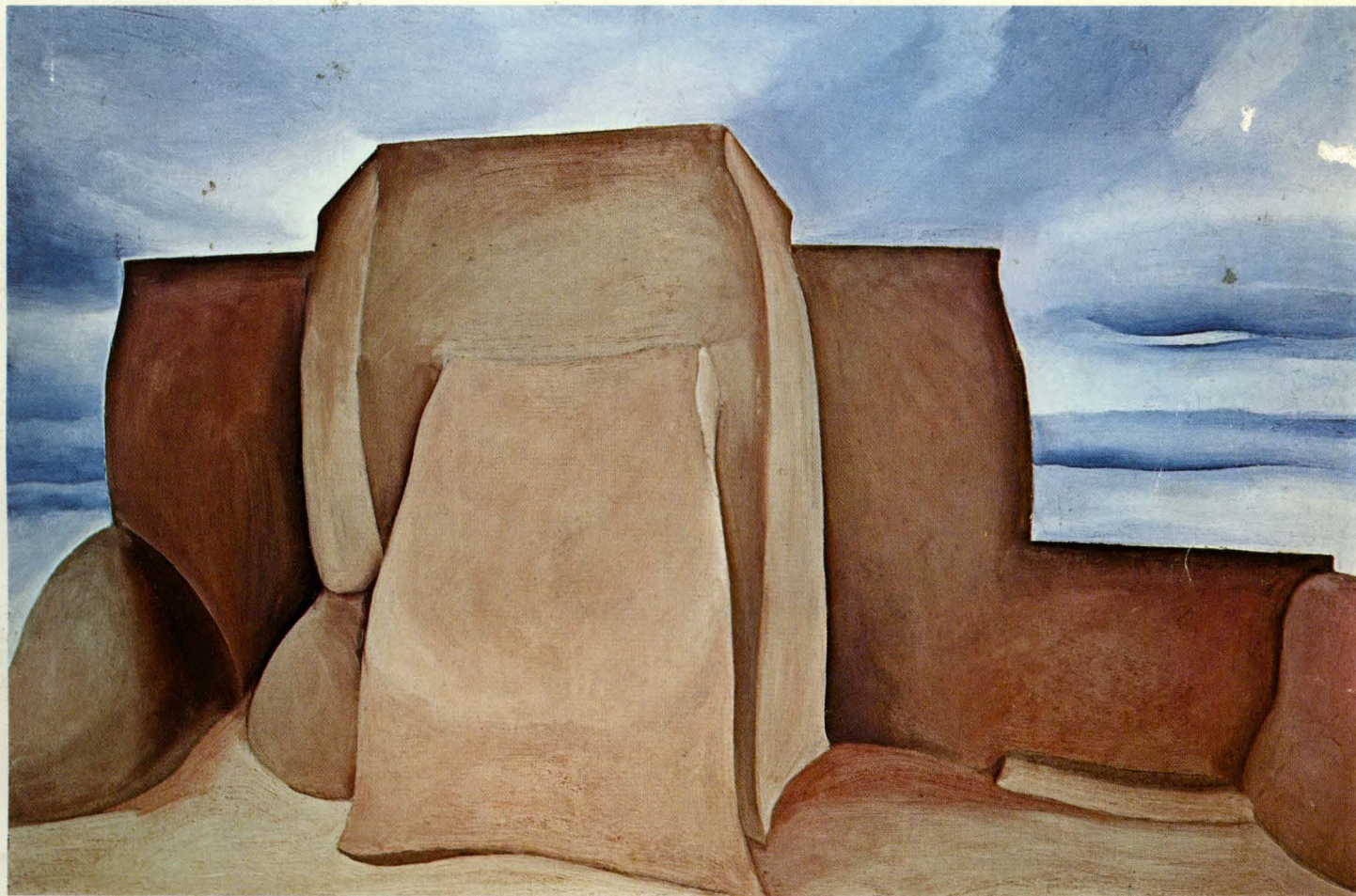


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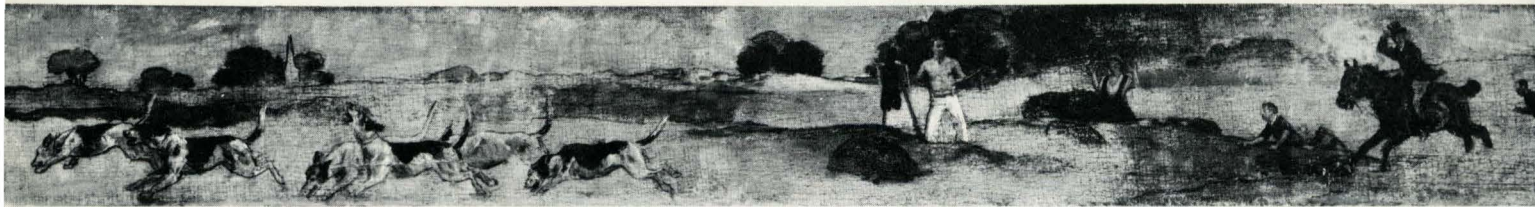
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Painting on the Straw Hat Circuit

At the turn of the century, American artists fleeing the summer heat established a string of lively art colonies from New York to Maine.





by Karal Ann Marling

Art journals used to succumb every August to a delightful form of summertime madness—the special art colony issue. Along with coat and tie, the dourest of critics shed all pretense of aesthetic rigor to celebrate the latest squabbles, fads, and fancies of the “Straw Hat Circuit.” The art world hit the road for a traditional holiday spin through the Muses’ seasonal campgrounds on the eastern seaboard. The hammockbound tourist, lazily perusing the *Magazine of Art* or *The New York Times* Sunday supplement, could count on several regular stops in the course of this vicarious excursion along the “Coast of Bohemia.” The Catskill Mountain art colony at Woodstock, New York was one high point of the annual tour; so was picturesque Old Lyme, Connecticut. And farther north, in Massachusetts, the caravan always paused at Provincetown on Cape Cod and Rockport on Cape Ann. Sometimes, too, there were side trips to remote beauty spots like New Hope, Pennsylvania; Eastport, Maine; or Laconia, New Hampshire.

Whatever the particular season’s itinerary, a fixed inventory of “colonial” charms was invariably found en

route. Unspoiled scenery—sandy beaches, opalescent wetlands, virgin forests—was paramount, along with the sleepy, backwater loveliness of ancient villages, where the odd studio skylight piercing the roof of barn or fish house did nothing to ruin the illusion of bucolic peace.

The locations of the eastern colonies were—still are—extraordinarily beautiful, which is why artists flocked to them in the first place. In the 1890s, the heat of city summers and artistic penury conspired with that beauty to create these edens. At the same time, troubled small-town economies and improved public transportation helped set a recurrent pattern for many out-of-the-way hamlets to become art colonies. Summering in lovely rural settings, where the temperatures and the prices were low, and the quality of milk and produce high, became part of the American way of life. Artists clustered in sweltering flats in and around the Sherwood Studio Building on Fifty-seventh Street were every bit as susceptible to the call of the countryside as their blue-collar neighbors. During the early 1900s, Woodstock natives would be delighted to see them stream northward: the local bluestone quarries had been

shut down and the farming of mountain rock was as unprofitable as it was tedious. The Catskill meadows seemed to be awaiting discovery by a founding colonial father.

Thoreau could have been writing the script for the New England art colonies in 1849, when he predicted great days ahead for Cape Cod: “It only remained to make these towns easy of access by rail to turn the outside world toward them for a summer resort.” The tracks entered Provincetown in 1873, accelerating innkeeping into a full-fledged industry and saving the town from inglorious decay; the cod-fishing business had peaked in the mid-eighties and slumped thereafter, while the whaling fleet had fallen victim to the introduction of petroleum. The painter Charles W. Hawthorne, furiously squinting into the opulent Venetian light of the late afternoon, his easel battened down against sea breezes, presented a strange spectacle there in 1889, but he was by no means an unwelcome mirage.

Hawthorne opened the Cape Cod School of Art, America’s first permanent, independent summer art school, at Provincetown in 1899. Primarily devoted to genre painting and the study of the figure in outdoor light, Haw-

Above: As Henry R. Poore’s *The Fox Chase* suggests, the appeal of the straw hat circuit was partly social. In the mantelpiece painting in the Griswold Mansion, the Old Lyme gathering place of American Impressionists, Will Foote leads a race; Willard Metcalf sketches behind a sprinting Henry Ward Ranger; a cow poses for William Howe; a half-nude Childe Hassam shocks Matilda Brown. 1901–05. Oil on panel, 5½x104". Lyme Historical Society.

Left: Childe Hassam’s 1908 *Bridge at Old Lyme* is awash with natural light. Oil on canvas, 24x27". Georgia Museum of Art, Athens. **Right:** Like other summer groups, this Provincetown sketching class accepted women more eagerly than city academies. Detail. Private collection.





Above: In his Parody of Fauve Painters Who Exhibited at the Armory Show, Woodstock artist Robert Chanler took the conservative side in the feud between Modernists and traditionalists. 1913. Oil on masonite, 37½x45½". Woodstock Artists' Association.

thorne's courses proved an instant success with amateurs and budding professionals alike—particularly with women, whose easy assumption of equality with men recorded in colonial annals contrasts sharply with their marginal standing in urban academies. The Cape Cod School of Art enrolled hundreds of eager students annually for thirty years, and provided the economic base and the artistic reputation from which a Provincetown colony grew.

Often the advent of a landscapist goaded a slumbering village into resort status. Henry Ward Ranger, patriarch of the Old Lyme colony, was such a figure. How he happened to quit his train in 1899 at the point where it connected with the Lyme livery rig is lost to history. Perhaps fate intervened; since his students days in the Fontainebleau forest, Ranger had been looking for a corner of the New World that might recapture the hazy magic and smiling summer fellowship of Barbizon, Sèvres, and St. Cloud.

He found a new magic in the glacial hills, lowland estuaries, and salt meadows of Lyme and in the Griswold Mansion, whose stunning disrepair symbol-

ized the hard times Lyme had suffered since its glory days as a seaport. The mansion's colonnade wavered precariously and its lofty halls were populated by a tribe of mongrel cats. The "Holy House," as resident landscapists later came to call it, was home to the last of the ancient Griswold line, the superannuated "Miss Florence." When this lady accepted Ranger and his friends as paying guests, she was becoming housemother to the American Barbizon and godmother to the elegiac tonalist paintings that were to enshrine Lyme on the summer pilgrimage route.

Lyme invented the summer annual, with the first all-colony exhibition of 1902, held in the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library. This innovation spread with lightning speed. In the days before formal art associations with rules and juries grew up around summer exhibits, these shows were exceptional in allowing younger residents—many of them women—an unprecedented degree of uncensored exposure to a largely sympathetic tourist clientele. The annuals gave both newcomers and veterans a chance to test the critical waters with an out-of-town rehearsal of work destined

for juried winter shows in the city. And, unwittingly perhaps, they aided the cause of group solidarity not only by identifying exhibitors as members of a defined colonial entity, but also by communicating internal stylistic developments with seismographic sensitivity. Summer seasons fostered regional styles, and an egalitarian, contentious drive to experiment when questions of what to paint started to give way to rancorous disagreements over how to paint. The magic Ranger discovered on his Connecticut coast, the enchantment Hawthorne found on Cape Cod, were even powerful enough to sustain the colonial esprit de corps throughout the bitter crisis of Modernism.

Ideas possess as potent a magic as scenery, however. Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead, driven by the sorcery of Ruskinian idealism, colonized an expectant Woodstock in 1902. Scion of a wealthy English family, Whitehead came to Mount Overlook, New York with the hope of providing a counter-cultural utopia. But the factory system did not crumble when his handcrafted "Byrdcliffe" furniture—skeptics dubbed his enterprise "Boredstiff"—emblazoned with wan renderings of Catskill flora, reached the marketplace. Competitive capitalism did not melt away under the blazing logic of his cooperative tracts. His own hired colonists drifted away, vexed by having to perform Morris dances on demand for the edification of visiting socialists, irked by endless hours of "ennobling" labor among the cows, irritated by work sustained only by firkins of sticky mead. By 1906, defectors from utopia had made Woodstock a typically unregulated colony awaiting the evolutionary perils of boisterous students, wild-eyed rebels, tipsy tourists—and a gabled gallery on the village green.

These quaint buildings, housing the local artists' association and proclaiming the existence of a unique local school or style of art, were a feature of any colony worthy of the name. By the 1920s, in fact, an epic construction boom threatened to rouse America's Kelmscotts and Barbizons from their patented, rustic somnolence. In 1921 Woodstock artists broke ground for a neo-Georgian gallery; Provincetown artists remodeled an authentic colonial house on Commercial Street; Old

Greenaway gowns who dispensed hand-painted seashells, beaten copper bracelets, and pickled limes. The Maverick Festival at Woodstock started by poet and former Byrdcliffe cowherd Hervey White in 1916 and held every August on the night of the full moon, marked the apogee of the colonies' lucrative bohemian shenanigans.

White's well had run dry in 1916. Drilling five hundred feet though Catskill bedrock had left him heavily in debt. With the help of the assorted anarchist-Cubist-moderne tenants of his splinter colony (his "Mavericks"), White planned a modest costume carnival, with open-air entertainment and gypsy campfires, to recoup his losses. Over the years, the scope, ambition, and notoriety of the Maverick Festival grew. A rustic concert hall was soon built. Helen Hayes made her stage debut there and George Barrere played his golden flute in blackface. A natural rock amphitheater was fashioned next, where Edna St. Vincent Millay's anti-war play, *Aria da Capa*, provoked an unruly audience in 1920 to hurl chunks of the seating arrangements down upon the visiting Provincetown Players. Long before the sheriff of Ulster County closed down the proceedings in 1931, unmanageable tourist crowds, an excess of homemade hooch, and well-founded rumors of nude midnight orgies made Woodstock artists and

their nervous colonial confreres up and down the coast wonder where it would all end. Their Market Fairs, their Motif Number One galas, their Artist and Model balls, had been stunningly successful even by the orthodox standards of Chamber of Commerce boosterism. However, while a honky-tonk art colony might be a great place for making whoopee, was it a great place for making serious art?

Roving summer critics had already begun to ask the same question. As the twenties wore on, the yearly summer art colony dispatches increasingly adopted the lugubrious tone of obituaries. When the Depression finally rendered the question academic by calling a decisive halt to vacationing and attendant revels in the bushes, it was hard to remember that the colonies had been hotbeds of radical artistic experimentation and had mapped the cutting edge of the American avant-garde. When the Depression ended, those facts had vanished into history. Economic catastrophe had forced many colonists to abandon their suburban haunts. For those who stayed behind, the gleeful quarrels of old were further exacerbated by the gossip-ridden atmosphere of small-town poverty. Community solidarity ruptured. And when the reporters and tourists and students trickled back to the resorts after World War II, the famous "Woodstock fuzz style," the

pearly Lyme mode, and the very notion of trademark regionalism had become matters of antiquarian curiosity. Although Hans Hofmann taught progressive abstraction in Provincetown, the postwar leaders of a newly triumphant American Abstract Expressionism went to colonies—if they went at all—for summertime privacy, not communal activity.

Not until another Hoffman by the name of Abbie came along and helped found a "Woodstock Nation" during the long, hot summer of 1969, did a large number of people rediscover the palpable magic that still clings to America's forgotten art colonies. It is the magic of old, hallowed places, a reproach to an age of aimless mobility. It is the magic of serene natural beauty, a challenge to concrete and smokestacks. It is the magic of creative fervor surviving in the face of media boredom. Above all, it is the magic of glorious eccentricity, of gentle madness, of dreams and visions whispered on a warm August wind. The best of American idealism—ever strong, often befuddled—waits and watches along the Straw Hat Circuit.

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Above: The Maverick Festival held every August from 1916 to 1931 on Hervey White's farm in Woodstock, New York included costume frolics, dancing around campfires, and open-air entertainment. The gala's creative atmosphere produced the oldest summer chamber music series in the country, as well as a reputation for wildness that attracted many tourists. 1925. Detail. Private collection.