



THE LIFE
AND PRACTICES
OF THE

Artists' Colony

A restless summer during my youth led me to The Cape School of Art and its rich tradition of instruction. It is but one example of America's artists' colonies, which provide instruction and support for artists looking to advance their skills.

—
by Michael Gormley

Reflections on Discovering an Artist Colony

When I was recently out of college and living in New York City, I decided to forestall adult life and serious employment—and avoid a humid summer in the city—by migrating to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where my chances of landing a job during the bustling tourist season seemed promising.

I made my way to the town at the end of Cape Cod and got part-time work in a pub, but before long I was bored. I decided to enroll in a figure-drawing class—perhaps prompted by the artists working outdoors in the area. A fellow participant in the class spied one of my poor but earnest attempts at drawing and pulled me aside. “There are a group of artists up on Pearl Street that are able to do what you are trying to do,” he confided in a somewhat conspiratorial tone. “You should go talk to them.”

The next day I gathered what few art supplies I had and ventured out onto the town's main drag, a Disneyesque tourist strip jammed with hotdog stands, souvenir shops, ice cream parlors, and a multitude of sightseers. Some locals pointed me toward Pearl Street, a narrow lane that rose above and away from the hullabaloo of the town.

At the top of the street, I turned onto a grassy yard bordered by a tumble of dilapidated sheds and high hedges. Facing the hedges stood a group of young men and women sporting

wide-brimmed straw hats and visors. Armed with palettes and brushes, they stood astride French easels and busily painted a female model, as one woman made the rounds from easel to easel.

It all looked more like a movie set than an art school. I approached one of the painters, who informed me that I had arrived at The Cape School of Art. The instructor was Joannette Egeli, who taught there with her husband, Cedric. I saw Joannette stop in front of a rather defeated-looking painter and exclaim, “What's the situation here? You need to relax. The sun is doing all the work for you. It cuts everything in two—either the form is in the shade or it's in the light. Look for those patterns.”

Waiting for a lull in her endless rounds about the yard, I approached this rather stern-looking woman and blurted out that I wanted to learn how to paint. That day I painted from the model—or, I should say, I floundered with the model. Yet somehow I managed to stick with it, and I returned the next day, and the day after that. I wound up staying the entire summer with that group of artists under the tutelage of the Egelis. We camped out in ramshackle studio barns, washed dishes for food and paint money, and—most important—we painted all day, every day. We posed fishermen on the beach at dawn, worked from still lifes in the afternoon, and painted children at dusk. Little by little we got better.



TOP
A photograph of Charles Hawthorne conducting a demonstration for students at his Cape Cod School of Art.

ABOVE
Students of Hawthorne painting on the beach, ca. 1915.

RIGHT
Barnacles on Rock
by Robert Henri, 1903, oil on panel, 8 x 10. Collection Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.



Historical photos courtesy Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown, Massachusetts.

BELOW

Block Study

by Henry Hensche, 1975, oil on board, 16 x 20. Collection Emile and Jennifer Henault.



Painting Practices of The Cape School

As an absolute beginner that summer, my first task was to learn how to depict three-dimensional form with color. I practiced this technique by painting studies of setups comprised of brightly colored wooden blocks. The challenge was to mix and apply a different color for each of the blocks' visible planes. That generally meant mixing four colors to start—hues for the top plane (the brightest), two side planes (one of which was in shadow), and the shadow cast by the block (the darkest).

After about a month I could lay in thick impasto highlights and in contrast paint luminous purple-green shadows lying across a tabletop. Later I learned to see and paint the light from the table reflecting back into the shadow side of the block. "Keep your eyes moving," Cedric would say. "Don't stare into the shadows." I remember the day that I understood what he meant. I realized it was all about relationships—one color shape coming up against another to make form, just like Charles Hawthorne (1872–1930), the founder of the Cape Cod School of Art, had said.

In his book *On Painting*—a wonderful and informative compilation of teaching notes and color experiments—Hawthorne directed his students to "get the color right" and not focus on details when painting. Like Robert Henri (1865–1929), another seminal figure in modern art education, Hawthorne believed that if more attention were paid to color and shape relationships within a composition, there would be less need to focus on detailed drawing. Indeed, if the color were truthful—that is, if it approximated the retinal effects of light on form—the resulting painting would be a more genuine replication of how the real world is perceived. It would offer a felt aesthetic experience that the viewer would accept as a genuine expression of the natural world.

**DEMONSTRATION: CAROL,
BY JOHN EBERSBERGER**

Maryland painter John Ebersberger studied at The Cape School of Art in the 1980s. He has since built a successful portrait- and figurative-painting practice based on his early training at the school, and today he is represented by Portraits Inc. The following step-by-step demonstration by Ebersberger shows the development of a portrait using the "mud head" technique taught at the school. It was painted during the hour from 3:00 to 4:00 over the course of several days.



Step 1

Using a painting knife, I laid in the large shapes that defined the light planes in relation to the shadow areas, known in Cape School parlance as "the main masses." I always try to look for a color difference between the light and shadow—not just a value difference—as the light effect is made by the opposition of colors in the light and in the shadow.

You don't want to paint the local color but rather the color that defines the local color in a given light key, or light environment. In other words, the model's hair could be described as brunette, yet the shadow colors of the hair have a violet cast to them, and the lighter plane of the hair is a warm off-note. These factors affect how the hair should be painted.

There is no shortcut to creating the illusion of sunlight; it can only be truthfully stated through diligent observation of nature and years of study. It is a mystery that must be studied with true love and admiration for nature's beauty.



Step 2 (left)

I continued to adjust the color in the masses and at the same time began to divide the surface of the painting into major variations. In some cases, this described the turning of the form. For instance, I indicated the turn of the cheekbone to reflect warmer tones reflecting off of the shirt and grass.

Color is continually affected by the sun, the blue of the sky, and the reflection of the subject's surroundings. For instance, the chest was receiving a cool cast of reflection from the sky both in the cast shadow and in the light plane, so I indicated this in my major-variation refinements. This is not done by reasoning so much as by sensory appreciation of the color notes, much in the way a musician would recognize a note just by hearing it.



Step 3 (above)

I began to include the minor variations, which include greater delineation of the features. The key is to get the smaller, linear detail to hold to the masses. You don't want anything popping out; you want it all to hold in the light key. This creates the illusion of the subject immersed in the light.

Not every color is stunningly brilliant. Notice the colors around the model's mouth—they're less highly colored than the more dramatic tones of the cheeks just above them. It is these somber, more sullen notes of beauty that often give a painting its true majesty. Hensche used to say that you can tell when a painter is making progress when he begins to "paint with colors that have no name."

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

Carol

by John Ebersberger, 2010, oil on board, 20 x 16. Collection the artist.



Hawthorne, and Henry Hensche (1899–1992) after him, based his painting instruction on these concepts. He had his students use a putty knife to complete loose portrait sketches of models posed on the beach backlit by a midday sun. The resulting sketches, affectionately called “mud heads,” were devoid of detail, yet in broad terms they expressed sufficient information about the models’ defining characteristics to make the person recognizable. “The idea was to thwart the students’ ability to draw the portrait using a thin, wiry brush and instead concentrate on the large color areas that define the patterns of light and shade,” explains John Ebersberger, a former student of Hensche and the Egelis. “With the model’s back to the sun, the model’s face in silhouette creates a decidedly mudlike color tone, hence the moniker ‘mud head.’”

Hensche’s contribution to this method of study was the refinement of the main color masses, or shapes, into subdivisions of color, the result being a form modeled by color changes. The first divisions of the main masses are called *major variations*, and the subsequent subdivisions are called *minor variations*.

The History of the Cape Cod School and American Artists’ Colonies

Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art when Provincetown was still a quaint fishing village. The location offered a quivering mirage of sea, dunes, sturdy houses, and sturdier fisherman, all awash with impressionistic light. It begged to be painted. Experimenting with the then-still-novel practice of painting en plein air and employing spots of high-chromo pigments, Hawthorne soon developed a sizable

following, with artists coming from all over the country to paint alongside the new master of color.

As the 19th century came to a close, Provincetown evolved into a popular artists’ colony and summer tourist destination. It was not the only such location. Across America, picturesque frontier towns and seaside fishing villages that embodied the myth of the “good old days” quickly became well-advertised tourist getaways.

America’s artists—in search of inspirational subject matter, like-minded colleagues, and inexpensive accommodations—were at the forefront of this new seasonal exodus from crowded urban centers. Many of these artists had studied abroad in European ateliers and had fond memories of communal life experiences in countryside artists’ colonies, particularly those that surrounded Paris. These artists’ colonies supported an egalitarian culture and a supportive community atmosphere in direct contrast to the competitiveness fostered in the Paris ateliers. The free and supportive encouragement—as well as all the bonding over communal dinners—had a profound impact on American painters, and they sought to recreate these idylls upon returning home. Artists’ colonies soon appeared all across America, with many being established by artists from Boston and New York City. Colonies formed in locations such as Old Lyme and Cos Cob, Connecticut; Ogunquit, Maine; Rockport, and Gloucester, Massachusetts; Cornish, New Hampshire; East Hampton and Woodstock, New York; and New Hope, Pennsylvania.

Similar to the experiences of artists that had visited Pont-Aven and Giverny, members of American artists’



colonies became influenced by the experience of being out in nature. This sensitivity to nature, and the creative expression it awakened in artists, also informed the content and manner of art instruction that became central to the life of the colony. Summer classes were taught by John Henry Twachtman and J. Alden Weir during the 1890s in Cos Cob under the auspices of the Art Students League. Childe Hassam painted and taught in both the Cos Cob and Old Lyme colonies, and he encouraged his students to adopt the loose brushwork and broken, high-key color we now identify with the Impressionist movement.

Robert Henri, a member of the Ashcan School and a teacher at the New York School of Art, made frequent trips to Monhegan Island, in Maine, and was soon followed by other artists lured by the promise of abundant and inspirational subject matter. Henri strongly advocated for a new American art based on American experience rather than European tradition. He urged his students toward a painting language that expressed a unique and individual response to a subject rather than an attempt to reproduce its outward appearance. His followers included George Bellows, Edward Hopper, and Rockwell Kent, and while on the island they created compelling works infused with great expressive power.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Wreck of the D. T. Sheridan
by Rockwell Kent, ca. 1949, oil,
27½ x 43¾. Collection Portland Museum
of Art, Portland, Maine.

ABOVE
Monhegan Houses, Maine
by Edward Hopper, ca. 1916, oil on
panel, 9 x 13. Collection the Portland
Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.

Aaron Draper Shattuck, a New York artist and second-generation Hudson River School painter, was an early visitor to Monhegan Island and recorded the natural beauty he encountered on that brief trip. Many of the Hudson River artists also painted in Maine, notably Frederic Edwin Church and Sanford Robinson Gifford. Shattuck’s emphatic description of the island’s natural wonders is in keeping with his era’s enthusiasm for the sublime beauty of the American wilderness and its symbolic representation of an omnipotent divinity.

The California coast also saw the development of artists’ colonies near the turn of the 20th century. These early settlements were clustered on the Monterey Peninsula and farther down the coast around Laguna Beach. The natural beauty of the Pacific coast, dotted with mission-style ruins, proved irresistible to artists who were inspired by the breathtaking scenery and the romance of the area’s Spanish colonial history. Like their Eastern antecedents, West Coast painters adopted an impressionistic, plein air style that remained vibrant well into the 20th century.

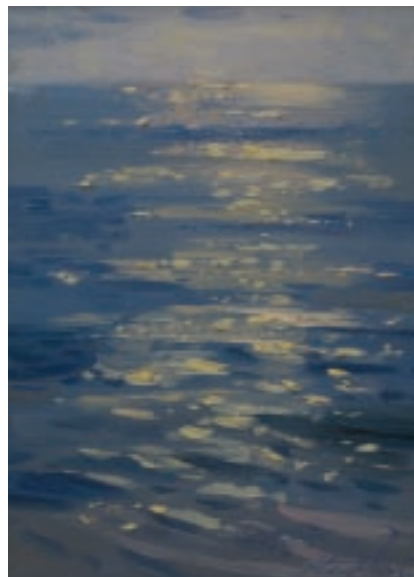


Preserving Nature: Artists' Colonies and Plein Air Painting Today

The contemporary interest in representational imagery has again made the landscape popular subject matter, and the movement to truthfully depict nature has become aligned with an urgent call for preservation and environmental awareness. American Legacy Fine Arts, in Pasadena, California, recently mounted a show of contemporary plein air painters who have created views of the California coastline reminiscent of the works created by area's first artist pioneers. Upon viewing these truthfully rendered scenes of nature unharmed by the excesses of human inhabitation, one can easily imagine the wonder and awe felt by the artists who first painted there.

Working in both oil and pastel, Tim Solliday renders clear blue waters, rocky shores, and shimmering sunsets in an expressive high-key palette that is filled with light but sufficiently tonal to impart a sense of weight and volume. In *Rock Cropping Near Santa Barbara*, Solliday expresses—with tight compositional cropping and broad brushwork—the imposing presence of glacial debris left stranded eons ago at the tide line.

If Solliday paints scenes that are rock-solid, then Peter Adams, Stephen Mirich, and Daniel W. Pinkham make works that are, by comparison, as smooth as smoke. In contrast to the solemnity of Solliday's marching forms, Adams, Mirich, and Pinkham revel in the soft misty light that heralds the start of a new day. Nothing in their paintings seems fully formed or



FAR LEFT
**Rock Cropping
Near Santa Barbara**
by Tim Solliday, 2010,
oil on canvas panel,
12 x 9. Courtesy
American Legacy
Fine Arts, Pasadena,
California.

LEFT
Full Moon
by Alexey Steele, 2010,
oil, 12 x 9. Courtesy
American Legacy Fine
Arts, Pasadena,
California.

Contemporary Artists' Colonies and Residencies

There are a range of contemporary artists' colonies active today that foster a sense of community and provide the space or means that allow artists uninterrupted studio time. Artists are often invited or selected through a formal process for residency ranging from a few weeks to more than a year. For information about many of these programs, visit www.newyorkartists.net/art-residencies.html.

Return of The Cape School of Art

The Cape School of Art closed in the early 1980s, but as of this writing, a group of former Hensche students and instructors at the school have reunited to form a trustee board and steering committee to reopen the school and secure a permanent teaching and student residency facility. For further information, contact John Ebersberger at johnebersberger@verizon.net, or Hilda Neily at www.hildaneilygallery.com.

stationary, as if this new light has yet to define what it has just pulled from the darkness that still lingers in the foggy air, rising over hills and treetops in a diaphanous, gauzelike veil.

Alexey Steele gives light—specifically its fractured display over reflective surfaces—center stage in his paintings of wave-soaked sand and rippling sea. In *Full Moon*, Steele paints the cool light glimmering over a still bay. His close cropping and high horizon line, however, undermine an easy reference to landscape. Rather, we are presented with a work that approaches pure abstraction in its distilled attention to form, rhythm, and color.

In the end we are left to marvel at the majesty of these natural habitats. We are reminded, not without regret, that their continued existence is dependent upon our loyal and humble stewardship. ■

Michael Gormley is the editorial director of American Artist.