



by Erik R. Brockett



the influence of

FORMED BY GLACIAL DEPOSITS OF ROCK and sand, Massachusetts's Cape Cod extends nearly seventy miles into the Atlantic Ocean. Situated at its northern extreme, with water on three sides, is Provincetown, home to the oldest continuous artist colony in America. The impact of the artists who have worked and lived here has been felt well beyond

in Provincetown and desire to start his own school came about in part through his prior relationship with William M. Chase (1849–1916) with whom he began studying in the 1890s at New York's Art Students League, an institution which would see many of its alumni active in the colony. Chase was known for his summer outdoor painting

of Franz Hals, Hawthorne came to Provincetown, and perhaps in part motivated by Chase's slight, opened the Cape Cod School of Art. Modeled after Chase's summer school, Hawthorne taught the principles of impressionism along with his own color theories. An enthusiastic instructor, the school flourished under his direction, having

Provincetown

its remote location. Perhaps Provincetown's contributions to the development of art in the United States are best summarized by historian Ronald A. Kuchta: "Provincetown is the origin of many famous paintings in the history of the twentieth-century American art, not only the place where they were painted, but where they were first exhibited, discussed and sold."



as many as ninety students per session from various parts of the nation. In his own work he continued to experiment with color and light in perceptive portraits and genre scenes. Among his best-known paintings is *His First Voyage*, 1914 (Fig. 1) depicting a figural group before a table at the center of which stands a boy whose detached expression epitomizes Hawthorne's psychological insight and serves as the focal point of the work.

Hawthorne's work fits comfortably within the confines of the academic painting tradition, in contrast with that of Edwin Ambrose Webster

on American Art

Provincetown began attracting painters when its accessibility was improved with the arrival of the railroad in the 1870s. In addition to the area's singular natural beauty and inexpensive summer lodgings, artists were lured by the activity on the wharfs of one of the busiest sea ports in New England. In 1899, Charles W. Hawthorne (1872–1930) established the first of several noted Provincetown art schools. Hawthorne's arrival

classes held in Long Island, New York, where he taught his plein air style. In 1897, in recognition of his talent for painting and instruction, Chase appointed Hawthorne assistant at his summer school. The following year, Hawthorne learned that Chase had closed his school without offering him the opportunity to take it over. In 1899, on his return to America after a stay in Holland where he was influenced by the tonal works





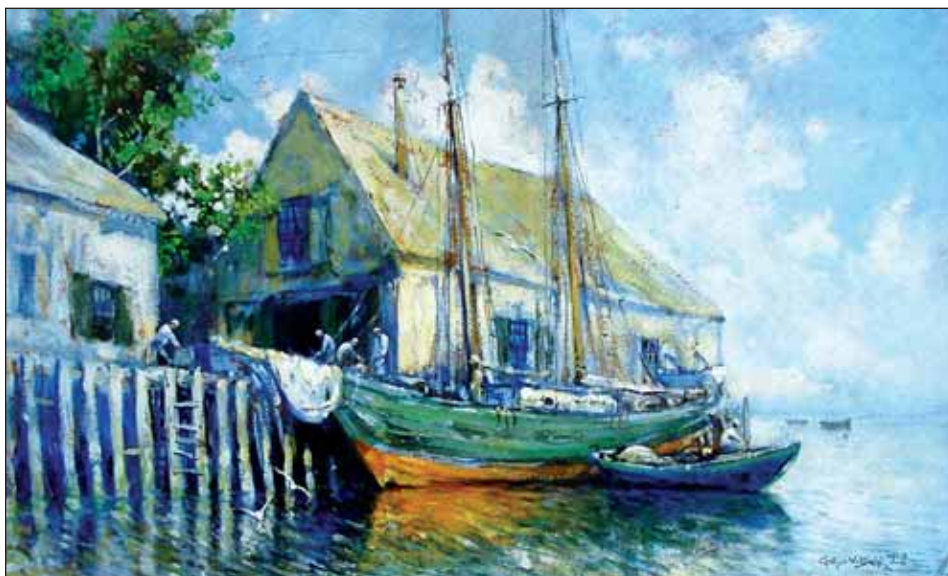
Fig. 1: Charles W. Hawthorne (1872–1930), *His First Voyage*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Signed and titled verso. Courtesy of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. Gift of Joseph Hawthorne, Provincetown, MA.

(1869–1935), who opened Provincetown's second art school in 1900. Following training at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts School, Webster traveled to Europe, where he studied at the Academie Julian in Paris, another institutional experience common to many early Provincetown artists. Later he painted landscapes in Holland, where he began to experiment with strong color and broken brushwork. At the school he directed for thirty-five years, Webster taught a progressive approach to the use of color, providing a modernist alternative to Hawthorne's classes. Considered the pioneer of modernism in Provincetown, he lectured widely and was invited to exhibit at the New York Armory Show of 1913. Although consistently active in Provincetown during the summers, Webster fre-

quently traveled to Europe or warmer climates during the rest of the year. In the late teens and again in the 1920s he went to France, which resulted in an increased emphasis on cubism in his work, and a belief in a conceptual approach to painting which involved the use of pattern, rhythm, and geometry. Webster's *New England Seaside Cottage*, circa 1915 (Fig. 2), a sunlight landscape dominated by long shadows cast by richly colored plants in its foreground, exemplifies his work from this era.

Several prominent artists were active early on in the growing colony. Among them was

William Halsall (1841–1919), the well-regarded maritime painter who began working in the area in the 1890s. Halsall's conservative, realistic style served as a dying counterpoint to trends increasingly popular with younger generations. Arthur Vidal Diehl (1870–1929), who like Halsall was native to England, came to America in the last decade of the nineteenth century and was soon painting in Provincetown. He was well-known for his capacity to conduct entertaining, largely one-sided conversations for the benefit of spectators or prospective customers as he quickly painted the local sand dunes or harbor. His associations with Cape Cod became so well known that in 1921 Fox Movietone made a short film of him at work



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Fig. 2: Edwin Ambrose Webster (1869–1935), *New England Seaside Cottage*, circa 1915. Oil on canvas, 27½ x 34½ inches. Signed lower left. Courtesy of Childs Gallery, Boston, MA.

in Provincetown. Diehl's *At the Dock*, (Fig. 3) dating from 1928, well represents his work as a mature artist. Waterfront activities are rendered with an attention to detail that is accurate but unlabored. Figures at work on the dock and the undulating water below offer a sense of motion that, along with the contrast provided by the bright hull of the vessel, engage the viewer. Boston-based William

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Fig. 3: Arthur V. Diehl (1870–1929), *At the Dock*, 1928. Oil on canvasboard, 18 x 30 inches. Signed and dated lower right: "Arthur V. Diehl 1928." Courtesy of Roy & Sheila Mennell, Bradford Trust Fine Art, Harwich Port, MA.

McGregor Paxton (1869–1941) was one of the earliest artists to spend summers in Provincetown. Known for his figural work, which brought him wide renown and commercial success, he is remembered as the only artist owning an automobile in Provincetown prior to the First World War.

Other younger artists who came to Provincetown for instruction at this time later

played an important role in the development of the colony. Gerrit Beneker (1882–1934), born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York. In 1912 he attended Hawthorne's summer painting classes and consistently returned to Provincetown throughout his career. His landscapes, rendered in an impressionistic style, contrasted with the studio work he created as a commercial illustrator. Sensitive to the dignity of the common man he depicted individuals at work ranging from steel mill employees in the Midwest to Cape Cod fishermen. In *Provincetown Pier*, painted in 1915 (Fig. 4), Beneker employs an intense pallet and a decided impasto to depict the Provincetown wharves on a sunny winter's day. Abruptly cropped elements close to the picture plane create an engaging composition in which Beneker's understanding of the effects of shadow and sunlight is clearly displayed.

Born in New York in 1886, Oscar Gieberich studied at the Art Students League and at the Cape Cod School of Art where, by 1916, he had become Hawthorne's assistant. Over the course of his career he exhibited at several noted venues including the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago. Although he traveled widely, he remained loyal to Provincetown, working there into the 1940s. Gieberich's *Provincetown Harbor*, circa 1917 (Fig. 5) is a sun-washed representation of dories and larger fishing boats at rest rendered in reflective, jewel-like tones. The work derives its strength from the relationship between broad areas of color rather than detail, and in so doing borders on abstraction. Other artists who arrived in Provincetown as young men prior to the First World War and would do much to shape its modernistic movements were Oliver Chaffee (1881–1944), Ross Moffett (1888–1971), and Edwinson W. Dickinson (1891–1978). In 1914 Hawthorne, Webster, Halsall, Beneker and Gieberich helped found the Provincetown Art Association (now the Provincetown Art Association and Museum) and donated examples of their work to form the nucleus of its collection. In the summer of 1915 a juried

show with over forty participating artists marked the beginning of the association's annual exhibitions and in October 1916, a traveling show opened at Vose Galleries in Boston with sixty-eight works. The association's membership rose sharply when the First World War closed Europe to travelers. With their training and experience abroad, artists returning from Europe were held in particularly high esteem. Among them were Max Bohm (1858–1923), John Noble (1874–1934), and Richard E. Miller (1875–1943), all of whom became noted figures in Provincetown. The arrival of some of the returning artist was a result, at least in part, to the encouragement of Hawthorne, who was active among a circle of American painters in Paris shortly before the start of the war.

By 1916 the instructor and student population comprised over three hundred individuals, twenty-five of whom were year-round residents, and the town was home to three more recently formed schools in addition to those started by Hawthorne and Webster. George Elmer Brown (1871–1946), like Webster, attended Boston's Museum of Fine Arts School and the Academie Julian before teaching in Provincetown where he opened his West End School. Brown was recognized for his landscapes, in which he strove to capture the essence of a specific location within a lively and engaging composition. He emphasized the importance of composition to his students when it was not the common practice. Although he traveled extensively he regularly returned to Provincetown, where he was active until his death. George Eyster Senseney (1874–1943) who studied at the Academie Julian and taught at the Art Students League of New York is considered the first artist in America to have practiced color etching. Although his classes on the subject were offered in Provincetown for only two seasons, printmaking thrived in the colony for many years. Opened in 1916, A Modern School of Art, despite the reputation of its faculty, which included Bror J. O.

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Fig. 4: Gerrit A. Beneker (1872–1976), *Provincetown Pier*, 1915. Oil on Canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Signed and dated lower left: "Gerrit A. Beneker / Feb 1915." Courtesy of Clarke Galleries, Stowe, VT.

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Fig. 5: Oscar Gieborich (b. 1886), *Provincetown Harbor*, circa 1915–1920. Oil on Canvas, 15 x 12 inches. Signed lower left: "Gieborich" Courtesy of Clarke Galleries, Stowe, VT.

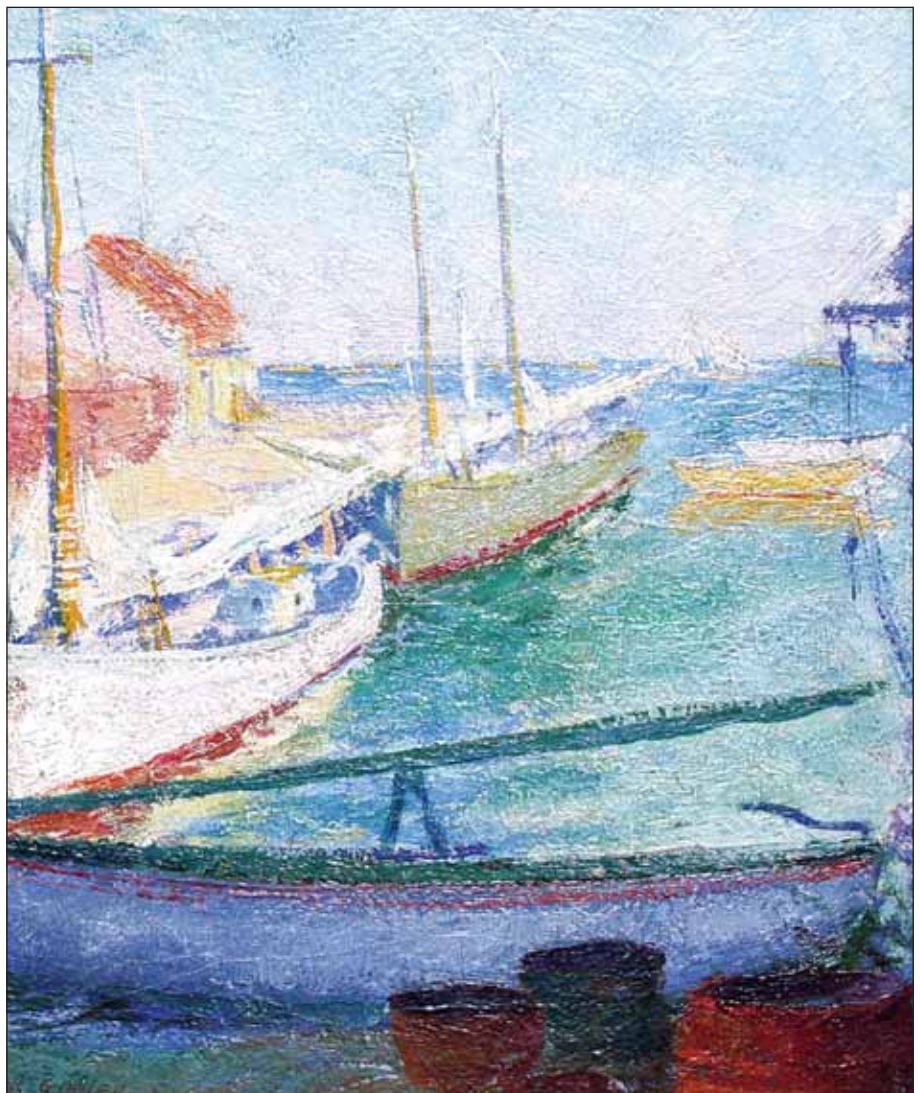




Fig. 6: Marguerite Zorach, (1887–1968), *Sunset, Provincetown*, circa 1920. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 8½ x 13 inches. Signed lower right: “M. Zorach” and inscribed lower left: “Sunset, Provincetown.” Courtesy of Alfred J. Walker Fine Art, Boston, MA.

Norfeltdt (1878–1955), and William (1887–1966) and Marguerite Zorach (1887–1968), failed to attract students its first year. This absence afforded time for the instructors to focus on their own work and participate in the productions of The Provincetown Players, a theater company established by a group of Greenwich Village-based actors and writers who summered in Provincetown. Converting a vacant fish house into The Wharf Theatre, it was here that Eugene O’Neill’s *Bound East for Cardiff* was first staged. William and Marguerite Zorach, who were both painters and sculptors, met in Paris around 1910 while studying at the progressive La Palette. During their time in France they were influenced by fauvist and cubist painting, and after returning to America they established a studio in New York and exhibited at the 1913 Armory Show. Shortly after they began coming to the colony Marguerite painted *Sunset, Provincetown* (Fig. 6), a reduced and colorful representation of a flotilla returning to port.

Nordfeldt, a well-traveled and innovative

artist is credited with inventing the white line color woodblock process, a technique in which grooves are incised around various shapes in a woodblock allowing for multiple colors to be printed from a woodblock simultaneously. Oriented toward abstraction and the use of flattened planes of color, Norfeldt’s innovation rapidly became popular with artists in Provincetown and led to the establishment of the Provincetown Printers in 1915. Their initial show was held in Ambrose Webster’s studio, but they soon had their own gallery space, in addition to organizing exhibitions that traveled the United States, Canada, and Europe. Active well into the 1920s, the group included several important modernist printmakers, Maud Hunt Squire (1873–1954) and Blanche Lazzell (1878–1956) (Fig. 8), among them. The debate between modern and traditional art

was central to the Western art world in the early twentieth century and Provincetown was involved in the fray. Although its founding members leaned toward the traditional, the Provincetown Art Association established a neutral position, displaying separate “modern” and “regular” exhibitions between 1927 and 1937. After this, different juries mounted concurrent exhibitions on opposite gallery walls. This duality was reflected by the next generations of instructors who taught in the community. Henry Hensche (1901–1992) continued the Cape School of Art after Hawthorne’s death in 1930, where he upheld Hawthorne’s traditional style of painting. In 1935 Hans Hofmann (1880–1966), established a longed-lived school in Provincetown dedicated to the principles of abstract expressionism. Hofmann’s energetic and powerful *Red Shapes* from 1946 (Fig. 9) juxtaposed with Hawthorne’s *His First Voyage*, painted thirty-two years earlier, illuminates the diversity and development of the visual arts in Provincetown.

During the 1940s and 1950s the town

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Fig. 7: Maud Hunt Squire (1873–1954), *Untitled (two fishermen)*, circa 1915. White line woodcut, 9¼ x 10¼ inches. Courtesy of Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, NY.

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Fig. 8: Blanche Lazzell (1878–1956), *Anenomes III*, 1937. Color white line block print, 15 x 13 inches. Signed and dated lower right: "Blanche Lazzell 1937." Courtesy of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. Gift of Hilary and Sidney Bamford, Provincetown, MA.

served as a center for abstract expressionists in the summer months, attracting figures such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), and Helen Frankenthaler (born 1928). At this time Provincetown witnessed the establishment of artists' cooperatives and the arrival of branches of reputable New York galleries which would continue into the 1960s. While further adding to the commercial success of the town, businesses would play a part in the developing problem of overcrowding and increased real estate costs. The community responded to this situation by forming nonprofit institutions supportive of young artists in the following decades. Consistent with its past, today Provincetown offers a diverse body of instructors and students who pursue their personal forms of expression in a verity of styles and continues to flourish as an artistic center. @



Fig. 9: Hans Hofmann (1880 – 1966), *Red Shapes*, 1946. Oil on cardboard, 25¾ x 21¾ inches. Signed lower right: "hans hofmann." Courtesy of Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York, NY.

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