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In her own image



Banner file photo

Elisabeth Carney, today's artist, bears little resemblance to women artists in Charles Hawthorne's 1910 classes.

A century of women making art

By Mary Ellen Butler
BANNER STAFF

Standing on the beach with the strap from her shirt hanging off her shoulder, her hair whipping in the wind and her clothes and body covered in paint, 28-year-old Elisabeth Carney is today's female artist.

"It can get kind of wild," Carney says of her painting. She is clearly a woman in a man's world, not because she's an artist, but because she spends most of her time down at the end of MacMillan Pier painting Provincetown's diminishing fishing fleet.

She is the successor to the young women students of Henry Hensche and Charles Hawthorne, the logical or illogical descendant of those who sat politely in the front row of their classes with long dresses and hats and seemingly no paint in sight, save on the canvas.

As Provincetown celebrates 100 years as an artists' colony there are some who would say that for women their time of being shown, sold and respected has only really begun in the last 10 to 15 years. Many of the well-known female artists from earlier in the century. Painter Lucy L'Engle (1889-1978) and white-line printers Agnes Weinrich (1873-1946) and Blanche Lazzell (1878-1956), to name a few, are held in higher esteem today than during their own lifetimes and were out of character for their time.

Women got off to a good start at the beginning of the century, taking prominent roles in the founding and organization of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) and making up a large portion of Hawthorne's painting classes. At the July show of 1916, Marie Lokke's painting received nine more votes than Hawthorne's work, notes Tony Vevers in PAAM's "The Permanent Collection."

But despite those early successes, most of the women simply fell

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Womenart continued from page 7 off the radar screen of the art world. Today the works of women from the early part of the century are as appreciated as those of men, but in the first 20 years of this century it was only men who could make it, says Robyn Watson, PAAM director.

"We're only now rediscovering some of them," says Watson, who suspects many of those early artists' works are probably tucked away in their granddaughters' attics and basements today.

In the first half of the century it was considered inappropriate for women to be artists. To be an artist one had to be tremendously good to be recognized or be married to another artist, Watson says. But in many cases, women who became wives of artists were not encouraged to show their own paintings. Instead they nurtured the artistic growth of their husbands.

Marion Campbell Hawthorne, wife of Charles Hawthorne, was herself a watercolorist but kept her paintings private her entire life. Shirley Yater studied alongside her husband, the painter George Yater, in Hensche's class in 1933. She gave up painting during their marriage and took it up again after her husband's death.

Yater, 87, says giving up painting was never a question for her and she never had any complaints about doing it. Instead, she helped support the family by designing dresses. "I did feel very much that he was a much better painter than I and he should paint and I should not," she



"Room With a View" oil by Nancy Whorf (Berta Walker Gallery).

says. "Now I don't sew and painting is a very nice outlet for me."

While Yater says she never felt there were obstacles in her way as a woman and there are no documents or memoirs that reveal the thoughts of the women of the time, some of the men's writings do point out the thinking of the past.

In "Provincetown I Remember," by Houghton Cranford Smith, in which he describes his experiences in Provincetown and attending Hawthorne's Cape Cod School of Art in the summer of 1908, Smith refers to the women in his class as "our pretty girls."

Artist, author and teacher Emily Farnham, 86, who earlier this year released her book, "Hofmann: Abstraction as Plastic Expressionism and Notes Made in Hofmann's

Class," remembers some of the subtle career rejections she suffered for being a woman.

As a master's student studying art history at Ohio State University, Farnham was passed over for a graduate scholarship to study in Europe in favor of a male student.

"The men who knew me knew I was capable but they didn't do anything about it," Farnham says. But she said it never bothered her to be treated differently.

"I never got upset about being treated as a less capable person," she says. The same thing happened to her friends, though their aspirations were different from her own. "Most women didn't want to be noted as writers or artists," she recalls. "They wanted to get married. It was

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Untitled oil by Lucy L'Engle (PAAM collection).

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their main aim."

Erna Partoll, a painter and assistant director at the Berta Walker Gallery, will never forget the piece of well-meaning advice she got from a professor in the 1960s while studying at the Art Students League in New York. "If you want to paint, paint like a man," he told her.

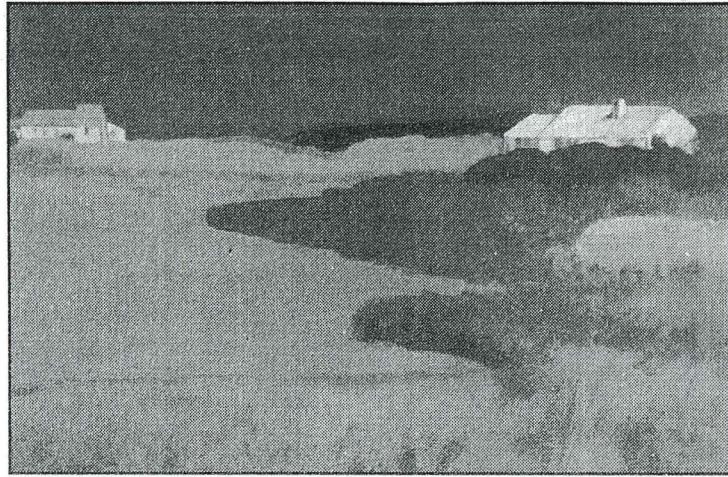
Partoll understands it was meant as good advice but is glad it is not something likely to be dispensed today.

Today, many artists and gallery owners say the tide has turned and when people come to buy art they don't ask for the gender of the artist. In fact in many of the recent auctions in town, in both the Provincetown AIDS Support Group (PASG) and PAAM, it was women artists who commanded the highest prices.

At the Wohlfarth Gallery in Provincetown and its companion in Washington, D.C., the artists' gender is a subject that has never come up. Since the gallery shows only American Impressionism, including landscapes, portraits and still lifes, the subject matter precludes the feminine or masculine influences of the artist, says owner Vinnie Wohlfarth. Even the Hensche paintings are sensitive and a bit feminine, she says.

"There's not much focus on whether it's a man or a woman," Wohlfarth says. "It's beautiful to begin with. Men make beautiful paintings."

Women like Carney say they have never felt resistance about their



"To Rothko" acrylic by Brenda Horowitz (Berta Walker Gallery).

art and feel just as free as their male colleagues. For Carney the male world of the fishing industry, where the men often offer to help her carry things, is as much of a flashback to the time of early women artists as she ever gets.

In particular Carney praises Provincetown, where she has painted in the summer for the last five years, as a place more progressive than the rest of the art world.

"It's a neutral environment where I can paint and not be held back by the conditions of sexism," Carney says.

But Carney says she does not intend to forget the efforts of any of the women that came before her, from groups of the 1970s like the Gorilla Girls who exposed galleries that didn't show women to those early women themselves.

"They really paved the way for women to have a more fair situation," Carney says. "It's important

not to forget that was only 10 to 15 years ago."

But the road ahead is still a long one, according to Berta Walker, whose Provincetown gallery shows a large number of women artists. She still sees resistance to raising the price of a woman's work as high as a man's. She also sees the same current running through the number of well-known women compared to men in the art world as a whole.

"I can't get their prices up higher. There's a resistance by the buyer. I don't think it's a thing a buyer incidentally thinks about, 'oh gee this is a woman, I'm not going to spend that much money on a female,'" Walker says. "I think it's much deeper than that."

Walker says she'll be watching in other galleries as well as her own to see how much that changes over time. She says she still sees a number of women artists whose work comes up at the PAAM auctions



"Two Pilgrims and the Dog" oil by Selina Trieff (Berta Walker Gallery).

who nobody knows and so their work stills sells for next to nothing.

Long before she ever became an art dealer, Walker says it was women artists that caused the only fight she ever had with her father. "He'd say, 'If they were so good why don't we know them,'" Walker says. "I'd say, 'because nobody encouraged them to be out there so we don't have any painters, and if they painted they painted under a male name.'"

It's that same fault in the past that gives Walker hope for the future. In her Bradford Street gallery she points to the walls of the gallery and the three women artists, all in their sixties, whom she says

are doing the best work of their lives.

Nancy Whorf, Selina Trieff and Brenda Horowitz have come of out of their artistic shells in the last 10 years, Walker says. For the first time in their lives they don't have commitments to children or parents and so can concentrate on their art.

"My feeling is as we go into the millennium there will be more and more women with a newer fresher point of view because I think the psychic energy from the earliest days has not been tapped," Walker says. "I think there's a lot of art to be made by females that has not been made so far." □