

Sixty Years with PAAM

By Robert Henry

I ARRIVED IN PROVINCETOWN IN THE SUMMER OF 1953, following Hans Hofmann to continue studies I had begun the previous fall in his school in New York. I was nineteen and dreamed of becoming an artist. I rented a room at Miss Williams's house at the corner of Commercial and West Vine Streets for eleven dollars a week. The other rooms were all occupied by Hofmann students. I set up a little easel in my ground-floor corner room, where I could paint at night after classes during the day. I was too young to drink; other than occasionally hanging out in the alley next to the Atlantic House to hear singers such as Josh White perform, I had no other interest but painting. We Hofmann students, hanging out together, believed we were grasping advanced concepts of American modern art.

The Art Association was open only during the summer months; there were two juried shows each summer. I arrived four years after Forum 49, when that momentous declaration and celebration of the arrival and dominance of post-World War II abstract and Expressionist art was still fresh. Even though there was no longer a distinction between the traditional and the modern abstract shows at the Art Association, to the brash, ambitious youth that I was, the Art Association represented the establishment. I did, of course, go to see the two members' shows held each summer. Without my realizing it, Provincetown painting, the painting of the traditional painters as well as the more abstract artists, began to fill me with a sense and an understanding of American twentieth-century painting. The Abstract Expressionists represented all that was important to me—not only Hofmann, but also Rothko, Avery, Kline, and Motherwell. Looking at Hawthorne, Dickinson, Malicoat, Moffett, the L'Engles, Agnes Weinrich, and others representing the best of Provincetown painting, has supplied me with resources I integrated with Hofmann's ideas.

In 1955, Selina Trieff and I spent the summer here, living in a little house on Fisherman's Court, just behind what is now the Fine Arts Work Center. In those days it was Days Lumberyard, where Hofmann, Jan Müller, James Gahagan, Bill and Lillian Freed, and Harry Engel had studios. Selina and I painted, easels back to back and attached to the beams of the low-hanging ceiling. I was drafted into the army and didn't return to Provincetown for the summer until 1961. Selina and I had our first daughter, Sarah, and lived and worked in cottages behind 158 Commercial Street. Selina had a painting accepted into one of the juried shows at the Art Association—a major event, for us.

In the late 1960s, Selina and I moved to Martha's Vineyard. The rents on the cottages that we stayed in had become exorbitant, above a thousand dollars for the summer for both of them, and on the Vineyard we rented a slightly converted chicken coop for the season for six hundred dollars. However, Provincetown kept calling us back. We were showing in galleries here and Selina was asked



ROBERT HENRY AND SELINA TRIEFF IN HIS NYC STUDIO IN 1991

to teach for two weeks at the Art Association. We stayed for that time in the second-floor studio at Pat de Groot's house. In 1988, Selina was again asked to teach there and we decided, on the spur of the moment, to come back to the Cape. After searching for a house in P-town and not finding one that was right for us, we widened the search and found the house in Wellfleet that we have owned ever since.

Shortly thereafter, I was asked to join the exhibition committee at PAAM. One of the major reasons for returning to the Cape was to reestablish connections with the vital visual-arts community that existed then and still exists now. On the Vineyard, we knew respected artists, but the sense of community and artistic challenge was lacking. We were aging. We felt our circle shrinking. We wanted to reconnect with old friends and to widen our circle to include younger and newer artists.

During the early years, when I was on the exhibition committee, we were still wintering in New York. I had little experience with the off-season in Provincetown, but I was very responsible. I drove up from New York for every committee meeting. Thinking back on that time now, what I most remember are the vertical strips of some sort of rubberized material that hung inside the doorway in a vain effort to keep the cold air outside. If the galleries were chilly, the people were warm. Pasquale Natale, chair of the committee, shared his enthusiasm, expertise, and creativity. His leadership set the right tone, and I particularly remember Midge Battelle's insights as well. Today, their curating of the *Duo* show, on view this year, demonstrates their continuing skills. Tony Vevers was always inspiring.

Tony had suffered a stroke; he was partially paralyzed and his voice, never strong, required a lot of attention to hear and understand. But Tony's quiet, steady wisdom embodied the history of the organization. Robyn S. Watson, the director, had led the Art Association through difficult times. The AIDS epidemic had wounded the community. In the wake of this downturn, she returned the Art Association to fiscal health and vitality. Her tenure was crucial.

The hardships of lack of comfort, of battling the elements, of the cold in the winter, the heat in the summer, the leaks when it rained, the fact that the artists themselves had physically participated in the building of some of the galleries, fostered feelings of camaraderie and contributed to the affection that the members who had gone through tough times together felt for the building.

An excerpt from a letter to the board from Salvatore Del Deo, a longtime resident artist, urging the board not to change the old Hawthorne Gallery, embodies this feeling of reverence for the building:

Whatever else the Art Association does or does not have in relation to its exhibition space in comparison to other museums, it has a precious plethora of natural light. This cannot be duplicated, and it is a legacy that we here in Provincetown have inherited from the founders of this organization and from far-sighted artists who continued the tradition of LIGHT in our galleries ever since the Art Association's earliest existence. Under no circumstances should the Hawthorne Gallery be touched as to its natural light and as to its footprint; it should remain as a present and lasting reminder that painters came here to paint in exceptional light, and their works have always been exhibited in that same glorious light.

I have often said that the exhibition committee at PAAM is extraordinary. It has been so in the past and continues to be so. There are not many museums that are also art associations where the exhibitions are conceived and managed by the artists themselves, where the basic decisions about art are made by artists and not delegated to academics and administrators. In 1999, I was asked to become a trustee, and in 2001 Jim Bakker and Burt Wolfman both suggested that I take on the presidency of the board of trustees. I was reluctant at first, but their argument that the president should be an artist at the time when the proposed renovation and expansion was about to be undertaken persuaded me. And, indeed, they were right. An artist at the helm was called for.

Most changes in a long-standing community tend to be resisted. The advent of a Modernist structure and the demolition of the Hawthorne Gallery, a gallery that the artists themselves had built, one that was dedicated to the founder of the Provincetown art community, was especially controversial.



(ABOVE) AFTER THE DEMOLITION IN 2003 OF THE INTERIOR OF THE MOFFET AND HAWTHORNE GALLERIES
(BELOW) SCENES FROM PAAM 2014 ALL PHOTOS BY JAMES ZIMMERMAN

The original idea for the renovation, as Chris Busa has detailed, was developed in order to increase and update the storage space for the collection. There was a plan that had been in the works for some time to extend the storage area underneath the parking area to the side of the building, but that was ultimately found to be unworkable.

An architectural competition was established. Four firms sent proposals; two were finalists. One was Machado and Silvetti, the other Michael Prodanou. Prodanou's design was the more traditional and less costly; Machado and Silvetti's the opposite. At board meetings the words "Taj Mahal" were frequently used to describe the more ambitious plan by the supporters of the more modest one. The estimate of the cost of the modest renovation was thought to be about a million dollars. Even this amount was far beyond what the Art Association had ever contemplated raising in the past, and the estimate for the major renovation was eight times that amount. Faith and courage were summoned by the board to approve the Machado and Silvetti plan. Chris McCarthy, whose enthusiasm is infectious, led the way. Burt Wolfman's skills and experience in development were absolutely crucial.

Doubts about raising funds were vehemently expressed. One trustee resigned, another followed in sympathy. Burt, feeling that he was not getting support, halted his development efforts. Little was accomplished without his participation. It was clear that without him we were destined to fail. Ultimately, he resumed his activities. Many people, board members, artists, residents, and foundations, came through. Irma Ruckstuhl and Richard Wurtman, to name just two, set a standard of leadership and generosity that encouraged others to contribute.

The grand opening of the new facility was one of the most satisfying days of my life. The windows that had been covered were uncovered. A searchlight

reached for the sky on the lawn in front of the galleries. The space developed in blueprints now existed. The floors sparkled and grand art hung on pristine walls.

I believe that, as president, I instituted a number of practices that helped the project to succeed. The board, well-intentioned, was too conservative, both financially and programmatically, and reluctant to change. Not long after I was first on the board, Rhoda Rossmore, a previous trustee, who had had a long and distinguished history at PAAM, was not nominated for reappointment. This caused quite a bit of hurt and antipathy and alienated her friends and supporters. We needed to rejuvenate the

board without creating dissension.

The first thing that I did, along with Peter Watts, the vice president, was visit each of the trustees who were going to be up for reappointment that year and ask those who had been on the board for a long time to step down, observing a voluntary four-year term limit. I knew that it would be virtually impossible to do this in the constitution of the organization, but in getting unanimous voluntary consent, my aim to find some new and forward-looking trustees was accomplished.

When it came to meetings dealing with the proposed renovation and expansion, feelings among the membership were high on both sides. These were serious issues, held by people who really cared about PAAM. The difficulty of fitting the modern architecture into the neighborhood was often expressed. The size of the shingles came in for criticism. John Dowd, an artist whose principal subject is the architecture of the town and who chaired the town Historical Commission, had grave doubts about the suitability of the new building. Nevertheless, he helped to overcome the doubts of other commission members.

There was a fear that the large old tree that grows next to the parking area on the side of the building would be killed as a result of the necessary excavations. It was noted by proponents of the renovation that the tree was nearing the end of its life expectancy and was going to die in the not-too-distant future no matter what. But measures were taken to protect the tree and, happily, it still lives.

One of the objections, from a prominent artist, was about the school. This artist's experience with another museum-and-school combination led him to believe that the school would be a distraction and a burden. Christine, the board, and I all felt that a school had to be an integral part of PAAM. And, indeed, the education programs for artists, schoolchildren, and the general public have

been effective and have garnered us many awards, grants, and recognition.

The facility is certainly important. And so, too, are the people, the officers, the staff, the membership, the volunteers, the scholars, the community, and the students, both mature and of school age. In this centennial year, we are focusing on the history of Provincetown art, but each and every year, there are many groups that compete for attention and for space. One of Chris McCarthy's many skills is her ability to balance the demands of these various constituencies.



THE NEW PAAM BUZZES with activity. In the past, the Art Association was moribund during the winter. Now, even January openings have an attendance that numbers in the hundreds. There are concerts, discussions, lectures, and events year-round. Listening to music in the galleries, surrounded by visual art in an acoustically brilliant space, is a pleasure. Dick Miller and Bart Weisman each bring a special approach to popular music. The Blue Door classical ensemble has thrilled audiences many times with its always varied programming and virtuosic performances. The school was renamed the William Freed and Lillian Orłowsky school in recognition of the couple's unexpectedly large gift to PAAM, which helps to fund the school and establish scholarships for artists. It is a significant source of income for the local artists who teach there.

I, myself, love teaching at the school. The facilities are excellent. I have been able to bring my students down to the galleries to see the original art that embodies the features I have been talking about. The artists who come to study with me are engaged and serious. I have been flattered that so many practicing and showing artists have chosen to work with me.

I taught at Brooklyn College for thirty years, and, although there were some satisfactions (and a good salary) that came out of that, there was always something that detracted from it. Hans Hofmann taught me that the best way to teach is to be on the side of the artist, to be colleagues in a great adventure, not one person judging another. The marking system, of course, discourages this sharing. The atmosphere of the school in Provincetown encourages sharing. Artists talking to artists is what it is all about. 

ROBERT HENRY is an artist and occasional writer and curator. He lives in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, with his wife, Selina Trieff, and is Professor Emeritus at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.

