

Sunday Globe Magazine Section

Boston, Sunday Morning, August 27, 1916

BIGGEST ART COLONY IN THE WORLD AT PROVINCETOWN

THE ART COLONY AT PROVINCETOWN

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1- A group of George Elmer Browne's students at work outdoors | 6 - One of Hawthorne's classes painting from model on the wharf. |
| 2 - A group of etchers. From left to right, F.H. Marvin, C.A. Slade, George Senseney, A.W. Blondheim. | 7 - A famous local model. |
| 3- One of the picturesque old wharves. | 8 - E. Ambrose Webster painting before a class. |
| 4- O.H. Gieberich. | 9 - Harold P. Browne |
| 5- Charles W. Hawthorne | 10- George Elmer Browne |
| | 11- The Beachcombers clubhouse. |
-
-

By A.J. PHILPOTT

Provincetown has probably the biggest art colony in the world at the present time. There are said to be more than 600 in the colony, from all sections of the United States, including painters, sculptors, etchers, actors, musicians, writers and playwrights of distinction, art students of all kinds, and a choice assortment of professional models whose faces and forms will be seen on the magazine cover and in the picture exhibitions of the future.

Here it nestles on the edge of the water, sheltered from the sou'westers by a spit of sand that terminates in a little lighthouse, and from the north-eastern gales by the mountains of sand that are being constantly shifted into fantastic wave forms by the fury of the ocean storms.

Sensitive, creative minds love such an environment; others see - nothing in it. And perhaps that is a fortunate thing. It is one of Nature's laboratories in which creative minds and artistic souls can work, and is in a way a demonstration of Gosse's theory that "Nature loves to refresh the pools of thought from distant and sequestered springs, and nourishes her Winckelmanns in the arid wastes of Brunswick, and brings forth her Thorwaldsens from a squalid village in Iceland."

And so these artists and writers, and "outlanders" generally, constitute a little world by themselves with interests remote from those of the native born yet connected by that subtle bond or force which brings opposites near together yet keeps them apart.

The imagination has full play here, for there are few of those intense, social diversions and compelling commercial forces which rack brains and nerves to the shrieking point and make even a cabaret seem like a condiment. People eat very quietly and sensibly in Provincetown - even at the Beachcombers Club.

A Little World of Its Own

Yes, this "Art Colony" - as it is called - is a little world of its own - distinct in nearly every way from the real and historic Provincetown, but vitalizing in an artistic way all that the old town stands for, and all that it has stood for since the first Pilgrim landed here, in 1620, and the compact for freedom and independence was signed in the cabin of the Mayflower in this harbor.

Those old Pilgrims were the first to sense the spirit of freedom that floats over this part of Cape Cod, where one is conscious of the forces as well as the beauties of nature in the vast sea and boundless sky.

There is nothing pretty or conventional about nature here. You couldn't grow tea roses nor box hedges on the dunes, and the people who settled on the curving, sheltered beach had an individuality and independence of spirit that is stamped on every house and shack in the place.

It would seem almost as if they plant-

ed their houses wherever they "darned pleased." That is why the place looks so quaint and it is probably what caused one middle-aged woman visitor to remark the other day:

"Well, this is the most antiques place I ever saw."

If you could see the expression on the spectacled face of that woman you would excuse the double superlative. In point of fact it takes some little time to wear off the feeling of strangeness which the place first inspires - the narrow main street, the surprising little cottages and the occasional big willows, all overtopped by an incongruous tower that is called a monument - a stretched-out copy of the "Toro," built in the 12th century, in the city of Siena, in Italy. Yet there is a certain harmony in the very incongruity of this tower, although it is devoid of a single suggestion that would in any way symbolize what the Pilgrim fathers stood for. They never copied anybody. They were original. A totem pole would be just as appropriate, if not more so.

Mostly Women

But the thing that staggers the visitor these days is the art students - mostly women - with their easels set up at nearly every house corner and street corner, on wharves, in old boats, in lofts, in yards, along the beach - anywhere and everywhere you go - painters, painters, painters!

You see them in classes on the wharves with a model posed on a dory or a fish tub, or something else. The model may be one of the dark-eyed Portuguese girls of the town, or a "professional" from New York who knows how to "hold" a pose. Or it may be that one of the town characters - a fisherman of other days who has lost the sprightliness and vitality necessary to handle a dory and haul a trawl on the Georges Banks.

I talked to one of these latter whom I met in the course of my rambles about the wharves. He was sitting on the stair porch of a little building overlooking one of the wharves on which at the time were a number of students sketching a young woman. He was smoking his pipe in a peaceful, ruminant sort of way when I asked him if he had ever posed. He chuckled and replied: "Yes, I posed some last year."

"How did you like it?"

"It's all right, if you ain't proud or stuck on yourself. Of course I'm not much on looks nohow, but you ought to've seen me when they got through with me."

He removed his pipe from his mouth and roared for a moment. When he got placid and ruminant again I suggested: "They were probably trying to get your true character."

"Shucks!" he exploded. I guess I

know my own character. If I had the kind of character some of 'em gave me I ought to been in jail."

"It was probably a futurist portrait of you they painted," I ventured.

"What's that?"

A Bit Hazy Concerning the Future

"A portrait of you as you might look some time in the future," I explained.

"How the h___ do they know how I'm going to look in the future" he blurted.

"The futurists claim to be able to see a person as that person will look at some future time or under some future condition," I explained.

"If that's so then my future ain't no pleasant dream," he soliloquized. And so we parted.

As I turned the corner of the building I almost fell over a young woman in a sea-green smock and a panama hat, seated in front of an easel sketching. She was thoroughly absorbed in her work. I asked her pardon. She merely nodded and kept right on painting purple shadows in the sketch of an old wharf across the way. She was one of the independents who do not sketch with the classes, but set up their easels wherever fancy dictates. And some of them - judging from the places on which they perch - are not subject to vertigo.

I asked one of the independents if she found many picturesque bits in Provincetown.

A Color Dream

"The place is a color dream," she answered.

And that is just what it is. And that is why the artists flock here. The sun doesn't always shine in Provincetown, however. There are stormy days, and gray days, and drab days, but these are also interesting to the painters though anything but interesting to the tourist and casual visitor. There is the mystery of gray luminosity in such days. There is a distinctive quality in the light of the place at all times, so that nearly every phase of the weather has a particular color charm for the painter.

There are four principal schools of painting here, each with a leader, or master. There is the Hawthorne school, led by Charles W. Hawthorne, N.A., who has been living here for 17 years and who has a picturesque house on top of

Charles W. Hawthorne has done more to put Provincetown "on the map" as a resort for painters than any other one man in the place. Such men as the late Mark Waterman and R. Sivain Gifford, however, knew all about - and painted - the dunes 30 to 40 years ago.

Next in importance to the Hawthorne School is probably the school of George Elmer Browne, although it is only a couple of years old.

Mr. Browne is a native of Cape Cod but most of his art life has been spent in Europe until the outbreak of the war. Then he brought his students to Provincetown, and among these one of the most gifted is his son, Harold P. Browne.

Mr. Browne encourages his students to paint pictures at once - to accomplish something that will have a market value. He takes them out on the wharves and lanes, and they also work in the studio, which is on a wharf.

He strives to develop memory for color and form, and to work indoors from sketches. He himself does this sort of thing in a remarkable successful way. He believes that from nature one can get the suggestions for the picture, but that the picture might be worked out in the studio on a largely different plan or pattern.

He too has a studio in the "Row" where he is doing some large, and important work. He has a strong sense of decorative values and he paints in a big, free way, paying close attention to his drawing and the color balances of his composition.

He rushes around the place in an auto which he manipulates himself and his costume is just as simple and democratic as Hawthorne's. His pictures are well known abroad and in some of the big galleries in this country.

The Webster School

Now comes a much more radical school than either of these - the school which is led by E. Ambrose Webster. He has a large following and many of them follow him to Bermuda in Winter.

Those familiar with the style of Dodge McNight will have some idea of Mr. Webster's style. The latter uses oil colors, however.

I saw him painting on the roadside one day for the benefit of his class, and his method is certainly strenuous. He

one of the highest of the hills in the town, and a large studio in "Studio Row" in the West End of the town.

Mr. Hawthorne has about 100 pupils at the present time. He has a very distinctive style of painting, in which the chief aim is to get the out-of-door quality of light and color - even in portraits.

In his work is combined both impressionism and realism - the impressionism of pure color juxtaposition, always softened and blended in the mystery of light effects, and the realism which does not offend by too close attention to detail.

Apparently his purpose is to study the illuminant effect of light on color. And this includes, on clear days, the midday iridescence of white light, the warmer radiance of the afternoon, and the cool blue of the forenoon, and if the sun is observed there are the subtle beauties of the grays.

Mr. Hawthorne has his students paint from the model out-of-doors, usually on a wharf and without umbrellas. The model must be painted in relation to the broad color and light effects of the environment. He strives, however, to impress the student with the necessity of developing his, or her, own individuality.

He simply desires that they shall paint on the broad principles that he lays down, and he criticizes the work on the spot two or three times a week. In addition he occasionally makes a sketch himself from the model in the presence of the pupils and this goes to the student fortunate enough to draw it by lot.

It is the work of the "Master" and is highly prized, for there is no doubt among the students and artists of the colony about Mr. Hawthorne's mastership. His pictures are in great demand these days for the museums and big private collections.

Mr. Hawthorne is a hard-working, thoughtful, modest man, democratic and well liked by everybody. He rides around from his studio to the wharf where his classes paint and to his home on a bicycle in a loose blue shirt and khaki trousers.

Smocks of Various Hues

But then everybody in this place dresses in an unconventional way and all of the girls wear, broad-brimmed hats and smocks of such various hues that when you see a crowd of them painting on a wharf they look like a sort of human flower garden.

stood up in front of the easel and canvas and gave me the impression of a man fencing. He would crouch and parry and thrust at the canvas with all of the nervous and physical intensity of a fencer.

He would look steadily and very intensely at the particular object, or portion of the scene he was painting then dab the brush in a color on his palette, wave the brush a few times as he looked again at his "antagonist" then make a lunge at the canvas.

Even more than Hawthorne his object is to paint light - to get vibration and luminosity by means of pure color and a generous use of purple. It is a high key in which he paints and the very nervousness of his style seems somehow to give a sort of vibrating character to the whole light effect. There is no fumbling - every stroke counts. There is a tremendous effort in it all and it would seem as if the painter must be about "all in" after an hour or two of such work.

Painting Without Drawing

Few of them down here bother very much with drawing. Webster just paints the color forms flat and when the colors are all laid down - that's the picture. And at the end he usually has a picture, but others are apt to get horribly tangled up in the process, with the objects askew and out of proportion. It is a big man's job to paint as Webster paints, and perhaps that is one reason why so many women like the style.

But to do it successfully one must carry form as well as color accurately in the vision and be able to transfer them to canvas just as accurately.

You must see true. The danger of such a method for many people would be to lie in the intensity with which the painter looks at the object and the particular color. If you look at any color long enough and intensely enough you can come pretty near seeing the whole spectrum in and around it. It requires strong eyesight.

However, it is fascinating, and the result is satisfying if the forms and pattern are in any kind of harmony. Those who paint in the Webster style are apt to "look down" on those who paint in the Browne or the Hawthorne methods, and vice versa. For any style of paint-

ing is right - for those who follow that particular style - and all others are wrong. Yet no two people see colors exactly alike.

Mr. Webster is a serious painter and he has done some notable work - in this style.

The Modern School

But there is one particular school here that considers itself just a little bit "ultra" and all the others as more or less in the amateur class. This is what is known as the "modern school" of which Bror J. O. Nordfeldt and William Zorach and Marguerite Zorach are the leaders.

They are essentially "futurists" - at least that is what the public at large would call them. Their work is certainly reminiscent of that famous futuristic exhibition in Boston and New York a few years ago in which the vibrating bundle of shingles called "Nude Lady Coming Down Stairs" was one of the particular gems, and the man with the face made out of cubes and cones was another, to say nothing of the Cezanne decorations.

An enthusiastic admirer of this modern school, pointing to a picture by one of the leaders a few days ago, said:

"That's a thousand years ahead of the times."

That lets me out. I'm barely up with the times, and I know a lot of good sculptors who are 2400 years behind the Greeks, and a lot of good painters who are 500 years behind Michael Angelo, Raphael, Titian, Veronese, Holbein and a few others - at least nobody has quite caught up with these artists and sculptors as yet, and if the moderns are 1000 years ahead of the best artists of today, comparisons are out of the question, and discussion would be fruitless.

There is, however, one other construction that might be put on that statement. The human race will be 1000 years older when it catches up with this school, and it may have the senility that accompanies old age. Lombroso and others, after studying this kind of art from a psychical standpoint, concluded that much of it was an evidence of mental senility - a manifestation of that curious reversion of old people to childishness, childish ways and childish methods of looking at things. But at what Lombroso might have been wrong. Who knows?

Must Have Courage

One thing is dead sure - it takes the passion and courage of a strong conviction to begin work now for the admiration and appreciation of the people who will be inhabiting this "vale of tears" 1000 years from now.

But the leaders and followers and admirers of this modern school of painting down here are just as satisfied with their work as are any of the others of theirs, and more so.

So there you are. What are you going to do about it? It is the case of the old Quaker and his wife all over again, when he said to her:

"Everybody in this world is queer but thee and me, and thee's a little queer."

To get back to the simpler things of life it might be well to consider briefly the school of etchers that have established themselves here in a studio on the waterfront under the leadership of George Senseney, president of the Chicago Etchers Association.

They are not so many nor so much in evidence as the followers of the other schools, but they are just as serious and hardworking; and they are doing some mighty good work with the needle, the acid, the copper-plate, and the printing press.

It is a pleasure to call on any of the groups and leaders here, but it is something of a treat to call on the etchers and have Senseney greet you in his whole-souled way. The group includes Frederick H. Marvin, C. Arnold Slade, Beatrice S. Levy, Marylka H. Modjeska, Oscar H. Gieberich, Albert Groil and Adolphe W. Blondheim.

Senseney is doing some mighty good work in color etching, as are Slade and Miss Modjeska. Marvin is translating some of his fine lead pencil sketches of Venice into terms of line and tint on the copper plate, and the others are doing whatever fancy dictates. There is a splendid fellowship among these etchers.

Beside these groups and classes there is one painter who is regarded by the others as in a class by himself. That is Arthur V. Diehl, painter, poet, musician, entertainer, business man. But he's another story.

The Provincetown Players

And then there are the Provincetown Players, with a unique theatre of their own and including some eminent actors and writers of plays, and artists and sculptors who have been bitten by the "stage bug."

And there are the Beachcombers - a very democratic club - including most of the big geniuses in all lines in the art colony with a picturesque club house on the end of a wharf. And there are the Meisterstagers who come over from Wellfleet occasionally, and there is the Provincetown Art Association - also very democratic-and-well the old town is just full of things that simply can't be squeezed into one article to say nothing of the three battleships in the harbor with several thousand Jackies and about half a thousand of middies from Annapolis.

All these things and people have so featured the staid old town that the authorities have found it necessary to double the police force. The town formerly had one policeman - now it has two.

[illegible]