

Transcript of Lecture
Delivered by
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East Hampton: the 19th Century Artists' Paradise

The early East Hampton art colony played a unique role in the formation of this town as a summer resort. I researched this topic in preparing my Master's Thesis in the History Dept. at New York University so that came to this work through the history mode, not the art history one. I accepted the fact that there were handsome pictures done here by good professional artists. What interested me more was why such a large and influential art colony developed in East Hampton and what were the connections between the art colony and the citizens of this tiny village on eastern Long Island. I wanted to show how the artists facilitated the growth of East Hampton into a summer resort with a strong artistic component. I did a good deal of my research in that wonderful repository, The Long Island Collection in the East Hampton Library.

There were two very interesting things about the East Hampton art colony - one that it was the most popular art colony in America for almost 15 years - from 1878 to 1890, which corresponds to the town's 'Boarding House' era. The other is that it was unique in character among the many art colonies established at the end of the last century in that it was spontaneous and self-generating. Once discovered by illustrators and painters such as Harry Fenn, Winslow Homer, Sanford Gifford, and then the Tile Club, the growth of East Hampton as an art colony grew naturally. Other art colonies such as Newport, Old Lyme and Southampton were formed around a single dominant figure - such as William Merritt Chase at the Shinnecock Summer School of Art in Southampton. East Hampton had only itself and by its own charm and beauty dominated the art colony era for over a decade.

There are several reasons why East Hampton was so popular with the young artists returning to America after study abroad in the post-Civil War era which has been called "The Era of the American Renaissance". Its popularity was due to a confluence of factors:

1. Proximity to NYC - the acknowledged art capital of US.
2. American collectors wanted to buy either European art or American paintings that looked like European art - which at that time was dominated by the pastoral scenes of the Barbizon school. East Hampton's agricultural landscape and the unsophisticated lifestyle of its citizens met these tastes perfectly. Also, painting "en plein aire" was the vogue and the area's clear, bright light met the artist's criteria for painting outdoors.
3. Town was inexpensive. In the late 1870s and early 1880s the boarding houses charged from \$6 to \$12 aweek, including meals.
4. Artists liked to be together. In the New York art world of that time everyone knew everyone else. There was a filagree of relationships that enveloped these young artists - through their studies in Paris or Munich, sharing studio space together in New York, working together as illustrators for the many magazines of the time, and, most importantly, through memberships in

organizations such as the National Academy of Design, the Society of American Artists, the New York Etching Club, the American Watercolor Society.

A genuine camaraderie was the mark of the tiny summer art colony in the early days. The artists liked each other's company, especially during the one period a year away from the battle for recognition and the struggle to make ends meet. A few marine artists had visited eastern Long Island as early as the 1860's. However, the area's attraction to artists was spurred by three events in the 1870's. The first was Winslow Homer's visit to East Hampton in July of 1874. He was already well-known for his illustrations of the Civil War for Harper's Weekly. He was charmed by the seaside village and his depiction of beach buggies and a windmill was printed in the September 1874 issue of that magazine. Interestingly enough, he did the preliminary studies for his famous painting 'Snap the Whip' while he was in East Hampton. (1) The painting was exhibited at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.

The second catalyst was William Cullen Bryant's publication of a two-volume work titled Picturesque America in 1876 which celebrated the beauties of the American landscape. Artist Harry Fenn was chosen to illustrate the chapter "Scenes on Eastern Long Island". The article stated 'Perhaps no town in America retains so nearly the primitive habits, tastes and ideas of our forefathers as East Hampton.'

However, the third and pivotal event in attracting artists to East Hampton was the visit of the Tile Club to the area in July 1878. A group of young artists in New York had formed this loosely-knit 'club', with an eye to weekly get-togethers. During their evening get-togethers they painted eight inch square tiles with a variety of whimsical pictures, more to poke fun at the current craze for "decorative arts" than for any serious artistic purpose. They named their club accordingly. Scribner's Monthly Magazine agreed to publish four illustrated articles about the antics of this band of young artists.

This organization has assumed mythic proportions in art history, mainly due to its membership which included William Merritt Chase, Winslow Homer, John Twachtman, Stanford White, Alden Wier and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. However, its purpose was conviviality and good talk about art.

(1.) "Reminiscences of Bruce Crane." Account of a conversation between Bruce Crane and William Whittemore at the Salmagundi Club, NYC on Nov. 17, 1933. Long Island Collection, East Hampton Library.

Several of the Tile Club artists had told Thomas Moran what a perfect place the area was for an artist. Moran brought his family to the town later in the summer of 1878. They stayed at 'Aunt Phebe' Hunting's boarding house on Main Street. He was the pivotal figure in the development of the East Hampton art colony. Moran's reputation was already established. He was known as the "artist/explorer of the American West" for his work sketching areas being surveyed by the United States government. He had also illustrated chapters about these regions for Picturesque America.

Scribner's Monthly Magazine published an article in February 1879 on the group's visit to the

area written by a 'Tiler'. In it East Hampton was referred to as an "artist's gold mine." From that time on artists came to eastern L.I. in increasing numbers.

Moran and his family returned every summer after their original visit and in 1884 Moran built a home overlooking Goose Pond at the entrance to the village. He designed it himself, copying the "Queen Anne" style favored in the current "aesthetic" movement. There were bay windows on all levels, hanging gables, detailed wood trim, and panels carved with sunflower motifs. A two-story livingroom/studio occupied almost the entire ground floor.

The Morans always referred to their home as "The Studio" as did everyone else in the village. A native commented, not unkindly, "The Moran place is about such a dwelling as one might expect to find belonging to an artist." Townspeople and artist alike loved to be invited to the Morans' open house on Saturday afternoons. The Studio became the center for artistic and intellectual life of the town. The evening gatherings there were the highlight of visiting artists' days. The house was always full of guests and the evenings were spent discussing art or in impromptu musicales for all the Morans either sang or played an instrument.

Another reason for the area's popularity was its appropriateness in terms of mood and scenery for the current craze for etching. A common thread among etchers was an interest in landscape studies. Quiet pastoral scenes, tranquil dawn and twilight studies rendered in soft tints of monochrome, and poetic mood studies were the rage. Almost every artist visiting East Hampton in the early 1880s did work in this medium.

Moran taught his wife Mary to etch and she became internationally famous for her work. She submitted her etching "The Goose Pond" to the Royal Society of Painters and Etchers in London for membership and was accepted. They did not know she was a woman and she remained the only woman member of that organization for years.

Her etching "Twixt the Gloaming and the Mirk" is indicative of the boldness and energy of her style. She went directly to nature and drew straight on the plate. She was experimental in technique, utilizing line etching, drypoint, mezzotint, and routette to create coloristic effects. In East Hampton she found the pastoral scenes she loved to draw: the windmills, gardens, ponds, gnarled apple trees, and old houses. Ruskin said that in her "New York possesses the best woman etcher of the day."

Clinton Academy was a gathering place for artists during the 1880's and 90's. The mornings were spent painting out-of-doors. Sketching classes set out for scenic points in great farm wagons, passing at every vantage point an artist working at his easel. Farmers complained they could not get into their own barnyards to milk cows, as the easels and umbrellas were so thick. The artists also found the farmers, fishermen and assorted "characters" of the village interesting subjects for their 'genre' paintings. In the evening, the artists would repair to Clinton Academy to critique each other's work.

East Hampton's appeal to artists was becoming better known. Journalists visited the village and wrote for the many magazines of the era about the happy juxtaposition of artists and farmers. Lippincott's Magazine referred to the village as the "American Barbizon" and the Century

Magazine said that East Hampton was the most popular of the adjacent sketching grounds and was a "true artist colony."

The young artists, largely male, stayed in local boarding houses. The best known and most popular was "Rowdy Hall" situated on Main Street facing the Presbyterian Church. Here they played cards, drank beer, and smoked pipes, all considered very daring in those days. When the village elders brought their families to church on Sunday mornings, they watched in disapproving horror as these youthful boarders would "open all the windows, put their feet on the window sills, wave their beer mugs (beer was considered the road to ruin in those days) and sing their most ribald French songs to the pious churchgoers."

One of the most virtuous pillars of the church was shocked to the depths of his Puritan soul by this display and cried out: "Look at Annie Huntting, she's running a Rowdy Hall." Miss Annie took in only male boarders as she did not want to be bothered with women in her kitchen. The house, moved twice since those happy days, now stands on the corner of Egypt and David's Lanes.

The Dominy house, built in 1715, was painted over and over again. It was the homestead of a family renowned for generations for their craftsmanship. Dominys made clocks, furniture, boats and windmills. They also owned and operated the Hook Windmill at the northern end of the village. The current occupant, Nathaniel Dominy VII jokingly complained to the young artists "You fellers git a thousand dollars in York for a picture of my back door and I git nothin'."

Clinton Academy and the Moran studio may have been focal points for the artists' lives but to the townspeople, the Presbyterian Church was the social and moral center of their lives. The disparity between the lifestyles of the artists and the townspeople can be seen in the reply an elderly native gave to an artist one Sunday when he was asked if a drawing might be made of his house. "No, I God no! There can't nobody paint pictures around my house, no on the Sabaday. I God no!" My research of church records showed that no artist rented a pew for the summer season.

"Aunt Fanny" Huntting, a sister-in-law to "Aunt Phebe" of boarding house fame, kept a dairy from 1855 until her death in 1887. She never married, living in a boarding house on the town's Main Street. The combination of her window observations and the tidbits of gossip visitors brought were recorded daily, along with her tart comments. She was painted by the noted artist Edward Lamson Henry amidst her possessions. She too was, as she put it "borne down in mind in consequence of the low estate of religion in this community. The summer visitors leave their religion at home. Surely such things ought not so to be."

However, her worries were not borne out by the facts. Starting in 1884, the collections at the Presbyterian Church were compiled as a block for the months from June through August. The collections were double the amount collected during the off-season months. The church also began to ask vacationing clergy to preach, augmenting both the attendance and the collections.

A weekly newspaper, the East Hampton Star, began publishing in December 1885. Almost every issue carried news of the art colony, either their activities in East Hampton or word of their

successes at New York exhibitions and sales. During the 1880s and 1890s the number of East Hampton scenes exhibited in the city tripled from the previous years. These landscape artists were caught in a paradoxical dilemma: their paintings were an irresistible advertisement to city dwellers who then descended upon this rural retreat, changing it by their very presence into a fashionable spa with all the trappings of modern society.

The artists were viewed as an exotic branch of the summer colony by the townspeople. The account books of local businesses listed the resident painters by name, but with the appellation "artist" after it. This distinction was not made for the other summer residents. However, the local citizens were proud to pose for the artists. By the same token, the artists took part in local picture exhibitions and musicales to raise money for community projects such as the enlargement of Clinton Academy and for wagons to sprinkle water on the dusty streets.

The Star chronicled the artists' social and professional doings weekly. When the Morans held a large costume party in 1890, it merited columns of print in the paper.

The Moran's purchase of a Venetian gondola on a visit to Venice in 1891 was considered a "seven-day wonder" by the villagers and the Star wrote weekly reports on its acquisition and shipment to East Hampton. The purchase of this exotic plaything convinced the sober East Hamptonites that artists were truly different from other folks. How could anyone spend \$2,000 on an essentially frivolous item! The paper wrote of the boat's voyage to America lashed to the lifeboat deck of a steamship. It was brought by steamer to Sag Harbor, "hung to the davits, it being so long, some 36 feet, that it could not be taken on deck." The Town Pond facing Moran's home was too shallow and inadequate for the boat so he moored it on Hook Pond. George Fowler, a Montauk Indian, who already worked for the Morans as gardener and caretaker, became "quite proficient in the art of propelling the curious craft."

The vacation industry had become the biggest business in the village by 1890. The art colony was as large as ever, but by 1890 relatively few artists rented houses in the village itself as "it has of late become too fashionable and the country around possesses superior attractions and fewer distractions."

Ruger Donoho was one of the greatest artists to live and paint here. He settled here permanently in 1891, living on Egypt Lane. The following year he participated in a torchlight parade during the presidential election of 1892. He and a friend made a huge abanner, 16 feet long and seven feet high on which was drawn a picture of Teddy Roosevelt, with the slogan "The People's Choice" printed under it. He became active in the community, serving for several years as Chairman and Clerk of the board for the Town Trustees.

Donoho convinced Childe Hassam to come to East Hampton. He first came to visit in 1898, visited each summer after that and finally bought a house next to Donohos in 1919. Hassam would paint many scenes of the old cottages, the beaches and dunes and would love the town the way the Morans had forty years earlier. He said "It has a character all its own, may it never be changed!"

In discussing the early East Hampton art colony and the town's growth as a summer resort, we

would be remiss in omitting the enduring contributions of the remarkable Woodhouse family. Lorenzo and Emma Woodhouse and later his nephew and his wife Mary established a legacy of support for the institutions that make up this unique community.

In the late 1890s Emma Woodhouse installed earliest documented Japanese water garden for a private home in this country. Open to the public and nationally known, local artists such as Donoho and Hassam made many studies of these famed gardens. They formed the nucleus of the area now known as the Nature Trail.

A later generation of the Woodhouse family was responsible for the building of the East Hampton Library and Guild Hall Museum. Guild Hall itself was the natural evolution of the town's acceptance of and living with artists for fifty years by the time it was built in 1931.

. At the opening reception Childe Hassam gave a speech dedicating the Moran Gallery. It was a particularly appropriate gesture as he and Moran were the "bookends" around the most vital period in the art colony's history. Moran was a disciple of the grand, panoramic landscape era of American painting. Hassam was the quintessential Impressionist painter with sunlight, broken brush strokes and fleeting shadows sketched on his canvas. Between them a generation of young American painters had visited this little town. Here they perfected their skills in the Barbizon mode, in a village uniquely suited for their endeavors.

slides:

1. Main Street, looking west - Town had no railroad. Visitors took train to Bridgehampton, stagecoach for rest of 7 miles. Population in 1880 was 2515. (Frank Dayton photo, EHL)
2. Hook Windmill - where North End Cemetary is- cow path.
3. 1874 - Winslow Homer - Snap the Whip. Bruce Crane and boys who posed for it. Homer had illustration of EH beach in Harpers Weekly that Sept.
4. Harry Fenn - View of Montauk - for Picturesque America
5. Fenn - View of Grist Mills at East Hampton
6. Fenn - Town from church belfry.
7. Sanford Robinson Gifford, 1877 "View of Montauk Light" Luminist school painter.
8. Carlton Wiggins, 1878. "Shinnecock Light" - studied with George Inness. Luminist. Guy Wiggin's father.
9. Aunt Phebe Huntting's boarding house. Moran family 1878. House moved to Hither Lane in 1926 and preserved.

10. Bruce Crane, 1879 - Town Pond.

11. Bruce Crane, ca. 1882 "Gathering Sale Hay" - EH pictures first to give him acclaim. Leading American tonalist, leader in Old Lyme art colony.

12. Samuel Colman, 1880 "Farmyard In EH". Bucolic scenes the rage.

13. Lawrence Carmichael Earle, 1881 "East Hampton Scene".

14. Thomas Moran Came yearly after 1878. . Bought Dr. Osborne's sheep meadow in 1882. "The Watering Place."

15. Moran - 1884 The Studio built. First home built by artist. Arts and Crafts movement in England influenced his design of house.

16. Moran, 1893 "Town Pond"

17. Mary Moran, 1881 "Goose Pond" Royal Soc. of Painter-Etchers. first and only woman. Active in EH comm. Hostess at EH tennis club and assemblies at Clinton Academy. Open houses.

18. Mary Moran, 1883 "Twixt the Gloamin' and the Mirk" Hook Pond windmill - compare it to now.

19. Clinton Academy - rented by John Ward Stimson and then Charles Yardley Turner to hold art classes each summer. Artists would meet there at night to talk over events of the day. It was in this period, the mid-1880's, that EH was referred to as the "American Barbizon" by Lippincott's Magazine. Said summer phase of town was almost entirely artistic.

20. Clinton Academy today. (Cameron photo)

21. Charles Yardley Turner "Long Island Potato Patch" - He was one of founders of the Art Students League in 1877. Came to EH in 1880 - summered here for 15 years.

22. Rowdy Hall - shown next to Pres. Church. Where David's Lane road is now. Why called Rowdy Hall? Miss Annie Huntting. Beer, poker, French songs - shocked parishioners.

Church center of people's lives. Native would not let artist paint his house on Sunday. "I God no, not on the Sabbathday!" No artists found in pew rentals or listings of Pres. Church.

23. Rowdy Hall today Corner Egypt & David's Lane. (Cameron)

24. Aunt Fanny Huntting - 1880 - Edward Lamson Henry. Kept diary, had everything in it. She and brother unmarried, rented at 3 houses on Main Street for years - watched from window. Summer visitors would call on her - including this famous artist. She was sister-in-law of Phebe

Huntting. Her portrait, done by an unknown local artist, is now hanging in Long Island Collection at EHL.

25. Dominy house -on North Main Street. Built in 1713. Many artists painted it. "You fellers get a thousand dollars up in York for a picture of my front door and I get nothin'. Family renowned for craftsmanship. Millwrights, clocks, furniture - also owned and operated Hook windmill.

26. Dominy site today. IGA parking lot.(Cameron photo)

27. William St. John Harper - "Old Charles Baker House" - He lived there for a number of years. Artists also used local townspeople to pose for illustrations for stories in many magazines of period - Century, the Argosy, Scribners, Harper's Weekly, etc.

28. Harper house today on Hither Lane. (Cameron photo)

1885 - EH Star began. News of art colony in every issue. Artists part of community but considered a group apart. Tradesmen records usually had appellation 'artist' after artist's name, not done for others. Reprinted all reviews of shows at Century, Union League, AWCS, NAD which had been printed in NY and Brooklyn newspapers. NY artists contributed to area's growing popularity by exhibiting scenes of EH in NY shows. Paradoxical dilemma - paintings were irresistible advertisement to city dwellers, who came and changed it to fashionable spa. Clinton Academy enlarged to hold dances and social events.

29. Costume party at Thomas Moran's house in 1890.

30. Son Paul, nephews Leon & Percy became very good artists.

31. Paul's watercolor painting of his sisters Ruth and Mary.

32. Leon Moran - "Sunset and Snow" - Guild Hall collection. Married daughter of John Nevitt Steele, one of many Pres. ministers who were summer residents. Summered here for yrs. John Drew one of his best friends. Clergy and artists close as neither had money and did not want social life.

33. Percy Moran - "Pond in EH" - both very active in tennis club, summered here for years. Very active in early years of Maidstone Club. Put on musicales and tableaux. Son baptised in St Luke's - also Percy buried here.

34. Moran gondola - 1891- On Hook Pond. Had Montauk Indian as gondolier. Now at Newport News Museum in Virginia.

35. Ruger Donoho - Home, Sweet Home. One of greatest artists to live here. Still unknown. Met wife when she was summer visitor in 1890. He settled here year round in 1891. Painted nocturnal scenes and sun-filled gardens.

36. Donoho - Autumn in East Hampton, 1897.

37. Sign for Presidential election of 1892 with friend and painter Emil Carlsen. Active in community. Chairman and clerk of the board for Town Trustees in 1897, served several years.

38. Childe Hassam moved here in 1919. Bought house next to his friend Donoho on Egypt Lane. Donoho had bought house in 1904 renovated it. House still there, called "Willow Bend." First came to EH in 1898 at urging of Donoho. Older, richer artists now coming here.

39. Childe Hassam, etching of Main Street, 1917. Gave it to Agnes Day, his god-child.

40. Dayton Photo of Main Street = how it looked ca. 1917.

41. Childe Hassam - Home, Sweet Home, 1916. Taught himself to be ambidexterous to catch fleetin light.

42. Donoho - Woodhouse Japanese Water Garden. Fabulous, nationally known garden, open to public. Nucleus of what we know as the Nature Trail.

43. Hassam rendering of Water Garden done at a later date. Woodhouse gave money to build Guild Hall where we are sitting now. Also instrumental in remodeling Clinton Academy and building EH Library.

44. Hassam "Fithian Farm", done in 1917. Opposite Donoho house. Adjacent to property given to village by Matilda Donoho for Nature Trail.

45. Fithian Farm site today. (Cameron photo) Adjoins property given by Mrs. Mary Woodhouse to village for Nature Trail. Nature Trail comprises over 25 acres in heart of East Hampton village.

46. Guild Hall Museum, opened in 1931. Childe Hassam gave talk dedicating Thomas Moran gallery. Guild Hall natural culmination of town's acceptance of and living with artists.