

Art in the Belgrades:

A Preliminary Look at the History of Visual Art, Literature, and Music in the Belgrade Lakes Region

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While thousands of tourists flood the Belgrade lakes region of central Maine every year to utilize the area's numerous outdoor activities and enjoy the picturesque views, many of them are unaware of the long, rich history of this dreamland. The continued health of the Belgrades necessitates not only respect and appreciation for the beautiful countryside, but also an understanding of the comprehensive history of the region. One of the major components of a comprehensive historical study is examining the art related to the seven major lakes, thirteen municipalities and surrounding Maine landscape. Through my investigation of Belgrade artists and pieces of art influenced by this central Maine region, I have compiled an original historical narrative of art affiliated with this central Maine environment.

Throughout my research on this project, I have not come across a single document or piece of published literature discussing this topic. This comes as a great surprise to me, as the Belgrade region of Maine is known for its remoteness and serenity; characteristics that embody landscape art. Talking with historians of the region such as Nan Mairs, town historian of Belgrade, and David Richards, assistant director of the Margaret Smith Chase (MSC) Library, confirmed my suspicion. Richards, who has also been researching the history of this region, admitted that he could not recall a single written source documenting the subject of Belgrade art. Mairs, a life-long resident of the region and current town historian, said much of the same as she flipped through the countless books, newspaper articles, magazines, and journal articles that make up her Belgrade history archives. To my knowledge, the project presented below is truly one of originality having never been formally studied or published in the long, rich history of the Belgrade region. That said, there is much that can be added to enhance this study in the coming years as the NSF-funded EPSCoR Belgrade project continues at Colby.

The first component of my Belgrade art history study deals with the visual arts, including drawing, painting, printmaking, stage performances and sculpture. Omitted from this initial study are photography and filmmaking, because of their arbitrary relation to art. It is a fine line that I could not delineate in the two months of my involvement of this project, and is one that will have to be looked at in the future. Notwithstanding the absence of photography and film in my project, I was still able to secure a general understanding of the history of visual arts in the Belgrade region.

Painting is often understood as the prototypical form of visual art. Painted scenes of a snowy landscape, an early morning fog or a windy day on the lake embody this form of artwork. Maine has always been a haven for painters looking to escape from the urban hustle and bustle in search of a more peaceful and serene working environment. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it has also been a place where aspiring painters can come to sharpen their overall artistic skills. The McMillan School of Fine Arts Vacation School on the shore of Great Pond was established by the artist and illustrator Mary Lane McMillan and her musician husband George McMillan in the early 1920s as a part of their residence-studio school in New Rochelle, New York. Acting as a camp for vacation students from the school's main campus, the McMillan School was, "removed from state roads and set among hills and trees on the shore of Great Pond..." to take full advantage of the scenic beauty of the school's surroundings.¹ Though this institution lasted only about a decade and did not produce any notable artists, it did lay the groundwork for future art schools in this central Maine region.

¹ Hollingsworth Fine Arts. "Maine Memory Network - Hiker, McMillan School of Fine Arts Vacation School, Rome, 1933." *The Maine Memory Network*. 2010. Web. 3 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.mainememory.net/bin/Detail?ln=12386%29>>.

Another more modern example of art schools in the region is the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a nine-week residency program for emerging visual artists located a little more than ten miles north of the Belgrade watershed in the town of Skowhegan, Maine. Established in 1946, this school continues to bring in a diverse group of artistically-gifted individuals every summer to stimulate and enhance their creative abilities. A component of this art school that has aided me in my research of the history of painting in Belgrade is the weekly lecture series. Since 1952, various poets, painters, architects, philosophers, journalists, curators and historians have given over 600 lectures on a plethora of different subjects.² Most interesting to me are those talks dealing with the history of painting in central Maine. British-born realist painter Rackstraw Downes and American-born modern artist Neil Welliver were guest lecturers at Skowhegan and talk at great length about their painting experiences in central Maine. Though they lived in towns west of Skowhegan, they spent many days at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and surrounding Belgrade watershed, gaining great insight on the methods and trends of painting in this central Maine locale.

One of the most evident trends in the history of painting in the Belgrades documented in the Skowhegan lectures is its association with the summer season. So many of the paintings of Maine and especially this region are “executed from nature” during the months of May, June, July, August, and September. Subjects associated with the summer months such as “a green field,” “kids fishing,” “a quaint cottage,” “chicken houses,” “a horse farm,” and “tractors” are all common focal points of paintings in this region. The explanation for why most paintings of the Belgrade are done in the summer is fairly straightforward: the artists of these pieces only live in Maine for the summer months. Every artist I came across throughout the many interviews I

² "Lectures." *Skowhegan School Lectures*. Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, 2010. Web. 2 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.skowheganart.org/index.php?page=lectures>>.

conducted and the Skowhegan lectures I listened to lived elsewhere for the other nine or so months of the year. Coming from Boston, New York City and Philadelphia among other cities, these artists wanted a more relaxed and peaceful area to work and chose the “green state” of Maine.³

Rackstraw Downes also talks about the frequent creation of central Maine “worksapes” in a 1981 lecture. Playing off the common genre of landscapes, Downes uses this word to explain the pieces of art portraying or implying scenes of labor and human exertion; Tarring machines and farm equipment are mentioned as common subjects in these worksapes.⁴ In one lecture given by Downes in 1975, the artist explains how “the quality of life that people lead in Maine” is often an intriguing theme for paintings done in the Central Maine region. Maine is much different from other states, because here, “you do it yourself.”⁵ This individualistic attitude is not only portrayed by Downes and other 20th century painters, but it was also evident in early woodcarvings of the region.

The town of Smithfield, located on the eastern shore of North Pond, has records of early woodcuts carved during the colonial times when the area was first being settled by a significant number of farmers. The carvings illustrate the hardworking life of the “short-lived homesteaders.” Scenes of farmers plowing fields, building fences, watering plants, pumping water, building furniture, stoking a fire, and reaping wheat illustrate the laborious workdays experienced by 18th century Mainers. Because of the intensity and long hours associated with this

³ Downes, Rackstraw. "1975 Skowhegan Lecture." Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Lecture Series. Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine. 1975. Lecture.

⁴ Downes, Rackstraw. "1981 Skowhegan Lecture."

⁵ Downes, Rackstraw. "1975 Skowhegan Lecture."

lifestyle, a man became “old and gray at 40” and often died before reaching the age of 50.⁶ Like Downes discussed in his 1981 lecture, Belgrade residents show an individual, “do it yourself” type of attitude that is often portrayed in the artwork of the region.

In comparison to the helpful painting resources I discovered, I found very little regarding the history of ceramics and sculpture in the Belgrades. I did not discover any local sculptors or written information on sculpting; however, I did interview one woman with knowledge on the subject. Susan McPherran, who manages the Spring Gallery and Sculpture Garden in Belgrade Lakes Village, helped me begin to understand the region’s connection to sculpting. Established in 2000 as part of the New York-based Modern Art Foundry Company, Spring Gallery and Sculpture Garden exhibits a variety of works cast in bronze, aluminum, wood and plaster.⁷ Though often created in the Modern Art Foundry central location in Astoria, New York, the sculptures seen at Spring Gallery are frequently commissioned by executives with the intent of appealing to the communities of central Maine. For example, the gallery is currently selling a number of animal bronze cast sculptures including one of a loon, an aquatic bird that has come to symbolize the Belgrade region and its natural beauty.

Similar to the painters of central Maine, the sculptors associated with Belgrade’s Spring Gallery spend much of their time and working life in a different location. After the pieces are created in their separate locations, the relevant sculptures like the aforementioned loon are shipped up to Spring Gallery where they are put on the market during the busy summer months. Acting as one of the earliest lake communities for “big city people,” Belgrade has always attracted the “big money” and willing clients to support a sculpture business such as Spring

⁶ Ferm, Deane William, and Debra Campbell. *Smithfield, 1840-1990: Maine's Only Leap Year Town*. Smithfield, ME: Town of Smithfield, Maine., 1990, 17.

⁷ McPherran, Susan. "Spring Gallery & Sculpture Garden." Message to the author. 25 Feb. 2010. E-mail.

Gallery.⁸ The sculptures and carvings seen in Spring Gallery and other galleries around the Belgrade watershed do not necessarily originate from the area; however, the tourist industry has created a large market for such items and thus ingrained itself as an artistic staple of society.

The final visual artistic genre I explored was stage performances. Though not as popular anymore in central Maine because of the accessibility of television and other forms of home-entertainment, theatre shows were all the craze in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Following the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, stage performances were a vital component of the entertainment scene. In the town of Smithfield, productions such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were put on with great regularity, and cost excited patrons 15 cents for general admission.⁹ Some thirty years later in 1903, a new summer recreation spot called Cascade Park was created in the Belgrade region that had theatergoers licking their chops. Located on the southern bank of the Messalonskee stream just east of the Cascade Woolen Mill and sponsored by the Oakland-Waterville Railway Company, Cascade Park included fairgrounds, a state of the art horse track, and an open-air theatre for concerts and plays.¹⁰ It was a smart, economic move by the Railway Company: an appealing tourist attraction situated along a busy travel route in an increasingly popular region of Maine.

Open from 1903 until 1935, Cascade Park's open-air amphitheatre officially seated 500 spectators, though the official attendance mark often rose above 1,000 for many performances. The program varied, but usually included some combination of vaudeville performances, music programs, Ringling Brothers Circus acts, and Sunday band concerts throughout the course of a

⁸ A quote from Susan McPherran. "Art in the Belgrades." Telephone interview. 23 Feb. 2010.

⁹ Ferm, Deane William, and Debra Campbell. *Smithfield, 1840-1990: Maine's Only Leap Year Town*. Smithfield, ME: Town of Smithfield, Maine., 1990, 32.

¹⁰ Cummings, Richard. O. *Waterville, Fairfield & Oakland Railway Company*. Warehouse Point, Conn.: Connecticut Valley Chapter, National Railway Historical Society, 1965.

typical summer.¹¹ It was truly a smorgasbord of live entertainment events that showcased the talents of musicians and actors of all ages.¹² Admission prices to the theatre at Cascade Park were comparable to those seen in Smithfield forty years earlier, costing ten cents for a reserved seat and fifteen cents for open seating. It was around this same time that the Belgrade Lakes region of Maine was beginning to blossom into a haven for peace-seeking Americans.¹³ Visitors were looking to unwind from the stresses of the working world and indulge in a bit of entertainment and leisure time. Cascade Park and its spacious open-air theatre offered exactly that, and went on to become a very successful enterprise for more than three decades.

The next major genre of art explored in this project is literature, which includes books, poems, and essays relating to the Belgrade region. To my knowledge, there have been no official publications documenting the history of literature in the specified region, forcing me to rely strictly on interviews, archival records, and published examples for this preliminary report. While diaries, letters, and personal memoirs rooted in Belgrade are certainly forms of literature that should be included in a comprehensive study of the subject, I have decided to focus on the published work of three major authors affiliated with the area. Ernest Thompson, E.B. White, and Erskine Caldwell are all esteemed American authors with different specialties, focuses, and career paths; however, they share a commonality in that they spent time in the Belgrade Lakes region. All three authors cherish(ed) the memories of this community and it is evident in some of their most venerable works. Though the publications of these authors do not account for the entire literary history of this central Maine region, they can certainly illustrate general patterns and trends of writing in the Belgrades.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Oakland Historical Society. *Images of America: Oakland, Maine*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2004.

¹³ Cummings, *Waterville*.

Arguably the most famous piece of literature with a direct connection to the Belgrade Lake region is Ernest Thompson's play *On Golden Pond*. The plot focuses on an aging couple who spend each summer at their cottage on a lake called Golden Pond. When they are visited by their daughter Chelsea, Chelsea's fiancé, and her fiancé's son in July, the turbulent father-daughter relationship becomes apparent to the reader. Thompson explores the complex theme of troubled relationships throughout the play, focusing on both the interaction between Chelsea and her father, as well as the difficulties faced by a couple in the twilight years of a lengthy marriage. While the thematic element of family difficulties moves the play forward, the plethora of references to central Maine was of great interest to me. Based on Thompson's childhood experiences and memories on Great Pond in the Belgrade region, *On Golden Pond* references many subjects typical of this picturesque community. Reminiscing about summer camps, picking fresh blueberries, listening to the Loons high-pitch mating call, and fishing off a dock at sunset are all activities present in Thompson's play that epitomize life on Great Pond.¹⁴

Similar to many of the artists discussed earlier, Ernest Thompson was not a full time resident of the area. His regular summer visits as a child created lasting memories that influenced his later work. Originally from Vermont and currently living in New Hampshire, Thompson's time in Maine was limited to the occasional visits his family made in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Belgrade's impact on his life was strong and influenced him to write a play that idealized his childhood vacation spot.

Best known for his popular children stories *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, E. B. White was a famous American writer with ties to the Belgrade region. Though he was born in New York and lived much of his life there, White made many trips north into Maine as a young

¹⁴ Ernest Thompson, *On Golden Pond*. New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2006. Print.

¹⁵ Mairs, Don and Nan. "Art History in the Belgrades." Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2010.

child and retired to his farm in Brooklin, Maine toward the end of his life. White wrote many books and articles throughout his career, and occasionally published essays that reflected events of his past. One essay in particular chronicled a visit White made to his ideal boyhood vacation spot: a cottage on Great Pond. Titled “Once More to the Lake,” the essay recounts the feelings and emotions felt by White as he shows his son the lake for the first time. White struggles emotionally as he continually has déjà vu of the past while watching his son engage in similar activities. Though he felt a sense of perpetuity in his return visit, the changing environment was hard for White to stomach as new, noisy boats speed up and down the lake disturbing the serene atmosphere that the author so clearly remembered experiencing as a child. These memories invoke a theme of technology and tourism, two components of the Belgrade region that were not as prevalent in the early 20th century when White was a young boy.

E.B. White’s “Once More to the Lake” typifies the life of an average Belgrade summer resident. White explains that his family was “escaping the city heat” during their summer travels to Great Pond. Fishing, swimming, and picking berries were the order of the day, followed by a relaxing s’more-filled evening under the expansive Maine sky and bright stars. Included in all of these activities was of course family time, a staple in White’s childhood visits and characteristic of many summer residents. Aside from the bulkier engines and faster motorboats, nothing had changed since White’s childhood. The lake, cottage, dock and roads were all, “as it always had been,” as if “there had been no years.”¹⁶ There was a sense of perpetuity in White’s writings. The Belgrade region was as it had always been, a haven from the hustle and bustle of the real world. The only difference was that more and more people were beginning to take advantage of this picturesque Maine community as a place for rest and relaxation.

¹⁶ White, E. B. *Essays of E.B. White*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. Print.

Like White and Thompson, the third author discussed in this project has major ties to the Belgrade region. Erskine Caldwell won critical acclaim for his writings about the social problems in his native South. In the late 1920s when he was in the beginning stages of his career as a writer, Caldwell decided to move to Mt. Vernon, Maine, a municipality within the Belgrade watershed. He lived in his Mt. Vernon home for less than five years; however, it was here that his prolific career as an author began. Though his work does not directly reflect the time he spent in Belgrade, the time Caldwell spent in Maine had a lasting effect on his work. Caldwell ventured into the region as a confused, unmotivated man trying to “get away from it all.”¹⁷ The serenity, remoteness, and solitude offered by Mt. Vernon enabled Caldwell to clear his mind and focus strictly on his goals of becoming a writer. The case of Erskine Caldwell demonstrates the versatility of the Belgrade region’s effect on the history of literature. While Thompson and White were directly influenced by their Belgrade interactions and memories, Caldwell was indirectly affected by the region’s tranquil, inviting environment.

The final artistic component of this study is music. Information on this subject was very scarce and will have to be expanded in later reports. Despite a lack of concrete information gathered on the topic, I did uncover two examples of music in the region that fit the trends of Belgrade visual art and literature. The New England Music Camp (NEMC), located on the shore of Lake Messalonskee in Sidney, offers high-quality and intensive musical education for children ages 11-18. In addition to the rigorous schedule of musical workshops and lessons, campers engage in popular sports and recreational activities on the lake. The NEMC goal is to not only help young people find joy in making and playing music, but also to “appreciate the splendor of

¹⁷ Richards, David. "Art History of the Belgrades." Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2010.

Maine's woodlands and lakes..."¹⁸ The warm, stimulating, and supportive community environment of the New England Music Camp enables campers to thrive in their specific musical discipline. Associated with this encouraging environment is the NEMC's tradition of "family."¹⁹ Portrayed in both Ernest Thompson's play and E.B. White's essay, the idea of a tight-knit family of friends or relatives is a major component of life in the Belgrade.

A second musical connection to the region that also portrays the importance of family in the Belgrades is the Gawler Family. John, Ellen, and daughter Elsie Gawler hail from the central Maine region but have traveled the country as a musical trio sharing their talents with thousands. They play an, "eclectic assortment of old and new sounds from many folk traditions" using a variety of instruments including banjos, cellos, guitars, fiddles, and ukuleles.²⁰ They are arguably the most famous musicians to come out of the Belgrade region, and have accomplished some of their greatest musical feats as a family. This is a testament to the significance of the family unit in everyday Belgrade life. Whether it be a late night barbeque, a water activity at New England Music Camp, or a collection of musical artists, the Belgrade region seems to always foster a tight-knit community.

When developing a case study to explore as part of the NSF-funded EPSCoR Belgrade Sustainability project, I wanted to insure the subject matter had deep ties to the central Maine region. Investigating visual art, literature, and music of Belgrade fulfilled this prerequisite and provided me with a good understanding of the general history of the area. A common theme

¹⁸ "About Us." *New England Music Camp Overview*. New England Music Camp, 2010. Web. 17 Apr. 2010. <http://www.nemusiccamp.com/index.php?page=en_Overview>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tibbetts Jr., George L. "Gawler Family to Perform Folk Concert at Lithgow on April 1." *The Valley Voice | Truly Entertaining*. 26 Mar. 2010. Web. 12 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.thevalleyvoice.org/2010/03/26/gawler-family-to-perform-folk-concert-at-lithgow-on-april-1/13906/>>.

found in all three genres of art was the direct relationship with the summer months. Painters, sculptures, stage performances, books, plays, authors, and music camps are all artistic components included in my studied that had an inherent connection to the months of June, July, August, and September. A second underlying theme of the Belgrade arts is the focus on Maine's serenity and peacefulness. Whether it be the subject of a painting, the inspiration of an essay, or the motive for building a summer music camp, the peaceful Belgrade environment has always influenced the art of the region. This case study is by no means a conclusive project detailing the history of art in the Belgrade, but is rather a preliminary investigation to be used as a springboard for future inquiries about the subject. It is a topic that has a long history in the region, and one that should not be overlooked by tourists and residents alike.

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