

The Arts & Letters of Rocky Neck in the 1950s

by Martha Oaks

Rocky Neck holds the distinction as one of the most important places in American art history. Since the mid-nineteenth century, its name has been associated with many of this country's best known artists: Winslow Homer, Frank Duveneck, Theresa Bernstein, Jane Peterson and Edward Hopper. From the mid-1800s through the first quarter of the twentieth century, the heyday of the art colony on Rocky Neck, the neighborhood was awash with artists. Listing their names and their accomplishments reads like a who's who of American art. And yet, not all chapters in Rocky Neck's long and celebrated past

have received the attention they deserve. With this exhibition, *Four Winds*, the Cape Ann Museum casts the spotlight on one of those interludes: the decade and a half following the Second World War. Not so far in the past that it cannot be recollected by many, yet just far enough that it is apt to be lost, the late 1940s and 1950s found a young and vibrant group of artists working on the Neck.

Although it is one of Cape Ann's longest-lived and best known art colonies, Rocky Neck was not the first. One of the earliest gatherings of artists occurred in the mid-1870s when a group of women art students arrived in the Magnolia neighborhood of Gloucester to study with Boston

painter William Morris Hunt and his protégé, Helen Mary Knowlton. Hunt was one of the first art teachers to welcome women into his classes. With his death in 1879 the Magnolia art colony came to an end, however, a handful of the women associated with the venture went on to be-

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ABOVE: Harry DeMaine, *Day's End* (*Tarr & Wonson Paint Manufactory, Rocky Neck*), c. 1950, w/c on paper, 12 1/2 x 15 1/2, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert DeMaine.

RIGHT: Gregory Smith and Albert Alcalay, *Untitled*, c. 1959, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 10, collection of the Family of Albert Alcalay.

LEFT: De Hirsh Margules, *Mother Ann Lighthouse, Eastern Point, Gloucester*, 1946, gouache on paper, 21 x 29, gift of Jean M. Horbit.

came successful artists in their own right including Helen Knowlton, Ellen Day Hale and Laura Coombs Hills.

Annisquam, one of Gloucester's north facing neighborhoods, was the site of another of Cape Ann's early art colonies. Among the earliest painters to work in the



village were Albion H. Bicknell who had set up a studio by 1868, Henry Hammond

Garrison who arrived around 1870, and William Lamb Picknell who began painting



LEFT: Helen Stein, *Untitled Still Life*, o/paper, 24 x 18 1/2, gift of Warren Rhodes.

BELOW LEFT: Gregory Smith and Albert Alcalay, *Untitled*, c. 1959, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 10, collection of the Family of Albert Alcalay.

RIGHT: Albert Alcalay, *Light Before the Storm*, 1950, o/c, 13 x 16, collection of the Family of Albert Alcalay.

in the area around 1883. The comings and goings of artists in Annisquam were carefully noted by Charlotte A. Lane, who ran a boarding house where many of the painters lodged. Lane was an avid writer and the pages of her narrative, *Reminiscences of Annisquam*, are sprinkled with references to artists who discovered the village during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In 1885 Augustus W. Buehler, who is often thought of solely in terms of the Rocky Neck art colony, began painting and teaching in Annisquam. Working in watercolor and oil, he discovered a storehouse of pictorial possibility. Buehler and other artists also discovered a neighborhood eager to welcome the summer visitor, but by the early 1890s, property owners in Annisquam began upgrading and improving their neighborhood, something which took the “old-time quaintness” out of the village. With this change, Buehler and other artists shifted their sights towards East Gloucester and Rocky Neck.

The two main businesses on Rocky Neck for much of the nineteenth century were a marine railway and a paint manufactory. The railway was built on the northern tip of the Neck in 1859, providing much needed facilities for the repair and maintenance of Gloucester’s growing fishing fleet. A short distance away was the Tarr & Wonson Paint Manufactory, established in 1863 by James G. Tarr and Augustus H. Wonson. The firm became best known for its anti-fouling copper paint used on boat bottoms.

In the years following the Civil War, Rocky Neck’s population continued to expand. In 1868, a four-room school house was built to accommodate neighborhood children. A few years later, Giles Chapel was built by the owners of the paint manufactory as a meeting place for residents of the Neck. And in 1878, a steam ferry named the *Little Giant* was put into operation providing passenger service between East Gloucester, Rocky Neck and Gloucester.



ter's central waterfront. By 1884, all of Rocky Neck's streets had been constructed and residential and commercial development was essentially complete.

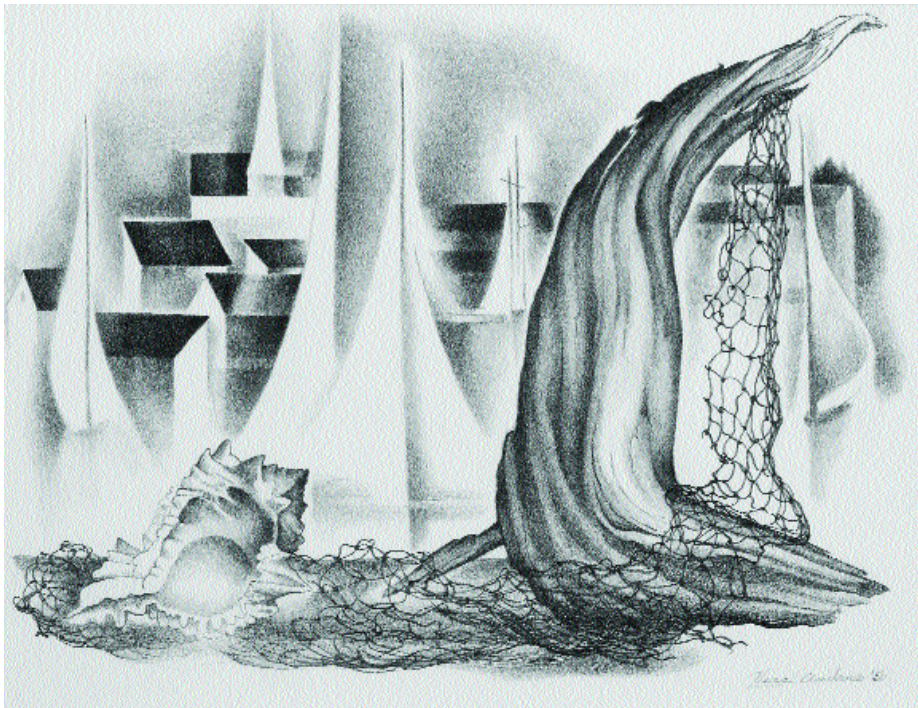
A new chapter in Rocky Neck's history began with the arrival of artists such as Buhler, Walter Dean and Frank Duveneck in the 1880s. Within a decade, scores of painters, etchers, sculptors and other artists would discover the area, making it their annual summer stomping grounds and giving rise to a true art colony. Boarding houses and hotels sprung up throughout the area followed in the early years of the twentieth century by the first real art galleries. Under the leadership of the newly formed chamber of commerce, civic and business leaders across Cape Ann shamelessly promoted East Gloucester and Rocky Neck during the 1920s as the perfect vacation spot, a place where visitors could find food and lodgings,

swim and sail, take in theatre and hear music, and of course, see art. The Depression and World War II cast a shadow over the entire area, but once it was lifted the lure of East Gloucester and Rocky Neck remained—a little rougher around the edges than in earlier days but still intact.

Many of the artists who flowed onto Rocky Neck in the wake of World War II were of a new breed, distinctly set apart from earlier generations. Traditional land and seascape painters continued working in the area but increasingly, sprinkled amongst them, was a group of younger artists looking for new subject matter, eager to explore different methods of expression. Some had come from foreign lands while others had lived on Cape Ann for a time. Many came with young children in tow and stayed for extended periods of time. Writing at the time, art critic

Dorothy Adlow called these artists, men and women like Louis Evan and Mary Shore, Tom O'Hara and Robert Bradshaw, "the modernists" and praised them for their "exploratory inclination." Although they never formalized their association, they came to be known as The Rocky Neck Art Group and much of the activity associated with them took place in and around the Doris Hall Gallery.

Opened in 1949 by Doris Hall and Kalman Kubinyi, the Doris Hall Gallery quickly became the center for the exchange of ideas amongst this new set of modernist artists working on Rocky Neck in the 1950s. The rambling multi-storied structure which housed the Gallery was located just a short distance from the marine railways and had previously been used for splitting and packing fish. The upper floors had been divided into summer rentals



ABOVE: Robert G. Bradshaw, *The Doris Hall Gallery, Rocky Neck*, w/c on paper, 14 1/2 x 20 1/2, private collection.

LEFT: Vera Andrus, *Harbor Window*, 1950, lithograph on paper, 11 x 14 1/2, gift of H. Wade White.

RIGHT: Helen Stein, *Still Life with Bouquet*, o/c, 20 x 16, gift of James F. O'Gorman in memory of Mary Shore.

social and artistic center for artists working in and around the Gallery, a place where outdoor demonstrations were staged, exhibitions were hung and tourists were urged to purchase art. It was also where plans were hatched for the annual Beaux Arts Ball, held each summer as a celebration of the arts on Rocky Neck.

The success of the Doris Hall Gallery had as much to do with its founders as with the times in which it operated. Hall and Kubinyi had both studied at the Cleveland School of Art; Hall focusing on enameling and Kubinyi on the graphic arts. The husband and wife team made their first visit to Cape Ann in 1933, traveling up from

which were popular with artists, particularly those who arrived with their families. Outside, stretching along the side of the

Gallery was a long display board, protected by a modest pitched roof. The board was affectionately called "the wall" and was the



Provincetown. In 1947 they returned to Gloucester and in 1949 opened the doors of the Gallery. Hall had a keen eye and carefully selected what was to be shown in the space. She also believed that every home should have art in it and made a point of including affordable pieces in her displays. Art critic Hilton Kramer, writing

in the mid-1950s, praised the diversity and quality of the objects Hall displayed and called the Gallery “a breath of fresh air...one of the most attractive art centers on Cape Ann.” Kramer also linked the seemingly overnight success of the gallery to a small coffee shop Hall and Kubinyi maintained within it.

The friendships and camaraderie forged at the Doris Hall Gallery carried over into other arts organizations and events throughout the community. In 1947, Rocky Neck’s modernists helped breathe new life into the Gloucester Society of Artists, successfully refashioning it into the Cape Ann Society of Modern Artists (CAS-



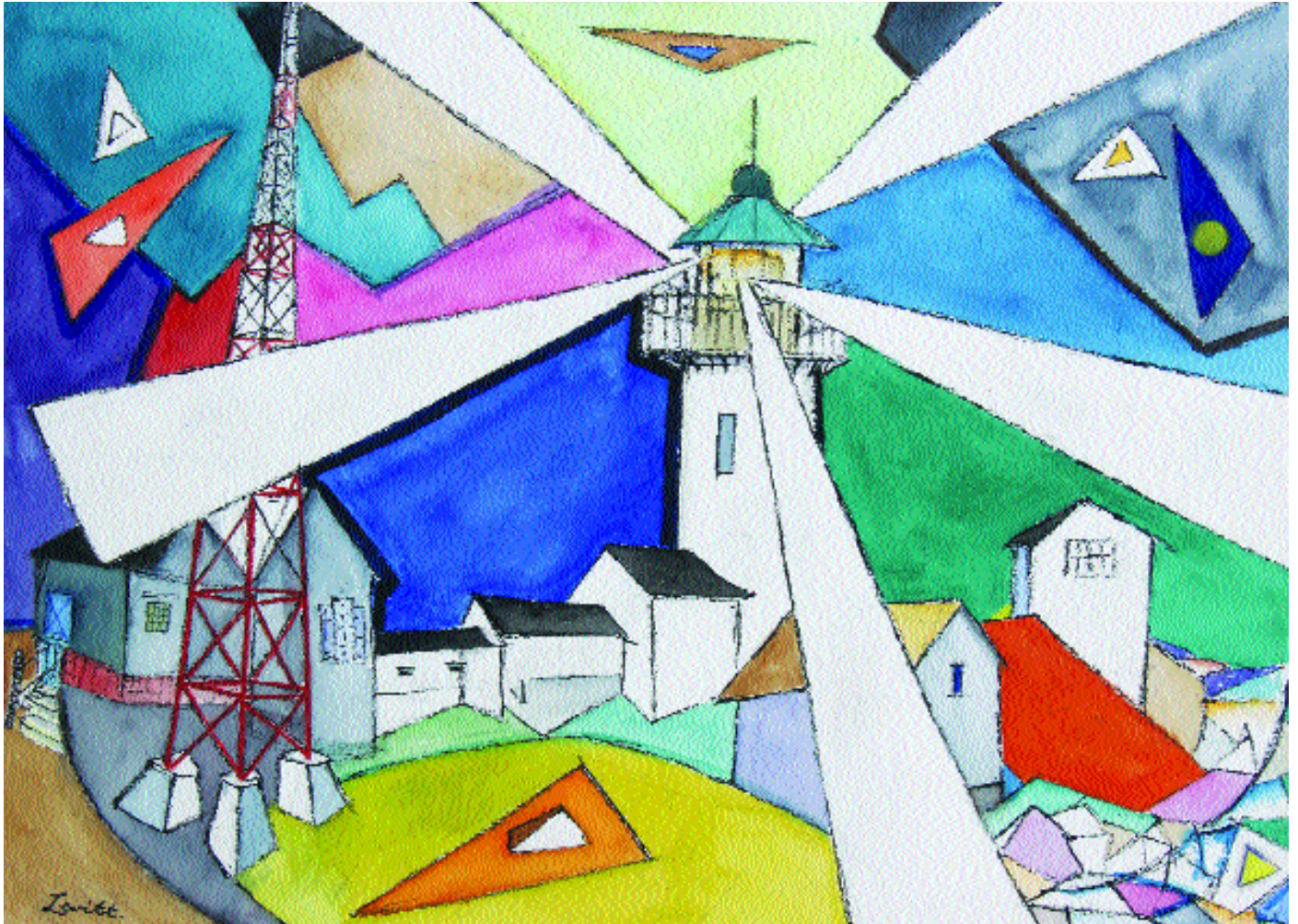
MA). With meeting spaces in Red Men's Hall in Rockport and above the casino at the Hawthorne Inn in East Gloucester, CASMA became headquarters for contemporary artists working across Cape Ann.

Under the leadership of individuals such as Mary Shore, George Aarons and Nathaniel Dirk, the group held a regular schedule of demonstrations, forums and exhibitions at both venues. They showed art films, invited the public to critique works and sponsored music, dance and poetry presentations. In 1952, CASMA collaborated with the new magazine *Four Winds* to present an evening soiree at the Hawthorne Gallery. Poet Cid Corman read four poems and was joined by artist Tom O'Hara who gave a demonstration on "how an abstract painting evolves."

The modernists also played an active and important role in the Cape Ann Festival of the Arts. Organized in 1951, the Festival sought to bring together and showcase the full range of arts found on

Cape Ann, from traditional landscape and portraiture, sculpture, graphic arts and photography to theater, music and literature. The modernist artists of Rocky Neck were well represented in the art exhibit held each year as the highlight of the Festival. By 1961, four sections of the exhibition were devoted solely to their work. Albert Alcalay, a central figure on Rocky Neck during the 1950s, was enlisted to write a brief essay for the Festival's catalog. "As modern men," Alcalay wrote, "we have to recognize that fundamental transformation of our world outlook is taking place on every level of thinking and feeling." He went on to argue that contemporary artists had been "thrown into a chaotic world" and in order to find inspiration they needed to look not in "sentimental sources of the past" but in "the air and breath of the present." Included in the 1961 exhibit, in addition to Alcalay, were Gordon Goetemann, Tom O'Hara, Vera Andrus, Abe Rothstein, Mary Shore and Helen Stein.

By the late 1950s, change was in the air on Rocky Neck and across Cape Ann. Route 128 had arrived and "day tripping" was quickly becoming the norm. The rambling summer hotels which had once catered to thousands of summer visitors on an annual basis were disappearing, many falling victim to arson in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The face of Gloucester's hard-scrabble waterfront which had inspired generations of artists including those of the 1950s was also changing. The same wave of fires which destroyed the Hawthorne Inn in 1957 and the old Delphine Hotel overlooking Niles Beach, took out the Bradford Hotel in central Gloucester and the Hydaway on Duncan Street. Rocky Neck was not immune from the threat, losing La Petite Gallery overlooking Smith Cove to fire in the autumn of 1957. As if that were not enough, on the heels of these blazes came urban renewal, wiping away whole sections of Gloucester's downtown waterfront district in the early 1960s.



ABOVE: Alfred Levitt, *Eastern Point Light*, c. 1947, w/c on paper, 22 x 30, gift of Don and Sherry Zowader.

RIGHT: Robert G. Bradshaw, *Beacon Marine*, w/c on paper, 19 x 24, Bradshaw Family Collection.

ABOVE LEFT: Albert Alcalay, *Boats*, 1952, o/c, 30 x 40, collection of the Family of Albert Alcalay.

Artists working in and around Rocky Neck were keenly aware of the changes and lamented the loss of earlier vistas and landmarks. Looking back on the period, artist and poet Andrus wrote of the old wharves and waterfront buildings that were quickly disappearing, “they were dangerous; they were dirty; they were lovely.”

The community which took hold on Rocky Neck during the post-war years was a largely unknown and soon to be forgotten period in our recent history. But it is hoped that with the initiation by the Cape Ann Museum to explore the artistic life on Rocky Neck during the 1950s, others will



continue the investigation, filling in details and enriching the story.

—For annotation see Martha Oaks’ essay

“Rocky Neck—A Moment in Time” in the accompanying exhibition catalogue from which this article has been adapted.