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Contributing writer

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Exhibition marks art colony's centennial

The Berta Walker Gallery will celebrate the centennial celebration of the pivotal summer of 1916 with an exhibition called "Bound East for Provincetown," showcasing work by several artists who were in town at the time.

It was 100 years ago when Eugene O'Neill produced his first play, not in New York, but in the seaside village of Provincetown in the summer of 1916. By that year, Provincetown was already an established art colony, where artists had been congregating since Charles Hawthorne launched his Cape Cod School of Art in 1899.

In 1916, the Boston Sunday Globe declared in a screaming eight-column headline: "Biggest Art Colony in the World at Provincetown." As A.J. Philpott wrote: "There are said to be more than 600 in the colony from all sections of the United States, including painters, sculptors, etchers, actors, musicians, writers, playwrights of distinction, art students and a choice assortment of professional models."

Set at the Provincetown Players theater on a wharf, O'Neill's "Bound East for Cardiff" is credited with marking the beginning of modern American theater.

The Berta Walker Gallery will celebrate the centennial celebration of that pivotal summer with an exhibition called "**Bound East for Provincetown**," showcasing the work of 29 artists who were in town at the time. Works by Hawthorne, E. Ambrose Webster and Edwin Dickinson, which were painted that legendary year, will be exhibited along with the art of Ross Moffett, Oliver Chaffee, Blanche Lazzell, Agnes Weinrich, and a number of other artists.

Lazzell, Weinrich and Chaffee were part of the Provincetown Printers who made history with the white-line woodcut, a printmaking approach that used only a single block, instead of the traditional Japanese method of a block for each color, to create an image.

Influenced by the revolution in art she saw in Paris while living there prior to World War I, Lazzell became an early advocate of European modernism when she came to Provincetown. The influence of cubism is a strong element in her work as well as in Weinrich's, most notable in "Cubist Figure" in the gallery exhibit. Both women studied with Hawthorne, whose work was primarily impressionistic, like his elegant "Nude" in the gallery show. However, Lazzell and Weinrich were filled with their Parisian experience, and their approach was more modern in their cubist works. Lazzell also ventured into pure abstraction, as in "Water Color #2."

Unfortunately, no white-line woodcuts will be on exhibit, because, Berta Walker says, they are scarce.

Chaffee studied in Paris, and like so many artists, left when World War I erupted. His exuberant works (for example, "Shells and Flowers") are dominated by simplified forms, sinuous outlines and vibrant colors. Moffett wrote of Chaffee: "He was a modern before modernism became popular."

Moffett, along with Dickinson, Chaffee and Webster, represented the avant-garde in Provincetown in those early years. Webster, who had a school in town, was influenced by post-Impressionism and the Fauves' expressionistic approach to color while he was in Paris, and his "Provincetown Garden" is a fine example.

Dickinson's paintings showed a different approach. Mostly grounded in realism, his work has references to symbolism and surrealism.

Moffett wrote "Art in Narrow Streets," which documents the early years of the art colony. In his art, he depicted village life: the streets and townspeople, the sea and beaches, the harbor and fishing boats. His work, which has a primitive quality and often a somber mood, is noted for simplified figures and distortions, which express the struggles and toil of the fisherman and farmers. Yet he also ventured into abstraction as is apparent in "Intellectual Pawn Shop."

Also on exhibit will be work by artists who were in town at the time, some on loan from the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. Included is art by Gerrit Beneker, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, Lucy L'Engle, William L'Engle, Tod Lindenmuth, Ethel Mars, B.J.O. Nordfeldt, and Marguerite and William Zorach. On display, too, will be a selection of books by writers in Provincetown at the time, including Moffett, O'Neill and Mary Heaton.

The year 1916 in Provincetown marked a pivotal time in this little fishing village when modernism in writing and art bloomed. That year defined what would become the art colony's legendary position, and Provincetown in 2010 was recognized as "home of the nation's oldest art colony" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



This Cubist figure by artist Agnes Weinrich is part of the "Bound East for Provincetown" exhibit, which opens Friday at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown. COURTESY OF THE BERTA WALKER GALLERY

If you go

What: "Bound East for Provincetown: A Visual Salute to the Great Summer of 1916" When: opening reception 6 to 8 p.m. Friday (July 22), with exhibit on display July 22-Aug. 14. A staged reading of Eugene O'Neill's "Children of the Sea" from 4 to 6 p.m. Saturday Where: Berta Walker Gallery, 208 Bradford St., Provincetown Information: 508-487-6411;

