

Masters of Vermont: The Watercolorists

by Mickey Myers

The state of Vermont was a “cultural destination” long before the tourism industry coined the phrase. Artists came to the Green Mountain State over 100 years ago, where vistas were uninterrupted, and locals, intent on their own pursuits, were not interruptive either. As word of these assets and accommodations spread among artists, painters such as Charles Curtis Allen, N.A. (1886-1950) led groups of artists to paint together in northern Vermont, some returning regularly at favorite times of the year, others staying for long stretches, and a few settling permanently.

Subsequent generations of artists have passed through the verdant environs, much of which remains as it was when the original bands of painters first arrived.

In serving as host for many of these painters over the years, Bryan Memorial Gallery now offers a biennial review of work by painters who in mastering the local landscape have contributed to the art history of the state. In curating *Masters of Vermont: The Women* (2007), followed by *Masters of Vermont: the Men* (2009), the Gallery became aware of the volume and quality of watercolors by some of these and other artists who painted in Vermont. Although oil paint remains the medium of

choice for most, many find watercolor an irresistible medium of convenience as its fluidity reflects the natural lushness of the terrain, and is adaptable to the vicissitudes of the seasons, as long as the temperature remains above freezing. In an historical statement all its own, *Masters of Vermont: The Watercolorists* highlights this work in homage to its mastery over the elements and the medium.

Martha Wood Belcher (1844-1930) was born in England and immigrated to Schenectady, New York, at age twelve. Within a decade both her father and brother died and the remaining sisters took in laundry and sewing to support the family.





Masters of Vermont: The Watercolorists is on view from July 2 through September 5, 2011, at the Bryan Memorial Gallery, 180 Main St., Jeffersonville, Vermont, 05464, 802-644-5100, www.bryangallery.org.

ABOVE: Lucien Day, *Black Trees*, w/c, 6 x 3 feet, estate of Lucien Day.

RIGHT: Hilda Belcher, *The Knitted Shawl—Portrait of Miss Peck*, w/c, 23 x 14, Belcher Family Collection.

LEFT: Robert N. Blair, *Mansfield Late Autumn*, w/c, 22 x 30, estate of Robert N. Blair.

Martha began painting local scenes which found favor with a visiting mining engineer, who became her patron. The young artist was able to attend the Cooper Institute and travel in Europe for two years thanks to this patronage. She married at age thirty-six, and raised two children, helping to support both families from her painting sales. Following the death of her husband, she received an unexpected inheritance from her family in England, allowing her to paint and travel for the rest of her life.

Education was emphasized in the upbringing of Hilda Belcher, A.W.S. (1881-



1963). She was one of the few women students at the New York School of Art, where she found her mentor Robert Henri “merciless.” Hilda established herself in New York City as a cartoonist and illustrator. Continuing to paint and enter competitions, she won the coveted Strathmore Watercolor Prize in 1908. She traveled extensively, including sojourns to Savannah,

Georgia, where she taught and painted formal portrait commissions and genre paintings of the local residents. After retiring, she continued to summer at the family home in Pittsford, where she considered herself “a thorough-going Vermonter.”

Mary Bryan, A.W.S. (1906-1978) was born in New Mexico and raised in Connecticut. In 1938 she moved to Gloucester,



Massachusetts, where she studied oil painting with Emile Gruppe and then with Eliot O'Hara at his school for watercolor in

Maine. She settled permanently in Jeffersonville, Vermont, in 1940. Mary became both proficient and prize winning in many

mediums. Never a "joiner," she treated her studio like a sanctum within which she mastered oil painting, watercolor, palette knife painting, acrylics, plastic tempera, ceramics, needlework and illustration. Through extensive travel and summers in Gloucester, Mary developed iconic imagery, with technique reflective of her location—palette knife paintings of Alaska, arid watercolors of New Mexico and Arizona. Following her death, Alden Bryan designed and built the Mary Bryan Memorial Gallery.

Walton Blodgett, A.W.S. (1908-1963) came with his wife and child and all their earthly possessions to Stowe, Vermont in 1941 to paint. Settling on Main Street, with sweeping views of Mt. Mansfield and rolling fields, the artist had already made a mark as a protégé of George Luks, with whom he had studied in New York. Blodgett attended Grand Central Art School and studied watercolor with George Pierce Ennis in Eastport, Maine. After three years of sketching and painting in Europe, he re-



ABOVE: Alden Bryan, *Quebec Harbor*, w/c, 22 x 30, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

RIGHT: Mary Bryan, *Canyon*, w/c, 12 x 14, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

LEFT: Genevieve Wilhelm, *North Cambridge*, w/c, 19 x 25, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

BELOW LEFT: Charles Curtis Allen, *Mountain Stream*, w/c, 17 x 23, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

turned to the U.S., and soon was employed by the Federal Government under the W.P.A. to paint in Key West, Florida. His striking urban style, using strong lines and contrasts, clear colors, and frontal compositions, depicted the era and its industrial precision with clarity and crispness.

Selling his first Stowe painting from the front window of the local drug store, Blodgett embraced the rural ambience of Vermont. For over twenty years, he offered a permanent exhibition of his work at his studio. His untimely death in 1963 occurred as he was at the peak of his fame,



leaving behind a singular record in watercolor of an era in Vermont.

Born in Barre, Vermont, Ron Slayton

(1910-1992) was a country boy at heart, assuming at every turn in his career a multifaceted role in his local community. Edu-



LEFT: Hilda Belcher, *Servant Girl*, w/c, 12 x 11, Belcher Family Collection.

BELOW LEFT: Martha Wood Belcher, *River Scene*, w/c, 5 x 7, Belcher Family Collection.

RIGHT: Walton Blodgett, *Mill*, w/c, 16 x 20, Sarah Nelson.

BELOW RIGHT: Ronald Slayton, *View from the Cliffs*, w/c, 17 x 23, Billi and Bobby Gosh.

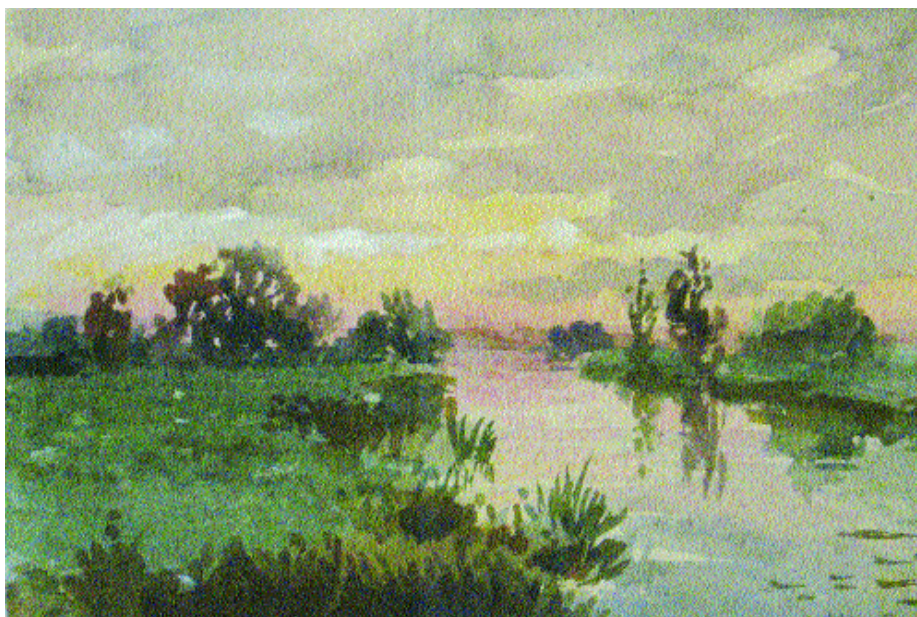
dexterity it required.

Born in Buffalo, New York, Robert Blair, A.W.S. (1912-2003) studied at the Albright Art School, and later, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. While he worked in various mediums, watercolor became the medium of his national reputation. Experimenting with what would become known as action painting, Blair used surprising techniques (“drip, splatter, and smear”) to add elements of motion and emotion to his seemingly effortless application of color.

Fluidity of gesture, a love of expressionism, and the strong influence of Japanese woodblock artists contributed to Blair’s iconography, both oriental and rural. His rural roots were reinforced each summer when he returned to his family farm in Vermont. There he recorded in watercolor not only the terrain, but also local customs such as barn dances and “kitchen tunks” where locals gathered for fun.

Alden Bryan, A.W.S. (1913-2001), who was born in Missouri and educated in economics at Harvard, settled in Jeffersonville in 1940. While summering on Cape Ann, Bryan caught the allure of Northern Vermont from others in the Rocky Neck artist colony. One trip to Jeffersonville to paint with Charles Curtis Allen was enough to convince Bryan that the attraction could last a lifetime. As a painter, Bryan’s forte was plein air oil painting, which he accomplished on site in twenty-six countries over a span of sixty years. He painted in watercolor for only a brief but intense period, painting the same scenes in watercolor and in oil, and earning membership in the American Watercolor Society, before setting the medium aside.

A fascination with perspective was a thread that carried Lucien Day (1916-2008) through his career, spanning eight decades. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Day studied at Yale University. He settled in Vermont in 1946, but by the 1950s Day was making extended visits to New York



cated at Pratt Institute and University of Vermont, his formal education was interrupted by an invitation to become a W.P.A. Easel Painter in the 1930s. He graduated from Columbia Teachers College in 1945, and took a position as Associate Professor of Crafts at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

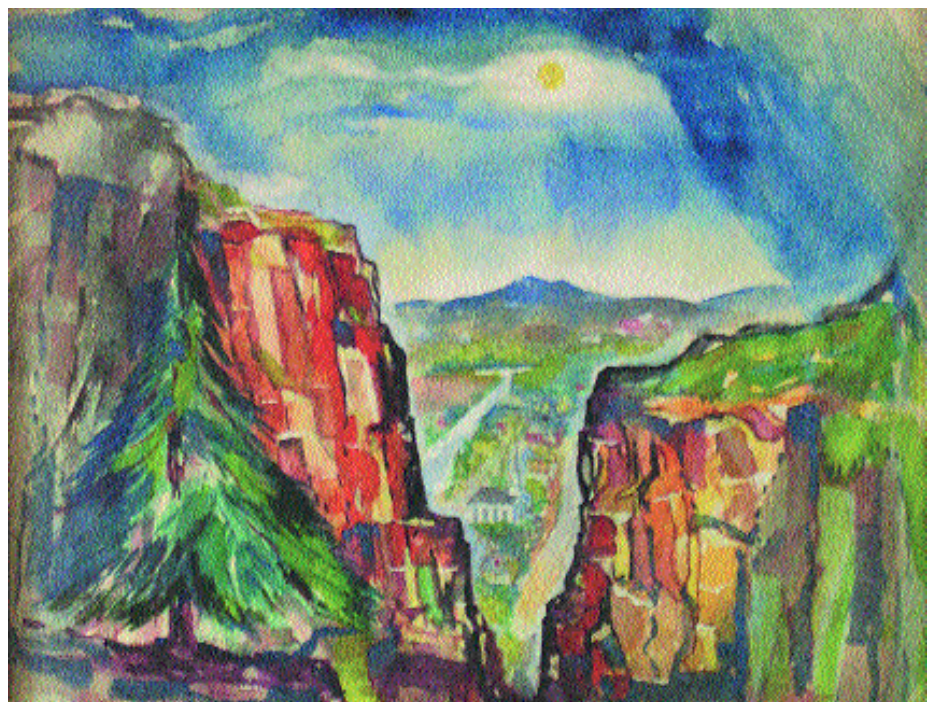
When his young wife died, Slayton re-

turned to Vermont, where he became a high school teacher, founded the Vermont Art Teachers Association, became Curator of the T.W. Wood Art Gallery in Montpelier, and eventually returned to painting. Almost in spite of his instincts as an artist who loved the objective world, Slayton became a master colorist, attracted by the boldness of the watercolor medium and the



City, establishing a dialogue in painting between landscapes and cityscapes. In 1968, Day founded the Green Mountain Gallery in Greenwich Village, which relocated to SoHo a few years later. It was a lively gathering place for conversation among contemporary painters with realist tendencies. Shortly before his death in 2008, the Vermont Arts Council gave Day its Lifetime Achievement Award, honoring his unique role in twentieth-century art.

Lawrence Goldsmith, A.W.S. (1916-2004) was born in New York City. Educated at Yale University, he was a highly accomplished freelance writer and editor, before embracing life as an artist and watercolorist. Goldsmith pursued his visual arts education through courses and workshops with some outstanding mentors of his day, such as Meyer Shapiro, Will Barnet, and Reuben Tan. In 1973 Goldsmith settled permanently in Fairfax, Vermont.





His book, *Watercolor Bold & Free*, written in 1980, provided practical advice, promoting originality in composition, concept and technique through sixty-four bold experiments. Setting out to “achieve the greatest

simplification possible and still convey the mood,” Goldsmith was intent in his belief that “our medium can do things no other medium can.”

Equally acclaimed for his oils and water-

colors, Paul Strisik, N.A. (1918-1998) originally found his passion for art at an early age, fascinated by painters who frequented Sheepshead Bay, near his home in Brooklyn, New York. In 1948 Strisik attended Frank Vincent DuMond’s classes at the Art Students League in New York. While attending his summer workshop in Pownal, Vermont, Strisik knew he had found his mentor. At first “there was too much green” in the Vermont scenery; later he discovered that each Vermont season provided an abundance of inspirational material. Strisik returned to paint in Vermont often for the rest of his life. Eventually, he settled in the artist’s colony of Rockport, Massachusetts and opened a gallery next door to the Rockport Art Association, where he was an active member for decades.

Mention Genevieve Wilhelm, A.W.S. (1908-2005) to any one of dozens of Rockport or Vermont artists, and the responses are fairly universal: she was kind and thoughtful and funny and a joy to be around. Born in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio,



ABOVE: Walton Blodgett, *Morning Near Moscow*, w/c, 18 x 22, Sarah Nelson.

RIGHT: Lawrence Goldsmith, *Miles Away*, 2000, w/c, 18 x 24, Lynda Goldsmith.

ABOVE LEFT: Robert N. Blair, *Swinging Kitchen Tunk*, w/c, 21 x 29, estate of Robert N. Blair.

LEFT: Paul Strisik, *Winter in Vermont*, w/c, 11 x 17, Paul Strisik Estate.

Wilhelm graduated from Ohio State University, attended the Cleveland School of Art, and participated in watercolor workshops with Roy Wilhelm and Tom Nicholas, N.A. In 1945 she moved to Gloucester, Massachusetts, and eventually settled in Rockport after retiring from teaching. She held memberships in the Boston Watercolor Society, the Rockport Art Association, the Guild of Boston Artists, and the North Shore Art Association.

Whether these artists stayed in Vermont for a week or a lifetime; whether wa-



tercolor became their sole medium, or one among many, the work of the eleven artists in *Masters of Vermont: The Watercolorists*,

spanning almost 150 years, is a testimony to the ongoing allure and the alchemy of painting in Vermont.