

Transcript of Lecture Delivered By  
Helen Harrison  
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From Barbizon to Bonac: East Hampton as an Art Colony

About 40 miles southeast of Paris, at the edge of the Fontainebleau forest, the rural hamlet of Barbizon began to attract artists as early as the 1820s. Within two decades it had become a mecca for French landscape painters fleeing the city's notoriously disagreeable summers, and for their European and American colleagues searching for picturesque subject matter. Ready access via the railway line from Paris that came to Fontainebleau in 1849 further opened the area to both tourism and artistic colonization. But even when Barbizon was an hour's carriage ride from the nearest railroad station, the rustic village and its wooded surroundings were providing motifs for notable painters such as Camille Corot, ThJodore Rousseau, and Diaz de la PeZa, who formed the nucleus of the so-called Barbizon School.

By the late 19th century, the numerous parallels between the East Hampton art colony and its French predecessor prompted journalists to dub our village the "American Barbizon." Admittedly there were other locales vying for the title--notably Cape Ann in Massachusetts, where several American veterans of Barbizon set up summer camp in the 1870s, and Old Lyme, Connecticut, which was colonized at the turn of the century by artists who, like their Barbizon forerunners, painted out of doors and aimed to capture the changing effects of light and weather on a domesticated landscape still tinged with wildness. The colonies organized around art schools--for example, the Art Students League's outpost at Woodstock, New York, William Merritt Chase's Shinnecock Summer School of Art and its offshoot, Provincetown's Cape Cod School of Art, founded by Chase's disciple Charles Hawthorne--were not considered comparable to Barbizon, where established artists congregated in a spirit of collegial enthusiasm and shared creative goals.

Describing the Barbizon phenomenon in *The Good and Simple Life*, his comprehensive and entertaining study of European art colonies, Michael Jacobs mentions various aspects that, if the place names and dates were changed, are also true of East Hampton. Both locations boasted a quaint village peopled by equally quaint inhabitants, many of whom turned out to be remarkably enterprising. Jacobs' account of the Barbizon natives' reaction to the inrush of eager landscapists might well be applicable to East Hampton's villagers: They were often initially suspicious, bewildered, amused, and sometimes even antagonistic. However, they were also sensible enough to realize the financial advantages to be gained by having large numbers of artists around: easy money could be had from providing food, accommodation, and studio space, posing for the artists, and even charging them (often illegally) for painting on their land. Moreover, in places where photographers hardly came, it flattered their vanity to have likenesses made of themselves. (pp. 13-14)

The area's legendary character, celebrated in stories and songs, was another of Barbizon's prime attractions for artists. The forest itself had long ago been romanticized by poets, in whose 16th century odes, according to Jacobs, "the real world of Fontainebleau and the world of classical mythology were curiously intermingled." (p. 17) Even the American writer James Fenimore Cooper, who visited in 1827, was surprisingly captivated by the place, declaring that it exceeded in "savage variety" anything he had encountered at home. Cooper's paean to an unspoiled Fontainebleau--pointedly ignoring the nearby royal hunting lodge and convenient thoroughfares developed under Louis XIV--is echoed in Walt Whitman's 1849 treatise on the "wonders and beauties" of Montauk's wilderness in his *Letters from a Traveling Bachelor*, and the laudatory chapter on East Hampton in William Cullen Bryant's popular and liberally illustrated *Picturesque America*, published in 1872-74.

As their French forebears had been drawn to rural peasant life as a symbol of the values missing from modern industrialized society, the idyllic character of John Howard Payne's "Home, Sweet Home," immortalized in a very popular ballad, would make East Hampton a similar focus of sentimental questing. In 1878 the Payne site provided artists with a convenient target at which to aim a well-publicized expedition to eastern Long Island. As one of their number wrote in a lighthearted account of the trip (published in *Scribner's magazine* the following February), the humble cottage was amply endowed with picturesque features, most notably the ancient hearth, which they considered to be "the vital center of the whole Payne legend." Actually the question of whether the artists had indeed discovered the fabled hearth was a subject of some conjecture. "Payne was born in two or three houses of Easthampton," they observed dryly, "besides Boston and No. 33 Broad Street, New York." Despite the initial confusion--during which several competing local guides offered to take them, for a fee, to the genuine property--they reached a consensus on one dwelling and "went on to make it their own, artist-fashion."

Here again the parallel between East Hampton and Barbizon is revealing, for artists responded to both locations selectively, ignoring the aspects that did not suit their aesthetic and ideological purposes. The squalor and poverty that often characterized rural life was glossed over in favor of its bucolic appeal and pre-industrial symbolism. At the same time, the surrounding countryside--whether Barbizon's forest or East Hampton's farmland and coastline--was coming under increasing pressure from the commercial development and tourism made possible by the railroad's advent. The vehicle that embodied the Industrial Revolution's relentless motive power was, according to a French journalist quoted by Jacobs, responsible for making Fontainebleau "seem little more than a suburb of Paris, and bringing (much to the regret of the many artists in the neighborhood) vast crowds of day-trippers to the place at the weekends." (p. 19) That account described Barbizon in 1849, but it is just as relevant to East Hampton after 1895, when the Long Island Rail

Road line was extended through from Bridgehampton to Montauk and the whole region became far more accessible to tourists from New York City and its eastern suburbs.

Proximity to the nation's art capital is another of the striking analogies between Barbizon and East Hampton, although in physical distance the parallel is not accurate. Nevertheless, in spite of being more than twice as far from New York City as Barbizon is from Paris, East Hampton's art colony from its inception was similarly linked to the acknowledged urban center of artistic activity. Measured in terms of miles, the Cape Ann-Boston connection is a better match to Barbizon-Paris, but by the 1880s, when Gloucester and Rockport became artistic destinations, New York was ascendant over Boston as the American art world's premier professional training ground and marketplace. In terms of scenery if not distance, one might consider Barbizon closer to the wooded, inland environs of New Hope or Woodstock than to the maritime landscape of eastern Long Island. New Hope, a charming town on the New Jersey-Pennsylvania border, was more allied to Philadelphia's art community than to Manhattan's. Woodstock, which has certainly attracted its share of prominent artists since its advent as an art colony in the early 20th century, is even farther from Manhattan than is East Hampton, and the village is several miles inland from the New York Central rail line that serves the Hudson Valley. Moreover, and perhaps decisively to its detriment as an artists' retreat, Woodstock suffers from long, hard winters that shorten the season for outdoor work and make travel to and from the city inconvenient, even perilous.

As the real estate agents are fond of repeating, "location, location, location." This indeed seems to have been the factor that tipped the balance in East Hampton's favor during the late 19th century and accounts for our continuing vitality as an artists' community. But, like the region itself, the art colony has undergone profound changes since its beginnings as a Barbizon-inspired enclave of plein-air painters in search of scenic vistas and unspoiled rustic motifs. One of the most consequential was the shift in emphasis from representational painting to abstraction. The influx of landscape and genre painters that began in the late 1870s lasted for thirty years, during which many New York-based artists established seasonal residences and some moved here full time. That period of the colony's development will be the subject of Kate Cameron's talk later in this series, so I will focus instead on East Hampton's transition from its "Barbizon" phase to what I have dubbed its "Bonac" incarnation, heralded by the Surrealists' temporary occupation during World War II and fully realized in the following decade with the arrival of New York's vanguard, the Abstract Expressionists.

In spite of its earlier reputation as an art colony, East Hampton was not attracting a new generation in the 20th century. Although a few artists continued to arrive in the 1920s and '30s--highlighted by the establishment of Hilton Leech's Amagansett Art School in 1933--an aura of complacency and tradition

discouraged bohemian aspirations. And, in terms one often hears repeated today, there were complaints that well-heeled summer residents had pushed property prices beyond the reach of all but the most affluent artists. Turning their attention to enclaves that, while more remote, were both affordable and welcoming, the avant-garde summered in Provincetown and Woodstock, leaving East Hampton to established landscape painters like Childe Hassam, William J. Whittmore, Francis Newton, and Arthur T. Hill. These artists and their conservative colleagues provided the regular bill of fare at Guild Hall, which opened in 1931 as the community's cultural center. At the building's inauguration, Hassam dedicated the main gallery to the memory of Thomas Moran, the distinguished landscape painter who, with his wife, the etcher Mary Nimmo, had erected the first purpose-built artists' residence in the village in 1884. But when Hassam held forth eloquently on the Morans' pivotal role in attracting fellow artists to East Hampton, he was essentially speaking in the past tense.

During the following decade, however, that situation was to change in ways that not everyone agreed were for the better. With the outbreak of World War II, New York became a haven for European artists, writers, and intellectuals fleeing Nazi persecution. Their contributions to the city's postwar emergence as the international capital of contemporary art have long been acknowledged, but it was not until Phyllis Braff's 1996 exhibition at Guild Hall that their significance to East Hampton's artistic revitalization was fully examined. In her catalogue for *The Surrealists and their Friends on Eastern Long Island at Mid-Century*, Braff outlined the influences that led the emerging American vanguard to consider the region as a suitable retreat. Like previous migrations to this and other locales, this one was spearheaded by a few individuals whose accounts prompted others to join them.

Among the first to arrive were the abstractionist Fernand Ljger and his companion Lucia Christofanetti, who used her first name professionally and was associated with the Surrealist circle in Paris. The couple left Europe under the auspices of Gerald and Sara Murphy, a wealthy expatriate couple who in the 1920s had entertained Picasso, Hemingway, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and other artistic and literary notables at their Mediterranean estate, which they dubbed Villa America. After their return to the United States, the Murphys' country retreat was The Dunes, Sara's family property on East Hampton's oceanfront, where they offered hospitality to their refugee friends. As the Murphys' daughter, Honoria Donnelly, recalled in her 1982 memoir, *Sara & Gerald: Villa America and After*, her father loved to discuss painting with Ljger. Although Murphy had abandoned his own brief career as an artist in 1929, he identified strongly with creative people and relished their company. "It's always great to back up once a year and take on a load of [Ljger]," Murphy once told his friend John Dos Passos. "He's very exciting on the subject of surrealist direction."

(p. 227) For several summers Ljger and Lucia were given the use of cottages at

The Dunes, and Lucia was so smitten with the area that she eventually settled here. Her enthusiasm was also responsible for attracting other expatriates. According to Braff, Lucia "urged the Surrealists, now waiting out the war in New York, to join her on Long Island. According to family legend, there was always a room ready in her home for AndrJ Breton and for Marcel Duchamp.... Many members of the extended Surrealist community shared accommodations with her in East Hampton and Amagansett," where the gregarious Lucia "regularly mixed American and European artists at her gatherings." (pp. 6, 32)

In a vignette from his engrossing 1984 memoir, *A Not-So-Still Life*, Max Ernst's son Jimmy remembered visiting his father in Amagansett during the summer of 1945, when many of the Surrealists and their coterie were in residence there. With Lucia as hostess, "friends like Breton, Ernst, Duchamp, LJger, [Roberto] Matta, David Hare and [Robert] Motherwell... shared the potluck of her Syrian cuisine, played chess and engaged in severely regimented intellectual party games on the beach, much to the annoyance of the local Bonackers." (pp. 250-51) Not only were the high-jinks (which also featured bathing beauties in improvised Continental-style bikinis) exotic by neighborhood standards, but the cast of characters was decidedly polyglot and therefore doubly suspect. In addition to the French contingent, it included the German Ernst; Matta, who hailed from Chile; Romanian-born architect Frederick Kiesler; the Cuban Wifredo Lam; Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi; and Sonia Sekula, a native of Switzerland.

If the foreign interlopers received a predictably cool reception from area residents, they in turn were unexpectedly tolerant of the young American artists who fraternized with them in the relaxed atmosphere of country summers. In New York City, the Surrealists were generally aloof, their air of natural superiority compounded by the language barrier. But with French-speakers like the Murphys and Motherwell and the English-speaking Duchamp and Matta as go-betweens, social tensions were eased and professional guards lowered if not dropped. The pivotal bilingual intermediary was Stanley William Hayter, an English-born printmaker whose Paris workshop, Atelier 17, had been a hotbed of graphic experimentation before the outbreak of war forced it to close. In 1940 Hayter transferred his workshop to New York, where he soon was joined by many of his former associates, among them Max Ernst, AndrJ Masson, Joan Mir\, and Ives Tanguy. Hayter's experimental approach, which stressed Surrealist-inspired iconoclasm, improvisation, and technical innovation, also attracted young New York-based artists eager for first-hand contact with the European vanguard.

Hayter and his American wife, the sculptor Helen Phillips, first visited eastern Long Island in 1944. As Phillips later told the author Jeffrey Potter: "There were so many Surrealists there in summer that a pair of women all dressed up stopped me on Amagansett Main Street and said, 'We're from Southampton. Can you tell us where we'll find the Surrealists?' The Europeans did stick

together actually, and none of us had much money, which is why we were there. That and Provincetown's being too far from New York." (p. 86) Again location was a crucial factor, but one based on economics and convenience rather than aesthetic imperatives. For unlike their 19th century counterparts, art colonists who sought creative inspiration in the unconscious mind did not look outward to the beautiful seaside scenery and charming villages as sources of subject matter. Still, those assets were highly desirable in a vacation spot, especially if the price was right, and they found that inexpensive rentals were available outside the established summer resort sections. One summer the Hayters rented a fisherman's shack at Louse Point--a decision that, in retrospect, had far-reaching consequences for the art colony.

In his 1985 book, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock*, Potter tells the tale of that fateful summer rental, an economical if somewhat primitive structure "with a leaky roof, a hand pump, and no electricity." (p. 80) Unfortunately, although its position on the shore of Gardiner's Bay was sublime, it was too remote for Hayter, who had to bike to the train station for his regular trips into the city, where Atelier 17 demanded his supervision. At the workshop, Hayter's assistant was a young sculptor named Reuben Kadish, one of Jackson Pollock's closest friends. When Hayter learned that Kadish, short of funds, was stuck in the city for the summer, he offered him the use of the shack, which was paid up for the season. Kadish accepted gladly, and invited Pollock and Lee Krasner, who were then living together, to share the place with him and his wife. Thus it happened that by chance Pollock and Krasner, who had been summering in Provincetown but were too broke to afford the trip that year, found themselves in East Hampton in August 1945.

The Kadishes remembered the vacation as a carefree time, the days filled with bike rides, clamming, and good-natured horseplay, although Krasner was worried, as always, that Pollock's beer drinking would get out of hand. (pp. 80-81) But compared to the city, where liquor and like-minded companions were plentiful, East Hampton offered a respite from the social and professional pressures that literally drove Pollock to drink and caused Krasner such anxiety. The couple even speculated about subletting their city apartment and finding a cheap winter rental where they could concentrate on work. They did a little house-hunting with the Kadishes in Amagansett, but it wasn't until they returned to the city after Labor Day that Pollock suddenly decided their pipe dream would become a reality. Their friends, the writers Harold Rosenberg and May Tabak, had bought an old house on Neck Path in The Springs, a hamlet that had previously attracted few people "from away." If the Rosenbergs could manage it, so could Pollock and Krasner. They contacted the realtor Edward Cook, who showed them a rundown homestead on Fireplace Road that was on the market for \$5,000. As Cook explained to Potter, the property was also available for rent, but Pollock was looking to purchase and move to the area permanently. "Pollock had no money at all but access to some, I guess," Cook remarked. "Anyway, he knew enough about money to want to own instead of paying it out

in rent with nothing to show." (p. 86)

The money to which Pollock had "access" was a loan from his dealer and patron Peggy Guggenheim. With her \$2,000 as down payment and a local bank mortgage for the balance, Pollock took title to the property in November 1945. He and Krasner had been married the previous month, with May Rosenberg as witness. According to a 1973 videotaped interview with Krasner, in the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center's oral history collection, she wanted to formalize their relationship now that they were settling down, especially in a community she believed was conservative and would not accept an unmarried couple. Their honeymoon was spent cleaning out the house, which was an improvement on the Louse Point shack but nevertheless lacked hot water and a bathroom, and had only coal stoves downstairs for heat. Notwithstanding the initial hardships, the couple felt confident enough to invite the family for Thanksgiving and were soon issuing eager invitations to their artist friends.

Like the Morans sixty years earlier, the Pollocks were a magnet for their contemporaries and were soon acting as unofficial real estate agents for colleagues who could scrape together the price of a fixer-upper in the neighborhood. In his anecdotal account of the Bonac art colony's rapid growth, written for the 1984 book, *Springs: A Celebration*, David Myers noted (p. 58) that Pollock found houses for David Porter, Conrad Marca-Relli, John Little, and Wilfrid Zogbaum, who in turn sold parcels of his land to Willem de Kooning and John Ferren. The Pollocks were also responsible for notifying Alfonso Ossorio that The Creeks--the spectacular Georgica estate built in 1899 for the artists Albert and Adele Herter--was on the market, and it became Ossorio's permanent home in 1952. By that time the Surrealists were long gone, but in their wake had developed something like an artistic tidal wave that included many members of the burgeoning Abstract Expressionist movement.

The transition from Old Guard to vanguard was not greeted with universal approval, however. Motherwell had already caused consternation among his Georgica Road neighbors in 1946 with his audacious home and studio, designed by the French architect Pierre Chareau using war surplus Quonset huts, and the presence of other modernists threatened the equilibrium of East Hampton's cultural establishment. When Guild Hall's art committee elected to invite several of the newcomers to participate in the 1949 annual invitational exhibition of regional artists, the latent animosity between conservative and progressive factions escalated into open conflict. The *East Hampton Star's* reviewer (as quoted by Enez Whipple in her invaluable 1993 history, *Guild Hall of East Hampton: An Adventure in the Arts*), found the artists' vision "sordid and scrambled," but conceded that not everyone shared that opinion. "It was our happy experience to hear an art lover exclaim again and again what he found in gazing upon a combination of colors that to us did not seem to hold possibilities for even a fourth-rate linoleum pattern," the balanced editorial voice advised, concluding that a visitor to the show "will either go home a raving enthusiast

for the new expression, or leave the galleries perplexed and disappointed." (p. 241) Eight years later the confrontational mood was still evident, but as Gerald Sykes wrote of the "art wars" in a checklist essay for the 1957 invitational at Guild Hall, "so far at least, all the bloodshed has been verbal.... There will be violence, but it will exhaust itself in a few well-worn phrases, such as every museum guard knows by heart."

No amount of negative rhetoric could stem the tide of change, as more and more of the vanguard generation made their own transition from young tyros to modern masters. By the late 1950s quite a few of them were under the guidance of respected New York dealers, but there was no commercial gallery in East Hampton to market the work locally. Ad hoc exhibitions at the House of Music and Books lasted only two years, and came to an end when the bookshop moved. In 1957 three artists--Ossorio, Little, and Elizabeth Parker--took on the task of showing and selling advanced art as a labor of love. Their venture, known as the Signa Gallery to indicate its status as a "sign of the times," mixed the work of area residents with that of outsiders, including a sizeable foreign contingent. In keeping with the philosophy that contemporary art is international in character, Signa exhibited European, Asian, and American artists--more than 120 of them during its four seasons of operation. The gallery's emphasis was on abstraction and its image cosmopolitan, two qualities that did not contribute to audience cultivation in a community already ambivalent over the new art's merits. As Ossorio told me in a 1990 interview, excerpts of which were published in my Guild Hall exhibition catalogue, *East Hampton Avant-Garde: A Salute to the Signa Gallery*, most of the gallery's sales were to "established collectors... who knew a good thing when they saw it," not to the converts he had hoped the gallery would attract. (p. 15)

According to Ossorio, the Signa Gallery "more or less broke even," but the fact that it failed to accomplish its ideological purpose made it a disappointment for the three partners, whose involvement was increasingly time-consuming and burdensome. As Little's wife, Josephine, pointed out, there came a moment when each "had to decide either to run a gallery or be a painter." (p. 18) They all decided in favor of their own art, and the gallery closed after the 1960 season. By then, however, other commercial galleries had appeared in the area, and Guild Hall's policy of including advanced artists in regional invitationals was no longer controversial. And the local art community--comprising property owners (some of whom were full-time residents), seasonal renters, and occasional visitors--had grown exponentially, representing numerous aesthetic viewpoints, from traditional landscape painting to Pop Art.

While East Hampton, especially the Bonac neighborhood, remained its undisputed hub, the South Fork's loosely knit confederation of artist-residents extended throughout the region, and as the decades wore on the growth rate showed no signs of slackening. Southampton had attracted the figurative painter Fairfield Porter as a full-time resident in 1949, after which several of his

friends migrated there and prompted others to follow. Even earlier, the Russian émigré David Burliuk had transferred from New York City to Hampton Bays, where he established an artistic enclave that included the painter George Constant and the sculptor Michael Lekakis. In Sag Harbor, Alexander Brook and Niles Spencer were among the postwar colonists, while far-flung Montauk, once home to Balcomb Greene and Andy Warhol, continues to attract the younger generation through seasonal artists' residencies offered by the Edward Albee Foundation. Today even the idea of listing all the artists active in the region is too daunting to contemplate seriously, although I have toyed with it in delusional moments.

Unlike Barbizon, in fact unlike most art colonies, East Hampton maintained its appeal even after its original artist population died or migrated elsewhere and its *raison d'être*, plein-air landscape and genre painting, fell out of fashion. After a fallow period that might have proved fatal, it was revitalized by a group that fortunately had no interest in pursuing a moribund aesthetic. Looking for recreation rather than inspiration, the Surrealists found a convenient, affordable rural retreat where they could both work and play. The psychological effect was to shatter the stereotype of an art colony as a Barbizon-style source of motifs and to reinvent it as a place of spiritual and creative sustenance. This radical rethinking of such a community's function--coupled with the obvious advantage of its easy access to and from New York City--virtually guaranteed that this would become a permanent destination for artists, regardless of their work's medium or style. And, paradoxically perhaps, many of those who came and continue to come as the century draws to a close are landscape painters, who are reinvigorating what once seemed to be an outmoded tradition by investing it with subjectivity and originality.

Also in contrast to the Fontainebleau area, eastern Long Island can boast a significant contingent of native artists. As I wrote in a 1989 article for the annual magazine, *Provincetown Arts*, "for those born and raised here, the existence of an active art community has provided both validation of their artistic impulses and a sympathetic milieu in which to develop. Unlike most artists who come from areas outside the urban centers of artistic activity, they are able to find stimulation and support right in their own back yard." (p. 137) To my mind, the true test of an art colony's vitality is its contribution to the community at large, as exemplified by the South Fork's artist immigrants, who nurture indigenous talent through teaching, mentoring, and personal encouragement, and participate in civic life as active and responsible residents. This is the spirit that will ensure the artistic future of East Hampton, and indeed the region, for generations to come.