

# Turmoil Marked Introduction Of 'Modern' Paintings At Art Association

By Ross Moffett

This is the seventh in a series of articles written by Ross Moffett, now one of the older and widely known year round Provincetown artists—this chapter also deals with the very early Cape End scene—others in the series will appear in subsequent issues of The Advocate.

To describe the first modern exhibition at the Art Association as it appeared relative to the art environment of 1927 is now difficult. Today the same exhibit would seem conservative in so far as concerns outward form and style. Yet it had taken courage and independence of spirit to produce the works that were shown. The artists were not sailing with any winds of official commendation nor of financial success. Many of them had been roundly condemned by the critics of the time, including, as we have seen, Provincetown's own Miss Abbie Putnam. This was, we may recall, the year in which Walter Pach, in "Ananor the False Artist," had said

that modernism would never become academic, since it would not be taught in academies nor be financially profitable to anyone, a prophecy which doubtless appeared well grounded to the Provincetown moderns of 1927.

There were in the first modern exhibition paintings showing a variety of tendencies. Many works disclosed influence from the School of Paris, particularly from Paul Cezanne, and there were some fairly abstract pictures, stemming from the early Braque and the early Picasso. Whether there were in the show any canvases in which subject matter was wholly unrecognizable can not be told from the catalogue, although the non-objective works of Blanche Lazzell must have appeared rather early in the series of modern exhibitions at the Art Association. There were discernable tendencies from the American Ash Can School—some of the exhibitors had studied with Robert Henri—and there were individualists, like the self taught Floyd Clymer, in whose works any sort of outside



Waldo Pierce, William L'Engle and George Biddle, top to bottom, in the Prado Museum in Madrid with their copies of paintings by the Spanish artist Valesquez. The three studied together in Madrid for a few months in 1910.

influence was hard to make out. Throughout nearly all of the showing there was apparent an intent towards composing or organizing the spatial elements of the canvas, an intent usually lacking in respect to the conservative pictures of the time.

At about the period of the first few modern exhibitions the resident, or year-round, Provincetown artists of modern bent were greatly, and it seems now perhaps unduly, exercised over a question of mathematical relationship in art, a concern possibly the anti-

thesis of the drip and gravitational interest in paint that came later. Reproductions of the Gothic and Renaissance masters were gone over with ruler, triangle and divider to find out what underlying secrets, if any, they might hold; so also were reproductions of the arts of the near and the far east. Writings of Gino Severini and Albert Gleizes were laboriously translated chapter by chapter and passed about town. Known were the several ways of dividing a line into extreme and mean ratio, the result being a point which the

aestheticians from time immemorial had called the golden sector. The idea of using mathematical means as an aid in securing fitting areal proportions in art was at this time well expressed by the local artist E. Ambrose Webster in a lecture at the Art Association. In this lecture was the following paragraph, afterwards quoted in the front of the catalog of the modern exhibit of 1935.

"The outstanding principle is the use of ratios as found in geometry, which bring about eurythmic relationships between the parts of a picture. Following this principle, the artist must be free to bend the line, change the pattern, or create new forms which may not be found in nature".

The 1928 season opened with Mr. and Mrs. Harold Haven Brown, respectively, director and assistant director. This year for the first time the directorship carried with it a fixed salary, this being \$250, which was increased to \$500 two years later. The Browns were keenly interested in expanding the Association's activities to include art classes and nature, as was made plain by Mr. Brown's report given at the annual meeting of 1928, which in part is as follows.

"During the past winter and spring, with the desire to make the Art Association more useful to the town as a whole, classes for adults on Monday evenings and for children on Saturday mornings, were started and carried on by the assistant director".

"Owing to lack of heat in the Art Association building, these classes were held in her studio. Membership in the Art Association was the only requisite to join the classes.

"Instruction was given in simple design and drawing and most of the drawings were carried out in linoleum block printing.

"The interest was sufficient to prove the value of a continuation of the work the coming year and the need of heated rooms for the further development of such work in the future.

"In the late winter the

the Provincetown Guide Book began to take shape, and from then to the present much time and work has of necessity been devoted to it. The primary purpose of the Guide Book was to raise money to aid in the further development of art classes, and other educational and community work by the Art Association".

The need for quarters that could be heated, as expressed by Mr. Brown, led to the erection of what is now known as the "little gallery". In charge of this addition was a committee made up of William H. Young, Dr. Percival Eaton and Frank Desch. Construction was started late in the summer of 1929 and completed in January of the following year. Originally the little gallery had a separate entrance, the door connecting it with the main gallery not being cut through until 1932. The addition seems to have been financed by taking out a \$2,000 mortgage, with also a \$500 gift from an anonymous donor. Unfortunately, the fitness of this room for exhibition purposes was not properly judged by the committee in charge of its planning, a fact of which hanging committees have long been aware.

The Provincetown Guide Book, mentioned in the director's report, was published in 1928, with a second edition in 1931. This work, of which a few copies are still to be found, contains short articles on Provincetown by Susan Gaspell, Frank Shay, Phyllis Duganne, John Johnson, Richard Miller, Mary Heaton Vorse and Nancy Paine Smith. There is a poem by Harry Kemp. An illustrated map and block prints by Provincetown artists are included, along with a directory of artists and business houses then in the town.

In the winter and spring of 1930

both the newly completed little gallery and the main gallery were used as a gymnasium four evenings and two half-days each week, the weekly attendance being about 150 children. During the Winter that followed, the little gallery saw children's classes conducted by Mrs. Brown and also an evening drawing class under the instruction of Edwin Dickinson.

At about this time the Association sent an exhibition of Provincetown artists to the Worcester Art Museum and a similar exhibit was dispatched to Amherst College. It is stated that "Commander MacMillan gave an illustrated talk to the children, which packed the little gallery to its limit".

The annual meeting of 1928 was notable in that for the first time since its incorporation in 1921 the membership was given a choice of candidates on which to vote for the trustee posts. On this occasion two nominations from the floor were somehow injected along side of the usual findings of the nominating committee selected by the trustees. With his unexpected development the election resulted in the selection of William L'Engle, Karl Knaths, Ellen Ravenscroft, and Tod Lindenmuth, all of whom had been on the committee for the first two modern exhibits. This outcome, however, did not indicate a numerical dominance of the moderns, but rather that the opposition had been caught off guard.

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