

Valued now at \$400,000

Commission protects art collection

By Mairread Byrne

The Provincetown Art Commission is making progress with the restoration and preservation of the town's art collection, which is conservatively valued at \$400,000.

The art commission was given \$10,000 at the town meetings of 1987 and 1988 to continue the work of securing and restoring the 271 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures in the collection.

"Almost all of the paintings need some work," said Mary Frances Daviess, chairman of the commission. "Little by little, we're trying to get them in shape."

Dr. Robert Fieux, an art restorer of international repute, is working on the collection's "Study for the Pilgrim Mural", by Max Bohm at his private laboratory in West Barnstable.

Carmen Lambert, a member of the commission who has already restored several works, and Daviess, are also now working on paintings.

"This painting badly needed cleaning," said Daviess about Henry Hensche's "His Breakfast", on which she is working at her Commercial Street studio. "It has been hanging in the Town Hall for some time. Hensche didn't use a final coat of varnish with the result that some of the paint has scratched off.

The bottom right hand corner was twisted so I braced that in the back. Now I'm going to goldleaf the frame because

it's too dull."

"Henry Hensche, who is now 87, is now living down in New Orleans," said Daviess. "He was a pupil of Charles Hawthorne and he uses some of the colors and techniques which Hawthorne used."

The works in the collection, of which the single most valuable piece is Charles Hawthorne's "The Crew of Philomena Manta", valued at \$40,000, are distributed throughout six locations in Provincetown.

Town Hall, Cape End Manor, Provincetown Library, Provincetown High School and Veterans' Memorial Elementary School each have small collections. The bulk of the work is held at the Provincetown Heritage Museum, which exhibits a large selection during the summer months.

"The collection was started in Hawthorne's day," said Josephine DelDeo, one of the curators of the museum. "He was the founder of an art colony here. Hawthorne and his students were the ones who started giving work to the town. So some of the collection dates from quite early in the century.

"A large amount came during the Depression as a result of the WPA program. There were 18 Provincetown artists working for the WPA. A lot of these pictures were painted for town buildings and that is significant."

The earliest painting in the collection

is Ambrose Webster's 1913 untitled oil on canvas, valued at more than \$3,000. The most recent painting is Mary Spencer Nay's "Homage to the Heritage Museum and Chaim Gross," which was donated by the artist in 1985.

Several generations of Provincetown artists from Hawthorne to Nay are represented in the collection. The titles of many works—"Netmenders of Provincetown", "Beached Boat", "Dunes Dawn", "Provincetown Winter", "Town Crier", "Pilgrim Landing" and "Blessing of the Fleet" reflect the history and landscape of the town.

"Provincetown has been an art colony since before the turn of the century," said DelDeo. "And it has never flagged. This is a very major aspect to the town."

The Heritage Museum, which was founded in 1976, also holds the Chaffee and L'Engle collections for the town. Both collections are of importance to scholars. The Chaffee collection is the largest collection in the country of Oliver N. Chaffee's work.

"Each department is proud of what they have," said DelDeo. "Although there are some transfers of paintings from one place to another, if it's too fluid no-one knows what they have. We can't have our paintings drifting around all over the place.

"On the other hand, if one of the departments asked us for a particular painting, nine times out of 10 we would

say fine."

The Provincetown Art Commission was founded in 1959, although it has functioned somewhat sporadically since then. "The first report of the art commission was in 1959," said Dorothea Alkire, who is researching the history of the commission. "But then there wasn't another one for 14 years. There just weren't any reports filed at the town meetings."

The commission became active again in the late 1970s, under the chairmanship of Salvatore DelDeo, and a catalogue of the collection was completed in 1979.

The present commission of which Rachel White, Bill Evaul and Grace Consoli are also members, has been meeting regularly in recent months.

"We have been working on securing the paintings to the walls," said Daviess. "We would also like to publish a book, along the lines of "Provincetown Painters", which would contain photographs of all the paintings and biographies of the artists."

Bill Evaul congratulated the town on the interest it has taken in maintaining the collection. "It is a part of Provincetown's heritage," he said. "It has a good market value and that is steadily going up. It's a good municipal collection for a town this size. This is only the beginning of the work."