zorach (1887-1968), was painted in Georgetown, Maine, circa 1930. *Flowing the Fields* by William Zorach (1887-1966) was made during the First World War while the then young couple spent the summer on a farm near Plainfield, New Hampshire. Other well-known married artists do not have the pleasure of each other's company. There is a work by William Meyerowitz (1887-1981), Gloucester *Hamoresque*, 1923, but no comparable one by his wife, Theresa Ferber Bernstein (1890-2002). There is one by Maria Oakey Dewing (1845-1927), but none by her husband, Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851-1938).

This isn't a show about married artists, however, nor was it meant to be comprehensive. These and other kinds of gaps were inevitable. Nonetheless, some of Fairbrother's choices will be (and already have been) questioned and criticized. Why, for example, did he include one by the lesser-known Fidelia Bridges (1834-1923)—*Pastures Near the Sea*, circa 1885, from the Peabody's own collection—but none by her friend and mentor, William Trost Richards (1833-1905), who spent years painting the *White Mountains of New Hampshire*, then, in later life, nothing but the sea?

It's also true that those who expect the North Shore to be favored, and feel that it should be, just because the Peabody Essex Museum is the venue, will be disappointed. Although roughly half of the paintings do depict scenes in Massachusetts, there are none by Frederick J. Mulhaupt (1871-1938), John Whorf (1903-1959), Aldro T. Hibbard (1886-1972), Anthony Thieme (1888-1954), or any of the prolific Grupper clan, Charles Paul (1860-1940), Emile (1896-1978), and Robert (b. 1944).

Before the show opened, we read the exhibition list over the phone to Michael March, who specializes in selling Cape Ann art at his auctions. Noting the omissions and unexpected inclusions, he said he was more eager than ever to see the show. That's the right attitude, borne of more than mere magnanimity in his case. He knows that art colonies everywhere are celebrated just as much for their obscure artists as their famous ones. Besides, he and his customers are branching out. At a sale on March 22, his most successful ever, he sold a work of N.C. Wyeth for \$20,600.

In today's market, regionalism is regularly being transcended, said Colleenne Fesko, head of the paintings department and a vice president at Skinner, Inc., one of the show's major sponsors. "Before, there were pockets of local favorites, but now it's all local, and it's all American, and it's all hot. One thing I find with valuing pieces," she added, "is that at every sale the estimates become obsolete. This kind of show and putting all these different artists in context will only increase that trend."

Fesko named Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922) and Dennis Miller Bunker (1861-1890) as two of the lesser-known artists in the show whose values will benefit by the association with names that are more familiar to the collecting public. "They were talented but never really reached the market," she said. "They are a more rarefied and unusual taste, and putting them in this context reminds people that they were also part of a larger movement of American Impressionism, and that their vision, although not as mainstream as Benson's and Tarbell's, is a wonderful complement to American paintings of that period."

Fesko recalled the Benson retrospective at this same museum that featured 79 works, on view from September 29, 2000, to February 18, 2001, and commented on its impact on the market. "Any major museum show adds an extra layer of approval to an artist," she said, "but Benson was always a major, popular, and desirable, so these shows just up the ante of his market and the competition for the notion of having one."

On the late April day that we wrote this report, the current record for a Benson was \$121,000, set at Christie's on May 25, 2000, by *The Gray Room*, signed and dated 1913.

James Bakker of James R. Bakker Antiques Inc., Provincetown, Massachusetts, lent a painting from his personal collection to the show, *Circus in a Cornfield*, 1933, by Frank Carson (1881-1968). It shows traveling performers and their tents bathed in Cape Cod light. Carson was a Boston painter who founded the Provincetown Art School in 1918 and taught there until 1933. He exhibited regularly at the Provincetown Art Association during those years.

We asked Bakker if he was surprised when Fairbrother asked for the painting by Carson, who is not a household name. He laughed, then said, "Even though I believe it's one of the most exciting paintings of its type, I worried a little about how it would hold up in a room full of masterpieces. When I saw it at the preview, I was proud and pleased because I thought it held up well."

Bakker was also pleased to see work by another Provincetown artist, Ross Moffett (1888-1971), lent by the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. "I think it's one of the first times in recent years that Moffett has been included [in a show of this caliber]," he said, speaking of Moffett's Historical Museum, Provincetown, 1961, a bird's-eye architectural view. "Like Carson, Moffett is someone who had a good reputation and exhibited widely during his lifetime but really fell into obscurity for various reasons after his death."

Bakker went on to praise Fairbrother's other bold choices that made provocative comparisons possible. "The way he posed two seemingly opposite things together made you think," he said. With luck, these thoughts may even give people new ideas about collecting, we suggested. "Definitely. It shows that there is a way of expanding that isn't as predictable as one might suppose."

Abbott W. "Bill" and Marcia L. Vose of Vose Galleries, Boston, were other lenders to the show. Bathers, Ogunquit Beach, (Maine, circa 1900), by Charles Herbert Woodbury (1864-1940) and *Old Street in Gloucester*, circa 1912, by Jane Peterson (1876-1965) are from their private collection.

We asked Marcia Vose about values. She said that those for Benson and others from the Boston school "have almost all grown exponentially in the last five years in particular, to the point that you don't even see them in the marketplace very often. The prices, even for their lesser works are just exorbitant." A show like this may have some effect in that stratosphere, but even without it, their prices would continue to climb.

Values for Woodbury "have come up really well recently. We gave him a big show two years ago, and his prices have probably doubled since 2001. He still has a ways to go, because he wasn't part of any group. It's very hard to pigeonhole him. He was his own person, very independent, even though he was friends with many other artists and was an important teacher. He had a very different way of going about things. He wasn't the elegant Boston painter. He's barely into the six figures, whereas any of The Ten are way into the six and seven figures."

Peterson is also heading upward, and the show will help her go further still, said Vose. "Jane Peterson got hot in the eighties, and now a good one-for example, any of the Venice scenes, any of the ones done in the teens—are well into the six figures for a major work." Yet Peterson's values are held back somewhat by her gender. "Traditionally, women's works are undervalued. I keep thinking, if she were a man, it would be a little different."

Since even Woodbury, Peterson, and others in their price range are so scarce, Vose said the gallery is moving toward works done in the 1930's and 1940's. "It's a whole different look, and I noticed that of the hundred and twelve paintings in the show, more than half were dated 1900 to 1950. That's what we're banking on. We're going into that era." The New York artists of that group already have been discovered, and the gallery handles them when it can. But it's more interested in "the overlooked artists from New England and elsewhere."

We asked Vose her opinion about regionalism and the market. Who is buying New England art? When New England paintings are sold, where do they go? All over the country or just to certain places? "It's a very simple idea, but it's true—people who live in a region want painters from their region," she said. "It's difficult to sell a New England landscape to a native Californian, although you do sell them to a displaced easterner. Clients I've sold to in the West have their roots in the East, and they miss it. So as far as landscape goes, it remains regional. What becomes more global would be, certainly, the figurals, the still lifes, conceptualism, and other subjects that are more universal."

Vose wanted to make this final point. "I think the people who are going to benefit most from being in this show are the living artists who were selected. They can hang their hat on that, particularly Scott Poirier (b. 1949)," who has five captivating works of realism in the show.

A catalog for *Painting Summer in New England*, written by Fairbrother, was published by Yale University Press in association with the museum and Marquand Books. Like the exhibit itself, it is arranged thematically. There's a beach theme, a farm theme, one devoted to gardens, one that features urban streets, and another category that Fairbrother claims to have invented, "New England nudes."

The show will not travel. With so many lenders, scheduling conflicts made it impossibly complicated to arrange. You will have to go to Salem to see George Luks's iceman delivering a huge block of ice on Boston's S.S. Boothby's street; Charles Lewis Fox's portrait of a gap-toothed Native American who worked the ferry from Old Town to Indian Island, Maine; William Morris Hunt's sand dunes of Newbury, Massachusetts; John Frederick Kensett's cliffs at Newport, Rhode Island; Walt Kuhn's bushel basket of apples in Dorset, Vermont; and all the other fascinating pieces that have been assembled here.

In addition to museum admission, special tickets are required for entry to this exhibit. Advance sales are available through TicketWeb at [www.ticketweb.com](http://www.ticketweb.com) or by phoning (866) 468-7619. For general information about PEM, phone the museum at (978) 745-9200 or (866) 745-1876, or see its Web site ([www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)).