

Arthur Diehl:

Provincetown's extraordinary speed painter

HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS

BY LAUREL GUADAZNO

Provincetown's fastest painter was, without a doubt, Arthur Diehl. Known as the "speed painter extraordinaire," Diehl often painted as many as 25 or 30 small, about nine-by-12-inch, very good-quality paintings a day. In 1912 he first came to Cape Cod, spending the summer and fall at Ballston Beach. After this he moved to Provincetown and opened a studio on Commercial Street where he entertained tourists, talking his fascinating line to tourists while he painted at his usual speed. Diehl painted local scenes, the sea and the sand dunes from memory and sketches. The Pilgrim Monument has in its collection a small painting by Diehl of Railroad Wharf which shows the S.S. Dorothy docked at the wharf.

In "Art in Narrow Streets," Ross Moffett recalls, "Provincetown then had the amazing and rather magnificent Arthur V. Diehl, an Englishman, who painted and sold his pictures in the building that for many years housed the Provincetown Art Shop. Diehl would paint a dune or beach scene in a few minutes, while keeping up an entertaining, impressive and largely one-sided

conversation for the benefit of the onlookers or prospective customers. On occasion he might claim descent from Napoleon, coupling with his story an involved explanation of legitimacy that was not easy to follow. Or again he might tell how, when as a boy of sixteen, in an emergency, he conducted the Royal London Orchestra. With the right audience, that is, when other artists were not present, he was apt to launch into a philosophical discussion of art. At a certain point the art of Rembrandt would enter the discussion, and at the end the listener would realize that Diehl was in no respect Rembrandt's inferior."

Arthur Diehl was born in London, and moved to the U.S. when he was 23 years old. In her autobiography, "The True Story of My Life" published in London in 1908, his mother, Alice Mangold Diehl, writes that her "painter boy" showed astonishing talent in painting and music early on but had no inclination for school work. His mother showed some of Arthur's painting to the great painter Sir Frederick Leighton, and on his recommendation the family sent Arthur to study in Italy at age 15. When he returned from his studies at age 18, he submitted a painting to the prestigious Royal



Photo courtesy Sandwich Glass Museum

Arthur Diehl (at right, dressed in white) standing on a wharf in Provincetown sometime around WWI with one of his large paintings, "Both Going Down." It shows a submarine sinking an ocean liner. Diehl had brought the painting out of his studio to be photographed and the activity attracted a throng of curious tourists.

Academy. The painting, "Aldeburgh Quay," was exhibited and sold for 100 pounds.

Diehl moved for a time with his family to Sandwich in 1915 and stayed at the Daniel Webster Inn. He paid for their keep by painting two large paintings in one of the dining rooms and by doing a portrait of Webster that stills hangs over the inn's fireplace.

He returned to Provincetown during the '20s, painting during the summer and putting on painting shows in various cities during the rest of the year, typically in major department stores. He always sold his paintings directly to the public, indifferent to his artistic reputation and content to

make enough money to support his family.

A devoted family man, when he was diagnosed with cancer he painted intensely to establish a large collection of paintings for his family to sell to provide them with income after his death. Arthur Diehl died in Fall River on Jan. 12, 1929. He is buried in Gray Gables Cemetery in Bourne.

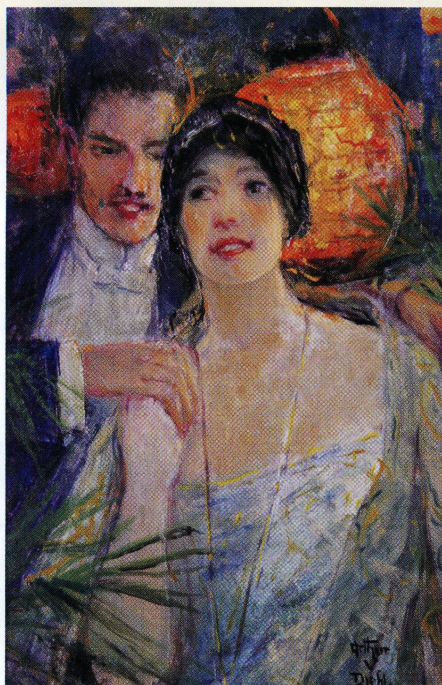
[Laurel Guadagno is Visitor Services Manager for the Pilgrim Monument & Provincetown Museum. She also writes "History Highlights," heard regularly on WOMR, 92.1 FM.]

Arthur V. Diehl, 1870 - 1929

by Eugenia Diehl Pell

Arthur Vidal Diehl, the eccentric Englishman best known today for his seascapes and scenes of dunes, wharfs, and fishing boats in Provincetown, Massachusetts, was born in London on January 6, 1870. His father, Louis Diehl, was a composer and violinist who conducted the Royal Italian Opera Company. His mother, Alice Mangold Diehl, was an accomplished pianist, piano teacher, and writer. Although the family was not wealthy, having seven children, they were well connected in the musical and literary circles of London. Not surprisingly, given the professions of both parents, the Diehl home was filled with music.¹

Arthur learned to play the piano and write music, but drawing and painting became his passion. His mother arranged for



Quite a Big Diehl is on view from June 19 through August 5, 2007, at the Cahoon Museum of American Art, 4676 Falmouth Road, Cotuit, Massachusetts, 02635, 508-428-7581, www.cahoonmuseum.org.

All illustrations are by Arthur V. Diehl from the estate of the artist.

RIGHT: *Provincetown Wharf*, o/b, 11 1/2 x 13 3/4.

BELOW RIGHT: *Going Down*, 1921, o/b, 29 x 48 1/2.

LEFT: *At The Ball*, 1921, o/b, 11 1/2 x 7 1/2.

BELOW LEFT: *Venice*, o/b, 17 1/4 x 29 1/4.

him to study at several different artists' studios in and around London and at Heatherleys, London's first independent art school. Arthur also spent hours copying paintings at The National Gallery and The British Museum. A fast learner, he soon exhausted the resources of his instructors. At





a loss as to where to send him next, his father sought the advice of Frederic Leighton, an esteemed painter and sculptor and President of The Royal Academy.

Leighton invited Alice to bring Arthur and some of his work for a Sunday critique. Unfastening the package of two canvases, Leighton looked at both and put one aside. Taking the other, he examined it closely in various lights and exclaimed: "However he painted that sky, I cannot imagine, I confess I could not do it.... He is, of course, a prodigy—a genius." His emphatic recommendation was: "Send him to Italy, if you can, by hook or by crook."²

So Arthur, at age seventeen, was sent to Milan where he became a student in the studio of Luigi Stefani, a Lombardian realist painter of land- and seascapes. Diehl also spent hours copying in The Pinacoteca



di Brera. Stefani was a good teacher and his choice of subject matter influenced Diehl's work, although Diehl turned more toward

Impressionism than to realism. Two years later in 1889, when the nineteen-year-old Diehl returned to London, he submitted



ABOVE: *Heading West*, 1920, o/b, 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$.

ABOVE LEFT: *Sand Dunes*, 1920, o/b, 17 x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$.

LEFT: *London*, o/b, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$.

RIGHT: *The Evening Flats*, o/b, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$.

BELOW RIGHT: *Girl at Easel*, o/b, 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$.

BELOW FAR RIGHT: Photograph, Arthur Diehl in his studio.

the painting *Adleburgh Quay* to The Royal Academy. The watery landscape of a landing at Adleburgh along the banks of the Thames River was accepted, hung, and sold for one hundred pounds—a considerable sum at that time.

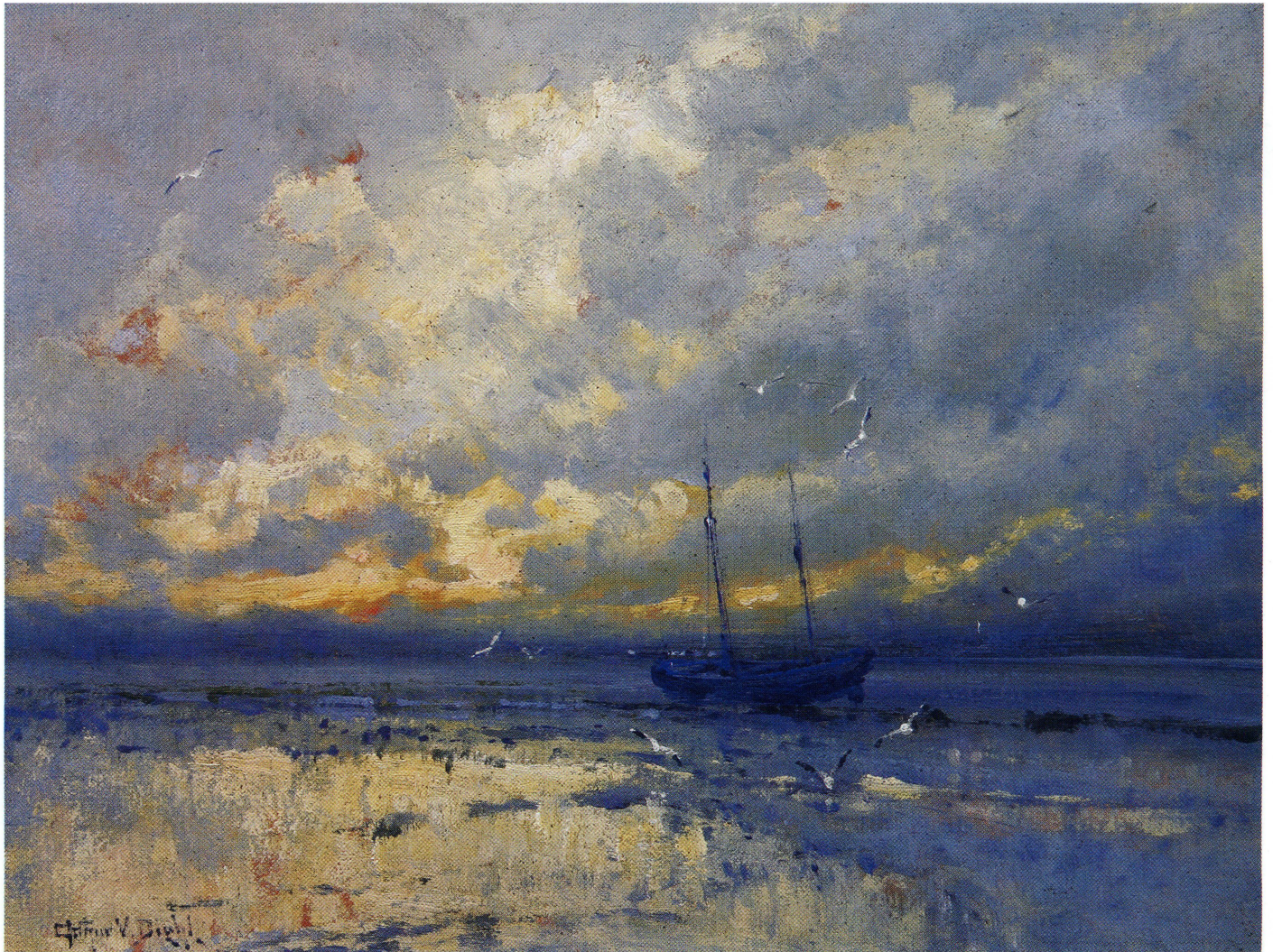
Despite this entry into the British art establishment, Diehl gave up a promising career and chose instead at twenty-three to

sail to America, as many did, in search of adventure and a new life. Landing in New York without money or connections, he found it impossible to survive by selling his watercolors. To his benefit, he had since the age of twelve actively cultivated his ability to paint from memory; he had also logged many hours copying in major museums. Consequently, he became ecstatic

when he first landed a job at a firm on Park Place that sold copies of European paintings that they imported from Vienna. Other artists were hired to copy the imported paintings, but Diehl was able to produce the kinds of paintings they wanted from memory. He knew this work was purely commercial, but it enabled him to support himself and practice his technique. He learned to be efficient and develop ways to complete full-sized paintings in less than an hour—a virtue that became increasingly important when supply exceeded demand and prices fell.

After fifteen years of what he called abject slavery and exploitation by his employer, in 1909 Diehl was ready to go out on his own. He opened a studio in Asbury Park on the New Jersey shore. Diehl later described the studio, inspired by his brief work in theater with the Barrymores, as intended to increase interaction between the often-alienated artist and the public:

My idea was to open a public studio where I could work and where people were free to come and go as they



pleased. It was a novelty then because artists usually painted in secret and only brought out their work for show after it was finished. Because it was such a novelty, my place was crowded. I had not a moment to myself. In fact, very often I could not get time enough to eat properly. Quite frequently I took in hundreds of dollars a day.³

Diehl first visited Cape Cod in 1912, having taken the overnight voyage on the Fall River Line from New York. He and his wife, Jennie, then rode the train to Truro, Massachusetts, where Jennie had reserved a cottage at Ballston Beach. Though Ballston Beach was small, it was busy and picturesque. The dunes were enticing and the surf was high. Diehl did some painting and sketching at their cottage. He also helped retrieve bodies of men lost from one of the many ships that foundered there on the shoals along the coast. This visit was the beginning of a love for Cape Cod that would last for the rest of his life.



Diehl first rented a studio in Provincetown in the summer of 1913 and in 1914 he permanently moved his summer studio location to Provincetown. Out on the furthest tip of the cape, this very quaint



town was home to a renowned art colony. Diehl rented a small place on Commercial Street, which had one main room in which he painted and displayed his work. The walls were virtually papered with paint-



ings. He welcomed people inside and gave them an experience to remember. The paintings he sold of the docks and boatyards, steam liners, and Cape Cod's massive sand dunes are the ones for which he is best remembered. Diehl painted all day, and in the evenings entertained people

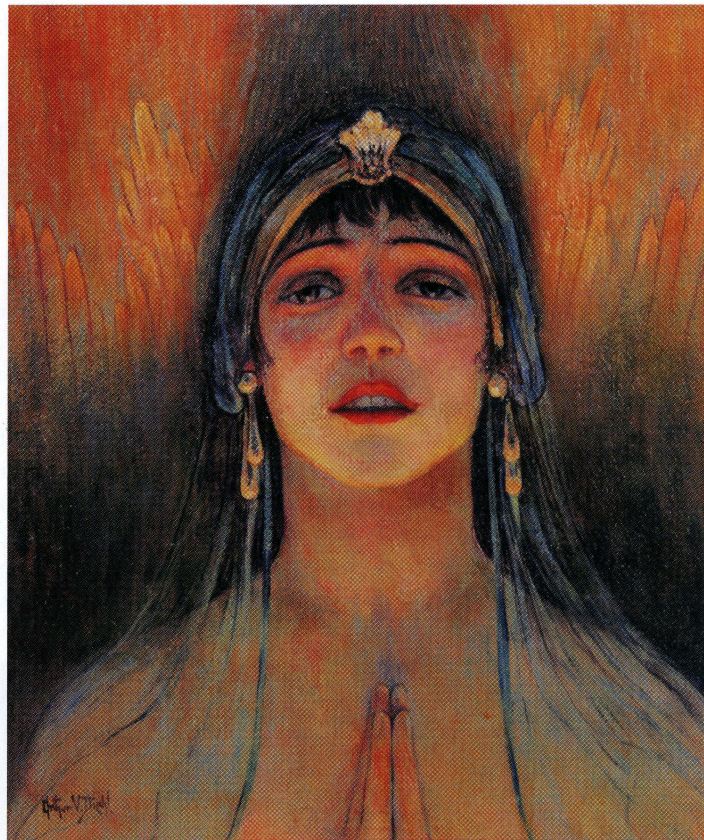
with his painting demonstrations and philosophical discussions.

Provincetown was a perfect match for Diehl's personality. He greatly enjoyed the activity of a busy tourist season. He was a quick man in manner and wit and thrived on the hustle and bustle of the lively fishing

port, tourist town, and artist colony. Open, honest, friendly, and outgoing, Diehl loved people, and the local people there, mostly of Portuguese descent, admired and loved him in return.

World War I was a deeply emotional and dark time during which Diehl closed his studio and refused to sell any paintings. He supported his family by giving paintings to his beloved patron, Mrs. Frederick E. Snow, whom he had met in Boston, in exchange for the use of a cottage on her estate at the Head of the Bay, near Buzzards Bay. As for everyone else, he said: "Put your money in Liberty Bonds, I am not selling any paintings."

After the war, he reopened his Commercial Street location and his dark and moody palette lightened up and perhaps reflected the special quality of light on Cape Cod. Diehl used simple applications of paint, color, and form to create believable images full of mood and atmosphere. He used a limited palette of succulent colors and employed a strong sense of light and shadow; in many of his works, light is the unifying element.



ABOVE: *Abstract Wharf, Provincetown*, o/b, 9 1/2 x 7 1/2.

ABOVE FAR RIGHT: *Pagan Prayer*, o/b, 14 x 11 1/2.

RIGHT: *The Dorothy Bradford*, 1920, o/b, 19 1/2 x 22 1/4.

ABOVE LEFT: *Halifax*, o/b, 15 1/2 x 23.

BELOW LEFT: *In the Country*, oil on cardboard, 5 3/4 x 8 1/2.

Preferring to work from memory, Diehl very rarely painted on location. He had a process that he called “absorbing,” in which he absorbed a scene into his mind and recalled and painted it later. “Any landscape that I have once seen and in which I was interested I can reproduce. There is not a capital in Europe that has not added to the pictures that are stacked away in my mind, all ready to be put on canvas when they are needed.”⁴

Diehl’s passion was to provide real art to people of average income. To accomplish this goal, he had to keep up his speed by relying on his memory and employing other labor- and time-saving techniques. By keeping his prices down, he accomplished his heartfelt wish—to provide real art to people who couldn’t otherwise afford it.

¹ Alice M. Diehl, *The True Story of My Life*,



An Autobiography (New York: John Lane Company, MCMVIII), p. 295.

² *Ibid.*, pgs. 322-323.

³ Arthur V. Diehl, “Ad Astra Per Aspera,

One Case of One Artist,” (1918): p. 19.

⁴ Charles Battell Loomis, “This Man Diehl, The Champion Speedpainter of America,” *Success Magazine*, (May 1909): p. 300.