

Edwin Dickinson painting in the snow at Days Lumberyard, 1915 (?)

Collection of Helen Dickinson Baldwin



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# EDWIN DICKINSON

By Helen Dickinson Baldwin

Writing about my father, Edwin Dickinson, is a pleasure for me, out of love and because I am an admirer of his pictures. I like to think I would seek them out even if I were a stranger. Certainly many people have.

My father was an artist for all his adult life, and he considered that to be an artist is a calling of the highest dignity and professionalism. A pendant to that belief was that no layperson could ever see the quality of a work of art as well as could a fellow practitioner. I am not an artist and I recognize that I see his paintings as a layperson, a non-professional. But I am also aware that I do know more about Edwin Dickinson's life and work than most people.

Edwin Dickinson was born in 1891, the youngest of the four children of Emma and Edwin Dickinson. The family lived in upper New York state where my grandfather was the minister of a church in Seneca Falls when my father was born. He grew up under the assumption that he would become a minister like his father, since neither of his brothers had done so, and there was then certainly no question of his sister doing so! He admired both his father and his occupation, but when he was seventeen his brother Burgess suggested he might prefer the navy.



*The Cello Player, 1924-26*

Edwin Dickinson

Father was taken with the idea and secured an appointment to Annapolis but failed the entrance examinations in mathematics. Disappointed and at loose ends, he studied drawing during a summer in Ashville, North Carolina, and right away he knew that in art he had found his future. In the fall of 1910, eighteen years old, he went to New York, entered Pratt Institute, and was ecstatically happy. He described himself as

“bursting out of my shell joyfully into a life that I hadn't known before . . . [as] . . . a professional art student in the biggest puddle . . . in New York. I was just completely taken up with the joy of being an art student and knowing what I was going to do.”

After a year of drawing from the antique at Pratt he moved to the Art Students League where he spent two years in the William Merritt Chase class, starting out by painting a still life, *premier coup* (done in one sitting) every day for seven months.

He admired Chase, saying he taught him to regard oil paint “not as an obstructing, fearsome thing, but a thing you could be friends with and get good at in some way or other.”

It was however, in Provincetown in the summer of 1912 that he found in Charles W. Hawthorne

the teacher who was for him in a class above all others. All his life he spoke of Hawthorne as a teacher beyond compare. He studied with him again in the summer of 1913 and then decided to stay in Provincetown for the winter, embarking on his independent life as a painter.

The move from New York was not, however, determined entirely by his enthusiasm for the life he found on the end of Cape Cod. In New York my father



had lived with his brother Burgess, a musician and a man also deeply responsive to the world of the aesthetic. Burgess took his own life in early 1913 and his father's response to the loss of the man he then loved and admired above all others was a heartbreak which he tried to ease by leaving the city, to winter in Provincetown.

Provincetown is famous and crowded with artists now, but in 1913 my father was one of only five "outsiders" wintering there, three of them painters. He thrived on the strenuous Cape winters and liked the challenge of the severe wind and cold. He was strong and hardy and he loved walking the great ocean beach, especially during storms. He responded emotionally, even poetically, to the foggy, cold and windy days and nights. And because he was at the same time also an unusually sociable and friendly man, he made good and lifelong friends throughout the Provincetown community. He found his new life fully absorbing and he was strongly attracted to "Old World" culture of the immigrant Portuguese community.

He painted steadily, sometimes in a studio so cold it was not far above freezing. It was a large room which he had entirely lined with heavy building paper to help keep the drafts at bay, and all the while he considered, as he liked to say, that emotionally he "lived more luxuriously than J.P. Morgan ever thought of."

The subjects of his paintings in these early years remained characteristic of his work throughout his life; still lifes, figures, landscapes and compositions are now so well known that it is not always realized that most of his work was done from nature. The Hirshhorn Museum's large Edwin Dickinson exhibition in 1980, "Selected Landscapes," gave an idea of how large that aspect of his work was. In later years when asked what kind of a painter he was, a typical reply was "I am a general painter, in oil."

Many of the early Provincetown paintings are lost, for sales were few and then he did not really try to keep them. Some were even tacked down onto the floor as insulation. His first interest was in the actual painting and then they were



*Self Portrait*, National Academy of Design

Edwin Dickinson

put aside and usually taken off the stretcher so it could be reused. Such economies were always necessary and economy figured too in his choice of still life as a frequent subject. Though he painted from a model as often as he could afford to, he liked to point out that still life has the advantage of being far more readily available, and in addition it not only doesn't get tired but does not even have to be paid!

His interest in still life, however, went far beyond such small practicalities. He considered it a valuable exercise for "learning to reproduce, if you can, as well as you can, the progressions of color that are in nature."

He spoke about it at some length in the winter of 1957-58 for the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, saying that:

"The attitude that you bring to still life is a very detached one . . . the difficulty of making something out of these greases . . . so absorbs the painter's attention in matters of form and of value and of color that he forgets the object . . . as early as 1915 I had come to the point where I could so lose track of what was the object I was doing that when the model was a person . . . I was surprised

[after an hour] to look up and see that person beyond the canvas. I was also surprised to see what it was that was down there on the canvas, and [that] it was a person."

Father brought this same attitude of detachment from his subject to landscape and considered painting still life and landscape to be essentially the same thing. Still life was simply more feasible in bad weather. But he loved painting out-of-doors and did so even in the cold.

I have a snapshot of about 1915 of him painting in the snow near his studio at Days Lumberyard. Days Lumberyard was exactly that, and above the lumber sheds Frank Days had built ten rough studios off an outside balcony. These studios were attractive to artists for their exceptionally fine north light and their very low rents; fifty dollars for the season or as far into the winter as an artist could last. Lasting through the winter meant getting along with the meager heat, carrying water up from downstairs, sharing the single toilet and perhaps most difficult of all, working against the incessant noise of the lumberyard. Like Provincetown itself the Days Lumberyard studios later came to have considerable cachet and they are now institution-



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The same urge led him to give an unexpected perspective to every book, plate, teapot, or jug, and further to place the kettle cover upside down and then tip it at a variant angle to the kettle itself. The angles at which objects are placed are so ingenious and so complex that they can be difficult for others to sort out. I once tried to photograph that china teapot from the angle at which it is painted and was defeated. I could not find it.

Thirty years later he told the Columbia University interviewer:

I've made [it] a rule all my life never to paint an object that has a normal posture in that posture . . . I always put something under an object . . . to give it a cant that will require me to look to see how much it is away from a position I might have assumed . . . [And] it may be a little livelier . . . to see things a little other than you've always seen them. I'd get pretty tired if I had to have things up and down [in a painting] because they had to be up and down in order to be used.

Like the viewpoints, the juxtapositions in *The Cello Player* are also original: the ordinary kettles and the elegant antique teapot and the old washstand pitcher from his grandparents' house; the real scallop and quahog shells and the artificial rose. A whole tumble of books includes Lucretius, Robert Burns and Shakespeare. And on the music rack of the organ is a volume which has inscribed in the paint itself the name "Nansen." I don't know how many people today know about Fridtjof Nansen, the Brilliant Norwegian arctic explorer, humanitarian and Nobel prize winner.

In the earlier years of this century, the exploration of the arctic was still thrillingly immediate, and Nansen won world fame for his arctic voyages. My father was intensely interested. He was, as he said, a "fireside arctic explorer" and he deeply admired Nansen who in 1920 led Norway's delegation to the first assembly of the League of Nations. In Geneva, Nansen was appointed High Commissioner for the repatriation of five hundred thousand prisoners of war, and he carried out his mission so successfully that he was awarded the 1922 Nobel Peace Prize.

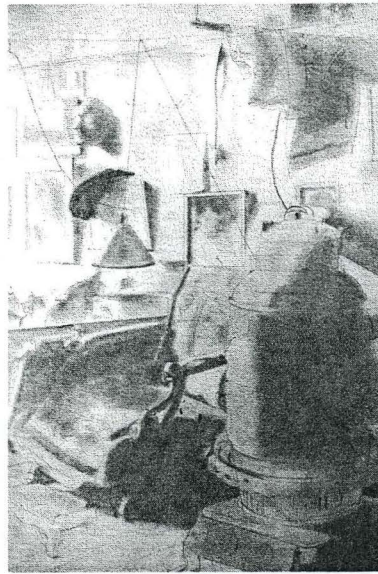
It is easy to see that *The Cello Player* is full of things which were stirringly important to my father, but it is difficult to determine just what the whole paint-

ing means, and such a question did not interest him. When Katharine Kuh asked Father if his large compositions were symbolic, he replied entirely honestly, "I wouldn't be able to say."

But whatever the painting may or may not mean, its tension of the literal and the unfathomable is so rich and so original that it is inconceivable that anyone else could have painted *The Cello Player*. It is entirely and distinctively Dickinson.

My Father's studios were as distinctive to him as are his paintings, and for many years his studio was where he both lived and worked.

His principal studio after he returned to Provincetown in 1920 was at 46 Pearl Street, just down the way from Days Lumberyard. Its interior as he drew it in 1926 is so like him that it is entirely fa-



Studio, 46 Pearl Street  
Provincetown, 1926  
Photo: Tatge

E. Dickinson

miliar to me even though I never saw it to remember. The stove and drying bar and mask of Beethoven are all habitual features. Having things drying above the stove was a practical matter, but I think there actually was always hanging drapery of some kind in Father's studios. He loved drapery and loved to paint it. As he was fond of pointing out, scarcely anything else is so versatile; drapery can be placed in virtually any position and it will stay put.

The placement of the pictures is characteristic; they seemed always to be hung quite at random and if one slipped in its frame it could stay that way for months. What for someone else would be clutter was for my father a rich, even nourishing, environment.

I don't mean to treat this drawing

simply as a document however. Father made many drawings which, like this one, are entirely independent and finished works. I suppose there may be around a hundred fifty of them in addition to his sketches. Though he always spoke of himself as a painter, in fact such drawings were a substantial part of his oeuvre.

In 1939 my parents bought a house on a cove off Wellfleet harbor. It was their first really settled home since their marriage in 1928. My brother and I still think of it as our childhood home and it was our parents' home until my father's death in 1978.

Our year-round life on Cape Cod ended though when we started spending winters in New York in 1944. The *Self Portrait* of 1949 was painted in a New York studio and I say "a" New York studio rather than "the" New York studio advisedly because over the years he had so many there. It used to seem to me that he was always looking for a new studio because in New York's postwar building boom, whatever his current studio building was being torn down.

In this self portrait he adapted the actual room to suit the painting. He arranged the walls of his "space" to suit himself and brought the skylight into the picture by using tilted mirrors. He was accustomed to drawing on the studio's bare walls as he worked out exercises in perspective, and so he painted in one of those drawings, but also foreshortened it so that the cube drawn on the wall appears in the painting as a diamond.

Perspective was a ruling passion for him in the 1940s for he was hard at work on the *Ruin at Daphne*, a "piece" as he liked to say, measuring four by five feet. Until it left his easel for good he habitually called it the sixty forty-eight and sometimes later on the "old" sixty forty-eight.

The *Ruin at Daphne* was begun in Wellfleet on New Year's Day of 1943 and it is characterized by intricate and sophisticated perspective drawing. The actual painting of it began only in 1951 and was never completed.

Like all my father's large compositions the *Ruin at Daphne* was a different picture when finished than at its start, but it is the only one for which photographs exist of several of its stages. The earliest one shows what turned out to be some constant features; the great triple arches, the helical stair around a pillar and the fountain basin. But even before this I remember a large French country house and once there were figures. In time a keep-like structure was taken out and later a half-ruined temple went in. And I have a memory of Father coming in from



the studio one day and saying that he had "drained the pool" that morning.

Some of the architecture is derived from extant ancient monuments, though the whole is entirely a work of the imagination. But Father enjoyed talking about it as though it had had an actual history. It was, as he told Elaine de Kooning for *Art News*, a Roman ruin in Syria, built in 40 A.D., in a style which is a concoction of corrupted Corinthian, Doric and Ionic forms. The original French mansion was built, he said, about 1800 and the stone "silo" he went on, was alleged to have been built in 1600 and then replaced by the temple which, he explained, leans slightly because it was built on soft earth. Given the chance he even tilted a building! Finally he declared that the entire ruin had been bought in 1900 by a well-to-do Frenchman who landscaped and built a pool.

The *Ruin at Daphne* became well-known after the publication of the *Art News* article about it in 1949 and it was sometimes exhibited in its unfinished states until 1954 when it was declared done and was promptly purchased by the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In recent years it has been largely out of sight while the Metropolitan was building its new Lila Acheson Wallace Wing for twentieth century art. But since the opening of that wing in the spring of 1987 the "Daphne" is again on view and hanging beside it is *Two Figures*, painted in Provincetown in the 1920s.

The years spent on such demanding compositions as the *Ruin at Daphne* were not, of course, years spent on one piece alone. Father always spoke of the time spent on his large compositions not in terms of weeks or months, but in terms of "sittings" which were painting sessions of about three hours.

A composition of 1953, *Still Life, Lascaux*, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art brings together many of my father's life-long interests and characteristics as a painter.

In the summer of 1953 Father and I went to France and after some time in Paris we went south to see the great prehistoric paintings in the cave at Lascaux. Father was thrilled by them. His admiration was boundless and we stayed a week in the tiny town of Montignac while Father walked daily out to the cave in the rock hills beyond the village.

The next year, back in New York, he undertook an intricate still life which focused on the Lascaux animals. Starting with a china pot from his grandparents' house he replaced its nineteenth century patterns with great beasts from Lascaux. The octagonal pot is, of course, tilted forward at an eccentric angle and

seen in perspective below eye level. Beneath it is a piece of shiny zinc so bent as to provide several reflective surfaces in which the Lascaux Vase is mirrored. The cast image is, naturally, distorted both because of the zinc surface and because it is seen in perspective from yet another view point than that of the vase itself.

As my father described it, he took a vase and:

"... put beneath it, in which it was reflected, a piece of clear zinc which I had ruffled into the simulation of oily, smooth water, rippling. I did a pretty crude job on it, because I'm no tinsmith, but it was a shiny piece of stuff and sure enough, I could see the vase in it..."

In this painting the great Lascaux bulls are incorporated into a composition which features them and integrates them into a work which is highly representative of Father's life-long interests as a painter.

My father always felt a comradeship with other artists. He felt there is a bond inherent in being an artist which unites all artists of whatever style or era. His Lascaux Vase is in part an expression of his admiring kinship with his Cro-Magnon colleagues of fifteen thousand years earlier.

This is appropriate to my father's spirit and, I feel, to that of all artists. For very broadly speaking art is the things that people have made. And the things that people have made constitute far and away our greatest record of human history and endeavor. The written record is scant by comparison. I am proud that my father's work is part of the ancient, continuing and visible record of human history and aspiration. □□

*Helen Dickinson Baldwin is the daughter of Edwin Dickinson. She teaches at Vanderbilt University, Department of Fine Arts, specializing in early medieval art.*

Unless otherwise noted quotations are taken from interviews conducted by Carol S. Gruber, *The Reminiscences of Edwin Dickinson*, (unpublished manuscript, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, NY, November 1957-January 1958).

Other quotations or references are to Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York, Harper & Row, 1960, 73), and Elaine de Kooning, "Edwin Dickinson Paints a Picture" (*Art News*, September 1949, 26-28, 50-51).