

**Idealism to Realism:  
An Investigation of Mid-Hudson Artisans from 1880-1940's**

Tucked inside the Hudson River Valley, a culturally rich settlement called Woodstock became home to traditional and avant guard American artists alike during the turn nineteenth centuries. Within this town, intellectual idealists Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead and Hervey White established artistic communities based on the socialist ideals of John Ruskin, and the work ethic of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The artists of these communities veered from industrialized America in favor of a humble life that fed their creativity. As the stock-market crashed, many of Woodstock's artists rejoined the greater American community to participate in President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, recording the history of the Hudson River Valley for decades to come. Through the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century, the artists and intellectuals who congregated in Woodstock would reject, shape, and rejoin America; leaving their unconventional fingerprints on Hudson River Valley's history.

In the eighteenth century, the rural town called Woodstock attracted culture like a magnet tucked in the Catskill Mountains. By geographical chance, Woodstock was on route to back settlements, so residents became tavern keepers for settlers passing through. Those who stayed in the Woodstock taverns brought stories of their travels and native lands, enriching the town an eclectic mix of outside influence. In addition to a varied culture, Woodstock attracted more seasonal residents with mountains, valleys, forests, cliffs, and streams. The small town developed a standing reputation for its glamour and romance, instilled in the Catskills by Washington Irving, Joseph Jefferson, and Thomas Cole. It even bore the famous American fable "Johnny Appleseed," as well as the

children's game "London Bridge." Even more people and ideas were brought by Woodstock's developing industries in glass making, bluestone quarrying, and woodworking. Based on its geography, crafts industry, and rich cultural reputation, Woodstock became host to idealists, artists, writers, poets and stage people alike.<sup>i</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Woodstock became the site of two significant artistic communities inspired by socialist ideals. In reaction to the dreary reality of the Industrial revolution, European and American intellectuals united under socialism, and artists responded with a sub revolution called the Arts and Crafts Movement. Supporters of the movement revolted against industrial produced products and urbanization by retreating to a humble life of self-sustenance. The Woodstock artist colonies that developed in the early twentieth century were parallel with this revolution. Wealthy, English intellectual Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead funded and established the first of these settlements called the Byrdcliffe colony. Whitehead attended the Harrow School and received his Masters degree at Balliol College, Oxford where he studied under the instruction of John Ruskin. With the socialist influence of Ruskin in mind, Whitehead began to imagine a "social experiment" where people would create beauty with their hands while maintaining the beauty of their minds and bodies through healthy socialist living.<sup>ii</sup>

Although he was born wealthy, the young Whitehead dreamed of being a business-man. The young man had lofty plans to turn the family business of industrialized felt-making to the production of beautiful cloth. After revealing the plan to his less than enthusiastic father, Whitehead set off to Paris where he apprenticed himself to a carpenter to earn a living with his hands. Despite the break between Whitehead and his father, Whitehead was assumed to have made amends by 1880s, when he moved to a

lavish estate in Syria. A year later in 1890, Whitehead moved to Italy and established a career as a writer, translating Dante into modern Italian. In his independent writings, Whitehead infers a sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of society. He wrote profusely of the “ideal community” where people produced their own goods, giving their work a sense of personal purpose.<sup>iii</sup>

When he returned to the United States in the late 1890's, White married artist Jane Byrd McCall of Philadelphia and settled in California where they had two sons. Within that decade, Whitehead involved himself with people who shared his views of current society. Whitehead was introduced to Hervey White, a free spirited writer who shared his ambition to build an Arts and Crafts colony. Although the men differed in personality and social status, they forged a friendship based on shared ideals. Specifically, they both studied and admired Ruskin and both favored the craft industry over factory-made products. In 1900, Whitehead invited Hervey White to his California estate. The visit resulted in a plan to create a community where craftspeople could live and work together in a self-sufficient community.<sup>iv</sup>

In 1902, Whitehead and White bought five mountainside farms in Woodstock. Although Whitehead funded the 1500 acres of land, he immediately returned to California, leaving White and recruited partner, artist Bolton Brown, to develop the self-sufficient colony. Whitehead's fundamental absence would mark the beginning of rift between him, and the rest of the Byrdcliffe community. With Whitehead back in California, White and Brown oversaw the construction of the buildings, and farmland. Facilities included furniture building, iron working, weaving, ceramics, and painting. Whitehead contributed by providing talented students with scholarships and dormitories.

As Byrdcliffe began to fill with eclectic teachers and students from all over the country, the colony became the first step in making Woodstock a center for American arts.<sup>v</sup>

Swedish painter Carl Lindin became one of the first inhabitants along with Fritz Van der Loo, an ex-Calvary captain under De Wet in the Boer War. Both were friends of White, whose gregarious and generous personality attracted people of all sorts.<sup>vi</sup> One of the farms was converted into “the Lark’s Nest,” which Woodstock historian Anita M. Smith described as “a club for highly interesting people” in her first person account of life in Woodstock.<sup>vii</sup> Smith names and describes the new inhabitants at Byrdcliffe by their name, profession, and personality, when it was worth noting. New teachers included Martin Schutze of the University of Chicago and his wife, painter and photographer Eve Schutze; George Eggers, who would become an art museum director; and Ned Thatcher, who taught medal-work. Other early teachers at Byrdcliffe included, Ellen gates Star, who came from the Hull House to do bookbinding, and Edith Penmann and Elizabeth Hardenvergh who started the pottery program. During this socially explosive time at Byrdcliffe, White met his future wife Vivian Bevans. Bolton Brown described “The Lark’s Nest” as being so full of people getting on each others nerves that it should be called the Wasp’s Nest.<sup>viii</sup>

In its early years, Whitehead called artists to join his Arts and Crafts Colony. In an article published in 1903, Whitehead wrote an article called “A Plea for Manual Work” in which he connects the sanctity of manual work with the newly formed community. “...the joy of a man in the work of his hands,-is not a mere passing satisfaction, but is an element in all sane life.”<sup>ix</sup> He writes that although the community

was young, it was successfully combining the manual and intellectual life that could flourish in the countryside.

Although many eccentric people were attracted to Byrdcliffe, the Whiteheads were not known for their free spirits. Whitehead, a well traveled and wealthy Englishman, believed artists should be under order and direction in order to produce creative work, which many artists found contradictory to the colony's zeitgeist.<sup>x</sup> Smith wrote that the nobleman did not communicate on the same level as the artists, often giving comments to the artists that were taken sourly. Mrs. Whitehead's personality mirrored her husbands. Her tendency toward the romantic was seen by the avant guard artists as old fashioned and annoying. In *Woodstock: History and Hearsay*,<sup>xi</sup> Smith describes Mrs. Whitehead as having "a vision of the picturesque life remote from reality."<sup>xi</sup>

The Whiteheads were generous and idealistic, but their strict rules and traditional ideals caused many Byrdcliffe inhabitants to leave. Many of the inhabitants at Byrdcliffe were from a different era and class, each battling the effects of the Industrial revolution and ferociously trying to express themselves through a new kind of art and lifestyle. This social rift proved too deep for many, including founding members Hervey White and Bolton Brown. White decided to create a less rigid socialist arts community of his own. Along with his old friends Fritz van der Loo and Carl Lindin, White left Byrdcliffe and bought several acres of land in Hurley, a settlement right outside of Woodstock. White and his wife Vivian Bevans settled in a preexisting barn. He and his friends began constructing humble dwellings with White's modest funds. The minimalistic colony called "the Maverick" would mark the next chapter in Woodstock history.

White's character was also built from his humble beginnings. Born in a sod hut on an Iowa farm in 1866, White spent his childhood taking care of his motherless family tending to the family farm. From a young age, White valued education. After moving to Kansas, the intellectually talented boy began teaching at a rural school and saving for his education. His hard work paid off when he attended the University of Kansas. During his college years, White traveled to Mexico for a year to participate in a scientific expedition. After graduation, he received a scholarship to Harvard University. After hitchhiking and rail-riding his way to the east coast, he studied and admired the work of John Ruskin. After graduation, White spent time in Italy, traveling and studying on a tight budget. He returned to the US after a year, and settled in Chicago where he worked at the Hull House. It was through the Hull House that White met many of his future partners, including Whitehead.<sup>xii</sup>

After splitting from Byrdcliffe, White, Bevans and their two sons lived between the Maverick and New York City. By 1908, the couple divorced and Bevans moved out West, leaving White with the Maverick community for the rest of his life. Although he struggled in his career as a writer, the artists at Maverick embraced White as their leader and friend. As at Byrdcliffe, a good personality was worth more than any physicality. White embodied this idea with his "genius for friendship" and generous attitude.<sup>xiii</sup> In his essay titled "Hervey White's Maverick Colony & Its Artists," Tom Wolf wrote "Hervey White ran his art colony with charisma, ambition, and idealism."<sup>xiv</sup> The result was a colony that had a successful and active publishing business, multi-media festivals, a theatre, and a still-existing chamber music concert, and still served as a home for artists.

Based on the artistic pull of Byrdcliffe and a nearby summer landscape painting school started in 1907, the Maverick was an established home for artists by 1910.<sup>xv</sup> Young, ambitious, and unknown artists from all over the country flocked to the colony in hopes of establishing their artistic careers. Many of the up and coming artists who came to the Maverick were old college friends, or couples. Artists like Henry Gottlieb, Arnold and Lucille Blanch knew each other from their undergraduate studies in Minnesota, and all attended the Art Students League in New York City before moving upstate. The appeal for these young artists was clear: the Maverick offered low-budget housing and lifestyle, and was close to the larger artist community of Woodstock. The communities were so closely linked, that in 1919, Maverick Artist Conrad Kramer founded the Woodstock Artists Association so the artists could show and sell their work in the town.

By the 1920's, the artists on the Maverick had developed their own style of artistic creation, fueled by their free-spirited lifestyle. Within the isolated community, they created various mediums of work, many of which were used at the wild Maverick festivals. The artists largely considered themselves modernists, and openly mocked the more traditional styles produced at Byrdcliffe.<sup>xvi</sup> Despite their self-proclaimed modern style, Wolf describes them as largely realists in his article "On the Maverick." He specifies that the Maverick artists explored traditional subjects, such as primary portraits, landscapes, and interiors, taken directly from their life as a close-knit community.<sup>xvii</sup> Style aside, the artists at Maverick were working, creating, and living successful lives as artists within the Woodstock colony. The economic events at the end of the decade forced these artists to reach outside of the colony to an unlikely ally: the U.S. government.

The stock market crash that devastated the United States in 1929 did not shatter the Woodstock community. The main population of artists did not own stocks or play the market, so they were spared some of the hardship faced by the rest of America. They did, however, suffer economically when their wealthy clientele stopped buying their pictures and sculptures. Like much of America, these artists turned to Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Association to give them an economic boost. A large number of Woodstock artists applied for the Artists Project under the Public Works Administration, simultaneously making a living and contribution to American Art.<sup>xviii</sup> The New York artists provided beautiful hand painted murals in post offices all over the country, including six in the Hudson River Valley. With FDR serving as guide and manager of the region's post office murals, the artists worked to idealize American culture rather than rebel against it.<sup>xix</sup>

Charles Rosen, a well-known member of the Woodstock art colony, began his work on the Beacon Mural in 1937. Rosen attended the Art Students League of New York's Summer School of Landscape Painting, located in Woodstock. He was also a founding member of the Woodstock Artists Association.<sup>xx</sup> The Beacon mural is a forty foot by eighty foot pictorial map of the Hudson Valley divided by counties, done in aquamarine and peach colors that compliment the avant guard style of the 1930s.<sup>xxi</sup> Despite the modern color, Rosen kept the beacon mural historically accurate and realistic to satisfy the government-funded project. Rosen met the project's expectations, which Eleanor Roosevelt herself confirmed. In her column "My Day" she wrote that Rosen's sketches were "not only lovely in color, but interesting in design.... (They) are historically interesting as well as scenically."<sup>xxii</sup>



With Roosevelt approval in mind, fellow Rhinebeck artists and friends Henry Billings and Olin Dows continued to satisfy the WPA project in their murals. Billings, who attended the Art Student's League and exhibited at the Whitney American Art Museum, painted two Murals in the Wappinger's post office in 1940. Both murals depict the gorge and falls of Wappinger Creek, and were painted directly on chestnut panels by request of the President.<sup>xxiii</sup> Billings, who is associated with social realism in Bernice Thomas' "The Stamp of FDR," did not emphasize Wappinger's reputation as a mill town. Instead he painted historically accurate, idyllic scenes with only a few human figures.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In his mural in Rhinebeck, Olin Dows included a small painting of his friend Billings as a "socially conscious modern painter." Despite this detail, Dows continued to paint in a historically accurate manner. The project was perfect for Dows, who had extensive knowledge of the Hudson River landscape and history and was a founding member of the Dutchess County Historical Society.

In addition to the Rhinebeck building, which he offered to paint free of charge, Dows worked on the Hyde Park mural. The sprawling Hyde Park mural depicts the town's history in a series of nineteen panels, starting with the arrival of Henry Hudson on the *Half Moon*. They go on to describe life on the river and even touch on slavery in Hyde Park. "The Stamp of FDR" states that Dows believed in the FDR's programs so he painted enthusiastically, and with a cooperative attitude towards suggestion.<sup>xxv</sup> The book goes on to say that Dows submitted sketches to FDR himself, who would approve or disapprove with red checks and crosses in the margins.<sup>xxvi</sup> Like Billings, Dows received appreciation from Eleanor in her column, in which she commended Dows for his

“wonderful piece of historical research.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The paintings themselves are largely dedicated to FDR himself, who appears in the murals three times.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Much like FDR did for the United States; the artisans of the Mid-Hudson region preserved and nourished American culture during the turn of the nineteenth because of their dissatisfaction with reality. While the rest of the nation conformed to the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution, the natural beauty of the Hudson Valley beckoned those who did not fit the mold. It was here that the idealists made utopian communities for people who created instead of simply operated. Interestingly enough, these isolated communities still felt the sting of the Great Depression, and abandoned their unconformity to follow a more traditional idealist, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Whether they worked in log cabins or state post offices, the artisans of this era shaped Mid-Hudson history with human hands and ideas.

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<sup>i</sup> Smith, Anita M. *Woodstock: History and Hearsay*. Woodstock, New York: Anita M. Smith c1959. WoodstockArts, 2006: 17.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid,82.

<sup>iv</sup> Bloodgood, Josephine, William B. Rhoads, Tom Wolf. *The Maverick: Hervey White's Colony of the Arts*. Woodstock, New York: Woodstock Artists Association & Museum, 2006: 12.

<sup>v</sup> (Ibid., (2006: 12).

<sup>vi</sup> Bloodgood, Josephine, William B. Rhoads, Tom Wolf. *The Maverick: Hervey White's Colony of the Arts*. Woodstock, New York: Woodstock Artists Association & Museum, 2006: 12.

<sup>vii</sup> Smith, Anita M. *Woodstock: History and Hearsay*. Woodstock, New York: Anita M. Smith c1959. WoodstockArts, 2006: 86.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bloodgood, Josephine, William B. Rhoads, Tom Wolf. *The Maverick: Hervey White's Colony of the Arts*. Woodstock, New York: Woodstock Artists Association & Museum, 2006: 19.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>xviii</sup> Smith, Anita M. *Woodstock: History and Hearsay*. Woodstock, New York: Anita M. Smith c1959. WoodstockArts, 2006: 173.

<sup>xix</sup> Thomas, Bernice, L. *The Stamp of FDR: New Deal Post Offices in the Mid-Hudson Valley*. Fleischemanns, New York: Purple Mountain Press, Ltd. c2002:8-9

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid, 62.

## **Bibliography**

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