

VOX

H A M P T O N S



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DRAWN BY THE LIGHT

For over two centuries, artists have been exploring the beauties of the "other" fork. BY SARA EVANS



EDWARD AUGUST BELL

Ever since the colonial period, Long Island's North Fork has attracted artisans of all types, from cabinet-makers and clockmakers to boatwrights and ship builders. Bounded by Long Island Sound to the north and Peconic Bay to the south, this long and narrow stretch of land, punctuated by deeply indented coves, creeks and inlets, steep cliffs, low bluffs and pristine beaches, is also a landscape of picturesque towns and villages, dense woodlands, and fertile farms, all put on canvas over the years by a steady stream of accomplished artists. From their collective viewpoint, the North Fork's greatest asset is the sweeping, ever-changing quality of its light as the sun travels across the landscape from Bay to Sound, from sunrise to sunset.

The first settlers who came here from New England were an austere and puritanical lot, definitely not given to making or collecting art. But as many became wealthier and more established, they commissioned portraits of themselves and their families from both native and itinerant European limners. A few local artists painted simplistic homestead and harbor scenes, and, by the mid-19th century, popular taste began developing for local landscapes, both painted and in prints.

But it was not until the last quarter of the 19th century that the North Fork really took hold as a destination for artists. At the time, art colonies were springing up and flourishing all up and down the eastern seaboard,



IRVING RAMSEY WILES



BENJAMIN RUTHERFURD FITZ



WHITNEY MYRON HUBBARD

thanks to improved travel by railroad and steamer, which allowed painters to travel with relative ease. And the invention of the metal paint tube allowed a newly minted generation of plein-air artists to work outdoors for hours on end without their paints drying up.

Benjamin Rutherford Fitz is acknowledged as the father of the North Fork painters. Fitz first came to Peconic as a boy with his recently widowed mother, who was returning to her family farm. He later trained at the Royal Academy in Munich and in New York at the Art Students League. He was a greatly respected portraitist, called by fellow painter Walter Shirlaw "the best teacher in the country." Sadly, Fitz's health failed, and in 1891 he died at 36 in his Peconic home.

Edward August Bell met Fitz at the Royal Academy in Munich. They became close friends, traveling and sketching together throughout Europe. A student of William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League and the National Academy in New York, Bell was also a superb and successful portraitist. When they returned from Europe, Bell came out to visit Fitz at his home in Peconic. He fell in love with the area and bought a large home on Peconic Lane, surrounded by deep porches and lovely old copper beeches. Later, he built "Bell Buoy," a rustic summer house and studio overlooking Peconic Bay. After Fitz's untimely death, Bell served as his executor, took over his classes and married the late artist's niece.

Bell's formal work is pivotal. His early paintings are characteristic of the dark, academic "Munich School," while his later paintings are looser and more impressionistic, with brushwork that is more typical of the modern art of that time. As a member of both the National Academy and the Art Students League, he exhibited widely; his work sold well. Like so many of his generation, Bell made much of his income by painting society portraits, but it is his Peconic paintings that are most sought-after today. Lovely and relaxed, they depict simple cottages, boating and harbor scenes and sparkling seascapes.

Irving Ramsey Wiles, considered one of the finest American Impressionists of his day, is often compared to John Singer Sargent, or to his close friend, mentor and teacher, William Merritt Chase. So close was his friendship with Chase that, upon the artist's death in 1916, Wiles was entrusted to complete Chase's por-

trait of his beloved wife, Alice. Wiles studied with Chase from the time he was 12, and later, in Paris, with Sargent's own mentor, Carolus-Duran.

Just as Benjamin Fitz had lured Bell to Peconic, he in turn invited his good friend Wiles out. Like Bell, Wiles was totally taken with the North Fork landscape. In 1895, he began teaching painting there during the summers with his father, Lemuel Wiles, a Hudson River School painter and former student of Thomas Cole. One of his students, Kate Freeman Clark, raved, "Peconic is the most ravishingly beautiful, picturesque place." Wiles built a studio at Indian Neck overlooking Peconic Bay. He spent many months each year on the North Fork, together with his wife May and their daughter, Gladys Lee, who grew up to be a noted artist in her own right. Like his good friend and neighbor E. A. Bell, Wiles was an artist who had found his place.

Henry Prellwitz and his wife, Edith Mitchell Prellwitz, first met as young artists at the Art Students League after studying in Europe. A passionate early feminist, Edith was convinced that she couldn't succeed as both an artist and a wife—and that art came first. But Henry persisted, and after a considerable courtship, they married. Prellwitz visited Peconic at the invitation of his friends Bell and Irving Wiles. Like so many artists before and since, he was entranced by the combination of seacoast and farmland that characterizes the North Fork, as well as the area's easy proximity to the City. In 1898, together with Edith's parents, he too bought property on Indian Neck, building adjoining studios, next to an 1811 farmhouse named "High House" that he had barged to the site from a hamlet farther to the west.

Both Edith and Henry Prellwitz garnered prizes, commissions and praise for their art, much of which is strongly traditional. Both rejected the new trends that were rippling through the art world. The pair ultimately retreated to Peconic, creating art as they saw fit, with Edith specializing in powerful allegories with a mystical aura, along with moonlit landscapes and charming portraits. Henry, on the other hand, became increasingly entranced with the winter landscape of the North Fork. Peconic served both as subject and backdrop for their work. Henry's tonalistic winter

scenes, almost entirely drained of color, captured the region at its bleakest and most powerful. Both painters of extraordinary talent, the pair came to call the North Fork their home.

Many other prominent artists found their way out to the North Fork at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, an impressive list that includes the young Scotsman Tom Currie-Bell, Charles Bittinger, William Ritschel, Walter Orlando Rouland, Gifford and Reynolds Beal, Charles Henry Miller and Emile and Karl Gruppe.

For one riotous summer, Ritschel and Rouland commandeered a ship, the *Escort*, that had wrecked on the Sound shore. Known locally as “the episode of the wreck,” during that summer of 1899 the ship served not only as home and studio for the two young artists, but also as *the* party place, with visiting young ladies merrily hoisted aboard in a bosun’s chair.

At the same time, a gifted group of local artists who studied, painted and traveled widely together emerged. Several of them studied with Edward A. Bell and Greenport artist Whitney Myron Hubbard. Many were women from prominent first-settler families, who shared a teacher, mentor and ringleader in the talented and eccentric Caroline “Dolly” Bell. Bell’s group included artists Julia Wickham, Clara Moore Howard, Marguerite Moore Hawkins and Carrie Carter Wells. Caroline Bell dispensed her artistic wisdom gratis; she didn’t believe that budding artists should ever have to pay for lessons.

Greenport’s native son, Whitney Hubbard, painted and taught for decades, leaving an uncounted legacy of landscapes, harbor scenes, portraits and seascapes. Another Greenport artist, Isabelle Wengenroth, was a noted portraitist, while her son Stow became one of the preeminent printmakers of the 20th century.

Out in the remote hamlet of Orient, the learned William Steeple Davis created paintings, prints, etchings and pioneering photographs of enduring beauty, leaving behind a trust that funds visiting artists today.

As the North Fork community matured and became increasingly sophisticated, it began to recognize its own artistic importance. Charity shows and centennial celebrations, studio tours, galleries and exhibitions all helped put the area on the cultural map. The establishment of the Old Town Arts and Crafts Guild in Cutchogue during the



WILLIAM STEEPLE DAVIS

1940s provided a permanent venue for both new and established artists to show and market their work.

After the Second World War, the art world was shredded by the explosion of new art forms. Abstract Expressionism, Color Field art, Pop Art—all radical departures from tradition—roiled the art establishment. Gallerist Betty Parsons, known as the “den mother of Abstract Expressionism,” gave virtually the entire pantheon of the New York School artists their first solo shows. Parsons understood them well, knowing instinctively that they were creating was an entirely new way not only of making, but also of seeing art. In her gallery, she promoted such prominent artists as Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly, Mark Rothko, Joseph Cornell, Richard Pousette-Dart and Arden Scott, to name just a handful.

In the early 1950s Parsons moved to a studio on the Sound in Southold designed by her friend, the modernist architect/sculptor Tony Smith. She abandoned her City gallery and spent many happy years wandering on the beach, swimming nude in the Sound, and creating her own unique art from found objects, flotsam and jetsam gleaned from her beach. “They were tossed about in the sea for I don’t know how long,” she noted, “And then they wash ashore, broken and changed—and I find them.” Smith also built a home and studio in East Marion for abstract expressionist Theodore Stamos and his assistant, the gifted, sadly short-lived, lyrical abstractionist Ralph Humphrey.

Today, the same qualities that drew the late 19th century Golden Age painters and sculptors to the North Fork continue to lure important artists. Sculptors Richard Serra, Robert Berks, Arden Scott, Bennett Blackburn and Michael Combs all live and work here, as do such prominent painters as Elizabeth Peyton, Max Moran, Ellen Wiener and Gabriele Evertz. Likewise, cutting-edge contemporary



HENRY PRELLWITZ AND EDITH MITCHI

artists Robert Gober, Ilya and Emila Kabakov, Ellen and Allen Wexler and Lillian Ball, all live and work on the North Fork.

The North Fork is not the Hamptons, nor does it resemble a social “scene” in any sense of the word. The artists who have been drawn to the area come in search of quiet and privacy, stillness and serenity, and the inspiration and sustenance they draw from the ever-shifting light.

A NEW BOOK

A Shared Aesthetic Artists of Long Island's North Fork

BY GEOFFREY K. FLEMING
& SARA EVANS

Introduction by Amei Wallach,
Photography by Randee Daddona.
The book will be published this
month by the Southold Historical
Society, and distributed by Hud-
son Hills Press (hardback; \$50).

