

## Richard Florsheim

Now in his fiftieth year, Richard Florsheim, the American painter and printmaker, can look back on a most successful career that began at seventeen, when he first showed in a national exhibition. Yet in spite of his work having been widely shown throughout the United States, in Mexico, and in Europe, and belonging in the permanent collections of important museums both here and abroad, his art has not become frozen, nor has his abundant enthusiasm for continuous growth abated.

Born in Chicago in 1916, Florsheim inherited a predilection for art from his mother, who had studied painting in St. Paul. Still, he admits that following his graduation from the Chicago Latin School and subsequent training at Chicago University, he had to combat parental disapproval of his decision to make art a career. However, his persistence paid off, and with his parents' reluctant support and financial assistance, Florsheim set off to study art independently in Europe. He worked abroad for several years, before World War II broke out and, like many artists of military age, his career was interrupted by service in the armed forces, in his case as a naval lieutenant.

Returning to Chicago, he took a studio and began painting, unleashing his pent-up feeling for those urban subjects that in a short time were to bring him critical acclaim and a special identity among American artists.

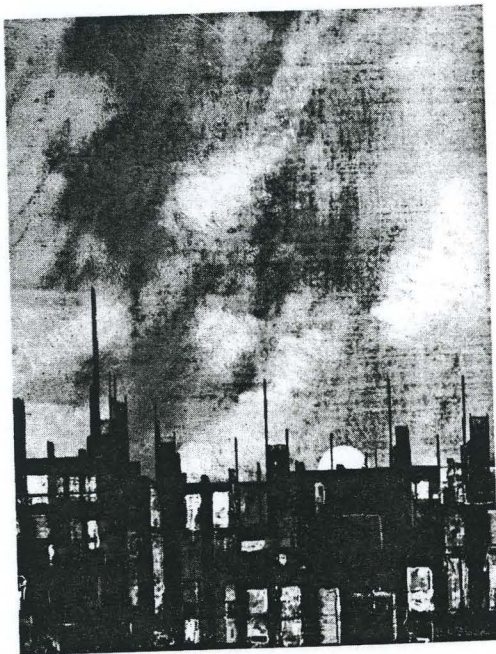
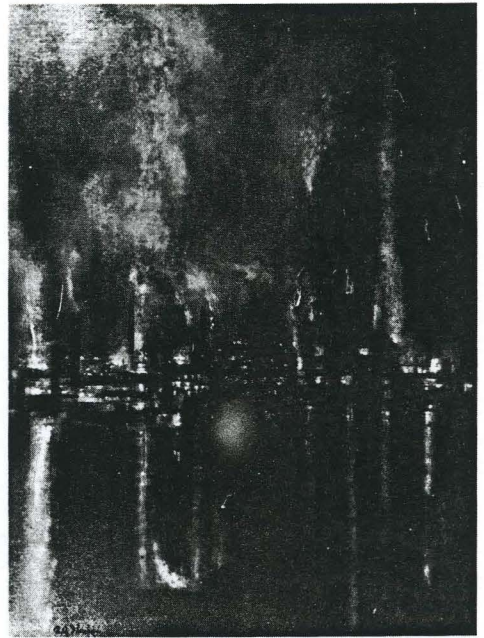
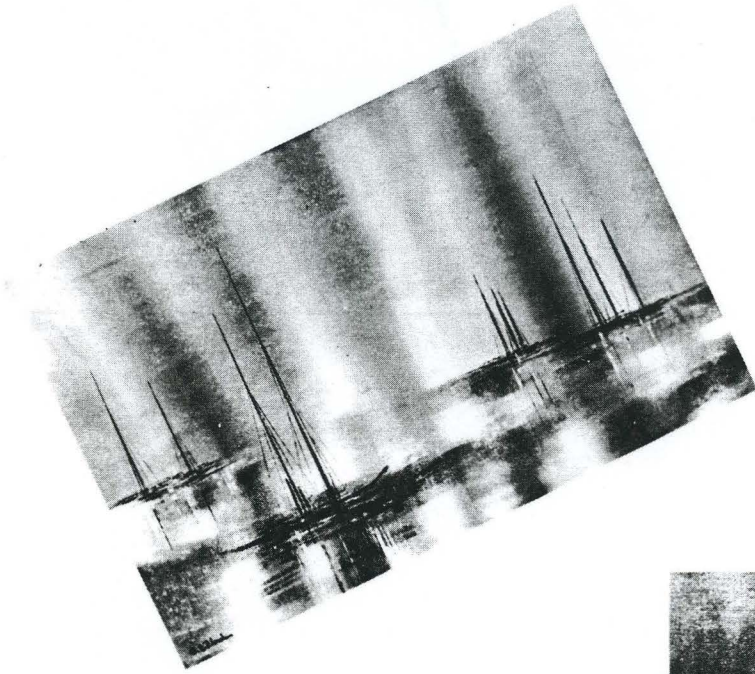
This individuality has not been limited to the Florsheim paintings, but manifests itself in his prints — particularly his lithographs — since, as the artist attests in the text that follows, his passion for making prints has run concurrently with his activity as a painter.

In addition to independent art, Richard Florsheim has taught in various art schools, workshops, and colleges for short, concentrated periods of time, and has appeared as a lecturer in many cities throughout the country.

During winter the Florsheims live in Chicago—except for annual trips to Europe — and in summer at Provincetown where, since 1954, Richard has become one of this famous colony's most enthusiastic residents.









A  
Neighbor's  
Memoir

DICK FLORSHEIM

by Richard McKown

**I MET RICHARD AND HELEN Florsheim in June, 1966, when my current girlfriend and future wife invited me to her parents' home in the East End of Provincetown. Umberto and Clorinda Romano lived next door. Joe and Virginia Kaplan lived two doors away. Hudson and Ione Walker summered across the street. Mervin and Rita Jules were situated a half-block away toward the center of town. Phil and Barbara Malicoat lived yearround in the woods across Bradford Street. Friends were constantly coming in and out of each other's houses. I had never been in such an interesting neighborhood.**

Dick was born in 1916 into a well-to-do Chicago family. His father was an entrepreneur, owning a fleet of Chicago taxis and parking garages, which he parlayed into trucking and Hertz Rent-a-Car and Thor tools. Growing up, he developed an undercurrent of civility after being taken into the family of the poet Archibald MacLeish and participating actively in conversations at their dinner table. He attended the University of Chicago, then made two trips to Paris, frequenting museums. His father wished him to join the family business. He wished to become an artist. When he became an artist, he also turned his back on his upper-class background. For the rest of his life, it became a matter of pride for him to earn his living through his work.

He bought the house in Provincetown with a mortgage, and tore down the partitions to create a large living room, a second-floor studio, and only one bedroom so it would be impossible to have overnight guests. The house was utilitarian and unpretentious, yet warm and elegant. The

front entrance, hidden behind the high privet hedge, contained a small rectangle of closely-cropped grass and flowers. The wild roses did the best. My favorite was a bi-color, a yellow and orange tea rose named Circus. Each year, Helen coaxed it back from saltspray winterkill to produce a few exquisite blooms. One year, she ordered a thousand ladybugs as a natural way to destroy the aphids which ate the garden plants. A small parcel arrived. That evening she brought us into the garden to open the box in the glowing light of proximate midsummer-eve. We still find ladybugs in the neighborhood, descendents of her original mail-order stock.

My first impression of crossing the threshold into the Florsheim house was to enter a space infused with light. The gray-and-white interior faced the waterfront through a wall of glass and the room seemed to float in the light reflected from the sky and ocean. I felt the south wind going around and through the interior, the house a breathing envelope that filtered the natural world but did not exclude it. All wood houses creak, but this one sang.

Richard was tall, tanned, and handsome. He smoked Gauloises and wore a skull ring. Helen was exotically beautiful. Her black hair was always severely pinned back into a bun. Once, when we asked her how long her hair was, she unpinned it, allowing it to flow way down over her shoulders.

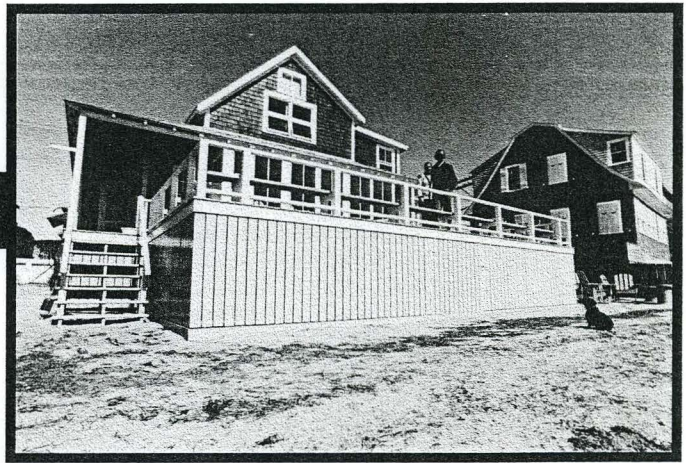
Helen's father was a White Russian officer who participated in the counter-revolution to overthrow Lenin. His extended family was exiled, eventually finding themselves in Tientsin, China, where there was a large expatriot community of other Russians and British. Helen attended a British school there. When she finished school, she travelled around the world, living in the U.S. with cousins for about a year. She became engaged to a British

officer who was posted to China. She was on shipboard, bound for England to meet the officer's family, when she met Richard for the first time. It was not until 14 years later that she met him again on shipboard. This time they continued their romance and married on Valentine's Day, 1948. Between them, they were fluent in about eight languages.

He maintained an abstract distance from reality in his work, even though the events that inspired certain paintings were very specific. He painted the fishing weirs, since removed, in a calm, raking light. This image was the Provincetown equivalent of industrial truss forms he painted in Chicago. The concentric circle of wood poles held together with the spider's web of line and netting was a recurring theme in his work. He painted fireworks many times. He painted from memory, each stroke deliberate. He learned how to build a painting up from the white ground by either floating thin glazes of pigment on the surface or by speckling it with drips and flecks of different colors until an idea, a hint of figuration, would appear on the surface, opening a dialogue with the unconscious somewhat in the manner of surrealist automatism. He returned again and again to the glow of light from skyscrapers and traffic at night in the fog, rain, and snow that plagues Chicago for much of the year. He was attracted to patterns of city streets as seen from the air, to reflections of the skyline on the waterfront, to the fire-glow of the open hearths of Gary steelworks and southside Chicago refineries, to the sun's reflection in the remaining pools of water between the flats of Provincetown at low tide.



HELEN AND RICHARD FLORSHEIM  
PROVINCETOWN, 1991  
PHOTO RICHARD MCKOWN



He never dated his work or labeled the scene specifically. In an interview with August Freundlich, author of *Richard Florsheim: The Man and His Work*, Florsheim said, "Everything that I have experienced visually goes into a storehouse of visual experience because I trained myself through a lifetime of habit to remember. Visually, I don't forget anything. It comes out as a synthesis of experience. If I paint a city, it's all cities. If I paint the sea, it's all seas I have experienced. A specific place modifies things, but I am looking for the universal, not the particular."

He died in 1979, a warm and connected human being, having found a way of inventing himself separate from the life his father had selected for him. In his will, he established the Florsheim Art Fund to benefit

distinguished veterans like himself who, due to the art market's need to discover and exploit new talent, might find themselves forgotten or neglected at the end of their careers.

August Freundlich, a former dean of fine art at Syracuse University, is president of the Fund and heads the board of directors, which includes the artists Will Barnet and Mervin Jules, the art dealers Sylvan Cole, William Meek, and Berta Walker, and the fine arts print publisher Jack Lemon. Even now, 14 years after Richard's death and five years after Helen's, the board is populated by their friends who know and share Richard's aspirations for the Fund. Considering all the sand in the Florsheim shoes, it is not surprising that several grants have been made to the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, The Provincetown Heritage Museum, and the Cape Cod Museum of Art. Artists who apply are generally over 55. Between eight and 20 grants, averaging \$5000, are awarded at the end of two annual funding cycles in March and October. The Fund has supported exhibitions and catalogues for Elise Asher, Gyorgy Kepes, Seong Moy, Lillian Orlowsky, and George Yater, among others. It has assisted the institutional purchase of works requested for permanent collections by such artists as Arthur Cohen, Norma Holt, and Boris Margo. In addition, the Fund has helped make possible exhibitions by Nassos Daphnis at the Boca Raton Museum in Florida and by Leo Manso

at the Art Students League in New York. Rarely funded are group exhibitions such as the large survey, this summer at the Provincetown Art Association, of artists associated with the Art Students League who also worked on the Cape.

Only one-tenth the size of the Guggenheim foundation, the Fund is acquiring a national reputation as artists and institutions have discovered it as a funding source. The seed money it provides can serve as a catalyst to revive interest in an artist's mature work. For example, a grant awarded to Tufts University in 1991 to mount a retrospective exhibition for the Russian emigré Esphyr Slobodkina travelled to Baruch College Gallery in New York and led to representation in New York by the Gary Snyder Gallery.

Florsheim's paintings and graphics are included in many public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian Institute, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. He was also a spokesman for artists' causes, serving as president of Artist's Equity and as a trustee of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. During the 1940s he worked with Albert Christ-Janer, then director of the Cranbrook Museum, to develop an organization of young artists working together in a community with established professionals. For lack of money, the idea was never realized at the time, but when Florsheim presented it at a meeting at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum in the late '60s, it was received as an idea whose time had come, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown was born. ■

RICHARD FLORSHEIM  
PROVINCETOWN STUDIO  
JUNE 1979  
PHOTO BILL TCHAKIRIDES



Richard McKown is an artist and a photographer who lives in the East End of Provincetown.



# Florsheim house faces demolition

By Mary Ann Bragg

BANNER STAFF

A draft plan to tear down another historic home in Provincetown was filed last week with the Cape Cod Commission.

The weathered, red-shingled cottage at 651 Commercial St., summer home of American artist and benefactor Richard Florsheim and his family from 1957 to 1990, will be demolished and then reconstructed "in a functional and sensitive manner to recall the existing building," owners Robert Steinberg and Lise Motherwell of Cambridge said in their draft plans.

"From our perspective, the reality is in the new drawings, which are very similar to the old building," Motherwell said on Tuesday. "We don't want to change the look or feel of the neighborhood, and in terms of size, the square footage is virtually the same. The outside is going to look very similar, with the same red shingles and white trim, and the same color of roofing. ... I have found that I spend more and more time [in Provincetown]. We want to make the house as close to what it is now, but have it warm and livable in the winter."

Motherwell, the daughter of American artist Robert Motherwell, has lived near 651 Commercial St. for more than 40 years.

The estimate for demolishing and rebuilding the house is \$500,000, according to the docu-

ments at the Cape Cod Commission (CCC). A renovation of the existing building would cost \$100,000 more, which is attributed, Motherwell said, to having to lift and move the house to install federally mandated pilings.

The owners' draft plans were automatically referred to the CCC as a Development of Regional Impact by the Provincetown Historical Commission in March — because the house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and because a demolition is planned.

(The demolition delay bylaw passed last week during Provincetown's annual town meeting projects — at least for six months — buildings that are not listed on the National Register inventory. Buildings that are on the National Register — such as 651 Commercial St. — can be demolished, as well, if no significant objections are raised through the regulatory review conducted by the town and state Historical Commissions, the Cape Cod Commission, and through public comment).

"I worry that this will be a sticking point that will make me have to leave, which I don't want to do," Motherwell said of the local historical review process. And in the owners' documents, the c. 1900 wood-frame house is described, generally, as dilapidated and lacking in any historical credentials, either architecturally or related to the town's history or people significant to that history.

Some longtime Provincetown residents, though, can easily recall the property's legacy — and, in particular, the former owner Richard Florsheim.

"I remember him as a very disciplined artist and that he worked religiously everyday, from early in the morning to around lunch time, and that he always had classical musical on," Provincetown artist Hatty Fitts said on Monday. Fitts lived with her father, American artist Hudson Walker, and their family a few houses down the street from Florsheim and his wife, Helen.

"After lunch, he would entertain and visit with folks on the deck, and swim and sail," Fitts said of her recollections at age 17. "He really participated in what was happening in the neighborhood. ... He was an avid Scrabble and backgammon player."

There are currently four Richard Florsheim paintings in the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) permanent collection and PAAM Executive Director Chris McCarthy described Florsheim, who died in 1979, as having a "national reputation," with a number of one-man shows, often of cityscapes and seascapes, to his credit.

Florsheim, part of an affluent manufacturing family in Chicago, also created a trust fund in 1978, The Richard A. Florsheim Art Fund of Tampa, Florida, to assist "mature American artists of merit." The foundation's endowment

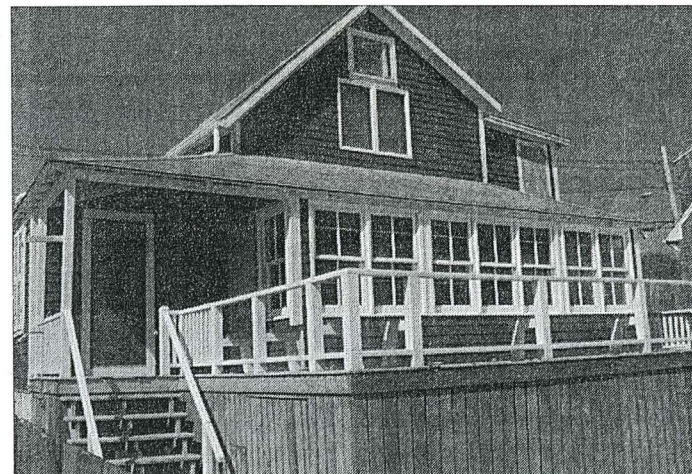


PHOTO VINCENT GUADAZZO

*The Florsheim house in the East End is the latest of the older summer cottages formerly used by artists that may be removed.*

is currently an estimated \$2 million, having funded 400-500 American artists, including several projects in Provincetown, since its inception, according to foundation president August L. Freundlich.

One other point of contention with the 651 Commercial St. property — between those who know the building now versus those who knew it then — is the physical condition of the house.

Owners Steinberg and Motherwell are calling the house in "poor" shape due to "deferred maintenance and alterations over time"; they have owned the house since 1990. Fitts recalled Richard and Helen Florsheim as "meticulously" maintaining their home, though. And Provincetown architect and historian George Bryant, who carried groceries "more than 100 times" as a teenager from his family's store to the Florsheim

home, called the original exterior of the house nearly unrecognizable last week, due to alterations.

"It was a very spare building, probably about 600 square foot, with 300 square feet on each floor," Bryant said. "I remember it being very similar to other summer places in that area built generally from 1905 through 1920. Typically there's one large space and then smaller rooms around. The kitchen was usually behind or to one side ... the walls were unfinished and the ceiling was open and varnished with a dark varnish. I remember that in this case."

Bryant also recalled the fireplace in the house as "very typical," designed and built by F.A. Days & Son, Inc. of Provincetown.

The next steps for owners Steinberg and Motherwell is to provide a completed Development of Regional Impact application to the Commission and then a public hearing will be scheduled in Provincetown, Commission planner Sarah Korjoff said

ON TUESDAY.