

# Peter Hunt: A Village Within A Village

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Cynthia Cabot's article in the May 22, 1943 Philadelphia Inquirer stated, "Peter Hunt of Provincetown, Mass. is the leading exponent of this new and decorative American art, that of making over ugly duckling furniture into handsome or amusing pieces to adorn every home."



Reverse and tinsel painting by Peter Hunt

Text and photos by Judith Cressy

August is a most appropriate month for an exhibition titled "Peter Hunt: A Village Within a Village" in Provincetown. All the way along Commercial Street, to the Art Association and Museum where the exhibition is being shown, fenced yards overflow with bounteous growths of hollyhocks, snap dragons and turks-cap lilies. The vibrant collision of colors prepares the senses for Peter Hunt.

An artist of sorts, and a personality extraordinaire, Hunt was best known for his decorative painting of furniture which received popular attention in monumental proportions in the 1940's and 50's.

The story goes that he swept into Provincetown in a long black cape with two Afghan hounds and a dwarf in tow in the early 1920's.

Hunt later would tell the story of his arrival as, "while I was sailing up the coast from St. Petersburg, I discovered the charming little town of 'Ovince' and simply never left."

But Hunt actually was from New Jersey, born in 1896 and christened with the name Frederick Lowe Schnitzer. He served as an ambulance driver in Europe during World War I and came to Provincetown after returning to the States. As he was always his own best promoter, there is probably a certain degree of truth to the tale of dwarf and hounds.

Hunt established an antique business in Provincetown and coupled that business with his flair for painting. During the Depression and World War II, his knack for transforming old things into decorative, quaint, arty, or sometimes even beautiful pieces with a brush and a couple of cans of enamel paint, caught on and spread like wildfire.



Madonna by Peter Hunt

An August 1943 magazine article showed a picture of models dressed up as farmers posing around a painted wishing well, and the headline "Peter Hunt Salvages Cast-Offs for Helena Rubenstein's Terrace."

And an April 1943 brochure for Carbone Decorative Arts featured their "Ovince Room" where Peter Hunt's work was sold. Typical prices in the brochure included a painted serving tray for \$2.50, and a decorated Welsh dresser for \$62.50.

Transformations in the Peter Hunt manner were executed in the studios of the mythical "Ovince", the Peasant Village Shops in Provincetown. This group of



Little Freddy Schnitzer, later to become Peter Hunt, with his sister Dorothy. Collection of William Sydenstricker.

shops on a garden edged lane included displays of antiques, folk art, copper, pewter and many other items from many countries. He did, in fact, create something of a little village where clients could take in the entire Peter Hunt experience or hire him to decorate their home.

But the heart of the Peasant Village was the workshop itself where Hunt often had as many as 10 people working for him as apprentices, carpenters and base painters.

The young people he trained to paint in his style actually did most of the decorating of furniture and smaller pieces, although his name was signed and not theirs.

Nancy Whorf Kelly, who was at one time an apprentice in the workshop and has had her own shop