

THE ARTIST AT HOME AND AT WORK

by
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Black-and-white documentary photographs of American artists in their homes and studios will be the focus of *Preserving Creative Spaces: The Historic Artists' Homes and Studios Program*, an exhibition that will begin a long, nationwide tour at Maine's Portland Museum of Art. The Historic Artists' Homes and Studios Program (HAHS), part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is a consortium of more than 40 museums and historic homes committed to the preservation of artists' homes and studios and to keeping them open to the public. One of many reasons to celebrate the HAHS is the Portland Museum of Art's recent membership in the program and its success in restoring Winslow Homer's studio at Prouts Neck, Maine. Homer's studio now joins the homes and studios of Georgia O'Keeffe, Thomas Hart Benton, the Pollock-Krasner House, and many others in the Studios Program.



N. C. Wyeth painting *The Elizabethan Galleons*, circa 1923.
Photo by Chester Thomas, N. C. Wyeth House and Studio,
Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

In a larger sense, the effort to save and make available the sites of artistic inspiration and endeavor is another signal that American art has come of age and that its origins and history as well as its cultural products, the works we see in museums, are important to us. For scholars, students, curators, collectors and art lovers, these places, as Karen Sherry, Chief Curator and Curator of American Art at the Portland Museum of Art says, “provide unique insights into an artist’s creative practice by allowing us to literally walk in the artist’s footsteps and see the things that inspired his or her work—often the surrounding landscapes and viewsheds. This kind of intimate, authentic, and experiential understanding of an artist’s life and work cannot be gained anywhere else—not in a museum or gallery, not in a book or a digital publication.”

But the photographs in the exhibition, in and of themselves, are very useful and offer insights not only into the artists’ working and living spaces—as well as snapshots of works in progress, an invaluable tool for scholars—but also tell us something about the artists themselves—how they saw themselves, and how they wanted to be seen. Sherry observes, “since many of the images are staged photographs rather than spontaneous snapshots, it is interesting to consider the fact that the artists were directly involved in constructing their own artistic identities, that is, in crafting the way they were presented through the photographs.”

The image of N. C. Wyeth in his Brandywine studio gives us a sense of the sheer scale of his workspace. Wyeth stands on a rolling staircase, working on one of four 15-foot panels in a mural commissioned for the First National Bank of Boston. The studio is a barn, but it’s scrupulously clean. There isn’t an irregular or unpainted board anywhere. A length of string dangling from the tall ladder at left is the only detail that seems overlooked. Wyeth is just above the halfway mark on the staircase, working on the sails of the dark ship, perhaps. There is



Arthur Dove & Helen Torr, Dove/Torr Cottage, Heckscher Museum of Art.
© Copyright The Estate of Arthur G. Dove, courtesy Terry Dintenfass, Inc.

Grant Wood next to *Daughters of Revolution* at 5 Turner Alley, 1932.

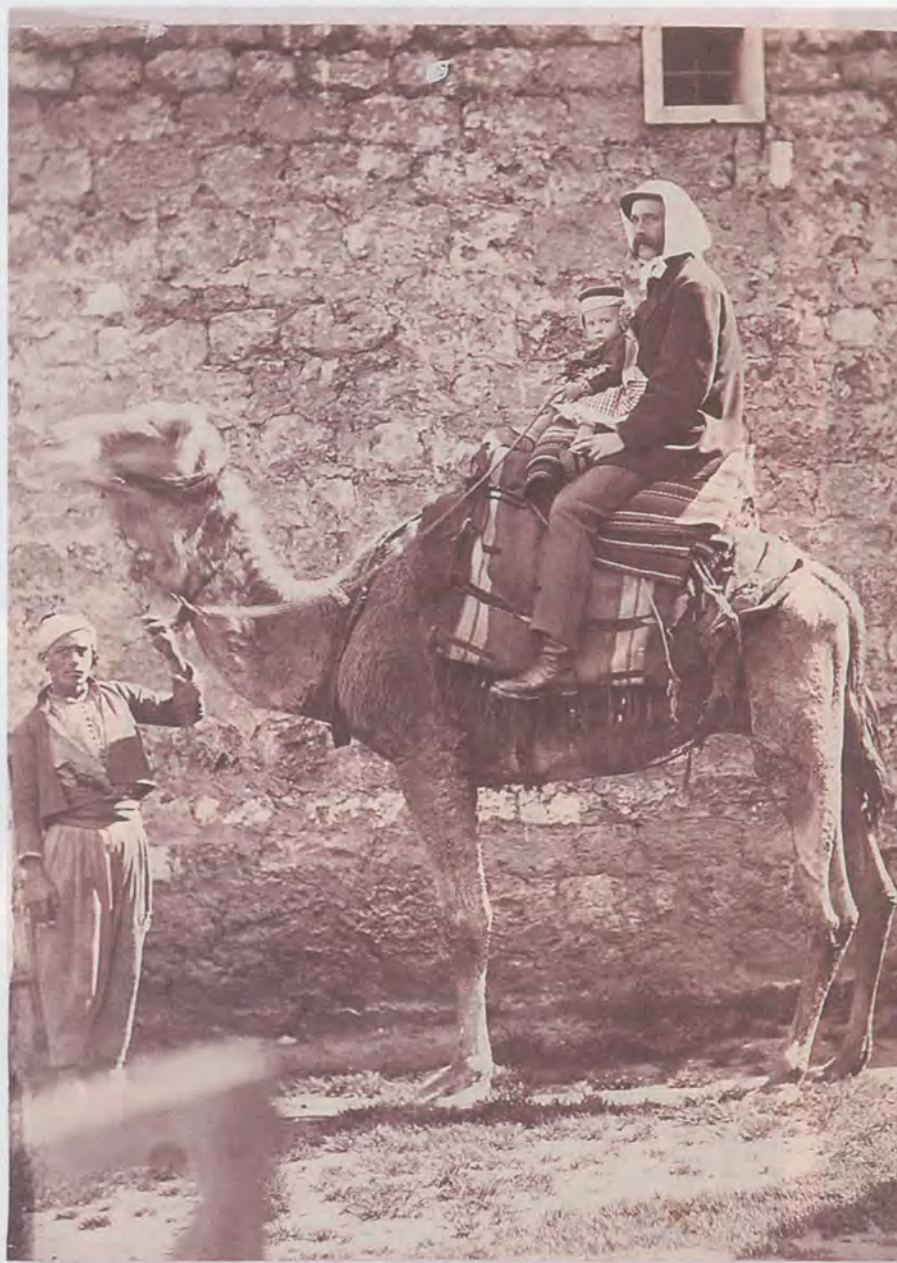


something European, something Old World in his coat, shoes and long stockings, and the over-the-shoulder Rembrandt pose. Though he is quite small, he dominates the space, the canvas and the subject of the painting—nothing less than tall ships at sea. The photo says: “See the master at work.”

Grant Wood, on the other hand, stands in overalls, thumbs hooked in his pockets, under slanting eaves, in the corner of a house. The worn chair, ottoman and dresser suggest that this isn't a dedicated space, that art is made within the larger context of life, that Wood might do his painting between chores or that art is work, just as farming is. There's no hint of Wood's training in Paris. The artist is a farmer, a tiller, and the viewer is put in mind of the last lines of *Digging*, one of Seamus Heaney's great poems, “Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it.”

Though he is painting in plein air in Long Island, Childe Hassam projects the very antithesis of Wood's farmer persona. In a very dapper fedora and tie, the rolled up sleeves of his starched white shirt his sole concession to labor, Hassam seems to want to make it seem that art comes easy to him. He is the essence of the artist as a blessed, talented gentleman as he stands back to appraise, approvingly, the landscape he paints.

Two works in progress appear in the photograph of Charles Burchfield. Both paintings are quite clear, and so this image might well prove fruitful for Burchfield scholars. But in his journals, the artist wrote, “Let my studio be hallowed by large adventurous thoughts; and a feeling of security and isolation from the banalities of life; by dreams, and bold imaginings,” and elements in this photo reflect his conception. The curtain at left isolates the artist from the outside world. The space is confined, as if actual space isn't necessary for a roaming imagination. Burchfield is turned away from us; we are meant to look at the art rather than at the artist. In his long, lab-style coat and polished shoes, he would appear to be a scientist—perhaps a naturalist—



Attributed to Felix Bonfils, *Frederic Edwin Church and His Son, Frederic Joseph, in Beirut, 1868*, carte-de-visite, 4⁷/₈ x 3³/₈ in., OL.1984.446, Collection Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, www.olana.org.

though the science that shines through Burchfield's paintings is a personal, idiosyncratic, mystical discipline.

The word “Private” on a sign nailed to a tree catches the viewer's eye in the photograph of the Dove/Torr Cottage on Long Island. The two artists—Arthur Dove and Helen Torr—converse, privately, as a young boy moves away from them toward the pond in the distance. Dove seems to have noticed the camera. Knowing of Dove and Torr's difficult first marriages, their sufferings as artists—and Dove's

declining health—this humble cottage was and is, in the photograph, a private refuge for the pair.

In contrast to Dove and Torr's private lives and their search for a personal art at the edge of the modern, Frederic Church, seen here on a camel with his young son, typifies the 19th-century artist as public man, as larger-than-life adventurer in search of the most dramatic scenes and majestic landscapes. Church's wanderings took him from the Hudson River to the Arctic, Andes, Europe, and the Holy



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Charles E. Burchfield, Burchfield Homestead Museum.

Andy in the Studio © Peter Ralston. Andrew
Wyeth Studio. Brandywine River Museum
of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.





Alice Austen, Alice Austen House Museum.



Julian Alden Weir, National Park Service, Weir Farm National Historic Site.

Land and his home high above the Hudson River, Olana, reflects his eclectic tastes, combining Moorish, Persian and Victorian design elements. At the time, the great paintings by artists like Church, Bierstadt, and Moran were questioned as to their veracity. In a masterwork like *Heart of the Andes*, Church would include carefully rendered local flora and fauna to show his knowledge of the place. The same is true of this photograph. “If I paint Egypt,” Church seems to be saying, “rest assured that I’ve been to Egypt, that I’m not making any of it up, however splendid and impossible it might seem.”

The photograph of Alice Austen, a pioneer among women photographers who worked out-of-doors capturing life and action as they happened, shows how important *Preserving Creative Spaces* and the Historic Artists Homes and Studios Program is to lesser-known figures in American art. Just glancing at this image makes the viewer want

to know more about Austen and her work and to pay a visit to her home on Staten Island. Documenting the lives of ordinary people on the streets of New York as well as important events like the end of World War I, Austen’s desire to document life was markedly ahead of its time. In private, she lived, against convention, with another woman, Gertrude Tate, for more than 50 years. Sitting sidesaddle atop a fence post, photographing, as it happens, an auto race, Austen personifies the artist as feminist, even without knowing anything about her. What is unusual is that the man beside her pays no attention to her—perhaps deliberately? And the woman, who looks very much like Tate, turns to the camera with a slightly bemused smile. She’s seen Austen at work before, so seeing her perched on a fence post isn’t surprising to her, but she doesn’t seem surprised that the photographer thinks it’s worth taking this picture. No, this photographer is certainly newsworthy herself.

What the preservation of these homes and the exhibition of these photographs do is to humanize the artists who lived and worked in these spaces. These photos of homes, studios and artists at work tell stories that deepen our understanding of their lives and art. *Preserving Creative Spaces* and the Historic Artists Homes and Studios Program help to fill crucial gaps in the history and practice of American art. ■

Preserving Creative Spaces: The Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios Program

Exhibition Schedule:
Portland Museum of Art, Portland,
ME, March 22-June 15

Olana State Historic Site,
Hudson, NY, June 28-November 2

Roger Brown Study Center/School
of the Art Institute of Chicago,
Chicago, IL, January 22-May 8, 2015