

Yankee Modernist Russell Cheney in South Coast Maine

Richard Candee

RUSSELL CHENEY (1881-1945) WAS the youngest of eleven children born to a clan of several brothers owning the Cheney silk mills in Manchester, Connecticut. He likely began to paint under Maine artist Walter Griffin during his years at the Hartford Art Society. A graduate of Yale ('04) where he also took art electives, he was one of three students who came to Portland a few years later to wish Griffin "*bon voyage*" to Norway. Cheney studied at the Art Students League in NYC



Photograph of Russell Cheney in front of his studio in York Harbor, c. 1910-12.

under Kenyon Cox, George B. Bridgman and Frank Vincent Dumond; his further training in Paris from 1907 to 1911 at the Academie Julian under Jean Paul Laurens was also influenced by Griffin's recommendation.

Summers were spent painting impressionistic



Russell Cheney, *Pine Trees, Ogunquit*, 1913, oil on canvas, 39 x 31½", Privately owned.

landscapes *en plein air* at the Cheney family's home in York Harbor, where Cheney had a rustic studio. In 1912 he began studying with Charles Woodbury in Ogunquit or "The Gunket" as locals called it. *Pine Trees, Ogunquit* (1913) was in his first one-man show in Hartford the next year.

Returning to York Harbor in 1915 after two years absence, he "took some stuff over to Woodbury to have him look it over." A morning with the master left him "full of new ideas." While Woodbury's criticism of Cheney as "too easily satisfied" was true, Cheney found him "great in not imposing his own way on you, but looking at things on your own ground."

In the early 1920s Cheney painted in Connecticut and Vermont, Colorado, California, and New Mexico as well

as France and Italy, exhibiting annually at the Babcock Galleries in New York City after 1921. What turned him from an international cosmopolitan into a Maine artist was his partnership with F.O. Matthiessen, the Yale and Harvard literary critic whose biography of Sarah Orne Jewett he illustrated with paintings of her South Berwick home. Meeting in Europe, the two returned to the United States and in 1927 took a Kittery Point summer sublet from another Yale man.

The next summer they returned to Kittery, settling in a rented house they would purchase in 1930. Here Cheney built a studio where he would capture aspects of the Piscataqua River, southern Maine towns and rural landscapes for the last 15 years of his life.

His Yankee Modernist interpretations of the local area, much influenced by older French masters like Cezanne, immediately became a staple of his yearly offerings at the Montross and Ferargil Galleries in New York, his offerings to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, and after 1934 the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston. His *Kittery Point* (1927) painted from the top of the Parkman Hotel overlooking the Pepperrell mansion was exhibited at the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress World's Fair exhibition and was later purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

"Kittery Point is the most paintable place I have ever seen," he said... "And I wonder why more painters do not come here? The village is still unspoiled by the summer visitor and represents a perfect gold mine of subjects."

A small watercolor sketch by Russell Cheney of his Kittery studio, found among his papers and photographs. Privately owned.



Russell Cheney, *Hutchins Corner*, 1934, oil on canvas, 17¼ x 24", Collection of the author.



Russell Cheney, *Kittery Point*, 1927, oil on canvas, 29 x 36". Exhibited at Chicago World's Fair 1933; formerly in the collection of the MFA, Boston, now privately owned.

Cheney exhibited in the first summer exhibition "at its gallery on the board walk to the bathing beach" in 1930. That summer he painted a double portrait of himself and his old mentor Walt Griffin *At Cassis* or *Two Painters* that by August was "hanging over at the Gunquit." He once described "My picture of Walt Griffin at Cassis [as] Mr. Cheney's best painting to date." When he was introduced to Boston in 1934, the *Boston Post* reviewer described his work as "frequently encountered at summer exhibitions at Ogunquit" and the same year the Addison Gallery chose Cheney to be first in a series showing the work contemporary New England artists. Indeed, that summer he was one of several painters whose "vivid works here in the modern manner" turned the lobby of the Ogunquit Playhouse into an art gallery.

Kittery, Eliot, York and Ogunquit landscapes, portraits, and still lifes dominated his work—bringing rural southern Maine to urban audiences throughout the country. He had shown in Portland with one-man shows in 1920 and 1937; in 1939 he donated his double portrait *At Cassis* or *Two Painters* to the Portland Museum of Art where he contributed to group shows of Maine artists through 1941. Plagued by serious alcoholism in his later years, his last local exhibits were that year at Lanier's Tea Garden in Eliot and the Barn Gallery in Ogunquit. Upon his death in 1945 he left a legacy of more than 1000 canvases and panels—the vast majority showing his love of New England, especially Maine.



Russell Cheney, *Two Painters At Cassis* (self portrait with Walter Griffin), 1930, oil on canvas, 42 x 56". Gift of the artist to the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.

PROF. RICHARD M. CANDEE retired from Boston University to study the artists and other characters of the Piscataqua region. He has exhibited local artists Thomas P. Moses, H. M. S. Harlow, Henry Bakula and Russell Cheney at the Discover Portsmouth Center and the Portsmouth Athenaeum. For more information, see www.russellcheney.com