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# Rhode Island Art and Artists

BY ALICE DEWOLF PARDEE

LOOKING around at the explosion of art in Rhode Island today, it seems incredible that only ninety-one years ago, within the memory of living Rhode Island citizens, there was no Rhode Island School of Design, nor its Museum of Art, no Providence Art Club, and no important galleries. In the late 1700s, the cultural arts — architecture, letters, sculpture and painting — were flourishing in Newport, quite naturally, as that city was the center of social political and economic activity in the state. However, the fine paintings and sculpture were behind the closed doors of the beautiful mansions, and not available to the public.

In the state at that time there were a few artists of national and even international fame, notably Edward Greene Malbone (painter of miniatures), Robert Feke, and particularly Gilbert Stuart who easily dominated the field. It is interesting to note that it took Gilbert Stuart — probably our finest and certainly our most famous native painter — two hundred years to achieve a one man show in Rhode Island. This took place at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design in 1967.

Times have changed. Today, if you are an artist member of the Providence Art Club, your work passes the Art Committee, you stand in line, and wait long enough, you are automatically entitled to an exhibit in its gallery.

The word "art" embraces a multitude of forms, many of which in an article of this length, must, perforce, be omitted. It will be enough to touch on only painting, drawing and sculpture — where and how they are being taught and exhibited — and on some of the artists who are producing them.

The most valuable and important collection of art in Rhode Island and one to which the public has access, is owned by the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Founded in 1877 by a group of women led by Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf, it has now become the valuable collection housed in the elegant extensive building that we know today. The Metcalf family has continued to be the great benefactor of not only the museum, but of the related school.

In addition to fine examples of ancient and European art, its permanent collection of paintings includes outstanding examples of French impressionists, modern abstracts, Pop, Op — whatever has been "In" at the moment, throughout the years.

Its collection of classical sculpture is third in importance in the Western Hemisphere, and the Abby Aldrich

Rockefeller collection of Japanese Bird and Flower prints is the finest in the nation.

This museum assembles many exciting temporary exhibits. During the past few years, these have included a wide variety of styles and periods of paintings and sculpture, from the work of Gilbert Stuart — which, as said before, was the first exhibit for this Rhode Islander in his native state — to the far out show of the faculty of the Rhode Island School of Design. At the latter, we were treated to a dummy on a swing, and urged to take out our frustrations by kicking around a huge, colorfully painted, peculiarly balanced, plastic ball — both done by John Bozarth. Imaginative, and good fun for the visitors.

The attendance at the Museum for 1967 was 92,763, and, according to the Director, Mr. Robbins, the number of visitors for the temporary shows varies, and is usually higher for the very modern exhibits. This would seem to indicate more tolerance for the avant-garde school of art on the part of the public, and fewer viewers prone to repeat those tired phrases, "I don't like it because I don't understand it," or "I wouldn't want to live with it."

Along with supervising the permanent collection, and organizing its temporary exhibits, the Museum runs many films and lectures on the subject of art for the benefit of both members and the public. Often, these deal with whatever work is currently being displayed in the museum galleries. It also offers courses for people interested in museum work.

Guided tours through the museum are provided, and for the past four years the number of school children alone taking these tours has exceeded twenty-five thousand each year.

There are numerous commercial and non-commercial galleries in Rhode Island, of all sizes and varieties. Some display chiefly work by local artists, who paint in many different styles — from the meticulous, representational paintings of Dorothy Holt Manuel to the dramatic collages of Richard Merkin. Those museums and galleries whose purpose is rather to exhibit than to sell — and not only local artists — generally seem willing to sell if the artist so desires, in which case they may take a small percentage.

If not the first, one of the earliest non-commercial galleries in the state is that of the Providence Art Club. This club was founded in 1880 by a small group of local artists — among whom was the Negro painter, Edward Mitchell Bannister. It seems to have been ahead of its



*The Providence Art Club on historic Thomas Street.*

*Journal photo*

time in many ways. As one present member proudly states, "the founders were foresighted enough to include not only artists, but also businessmen to administer the finances; and," she added, "they even admitted women from the beginning."

The club is today situated in a charming group of historic buildings on Thomas Street hill, and in its small gallery, many struggling Rhode Island artists, over the years, have been able to exhibit and sell their work, and have received the support and encouragement to start them on their way. This policy is still being pursued.

The physical setups of some of the other galleries and museums around the state are quite unusual and interesting. In a short space it would be impossible to describe them all, but to mention a few.

The Newport Art Association operates in a large wooden Victorian house, complete with portico, formerly belonging to the Griswold family. Across the lawn, it owns a handsome building – the Cushing Memorial – designed for the purpose of exhibiting art, and presented to the Association in 1920.

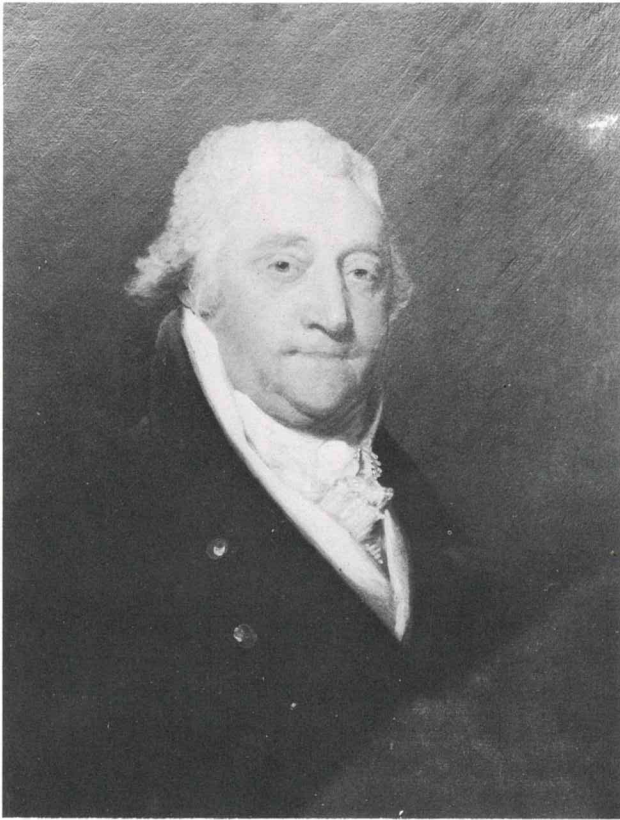
The South County Art Association, on the main street in Kingston, is in a lovely colonial house whose low ceilings seem to add an attractive intimacy to its exhibits.

The Bristol Art Museum enjoys elegance inside and out, being housed in the building which was the former ballroom for Linden Place, now owned by the heirs to the Colt Estate and loaned by them to the museum. Incidentally, in addition to its regular exhibits – in summer only – this small museum performs a service for two banks, a real estate office, and a medical center, by hanging on their walls, original paintings by local artists, and changing them periodically. This has been particularly popular among the bored and now grateful patients who must wait at the Bristol County Medical Center.

The Newport Art Association and the Warwick Arts Foundation also lend original paintings.

All the galleries strive for a balance of shows and report no special emphasis on either abstract or representational work.

The exhibits generally open with some sort of reception – Sunday afternoon teas, suited to their antique settings, at the South County Art Association and the Providence Art Club; evening gatherings in an adjoining courtyard at the Bristol Art Museum, graciously loaned for the occasions by Ethel Barrymore Colt Miglietta who occupies Linden Place; cocktail parties proper



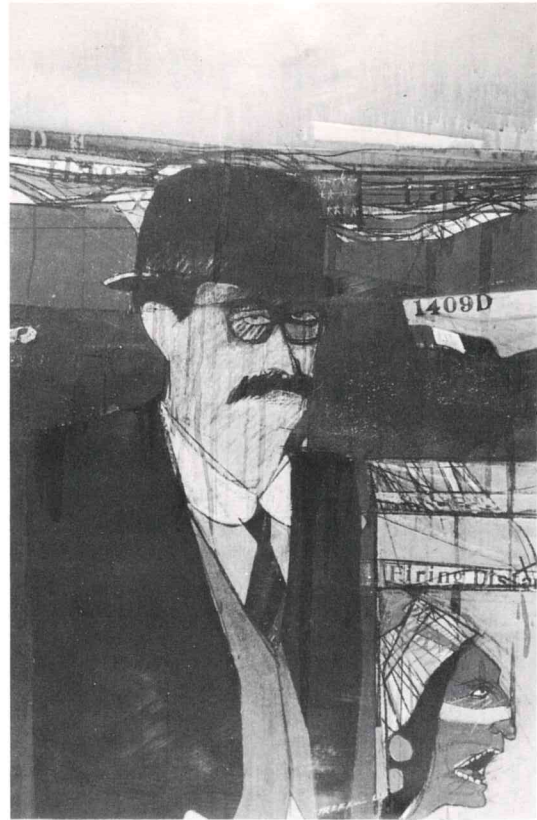
*The Gilbert Stuart portrait of Samuel Dunn. Courtesy of the Museum of Art, R. I. School of Design.*

for the social sophistication of Newport; and huge evening receptions at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, where the guests sometimes are as interesting and dramatic as the pictures.

Increasing in popularity are the many outdoor shows of art work that have sprung up in the spring and summer on the sidewalks of the towns and cities. Of course, the most ambitious of these is the Art Festival which, for the first nine years, bloomed under tents on the Mall in Providence. Losing battles with the elements — high winds and rain — have finally forced it under the parking deck opposite the Union Station. This location was formerly known as the “Transit Underpass,” but now, because of the new dignity conferred upon it by the Art Festival, it will henceforth be called the “Kennedy Plaza Arcade.”

All schools of paintings, drawing, graphics and sculpture are on display at these festivals, and some lively controversies have arisen in consequence. Having experimented over the years with one, two, or three jurors, this year — with intent of trying to please everyone — there were four.

The move to the underpass has taken care of the weather problems, but judging by the letters to the newspapers, there is still some dissent about what was selected by the jurors to be displayed, although it seems rather less than usual.



*Modern self portrait by Richard Merkin. Courtesy of Mrs. Jack MacDonald, Hope Street, Bristol.*

The libraries and historical societies also get into the art act. Fine paintings, particularly portraits, may be found in the permanent collections at the Providence Athenaeum, which owns “The Hours,” considered Edward Malbone’s (1777-1807) finest miniature, and also a Van Dyck (1599-1641), and a Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792); the Redwood Library (Newport), which hangs on its walls portraits by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), Thomas Sully (1783-1872), and John Wesley Jarvis (1780-1834); the Newport Historical Society, which owns three Robert Fekes (1705-1750), and a Joseph Blackburn (1700-1760); the Rhode Island Historical Society (Providence) which owns a self-portrait and one of his wife by Robert Feke, and the “Burning of the Gaspee,” by Charles DeWolf Brownell (1822-1909).

The Annmary Brown Library, without much fanfare, occasionally holds an outstanding exhibit of painting and sculpture, in conjunction with the Art Department of Brown University.

The Barrington Public Library and Rogers Free Library (Bristol) each have a lending library of framed prints of famous paintings which may be borrowed with no charge in the same way as books; for a month in Bristol, and six weeks in Barrington.

Libraries and historical societies are, of course, open to the public.

At the other end of the spectrum are the Lenore Gray Gallery and the Tonoff, both commercial galleries. The former in a small modern picture-windowed building, and the latter in the cellar beneath a restaurant in downtown Providence, where against the white painted walls, may be seen a great variety of work — paintings, drawings, and sculpture — arranged with imagination and taste, and managing to give the impression of glamour in an unlikely setting. Mr. Tonoff divulges that it took twenty-six gallons of white paint to transform the cellar into a gallery!

Thomas Tadlock, a native Rhode Islander and well-known Kinetic artist, who was among the first to experiment in this medium, first exhibited his original Light Machine in this gallery. Since then, he has been widely shown in the leading museums, including the Chicago Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is considered one of the top artists in this field.

Adjoining the Tonoff Gallery is a studio where classes in painting and drawing are held daily — but more about that later. This does, however, bring us to the subject of art in the Rhode Island schools.

A ten year old lad wandered into the Bristol Art Museum one day, made his rounds of the exhibit — which happened to be framed prints of famous paintings just presented to the local library — and stopped for some time in front of one picture. Thinking to be helpful, the hostess asked him if he would like her to tell him about the artist.

“No,” he replied forthrightly, “I know all about him. He was Dutch, his name was Van Gogh, he cut off his ear, and died in a sanitarium in France.” Then he pointed to the picture and added “Look at the way that guy paints sunlight!”

Where did he learn this? From his art teacher in the public school fourth grade.

This is perhaps indicative of what is happening in the schools. The children are being given solid backgrounds in art history, and entire classes are taken to visit the galleries and museums.

A fifteen year old school girl submitted a “far out” painting she had done of her little sister to a jury show at a local museum and it was accepted and hung.

It was not always so. Many of us can remember when art lessons in the public schools — if we were lucky enough to have them — consisted of being given some crayons or paints, told what to draw or paint and exactly how to do it. Not these days. The work of the children today is highly individual and imaginative. If a child shows talent, the teachers have the interest and ability to bring it to the surface.

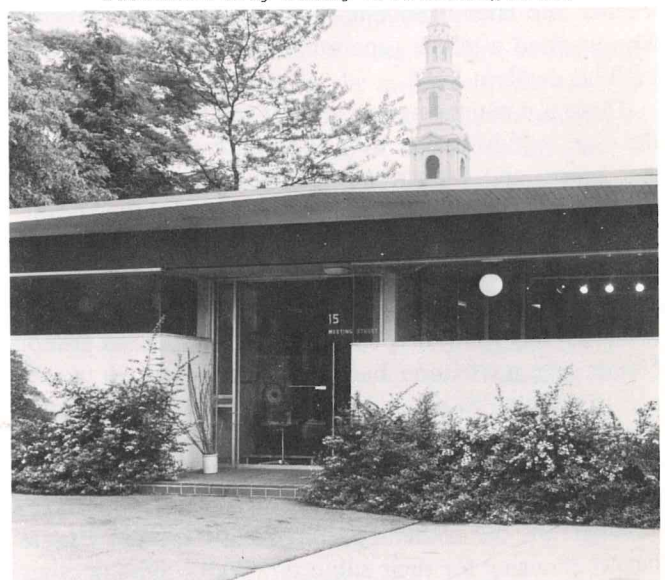
In 1873 a young lady named Mary C. Wheeler, her-

self an artist who had studied in Europe, was teaching painting classes “for young females” in Mrs. DeMunn’s private school on Benefit Street, in Providence. Later, she conducted popular art classes in her own studio on North Main Street. In 1883, she wrote in a letter to a friend, “The art in this city is pitiable, hardly an artist here who deserves the name of one.” That year, no doubt in an effort to correct this situation, she built a house on Cabot Street over the hill, to house her studio and her classes, and began teaching not only drawing and painting but history of art and architecture. Since she was what might have been called a “feminist” in the sense that she believed in *educating* as well as “finishing” the young ladies, this small beginning soon developed into the Mary C. Wheeler School, a college preparatory boarding school for girls. Boarding schools for girls were not uncommon at that time, but rare indeed was one that prepared the girls for college — much less majored in art as well.

However, according to Miss Marion Park, who taught at the school, and later became president of Bryn Mawr, she always had trouble convincing Miss Wheeler that the college preparatory subjects were as important as the work in the studio.

Starting in 1887, for twenty-seven years, Miss Wheeler directed the academic curriculum of her school for eight months of the year, and from June through September took those girls whose parents thought them deservingly talented (and who could afford to pay the tariff!) to France to paint and to study drawing, painting, and the history of art and architecture. This involved living in her rented villa at Giverny, near Paris, where the next door neighbor and intimate friend turned out to be the great Claude Monet. Today, on the walls at

*The Lenore Gray Gallery at 15 Meeting Street.*



the Wheeler School, may be seen a number of paintings by Miss Wheeler and her pupils showing a strong influence of Monet and French impressionism.

Miss Wheeler was the first Rhode Island educator to become intensely enthusiastic about the sculpture of Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). At the school there was particular emphasis on his work, and from Giverny, the pupils were always taken to his studio.

All the schools and colleges in Rhode Island include in their curriculums some instruction in art. Many are equipped with full-fledged art departments, some of which are outstanding, as those of Brown University and the University of Rhode Island. But the only college whose primary purpose is the teaching of art and design in all its forms is the Rhode Island School of Design.

From a humble beginning of a few classes formed in 1877 at the same time and by the same group of ladies who organized the adjacent museum, it has grown to a four-year college with an enrollment of one thousand students. It is recognized as one of the top art schools in the country. It has recently acquired a new foundry which provides the finest facilities for casting ever seen in a school of design.

The long-haired, bearded, bare-footed, slovenly students are a familiar sight "on the hill," but let us not forget how many of them have made good in the art world — not only in Rhode Island, but nationally and internationally. This past year alone, two graduates of the Rhode Island School of Design — Thomas Tadlock and Richard Merkin — have received recognition in *Time* magazine.

Many, if not the great majority, of the men and women teaching art in the Rhode Island schools and colleges today were trained at the Rhode Island School of Design. Most of them were pupils of John R. Frazier, the great teacher and later President (1956-1963) of the school, who inspired a whole generation of painters from 1923 until his death in 1966.

There are many small art classes scattered throughout the state in Y.M.C.A.s, Y.W.C.A.s, private houses, summer barns, and back rooms of small galleries. Among the most interesting of the latter, are the flourishing classes being taught in that downtown Providence cellar studio connected with the Tonoff Gallery, taught by Mr. Tonoff himself, complete with a magnificent flowing black beard. Here the pupils are indeed a varied group. Numbering up to one hundred and twenty per week, ages from nine to seventy-five years, there are children, teenagers, housewives, doctors, businessmen, and one policeman. All are working happily and enthusiastically in cramped, colorful, cluttered, quarters.

What are the contemporary painters around Rhode Island choosing for their subjects? Well — among other

things — Richard Grosvenor is painting with serenity, sailboats, the very blue sea, and the Newport waterfront; Dorothy Holt Manuel meticulously reproduces Colonial churches, public buildings, and houses; Anne Kolb Henry is fascinated by city streets, making them come alive and lighting them up at night; Angelo Rosati charms with the glitter and gold of his liturgical paintings; Jane Motley produces on canvas hauntingly grotesque children; Fritz Eichenberger of the University of Rhode Island is an illustrator, and William Klank — also of U.R.I. — uses letters and numbers in his collages; Roger Pontbriand is likely to sectionalize his paintings, using representational and abstract in the same canvas.

Strangely enough, not many local artists at this time are portraitists. Katherine N. Hoyt of Newport, and Walter Feldman do portraits in oils; and Mary Stafford Frazier does pastels of children, but few others seem interested.

What mediums are the Rhode Island painters using? There is something for everybody. They range from oils, watercolors, pastels, acrylic, to — of all things — dried fish scales!

Most of the artists who paint, also draw. For this, the subjects seem unlimited. Perhaps the most famous drawings by an artist with Rhode Island affiliations are those of Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944) who, although not born here, boasted of ancestors who were, and who spent most of his summers as he was growing up, in Bristol with his grandparents. His drawings of fashionable ladies of his period evolved into the famous "Gibson Girl."

To mention a few Rhode Island sculptors; Hugh Townley's sculptures are generally very large, abstract, and arresting. He works in different kinds of wood, and has been widely exhibited in this country, and has been shown in Paris and London.

Gilbert Franklin designed and executed the group of sculpture in honor of John R. Frazier on Benefit Street opposite the entrance to the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

Brian Kirkpatrick works imaginatively in wood, and Turner Johnson uses black leather and found objects.

Robert Hubbard is intrigued by shapes he finds on the beaches and executes them chiefly in marble.

Joseph Goto does welded sculpture constructions.

Most of these sculptors use a wide variety of material.

Surely the magnificent carved boat models done by "The Wizard of Bristol," Nathanael Greene Herreshoff, could be mentioned under the heading of Sculpture. The models were done first, and from them he took the designs for his famous yachts. They are now in the Herreshoff Model Room adjoining the house of his son,



*The Tonoff Gallery at 45 Peck Street including the genial, black bearded art teacher himself.*

Tilley

Sidney Herreshoff, which is occasionally open to the public.

Do Rhode Islanders support art in our state? Judging by the records, they do — in interest and attendance. Mr. Tonoff says that seven years ago if twelve people entered his gallery in one day, he considered it good. Now he counts hundreds. All the galleries report ever increasing numbers of visitors.

No article on this subject should omit mention of the influence of Bradford Swan, who has been writing provocative reviews in the *Providence Journal* for a quarter of a century, which have contributed immeasurably to the burgeoning interest in art on the part of Rhode Island citizens.

What about financial support? This too is growing. Perhaps too slowly, but nevertheless increasing. The sale of pictures and sculpture is soaring, and it is known that private collections in the state are important, and contain original paintings by El Greco (1547-1614), Canaletto (1697-1768), Robert Feke (1705-1750), Charles Wilson Peale (1741-1827), Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), Edward Malbone (1777-1807), Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), John Wesley Jarvis (1780-1834), Thomas Sully (1783-1872), George DeForest Brush (1855-1941), Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944), many of the French impressionists, and the finest of contemporary artists and sculptors.

The Rodin sculpture of Balzac standing in the garden of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design was purchased with funds contributed by Rhode Island citizens.

The non-commercial galleries and museums report steadily expanding memberships, and funds are now available from the state as well as the Federal Govern-

ment to promote art in the state.

One of the most significantly hopeful signs is that business and industry are beginning to understand the importance of the cultural arts to the economy of the state, and are increasingly willing to support them. The young married group, particularly, prefer to locate in towns or suburban areas where their children have access to art, music and drama.

Rhode Islanders — quite naturally, considering the historical background of our state — venerate antiquity; but we seem to be open-minded about the modern in the realm of cultural arts.

In a widely quoted lecture delivered in 1966, Professor W. Edward Brown of Lafayette College had this to say about modern art:

“... I am tired of sculptures of truck tires and baling wire, of paintings of soap and ping-pong balls. . . . Away with this snivelling pusillanimity!”

It seems unlikely that in showing this type of art, there is a great conspiracy among the directors of the galleries and museums to perpetrate a hoax upon the public; or among the critics for praising it; and certainly there is no Gestapo forcing the people to flock in to view it.

Rhode Islanders are notoriously independent, and while they may or may not agree with Professor Brown's opinion, they would defend his right to express it, and — remembering the roar of derision and disapproval that greeted the first showing of the French impressionists — go right on displaying and enjoying *both* the ancient *and* the modern in art.

As of now — 1968 — it would seem safe to say that art in Rhode Island has had a limited though impressive past; is enjoying an exciting and prosperous present; and can look forward to a promising future.