

PROVINCETOWN RISES TO THE CHALLENGE

It was Henry David Thoreau who famously wrote that, on maps, Cape Cod resembles an arm bent at the elbow, flexing its muscle. At the peninsula's tip, Provincetown was the Cape's "sandy fist." More than 150 years later, the modern denizens of Provincetown's art community have shown all the strength and resolve that Thoreau's potent metaphor represents: they have adapted to the limitations and uncertainties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the centuries, the people of Provincetown have proved a resilient bunch. Inhabited for eons by the Wampanoag and Nauset tribes, and later populated by fishermen and sailors especially from the Azores, "P-Town" (its affectionate nickname) is now a premier destination and permanent address for many members of the LGBTQ community. It also rightfully lays claim to being among the most important centers of 20th-century American art. From Native Americans to seafarers to artists — not to mention political activists — the citizens of P-Town know how to weather hard times, and the current residents are working together to figure out how best to rise to the latest challenge.

P-TOWN ART HISTORY 101

The list of artists who have lived in Provincetown — or merely passed through, taking up residence for a summer or two — is truly exalted. This picturesque locale with its scarlet sunsets and rugged, rolling dunes began attracting painters as early as the 1890s. Provincetown's legacy-keepers peg its official start as America's oldest continuously active artist colony to 1899. That's the year Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872–1930) opened his Cape Cod

School of Art. By World War I, several schools were attracting hundreds of students each summer. Hawthorne's impressionist colleague E. Ambrose Webster (1869–1935) also ran a school. So did Hans Hofmann, who, both here and at his school in Manhattan, encouraged young artists like Lee Krasner and Red Grooms to break free from formalism and convention.

As early as the 1920s, Provincetown artists had begun to embrace modernism. A group of them had studied in Paris, been exposed to the Fauves, Cubists, and others with revolutionary

notions about art, and transported those ideas back home. In the 1940s and '50s, among the abstract expressionists (beside Hofmann) who converged here were Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler. They joined the long list of artist couples who have worked and lived in P-Town, nurturing each other (or not): Hawthorne and Marion Campbell Hawthorne, Krasner and Jackson Pollock, Milton Avery and Sally Michel, Lucy and William L'Engle, Jo and Edward Hopper, Jerry Farnsworth and Helen Sawyer, Henry and Ada Raynor Hensche.



LASZLO DE NAGY (1906–1944), *Monday, n.d.*, color white-line woodblock print on paper, 10 x 11 1/4 in., collection of Napi and Helen Van Dereck, on view at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum



Provincetown has, likewise, been a place where artists have experimented with techniques. Most notably, the white-line woodcut method for making color prints was invented here. According to lore, it was B.J.O. Nordfeldt (1878–1955) who, having grown impatient with the labor of making multiple blocks, devised a way to make such prints with a single block. He separated the colors with grooves that he didn't ink during the printing step, causing the white of the paper to become the outlines around shapes. The results were clean and crisp, with a distinctly modern look, emphasizing design and composition over content. Nordfeldt's student Blanche Lazzell (1878–1956) became the technique's leading practitioner and developed with others what became known as the Provincetown Print. Its style was particularly well suited to images of this locale, with its sunshine and shadows, steeply pitched rooflines, and white picket fences that — then and

(LEFT) **NANCY WHORF** (1930–2009), *Summer Night, East End, n.d.*, oil on panel, 25 x 29 in., Berta Walker Gallery ■ (BELOW) **CHARLES WEBSTER HAWTHORNE** (1872–1930), *Crew of the Philomena Manta*, 1915, oil on canvas, 70 1/4 x 88 1/2 in., Provincetown Town Art Collection, photo: James Zimmerman



(RIGHT) ROSS MOFFETT (1888–1971), *Shank Painter Pond (Cutting Ice)*, c. 1925, oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 39 1/2 in., Provincetown Town Art Collection, photo: James Zimmerman ■ (BELOW) ALVIN ROSS (1920–1975), *Haircut*, 1958, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 in., collection of Lucas Garofalo and Jeff Swanson, on view at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum

now — demarcate the town’s charming cottages and lush gardens. (A fine example of a Provincetown Print by Laszlo de Nagy is illustrated here.)

Not all of Provincetown’s artists chose to innovate. Ignoring the avant-garde, John Whorf (1903–1959) found inspiration in the seacoast and expressed it in marine motifs reminiscent of Winslow Homer. Like her father, Nancy Whorf (1930–2009) favored realism, painting P-Town scenes in every season, particularly winter, creating what she considered a kind of visual memoir. Even today, says Christine McCarthy, executive director of the **Provincetown Art Association and Museum** (PAAM), “You’ll find everything here, from traditional landscapes all the way to video art.” And she doesn’t mean only at 460 Commercial Street, where PAAM established itself in 1918, three years after the



organization’s founding by a group of artists, including Hawthorne, Webster, and Gerrit Beneker. Along with local businesspeople, they saw a need for both a professional asso-

ciation and a permanent collection. In fact, Provincetown’s commercial district is only three miles long and a quarter mile wide, but it is saturated with art venues. There are 49 licensed galleries and, altogether, more than 60 places to buy art.

Other municipalities possess some fine artworks, but who can name another that does so on the scale of Provincetown, which owns more than 300? Some 30 of its portraits, seascapes, and historical narratives hang in the hallways and offices of the **Provincetown Town Hall**, an 1886 Victorian grand lady that underwent a \$6 million restoration in 2008–10. Another 30 works are displayed at the **Provincetown Public Library**, a former church spacious enough to accommodate a half-scale model of the schooner *Rose Dorothea* built by Francis “Flyer” Santos (1914–2015). Still more impressive town-owned pieces are on view at the **Veterans Memorial Elementary School**, and also at the **Council on Aging**.

Hawthorne’s 1915 wall-size oil *Crew of the Philomena Manta* was the earliest piece to enter the town’s collection, the year after it was painted. In 1905, the fishing dory of Antoine Souza and Manuel Souza Bartholomew, cousins from the Azores, had become separated from its mother ship, the painting’s namesake. Only Antoine survived the ordeal. Ross Moffett (1888–1971), who posed for Hawthorne as a *Philomena Manta* crew member, is represented in the town’s collection with paintings of his own, including *Shank Painter Pond (Cutting Ice)*, a circa 1925 scene of ice cutters working in what is now a wildlife sanctuary.

Stephen Borkowski, a longtime member of the Provincetown Art Commission, says the town adds new artworks to its



JULIE BECK (b. 1981), *Lydia the Lawyer*, 2016, oil on canvas, 36 x 18 in., Bowersock Gallery

holdings “very judiciously.” One recent acquisition, now hanging in the library, is a wall-size seascape, *Gods of the Sea* by Nancy Ellen Craig (1927–2015), who was known for grand, classically inspired scenes and celebrity portraits. Another new arrival is *Still Life with Conch #2*, painted in oil by Mofett and donated by **Berta Walker**, whose eponymous gallery is at 208 Bradford Street. Walker’s grandparents the musician-composer Harvey Gaul and writer Harriet Avery Gaul, in whose honor she made the donation, began coming to Provincetown from Pittsburgh in 1915. A third recent addition is Iлона Royce Smithkin’s red-chalk likeness of Grace Gouveia Collinson (1909–1998), a teacher, poet, and all-around political and cultural force who arrived in Provincetown from Portugal at 7 and spent a storied life here. “She was a real Provincetown character, known for helping Portuguese and other immigrants learn English, assimilate, and become citizens,” Borkowski explains. As for Smithkin, a P-Town character in her own right, she turned 100 on March 27, 2020.

Considering the sheer number of artists who live or visit here, it’s unsurprising that one often sees art being created in Provincetown’s coves, streets, and **Province Lands**, which are part of the **Cape Cod National Seashore**. Besides plein air painters working on their own, artists often paint in groups, usually hosted by schools. For example, PAAM, whose teaching program was launched in the 1920s in the manner of the Art Students League of New York, offers an array ranging from two-hour drop-in life-drawing sessions to week-long workshops. Or at least it did so before the pandemic struck.

ART LOVE AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

It’s tough to socially distance in Provincetown proper. While the resident population tops out at 3,000, the office of tourism has estimated that, in ordinary times, 50,000 to 70,000 people arrive by car, bus, ferry, or otherwise each summer day. On special occasions such as Parade Day during August’s raucous Carnival, the number of day trippers can reach 100,000. This year the town expected to welcome crowds for its commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims’ landing. Many people erroneously think that William Bradford and the others who crossed the Atlantic in the *Mayflower* first set foot in what is now Plymouth, on Boston’s South Shore. In fact, on November 11, 1620, they made landfall and signed the Mayflower Compact in the place now called Provincetown Harbor. This explains the **Pilgrim Monument and Provincetown Museum** and its towering (253 feet) granite campanile at 1 High Pole Hill Road.

Town-wide exhibitions and events were planned for the remembrance, among them the opportunity to step aboard the *Mayflower II*. This vessel was to be anchored in the harbor for some days in mid-September. Alas, **Provincetown 400** has been postponed until 2021. Many of P-Town’s theme weeks were cancelled, too. Nonetheless, folks here





EDITH LAKE WILKINSON (1868–1957), *Girl on Beach*, c. 1916, oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 13 1/2 in., The Bakker Project

are finding ways to bring art to the people while keeping them safe and healthy.

“We’re offering a lot of online content,” says Chris McCarthy, who is happy that students living across the country are now taking PAAM’s classes. Before the pandemic struck, she had organized an exhibition highlighting the collection of the late local restaurateur and landlord Napi Van Dereck (1932–2020). It features a pantheon of Provincetown artists, including Beneker, Nordfeldt, Lazzell, Moffett, Nancy Maybin Ferguson, Pauline Palmer, and George Yater. Her project had been scheduled to hang at PAAM from March 27 through Sep-

tember 13. When we spoke in early summer, it was being presented online. Since then, PAAM has reopened, with timed, ticketed entries for limited groups to see an edited slate of exhibitions, including that one.

Scheduled from September 18 through November 30 is a retrospective devoted to Alvin Ross (1920–1975) in celebration of his centenary. It will feature his masterful still lifes and enigmatic portraits, 40 from PAAM and 20 loaned by private collectors. From October 2 through November 29, PAAM will present *The Arrival, 1620* by Mimi Gross (b. 1940) — a conceptualization of the first meeting of

Native Americans and Pilgrims that features life-sized figures, the *Mayflower*, and renditions of sea and sky that will turn one gallery into the shores of Provincetown as they looked four centuries ago. “I’m adding ‘hopefully’ to every statement I make,” McCarthy warns. “If there’s a resurgence [of COVID-19] in the fall, we have about 10 recovery plans, 10 different scenarios.”

As for the municipal collection, before the pandemic it was accessible to anyone whenever the town’s governmental buildings were open. Alas, Borkowski notes, “[The collection] is a sleeping beauty right now. I suspect it will reawaken by summer’s end, but the situation seems to change daily. Everyone has had to adjust, but we’re strong people.” Fortunately, the town collection’s website (provincetownhistoryproject.com) was already in place pre-pandemic, so one can see there not only the art, but also many historical ephemera.

FRIDAY NIGHT ART STROLL, TRANSFORMED

In the past, considering its scope, Provincetown’s summertime **Friday Night Art Stroll** required a serious plan of attack. Openings were staggered, starting at 5 p.m. in the West End and 6 p.m. in the East End. A convenient endpoint was PAAM, which stayed open until 10 p.m. on those evenings. Most people walked or biked from gallery to gallery. Pedicabs were another option. (Driving is never a smart idea in P-Town.) And often what one saw along the way, whether drag queens or costumed pets, was just as entertaining as the galleries’ displays.

When the pandemic hit, this weekly tradition, which typically brought 150 to 300 people through any single gallery, was cancelled — at least in its previous form. The “stroll” is now online at ptowngallerystroll.com, a collaborative site in which some 30 dealers participate. Its organizers are Jill Stauffer, Jill Rothenberg-Simmons, and Pete Hocking — executive director, board member, and board president, respectively — of **The Provincetown Commons**, a 10,000-square-foot community center, exhibition venue, and shared studio space.

Steve Bowersock of **Bowersock Gallery** is gratified that the pandemic has finally united so many independent gallerists. They had tried forming a guild more than once, and always failed. “This coming together is very hopeful,” he notes. Stauffer adds that it probably worked this time because the pandemic made collaboration seem urgent and also because her organization, being non-profit, was a “neutral party.” Bowersock, for his part, credits the pandemic with getting him to finally adopt Hoverlay, an app that helps would-be art buyers visualize pieces in the spaces where they’re destined to go. He had



PETE HOCKING (b. 1966), *At Love's Frayed Edge, Requiem*, 2019, oil on panel, 36 x 36 in., Four Eleven Gallery

to write-ins during the actual show. When we spoke, McCarthy was uncertain if the exhibition would be possible this year. Even if only virtual, July 6 to September 13 is its designated window. Whatever happens, McCarthy notes, "It's a great way for a beginning collector to pick up an original work of art for as little as \$125."

BEYOND THE TOWN LIMITS

Founded in 1968, the **Fine Arts Work Center** (FAWC) is accustomed to offering residencies and a full summer season of workshops and classes, as well as nightly readings and artist talks that are free and open to the public. Its roster is usually chockablock with nationally recognized names. Now, however, the entire 2020 program has been shifted to 2021, with virtual events and programs filling the interim.

Pete Hocking (b. 1966), who is represented by the **Four Eleven Gallery**, was scheduled to lead a landscape painting workshop at FAWC in June. Instead, he taught an online class with Mark Adams (b. 1953), a fellow landscapist and professional cartographer whose work is shown by the **Schoolhouse Gallery**. Hocking has also been teaching virtually for PAAM, engaging with students as far away as Florida and Texas. "One benefit of taking an online class is that you can work in your own space," he notes. "Another is you don't have to uproot yourself from the life you're living." Of course, Hocking admits, "It's not as immersive an experience as the one you have here, and you miss the chance to take a meditative walk in the woods or on the beach."

In the mid-19th century, Thoreau walked the Cape's length and breadth, going long distances alone and with companions. This year, Hocking tasked himself with walking 1,000 miles around the Cape as a fundraiser for The Provincetown Commons. He does it in eight- to 12-mile sprints, so to speak. Hocking's self-imposed deadline for completion is September 22, the first day of autumn, but his walking will undoubtedly continue thereafter. He declared in a recent blog post: "I've tried to use nature as my anchor, and I've largely been successful. Walks ... have done much to remind me that the universe is bigger than this [COVID-19] crisis and certainly bigger than me." ●

Information: To plan your visit, go to ptowntourism.com and provincetownartguide.com.

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already researched what Hoverlay's developers call its "augmented reality" platform, since, he explains, "As you know, people are forever asking 'What's it going to look like on my wall?'" Now he has the tool available to help clients answer that question.

AUCTIONS: GOING, GOING STRONG

After the Commonwealth of Massachusetts allowed retail operations to reopen, galleries began accommodating up to five people at a time, depending on square footage. Like many gallerists, James Bakker of **The Bakker Project** has made use of his windows for changing displays. "That way people are able to look at art even if they feel uncomfortable coming inside," says the collector, dealer (since age 15), appraiser, and auctioneer, who is planning an exhibition, *The Women*, for September 18 through October 18. Its lineup includes Edith Lake Wilkinson (1868–1957), a Hawthorne student who, new evidence indicates, was making white-line color woodblock prints even before Nordfeldt. A 2015 documentary, *Packed in a Trunk*, tells the story of Wilkinson, who ended her days in a mental institution but has been rediscovered thanks to her grandniece Jane Anderson.

Bakker holds auctions every spring and fall, with online sales in between. Customarily his live sales occur at the **Harbor Hotel**. "We're so dependent on decisions being made by government, but even if we have another [COVID-19] wave in the fall, one way or another we'll have our fall sale on October 24. Because we do online auctions, we're already set up."

A year-round resident since 2001, Bakker moved to P-Town after closing his gallery in Boston. Since 2008, he has lived in a house built for a 19th-century sea captain that was acquired in 1900 by E. Ambrose Webster, who ran his school there. The house appears in Webster's own paintings, as well as in paintings by others. In 1988, when Bakker began spending summers in Provincetown, he guest-conducted PAAM's first **Annual Consignment Auction**, a benefit at summer's end. He's done the same every year since. This year, that auction will be held online, with bidding open September 11–25.

PAAM's annual **Members' 12x12 Exhibition and Silent Auction**, which presents nearly 400 works measuring 12 inches square, has previously had online bidding in addition