

The Arts Tradition of the Outer Cape: A Work in Progress

by Bridget Macdonald

On August 27, 1916, a headline in the *Boston Daily Globe* proclaimed: "Biggest Art Colony in the World at Provincetown." Given the steady decline of the Cape's traditional maritime industries in the preceding century, these words signaled a promising new era.

The Outer Cape had not only transformed from a maritime economy to a tourist destination, it had become a place where people came for creative inspiration – all in what seemed like the blink of an eye. An 1890 Provincetown business directory had listed just two teachers of oil painting in a place still defined by a seafaring past with trades like boat building, sail making, and sea captaining.

Just twenty-six years later, the *Globe* reporter described an entirely different scene: "There are said to be more than 600 in the colony, from all sections of the United States, including painters, sculptors, etchers, actors, musicians, writers and playwrights of distinction, art students of all kinds, and a choice assortment of professional models..."



Charles W. Hawthorne, *His First Voyage*

Posing his models on the beaches and wharves of Provincetown, he challenged students to capture the way natural light affected a subject, rather than focus on rendering anatomical details.

In a place surrounded by water, and known for dramatic weather, the changing quality of light created infinite possibilities for artistic interpretation. Within ten years of Hawthorne's arrival, there were six more art schools in Provincetown alone.

By the time Cape Cod National Seashore came along, the Outer Cape's cultural pedigree featured big names like Edward Hopper, Jackson Pollack, Charles Demuth, and Eugene O'Neill, as well as numerous other important, if less well-known figures, like Hans Hofmann, Henry Hensche, Milton Avery, Blanche Lazzell, Mary Heaton Vorse, and Edwin Dickinson.



Hans Hoffman, *Spring*

Tourists who ventured to the Cape were as intrigued as reporters. According to local lore, visitors would ask immediately upon disembarking from the train or steamship, "Where can we see the artists?"

They didn't have to look far. According to the *Globe*, there were "easels set up at nearly every house corner and street corner, on wharves, in old boats, in lofts, in yards, along the beach – anywhere and everywhere you go – painters, painters, painters."

Although nearly a century has passed, a contemporary reporter could write a similar account. At bayside and ocean beaches, along bike paths and roadsides, overlooking harbors and salt marshes, possibly even in old boats, there are still "painters, painters, painters."

It was artist Charles Webster Hawthorne who brought "plein air" painting to the Cape when he opened the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown in 1899. An early American Impressionist, Hawthorne helped liberate the traditionally studio-bound painter by teaching classes outside.



Henry Hensche, *Untitled*

Today, the works of these artists and writers can be found in museums, galleries, theaters, and libraries around the world, but their legacies remain an important part of local history. Many of the places where artists came for inspiration are now within the national seashore, partly to their credit.



Charles W. Hawthorne painting before students on the beach in Provincetown.

Compact, the Eastham Painters Guild, and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, which predates the park, have all played pivotal and distinct roles in sustaining the arts community.

Through fellowships and residency programs, many of these organizations have created opportunities for working artists and writers to experience the beauty and isolation cherished by their predecessors.

Although the countless artists and writers who have come to the Cape over the past century encompass a broad range of styles, mediums, and point-of-views, they have found something in common here.

"Why this phenomenon?" asked historian Ronald A. Kuchta in the catalogue for "Provincetown Painters," an exhibit shown at the Provincetown Art Association in 1977.

All photos courtesy of Provincetown Art Association and Museum



Ross Moffet, *Clamdiggers Fleet*

Similar to large western national parks long before the national seashore was conceived, it was writers and artists who brought attention to the majesty of the Outer Cape, creating a visual and literary case for its preservation. It was author Henry David Thoreau who coined the term "The Great Beach" to describe the spectacular stretch of shoreline that traces the Cape.

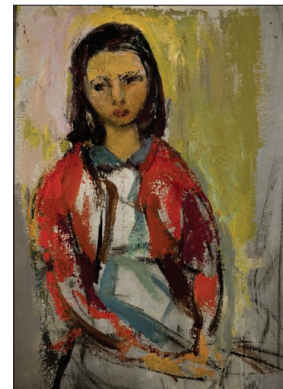
Painters like Philip Malicoat, Boris Margo, and Franz Kline captured the unique beauty of the dune landscape while working in the isolated shacks along the backshore of Provincetown and Truro.

During the contentious planning process leading up to the park's establishment, it was local artists and writers, like Ross Moffett and Josephine Del Deo, who advocated for preserving the seashore. They knew what was at stake.

The Outer Cape's artistic traditions have become as integral to its cultural identity as its maritime heritage, and as sensitive to economic pressures. As second-home owners and retirees have gradually become the most powerful demographic on the Outer Cape, fostering and nurturing the arts has become of increasing importance.

Over the past 50 years, cultural institutions have flourished in the communities around the seashore. The Fine Arts Work Center, The Castle Hill Center for the Arts, the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, the Peaked Hill Trust, the Provincetown Community

"Perhaps remoteness," he wrote, "and perhaps Nature most of all, appealing to realists, impressionists, expressionists and abstractionists alike."



Franz Kline, *Sue Orr*

For artists, the Outer Cape is a native habitat with no carrying capacity. Inspiration is not a finite resource, and the Cape's cultural legacy is a perpetual work in progress.

"You don't just see where the O'Neills or Pollocks or Mailers worked, you work there yourself," wrote a member of the Peaked Hill Trust in a collection of writing and drawing from 1988. "It's a living history."