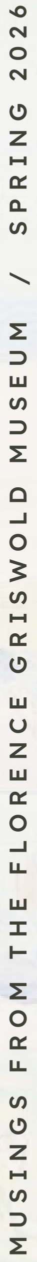

The Journal

Peter Steere

Executive Director
Florence Griswold Museum

Dear Friends,

Please know how thrilled I am to invite you to explore this edition of *The Journal*—my first as (the new) director. This title feels a bit different for me, moving as I did from a career in healthcare to helping lead this incredible place. Being immersed in art (and history and this beautiful landscape) is now my everyday pleasure.

I have several personal entry points to the arts. In my previous role and with significant support from an inspired Yale University artist and colleague, I created The Arts at Yale Health initiative. The goal was to make the halls and waiting areas more welcoming for both patients and staff. The program is a proud achievement, and it continues today.

My family's own small collection of works—mostly of Maine artists, given where I'm from originally—provides inspiration in ways that are hard to explain yet are real and nearly palpable. To me, art is that important.

I believe that's what people experience when they come to the Museum. For those arriving for the first time, the landscape, the history, and the extraordinary art on display are unexpected. For those who return time and time again, it's because they do expect to find new and special things here. And the Museum never disappoints.

This edition of *The Journal* brings the same delightful experience. In this issue you will read how Real Art Ways (RAW) brought innovative art—and a different business model—to the Hartford area, discover new scholarship on the Griswold Family history, along with artists Louis Paul Dessar and Charles Morris Young, and be reminded of the genius of Walker Evans through his friends John Hill and Jerry Thompson.

The Journal is, perhaps, the Museum's most prominent publication exploring art and history in depth. Between issues I urge to you have a look at the Museum's History Blog posts at FloGris.org.

Lastly, to those readers I've met in my short time as director, thank you for your kind welcome. To those whose paths I've not yet crossed, know how eager I am that they do.

Very sincerely,

Inside cover: Louis Paul Dessar (pink shirt) as portrayed in Henry Rankin Poore's overmantel caricature of artists of the Lyme Art Colony, *The Fox Chase*. Read about Dessar as a landscape artist on page 26. Henry Rankin Poore (1859–1940), *The Fox Chase* (detail), 1901–1905; revised C. 1920. Oil on wood panel. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of the artist

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Recalling the House of Griswold

BY CAROLYN WAKEMAN

Historian Carolyn Wakeman is a Florence Griswold Museum trustee and editor of its History Blog. This article includes excerpts from a book-in-progress tracing the vessels, voyages, and markets that created wealth and influence for the Griswold family's global shipping business.

Today, little is known about the Griswold family's shipping firms that flourished on the New York waterfront and played a pivotal role in America's foreign trade before the Civil War. At least 30 of Florence Griswold's relatives, including her father, served as partners, ship captains, supercargoes, and commission agents in the family's far-flung enterprises. Griswold firms owned scores of sailing vessels and made fortunes in the sugar, rum, flour, cotton, and tea trades, propelling America's commercial expansion and linking the small town of Lyme, Connecticut (later Old Lyme), to a much wider world. Family histories and anecdotes describe the Griswolds' land wealth, political office-holding, and social status, but their success as maritime merchants has been largely ignored.

In 1936, a year before his death, noted New York socialite Frank Gray Griswold published the memoir *After Thoughts,* a rare source of detail about the family's shipping business. Born at his parents' home at 91 Fifth Avenue in 1854, Frank recalls the business that his grandfather, George Griswold 3rd, established and his father, George C. Griswold, inherited. The firm started in a small way in 1796 under the name N. L. & G. Griswold, Frank writes, but by 1847 it had "1,241,313 tons of ships" engaged in foreign trade, sometimes making $100,000 on a round trip, a sum that amounts to nearly $4,000,000 today. Clipper ships in the large fleet required crews of 75 men who were paid high wages for employment mostly in transporting teas and silks from China. Frank remembers an uncle and a cousin, members of the famous firm Russell & Co. in Canton, sending large cases full of curios that he and his siblings used as toys. He recalls remnants of the Chinese porcelains and bronzes lying strewn across the nursery floor.

Frank's father's ships often stopped at the island of Madeira to take on highly-prized casks of old wine, each bearing the year of its vintage and the name of the carrying vessel. But then "matters concerning the welfare of our family went wrong," and "the House of Griswold, the oldest in the country under one name," closed its doors in 1867. The reason was not lack of brains or want of pluck, he explains. American merchants during the Civil War either had to sell their ships or have them destroyed by raiding Confederate vessels, allowing England to regain a large part of the world's trade. Cheaply operated tramp steamers that England produced, together with "unwise laws" passed in Washington that prohibited any vessel not built in the U.S. from flying the American flag, ended the family business. By 1870 Griswold flags had disappeared from the seas.

After the House of Griswold dissolved, Frank spent many years in Europe. Whether he ever visited the Connecticut town where his grandfather was born and many of his relatives lived is not known. He certainly never met his father's brother, Richard Sill Griswold, a partner in the shipping firm, who built a mansion house on the main road through Lyme but died before Frank was born. A cousin Richard Sill Griswold, Jr. continued to live in the elegant home, called Boxwood, and another cousin, Florence Griswold, four years older than Frank, lived a mile north on today's Lyme Street. No evidence so far suggests that he met them, or even Florence's father, Captain Robert Griswold, who sailed handsome packet ships for the family business until retiring in 1855 when Frank was 16. Today, the stately Georgian mansion house where Florence lived until her death in 1937, a year after the memoir *After Thoughts* was published, is a National Historic Landmark and the cornerstone of a vibrant museum of Connecticut art and history.

↖ F. Gray Griswold, Esq., in A. Henry Higginson and Julian Ingersoll Chamberlin, *The Hunts of the United States and Canada: Their Masters, Hounds, and Histories* (Boston: Frank L. Wiles, 1908), 72.

↑ Samuel Walters, *The Ocean Queen,* 1851. Oil on canvas. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William E.S. Griswold, Jr., in Honor of the Centennial

↑ Thomas Coke Ruckle, *Captain Robert Harper Griswold,* 1840. Watercolor on paper. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Dr. Matthew Griswold

The Griswolds' prominence in Connecticut reaches back to the earliest years of English colonization, when the immigrant ancestor Matthew 1st arrived in Boston in 1638 at about age 18. With an older brother Edward, he settled in Windsor, a trading center on the upper Connecticut River. Colonial records show that a request from Captain John Mason, acclaimed for his role in the Pequot War, drew Matthew in 1645 to the town of Saybrook where his skills were needed to reinforce the palisades protecting English trading interests at the mouth of the Connecticut River. Matthew returned to Windsor the next year to marry Anna Wolcott, daughter of a prosperous farmer and merchant active in the timber and fur trades. Two years later, he was among those tasked with surveying Saybrook's outlands, and when that land was distributed, he acquired substantial acreage on the river's east side. In about 1657 Matthew moved his family from Saybrook to what would soon become the separate town of Lyme. Over the next decades he held multiple local offices, served repeatedly as a representative to the colonial legislature, and traded in horses and other goods.

Available agricultural land and timber resources at the mouth of New England's longest river offered economic opportunity, and Lyme's population grew as trade with the West Indies increased. Matthew Griswold 2nd, expanded and consolidated his father's landholdings, which allowed his son, known as Judge John Griswold, to generate substantial wealth from a profitable store and husbandry business in Black Hall. While John managed his father's financial interests, his brother George, who was Frank's great-great grandfather, attended the Collegiate School (later Yale College) and devoted his life to serving as minister in Lyme's east parish. Judge John's extensive landholdings and business interests passed to his sons Thomas and Matthew 4th, a distinguished lawyer who became governor of Connecticut in 1784. Matthew 4th's eldest son Roger Griswold was elected Connecticut's governor in 1811, while a younger son, known as Deacon John, managed the Black Hall farm, store, and husbandry business.

The family's wealth grew rapidly after the minister's enterprising grandsons, Nathaniel L. Griswold and George 3rd, left Lyme to pursue opportunities in the growing port of New York. The firm N. L. & G. Griswold that began as a small flour store soon acquired sufficient revenue to commission its own vessels from Connecticut River shipyards. Long before importing the teas and silks from China that Frank's memoir recalls, the firm prospered in the triangular West Indies trade, transporting flour to Caribbean ports to feed enslaved plantation laborers and carrying back sugar, rum, and cotton for shipment across the Atlantic. Classified newspaper advertisements and recently-discovered freight records, ships' logs, business correspondence, and personal letters trace the Griswolds' expanding trade and detail both high profits and harrowing voyages during years of war and revolution.

The Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), in which America tried to remain neutral while England and France fought for supremacy, brought opportunity and risk to New York shipping merchants. Griswold partners had sufficient resources to commission new vessels when European shortages brought spiraling prices for flour, sugar, and cotton. They could also recover financially when enemy frigates seized cargoes and costly ships were lost at sea. A journal kept by Governor Roger Griswold's eldest son, Augustus Henry, details his experiences when Danish privateers captured the *Maria*, an English warship seized the *Flash*, and severe Atlantic gales caused the *Almira* to founder on his first voyage as ship's captain. On the return crossing from Lisbon in January 1813, he encountered extreme winter weather that dismasted the vessel

Unidentified artist, China, N. L. & G. Griswold's ship *Niantic* in port at Ningpo, ca. 1838. Oil on canvas, 22 x 27 in. NPS Photo, SAFR 22386

Ellen Noyes Chadwick, *View of Ferry Point*, ca. 1860. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Krieble This view from Lyme shows the town of Saybrook. In 1870 a bridge across the Connecticut River replaced the ferry as connection between the two towns.

Captain Augustus Henry Griswold, ca. 1820. Oil on canvas, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Gay Wilmerding

and defeated every effort to withstand the peril of the seas. When water in the hold reached the cargo of salt, he knew the *Almira* could not be saved and ordered the launch of the open long boat. Henry and all but one crew member survived for three weeks, adrift in the Atlantic, before sighting a fishing boat that towed them to Fayal, the largest island in the Portuguese Azores.

The ongoing recruitment of Lyme relatives extended the success of the initial shipping business. Soon after Nathaniel and George's nephew-by-marriage William Hall founded Hall & Hull in an adjacent countinghouse, their cousin John Griswold, Jr. launched a third family firm on South Street. When that venture failed, John joined Hall & Hull, which became Hull & Griswold and briefly took the name J. & C. C. Griswold when his brother Charles became his partner. Soaring shipping profits during the cotton boom led Charles to establish an affiliated business in a rented stone warehouse in Savannah. The firm C. C. Griswold & Co. carried Southern cotton to New York for trans-shipment to expanding European markets.

Pacific ports also beckoned, and in 1822 Augustus Henry sailed on

the *Ann Marie* to Lima, Java, and Manila. Five years later, his younger brother William sailed to Canton on the *Panama*, launching the China tea trade that brought wealth and renown to the Griswold family over the next three decades. While William and another cousin, Thomas commanded lengthy Pacific voyages for N. L. & G. Griswold, Augustus Henry and a younger brother, Robert, sailed for John's growing fleet of packet ships that offered regularly scheduled Atlantic crossings. The *Cincinnatus*, *Northumberland*, *Toronto*, the *Ocean Queen*, and other elegantly appointed vessels carried freight, often Southern cotton, across the Atlantic, while Griswold captains entertained wealthy travelers in luxurious salons. Thousands of European immigrants traveling in steerage on those voyages endured cramped, poorly ventilated, and often sordid surroundings.

Captain Robert Griswold had sailed for London on the *Ocean Queen* in December 1850 when his youngest child, Florence, was born. Today, the family's elegant home, now the Florence Griswold Museum, exhibits an exceptional

collection of works by American Impressionist artists, many of whom Florence encouraged and promoted. In the carefully restored period rooms of the Griswold House, portraits, ship paintings, decorative ceramics, tea boxes, and monogrammed dinnerware commissioned in Canton celebrate Florence's inheritance and vividly recall her family's mercantile achievements during the "golden age" of American shipping. ■

Visit the Museum's History Blog at FloGris.org for additional reading

Patricia Devoe, *Tea Chests at the Florence Griswold Museum*
Carolyn Wakeman, *Florence Griswold's Resting Place*
John Noyes, *The Capture of an American Privateer during the War of 1812*
Patricia Devoe, *Collecting Ceramics in Old Lyme*
Carolyn Wakeman, *Encountering the Ice: The Last Voyage of the Ocean Queen*
Charles Beal, *Travels with Captain Robert Griswold, Parts 1 & 2*
Carolyn Wakeman, *Setting the Holiday Table*
Carolyn Wakeman, *Painted Gardens: Boxwood Manor*
Carolyn Wakeman, *Griswold Family Letters*
Amy Kurtz Lansing, *A Home Upon the Seas*
Charles Beal, *Captain Robert Harper Griswold*
Carolyn Wakeman, *Lyme Artists and the Changing Landscape at Ferry Point*

John Frazee, (1790–1852), Bust of George Griswold, III, ca. 1842. Marble. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of The Honorable Mr. John Davis Lodge

Unidentified artist, *John Griswold Jr.*, n.d. Watercolor on ivory. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Pamela Baker Weiss

The Griswold firms on South Street sold slave-produced West Indies sugar and rum and shipped large quantities of Southern cotton to European markets. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "South St. from Maiden Lane" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1834.

Sources: Griswold, Frank Gray (1936). *After Thoughts: Recollections of Frank Gray Griswold.* The Plimpton Press. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b471734&seq=15
Griswold, Frank Gray (1926). *The House Flags of the Merchants of New York.* The Plimpton Press. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc1.ar01516353&seq=13

Tea Box from N.L.G.G. Panama Tea, ca. 1830. Paper on wood, 15 x 15 x 15 inches. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Dr. Matthew Griswold

CELEBRATING THE SPIRIT OF WALKER EVANS

STARE, EDUCATE YOUR EYES, LISTEN . . .

BY JOHN HILL AND JERRY THOMPSON

When Walker Evans, known for his indelible images of the Great Depression and the New Deal, died on April 10, 1975 at the age of 71, *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer began his obituary: "The American photographer Walker Evans [...] was one of the greatest artists of his generation."

Almost two decades later in 1993, Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) curator Maria Morris Hambourg (then head of the Department of Photographs at The Met) wrote to her colleagues, and later to Evans's heirs, "I see Walker Evans as one of the most original minds of this century."

In 1994, The Met established the Walker Evans Archive, after competing for its acquisition with Los Angeles' Getty Museum. These two giant institutions were the two contenders left, as the wooing of Evans's heirs, who owned the material, came to an end. Would it have turned out this way, without the decades-long effort of Connecticut artist, photographer, and friend John T. Hill?

Photographer Jerry Thompson, who served as Evans's assistant, talked to Hill about his work safeguarding a seminal artistic legacy.

What confirmed Walker Evans' reputation as one of the greatest artists of his generation?

When Walker died in 1975, his reputation had been solidified by the 1971 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) retrospective curated by John Szarkowski. The exhibition traveled to nine venues and had a major influence on a generation of young photographers in the U.S. and in Europe, particularly in Germany. Although his work was respected by those who truly understood its depth, his reputation was not widespread.

How did changing trends impact his reputation?

In the art world, fashions change like hemlines. Museum curators—and the dealers who advised them—are drawn to new movements. A growing market in American art was developing in photography, which galleries and museums were recognizing as art.

By 1975, a serious interest in photographic prints was taking shape, thanks to a few savvy dealers. Artists who used photography, or photographers whose work borrowed strategies from other visual arts, were the ones getting attention. Images that looked like they belonged in larger, louder, more theatrical movements—Pop art, Op art, Minimalism, or late-stage Abstract Expressionism—were favored.

↑ The article title is inspired by a quote by Walker Evans, "Stare. It's the way to educate your eyes. Stare. Pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long."

↖ Walker Evans (American, St. Louis, Missouri 1903–1975 New Haven, Connecticut), [*Parked Cars and Elm Trees Along Broadway, From High Elevation, Saratoga Springs, New York*], 1931, Glass negative, 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.256.137):**© Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

↗ Walker Evans by John T. Hill, date unknown.

I was not the only one to recognize his work had an importance that ranged beyond the fine print. Lincoln Kirstein, benefactor of the arts, critic, poet and novelist and the poet William Carlos Williams (both in 1938), writer and critic Lionel Trilling (as early as 1942, when he wrote that one of Walker's pictures was "one of the finest works of any art of our time"), among many others (who were not specialists in photography) recognized that Walker was doing something that was broader than what photographs were commonly thought to accomplish. (Walker said it himself to Leslie Katz in the interview: "Very often I'm taken to be doing one thing when I'm doing another" [or words close to that]. Leslie, in conversation, said that Walker was "touched by greatness."

That Walker's work was of cultural importance was not as easy to understand as the value of a fine rare collectable. The importance of his work is not easy to grasp and is not always available in a first take or to an uninformed look. Consequently, in the mid-70s, Walker was in danger of being eclipsed by the more carefully managed bodies of flashier work turning up in galleries and museums in those years.

"Sophisticated" writing about photography that began to appear in intellectual journals in those years took another tack. In some of these analyses, Walker was seen as a holdover from elitist cultural traditions, attitudes and practices that needed to be "swept away" and replaced by new art dedicated to the "improvement of society."

The intellectual horsepower needed to appreciate the greatness of Walker's accomplishment was taking notice of photography, but that brainpower was also primed to question nineteenth-century notions such as greatness and genius.

Susan Sontag, American writer, critic and activist, questioned Walker's famous dictum that a photograph should be "literate, authoritative, and transcendent," calling these ideas from another "moral universe," concepts from the 1930s which in her understanding, were meaningless in the 1970s.

Plus, Walker's printing history was complicated; he used assistants from early days, and he kept everything. That wasn't ideal for collectors who were looking for rare, "vintage" artifacts.

How did your close friendship grow over the years?

Walker and I became friends almost immediately after he came to Yale. I greatly admired his work and thought I understood his perspective. He became part of the "Hill family" and spent time relaxing with my family—my wife Dorothy, also a graduate of Yale's MFA program, and my daughter Leila. He spent considerable time with us and other Yale friends, Norman Ives being a key friend and associate. He was perfectly at ease taking naps in the upstairs bedroom and liked our house in Bethany.

Upon his death, you were entrusted with his estate. Why do you think he named you as executor?

He needed a person he could trust and who understood the value of his work.

What was your approach to taking on the responsibility of executor of Walker's estate?

I was entrusted with his legacy. I could have sold everything left, including the negatives and his papers, to dealers, split the assets among the three heirs, and walked away. My other option was that I could try to preserve the material as an estate and work to spread the word about Walker's importance and his full range of artistic activity. At the time, most people only knew Walker for a few dozen pictures taken in 1935 and 1936.

I chose the second option. The publications and exhibitions I arranged during the first 10 years, with the super-capable assistance of Frances Strunsky Lindley, one of Walker's three heirs, a senior editor at the publisher Harper and Row and a force of nature, kept his name alive.

While exploring 20th-century photography as the 1990s neared its end, diligent researchers came to realize that Walker turned up everywhere. They realized that the papers he saved, documenting his work, correspondence, ambitions, achievement, and writings, many unpublished—were a treasure trove of information on American art in the 20th century.

In my role as executor, I presented these pictures as serious artistic work, first in the last estate-controlled publication, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, which was my collaboration with French artist and writer Gilles Mora. I would like to think that my choice to preserve his work helped the world see that he truly was one of the greatest practitioners of art.

What significant work did Walker produce in Connecticut?

After leaving his position as photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), Walker's first focused picture-making campaign was a visit to Bridgeport. He was hired by *Fortune* magazine (as yet, he was not a full-time employee) to provide pictures for an article that

would appear in 1941 as "Bridgeport's War Factories." Later he would become a full-time *Fortune* employee.

For this work, Walker applied techniques he had developed while working for the FSA in the previous decade. He used three cameras: an 8 x 10 and a 35mm, as during the 1930s, and a new one that would become his favored tool over the next 30 years, the 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 twin-lens reflex. He kept fields notes, though they are more abbreviated than those from his FSA work.

The pictures he made with this camera proved to be important. Taking advantage of its waist-level reflex viewfinder, Walker used it on the street to photograph pedestrians without asking them, capturing them as they were. Often, he was far enough back from his subjects that he enlarged only a small part of the whole negative to get his picture.

Walker Evans, *Picture Penny Display, Savannah,* 1936. Library of Congress.

Walker Evans (American, St. Louis, Missouri 1903–1975 New Haven, Connecticut), *Couple at Coney Island*, 1928, Gelatin silver print, Image: 18.6 × 15.4 cm (7 5/16 × 6 1/16 in.), Getty Museum (84.XM.956.464): **© Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

This approach grew out of his use of a 35mm camera in the New York subway system, a body of work he was just completing. The aim was the same: to catch his subjects unawares, "freeing me of contact with them, and freeing them of my photographing presence," as he wrote of other unposed portraits. He would later use this technique, with this same larger-negative camera, to good effect in Detroit and Chicago.

By the early 1970s, Walker was living in Old Lyme, Connecticut full time. He was photographing during what he called "working trips," visiting photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank in Nova Scotia, and traveling most late summers to visit friends in England.

Did Walker exhibit his work in Connecticut?

The first large exhibition of his work held in Connecticut was *Walker Evans: Forty Years*, presented at the Yale University Art Gallery. Walker worked with gallery curators Alan Shestack and Jim Burke, as well as with his student assistant Melinda Blauvelt. Melinda was a first-year graduate student in photography, which was by then a major, largely thanks to Walker's presence on the Yale School of Art faculty.

Walker directed that the exhibition be fitted with the museum's moveable temporary walls, arranged to prevent one corner of the space from being seen from the entryway. The visitor was greeted by a wall bearing a print of his photograph of a painted sign, a picture of a huge hand, its index finger pointing left. Visitors were thus directed to move through the exhibition space in a clockwise direction.

As the visitor rounded the last corner of the path created by the temporary walls, the final area of the exhibition space came into view. On two walls were displayed signs from Walker's recent collecting. One of these was a large, rusted sign advertising the soda brand Nehi. Earlier in the exhibition, a visitor would have encountered the well-known photograph from 1936 that showed the same sign—the actual object—on the exterior wall of a brick structure in Alabama.

Walker included a brief text for display on the wall near these signs. The note is dense, allusive, subtly thought-provoking, and somewhat subversive. Like many of his best pictures, it made the viewer think. Walker used this Connecticut exhibition to announce that he was making other art that he wished to be considered alongside the photographs he was known for.

How did you share this transition through the work you did with his estate?

I wanted to capture Walker's shift in interest. I did so first in *The Hungry Eye*, and later in the 2011 Florence Griswold Museum exhibition *The Exacting Eye of Walker Evans*, which I organized in cooperation with curator Amanda Burdan.

The exhibition space was divided into three areas. Of the photographs on display, there were gelatin-silver prints, inkjet prints produced from digital scans, and scans made from the original negatives. Some prints were quite large.

The last space was devoted to items collected by Walker. Some of his actual objects were on display. In other instances, there were digital prints made from scans or photographs of the objects.

In this exhibition, Walker's artistic work and his artistic spirit could be seen as freshly alive. This was not a stale, rehashed survey of greatest hits or a display of choice vintage collectibles.

This same inclusive strategy shaped the 2015 exhibition and book, *Walker Evans: Depth of Field,* which I organized in cooperation with Heinz Liesbrock, director of the Josef Albers Museum in Bottrop, Germany. He agreed to cooperate on that larger, ambitious project after seeing the exhibition at the Florence Griswold Museum.

How was Walker involved at the Yale School of Art?

Walker taught at what was then known as the Yale School of Art and Architecture, at a time when the school was recognized for its "luminaries." His faculty colleagues from the 1960s and 1970s included Alvin Eisenman, Paul Rand, Herbert Matter, Norman Ives, Bradbury Thompson, Anton Stankowski, and Lisette Model.

He influenced those who were clever enough to notice by example. He didn't teach in a pedagogical way. He demonstrated what an alert, witty, and capable artistic sensibility was—in the "being mode." Those who knew how to look saw a lot.

↖ Walker Evans (American, St. Louis, Missouri 1903–1975 New Haven, Connecticut), [*Pedestrians in Bridgeport, Connecticut*], double-page spread from *The Hungry Eye*, 1993, edited by John T. Hill in collaboration with Gilles Mora., Film negative, 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 in.: **© Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

↑ *Walker Evans: Depth of Field,* initial installation at Josef Albers Museum, Quadrat, 2015, Bottrop, Germany.

"In our day of prepotent subjectivity, he has retrieved, preserved, and reaffirmed the aesthetic validity of our objective world."

– Lionel Trilling

What made Walker Evans one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century?

His most significant achievement was to elevate descriptive photography into a major art form by informing his work with intelligence, a vast cultural range of reference, and a lightning-quick ability to bring to photography the kind of associative thinking we encounter in great poets.

T.S. Eliot wrote that the poet's job is to make "new wholes," to bring the disparate features of contemporary life into coherent expression. To do so, he noted, the poet may need to "dislocate" familiar language to arrive at an expression appropriate to the time.

Walker went beyond accepted photographic conceptions to forge a forceful, revealing new mode of expression. He brought descriptive photography into the realm of great art.

As distinguished literary critic Lionel Trilling noted when honoring Walker at the 1974 convocation of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, "In our day of prepotent subjectivity, he has retrieved, preserved, and reaffirmed the aesthetic validity of our objective world."

Describe Walker's perspective on the personal versus the artistic.

The personal versus the artistic touches a question that concerns many serious photographers. Some of us have learned that the personal includes personal passions and predilections, but also what critics call an "artistic sensibility." Although they are two different things, they come under the same heading.

Walker's sensibility drew upon a great intelligence and a willful acquisition of multiple literary and artistic sources. He had an ambitious view of his place at "the feast of the world's culture" (a phrase from James Joyce, his god). His imaginative and intellectual horizons, as an autodidact, were very broad. All this came into play every time he framed a subject with his best attention.

The personal, for Walker, as quirky as he was, can distract from his great achievement, which was to transcend—a word he loved to use—his complex and flawed person to connect with a larger artistic sensibility. Above all, he was a great artist.

Most significant were the friends he made at Yale, where he taught only a day or two a week, opting to decline both full-time status and administrative roles even though he was given the title of professor.

I was one of Walker's closest friends, along with Norman Ives. You, Jerry, have told me that in private conversation Walker would often mention the people he liked to think about. Invariably, he would say, "Norman is a genius" and "John is a prince." ■

Read the complete interview online at FlorenceGriswoldMuseum.org/WalkerEvans

↖ Walker Evans (American, St. Louis, Missouri 1903–1975 New Haven, Connecticut), [*Fruit Sign, Beaufort, South Carolina*], 1936, Contact print, 8 x 10 in.: **© Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

↗ Walker Evans in Murray's, a diner across Chapel Street from the Yale Art School building, 1971 or 2. John T. Hill.

CREATING AND CONVENING: THE REAL ART WAYS STORY

BY EMILY CLARK

Since its inception in 1975, the Hartford, Connecticut organization Real Art Ways has been a home for artists. Much as Florence Griswold's boardinghouse for artists built the foundation of the current Florence Griswold Museum, RAW (an apropos acronym, as "raw" talent abounds) fostered creatives and exhibited works by many who have gone on to become household names. Ever heard of Cindy Sherman, Sol LeWitt, or Philip Glass? All are RAW alumni. In fact, 48 MacArthur Foundation "genius" grantees have worked with RAW to date, most before they received those career-making honors. Having celebrated a milestone 50th anniversary in 2025, we look to both the storied past and the exciting future of this Connecticut institution.

The RAW origin story has humble beginnings. In the summer of 1975, a group of artists[1] who had graduated from the Hartford Art School and the Hartt School of Music assembled their lives and work in one shared space on downtown Hartford's Asylum Street. In a portent of things to come, the space immediately began to serve a whole host of purposes: home, multidisciplinary gallery, community gathering place. "It was kind of a clubhouse where they could live and make artwork," recalls RAW executive director Will K. Wilkins. "It was always centered around artists and the creation of new work." In an impressive show of confidence in RAW's founders and work, the National Endowment for the Arts provided early and crucial financial support. RAW quickly built a reputation as a hub of innovation and experimentation, a place where creatives on the margins and those starting out in their careers would be welcome and encouraged. "Real Art Ways is one of the most influential contemporary arts spaces in Connecticut," says contemporary artist Ezra Moth, a recipient of a Real Art Award[2] and recent RAW exhibitor.

Fostering new talent has been part of the organizational ethos since day one. RAW emerged at a time when "alternative spaces" were cropping up in urban centers around the country, countering the dominance of museum institutions perceived as staid and traditional. RAW was the very definition of an alternative space. "They were focused on artists who were creating work not necessarily with posterity in mind, but with a sense of community and interactivity," Wilkins says. Indeed, the organization has striven to respond to current events, driven by the particular urgency artists feel to connect and share perspectives about their work and the world. Surviving and thriving in the art world as a community endeavor is not unique or new, but RAW's success in doing so speaks directly to the targeted perspective shared by the organization and the artists whose work hangs in its galleries.

RAW weathered real estate and financial shifts over the years, relocating again and again before finding its current home at the former Underwood Typewriter Factory on Arbor Street in 1990. The organization now owns the space, a remarkable turn of events for an institution that often survived on a self-described shoestring budget. Asked what he is most proud of in looking back over RAW's history, Wilkins wryly says, "Survival comes to mind. Our foundation is based on the good work that people did in those early years. They did great work in presenting a wide range of innovative, challenging, superb artists."

By the time the organization settled in a permanent home, RAW was firmly established as a collective unafraid of existing at the margins and pushing boundaries, whether artistic, political, or social. RAW has, in its DNA, been a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ community, embraced by creators who undoubtedly saw the potential for positive engagement and community-building in their own work and lives. "I think that it's a natural connection to make," Wilkins says. "There is a creativity that comes with challenging assumptions and being different. It's something that has made Real Art Ways a safe place."

RAW's community events, particularly the monthly Creative Cocktail Hour, have evolved into Hartford mainstays and gathering places for artists, creatives, and their supporters. Wilkins knows what a positive this is for all: "The feeling of acceptance, support, and recognition that goes on here creates an environment where people feel comfortable."

Though it is no longer a space where artists live, RAW is most certainly one where they create and convene. Performance artists, filmmakers, visual artists, writers, and musicians have all found RAW

Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #7, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm / 10 x 8 inches. © 2026 Cindy Sherman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. This image was included in William Zimmer's January 13, 1991, *New York Time* review of the exhibition *15 Years of RAW*, which, as Zimmer wrote, "celebrates the 15-year history of this dogged alternative space." He continued, ". . . one sees how each of the pieces is a link in a strong chain of innovative work coming out of Real Art Ways."

[1] Ruth Cutler, Dan R. Talley, Al Baccili, Joseph Celli, and Stan Sharshal

[2] A juried program supporting emerging artists in the Northeast, with funding support from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

receptive to varied approaches to contemporary art. It is an institution well-versed in encouraging artists to do the work that truly drives their creative practice, even when that presents unique challenges to mount. Moth presented their solo exhibition *Megafauna (these desperate earthly forms)* at RAW in 2025. At the intersection of speculative science, ecological urgency, and queer futurism, the exhibit was an immersive installation centered on radical bioethics and the potential of plant-based hormone alternatives.

Working from a community biology lab, Moth genetically hybridized fennel, a plant rich in natural estrogenic compounds, as a speculative source for DIY hormone therapy, a long-politicized and often inaccessible treatment which transgender people and many other populations rely on for health and wellbeing. The exhibit posed many questions: What might bodily autonomy and identity look like when that access barrier is broken down? If we surmount the fear and uncertainty around these topics, how does our world change? Moth explored these concepts in a multidisciplinary installation that included living organisms, sculpture, and live drag performance with a standing-room-only audience.

[The experience of working with Real Art Ways] renewed all of my ambitions to make big work," says artist Ezra Moth.

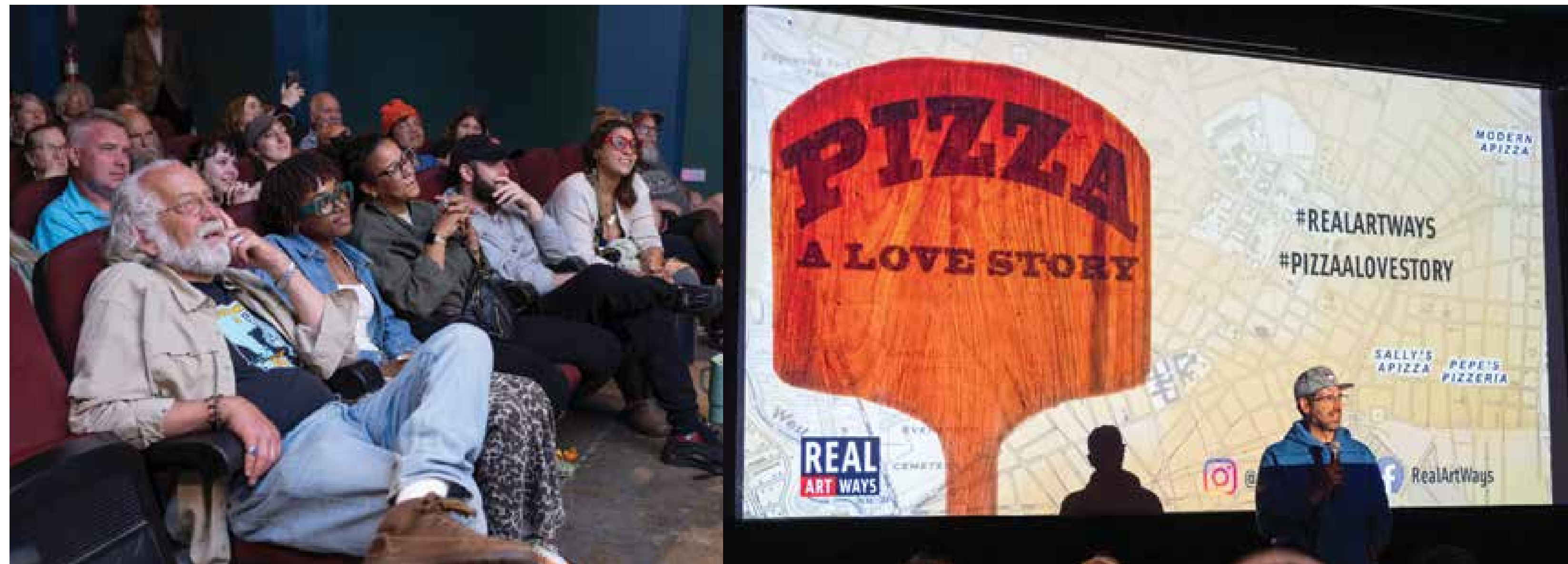
To Moth, a marriage of art and science is not as far-fetched as some might think. "I am very invested in contemporary art that does more than just 'raising awareness' of whatever issue it is talking about," they say. "Making a painting that depicts a problem with reality as a way of saying, 'Look at this thing, I want us to talk about it,' is lovely. I think we, as artists, can take it one step further and effect the lived realities of the people and the stories that we are invested in." It is scrupulously researched science as a call to action, expressed through multidisciplinary, ephemeral art. They continue: "Incorporating science into my work is a way to use research to say, 'This is something we have the power to change, right now, with tools we have on hand.' My art is the strongest when it is supporting the community that supports me."

Installing such an ambitious project was no small feat, and Moth found RAW's unfailing commitment to expressing an artistic vision gratifying. "I knew [exhibiting my work] was always going to be a tough sell," they say. "My work is visually strange, the materials are not particularly archival, and the content is a little bit conceptual. But I felt really supported by Real Art Ways throughout this whole process. I think it will be hard to find people as supportive as their team." Risk taking is in the organization's nature, and the response from supporters speaks volumes about the enthusiastic audience that approach has built.

RAW's institutional commitment to displaying work that, by design, cannot and should not exist forever remains a core tenet of their mission. Moth knows this to be true. "Not all art is made in the commercial or collectable art world," they say. "The concerns of artists working in that different space can be very

Ezra Moth in performance at Real Art Ways on September 5, 2025. Photos taken by Matt Bronson of Parkville Sounds, courtesy of Real Art Ways.

Jennifer Angus' contemporary intervention in the Florence Griswold House for the Museum's 2019 exhibition *Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art* shares a kindred spirit with the ephemeral, ecologically driven displays of Ezra Moth. Image: Jennifer Angus, Insect wallpaper from *Silver Wings and Golden Scales*, 2019. Florence Griswold Museum, Photograph by Paul Mutino.



A sense of continuity with the ideals of the past, combined with community engagement and meaningful support for artists in the creation of new work, remains at the heart of everything RAW does.

present and vital, and some of the most exciting work happening is by artists that aren't particularly well-known. The work being shown at Real Art Ways has always been really inspiring to me; work that doesn't have to last forever or be part of an archive somewhere." The ephemeral—like Moth's eco-art—has no choice but to be rooted (plant pun intended) in the present moment, and a real vibrancy and vitality comes along with that. Though the tactile expression of the work may not last, the confidence and excitement created by working in such a space does.

Notably, one of RAW's biggest draws and greatest success stories over the years has been the organization's consistent screening of films. Video was always a component of what artists presented in the RAW space, though a proper theater came only in 1996.

Asked why film screenings have been such a hit, Wilkins points to the accessibility of the form and the pleasure anyone and everyone can get from the experience of going to the movies. "We are a contemporary arts organization," he says. "If you think of visual art and you think of building broad audiences, we're not, as a culture, particularly familiar with 'contemporary art'. We don't necessarily have experiences with it or talk about it in free and easy ways. What we do know is that everybody feels comfortable going to the movies. The ritual of it is something we are all familiar with."

RAW provides complimentary exhibition space admission to filmgoers, a practice Wilkins believes is a crucial gateway to the broader work RAW does. As the organization prepares for an expansion and capital campaign in the near future, new theaters are in the works with aims to present even more unique fare not typically found at the chain megaplex: foreign films, experimental pieces, and offbeat works. It is bound to be an exciting time for the organization, and for the community of supporters and frequent return visitors RAW has fostered. The plans are ambitious, and the rewards for the arts field in Connecticut will no doubt be manifold. Wilkins and his team think it will be their best decade yet.

RAW and the artists who work and engage with it know the lasting power of purpose-built community. And Wilkins knows that its benefits are key to RAW's past, present, and future. "What we have done with Real Art Ways is made it much more engaged with community," he says. "We have built a base of support that is going to keep the organization going for decades to come." A sense of continuity with the ideals of the past, combined with community engagement and meaningful support for artists in the creation of new work, remains at the heart of everything RAW does.

"We want to ensure our space is one where everyone feels welcome, crossing the barriers of class and race that are so often obstructions to people understanding one another," Wilkins says. "That's what I'm really proud of." ■

Executive Director Will K. Wilkins; RAW theater in use; photo taken at George Day Park (across from RAW on Arbor Street) in the early 1990's at the Free Summertime Concert featuring the band People of Goodwill; all photos courtesy of Real Art Ways.

INSPIRATION FROM GIVERNY

A Recent Acquisition of Work by Charles Morris Young

BY AMY KURTZ LANSING

Florence Griswold's dining room owes its collection of painted panels to artists who created them in celebration of the camaraderie they experienced during their visits to the Lyme Art Colony in the early 1900s. While the names of Childe Hassam and Willard Metcalf may be better known today, many of the 33 artists whose work adorns the room are no longer widely recognized. Charles Morris Young is one of those painters. At the height of his career, he was lauded as a leading American landscape painter, largely associated with Pennsylvania Impressionism. In 1907, he added *Autumn Landscape* to the ensemble in the Griswold dining room. What brought him to Old Lyme? The recent donation to the collection of Young's *Giverny* (1905) by Young expert, Collections Committee member, and Museum trustee Charles T. Clark points to potential reasons for his visit and broadens our knowledge and appreciation of the artist's work.[1]

Young was raised in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on a struggling farm that he and his siblings helped their parents operate. His father was also a schoolteacher whose personal library included a book about the English artist John Constable that influenced Young as a boy. Gettysburg's Civil War history attracted visitors, to whom Young sold watercolors and souvenir canes hand-carved with battle scenes. He saved enough money from those sales and from teaching art to enroll in 1891 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he received commendations for his work under teachers Thomas Anshutz and Robert W. Vonnoh.

By October 1897, Young was able to go abroad using proceeds from his teaching at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (later Moore College of Art and Design) and the sale of paintings. In Paris, he enrolled at the Académie Colarossi but found informal interactions with fellow artists to be more inspiring and instructional than his courses. French landscape painter Jean Charles Cazin, who evaluated the Colarossi students, encouraged Young, telling him he had an "eye for landscape" — affirmation of the young man's ability to suggest the nuances of weather, sun, and season.[2]

Friendship with another American painter studying in France, Frederick Carl Frieseke, led to an 1898 trip to the Netherlands, during which Young began to explore the Impressionist technique of addressing a motif or theme under shifting conditions of light and atmosphere. Frieseke's work would later become synonymous with the French village of Giverny, and the two found common ground in a pale pastel color palette embraced by several American artists.

Following this first period in France, Young returned to the United States, where he found increasing success in exhibitions of his work. He was celebrated, both domestically and in the French Salon, for his depictions of snow, a subject tackled by few artists because of the rigors of working outdoors in the winter.[3]

Young married fellow artist Eliza Middleton Coxe in 1903. The couple applied for a joint passport in June 1904, intending to spend two years abroad. They rented Cazin's former studio in Paris and Eliza enrolled at Académie Colarossi. During their first summer, they traveled extensively, including to Spain and Italy. While Young had become known for his exceptional treatments of winter landscape, he perhaps sought to broaden his repertoire through plein-air work in warmer, more colorful climes.

Back in Paris, and at the urging of Mary Cassatt (who knew Coxe's socially prominent family from Philadelphia and strongly urged American artists to embrace contemporary French approaches to painting), they spent part of the summer of 1904 in Giverny. The village

Charles Morris Young (1869–1964), *Giverny* (detail), 1905. Oil on canvas board, 10 x 13 in. Gift of Charles T. Clark in memory of Paul E. Crowley, 2025.27.2

[1] Charles Teaze Clark, "In Pursuit of Higher Truth: The Landscape Paintings of Charles Morris Young," *The Magazine Antiques*, 168, no. 5 (November 2005): 163–169.
[2] Charles Morris Young, "Nature Was My Mistress: My Life and Some Comments," unpublished typescript, Artist's file, Florence Griswold Museum, 76.
[3] By 1910, Young's work had been acquired by the National Gallery, Budapest, Hungary, and the state collection of Chile.

near the Seine River, not far from Paris, was home to Claude Monet and hosted a growing colony of expatriate artists and art students who gathered in the master's vicinity.

The Youngs stayed at Maison Rose, a lodging with views of Monet's garden, and walls adorned with studies by the late American Impressionist Theodore Robinson.[4] Both there and at the Hôtel Baudy (popular with artists), Charles made use of the tennis court, billiard room, and "other facilities for amusement and exercise."[5] In the unpublished memoir Young wrote in the 1950s, he described Giverny's appeal as both social and aesthetic: "This seemed to be just what I was looking for, good subjects for painting, opportunities to counter the nervous tension that painting causes, and social contacts with fellow artists."[6] Young recalled "there were miles of interesting country in every direction from Giverny, and I took tramps, looking for subjects, carrying my painting traps with me."[7] Those walks and time spent outdoors helped shape his core belief that "Objects in landscape are affected by the weather and to get the true effect this condition must be observed and noted on your canvas"—concepts evident in the veil of colored atmosphere in *Giverny.* [8] Young's wife had returned to Paris to await the birth of their first child, and he soon relocated to his studio there for the winter. After the dreariness of Paris in those colder months, the Youngs decided to "make a break for the country" and rented a house in Giverny the following year, when their friend Frieseke was resident as well.[9] The two men's tendency to work in high key, pastel tones, a fascination soon shared with American painters Guy Rose, Edmund Greacen, Lawton Parker, and others, imparted a distinctive silvery, lavender look to their pictures. These artists collectively became known as the "Giverny Group."

Young's painting *Giverny* exemplifies the nascent style that would become a signature for Americans at the French artists' colony. Soft greens, pinks, purples, and blues impart the sense of a riverside landscape over which mist is evaporating in strengthening sunlight that casts shadows beyond the poplar trees. A reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* remarked in fall 1905 that Young had "struck a new vein of late and his work is greatly strengthened and freshened in color from the exclusive working out of doors." The reporter continued, "one great characteristic of Giverny is its beautiful atmosphere, its soft, moist clouds and the mellow enveloping quality of its air. This . . . Mr. Young has succeeded in putting into his canvases."[10] The tonal harmony of pictures like Young's imparted a dreamy quality to Giverny landscapes that has been acknowledged as an aspect of the insular experience American artists built for themselves in the village in the decade before World War I. Likening Young's work to that of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, critics praised paintings like *Giverny* as "intimate" canvases that "linger long in the mind like some haunting beautiful melody."[11]

"Eager to show her baby Arthur to her family and friends," Eliza Young wished to return to America, so the couple left France for Pennsylvania at the end of the summer season.[12] They set about establishing a home and studio on family property in Jenkintown and began to spend summers in Nahant, Massachusetts.

By 1907, the memory of his own pleasant experience in Giverny, painting outdoors and socializing with artist friends, may have attracted Young to the Lyme Art Colony, as did his persistent interest in finding fresh subjects to paint.[13] He wrote that in the late autumn of that year, he delivered his family home to Jenkintown after a summer in Nahant, "then off for a few

4 Helen W. Henderson, "Memories Revived by Monet's Death," Philadelphia Inquirer, January 2, 1927; Special Correspondence, "Claude Monet and Quaint Giverny," Philadelphia Inquirer, September 10, 1905, p. 34.
5 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 135.
6 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 135.
7 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 136.
8 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 363.
9 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 142.
10 Special Correspondence, "Art Comments from Paris," Philadelphia Inquirer, October 15, 1905, p. 33.
11 "News of the Art World," Philadelphia Inquirer, March 3, 1907, p.44.
12 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 143–44.

weeks painting in Old Lyme, then not much invaded by artists." Why exactly he chose to go there then is not fully documented but several possibilities exist: Harry Hoffman, whom Young knew from Gettysburg College, was part of the Lyme Art Colony, and may have touted to Young its potential to provide him with an experience like that at Giverny. Young even recalled that he "may have been the cause of [Hoffman] taking up painting as a career, as he came often to my studio during his college days." Another Gettysburg friend, writer and critic Schumucker Duncan, was also in residence in Old Lyme.[14] Moreover, Willard Metcalf, who had painted at Giverny two decades before Young, had made his way to Old Lyme, and in later years other former Giverny artists such as Edmund Greacen and Lawton Parker did the same, familiar with the colony's growing reputation.

Two years after Young executed *Giverny*, he completed *Autumn Landscape* (see back cover) on a wooden panel fit into a framework on the Griswold House's dining room walls, as he had seen at Giverny's Maison Rose—the inn where he stayed in 1905. Young commented upon his Old Lyme visit, "We stayed at Miss Florence Griswold's mansion, a fine example of New England old colonial architecture. We found quite a group of artists there, among them Childe Hassam, Willard Metcalf, painters of the top rank, who I was to see a good deal of later on.[15] " Young also fondly remembered the presence of artists Henry Rankin Poore, William S. Robinson, and others. Ultimately, though, he did not become a regular at Old Lyme because he hoped to find someplace where he could make his own mark. "I found subjects for a number of canvases," he recollected, "and the region was good for the landscape painter, but too much cropped by other artists, and I did not like regions that had been painted, but liked to go where artists had not been in numbers before me."[16]

The Museum's collection has attested to Young's ability to evoke New England autumns through both his dining room panel and his 1912 oil, *October Landscape* (painted around Cornwall Bridge or Falls Village, Connecticut, where he also encountered Metcalf). But with the generous gift of *Giverny* to the collection, we can now appreciate the artist's masterful sensitivity to other landscape conditions and the atmosphere he may have been seeking by coming to Old Lyme. All three Young works in the collection attest to the ambition he described as "painting the less obvious effects of nature that had been overlooked by landscape painters, the quiet moods and interludes that did not make a showy canvas, but enlarged the vision of the nature lover."[17]

Following his visits to Old Lyme and other parts of Connecticut, Young continued to exhibit his work around the United States. At his summer 1912 solo show the Art Institute of Chicago, a painting titled *Giverny* appears on the checklist.[18] Could it be the work that has now been donated to the Museum?

Young would go on to settle with his family in Radnor, Pennsylvania, where he immersed himself in local scenes and became especially known for landscapes that included depictions of the state's fox hunts. Sadly, many of his best paintings were destroyed in a fire at his home, where they had been gathered for his son to shoot a film in 1962. *Giverny* is a rare survival from Young's earlier career and one that demonstrates, as author Helen W. Henderson wrote in 1911, that "His work has essentially that touch which brings the beholder at once under the atmospheric spell of its locality."

Many thanks to Charles T. Clark for his research on Young and his donation of *Giverny* to the collection. ■

13 Further research is underway about connections between Young and Schumuker Duncan, whose surviving correspondence with Florence Griswold suggests that he had spent time at her boardinghouse in 1907 and earlier, perhaps during his studies for a master's in literature at Yale University (completed in 1894). Two more letters between Griswold and Duncan exist from 1910 and 1911 and reference tentative arrangements for visits, although Young is not mentioned. Like Young, who was only a few years older, Duncan (1871–1957) was from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the two were "old friends," according to Young's recollection. In 1905, Duncan wrote for their hometown newspaper a detailed review of the paintings from France that Young exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. See Schumucker Duncan, "An Artist's Recent Work: The Painting of Charles Morris Young," Gettysburg Compiler, March 1, 1905, p. 3. See also, Letters FG9.1A/9.2B, FG9.1/9.1B, FG 9.3A/B Florence Griswold Papers, Lyme Historical Society Archives at the Florence Griswold Museum; and on Schumuker Duncan, see Young's, "Nature Was My Mistress," p. 164.
14 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," 164.
15 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," 163–64.
16 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," 165. Young did return to Old Lyme in 1911.
17 Young, "Nature Was My Mistress," 179.
18 Exhibition of Paintings of Charles Morris Young, Art Institute of Chicago, July 16 to August 12, 1912 (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1912).

Louis Paul Dessar

Agrarian Landscapes and Laborers in New England

BY TERRI C SMITH

Landscape paintings by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists working in the styles of Hudson River School (1825–1870), Tonalism (1880–1915 influenced by the Barbizon School of France), and to a lesser degree American Impressionism (1880–1920) have been perennially labeled "pastoral," "sublime," "picturesque," and "bucolic" in art reviews, auction catalogs, and art history volumes. Paintings of New England from this era reflect these adjectives and serve as a record of how European settlers molded the landscape itself, bringing it in line with their aesthetic and utilitarian preferences. In their depiction of the relationship between man and nature, the paintings that Louis Paul Dessar (1857–1952) made in Old Lyme, Connecticut, beginning in 1900 reflect both the landscape ideals of his day and the rapid environmental changes that preceded those works.

Using Edmund Burke's influential 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* as a jumping-off point, literary scholar Robert Chianese draws connections between the alterations humans make to landscapes and the adjectives they use to describe them, teasing apart the distinctions between the sublime[1] and the picturesque[2]:

> *The sublime is about power, nature's supernatural power over human life and consciousness. Burke bases his definition of the sublime on our ideas about "natural power," which induces "astonishment" and "terror." Elements of the natural world . . . must threaten in order to evoke the sublime; a prairie cannot, because while vast, it does not instill terror, a horse cannot, nor anything we control or use: "Wherever strength is only useful and employed for our benefit*

Louis Paul Dessar, *Family in the Field* (ca. 1892). Photo courtesy of M.S. Rau, New Orleans

[1] "Sublime" is a word often associated with Hudson River School paintings.
[2] The "picturesque" is more closely associated with Tonalist and some American Impressionist paintings.

Mr. Dessar acknowledges that the poetic side of nature has the most charm for him, and the romantic rather than the real he more eagerly seeks. Nothing pleases him more than, when twilight comes on, to stroll through the country roads and lanes and enjoy the restful charm of nature. As he puts it, "It is like another world to me—a world of dreams."

— Lena Cooper, *Brush and Pencil*

or our pleasure, then it is never sublime [...] to act agreeably to our will, it must be subject to us and therefore can never be the cause of a grand and commanding conception."[3]

Chianese adds, "Charted, cordoned off, and 'saved,' nature can inspire the beautiful and the picturesque, but not the sublime."[4]

Novelist Walker Percy took up the subject of "cordoned off" nature almost 200 years after Burke in his 1956 essay "The Loss of the Creature." In it, Percy writes about the cognitive complexity of visiting the Grand Canyon, arguing that a visitor's authentic experience of this natural wonder is diminished by a compulsion to compare it to their expectations: "It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind."[5] Percy writes that these expectations are formed by commercially—and institutionally—driven packaging of the Grand Canyon. One could draw parallels between Percy's "symbolic complex" and American landscape paintings, including Dessar's, which mirror European hegemonic ideals of nature, beauty, work, and leisure *and* simultaneously "package" and perpetuate those ideals.

Dessar's early career was largely spent in France, where he painted rural workers. However, he returned to New York each winter from 1894 to 1897 to paint client portraits, and at a patron's home "was deeply impressed by a collection of moody, romantic landscape paintings of the . . . Barbizon School, and subsequently decided to specialize in landscape painting."[6] Barbizon painters were the first European artists to paint landscapes as the primary subject rather than merely as a background for history paintings. The school influenced American Tonalist painters like Henry Ward Ranger who catalyzed the Lyme Art Colony at Florence Griswold's boardinghouse, which Dessar eventually joined.

Prior to becoming a Tonalist, Dessar worked in France from 1886 to 1899, studying painting at École des Beaux-Arts in 1889 and 1890. Many of his compositions during this time included romanticized depictions of laborers, as with *Family in the Field* (ca. 1892) where he uses a pastel palette to paint a mother standing next to her young child while swaddling a baby and watching a man (presumably her husband) attach a plow to two horses.[7] The painting provides a more romanticized version of labor than that of Barbizon artist Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), who portrayed rural workers—in the words of

[3] Chianese, Robert (1988). Avoidance of the Sublime in Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Art: An Environmental Reading of Depicted Land. *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 43:437-461, p. 437
[4] Ibid., p. 439.
[5] Percy, Walker (1958). "The Loss of the Creature." In *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has To Do With the Other.* New York: Picador, 1975., p. 47.
[6] Terra Foundation for American Art: Retrieved Oct. 2025, https://collection.terraamericanart.org/people/193/louis-paul-dessar
[7] https://www.artnet.com/artists/louis-paul-dessar/family-in-the-field-a-SAs1uzCpTuCKwuZBiTwiuQ28 Amory, Dita (2007). "The Barbizon School: French Painters of Nature." Metropolitan Museum of Art Website. Retrieved, October 2025: https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-barbizon-school-french-painters-of-nature

Louis Paul Dessar, Self Portrait, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Jeffrey Cooley

An example of nature as "sublime." Thomas Cole, *Study for "A Wild Scene,"* 1831. Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company

Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Dita Amory—with "blunt realism and quiet dignity."[8] Writing about Dessar for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, scholar Peter Bermingham draws this distinction between the artists, sharing that "[Dessar's] farmers are only small-scale allusions to Millet's peasants and eschew any hint of social commentary."[9]

In 1899—one year before Dessar moved to Old Lyme, Connecticut—Lena Cooper writes about the artist's depiction of French laborers in the art magazine *Brush and Pencil:*

> *His pictures of fishing scenes and peasant life, broadly handled and printed in soft, restful tones, are not less interesting [than his "poetic" landscapes]. That he has a thorough knowledge of the people he puts on canvas is everywhere evident, and I was not surprised when he told me that all his summers are spent among them, living near the little village of Trépied, in northern France, two miles from the sea [...]*[10]

Later in the article, the author reveals Dessar's romantic attitudes toward the French peasant as a subject:

> *I asked him why did he not, being an American [...] undertake to give us as pleasing glimpses of purely American scenes. He replied that such was his ultimate intention, and regretted the fact in not being able to do so at the present, assigning many reasons; among them [...] that our peasants had not the picturesque attire or quaint motions of those abroad [...]*[11]

Louis Paul Dessar, *Return to the Fold*, n.d., oil on canvas, 15 in. × 18 1/4 in. (38.1 × 46.2 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of William T. Evans, 1909.7.18

Cooper also mentions Dessar's love of painting sheep and his hope to have a "flock of his own for the purpose of studying them still more closely."[12] (He ultimately fulfilled that dream after moving to Old Lyme.) Two paintings of sheep by Dresser are in the Smithsonian collection: *Return to the Fold* (n.d.) is awash with the blue light of dusk and features a farmworker in soft focus surrounded by the flock, while *A Watering Place* (1910) is soaked in orange afternoon light and includes a faceless shepherd holding a staff while watching sheep, each abstractly rendered with curved, white brushstrokes.

In Tonalist paintings, writes art historian David Adams Cleveland, the "prime locus was landscape, especially depictions of the intimate near-at-home farmlands and rural places—often at dusk or dawn [...] the absence of figures in the Tonalist landscape is almost universal."[13] Therefore, Dessar's inclusion of working people was uncommon for Tonalism. Arguably, the manner in which this 1910 review describes his paintings further indicates that they did not fully meet expectations of that style:

> *He looks at the play of light upon the subject before him and gets a wealth of detail, a variety of distinct colors and gives a careful rendering of the scene. He too is a tonalist, but not nearly as brilliant in coloring [as Henry Golden Dearth]. More attention is paid to drawing and choice of subject, and the proper filling of space, or composition.*[14]

Dessar's frequent choice of workers as a subject is also evidenced in two paintings in the Florence Griswold Museum's collection, *The Wood Chopper* (1906) and *The Toilers* (1907). Both works feature abstractly rendered farm workers alongside animals that are hauling lumber. In *The Toilers*, horses are pulling what appears to be a section of tree trunk; and in *The Wood Chopper*, a figure holds a raised axe near a wagon partially filled with split logs and pulled by two oxen. Both pieces also gesture to the seasons. A canopy of orange and yellow leaves connotes autumn in *The Wood Chopper*, while the bare trees in *The Toilers* place it a few months later during winter. Both paintings also frame their subjects with a large tree on one side and foreground them with stones and brush. Dessar's attention to painting light is evident in both compositions. In *The Wood Chopper*, the sky appears to be imbued with the brisk light of early morning, while *The Toilers* is illuminated by the last sliver of the setting sun's orange rays. Both exemplify a Tonalist artist's tendency to create what ecologist Edward K. Faison describes as "a pronounced atmospheric quality in which the very air that infuses the landscape has a palpable density and optical resonance."[15]

Louis Paul Dessar, *The Watering Place*, 1910, oil on canvas, 35 1⁄8 x 45 in. (89.2 x 114.3 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of William T. Evans, 1910.4.1

Looking at agrarian landscapes like these from an environmental point of view, Faison writes that this preference for "an open plain with scattered trees and nearby water is the single most appealing landscape to humans, simulating our ancestral savanna home in Africa and closely describing many nineteenth-century landscape paintings."[16] However, he adds, we sometimes don't consider the habitat destruction when looking at these paintings: "Semi-open landscapes, though innately appealing, do not occur naturally in the environment of the northeastern United States. They are almost entirely the result of deforestation followed by sustained disturbance by human activity."[17]

The human activity that altered these landscapes was largely driven by European colonial settlers who occupied land after stealing it from and killing or displacing Indigenous people. That land was then exploited by some for economic gain, often in the form of deforestation. Faison contextualizes early American landscapes within this rapid environmental devastation:

[8] Amory, Dita (2007). "The Barbizon School: French Painters of Nature." Metropolitan Museum of Art Website. Retrieved, October 2025: https://link.edgepilot.com/s/d906c564/isf4cDmgdUe1UaFxohqXXQ?u=https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-barbizon-school-french-painters-of-nature

[9] Bermingham, Peter (1975). American Art in the Barbizon Mood. Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts and Smithsonian Institution Press. Retrieved October 2025: https://americanart.si.edu/artist/louis-paul-dessar-1233

[10] Cooper, Lena, M. (1899). Louis Paul Dessar and His Work. Brush and Pencil, 5:97-106, p. 97.

[11] Ibid, p. 102.

[12] Ibid, p. 98

[13] Cleveland, David Adams (2015). "What is Tonalism?: 12 Essential Characteristics." Artsy.net, Jul 10, 2015 11:16 a.m. Retrieved October 2025: https://link.edgepilot.com/s/1ec3e7bc/jQ4eS9Y5Z0_fUzP0RnrtcQ?u=https://www.artsy.net/article/david-adams-cleveland-what-is-tonalism-12-essential-characteristics

[14] No Author (1910). "EXHIBITIONS REVIEWED. Paintings by Henry Golden Dearth, N. A., and Louis Paul Dessar, N.A." in *Bulletin of the Detroit Museum of Art*, 4:16-19, p. 17.

[15] Cleveland, D.A. (2015).

[16] Faison, Edward K. (2015). "Seeing the Landscape in Landscape Art." *Arnoldia*, 73:2-18, p. 4.

[17] Ibid.

"In an ironic twist, [the Hudson River School], founded to celebrate America's wilderness, became synchronous with a brief period in the northeastern United States in which the landscape was altered to a greater extent than at any time since the last ice age."[18] Giving a sense of how much the New England landscape was altered before Dessar moved to Connecticut, Faison adds that "from about 1810 to 1870, much of the forested northeastern United States was transformed into a mosaic of agricultural fields and cut-over woodlots,"[19] and that "by mid-century every New England state except for Maine was less than 50% forested."[20]

The Toilers and *The Wood Chopper* both center people managing woodlots. In both, workers gather wood and are active agents in inhibiting forest growth, maintaining European ideals of the picturesque landscape through "sustained disturbance." While concepts of the picturesque informed Dessar's paintings and how he managed his land, his conformity to those notions existed in tandem with a seemingly spiritual love of nature and an abiding interest in rural laborers. In the *Brush and Pencil* article, Cooper describes Dessar's love of his subject:

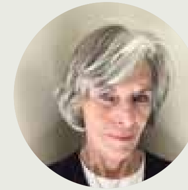
> *Dessar acknowledges that the poetic side of nature has the most charm for him, and the romantic rather than the real he more eagerly seeks. Nothing pleases him more than, when twilight comes on, to stroll through the country roads and lanes and enjoy the restful charm of nature. As he puts it, "It is like another world to me—a world of dreams."*

This romantic temperament is perhaps what inspired Dessar to not merely include laborers in his paintings, but—through composition, light, and gesture—to elevate them as integral subjects in the landscape, partners in cultivating the poetry of place he so appreciated. ■

[18] Ibid., p. 2.
[19] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[20] Ibid., p. 4.
[21] Cooper, Lena, M. (1899). Louis Paul Dessar and His Work. *Brush and Pencil*, 5:97-106, p. 97.

↑ Louis Paul Dessar, *The Wood Chopper*, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. Fenton L. B. Brown

↑ Louis Paul Dessar, *The Toilers*, 1907, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart P. Feld



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Jerry Thompson is a photographer and author of several books on photography including *The Last Years of Walker Evans.* In 1971, Thompson joined the new graduate program in photography at Yale University's Art Department. After graduation, he was invited to join the faculty as assistant professor and taught there until 1980. During this time, he became close friends with both John Hill and Walker Evans. Thompson later left Yale to pursue professional photography on a full-time basis.

Emily Clark is the Museum's Marketing Coordinator. Her work includes managing advertising and maintaining the Museum's website and Instagram presence. She also serves on the Old Lyme Arts District executive leadership team. Emily holds a B.A. in History and the History of Art from Smith College and an M.S. in Library and Information Science from Simmons University.

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Terri C Smith is a curator and writer who has developed innovative contemporary art programs, foregrounding sociopolitical themes and conceptual art practices. Smith has curated more than one-hundred exhibitions at museums and alternative art spaces and was the founding creative director of Franklin Street Works (2011–2020), a critically recognized nonprofit art space in Stamford, Connecticut. She lives and works in Bridgeport, CT.

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Cover image: Charles Morris Young (1869–1964), *Giverny* (detail), 1905. Oil on canvas board, 10 x 13 in. Gift of Charles T. Clark in memory of Paul E. Crowley, 2025.27.2.

Panel in the Griswold House dining room Charles Morris Young (1869–1964), *Autumn*, 1907, Oil on wood panel, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of the artist Read more about Charles Morris Young and the inspiration he found in Giverny, France on page 22.

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