

Masters of Vermont: The Men

by Mickey Myers

When Charles Curtis Allen, N.A., (1886-1950) originally registered at the Smugglers Notch Inn, in Jeffersonville, Vermont, for the duration of a painting workshop he was offering, he began a ritual among painters of the New England landscape that continues today. Among the quintessential vistas and views available to landscape painters across the country, few are as unrelenting and self-sustaining as the immediate area around Jeffersonville and Lamoille County, Vermont. In laying the groundwork for peri-

odic workshops through the years, Allen introduced painters of note to the area, who in turn taught their workshops, and painted their iconic views of the centerpiece of the county, Mt. Mansfield. For over one hundred years, painters have befriended Mt. Mansfield and its environs, and in doing so, whether residents or frequent visitors, they have become masters of the area, as much as the snow and ice and wind and sub zero temperatures allow anyone to master anything.

In 2007 when Bryan Memorial Gallery offered its exhibition *Masters of Vermont: The Women* featuring five pioneering Ver-

mont artists, it started a trend of its own. Such a focus and such a context begged the question, "Whence the men?" *Masters of Vermont: The Men* presents the next chapter in a series of historical exhibitions. Seven men painters of the twentieth century are featured in the exhibition, which includes an abundance of Vermont scenes as well as demonstrates the breadth of the work for which these men are known.

Engaged by the vicissitudes of painting in Vermont in the winters and Cape Ann, Massachusetts, in the summers, Aldro Hibbard (1886-1972) generally limited himself to those locations for most of his career.





Masters of Vermont: The Men is on view from May 24 through July 12, 2009, at the Bryan Memorial Gallery, 180 Main Street, Jeffersonville, Vermont, 05464, 802-644-5100, www.bryangallery.org.

ABOVE: Alden Bryan, *Mt. Mansfield*, 1952, o/linen, 20 x 30, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

RIGHT: Aldro Hibbard, *Rockport Harbor*, 1949, o/c, 18 x 24, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

LEFT: Thomas Curtin, *Apple Blossoms*, o/board, 9 x 12, Jane and Terry Shaw.

Born in Falmouth, Massachusetts, Hibbard studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, winning its coveted Paige Traveling Scholarship to study abroad for two years starting in 1913. Although the World War I cut short his European study, when he returned to the States he discovered Vermont.

Most of Hibbard's winters were spent painting in the outdoors, often in sub-zero temperatures. He professed that "nature won't come into your studio," and painted accordingly. In order to deal with the consequences of freezing temperatures and at times under near blizzard conditions, he painted with speed. If the process was har-



rowing for his family, the products of his steadfast devotion to the Vermont landscape in winter earned him the reputation as a quintessential master painter of the state's winter landscapes for generations.

Hibbard had another passion in his life—a love for the game of baseball. It is said that he had the natural talent to have been a major league player, and while that specific fact may never be known, it is cer-



LEFT: Emile Gruppé, *Sugaring in Vermont*, o/linen, 30 x 36, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

BELOW LEFT: Thomas Curtin, *Orange Maple*, o/c, 24 x 28, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

RIGHT: Alden Bryan, *Looking Across Gloucester*, 1940, o/linen, 25 x 30, Phoebe and Alden Bryan.

BELOW RIGHT: Robert N. Blair, 1963, *Road to Bing*, w/c, 23 x 31, estate of Robert N. Blair.

young artist grew up in a fishing village on the coast of Holland where his father was both an artist and an art dealer. When the family returned to America, Gruppé studied at the Art Students League, and then with a series of painters: John Carlson in New York State, Richard Miller in Paris and Charles Hawthorne in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Soon after his initial visit to Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1925, the area became his annual destination, with the establishment of a studio and a summer school that operated until 1970. This same pattern of identification with a geographic area, resulting in regular painting trips and art classes, repeated itself in Vermont, New York and Florida.

Cape Ann painter Charles Movalli remembers an encounter with Gruppé, one fall afternoon in Vermont. Both were painting on the same road, and Gruppé walked down to see what Movalli was doing. Commenting kindly before lowering the boom, Gruppé grabbed a big brush and smudged up Movalli's foreground, where he'd been busily painting a little bush, that Movalli now acknowledges "added nothing to the composition." Gruppé continued to eliminate details he found useless from Movalli's canvas, taking out a bank of pine trees, details on the face of a rock, and other "distracting outlines." In fifteen minutes, Gruppé simplified the canvas to such a level of dignity that Movalli, to this day, tells the story and exhibits the painting.

A similar Gruppé story is told by the family of Vermont artist Georgia Balch (1888-1981) who had her studio in her home. She invited Gruppé to dinner one evening, but got lost in her painting that afternoon, starting dinner late, so it wasn't ready when he arrived. That was OK by him, Georgia reported, he'd just look at her paintings while she cooked. By the time she served the dinner, he'd finished the painting that caused her to be late. Characteristic of the camaraderie that existed between



tainly true that a team spirit prevailed throughout his life. In establishing what ultimately became the Hibbard School of Painting, as one of the founders of the Rockport Art Association (1921), and as the manager of the Rockport Baseball Team for forty years, Hibbard's contributions to Rockport, baseball and his fellow

artists were legendary.

Emile Gruppé (1896-1978) is remembered as an exuberant personality and a charismatic teacher. Known primarily as a regional painter, Gruppé is identified with four distinct regions: Cape Ann, Massachusetts, Vermont, western New York and Florida. Born in Rochester, New York, the



the two artists, Balch told the story with humor and wit until her death. Gruppé is said to have painted two hundred paintings a year for sixty years, and to have experienced the same abundance in his friendships with other artists and art students.

Thomas Curtin (1899-1977) is remembered as an artist who welcomed an entire community to his studio. His support and camaraderie resonate today among the artists painting in the area and locals for whom he made the visual arts a part of their everyday lives. Born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to a working class Irish family, one of seven children, Curtin studied at the National Academy of Design and at the Art Students League, where he befriended John Carlson, who would become his mentor. He went to Vermont with fellow artists Carlson, Gruppé and Hibbard





LEFT: Charles Curtis Allen, *Brewster River*, o/board, 11 x 14, Jane and Terry Shaw.

BELOW LEFT: Francis Colburn, *Landscape with Figures*, 1950, o/c, 31 x 35, Anthony and Sheila Shaw.

RIGHT: Alden Bryan, *Quebec City*, 1955, o/linen, 20 x 30, Bryan Memorial Gallery.

BELOW RIGHT: Aldro Hibbard, *Chinese Street Scene*, o/c, 24 x 20, Phoebe and Alden Bryan.

Curtin made himself at home in a house next door to the Village Market. Anyone was invited in to see his latest paintings which were hung in the windows and emassed throughout the first floor of the small house. The living room served as gallery, TV room, and sometimes studio; the dining room was the storage area, and the basement was the framing space. Curtin would greet the visitors, admonishing them to “Come in fast so the flies don’t get out.” He would allow the locals to take home two paintings at a time to see which one best suited their homes, often not reclaiming the other painting for years. Sometimes he gave watercolor sets to local children who expressed an interest in painting. When a particular young child showed talent, Curtin informed the father, “Poor boy is going to be an artist.”

Francis Colburn (1909-1984) was born in Vermont, where he returned for the rest of his life after studying at the Art Students League in New York City in the mid-1930s. After teaching high school, Colburn joined the art faculty at the University of Vermont, where he ultimately became Chairman of the Art Department until 1964. A classic humorist, Colburn’s legendary graduation address delivered in “Vermontese” endeared him to generations of his acquaintances, students, neighbors as “Vermont’s first raconteur,” even while he continued to paint “social realism,” with serious themes of relationship and alienation.

Colburn developed his own style of both cubism and surrealism, while at the same time he was frequently called upon for portraits of dignitaries. University administrators or sailing captains were often painted in context with isolated references to their achievements painted into a corner of the canvas. His landscapes were often dream-like, emphasized by an elongation of trees, sometimes dotted by people. His *Landscape with Figures* is typical of the theme of relationship that recurs in his



for the first time in 1943, and settled in Cambridge, Vermont, permanently in 1957, after he retired from teaching.

Best known for his paintings of the area surrounding Mt. Mansfield, Curtin was often heard to say the phrase, “Let’s see how the Old Man looks today,” referring to Mt.

Mansfield in the vernacular, and to the shifting characteristics of the mountain that dominates the local landscape. With his home on Main Street in Cambridge, the mountain was never far from his view, and provided him with the subject of the iconic work for which he is best known.