



NANCY WHORF

front cover *Hot Snow*, 2000, 36 x 48"

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*Welcome to Provincetown, 1992, 48 x 96"*

# NANCY WHORF

PROVINCETOWN'S SEASONS & SENSATIONS

A TEN-YEAR OVERVIEW OF LARGE PAINTINGS

PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION & MUSEUM



*To Herman, my amiable consort*

## INTRODUCTION



Nancy Whorf

JUST THE MENTION OF HER NAME brings a smile to your face. Listen to her stories and you can't hold back the laughter or the tears. Look at her paintings and you will experience the gamut of emotions that is Nancy Whorf. She tells and paints it like it is. She holds back nothing and is not afraid to express herself. Her love of place comes through loud and clear with pounds of paint which she has no qualms applying with incredible skill. Perhaps everything is a little more intense in this seaside town of Provincetown or maybe it's just Nancy, but her paintings demand your full attention. You can smell the salt air and the fish. You can sense the storm coming and the fog rolling in. She captures the elements and makes you look. The images are honest portrayals of her surroundings often mixed with her own unique viewpoint and sense of humor. Although they may not all be pretty, they are all very real and capture the life that is Provincetown.

James R. Bakker  
President  
Provincetown Art Association & Museum

# OF TIME AND PROVINCETOWN: NANCY WHORF AND THE AMERICAN SCENE

A BOHEMIAN YANKEE, NANCY WHORF – at 71 – is a painter passionately in love with her subject – Provincetown. She gives us back her deepest sensory remembrances of the town she has lived in her entire life – and whose family heritage in Provincetown dates to 1710!



fig. 1.

Whorf paints in the tradition of the American Scene painters of the 20's and 30's, who believed that art should be inspired by one's hometown. "I have a very emotional feeling about this town...I try to put this feeling down one way or another." However, Whorf's paintings are not simply "nostalgic". More than some of the earlier American Scene painters, she succeeds in rendering the unabashedly "sentimental" consistently alive and fresh.

There is nothing static; her surfaces move, vibrate even, with jewel-like color juxtapositions. Whorf can handle paint like a virtuoso, wielding her palette knife heavy with paint, in total command of form, color and atmosphere. Her mastery of the figure is consummate – one flick of her blade and she can articulate the hunched shoulders of a winter walker or the entire form of a dog with wagging tail. "We actually see the lights turn on in houses, hear the fire crackling as daylight turns into darkness," her art dealer Berta Walker has remarked.

Whorf is a third-generation artist who purposely developed outside any movements or schools. Much

has already been written about Whorf's artistic background as the daughter of watercolorist John Whorf, as well as her early apprenticeship with famed New York and Cape Cod folk artist, Peter Hunt. By 1986, at the age of 56, after 30 years of focusing her talents on folk painting and "single parenting" three daughters, Whorf had renewed in earnest her independent painting career begun with her early sojourn at the Boston Museum School. Bringing with her the skills she'd acquired working with narrative scenes on unforgiving surfaces (she once remarked that she could "paint 'The Last Supper' on the head of a pin"), Whorf turned her full artistic attention to her beloved Provincetown in paintings that read as visual memoir.

Whorf's painting style has sometimes been too quickly compared to that of the American Impressionists who have been working steadily in Provincetown since the turn of the last century. But, rather than the almost scientific atomization of light that is the signature of Impressionism, her use of color actually has more in common philosophically with Edward Hopper than Henry Hensche or Charles Hawthorne. Her use of thick impasto with pure unmixed color and palette knife, as well as her laying down of color "side by side" has to do with her striving to get more "punch" from the paint. Both techniques are used to achieve "umph", as Whorf describes it, from modern pigments that she feels lack "staining power".

Although her scenes are closely observed out-of-doors, Whorf is a studio painter better characterized



fig. 2.



fig. 3.

fig 1. *He Stole My Heart Away*, 2000, 36 x 20"

fig 2. *Loading Up The Wagon*, 1999, 24 x 24"  
collection Alix Ritchie & Marty Davis

fig 3. *Dorymen*, 1998, 20 x 24"  
collection Glen Martin, Martin House

as an expressive realist: "Realism isn't important; it's having something to say," she once commented. Whorf pushes the limits of realism's plastic possibilities in many paintings that ride the tension between her rough handling of surface and the soft sentiment of their content. Sometimes the raw energy and action in her handling of the paint becomes as much the subject as her painting of the scenes itself, brushing the edges of abstraction.

Often working monumentally, Whorf practically allows the viewer to walk into many of the scenes, something she clearly intends. Her long practice with painting on relatively small-scaled furniture helped shape Whorf's ability to render naturalistic depth in a compressed format. When released from those constrictions, Whorf has often chosen to work on gigantically scaled masonite board, pushing the boundaries of what is possible with linear perspective.

Not only is there a perpetual vibrancy in her painting style, but also in her choice of subjects which include sunsets and sunrises, riotously hued gardens, street festivals, seductive nudes, and fantastical circuses, all saturated with hot, highly keyed primary colors. But it is when she turns to the icy, isolated, snow-draped streets, the harbor, and the Portuguese fishermen inhabiting them, that we see where the soul and heart of her work seems to lie.

Often it is the fishing community of Provincetown that has engaged her eye (see fig. 1-6). In these vibrant paintings she portrays the typical rather than the particular, the character of a whole group of working

fishermen, not an exploration of the group through an individual personality. The features of her fishermen are viewed through the lens of a sympathetic observer. "It's a very dangerous and difficult way to make a living," she feels. Yet, her pictorial translation only sometimes hints at the sadness she feels is inherent in "the whole fishing business." Overall, it is the warmth of Whorf's memories and feelings toward Portuguese fishermen, and one in particular, her long-time beloved "consort" Herman Tasha, (see fig. 1) that largely override any darker portrayal of fishing. In a very recent painting, "New Model" (see fig. 4) the subject appears to be a love poem to the young, dashing fisherman she fell in love with so many decades ago.

Nancy Whorf's paintings stand as powerful, evocative witnesses of a time and a Provincetown that has been irrevocably erased from the American scene. What remains is Nancy Whorf's eternal sensory impression, an impression so profound that it continually allows us to experience the thrill of being in that moment, in that place.

Eileen Kennedy  
Provincetown, May 2001

*Eileen Kennedy is an art historian,  
free-lance art critic and active visual artist.*



fig. 4.



fig. 5.



fig. 6.

fig 4. *New Model*, 2001, 24 x 28"  
collection Nancy Whorf

fig 5. *Three Men on Deck*, 1998-99, 24 x 28"  
collection Daniel R. Lovette

fig 6. *Rain, Sleet or Snow...*, 1995, 24 x 32"  
collection Berta Walker



fig. 7.

fig. 7. *Bicycle in Winter*, 1998, 18 x 20", collection Ken Ishiwata



fig. 8.

fig. 8. *Night Sledding, Winslow Street*, 1997, 20 x 24"



fig. 9.

fig. 9. *Ice Hockey*, 1997, 20 x 24", collection Deborah Littlefield

fig. 10. *Fauve Flats*, 1995, 24 x 48"

fig. 11. *Clam Diggers*, 1999, 20 x 24"

fig. 12. *Nude Sunbathing*, 1997, 36 x 48", collection Louise Davy





fig. 10.



fig. 11.



fig. 12.

IT IS NO SURPRISE TO THOSE WHO know Nancy Whorf's brilliant oil paintings that other artists, writers, and poets number significantly among her patrons. The sensuous beauty of her expressionist views of Provincetown cut straight to the heart and produce an ecstasy of emotion that resonates long after the paintings are viewed...Whorf has no European counterpart. Although she studied with impressive painters, her work seems to come from a place deep inside of her. Her vision is pure Provincetown. She is not of the Provincetown School; rather, hers is the school of water and light. This much-loved local character demonstrates her freedom from constraint with palette knife, lavish use of oil paint and an expressive technique unmatched outside of Montmartre.

Patrick Clarke-Fussell  
artist, art historian  
"Purely Provincetown"  
*The Provincetown Paper*, 1992



*Unloading at MacMillan Wharf, 36 x 48"*

## NANCY WHORF di PROVINCETOWN

**T**HROUGHOUT HISTORY, THERE HAVE been artists all over Europe known primarily by the name of the City or Town they paint – Pietro da Cortona, Antonello da Messina, Andrea di Bonaiuto de Firenze, Lucas van Leyden, Joseph Wright of Derby. Since Nancy Whorf is the true Recorder of Provincetown – its past and present, its seasons and its atmospheres – I have taken to referring to her as “Nancy Whorf di Provincetown”. I am delighted to record in this catalogue that, at its meeting on Monday, June 26, 2001, the Board of Selectmen elected to honor this great artist’s work by dedicating Friday, July 27, the opening of the Nancy Whorf exhibition at the Provincetown Art Association & Museum, as “Nancy Whorf di Provincetown” Day.

Of the much there is to admire about Nancy Whorf, I particularly honor how much she dares – dares to paint the bravado, the energy, the soul of our town – our exciting, spell-binding, oft “garish” sunsets; our lavish gardens with myriad colors and shapes; the gaiety of our local circuses and flag-draped streets; the excitement of our “Portuguese”, “4th of July” and “Carnival” Parades with slinky men dressed in pink feathers and heels, floats so complex in color and people we can hardly separate them from the crowds; our winter snow storms; our Nor’Easters, and the struggles of our fishermen; the daily activities such as clamming, cleaning fish, taking a tour of the harbour, winter sledding and ice skating, She doesn’t hold back (*see fig. 7–16*) – to Nancy the purples, oranges and pinks floating above the greens and dark blues

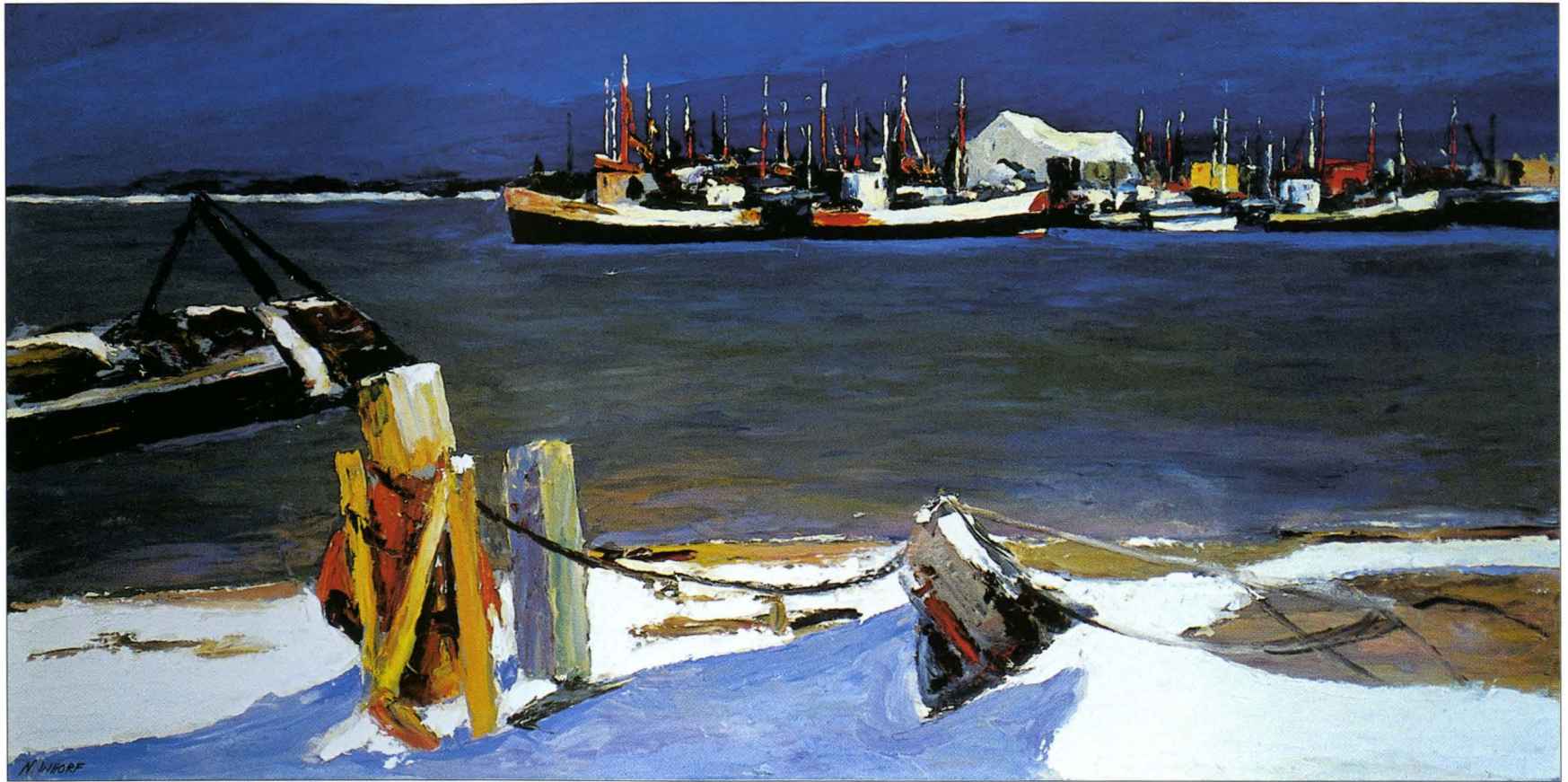


*High Wire at the Circus, 2001, 36 x 48"*

stimulate her and challenge her, where few would dare to tread. She’ll “walk the tightrope”, and she pulls it off! Nancy Whorf succeeds in revealing the secrets and truths of nature’s source through her intimate knowledge of Provincetown.

So be it then: “NANCY WHORF di PROVINCETOWN”

Berta Walker



*MacMillan Wharf, Winter, 1992, 36 x 72"*



*Portuguese Parade/Blessing of the Fleet, 1999, 48 x 72*



*Winter Walk, MacMillan Wharf, 2000, 48 x 72"*



*Terra Nova Gone Aground, 2001, 48 x 96"*



*Figurehead House, Dick Tracy*, 1992, 36 x 48", collection Scott & Svea Fraser





*It's Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas, 1993, 36 x 48"*



*Closed for the Season, 1993, 36 x 72"*



*Fisherman's Garden, Winter, 2001, 48 x 96"*



*A Summer's Day*, 1992, 48 x 96"



*Joan & Tom, 1991, 36 x 48"*



fig. 13.

fig. 13. *Purple Sky*, 2001, 24 x 20"

fig. 14. *Harbour Tours*, 1995, 36 x 48"

fig. 15. *Flowers on Red*, 1993, 32 x 34"

fig. 16. *Fish & Daffodils*, 24 x 48"



fig. 14.



fig. 15.



fig. 16.



*Stroll Before Dinner, Provincetown Art Association & Museum, 2000, 36 x 48"*



*School House/Ice House, 1999, 36 x 48"*, collection Dave Davis





*Provincetown Library*, 1990, 36 x 48"

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*Unless otherwise noted, all paintings are on loan from the artist, courtesy of the Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown; the medium is oil on panel, and the dimensions are in inches, height before width.*

## CREDITS

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*And my Thanks to Berta, always guiding me...*





*Provincetown Remembered*, 1999, 48 x 72"