

April 16, 1967

Peter Hunt, Artist, Dies at 71; Noted as Furniture Decorator

Special to The New York Times

ORLEANS, Mass., April 15—Peter Hunt, an artist who applied folk art to the decoration and remodeling of furniture, was found dead yesterday of a heart attack in his home here. His age was 71.

Helped Provincetown Grow

Mr. Hunt was born in New York and in 1919 settled in Provincetown, then a small fishing village. He was influential in the growth of Provincetown as a summer center for the arts.

Like the European working people, whose designs he adapted, Mr. Hunt found the long cold Cape Cod winters afforded leisure for artistic expression.

His first project was decorating an old sea chest after the designs on a Sicilian wine cart. Borrowing the bold strokes, vivid coloring and story-telling technique of the untutored Italian peasants, Mr. Hunt painted the chest, which he planned as a gift for a young girl, with pictures of the happy events of her life.

Decorating furniture in this

manner became his hobby, and his reputation as a folk artist spread throughout Cape Cod.

Later, his designs appeared on fabrics, stationery, clothing and glassware as well as on furniture. He established the Peter Hunt shops in Provincetown. He moved to Orleans 14 years ago and set up his shop there.

Mr. Hunt once explained that all his decorative motifs started with a blob of paint. Since the paint he used dried quickly, the blob could be at once turned into a bit of fruit, a flower, a bird or the head of one of his peasants or angels.

Mr. Hunt had decorated rooms for the late Helena Rubinstein and the Cape Cod Room of the Drake Hotel in Chicago.

He was the author of "Peter Hunt's Workbook" and "Peter Hunt's How-to-Do-It Book," which detail his decorating methods. His hobby was cooking, and he was the author of "Peter Hunt's Cape Cod Cook-book."

A sister, Mrs. Robert K. Heist of Wellfleet, survives.

Peter Hunt, folk artist

On one of his winter trips to town, Peter Hunt decorated a chest as a gift for a young girl in the style of a Sicilian wine cart he had once owned. He painted the chest with scenes from her life. "She liked it, and I liked making it," recorded Hunt, "And that's how I began to paint things in my version of the peasants' manner."

In the early 1940s Peter Hunt established a workshop called Peter Hunt's Peasant Village in Provincetown. He employed as many as a dozen local people as apprentices to help him with his work. Hunt adapted the bold brushstrokes of folk designs to decorate and brighten junk-shop furniture finds. After the New York crowd discovered his painted furniture, it became a phenomenon.

Peter Hunt wrote, "People in shops heard about it all and it seemed very strange to them, so they came up to see it. Then the things I made were put in some shops. And when one of the clever heads of a huge department store wandered up here in a blizzard, I found I was in business. At least I suppose it's a business. A lot of people work with me now, but they all stay on their job here because they like doing



History Highlights

BY LAUREL GUADAZNO

other reports place his birth in Manhattan. When and why the artist changed his name, and how he came to settle in a fishing village at the northern tip of Cape Cod, are mysteries. One theatrical account suggests that, in the early 1920s, Hunt arrived in Provincetown wearing a long black cape, with two Afghan hounds in tow. Hunt's own reminiscence suggests that in 1921, on a cruise to Maine, 'we put into Provincetown in a storm. I was utterly charmed by this naïve, Old World village. When the cruise was over I returned to Provincetown to see why I like it so much, and I have remained there ever since.' Wherever he was born, and however he arrived in the town he affectionately called 'Ovince,' Peter Hunt was irrefutably an influence in the area's growth as a summer center for the arts. A

Peter Hunt had made, and exclaimed in horror at the price of \$2.50 marked on the ornament. Peter said he knew then that people with money were no longer coming to Provincetown, and it was time to close up shop. He moved to Orleans and opened a shop there in Peacock Alley.

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In an article written in 1990 for *Country Living Magazine*, Abby Ruoff writes, "An enigmatic personality, Peter Hunt became a celebrity who often invented his own biography. According to some renditions, he was christened Frederick Lowe Schnitzer in 1896 in New Jersey;



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Some local residents say that Peter Hunt left Provincetown when one day in the 1950s a man came into his shop, picked up a Christmas ornament that

made, and exclaimed in horror at the price of \$2.50 marked on the ornament. Peter said he knew then that people with money were no longer coming to Provincetown, and it was time to close up shop. He moved to Orleans and opened a shop there in Peacock Alley.

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"To reconstruct your old furniture and decorate it in a peasant manner should be a lot of fun for you. In fact a 'blithe spirit' — as I found out I had from reading somebody's editorial about my things — is an important part of your equipment. I think that peasant designs are the gayest and happiest form of decoration that exists. They must be created in that frame of mind. If at the very beginning you realize you aren't going to have a grand time doing it, just stop right there, because as sure as death the result will be a tired, dreary affair," wrote Peter Hunt in the introduction to "Pe-



Detail of decoration painted by Peter Hunt on a piece of furniture from the collection of the Provincetown Heritage Museum.

ter Hunt's Workbook," published in 1945.

In 1952, Prentice-Hall published Peter Hunt's "How to Do It Book," and an illustrated volume of recipes, "Peter Hunt's Cape Cod Cookbook," was pub-

lished in 1954.

[Laurel Guadagno is visitor services manager for the Pilgrim Monument & Provincetown Museum. She also writes and narrates "History Highlights," heard regularly on WOMR, 92.1 FM.]