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Framing Region: The Modernist's New England

By DONNA M. CASSIDY

IN THE FALL OF 1922, Frank Benson and Willard Metcalf teamed up for a painting expedition to Vermont.¹ In *Portrait of Willard Metcalf* (back cover), executed during this trip, Benson depicts his colleague sitting with his watercolor box and looking down at his work in progress on a portable easel. From what we (or Benson) can observe, Metcalf is composing a scene similar to the prospect that stretches before him as a river and riverbank take form in the watercolor washes. Benson's work is both a portrait of a specific artist picturing the edge of the William River near Chester, Vermont, and of the archetypal impressionist artist painting an outdoor setting bathed in sunlight in a venue secluded and serene. At another level, it provokes questions not only about Metcalf's act of representing the New England landscape but all artists' encounters with place and region. The process of seeing is the subject here. Benson focuses our attention on this act as the brown felt hat and bright red scarf frame Metcalf's face and draw our attention to the intelligence and intensity of his eye; he depicts Metcalf at the moment when the artist confronts and transforms his subject.

In this instant, something occurs that Benson cannot record by describing the externals of the vista before him. Impressionist painter Childe Hassam alluded to the complexity of the artist's gaze and the exchange between artist and subject when he wrote, "The definition so often given of the work of modern painters in landscape—which is, that they take a motif anywhere, as if looking out of an open window, and paint it just as they see it—is partly erroneous, only a half truth."² The artist does not simply record what he sees before him, producing a snapshot of reality, as representation is never quite so easy. The artist carries not just the instruments of the trade—the watercolor paint box, the portable easel, in this case—but artistic and cultural lenses for framing nature. Here, for example, impressionist art and visual language, historical and contemporary representations of the New England landscape, and the values that defined the artist and his moment in time

1. See Elizabeth de Veer and Richard J. Boyle, *Sunlight and Shadow: The Life and Art of Willard J. Metcalf* (New York: Abbeville, 1987), 239, and Lynn D. Marsden-Atlass, *One Hundred Works from the 20th Century at the Colby College Museum of Art* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Museum of Art, 1996), 22.

2. Quoted in H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 51.

shaped the way that Metcalf saw the Vermont riverbank before him and even the selection of this particular site, since what he chose as subject matter was not natural but cultural.

This essay will examine this artistic encounter with New England from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century in selected paintings in the Colby College Museum of Art, which has a strong collection of work dealing with the region, especially Maine. The region represented on its walls and in its storage rooms offers a particular vision of place—an image of New England as isolated, primitive, pastoral, an image that was dominant in the wider culture and that served an important social function with the rise of modernity. The works in the collection that I will discuss were produced by painters and sculptors identified with modernism in its diverse forms. In their own ways, these artists, whether the impressionist “Ten,” the New York realists, or the avant-garde Stieglitz circle, rebelled against the National Academy of Design, against the staid and polished technique and classical, saccharine subjects of the art establishment. Critics and historians have recognized their experimental style—the impressionists’ broken daubs of pure color, the avant-garde’s abstractions—but these artists also brought a fresh attitude toward their subject matter, creating, for example, new visions of New England. Their work and cultural viewpoints, however, were complicated. In their positions as middle-class and elite New Englanders and New Yorkers, the impressionists, realists, and avant-garde perceived New England as a haven from modernization and the tribulations of urban living; they drew from and were influenced by popular tourist representations along with earlier paintings of the region. These modernists looked in two directions: they were both conservative—turning back to historical paintings and to popular culture—and forward-looking—providing innovative ways of picturing New England. They framed New England as others before them had, but they also reframed it using the new aesthetics of the period. They simultaneously offered an old New England and a new New England to their viewers.³

The Impressionist and Realist “Look”

IN THE 1880S AND 1890s, many American artists traveled to Paris to study and, in the process, discovered the impressionist “look,” a new way of seeing art and reality that would ultimately lead them to New England and to representing this region as thoroughly antimodern. The distinctive impressionist style, with its visible brushstrokes and intense pure color, evolved to convey momentary, immediate sketches of both urban and leisure sites in late nineteenth-century France. This art movement emerged in 1870s Paris in response to the realist call to paint the spectacle of modern life—the new urban architecture and boulevards, popular entertainment venues like the Moulin de la Galette, the working class of the city—with artists from Claude Monet and

3. For a discussion of the image of New England in American art, see *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory*, ed. William H. Truettner and Roger B. Stein (New Haven: Yale UP, and Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1999).

August Renoir to Edgar Degas playing the role of the flâneur, the passionate spectator of the city, as described by writer and critic Charles Baudelaire. Also part of modern life was a longing to escape from modernity. In the late nineteenth century, anxieties over modernization and rapid urban growth in Europe fueled the desire of middle- and upper-class urbanites to seek temporary refuge from the city, often in rural provinces with peasant and fishing communities where many tourist resorts and art colonies were established. One of these destinations, the village of Pont Aven in Brittany, was frequented by tourists and artists alike—both groups creating an image of this locale as backward and remote, quaint and picturesque, inhabited by exotic folk in traditional dress.⁴ Following his French colleagues, American artist Childe Hassam visited Brittany where he painted *Harvest Time, Brittany* (n.d.; Colby College Museum of Art) and learned to value the rural landscape and traditional cultures—a lesson he would not forget when he returned to the United States.

Indeed, impressionism soon crossed the Atlantic as artists like Hassam, Mary Cassatt, Theodore Robinson, and dozens of others became familiar with this innovative art in their travels to Paris. These American artists often depicted the human figure—the main subject of their training in the French Academy—in the broken daubs, dazzling light, and color of impressionism. By the 1890s many transformed themselves into *American* impressionists not by style so much as by painting distinctly American subjects and emulating artists like Monet who in his *Haystacks* and *Rouen Cathedral* series was engaged with French iconography, often nostalgic in flavor.

The American impressionists were mostly urbanites from the northeastern United States and from comfortable, well-established families: Benson and Hassam were sons of wealthy Massachusetts merchants, while Edmund C. Tarbell, Dennis Bunker, and Robinson all had deep family roots in New England. Their paintings show little of the social transformations of turn-of-the-century America, yet their work must be understood in the context of these changes. Glimpses of the urban occasionally appear but their work, especially that of New England, shows a world without industrialization, technological inventions, and consumerism—in short, an ideal premodern society.⁵ It rarely references the demographic changes brought about by the new waves of immigration at the turn of the century; instead, it offers a New England filled with artifacts equated with the colonial past, with an Anglo-Saxon America absent of “foreigners.”

4. On Brittany as a tourist and art colony, see Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 42-87, and Gill Perry, “Primitivism and the ‘Modern,’” in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles Harrison, Francis Frasciana, and Gill Perry (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1993), 8-27.

5. Even when the impressionists turned to industrial scenes, they presented them in a pastoral way, as in the view of the Willimantic Linen Company in J. Alden Weir’s *The Factory Village* (1897; The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Clifford Greer Alexander’s *South Summer Street, Boston, below South Street* (n.d.; Colby College Museum of Art) deals with the modern city and industrial landscape but in an aestheticized fashion as the haze from the harbor obscures the urban dirt and filth in the way that contemporary works like Childe Hassam’s *Late Afternoon, New York: Winter* (1900; The Brooklyn Museum) and Edwards Steichen’s *The Flatiron* (1904; The Metropolitan Museum of Art) used weather conditions and atmospheric effects to transform the city into a picturesque locale.

This antimodernity and the colonial revival defined the impressionist's New England. A frequent visitor to the rural art colonies in France, including Normandy and Brittany, Maurice Prendergast ventured to many New England coastal resorts—Revere Beach, Nahant, Gloucester, Nantasket—in search of comparable American motifs. His experience summering in Maine in 1913 is translated into *Barn, Brooksville, Maine* (c. 1918; Colby College Museum of Art). With his characteristic style, modeled after the divided brush work of impressionist Camille Pissarro, the stitch stroke of Postimpressionist Paul Signac, and the brilliant palette of fauvist Henri Matisse, he painted a pastoral setting of a down east town on Penobscot Bay—the large barn set against the Bagaduce River in Brooksville on which a boat sails, while two figures walk along a foreground path, all bathed in a twilight glow.⁶

Such architecture and artifacts stand as signs of a premodern New England in many impressionist landscapes. Theodore Robinson's *Cart, Nantucket* (Figure 1) with its old wooden cart placed center stage, refers to an earlier

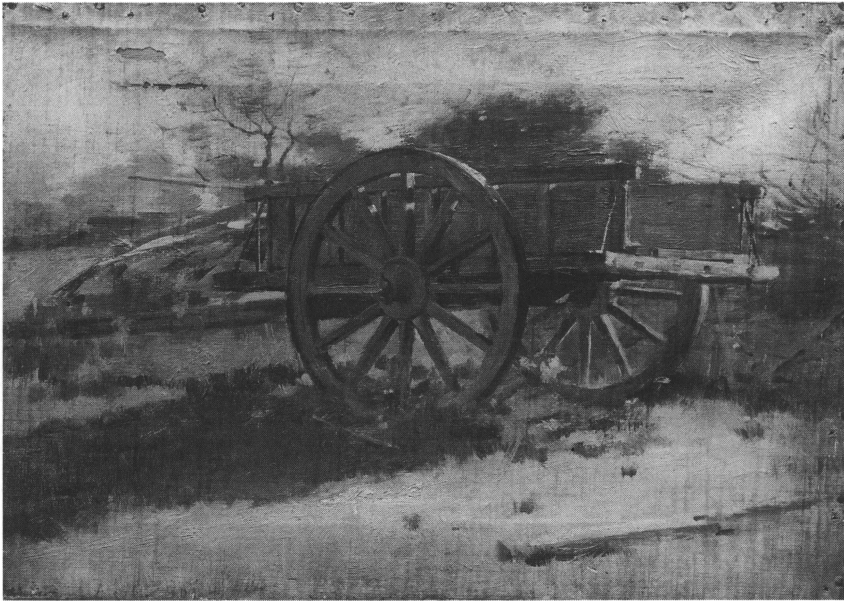


Figure 1.

Theodore Robinson, *Cart, Nantucket*, 1882. Oil on canvas, 10 x 14 inches.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nevil Ford. (All works shown in this article are located
in the Colby College Museum of Art.)

6. See Richard J. Wattenmaker, *Maurice Prendergast* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, and Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1994). Wattenmaker, 154, dates Prendergast's trip to Brooksville, Maine, to 1913.

rural society and a place associated with New England history. When he painted this work during the summer of 1882 while on Nantucket, the island was developing as a tourist mecca, the result of “nostalgic touring” and search for places outside the modern, urban, and industrialial. Known as a premier whaling port in the nineteenth century, Nantucket was in decline as the whaling industry had faded by the 1870s. Tourism became the island’s new source of livelihood with its past as well as its people on display to be “sold” to outside visitors, some of whom were artists who helped create the image of Nantucket as a picturesque, old-fashioned locale. Summering on Nantucket from 1870 to 1887, for instance, Eastman Johnson painted the old salts in *Nantucket School of Philosophy* (1887; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore) and the islanders engaged in rural occupations in *The Cranberry Harvest, Island of Nantucket* (1880; Timken Art Gallery). As historian Dona Brown has argued, by the 1880s the natives themselves helped to manufacture quaint mannerisms and a nostalgic setting for Nantucket. Along with this was a growing awareness of the historic importance of the island’s buildings, with a 1686 farmhouse on the edge of town built by Jethro Coffin being designated the “Oldest House.”⁷ The simple farm wagon pictured in Robinson’s *Cart, Nantucket* possesses the nostalgia for old Nantucket—and rural New England and America by association—that characterized both the art of realist artists like Johnson and the tourist culture on the island.⁸

Having spent time in New England tourist areas connected with the colonial past and the colonial revival, especially Cos Cob and Old Lyme, Connecticut, Childe Hassam included buildings, both domestic and public, identified with regional history in many of his works. In his lithograph *Gloucester* (Figure 2, next page), an elm-lined gravel path leads to a Federal meetinghouse, with pediment and Palladian window forming an imposing, symmetrical facade. This print, related to Hassam’s painting *The Church at Gloucester* (1918; The Metropolitan Museum of Art), depicts the Universalist Meeting House, which was constructed by a local builder, dedicated in 1806, and housed America’s first Universalist congregation and a Paul Revere bell. Hassam ignored Gloucester’s immigrant Catholic churches and painted instead a religious building considered American because of its affiliation with struggles for religious freedom during the early years of the nation. It was a symbol too of an Anglo-Saxon New England and of the artist’s heritage as it resembled the church type that he had admired since his boyhood in Dorchester, Massachusetts.⁹

American impressionists, always students of the human figure as much as the humanized landscape, portrayed New Englanders as signs of the region’s

7. For a discussion of tourism in Nantucket, see Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 105-34.

8. On Robinson in Nantucket, see *Theodore Robinson* (New York: Owen Gallery, 2000), 14-15, 18.

9. Weinberg et al., *American Impressionism and Realism*, 133.

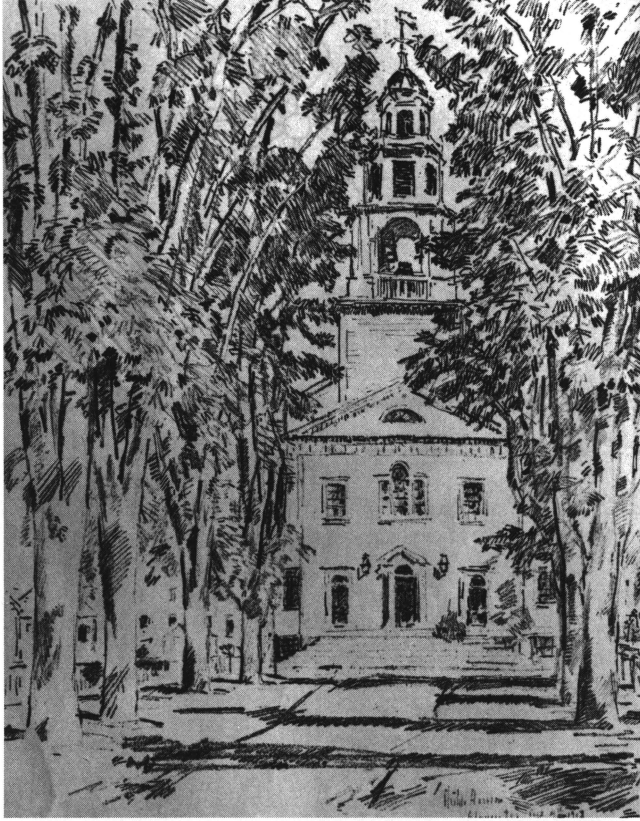


Figure 2.
Childe Hassam, *Gloucester*, c. 1918. Lithograph, 18 x 12 ³/₄ inches.
Gift of Mr. Robert G. McIntyre.

past too, as can be seen in Gertrude Fiske's *Spinster* (Figure 3). A direct descendent of Massachusetts governor William Bradford, Fiske studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, lived in Weston, Massachusetts, and summered in Maine. She worked in a painterly style not unlike that of realist Thomas Eakins but also with light effects and textures drawn from impressionism.¹⁰ Despite the new style of her painting, *Spinster* is the embodiment of things old-fashioned: seated in a chair, her dress adorned with a fichu, she recalls the elite older women of eighteenth-century New England pictured in John Singleton Copley's portraits—*Mrs. Thomas Boylston (Sarah Morecock)* (1766; Harvard University Portrait Collection) and *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis)* (1771; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), for example. The

¹⁰. *American Painters of the Impressionist Period Rediscovered* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1975), 34.



Figure 3.
Gertrude Fiske, *Spinster*, c. 1920. Oil on canvas, 42 x 40 inches.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ellerton M. Jetté.

chest of drawers (a simple country blanket chest) in the background, tin candlestick, and Windsor chair speak to the New England-ness of the woman, as do her sculpted hard features.

American impressionism, however, did not solely look backward. As discussed above, tourism, an important part of modern culture, very much shaped the impressionist's New England—where artists ventured, what was painted, who consumed the art. Contemporary popular resorts were sometimes represented by these artists, as in Fiske's *Ogunquit Beach, Maine* (1924; Colby College Museum of Art), which describes the sunlit beach along the southern Maine coast filled with vacationers. Those in the painting and the painter herself participated in the middle-class desire to “go away” from the city and the search for things that had been lost in modern culture. Seaside resorts such as Ogunquit along with dozens of others in New England—from Newport, Rhode Island, to Gloucester, Massachusetts—were the destination of those who wanted to escape the dirt and noise of the city to gain rejuvenation in nature. As one artist phrased it, such colonies in New England served as a “pick up after too much New York.”¹¹

11. Robert Henri to Theresa Lee (his mother), July 30, 1915, quoted in Jessica K. Nicoll, *The Allure of the Maine Coast: Robert Henri and His Circle, 1903-1918* (Portland, Maine: Portland Museum of Art, 1995), 5.

These sentiments defined not just impressionist art at the turn of the century but realist art as well. The Ashcan School (or New York realists) made summertime visits to Ogunquit, Provincetown, Gloucester, and Monhegan Island, where some even bought property and thus spent part of the year in New York and part in New England. As early as 1903, the realist leader Robert Henri summered and painted on Monhegan, and, two years later, his student Rockwell Kent settled there for most of the year, building a house and supporting himself by lobstering and doing carpentry. George Bellows visited Monhegan in 1911 and again in the summers of 1913 and 1914, followed by two seasons in Ogunquit and Camden. In search of the authentic and the “real,” Henri, Bellows, and Kent were attracted not to the rural domesticated landscape or genteel, middle-class tourist sites colonized by the impressionists but to wilder locales like Monhegan where they discovered the New England that Winslow Homer had painted (and was still painting until 1910).

Kent wrote enthusiastically to Henri about the rugged, elemental Monhegan environment: “This place is more wonderful & beautiful than you told me it was. I’ve been here almost three weeks and haven’t gotten over my amazement yet. It seems to me now that I’d like to paint here always. I could sit all day in some of those holes under the headlands, watching the water & scared to death. I’ve never seen such terrible places as some of those crevases [sic].”¹² The stark forms of the island’s headlands appealed to Kent who camped out on Blackhead (the remoter of the island’s two headlands) where he built a small tent from painting canvases. He pictured this wild landscape, this rough terrain, in *Blackhead, Monhegan* (Figure 4), in which detail is subordinated in favor of bold, simple shapes, and the stark gray-black uninhabited rock promontory presents Maine as primitive locale. The thickly painted sea foam makes reference to Homer’s seascapes of Prout’s Neck, Maine, and creates for the viewer the vicarious experience of the spraying surf along the coast.

While they produced a more rugged view of the New England landscape in comparison to the impressionists or their academic colleagues, the New York realists still spoke to historical regional paintings in forming their own visions of the coast. In *Hill and Valley, Monhegan, Maine* (Figure 5) Bellows creates a updated version of the New England wilderness imagined by nineteenth-century painters, as in Harrison B. Brown’s *Franconia Notch* (n.d.; Colby College Museum of Art), with its rocky foreground, bold mountain forms, hardly inhabited. The fierce coast, with its massive boulders and crashing waves, figured into earlier New England seascapes as well, as in John Kensett’s *Sea Coast View* (1854) and Thomas Birch’s *Seascape* (1836), both in the Colby College Museum of Art. Like these earlier paintings, Bellows’s *Hill and Valley, Monhegan, Maine* describes a harsh landscape with hardly a sign of human presence. Here, the prospect, without a secure or easy entry for

12. Rockwell Kent to Robert Henri, July 12, 1905, quoted in Nicoll, *Allure of the Maine Coast*, 11.



Figure 4.
Rockwell Kent, *Blackhead, Monhegan*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 inches. Gift of the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 5.
George Bellows, *Hill and Valley, Monhegan, Maine*, 1913. Oil on panel, 16 x 20 inches. Museum purchase.

the viewer, has a crevice opening into a rock cliff in the center. The foreground is brightly lit but, as we move into the landscape, we confront the darkness of the crevice and then a foggy, indistinct ocean. The contrast of light and dark suggests the drama of a sublime nature where all is primordial and elemental—trees, earth, water, sky. As one critic commented on Bellows's 1913 Monhegan paintings: "The romance of the place, the weight and power of the sea, the massive architecture of the ledges, the domination of the sky, and the relation of these elements to each other, have evidently appealed strongly to Bellows, and he conveys his feeling for them in a simple, large, and striking manner."¹³ Bellows paints this landscape with rich, thick paint strokes, sensuously applied. This vigorous, visible brushwork was read by viewers and critics alike as "real," immediate, direct, while the vibrant colors evidence Bellows's study of the European expressionist art on view at the Armory Show in New York the previous winter. Gone is the gray-green palette of his early Monhegan works in favor of intense greens, yellows, and violets, as Bellows sees the island through the lens of Matisse's fauvism. With these exuberant colors along with the close vantage point, *Hill and Valley, Monhegan, Maine* also resembles the work of Leon Kroll with whom Bellows painted on Monhegan in the summer of 1913 (see, for example, *Kroll's Monhegan Island* [1913; Bowdoin College Museum of Art]).¹⁴ It also shows the way that innovative avant-garde styles emerging in Europe began to shape the modernists' New England.

The Avant-Garde: Expressionism, Abstraction, and Region

LIKE THE NEW YORK REALISTS, twentieth-century avant-garde artists found New England, Maine in particular, suited to their personal, artistic, and cultural needs. Anxious and ambivalent about modernity, they considered the state a retreat from New York, its towering skyscrapers and hectic pace. Often inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, members of the Alfred Stieglitz circle like Marsden Hartley and John Marin, among others, sought solace and spirituality in the Maine landscape where they discovered a place where humans could peacefully coexist with nature.¹⁵ Maine, for them as for contemporary tourists, was an Edenic world.

Born in Lewiston, Maine, Hartley became involved with the international avant-garde in New York, Paris, and Berlin in the first decades of the century. After spending much of the 1920s in Europe and being criticized as an expatriate for doing so, he began to reconnect with his native region in the late

13. From a review of George Bellows exhibition, Montross Gallery, *New York Post*, January 24, 1914, quoted in Franklin Kelly, "'So Clean and Cold': Bellows and the Sea," in *The Paintings of George Bellows* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 155.

14. On Bellows in Monhegan, see Kelly, "'So Clean and Cold,'" 135-69, and Nicoll, *Allure of the Maine Coast*, 22.

15. Matthew Baigell, "American Landscape Painting and National Identity: The Stieglitz Circle and Emerson," *Art Criticism* 4 (1987): 39-42.

1920s and early 1930s.¹⁶ In 1928 he visited his friends, the Bullitts, for the summer in Conway, New Hampshire, although he did not find the landscape there very moving. He returned to Europe to paint in Aix-en-Provence, the same locale that had inspired Paul Cézanne, and then spent the summer of 1930 back in New Hampshire, this time in Sugar Hill near Franconia in the western White Mountains. Accompanied by a Polish friend who served as chauffeur, Hartley traveled through the countryside in search of suitable sites—a quest that turned out to be a struggle although he did discover Kinsman Falls and the “Lost River” with its dramatic boulders and rock formations. The area in which Hartley found himself was one of famous tourist attractions—Crawford Notch, Echo Lake—and one often the subject for many earlier American painters, as in Brown’s *Franconia Notch*. But Hartley felt besieged by tourists, missed the solitude of southern France, and could not find the dramatic mountain views that had inspired him there. He complained that too many automobiles blocked views of the mountains and people got out of their cars to stare at him while he painted. In his opinion, “New England is sold out body and soul to the tourist trade.”¹⁷ He briefly left but came back for the fall colors as he considered this season the best time in New England, but this too was a disappointment as a dry summer had toned down the autumnal scenery.¹⁸

While he grumbled about the commercialization of the New Hampshire landscape and the difficulty of finding a spot of nature uncorrupted by tourism, Hartley did manage to produce powerful images of this region, as is evident in *Brilliant Autumn Landscape #28* (Figure 6, next page). Despite the dull foliage of that 1930 season, he paints a river bed with a backdrop of radiant rusts and golds—a vision perhaps shaped more by his *idea* of a New England autumn and his memory of the same as pictured in his early New England works like *Carnival of Autumn* (1908; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). In *Brilliant Autumn Landscape*, hot colors of the background are set in contrast to the blue violets and browns of the foreground, while the roughly painted surface, rugged rocks, and desolate scene create an image of a pristine, if not primitive, nature—a view of the New England landscape not unlike that of Bellows or Kent. Here is a New England outside the modern, a place seemingly untainted by the modernizing forces that were transforming the western White Mountains. While the long, regular strokes indicate the influence of Cézanne and European modernism, Hartley’s painting also signaled his return to New England and eventually to Maine, his native state. As

16. Donna M. Cassidy, “‘Localized Glory’: Marsden Hartley as New England Regionalist,” in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Kornhancer (Hartford: Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art and New York/London: Yale UP, 2003), 175-92.

17. Marsden Hartley to Rebecca Strand, August 25, 1930, Elizabeth McCausland Papers, reel X3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA).

18. Hartley to Strand, September 31, 1931, reel X3, AAA. On Hartley’s trips to New Hampshire, see Townsend Ludington, *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1992/1998), 184, 200-01, and Gail R. Scott, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 87. Also see Marsden Hartley, “New England on the Trapeze,” *Creative Art* 8 (February 1931): suppl. 57-58.



Figure 6.

Marsden Hartley, *Brilliant Autumn Landscape #28*, c. 1930. Oil on canvas, 25 x 31 1/4 inches. Gift of C. David O'Brien '58.

he wrote to his friend Rebecca Strand: “I have put myself through the test of the return of the native [in going to New Hampshire]—and I find I can’t do that again either for so long a stretch—but I’d like to come up and see the snow in the hills and maybe paint it...—but I would return to Maine for that.”¹⁹ Such paintings and experiences in New Hampshire helped Hartley transform his identity from an expatriate artist in the 1920s to a regional artist in the following decade.

Brilliant Autumn Landscape speaks not only to a twentieth-century longing for a space in nature isolated from modernization but to previous images of New England. The natural world, secluded and uninhabited, with rocky promontories and glowing autumn colors, was a common picture in nineteenth-century regional landscapes, as in the many White Mountain scenes by Thomas Cole, Jasper Cropsey, and Harrison Bird Brown. Cole himself identified autumn hues as typical of the northeastern United States: “There is one season when the American forest surpasses all the world in gorgeously—that is the autumnal;—then every hill and dale is riant in the luxury of color—every hue is there, from the liveliest green to deepest purple—from the most

19. Hartley to Strand, c. 1930, reel X3, AAA.

golden yellow to the intensest crimson.”²⁰ In his “Essay on American Scenery” (1835), Cole also claimed that the white steepled church held the same associative power in American landscapes that classical ruins did in European ones. But unlike these ruins, the “village spire beams like a star” suggesting “freedom’s offspring—peace, security, and happiness.”²¹ His *New England Scenery* (1839; Art Institute of Chicago) combined features—a cleared field, village with white steepled church, river, distant mountains—that made up the archetypal regional landscape and defined New England as an ideal preindustrial locale where culture was in balance with nature—an image constructed by other antiindustrialist New Englanders like Timothy Dwight and enlarged upon by Cole’s student Frederic E. Church in his own *New England Scenery* (1851; George Walter Vincent Art Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts). Thomas H. Hinckley’s *Mr. Faxon and a Friend at Old Mill Dam, Boston* (1839) in the Colby College collection exemplifies this pastoral ideal with steepled church in middle distance, cows in foreground, and men in a wagon—an ideal that American modernists continued to picture in the twentieth century.

Modernists like Hartley were forward-thinking and experimental when it came to style as they adopted nonnaturalistic manners like cubism and expressionism. The subjects that these artists selected were sometimes as innovative as their style—as, for instance, in their depictions of the city and advertising—yet their subjects could be antimodern and even nostalgic at times. Icons like the white-steepled meetinghouse and nucleated village, for example, found a prominent place in their paintings, as can be seen in Hartley’s drawing *Church at Corea* (1941; Colby College Museum of Art) and painting *Church at Head Tide, Maine* (Figure 7, next page). Hartley understood the power of architecture to define place, as he had used the ancient Roman aqueduct in this way in *Aqueduct in Provence* (n.d.; Colby College Museum of Art). Upon his arrival in Georgetown, Maine, in 1937, he planned to paint the birthplace of poet Edwin Arlington Robinson and the nearby church at Head Tide, the “amazing little white church which no one has done and is ‘mine’ really as Dogtown [in Gloucester] now is.”²² *Church at Head Tide* refers to the popular image of the white-steepled New England church while simultaneously showing this structure with closed, blackened windows and in distorted perspective that evokes the dark New England village evoked in Robinson’s poetry. There is a dislocation, a fragmentation of forms and space, an unsettling quality, as the building seems pulled apart, with the façade and side wall placed on same plane and the wall appearing to dissolve into the snow on the ground. Fallen leaves under the snow and the snow-capped stones that resemble grave markers serve as reminders of death and decay.

20. Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” 1835, in John W. McCoubrey, *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 107.

21. Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” 109.

22. Hartley to Strand, June 18, 1937, reel X3, AAA, and Hartley to Adelaide Kuntz, n.d. (1937), McCausland Papers, reel X4, AAA.

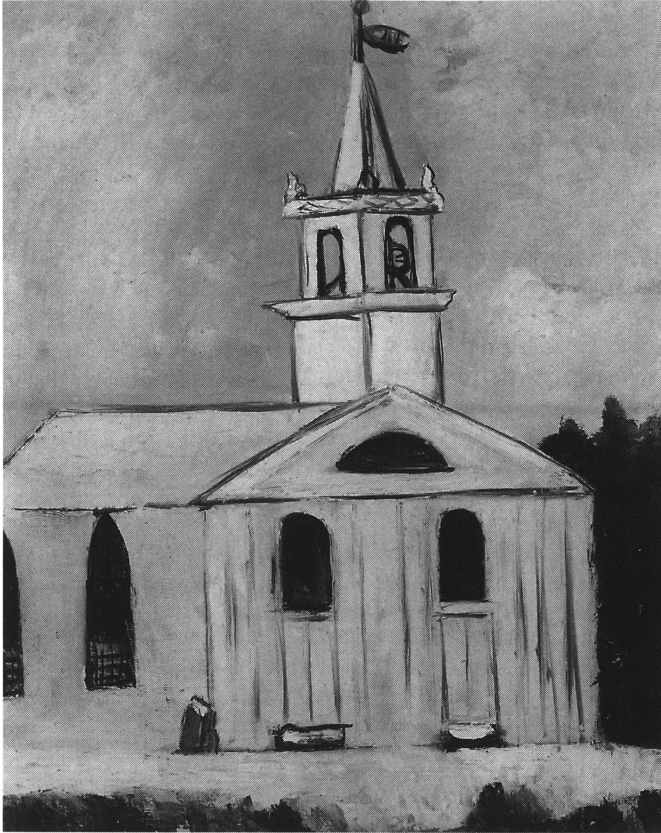


Figure 7.

Marsden Hartley, *Church at Head Tide, Maine*, 1938. Oil on academy board, 28 x 22 inches. Bequest of Adelaide Moise.

Some of the modernists who settled in northern New England during the 1920s and 1930s not only sought to define the distinctiveness of the region but to challenge this perception of New England as bankrupt and in decline. As critic Bernard de Voto argued, the region and its people, especially those who lived in the inhospitable northern reaches, could instruct Depression-era Americans about survival during tough times: this “almost perfect” region, divorced from modernization and consumerism, was a society “founded on granite,” and its Yankee inhabitants were “free, self-reliant,” and masters of the “conditions of their life.”²³ Within this context, images of small-town

23. Bernard de Voto, “New England: There She Stands,” *Harper’s*, March 1932, reprinted in Bernard de Voto, *Forays and Rebuttals* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936), 138-39.

northern New England took on new meaning,²⁴ and modernist artists helped to resurrect and reinterpret regional icons like the white steepled meeting-house. Marguerite Zorach, for example, combined her cubist-based style with folk art mannerisms to fashion paintings of the rural people and environment from her farmhouse in Georgetown, Maine. In her *Maine Landscape* (front cover), the white church topped by an attenuated tower dominates the painting's center and is surrounded by blocky white houses nestled in the landscape as a welcoming path guides viewers into this New England village. While Zorach shows the avant-garde sources of her style in the bold expressionistic strokes, she also refers to stock images of New England in the choice of an autumnal scene and the bare trees framing the scene that was a frequent compositional feature in Hudson River School landscapes.

This negotiation between avant-garde style and traditional iconography, between modernism and nostalgia, plays out in John Marin's paintings of New England as well.²⁵ After his first visit to Maine in 1914, Marin summered in Small Point from 1915 to 1917 and in Stonington and Cape Split in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively. His Maine watercolors, drawings, and oils were varied, ranging from views of sailing ships to impastoed canvases of the thundering surf. Although his work might be seen as standing outside the popular construct of New England because of its nonconventional cubist-expressionist style with its fragmented and floating forms, it clearly advanced the image of the region as tightly knit, picturesque, isolated, and small-town. In *Stonington, Maine* (Figure 8, next page), the interlocking white houses, opera house, and steepled church at the hilltop constitute the ingredients of an archetypal New England (here down east) village—similar to one pictured earlier by R. G. Hall in *Upper Part of East Machias from the Academy Hill* (1858; Colby College Museum of Art). For Marin, as for Hartley, buildings signified place. Architecture was always part of his artistic vision from the Gothic cathedrals in his early Paris etchings to the towering Woolworth Building in his many New York watercolors. In Marin's estimation, the clean white houses defined the coastal villages of Maine: "This spot, this place of mine, a village [Stonington], where clustered about you can see if you look dream houses of a purity of whiteness, of a loveliness of proportion, of a springness of sensitive detail, rising up out of the greenest of grass sward.... Yes, come with me to Wiscasset, Maine, and too to Thomaston, Maine, and I'll show you."²⁶

Stonington might be an ideal coastal village resembling nineteenth-century premodern America but new technologies were even reshaping the environment of this remote town. Marin's watercolor *Stonington, Maine* (1924; Colby College Museum of Art) describes a busy street scene in the town: at the center is a telephone pole and automobile that signal the presence of technology and contrast the nineteenth-century building with its mansard roof.

24. William H. Truettner, "Small Town America," in *Picturing Old New England*, 111-42.

25. See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 299-480, for a discussion of tradition and the interwar decades.

26. *Letters of John Marin*, ed. Herbert J. Seligmann (1931; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), August 21, 1927, n.p.

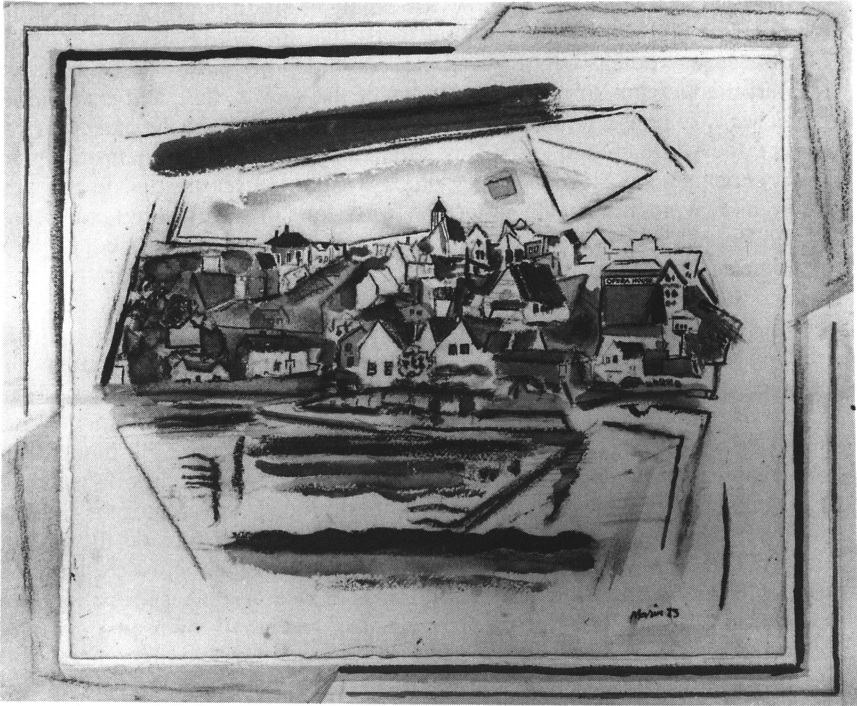


Figure 8.

John Marin, *Stonington, Maine*, 1923. Watercolor, 18 3/4 x 21 7/8 inches, with enframement. The John Marin Collection, Gift of John Marin Jr., and Norma B. Marin.

While modernity plays a subtle role in this work as it had in nineteenth-century landscapes of New England (see, for example, George McConnell's *Railroad Bridge, Lewiston, Maine* [1891; Colby College Museum of Art]), industrial New England becomes more visible in twentieth-century art, especially that of modernists, as machinery, industrial design, and steel and glass skyscrapers became the subject for many avant-garde painters and photographers. Foremost among them was Charles Sheeler who produced a series of photographs and paintings of New York skyscrapers and Henry Ford's River Rouge Factory executed in a crisp, precisionist style derived from his study of cubism and the straight photography of contemporaries like Paul Strand.²⁷ Sheeler, however, used this style not only to represent streamlined steamships, automobile plants, and hydraulic turbines but the eighteenth-century Ephrata Cloister outside of Philadelphia and Shaker furniture. For him, modern industrial objects and buildings had an affinity to these early American artifacts, especially those made by the Shakers, as they shared an efficient design, smooth forms, and sharp edges.

27. Also see Stefan Hirsch's *Factories, Portsmouth, New Hampshire* (1930; SBC Communications, Houston, Texas) and Marguerite Zorach's *Brunswick Mills* (1930s; private collection).

The interrelation and interchangeability of the traditional and the modern defined Sheeler's New England work too. Painted in a nonnaturalistic style common to nineteenth-century folk paintings, *Vermont Landscape* (1924, private collection) describes a village scene replete with a white-steeped meetinghouse, picket fence, and old-fashioned horse and buggy—a view of archetypal small-town New England.²⁸ While living in Ridgefield, Connecticut, from 1932 to 1942, Sheeler turned his artistic eye to another vernacular building form of the region—the barn. Along with photographer Edward Weston, he photographed and painted a barn on Old Town Farm Road in New Milford, Connecticut, not far from Ridgefield, in *Barn in Connecticut* (1941; The Lane Collection) and *White Sentinels* (1942; private collection).²⁹

Not the tower of the barn or meetinghouse of a New England village but that of the factories of a New England mill town is the subject of Sheeler's *The Mill—Ballardvale* (Figure 9). In 1946, while artist in residence at the



Figure 9.

Charles Sheeler, *The Mill—Ballardvale*, 1946. Tempera on paper, 12 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches. Gift of Adelaide Moise in memory of William Moise.

28. See Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), 331-32, on *Vermont Landscape*.

29. See Carol Troyen and Erica E. Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler: Paintings and Drawings* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), 180-82.

Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts, Sheeler took a series of photographs of Ballardvale, a small working-class neighborhood that had once been a thriving industrial community and whose woolen mills on the Shawsheen River had stopped production in 1930 and fallen into disrepair. Sheeler had dealt with several industrial subjects in the 1940s—painting *Old Slater Mill* (1945; Regis Collection, Minneapolis, Minnesota) for the owner of that property in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and *Riding through Gatun* (1946; Citibank, New York), a view of the Panama Canal as an advertisement for National City Bank, and photographing a synthetic rubber plant in West Virginia for *Fortune* magazine in 1946—so it is not surprising that he showed interest in this mill during his Addison residency. Sheeler studied the finishing mill and chimney taking photographs as “notes” or sketches and completing paintings like *The Mill—Ballardvale* later at his home in Irvington, New York. His photographs show the mill as a ruin, neglected and decaying; his paintings, by contrast, present a restored mill with pristine forms. While the empty shadows of the windows in *The Mill—Ballardvale* allude to the structure’s vacancy, the geometric forms in intense red, blue, and green suggest how the building might have appeared in its original glory. As reconstructed by Sheeler, this building is both descriptive and abstract: it includes distinctive markers like the tower but is painted with flat planes of color influenced by synthetic cubism and the tonal contrasts and double-exposure effects typical of Sheeler’s own photographs.³⁰ It is ironic, of course, that Sheeler paints these ideal factories at a time when the New England textile industry was in rapid decline. As such, his Ballardvale paintings possess a nostalgia for a different kind of old New England: one characterized by productive industries and ordered industrial towns.

Despite such powerful images of industrial New England, modernist artists were much more interested in representing the premodern survivals of New England—a concern evident not only in their representation of the regional landscape but of the inhabitants too. The modernists romanticized the local natives—the fisherfolk, woodsmen, shipbuilders, hunters—seeing them and their way of life as an alternative to urban, middle-class, standardized living. Hartley, for example, viewed the Maine fisherfolk through the lens of the primitive Other: he saw them as simple and natural and compared them to the Native Americans of the Southwest. As a socialist, Kent was attracted to Monhegan because he considered it an ideal human community founded on hard physical labor. For him, the “hardy” Monhegan fishermen, “those horny-handed sons of toil,” were both “material” for art and a source of envy:

I envied them their strength, their knowledge of their work, their skill in it; I envied them their knowledge of boats and their familiarity with that awesome portion of the infinite, the sea; I envied them their worker’s human dignity. Standing upon a headland I’d look down at lobster-

30. On Sheeler’s Addison Gallery residency, see *Charles Sheeler in Andover: The Ballardvale Series, 1946* (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1996), and Troyen and Hirshler, *Sheeler: Paintings and Drawings*, 35, 192.

men at work, their dories almost in the back-wash of the surf. God, how I envied them their power to row! To pull their heavy traps! I'd see my own thin wrists, my artist's hands. As though for the first time I saw my work in true perspective and felt its triviality.³¹

As this passage suggests, Kent identified the New England folk with traditional concepts of masculinity. At this time, social changes from the sexual revolution to the feminization of service jobs challenged established notions of male and female roles, and middle-class businessmen sought to reconstruct their masculinity by exercising in New York sports clubs or testing their mettle hunting in the Maine woods. In Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel *Babbitt*, George F. Babbitt, a real-estate man, vacations in a Maine hunting camp because he wanted to "go off some place and be able to hear [him]self think... Maine... Wear old pants, and loaf, and cuss." He was not only able to escape the modern city in the woods but recover his masculinity: sitting on a stump and watching his guide Joe Paradis prepare his breakfast, he "felt virile;" he was "free, in a man's world."³² This manly Maine, aggressively marketed by state tourist agencies, spoke to a male audience. It also spoke to New York painters and art audiences.

In the visual arts, a vigorous, physical masculinity modeled on the work of Winslow Homer (see, for example, *The Trapper* [1870; Colby College Museum of Art] and *Three Men in a Boat* [1890; Colby College Museum of Art]) appeared over and over again in paintings like Bellows's *The Big Dory* [1913-15; New Britain Museum of American Art], Hartley's *Down East Young Blades* [1940; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art], and Marguerite Zorach's *Maine Trapper* (Figure 10, next page).³³ Although not a hulking man, the hunter in Zorach's painting sits as a pioneer with his hand gripping the rifle in sureness and readiness. The sculpted, hard-edged, frontal, even masklike face and the angular lines of the body create a sense of stability and power. The objects in this work—the L.L. Bean boots, hunting cap, raccoon skin on the back wall—indicate the accomplishments of this man as a hunter just as the objects signaled the sitter's occupation in the traditional folk portraits that Zorach admired (for example, *Captain Farnum of Farnum, Maine*, in the Colby collection).³⁴

Another, more surprising figure—the female nude—finds its way into modernist paintings of New England, serving as a sign of antimodernity and antipuritanism. Closely allied with the Stieglitz circle, writer-critics Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank adopted the term Puritanism to denote the emotional and sexual restrictions that they observed in American society. In *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908), Brooks presented the Puritan as the embodi-

31. Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1955), 120, 122.

32. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), 64, 238, 241, 115, 121.

33. Sarah Burns, "Revitalizing the 'Painted-Out' North: Winslow Homer, Manly Health, and New England Regionalism in Turn-of-the-Century America," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (summer 1995): 21-37.

34. Such occupational portraits were common in the early twentieth century as artists participated in creating New England folk types, as in Gerrit Beneker's *Clam Warden of Truro, Cape Cod, Massachusetts* (1933; Colby College Museum of Art).



Figure 10.

Marguerite Zorach, *Maine Trapper*, c. 1928. Oil on canvas, 43 x 26 inches.
Gift of C. David O'Brien '58.

ment of the negative features of American culture—materialism, antiintuition, intellectualism, efficiency, and commercialism. In his view, American artists must spurn this Puritanism and embrace emotion to mold a new culture and a vigorous creative life.³⁵ This rejection of inhibition in favor of instinct formed the philosophical base of American early modernism, and the female nude became an important vehicle for embodying the regenerative power of spon-

35. Donna M. Cassidy, "John Marin's Dancing Nudes by the Seashore: Images of the 'New Eve,'" *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 4, no. 1 (winter 1990): 71-91.

taneity and sensuality in the work of many artists—Alfred Stieglitz, Max Weber, Abraham Walkowitz, Marguerite and William Zorach, Gaston Lachaise, and John Marin, to name a few.

Ironically, this rebellion against Puritanism took place in the region associated with Puritanism—that is, New England. From his house in Georgetown, Maine, Lachaise molded sculptural images of the potent, procreative female with large breasts, round abdomen, and wide hips as in *Standing Woman* (1912-27; Whitney Museum of American Art) and *The Ogunquit Torso* (1926; Colby College Museum of Art). Influenced by Pablo Picasso's, Paul Cézanne's, and Henri Matisse's nudes, Marin's pink nudes dancing along the Maine coast and buoyant sea nymphs floating on and merging with the lilting waves as in *Sea and Figures, Concept #1* (Figure 11) share in this early modernist iconography and antipuritan ideology and reflect the artist's interest in both modern dance and D. H. Lawrence's writings. Marin's Cape Split neighbor, Liliias Seligmann, performed modern dance à la Isadora Duncan, and in a 1935 letter he describes having seen her dance outdoors recording the event on canvas afterwards. Led by Duncan, the new dance rejected the studied,



Figure 11.

John Marin, *Sea and Figures, Concept # 1*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 inches. The John Marin Collection, Gift of John Marin Jr. and Norma B. Marin.

awkward postures of classical ballet in favor of natural, organic movement. Images of liberated bodies dancing in nature were common in Lawrence's writing too. Greatly admired by the Stieglitz-circle artists and writers, Lawrence criticized the deadening impulses of modern society and reveled in the passionate, carnal side of humans in characters like Constance Chatterly in his novel *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (1928). Marin's nudes, so thoroughly part of nature, also embodied this naturalness, this primitiveness, that, for the artist and many of his contemporaries, was only possible in remote spots like down east Maine.³⁶

Marin's nudes can be located in the larger early twentieth-century modernist movement, as can his Maine landscapes that reveal a new way of experiencing and seeing New England. Marin was not after naturalistic description but rather conveying his own feelings and responses to nature as called for in the aesthetics of the Stieglitz circle and, as he explained in 1916:

These works are meant as constructed expressions of the inner senses, responding to things seen and felt. One responds differently toward different things: one even responds differently toward the same thing. In reality it is the same thing no longer; you are in a different mood, and it is in a different mood. If you follow a certain path you come to a something. The path moves towards direction, and if you follow direction you come to the something; and the path also is through something, under something and over something. And these somethings you either respond to or you don't. There are great movements and small movements, great things and small things—all bearing intimacy in their separations and joining. In all things there exists the central power, the big force, the big movement; and to this central power all the smaller factors have relation.³⁷

Marin was searching for underlying principles of objective reality, for the invisible forces of nature: he wrote about the inner picture, the great forces of nature, magnetism, the structure of thirds—all to be revealed by the artist.³⁸ These aesthetic goals led him towards abstracting nature in his art, although he never abandoned objective reality as he thought that it remained the source of all great feeling in art. In *White Waves on Sand, Maine* (1917; Colby College Museum of Art), Marin shows us the process of abstracting nature as he uses simple lines and colors—lyrical curves, a limited gray palette—to stand for the waves, sands, and clouds along the Maine coast.

American modernist photographers and painters used other visual strategies in trying to abstract the essential forms from nature. Paul Strand and Edward Weston photographed fruit, flowers, and vegetables at a close range, producing works in which the object's specific identity is lost as the artist and viewer see the abstract curves, lines, and tonal contrasts of the thing instead. This approach to nature and to art-making was central to the work of Georgia

36. In a letter to a friend, Marin lamented having to leave the Maine coast to return to civilization, which he described as "streamlined—ironed out—flattened out—squeezed out—by the Hitlers of the Earth—they haint up here [in Maine]—no semblance of a Hitler was ever known to live near the Sea." Marin to Herbert J. Seligmann, September 18, 1938, in Dorothy Norman, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Marin* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1949), 183.

37. *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* (1916; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968), n.p.

38. Norman, ed., *Selected Writings*, 4-5, 51, and Cleve Gray, ed., *John Marin by John Marin* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 107.

O'Keeffe, from her famous flower paintings to paintings inspired by the time she spent in Maine. Although it is not well-known, O'Keeffe made several trips to York Beach, Maine, the first in 1920 and others throughout the decade.³⁹ Dated c. 1940 in the recent O'Keeffe Catalogue Raisonné, *Shell and Feather* (Figure 12), in the Colby collection, is related to the many paintings that O'Keeffe did based on coastal objects that she collected on her Maine trips—*Slightly Open Clam Shell* (1926; Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis), *Open Clam Shell* and *Closed Clam Shell* (1926; both in private collections), several 1926 works pairing a shell and shingle, and another shell series in 1937.⁴⁰ O'Keeffe wrote about the origin of the 1926 shell and shingle paintings:

We were shingling the barn and the old shingles, taken off, were free to fly around. Absentmindedly I picked up a loose one and carried it into the house and up to the table in my room. On the table was a white clam shell brought from Maine in the spring. I had been painting it and it still lay there. The white shape of the shell and the grey shape of the weathered shingle were beautiful against the pale grey leaf on the faintly pink-lined pattern of the wallpaper. Adding the shingle got me painting again.

After the first realistic paintings I painted just a piece of the shingle and a piece of the shell. To a couple were added two quite large green leaves that were in a glass on the table. Finally I went back to the shingle and shell—large again—the shingle just a dark space that floated off the top of the painting, the shell just a simple white shape under it. They fascinated me so that I forgot what they were except that they were shapes together—singing shapes.⁴¹

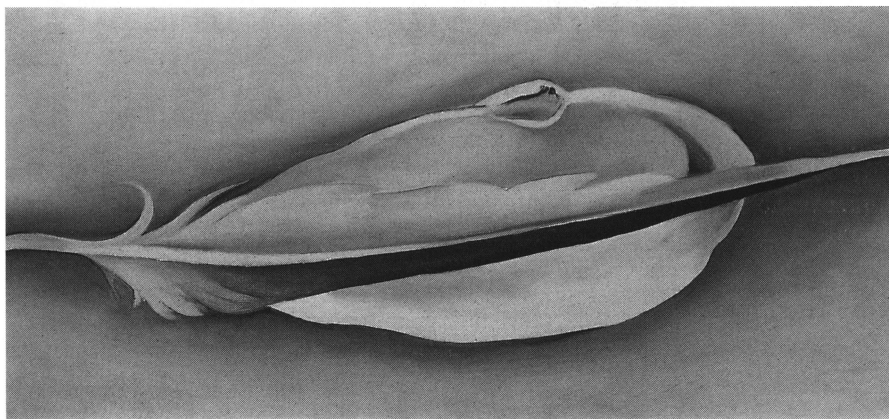


Figure 12.

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Shell and Feather*, c. 1940. Oil on canvas, 6 x 12 inches.
Bequest of Rowland Burdon-Muller.

39. *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking, 1976), n.p.

40. See listing of *Shell and Feather* in Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, and Abiquiu, New Mexico: The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, 1999), volume 2, p. 633. See Lynes, volume 1, pp. 302-07, on the 1926 series and pp. 570-73 on the 1937 series.

41. *O'Keeffe*, n.p.

O'Keeffe saw the shell and shingle as abstract forms, just as she perceived the objects in the Colby painting. Here, the viewer is drawn to the formal qualities of the objects—the concave shell interior, the convex feather—and these things seem to be free-floating as a dark shadow surrounds them, and their context or location is unclear. These forms were “singing”—a word used purposefully by O'Keeffe to suggest that the visual images “sounded” an emotional quality similar to abstract musical sounds. Indeed, like Marin, O'Keeffe was not after accurate depiction but wanted to paint an equivalence of the object, its emotional charge or resonance.⁴²

This way of seeing Maine and its environment—as equivalents, as abstractions, as subjective response—continued to shape the work of artists in the later part of the twentieth century. An admirer of Marin and O'Keeffe, William Kienbusch sought the “big forms” of the Maine coast as is evident in his *Sheep Island, Penobscot Bay* (1973; Colby College Museum of Art). The fluid paint and buildup of paint on the surface recalls Marin's working method and the energy and movement that was the core of Marin's representation of the Maine coast. Like Marin too, Kienbusch uses large, broad shapes to signify the sea, a coastal island, and the sky/sun. Although he often worked from life and from photographs, he is hardly literal in his reference to the objects before him: rather, he transforms nature into abstract symbols, suggesting the essence of these natural features, as he has explained: “To me, my work is a translation, a language, to communicate a world. It is a world of many things I love: Maine islands, trees, the sea, fences, gong buoys, churches, roses, mountains. I betray these if I copy.”⁴³

Like early twentieth-century artists, those of the later part of the century gestured to their predecessors at the same time that they created new visions of the region. The way they saw New England, the way they represented this place, was also defined by their historical moment. The big paintings of post-World War II American artists—from the abstract expressionists to the minimalists—and the super life-sized images of the commercial culture—from billboards to Hollywood movies—defined a new visual culture in the late twentieth century. This expanding scale even helped to reshape images of the Maine landscape as can be seen in Alex Katz's work.

Although best known for his figure pieces of sophisticated Manhattanites, Katz has painted the landscape around his house in Lincolnville, Maine, where he has summered since 1954 and where he discovered what he has called the “great Maine landscape to be devoured.”⁴⁴ Some of his early Maine paintings like *Camden, Maine* (1953-54; Colby College Museum of Art) are

42. O'Keeffe wrote: “I often painted fragments of things because it seemed to make my statement as well or better than the whole could. And I long ago came to the conclusion that even if I could put down accurately the thing that I saw and enjoyed, it would not give the observer the kind of feeling it gave me. I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at—not copy it.” See *O'Keeffe*, n.p.

43. Kienbusch, quoted in *William Kienbusch* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Museum of Art, 1981), 11.

44. *Alex Katz at Colby College* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Museum of Art, 1996), n.p.

small scale and picture small-town New England—a traditional image of the region. His later works, however, are large scale canvases that overwhelm the viewer and offer new visual experiences of the regional landscape. *Black Brook* (1990; Colby College Museum of Art), *Fog II* (1988; Colby College Museum of Art), and *Twilight* (Figure 13) deal with transitional moments in nature, provocative times of day when light and weather transform the environment. While Katz rejected the bold gestural brushwork of the abstract expressionists in favor of broad areas of smooth, flat color, he was influenced by the dense, shallow space and large scale of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings in his landscapes.⁴⁵ In Katz's nearly abstract canvases, nature is

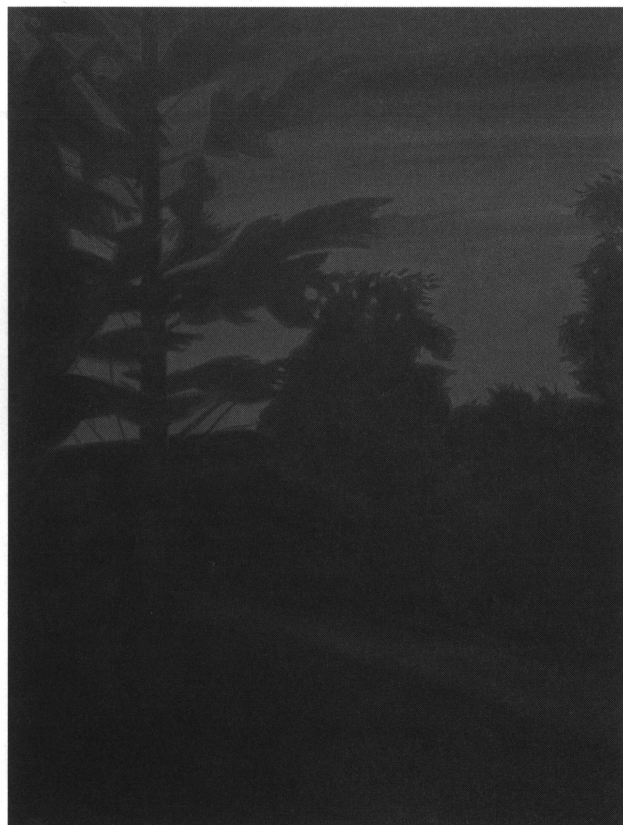


Figure 13.

Alex Katz, *Twilight*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 126 x 96 inches. Gift of the artist.

45. Alex Katz, quoted in Richard Marshall, "Alex Katz: Sources of Style," in Richard Marshall, *Alex Katz* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Rizzoli, 1986), 16.

reduced to a series of colors and shapes in which the details of the landscape are obscured and the dark forms of twilight trees, a green wall of fog, and dense vegetation mirrored in a dark stream seem impenetrable, at the same time that large scale—126 x 96 inches—transports the viewer into the scene. The indistinct landscape in darkness, edges of trees against pale blue sky, and clear skies of Maine summers in *Twilight* also relate to Katz's nocturnal views of New York. In both the rural and urban context, he is concerned with light: "The place doesn't matter. I have this intellectual idea of a landscape, which I happened to see, wherever. It's the armature for the light."⁴⁶ But the place does matter, as his paintings of the Maine landscape create ideas and associations about this particular locale. Katz's Maine is a place of mystery, of evocative light, of dark corners in the natural world, empty and lonely. It is also a big space.

Big size is also a feature of Neil Welliver's *West Slope* (Figure 14) which pictures the woods near the artist's home in Lincolnville. Welliver tries to



Figure 14.

Neil Welliver, *West Slope*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 96 x 120 inches. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund.

46. Quoted in Marsden-Atlass, *One Hundred Works*, 94.

give the viewer the sense that he/she is in the center of the Maine wilderness, in a deeply forested woods carpeted with moss, dense tree-growth with sunshine dappling the open spaces. The large-scale works of Welliver and Katz address the late twentieth-century need for art (like other images) to overwhelm the viewer, to set up a virtual experience. At a time when people see nature reproduced in diverse ways, from inexpensive prints of historical paintings to dramatic documentaries on television, artists like Katz and Welliver are challenged to create landscape art that still provides a sense of wonderment for viewers. While they produce new visions of New England, *Twilight* and *West Slope* speak to historical landscapes of the region as well—Marsden Hartley's dark landscapes of western Maine, wilderness scenes of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School, for example. However fresh and innovative their work, they still gesture to the past, as Katz himself has explained:

I think of myself as a modern person and I want my painting to look that way. I think of my painting as different from some others in that they derive a lot from modern painting as well as from older paintings.... They're traditional because all painting belongs to the paintings before them, and they're modernistic because they're responsive to the immediate.⁴⁷

The weight of the past and the urgencies of the present, then, shape visual artists as they encounter the New England landscape and people. Although the twentieth-century paintings of the region in the Colby College Museum of Art represent multiple styles covering approximately one hundred years, there are consistent themes and an interconnected web of ideas that define the modernist's New England. With the rise of modernization during this time, New England was pictured as a place outside civilization, outside technological progress. Some artists admitted the industrial and technological onto their canvases but these works too are nostalgic and picturesque. The New England that we see at the Colby College Museum of Art is the New England the tourists seek, an ideal space distant from the modern, "the way life should be." And just as urban tourists seek out New England's remote landscape and people to gain rejuvenation, art viewers can experience a similar retreat into a quiet, pastoral, and sometimes primitive New England inside the museum.

47. Katz, quoted in Marshall, *Alex Katz*, 22.