

Arts & Entertainment

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Gammell: master of allegory

Provincetown painter honored with show at Dennis museum

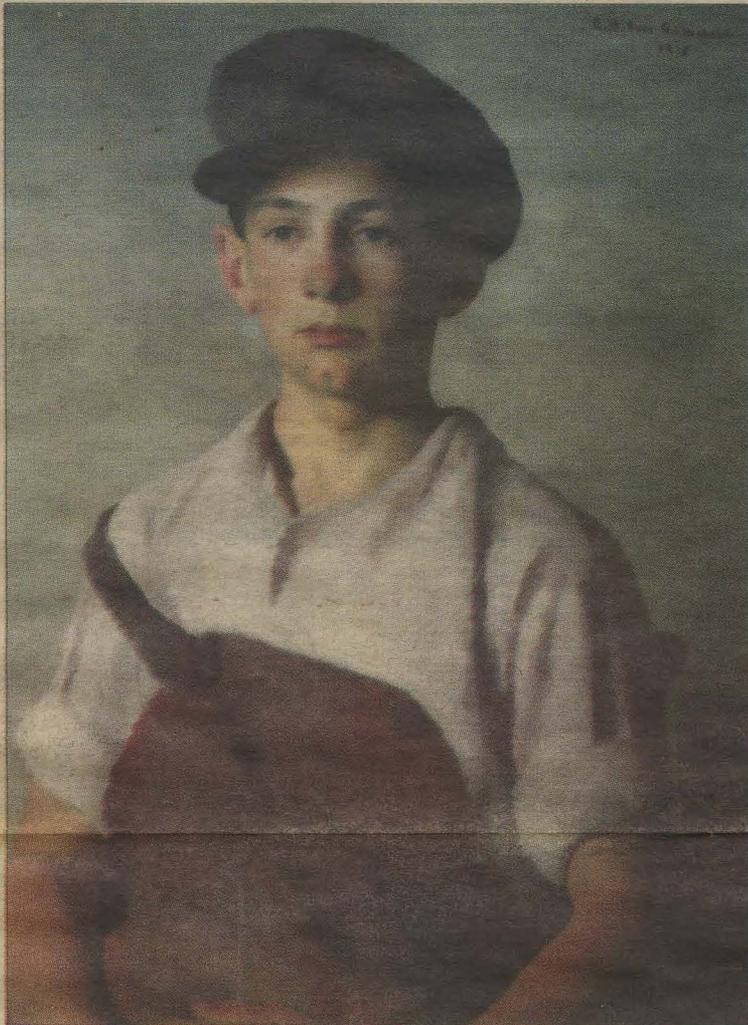
By Gerry Desautels
BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Robert Hale Ives Gammell was a prolific summertime Provincetown painter for half of the 20th century. A regular fixture from 1912 through 1963, Gammell visited from Boston where he continued work on painted murals, portraits of Provincetown residents, landscapes, still lifes and large allegorical works drawn from his very active imagination. "Transcending Visions" — a sweeping retrospective exhibit of Gammell's eclectic work — is now showing through July 14 at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts in Dennis.

The diverse collection provides the first opportunity on the East Coast to follow the New England artist's career from the 1920s almost to his death, 21 years ago at age 88. Fascinatingly eclectic, most of the works are partial byproducts of long, languid summers spent by Gammell in his studio at the Hensche School on Pearl Street, currently scheduled for demolition.

Starkly evident to even a layperson's eye, "Transcending Visions" represents several mediums, including oils, etchings and drawings, by the ever-curious Gammell. The show does a masterful job in chronicling the evolution of Gammell's ability to draw, his increased command of the abstract elements of design, and the integration of his work from nature and the model into his finished allegorical pieces. The exhibit, traveling from Washington state's Maryhill Museum of Art, accentuates the tremendous variety of sources from which Gammell drew inspiration, including not only the body of work by earlier painters, but also poetry, music, myth and current events.

Of special note and undeniable presence, the show is anchored by Gammell's "The Hound of Heaven" series, a colorful and haunting 23-panel allegorical sequence based on Francis Thompson's popular poem with the same name — many of the godlike models used for the series were actual Henry Hensche students "borrowed" by Gammell.



Portrait of William Cabral (who later became the postmaster) by Gammell is part of Provincetown's town collection. It is on display in the Assessor's Office in Town Hall.



Gammell (far right) on New Beach (Herring Cove) with his assistant Ted Valsam and Valsam's daughter Liz. Liz later married Gammell student Robert Douglas Hunter, and she curated this current show.

Born in 1893 into a wealthy and socially prominent Rhode Island family, the artist was first drawn to Provincetown at the on-

set of World War I to study with impressionist Charles Hawthorne. Gammell would eventually meld that valuable instruction with that



Panel VI from R.H. Ives Gammell's "Hound of Heaven" series, painted over 20 years.

of another great teacher and painter, William Paxton.

"Gammell came to Provincetown every summer for at least

three weeks but usually for three to four months," says Liz Hunter,

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the exhibit curator and daughter of Gammell's longtime assistant Ted Valsam, and also the wife of former Gammell student Robert Douglas Hunter.

"Initially Gammell was attracted by the camaraderie of Provincetown. He loved the sea air. He was also a great birder and he would go out walking from his studio and cut down over the dunes and out to the ocean before Route 6 had been built in between. He'd spend hours out there walking, thinking and watching birds."

Hunter, also the goddaughter of Gammell, inherited journals faithfully kept by her godfather from 1919 until his death. Gammell proved to be an equally prolific writer, having authored several art history books during his lifetime, amongst them the groundbreaking "The Twilight of Painting." Of late, Hunter has written about "Uncle Ives" work and process and offers invaluable insight into the quiet artist's summer years in Provincetown.

Hunter describes her godfather as a lifelong bachelor and "very down to earth, and very, very focused on what mattered to him." Many artists and residents still in town recall Gammell's presence. Peter Macara, assistant director and registrar at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, modeled for Gammell as a young teenager living on Brewster Street.

"He was sort of like a plump old grandfather," remembers Macara. "He had half-framed glasses that he would peer over when he looked at the model, and then he would look through them to work. He worked very close with a very realistic kind of rendering. He was really quite masterful."

According to Hunter, Gammell himself had about 120 students go through his hands in his lifetime, 80 of which are probably now making a living painting. "About 60 percent of the pictures at the Guild of Boston Artists are by Gammell

students or the students of Gammell students," she says.

According to Hunter, "Gammell was a quintessential Provincetown painter simply because he derived his inspiration from being in the place. He was there for purely artistic reasons."

Throughout his life, Gammell remained fascinated by the behavior of people under the stress of the human condition. He was particularly interested in reactions at the extreme end: terror, wonder and passion. "Gammell had always put painting first, working seven days a week and systematically giving up anything which got in the way of his ability to perform professionally," writes Hunter. (Gammell himself suffered a nervous breakdown in 1939, it is said in part due to the rise of abstract expressionism and minimalism and his strong reactionary holdings on his impressionist roots.)

"He had put his entire life into another philosophy of painting," says Hunter, "and found himself in an isolated position artistically."

In town, Gammell boarded with Mrs. Dutton on the hill at the East End of town. The shy and intense intellectual made friends among his fellow students and artists, and some of those friendships were to last for a lifetime. Among the artists with whom he became chums were Edwin Dickinson, John Fraizer, Raymond Eastwood, Reeves Euler and William Boogar. Better known Gammell students include Charles H. Cecil,



"The Rail Road Yard," painted in Provincetown in approximately 1920.

Richard F. Lack, Thomas Dunlay and Robert Douglas Hunter, whose own training began with Henry Hensche. At the center of Gammell's art and that of his students was the cross between French Salon and French impressionist techniques known as the "Boston School," now practically synonymous with Gammell.

"When he first came to Provincetown, it was a community of dirt-poor fisherman, local merchants and dirt-poor art students," says Hunter. "What made that art colony go was that it was cheap. And that's one of the things that it is no longer."

Even in Gammell's life,

Provincetown was changing; as it became more built up, he found that the walks that he had enjoyed since 1912 were being threatened. In 1960, a plan was announced to turn the old railroad right of way into a street and to develop the land behind his studio on Pearl Street. In 1963, at age 70, he decided to relocate to Williamstown in Western Massachusetts — a place he believed would be relatively safe from change for the foreseeable future. Williamstown also afforded a close location to a hospital, a concern for the increasingly feeble bachelor. Ironically,

Gammell had his first heart attack after the second year of his move. The feisty and passionate artist would live 17 more years, however, dying in 1981 of congestive heart failure.

Happily, a Gammell portrait is part of Provincetown's art collection: "William," a large oil portrait of the young boy William Cabral — later the town's postmaster — hangs in the Assessor's Office of Town Hall. □

"Transcending Vision" shows at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, Route 6A, Dennis, through July 14. For further exhibit details, call (508) 385-4477 or visit www.cmfa.org.