

Exploding the American Art Colony Movement:
A Hudson Valley Case Study

From the first half of the nineteenth century to the start of the twentieth century, the United States experienced a new phenomenon: the growth of art colonies. There are many different definitions used to describe these types of communities that sprung up across America during this period. These colonies are commonly referred to as locations where diverse artists came together and worked. More recently, art colonies are labeled as areas in which artists and art galleries were concentrated. Ranging in sizes large and small, these art colonies developed across America from California, to Pennsylvania, to New Mexico. However, a vast majority of these colonies developed in the New England region, including some significant ones that formed in the Hudson River Valley.¹ The Hudson River Valley was the site of creation of the Cragmoor, Snedens Landing, and Byrdcliffe Art Colonies. Through analyzing the qualities of these three art colonies, such as their founding ideals, settings, and purpose, it is clear that in some ways they each exemplify the wider art colony movement that developed across the United States. However, it is also evident, that Snedens Landing and Byrdcliffe possessed interesting characteristics that also separated them from the typical American movement.

The American art colony movement was inspired by a similar development in Europe that began in the middle of the nineteenth century. At the time, Europe was experiencing their Industrial Revolution, which promoted urban ideals “of a prudent society, economic growth through industrialization, and institutions of conformity.”² This sparked a resistance movement among artists to move away from urban centers and seek out alternative locations where they

¹ Steve Ship, *American Art Colonies, 1850-1930: A Historical Guide to America's Original Art Colonies and Their Artists* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996)

² Jennifer Aldrich, “Artist Colonies in Europe, the United States, and Florida,” *Graduate School Theses and Dissertations* (2008), 1.

would be free to express their creativity with other innovated-minded people. As a result, numerous art colonies began to develop in Europe, especially in simplistic, rural settings. The goal of each art colony was to form a utopian community where like-minded individuals worked together and promoted creative expressions.³

At the time, the United States was also experiencing an industrial revolution like the one occurring in Europe. The similarities between Europe and the United States' industrial, economic position promoted the admission of European utopian and natural concepts. Like many European artists, American artists detested the United States' "rapid industrialization and increasing metropolitan over-crowdedness during the late nineteenth century."⁴ Thus, many artists felt encouraged to develop communities where "they could freely discuss their personal artistic beliefs with other artists."⁵ As a result, art communities began to emerge.

Founders of these developing American art colonies believed that the settings of their communities were extremely important. Many of these founders were inspired by famous French art colonies such as Pont-Aven, Giverny, and Barbizon. In these French communities, artists were taught to move beyond using art, academic theories when creating works. Instead, these artists were encouraged to "learn their art from nature" and embraced experimentation.⁶ This idea coupled with the notion of moving away from industrial conformity, influenced colony founders to choose natural, inspiring locations to build their communities. They actively sought "quiet places with picturesque scenery" that would stir an artist's imagination.⁷ Some chose settings with beautiful mountain views, while others chose eye-catching coastal scenery.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ Ship, *American*, X.

⁵ *Ibid.*, X.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

However, despite the difference in locations, the common thread of these art colonies was to have a natural, striking view setting.⁸

American artists began to move to these new centers because of their appealing qualities. First, art colonies served as an alternative, beautiful setting to express one's creativity, instead of in a rigid industrial city. Second, these communities promoted the formation of camaraderie between similar-minded artists because they could openly share their creative ideas.⁹ Third and equally significant, art colonies "offered attractive benefits for both struggling and successful artists, such as inexpensive accommodation and a wide variety of local residents who would pose as subjects for minimal fees."¹⁰ Thus, these art colony qualities encourage artists to flock to these communities. Here, many important sculptures, painters, and musicians, and so on came to grow their artistic style and imaginations. A significant number of these artists moved to art colonies that formed in the Hudson River Valley.

The Cragmoor Art Colony was one of the notable art communities that developed in the Hudson River Valley that reveals many of the themes embodied in the nation-wide art colony movement. This American art colony got its start in the 1870s, in the small village of Cragmoor in Ulster County.¹¹ Similar to other art colonies that sprung up across the country "in the late nineteenth century, Cragmoor provided welcome relief and inspiration for artists to escape from busy cities to pursue nature in a place not yet touched by industrial progress."¹² This art colony was founded on the belief of the importance of moving apart from the confining industrial cities

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*

to a place surrounded by inspiring nature. Thus, the beauty of village of Cragmoor was a central element of its art colony.¹³

Like most art colonies across America, the Cragmoor Art Colony valued its scenic setting. Cragmoor offered artists an alternative environment to the industrial cities. It was centered in a rural location “with valleys and mountains, ever-changing light and weather,” which all together provided “idealistic landscape scenes.”¹⁴ This was effectively marketed to those artists who were anxious to leave the busy city, especially during the summer months. These artists were seeking a calm, natural setting where they could work on their craft. They all desired a setting that was refreshing and invigorating.¹⁵ Thus, they all wanted to experience what artist “Judge Addison Brown describe as ‘ its stimulating air, its distant horizon, its wide expanse of landscape, valley and mountain, the brilliancy of its sunset skies, and the grandeur and awfulness of its summer storms!’”¹⁶ Artists wanted to experience this exhilarating setting of the Cragmoor Art Colony. As a result, in numbers they began to travel Cragmoor.

On line with the larger American trend, artists were attracted to the Cragmoor Art Colony not just because of its natural, breathtaking setting, but also because of its appeal of becoming a part of an artistic community. Cragmoor was a location were artists could gather and share their ideas openly. This can be seen in a journalist’s 1906 description of this art colony. He wrote, Cragmoor is “a harmonious community...active-minded and deeply interested in the best art, literature, drama and music.”¹⁷ Thus, this art colony supported the

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

development of camaraderie among artists by creating a community where artists could freely express themselves and work.

The Cragmoor Art Colony welcomed a variety of artists into its community, where they could further developed their talent. There was a long list of artists who visited Cragmoor such as “portrait specialist George Rufus Boynton, landscapists Charles Francis Browne, Boston painter Margaret F. Browne...and sculptor Ernest Wise Keyser.”¹⁸ One of the most distinguish Cragmoor community members was John George Brown. He was a popular painter in the late 1800s, who specialized in depicting genre settings. He became distinguished for his paintings portraying children in rural settings.¹⁹ During the late 1850s, Brown was “spending many summers at Cragmoor and exhibiting at the National Academy of Design in New York annually.”²⁰ Like many other artists, Brown grew and developed his skills during his time at the Cragmoor Art Colony.

Similar to the Cragmoor Art Colony, the Snedens Landing Art Colony also had many characteristics of the larger art colony movement that began shaping in America in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. Its founder, Mary Tonetti, formed this art colony in the 1920s. She developed this community in a neighborhood in the Palisades, which is located in Rockland County, New York.²¹ This art colony consisted only of Tonetti’s “sixteen-odd attractive white frame or stone houses she owned.”²² Thus, Snedens Landing represented a smaller-scale colony that formed during the American art colony movement.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Alice Gerard, *Palisades and Snedens Landing: The Twentieth Century* (New York, 2007), 40.

²² *Ibid.*

Like many art colonies of the period, Tonetti created Snedens Landing as a rebellious response to the Industrial Revolution. She wanted to create a community that would value “gardens rather than garages, ballrooms rather than furnaces.”²³ Many of the artists that visited and stayed at Snedens Landing came because they wanted to find an alternative, natural location to the busy, confining cities. However, it is important to note that the founder, Tonetti, herself never experienced that effect of the Industrial Revolution first-hand. The rural location of the Palisades, prevented the local population from directly experiencing the changes associated with an industrial culture. Nevertheless, locals like Tonetti heard about the new ideals of the country and were repelled by them. Thus, Tonetti created Snedens Landing with the idea of forming a community where creative-minded people could share and express themselves.²⁴ In this effort, Tonetti personally picked the tenants she wanted to live in her art colony. Her choices consisted of only “special” people, such as “artists, writers, actors, or architects.”²⁵

Like many artists who moved to art colonies across America, artists who came to Snedens Landing were attracted to its economic benefit for struggling craftspeople. In order to create a community filled with interesting, artistic people, Tonetti decided to rent out her houses for very modest prices. On most occasions, Tonetti would only charge people what they could afford. For example, at one point, she rented one of her houses for only a mere five dollars a month.²⁶ However, when Snedens Landing first opened, she typically “rented [her] houses for \$15 to \$20 a month, about what her artists tenants could afford, and as a result she lost \$12,000 to \$15,000 annually.”²⁷ Tonetti did not care about losing money, as long as she was able to create

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

the artistic community she visualized. As a result, artists eagerly sought residence at Snedens Landing because of its inexpensive accommodations.

Additionally, these artists were also attracted to Snedens Landing's scenery, which fit into the typical description of American art colonies across the country during the time. Like most art colonies, Snedens Landing was set in a rural area that had a picturesque, natural landscape. This is demonstrated in a letter written by E.B. White, whose wife lived in the art colony. He wrote to his friend in 1937, "Snedens Landing is a lovely place, still quite countrified."²⁸ White along with other residents at Snedens Landing were drawn to its natural beauty. One of this art colony's main highlights was its magnificent waterfall that existed in the woods of Snedens Landing. Anyone who visited this art colony never forgot this striking view.²⁹

Artists were not only attracted to Snedens Landing's beautiful setting, but were also drawn to its unique residential housing. When renovating and refurbishing her colony's houses, Tonetti tried to create interesting properties that could inspire artists. For example, one of her houses she named Chateau Hash, was made up of two houses that were sawed in half and added together: the Mann House and the Adriance house. Residential properties like this were not common in the context of the larger art colony movement. Nevertheless, Tonetti's houses unusual design was appealing to many creative-minded individuals, who sought residence in the Snedens Landing Art Colony.

Snedens Landing hosted an array of different artists who rented houses from Tonetti. A majority of her first renters were architects such as Lawrence Bottomley and Bancel La Farge. Soon after, writers began to move in such as "Katherine Angell, the fiction editor of the fledgling

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

Exploding the American Art Colony Movement
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New Yorker.³⁰ Then a string of theatrical luminaries, especially dramatists including Edgar Snow and Noel Coward began to rent from Tonetti. Over a period of ten years, this list would grow to include inspiring actresses, musicians, painters, and so on. This diverse group of artists all came to the Snedens Landing Art Colony where they built off one another to expand their creativity and artistic expressions.³¹

Like the Snedens Landing Art Colony, the Byrdcliffe Art Colony also exemplified the larger art colony movement. This art colony was established in 1902, in Woodstock, NY in the Hudson River Valley. Its early funding came from founder Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead, who used his large inheritance to help develop the colony.³² However, the list of founders also included Whitehead's wife, "Jane Byrd McCall, artist Bolton Brown and writer Hervey White."³³ Similar to many art colony founders across America, the Byrdcliffe founders sought to create a community where like-minded individuals could come together and express their ideas openly and freely. They wanted to form an "idyllic arts colony that would educate young students, provide a haven for writers, musicians and crafts-people, and establish a healthful life for their families in the beautiful natural surroundings of the Catskill Mountains."³⁴

Like many other American Art Colonies, Byrdcliffe's breathtaking, natural setting was one of its major important elements. The founders spent months looking for the perfect location to build their colony. Then in June of 1902, they stumbled upon the hamlet of Woodstock, which

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

³² Ship, *American*, 123.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ellen Denker, Robert Edwards, Heidi Evans, Nancy Green, Cheryl Robertson, and Tom Wolf, *Byrdcliffe: An American Arts and Crafts Colony* (New York: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2004), 8.

sat on top of the Overlook Mountain.³⁵ It was at this triumphant moment when realized that they “finally found an idyllic spot for their future art colony.”³⁶ They believed this was the perfect setting to inspire artists who would soon visit their community. Shortly after finding this location, Whitehead wrote to his wife, ““We have found a country with a sky – such beauty of sky I have not seen except in France, I mean of Northern skies. Such as sky for any painter, a transparent blue with wonderful graduation to horizon...”³⁷ This letter reveals the beauty of Byrdcliffe’s natural setting that was not only appealing to its founders, but also to artists that began to gather in this art colony.

Although the Byrdcliffe Art Colony is in line with the larger art colony movement’s idolization of creating a community in a natural setting for like-minded artists, its founders also responded similarly and differently to the Industrial Revolution. Its founders, especially Whitehead and McCall, shared the belief with other typical art founders of the “spiritual value of art and hatred in the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution.”³⁸ However, Byrdcliffe was not developed as a hard-resistance to the industrialization that was occurring in art colonies across the country. Nor did this art colony resist the use of machinery to do day-to-day chores. At the time, many Arts and Craft practitioners “felt that the machine dehumanized the worker.”³⁹ Thus, in an effort to embrace the natural, they rejected the use of machinery and had the work done by the hands of community members. However, Whitehead believed that this was a foolish display of medieval guild romanticism. He felt that machines “did not cause an artist to lose interest in his work but rather enabled him to get on with his business of creating in a timely

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

way.”⁴⁰ As a result, machinery was in constant use at Byrdcliffe. This made a huge difference in the amount of work being produced in the colony because less time was being spent on menial work. This sort-of embrace of machinery promoted by the Industrial Revolution was unlike what occurred in the wider art colony movement. Nevertheless, Byrdcliffe’s founders did openly reject the values of the Industrial Revolution.

Along these lines, Byrdcliffe also differed because of the colony’s attempt to finance itself. Part of this art colony’s mission was to “produce beautiful handmade objects that, when sold,” would help pay for the costs of upholding Byrdcliffe.⁴¹ One of these marketed objects included furniture, especially cabinets. Whitehead put in a lot of energy into finding a cabinetmaker who could assist in designing the perfect, simplistic cabinet prototype that could later be produced in the colony. However, in the end, the art colony only produced about fifty pieces.⁴² The problem was this idea was that the furniture was expensive to make and thus could not compete with other brands “with more efficient means of production.”⁴³ Thus, this commercial venture failed. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how Byrdcliffe deviated from the large art colony movement by trying to make its colony financially self-sufficient.

In addition, just like other art colonies, the Byrdcliffe Art Colony welcomed an assortment of artists who came to grow in their art and craft. This included sculptors, painters, musicians, and list goes on. Some of these early visiting artists included “Andrew Dasburg, Charles Rosen, Harry Leith-Ross, Leon Kroll, and Hobson Pittman.”⁴⁴ One of the most notable residents was George Bellows, a prominent painter known for his realistic depictions of New

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 10.

⁴² *Ibid.* 26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Ship, *American*, 124.

York City urban scenes. He visited Byrdcliffe in the summer of 1920, “after which he purchased property there in 1921” to build a house.⁴⁵ He later spent many summers at this art colony where he produced a number of powerful landscape paintings of the Woodstock area. He along with the other artists, came to Byrdcliffe to expanded their creative expressions in an art community environment.⁴⁶

The Cragmoor, Snedens Landing, and Byrdcliffe Art Colonies exemplify many of the larger aspects of the American art colony movement that developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These Hudson River Valley art colonies all valued many of the elements central to the wider movement. In some ways they were each formed out of a resistance to the Industrial Revolution. They were all founded on the ideal of creating an alternative community to the confining industrial cities. The purpose of these art colonies was to create a welcoming gathering place for artists to come and expand their creative style and abilities in a beautiful, inspiring setting. All three of the Hudson River Valley art colonies represent these central traits of the nation-wide movement. However, the Snedens Landing and Byrdcliffe Art Colonies also had characteristics that separated them from the wider movement. Nevertheless, their unique elements attracted artists to their art community. These Hudson River Valley colonies hosted a variety of artists who came and shared their creative ideas and further developed their artistic talent. Thus, the legacy of these notable art communities continues.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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