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## Upper Cape Artists Well-Represented In Cape Museum Of Art Collection

By Joanne Brianna-Gartner

Patron of the arts Ann F. Bengtson was instrumental in procuring art for not only the Cape Cod Museum of Art but for the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Cape Cod Hospital and Falmouth Hospital, and other institutions on the Cape.

While she was collecting, Ms. Bengtson gifted more than 75 works to the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, 63 of which are currently on display at the museum through March 6.

“The Collection of Ann F. Bengtson, Patron of the Arts” celebrates not only these works of modern art, all of which were created by local artists, but also Ms. Bengtson herself, who in her lifetime requested anonymity along with her donations.

Ms. Bengtson moved to Falmouth in the early 1980s and became both a friend and a patron to many artists on the Upper Cape and beyond. She moved off-Cape after the death of her husband, Niles, and died in 2012.

“She was a remarkable patron of the arts because she understood that the most effective way of helping artists in the community was by buying work directly from the artists,” said Benton Jones, director of art at the museum. “She was known for having incredible taste and for being an influential person,” he said, adding that her reputation enabled her to approach institutions and offer work to their collections, placing a considerable amount of pieces in local museums and institutions.

In some cases Ms. Bengtson would even give works back to artists after she’d purchased them.

While she had a reputation as a serious collector, Ms. Bengtson was not without her eccentric side. “She was known for ordering desserts both before and after dinner,” Mr. Jones said. “Two desserts and a soda before, and then another two desserts after.”

“She was a person who really cared deeply for the artist community and at the same time, when she gave works to the museum, she asked that the credit line be left anonymous,” Mr. Jones said. “She wasn’t seeking any recognition for the work that she was doing; she did it for the love of art and for the friendships that she made with the artists.”

“She knew most of these artists personally,” Mr. Jones said. “She became friends with and then collected from artists that she really admired. The works that she collected were contemporary and not always necessarily traditional.”

The show starts with unconventional Woods Hole artist Sig Purwin (1915-1996). Perhaps best known for creating “The Provider,” the 25-foot-tall sculpture installed at the Chatham Fish Pier, the show includes preliminary drawings for the sculpture as well as several pieces created using thermal relief, a technique that consisted of laying a polystyrene sheet over plywood and then carving into it.

“In the grooves where the [polystyrene] was carved, he would put gesso, which would adhere to the plywood and then he would use heat to burn off all the [polystyrene],” Mr. Jones explained. “It’s almost the opposite of a white line wood cut,” he said, adding that he didn’t know of any other artists who used the same technique. The largest example of thermal relief by Mr. Purwin in the show is an image of roller derby skaters. The piece has an otherworldly robotic feeling to it with its bold colors, texture and jerky sense of movement.

More than a dozen pieces by Falmouth resident and longtime gallery owner Jan Collins Selman are on view, including several of her digital pieces, a medium in which Ms. Selman is one of the early pioneers. “The variety of Jan’s work is incredible,” Mr. Jones said, “from oil paintings and pastels to collage, mixed media and digital works, she’s really spectacular.”

The collection also contains a ceramic bas-relief by Cape Cod Museum of Art cofounder Harry Holl. “We don’t have a lot of Harry Holl’s work in our collection,” Mr. Jones said, “so this is a great piece to have.” “Four Sisters” is a figurative image in clay, a tribute to Mr. Holl’s children and grandchildren.

Falmouth artist William Littlefield (1902-1969) is also represented in the show. One of the few artists Ms. Bengtson collected posthumously, Mr. Littlefield’s work, purchased by Ms. Bengtson at an estate sale, is what sparked her interest in collecting.

One of the founders of the Cape Cod Art Center, Mr. Littlefield was a prolific artist who was meticulous about documenting every part of his process. After lifting one of Mr.

Littlefield's paintings off the wall, Mr. Jones turned it over to reveal handwritten "recipes" on the back giving the ingredients and proportions of the colors used to make the painting, where the painting was exhibited and the dates it was exhibited.

Paintings on exhibit by Mr. Littlefield are both representative and non-representative, with two large abstract paintings included alongside a streetscape painting of Woods Hole.

The collection also includes works by local sculptors including Dorothy Polansky, Polly Seliger Egelson, Michael Ernst and Russie Wight-Waltman. "Ann was also a big proponent of sculpture," Mr. Jones said. "Some people might prefer one or the other but she collected both."

The works by Ms. Wight-Waltman (1949-2019) are especially fanciful. "Her use of ceramic is so unusual. I haven't seen many people working like that," Mr. Jones said, pointing out Ms. Wight-Waltman's wood and ceramic sculpture, "The Fallen Birdman," which includes what looks like sage leaves imprinted into a thin layer of clay atop a sturdier, more roughly textured part of the sculpture. "I can envision the process of making this thin ceramic piece, shaping it and using it in the larger piece," Mr. Jones said. It's very effective."

There are two works in the show by well-known Cape folk artist Martha Cahoon, one-half of the namesake of the Cahoon Museum of American Art. Both pieces feature elements—hot air balloons and mermaids—that are iconic to the painter. The two scenes are different from Ms. Cahoon's more-familiar works in that instead of Cape Cod settings the landscapes show more-distant shores with junks and pagodas rather than schooners and lighthouses. Mr. Jones theorized that Ms. Bengtson chose to collect Martha Cahoon's work rather than her husband's, because Ralph Cahoon is often the better known of the two artists.

The show includes one large oil painting by Falmouth artist Lillia Frantin. A colorful landscape with expressive brush strokes, "View of Pedernal (Otono)," is indicative of Ms. Frantin's work. The painting is hung adjacent to Anne Boucher's watercolor "Lotus at Ashumet." While vastly different in styles, the two paintings have similar palettes.

Other artists included in the show are Claude Croney, Jane A'Lee Heyerdahl, David Laasko, Frank Cardozo Nicholas, Ann Teufel and John Whorf.

The Cape Cod Museum of Art docents took the lead in the show by researching the artists whose works are on exhibit. "A docent was assigned to each of the artists in the exhibition and they researched them so each artist has a 120-word writeup about them

and the docents identify themselves at the bottom. It's a great way of making sure that the artists' stories aren't lost to the wind," Mr. Jones said. "It's a great resource and we're lucky that our docents have this much interest."

"The Collection of Ann F. Bengtson, Patron of the Arts" is on view at the Cape Cod Museum of Art through Sunday, March 6. Museum hours are Wednesdays through Saturdays from 10 AM to 4 PM, and Sundays from noon to 4 PM.

The museum is at 60 Hope Lane in Dennis.