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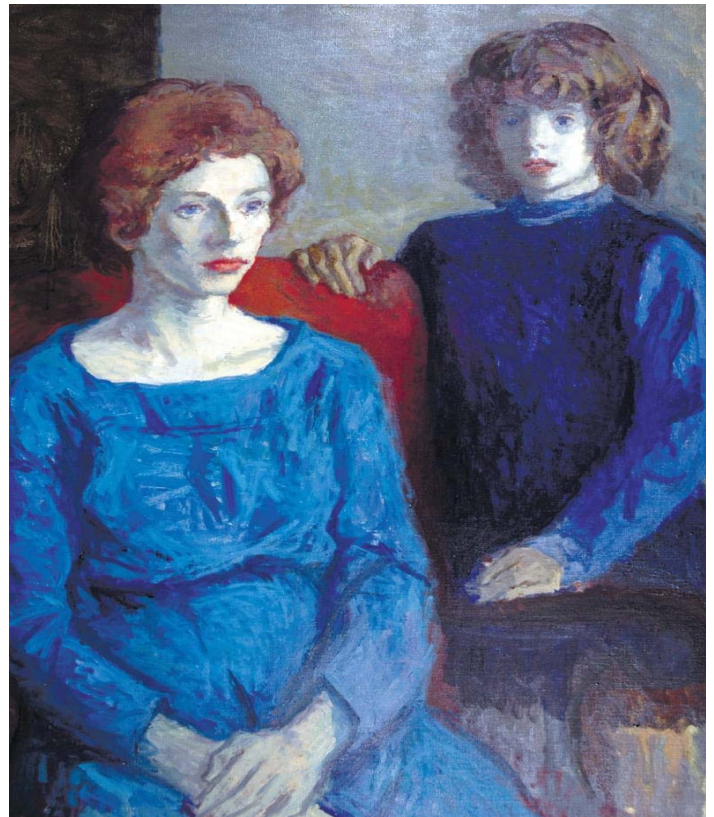
Hampton Bays Seeks Its Place In Art History

Museum documents work of 'The Squiretown Circle'

Over the years, books and articles about the East End as an artists' refuge have consumed a river of ink and not a few trees. Ever since the rowdy, irreverent members of the Tile Club started it all by publishing a lighthearted account of their adventures during an 1878 excursion to eastern Long Island, tales of city artists out in the country have poured from the pens of journalists and authors. The bohemian antics of the first wave of artists to "colonize" East Hampton, the celebrity luster William Merritt Chase lent to Southampton with his Shinnecock Summer Art School, the unconventional, uninhibited spirit with which the Abstract Expressionists assaulted local sensibilities—all have been exhaustively observed, analyzed and evaluated. There is, however, another, less familiar, chapter in the story, one that centers on what might be called "The Squiretown Circle." That is, in fact, the title that cocurator Marc Fasanella has given to an exhibition that will open at the Southampton Historical Museum on Saturday, June 2, featuring small works by David Burliuk (1882-1967), Nikolai Cikovsky (1894-1987), Moses Soyer (1899-1974), and Robert Gwathmey (1903-1988). Mr. Fasanella's cocurator is Mikaela Sardo-Lamarche of ACA Galleries in New York, which is loaning many of the paintings.

For a year and a half after the closing of Southampton College, where he had been teaching graphic design and art education courses, Mr. Fasanella ran his own gallery in Hampton Bays. His goal in founding the Artisan Gallery, which closed last January, was twofold, he said in a recent interview. "I wanted to put down stronger roots in Hampton Bays," he said. As a local merchant, providing an outlet for what he called "down-to-earth local artists," he thought he could do that.

But Mr. Fasanella is a teacher and he also had an educational agenda: he wanted to alert the community to the existence of that lesser known chapter in the history of East End artists' colonies. "I wanted to expose the fact that there is a history that is tied to the New York art world," he said, "but based in the local community." It is, of course, the concept behind "The Squiretown Circle." Though Nikolai Cikovsky settled in a cottage in North Sea in the 1940s and Robert Gwathmey famously occupied the iconic house designed for him by his son Charles in Amagansett, David Burliuk and Moses Soyer lived within a half mile of each other on Squiretown Road. (Both artists' Hampton Bays homes remain in the family.) The four artists were friends and, according to Mr. Fasanella, Squiretown Road was more often than not the place



where they gathered. Indeed, accounts of their parties are part of the local lore, he suggested, describing them as lively affairs that found them "drinking and talking progressive politics, this very powerful artists' social circle, right there in Hampton Bays." Of the three Russian-born artists (Burliuk, Cikovsky and Soyer), Moses Soyer, whose landscapes and portraits have been widely collected and are in major museums nationwide, is perhaps the best known in this country. He is represented in the exhibition by a selection of portraits—a self-portrait and one of Cikovsky among them. Soyer landscapes have been so popular with collectors, said Mr. Fasanella, that none were available for the show.

Mr. Fasanella noted that when he mounted an exhibition of Soyer's work at his gallery last year, a portrait of the artist's daughter-in-law attracted the most attention. She was very familiar to local residents because of her charitable work in Hampton Bays, he said, and that connection gave the show an added dimension. David Burliuk, often described as the father of Russian Futurism, was "probably better known in Russia than the U.S.," said Mr. Fasanella. "He was a very interesting character." To say the least.

The author—along with fellow avantgardists in pre-revolutionary Russia—of a Futurist Manifesto, David Burliuk was not only a prolific painter, he was a consummate showman, whose youthful antics in the name of artistic exuberance were legendary. He and his friends were known to roam the streets of Moscow dressed in outrageous costumes, wearing spoons or vegetables pinned to their lapels and with images of animals or airplanes painted on their faces.

By the time he arrived in Hampton Bays, four decades and half a world separated him from his wild youth, but Ellen de Pazzi, his Hampton Bays neighbor who has written a memoir of their friendship, remembers him as a forceful personality and still “a bit of a showman.” No sooner had she arrived with her family at their new home in Hampton Bays in 1952 than David Burluk and his wife appeared at her door with a bottle of wine and a painting.

It was Burluk who was responsible for bringing Moses Soyer and Nikolai Cikovsky to the area, according to Ms. de Pazzi. And it was on his birthday every year that more than 200 people, including a quorum of art world luminaries, gathered at Squiretown Road for a giant celebration. “Everyone came from New York to celebrate,” she said, noting that the Greeks led the dancing, which “got a little riotous with the drink.” For Hampton Bays and the Shinnecock area, said Ms. de Pazzi, “it opened a whole new door to the world.”

When Nikolai Cikovsky arrived in New York in 1923 after fleeing his homeland, he was a mature artist but had been forced to leave all of his early work behind. His American career began with Cubist-influenced canvases that earned him accolades and exhibitions, and then the purchase of his cottage in North Sea opened another new chapter.

When his work was exhibited at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton in 1980, it was noted that in the new location “his palette lightened, his compositions revealed broad spacious fields, vast expanses of sky and far horizons. Light entered his canvases as never before.” Gary Madison, owner of Long Island Sound and an avid collector of Cikovsky’s work, eventually purchased one of the paintings from that show—a woman in a red dress. It is one of more than 60 Cikovsky works that Mr. Madison has acquired over the last 25 years, a widely representative collection from which Mr. Fasanella has made his selections for the Squiretown show.

Cikovsky used many mediums for a variety of subjects, and Mr. Madison has tried to find examples of each. “I have watercolors, gouaches, oil on board, canvas, still lifes, landscapes, portraits—I don’t try to get eight of the same type of painting,” he said.

Of the four artists represented, Robert Gwathmey remains slightly apart as an internationally known artist of social realism whose works are admired for their compassionate content as well as their distinctive high modernist style. From the rural South rather than Russia, and a resident of East Hampton, where Manhattan art world influences are heaviest, “he was tied to that whole scene in East Hampton, but very separate in many ways, very conservative,” said Mr. Fasanella. Conservative, he added, in that “he had a direction that he went in and

stayed with.”

He may not have been fluent in Russian, but there was apparently plenty of political talk in English, and as a man of passionate concern for society’s underprivileged, Gwathmey would surely have been an enthusiastic participant. Despite some obvious differences, Mr. Fasanella has found similarities in the paintings of all four artists, which have suggested ways in which their East End surroundings influenced each of them and ways in which they influenced each other.

He points to certain paintings by Cikovsky with “a Russian folk look” and compares them to Gwathmey’s figures of southern sharecroppers and migrant workers. He notes that Burluk sometimes painted like Soyer and occasions, as in his portrait of Burluk, when the same could be said of Cikovsky. He looks at Cikovsky’s famous red-dress painting and sees a woman gazing out from the canvas with “Soyeresque eyes.”

Clearly, the more he discovers about the lives and work of these artists who gathered a half century ago in Hampton Bays, the more intrigued he becomes. In putting together “The Squiretown Circle,” which opens on Saturday, June 2, at the Rogers Mansion and remains on view through July 28, Mr. Fasanella is hoping to spread the word about what he calls “this fascinating group who came here to this un-Hampton.”