HISTORIC MASTERS

BY LESLIE GILBERT ELMAN

KENT, CONNECTICUT'S COLORFUL LEGACY



FRANCIS LUIS MORA (1874–1940), *Picnic on the Hill*, 1912, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in., courtesy Gavin Spanierman Ltd.



ROBERT HOGG NISBET (1879–1961), *South Kent Cross Roads*, 1931, etching, 15 4/5 x 12 2/5 in., National Gallery of Art, Washington, Reba and Dave Williams Collection, gift of Reba and Dave Williams

In 1910, artist Robert Hogg Nisbet settled in Kent, Connecticut, with his new wife, Marguerite. Theirs was a love story that would endure for more than 50 years, but its beginning — and the circumstance that brought them to Kent — was turbulent.

In the early 1900s, as he was building his reputation as a landscapist, Nisbet (1879–1961) was an active member of the thriving artists' colony at Old Lyme, Connecticut. Under the patronage of Florence Griswold, who opened her home (now the Florence Griswold Museum) to artists such as Childe Hassam (1859–1935) and Willard Leroy Metcalf (1858–1925), Old Lyme became "the most talked about art colony in America," according to the *Hartford Courant* newspaper. Situated on the shoreline in the state's southeast corner, Old Lyme was undeniably an inspiration for Nisbet, who left his New York studio to spend summers there, working prodigiously under his mentor Metcalf.

In Old Lyme, Nisbet fell in love with Marguerite, a former stage performer whose beauty and poise made her an ideal artists' model. Unfortunately for Nisbet, Marguerite also happened to be Metcalf's muse and — more importantly — his wife. (See sidebar on page 51.)

Nisbet and Marguerite left Old Lyme for the last time in 1907 and returned to his New York studio. The following year he was elected to both the Salmagundi Club and the National Arts Club, and from 1909 to 1910 he served as president of the Art Students League of New York. A February 1909 review in *American Art News* called his work "splendid" and included him among "newer and younger painters who loom large." He and Marguerite married in June 1910.

Yet, even as his career progressed, Nisbet's marriage to Marguerite and their bitter standoff with Metcalf created tension in the art community. Uncomfortable in New York and unwelcome in Old Lyme, the couple decided to reside in a place with natural beauty that Nisbet could depict in his landscapes, yet also near cities where his work could be shown and sold. They moved to Kent in 1910, planting the seeds of a new life for themselves and a new artist community that endures to this day.

A CORNER OF PARADISE

Located in Connecticut's northwest corner, Kent is about as far as one can get from Old Lyme while remaining within the state. While it lacked Old Lyme's proximity to Long Island Sound, it had the picturesque Housatonic River and the rolling Litchfield Hills. Nisbet painted it all, and he painted year-round, working in plein air through the winter. One 1918 review highlights a snow scene "painted at 8 a.m., the rising sun throwing shadows of the trees." He was also highly regarded for etchings and drypoints, an exhibition of which was held at the Smithsonian Institution in 1931.

"No other Litchfield Hills artist came close to equaling him in the sheer number of paintings done of the area," writes Robert Michael Austin in his 2003 book *Artists of the Litchfield Hills*. Austin notes that Nisbet's "snow paintings" were examples of a distinct genre that emerged in the 20th century



ROBERT HOGG NISBET (1879–1961), *Untitled Kent Snow Scene*, c. 1912, watercolor on paper, 6 x 8 in., private collection



REX BRASHER (1869–1960), *Blue Jay (Cyanocitta cristata cristata) and Swamp White Oak (Quercus platanoides)*, Volume 8, Plate 477, 1911, photogravure print with watercolor paint on archival watercolor paper, 12 x 18 in., Rex Brasher Association

— depicting the snow as a subject rather than a mere backdrop.

Nisbet was not the first landscapist to make the Litchfield Hills his primary subject. Charles Seeley Gaylord (1811–1862) lived there and painted landscapes some 70 years earlier. Gaylord's friend Jasper Cropsey (1823–1900) visited and produced several scenes around the Housatonic River. Yet for Nisbet, Kent was more than a beautiful place in which to work; it was a place where he could build a community. It didn't take long for one to develop, both organically and by design.

Some artists came at Nisbet's invitation, others independently. They admired the beauty the area had to offer and they stayed. As Deborah Shiflett-Fitton, executive director of the Kent Art Association, notes, the iron industry that existed in the region until the 1890s had relocated to the Midwest, leaving large houses and properties available for reasonable prices. It was an ideal place for artists to settle.

One of the first to arrive was Rex Brasher (1869–1960), a Brooklyn-born naturalist described in a 2023 *Washington Post* article as "the greatest bird artist you've never heard of." Around 1911, Brasher purchased a farmhouse that he named Chickadee Valley and embarked



G. LAURENCE NELSON (1887–1978), *Helen with Poppies*, n.d., oil on canvas, 27 x 23 in., Kent Historical Society



Seven Hearths is now the headquarters of the Kent Historical Society.

Marguerite: Model and Muse

Titled *The Convalescent* (or *Convalescence*), this 1904 painting by Willard Metcalf is in the permanent collection of the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky (speedmuseum.org). It depicts a young Marguerite Haile around the time she married Metcalf. The two had been together for several years in a relationship made volatile by his drinking and persistent lack of money. Threatening to harm herself, Marguerite persuaded Metcalf to marry her, which he did in September 1903. This painting likely depicts her after that threat, looking beautiful in spite of her travails — a fact that was not lost on reviewers. When the painting was exhibited in March 1904, one wrote: "A comely girl in bed, reclined among her pillows... has little of the pallor and languor one expects of the sick, but, on the contrary, robustness painted in a robust style."

Around this time, Metcalf began teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design, where Robert Hogg Nisbet was his student. Nisbet followed Metcalf to Old Lyme, Connecticut, where he met and fell in love with Marguerite. The two ran away together, eventually settling in Kent, where a new artists' colony was about to take shape.



WILLARD LEROY METCALF (1858–1925), *The Convalescent*, 1904, oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 29 in., Speed Art Museum, Louisville, gift of Mrs. Louis Seelbach, 1928.4

on his quest to paint all the birds of North America from life. His full collection of 874 paintings, completed in 1924, is now archived at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

Francis Luis Mora (1874–1940) purchased 28 acres of land in Gaylordsville near the Housatonic River in 1912. The setting was stunning; all it lacked was a place to live and work. So Mora and his wife, Sonia, lived in a tent on the land until he could build a studio. A highly accomplished artist who was named a National Academician at age 32, Mora worked as an illustrator, painted portraits of such celebrities as Andrew Carnegie and President Warren G. Harding, and made many paintings of the splendid flowers the wives of Kent's artists grew in their gardens. His 1912 scene *Picnic on the Hill* depicts a subject he would return to many times in subsequent years. It is likely that among the group pictured in it are Robert and Marguerite Nisbet as well as sculptor Willard Paddock and his wife, Charlotte, who settled in Kent in 1912.

Three more artists arrived in Kent in 1915. Frederick Judd Waugh (1861–1940) knew Nisbet through their association with the National Academy. Although he specialized in seascapes, Waugh visited Nisbet in Kent and decided to stay. He and his wife bought a farm with numerous outbuildings that became a gathering place for artists; despite living firmly inland, Waugh continued to paint seascapes. The other two artists to join the community in 1915 were Carl Hirschberg (1854–1923) and his son G. Laurence Nelson (1887–1978).

Rounding out the original Kent artist community were Eliot Candee Clark (1883–1980) and his friend Spencer Baird Nichols (1875–1950), both of whom arrived in Kent in 1922. Considered a prodigy who first exhibited at age 9, Clark traveled widely, lived in Kent for a few years, and eventually settled in Virginia. Nichols left a profitable career as Tiffany Studios' chief designer and moved to Kent to pursue painting and illustration.

THE ASSOCIATION TAKES SHAPE

These nine artists and their wives (some of whom were trained artists but did not pursue professional careers) settled into life in rural Connecticut. The women gardened. The men painted. Nelson's home, Seven Hearths, became another spot for the group to gather. Its garden provided most of the flowers he included in his paintings, including the poppies in his undated portrait of his wife, Helen. The dirt road between Nelson's house on Kent Mountain and Nichols's house just above it was dubbed "Studio Hill Road," the name used today.

While the artists maintained ties to galleries and professional associations in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities, they recognized an opportunity to bring notoriety to their Kent community by exhibiting as a collective. Their styles varied. Brasher painted with painstaking detail while Nisbet and Mora often worked in an impressionistic manner. Nelson painted formal portraits while Nichols and Waugh sometimes introduced an element of fantasy in their work. Nevertheless, their tie to Kent was a bond strong enough to unite them.

The group that formed the Kent Art Association (KAA) in 1923 included Brasher, Clark, Mora, Nelson, Nichols, Nisbet, Paddock, and Waugh, as well as Waugh's son-in-law James Floyd Clymer (1893–1982). They staged their first annual exhibition at the Kent Library in October 1923, displaying 27 paintings plus sculpture by Paddock. "They were close-knit and tight at the beginning, trying to keep the caliber of art high," says watercolorist Deborah Chabrian, who has lived and worked in Kent since 1987. (She is an active KAA member and president of the Kent Historical Society.)

KAA annual exhibitions continued until 1941 at various venues in town, with numerous artists from the area being invited to join. The 19th Annual in 1941 featured an impressive 230 works. Following a hiatus during World War II, the KAA has sustained its annual exhibitions. In 1956, it acquired a section of the historic Kent Inn and converted it into gallery space now used for group and solo shows year-round.

PRESERVING THE LEGACY

Artists continued gravitating to Kent and its surroundings through the years. One was landscape artist and illustrator Eric Sloane (1905–1985), who is commemorated by the Eric Sloane Museum, housing



DEBORAH CHABRIAN (b. 1958), *Spring Thaw, Newton's Farm, South Kent*, 2017, watercolor on paper, 9 x 12 in., private collection

his work and also his vast collection of historic tools. Rex Brasher's Chickadee Valley house and property are now in the care of the Rex Brasher Association, which recently began a residency program for artists and seeks to open a museum for the public.

Seven Hearths, the home of G. Laurence Nelson, was bequeathed to the Kent Historical Society after his death in 1978. Built circa 1750, through its history the house has been a trading post, a store, and the home of Nelson and his wife, Helen, a one-time "Gibson Girl" model turned art writer. Today it serves as the historical society's headquarters and a museum whose collection has grown in unexpected ways. For instance, in 2025, the society received Nelson's portrait of Helen with poppies as a gift. Not only did curator/archivist Marge Smith recognize the painting from a magazine article Helen had written, but she knew precisely where in the house it had been painted. It hangs in that spot today.

Not all of the art to be savored in Kent is historic. Several galleries on and near Main Street exhibit high-quality contemporary art, including Kenise Barnes, Carol Corey Fine Art, Craven Contemporary, Good Gallery, Morrison Gallery, and RT Facts.

Deborah Chabrian lives with her husband, artist Edward Martinez, in the 1783 home once owned by Willard Paddock. The house retains many of the alterations Paddock made when he bought it, including an industrial-size north-facing window and a rail track to wheel sculpture into natural light that was based on one installed by sculptor Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) at his Massachusetts studio, 45 miles north of Kent.

Chabrian says the area continues to inspire and surprise her, including the serendipitous discovery that the view Jasper Cropsey painted in his *Schatacook Mountain, Housatonic Valley, Connecticut 1845* (now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston) is essentially the one she enjoys from her kitchen window. "The things that drew the Kent Art Association founders here are the same ones that drew Ed and me here," she adds. "We spend our days in much the same way [they did]: doing home restoration projects, tending perennial gardens, and recording our experiences through art." ●

Information: *kentart.org, kenthistoricalsociety.org, rexbrasher.org, housatonicmuseum.org, flogris.org, ericsloane.com, deborahchabrianart.com. The exhibition* Making His Mark in Connecticut: The Creative Process of F. Luis Mora *is on view at the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport, Connecticut, through February 19.*

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