

# Crucifixion:

## Frederick S. Wight & OTHER 20TH CENTURY ARTISTS



*By Sandra Bowden*

The Crucifixion is the central event of the Christian faith, and no other topic has inspired such a flood of art and music in western civilization. Across history, artists have imagined the Crucifixion, not only as a biblical narrative, but also as an event happening in their own historical context. This strategy of depicting the Crucifixion in contemporary terms both makes Christ more directly present in the time and place of the contemporary viewer and employs the Crucifixion as a point of reference for critically understanding modern life. Working in the early 1930s, Frederick Wight imagined the Crucifixion as happening in Chatham, MA with the sea-faring folk of the town. His *Modern Crucifixion* triptych localized the subject for his generation and continues to spiritually engage the viewer today.

A crucifixion was a form of slow and painful execution in which the victim was either tied with ropes or nailed to a large wooden cross and left to hang until dead. The early church rarely depicted the Crucifixion of Jesus, probably because this kind of death was viewed as a humiliation. Instead, their focus was on the triumphant Christ of the Resurrection.

Starting in the fourth century, crucifixion imagery began to appear; however, the depictions portray a composed, living Christ with his eyes wide open and his arms outstretched. The suffering was minimized to draw attention to the message of the resurrection and faith. With the rise of Byzantine icon art, a

stylized, elongated body type developed in the crucifixion images. In contrast to the Byzantine period, artists of the Renaissance sought to create a realistic depiction of the body as it hung on the cross. Although the Gospels recount that Jesus' clothing was removed before the Crucifixion, most artists chose to present his lower body draped in some fashion. The Baroque painters portrayed the Crucifixion with drama and grandeur.

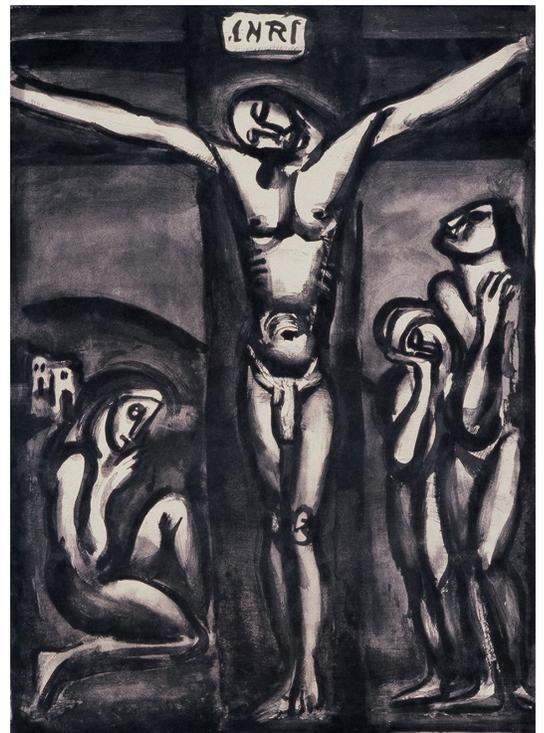
By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists viewed the Crucifixion through the lens of the Academy and many of the works had become banal, lacking the intensity that it merited. Thomas Eakins' *Crucifixion*, painted in 1880, was seen by many as an academic exercise to portray Christ as realistically as possible, but with little religious feeling. Also in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gauguin's *Yellow Crucifixion* places the event in the countryside of Brittany. Three women near the cross are wearing the typical peasant dress and the entire scene, including the body of Christ, are cast in yellow tones of the season's harvest. Time and again artists have placed the crucifixion and those present at the event against a local background and dressed in the apparel of the day.

The Crucifixion continues to appear as a theme during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but with a renewed perspective. German Expressionist artist Emil Nolde was fascinated by the expressive intensity of the Isenheim Altarpiece and created his own version with a stylistic fusion of primitive forms and the exaggerated colors of the Fauves. Salvador Dali famously painted his *Crucifixion* representing the cross as a hypercube. Marc Chagall, a Jewish artist, broke with his religious tradition to paint several crucifixions, one of which is in this exhibition. Stanley Spencer, an English painter, set his biblical stories in his home village with local people filling the scene much like Frederick Wight has done in his *Modern Crucifixion*.

### ***Crucifixion: Frederick S. Wight and Other 20<sup>th</sup> Century Artists***

*Crucifixion: Frederick S. Wight and other 20<sup>th</sup> Century Artists* presents an intimate glimpse into how artists of the last century artistically wrestled with the Crucifixion. Twenty artists are brought together to offer a dramatic visual dialogue about how the Crucifixion and its relevance in recent history are envisioned.

Each artist, reflecting various perspectives and insights on the Crucifixion, depicts the Christ from a distinct vantage point. In Nancy Snooks' *Crucifixion*, Jesus hangs from the cross in an almost grotesque pose that recalls many medieval German crucifixes that hung in Bavarian churches. Wayne Forte's etching, *Crucifixion*, depicts a similar body slumping forward from the cross as Jesus nears his death. The contemporary German artist, Carmel Titus, focuses on the torso of Jesus, drawing our attention to the rib cage as a way to remind us of the victim's struggle to breathe. *We did not know* by Ed McCartan hones in on the accompanying angels supporting Christ as he endured the horrific death. Picasso's lithograph, *Christ*, pictures Jesus alive on the cross with one hand nailed to the crossbar and the other offering us the wrappings from his body.



*Love One Another, George Rouault*

Layers of fabric and other materials provide the surface texture in *It is Finished* by Sandra Bowden. The inscription written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin above Christ's head reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The crown of thorns has been constructed using old floor nails and the abstracted forms suggest the brokenness of Christ. Contained within the torso is a large arrow shape that thrusts itself into a flat broad area of red.

*Love One Another* by Georges Rouault offers a more gentle and tender picture of Jesus admonishing the bystanders to love one another. Watanabe's *Crucifixion* with a bright yellow background suggests the light and hope that emanates from the cross. Without the use of color, Lovis Corinth's woodcut, *Kreuzigung (Crucifixion)*, has a similar reading with strong lines radiating from the body of Christ to imitate light rays.

The Tanzanian wood and Mexican straw crosses demonstrate how every Christian culture finds a way to visually express its interpretation of Christ's death. The folk *Romanian Altar* reaches a step further, as it creates a setting for worship around the Crucified Christ.

### ***Modern Crucifixion* by Frederick S. Wight**

The centerpiece for this show is the large *Modern Crucifixion* triptych, measuring 103 x 152.5 inches. It was painted by Frederick Wight in the early 1930s when he was living in Chatham, MA. Although the exact date of its creation is difficult to pinpoint, several news clippings give some clues. The New York City Tribune and the Raleigh N. C. Times both state that the painting was "shown for the first time at the New School of Social Research on January 16, 1933[1]." This suggests that it had been completed a year or two earlier. The article also recorded that it was designed for a modern church. It is not certain if this was a commission or painted on speculation by Frederick Wight.

The New York Sun on Wednesday August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1936 reported: "The mural, *Modern Crucifixion* by Frederick Wight created a stir when shown two years<sup>1</sup> ago at the New School for Social Research in New York." It also stated that the mural was to be placed in the Methodist Episcopal Church, now the United Methodist Church of Chatham, August 20, 1936. A quote from the Boston Herald on August 7, 1932 when Alice's *Christ Preaching* was unveiled states the following: "[The artist is the] mother of Frederick S. Wight, an artist whose modernistic treatment of a religious theme in a studio adjoining that of his mother was the inspiration for the church painting." Since we know of no other religious paintings by Frederick in the early 1930's, this would suggest his *Modern Crucifixion* was painted at about the same time as her first biblical mural.

Each news article relating to the *Modern Crucifixion* emphasized that the people at the Crucifixion were in "modern garb." Some reporters went so far as to comment on the young girl in "high heels," as well as how the kneeling mother of Jesus wore a "modern dress" and had "bobbed hair." It is interesting that in the 1930's this seemed so novel given that, until very recently, depictions of the Crucifixion had always included the people in the historical context of the artist.

Two news clippings, one from the archives of the Chatham Historical Society, and the other from the New York Sun of August 1936, state that the painting had been stored since its showing at the New

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1 This seems to be a mistake on the part of the reporter because there is substantial evidence that the *Modern Crucifixion* was displayed at the New School in January, 1933.

School of Social Research, and that *The Modern Crucifixion* was to be hung on August 19, 1936 at the Methodist Episcopal Church (now the United Methodist Church of Chatham). The painting was on loan for an indefinite period of time, only to be removed later and stored in the family home near Stage Harbor. Some found the painting nearly blasphemous, but it “was considered by the nationally renowned artist to be one of his best and most important [works].”<sup>2</sup>

All the characters present, including Christ and the two thieves on either side, were townspeople Wight knew. Historically, using local figures in a biblical narrative was not a new artistic device. The Italian, Netherlandish, and German painters had done this for hundreds of years, creating some of the most beloved depictions of stories in the Bible that included local citizens and patrons. The crucifixion paintings of Andrea Mantegna, Rogier van der Weyden, and Lucas Cranach are examples of similarly using the period apparel and local scenery as a backdrop to the event. Stanley Spencer, a renowned English painter, painted numerous biblical narratives a decade earlier than Wight, setting the events in his hometown of Cookham, England, and placing his family and friends at the scene.

Who are these people at Wight’s *Modern Crucifixion*? They are the rugged fishermen who went to sea. They are the women of the village along the coast who waited anxiously for the return of their boats. They are the mothers of children who skipped rocks along the shore. They are all part of Chatham’s history. From a series of articles in magazines published on Cape Cod, many of the people can be identified.

Wight has positioned three local men, one in modern trousers, on three crosses with the clean-shaven Christ figure in the center. Interestingly, each man is held in place with ropes or lines from a fishing boat, a method that archaeology has verified for Roman crucifixions. Echoing the text from the Gospel of John, one criminal looks away from Christ, but the other engages in a conversation with Jesus. Usually the repentant thief is to the right of Jesus, but in this scene, Wight seems to have placed him on the left along with a group of three people. Several newspaper articles state that Christ was a composite of several Chatham men. Being sensitive and not wanting to offend anyone, Wight fashioned the two thieves from models that he hired and never disclosed their names.

Most of the other participants in the foreground can be identified from news clippings in 1936 when the painting was hung in the Methodist Church. The man kneeling to the extreme right is Ernest Eldridge, and next to him is his wife, Angie<sup>3</sup> who is certainly Mary, the mother of Jesus. Angie’s son, Ernest, dressed in fishing boots, stands behind her, and is pictured as the Apostle John traditionally seen reaching out to care for Mary. This is a fascinating grouping. Who is the kneeling man? Is Wight suggesting that Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, is present at the event? Tradition assumes that Joseph has died since the Scriptures do not mention or allude to him after the incident of Jesus in the Temple with the teachers. The young woman wearing a light blue “modern dress” and high heels is Caroline Taylor (Crosby)<sup>4</sup>, daughter of a trustee of the Methodist Church. The other figures have not been identified. Who is the soldier helping the onlookers clamoring up the hill? Is this just a modern uniform or might the soldier’s outfit suggest a commentary on the Nazi problems arising in Germany early in the 1930’s? Why is one woman dressed in white as if she had just been baptized? Many intriguing questions come to mind when viewing the piece. More townspeople dressed in sou’wasters and fedoras are climbing the embankment as they approach Chatham’s Golgotha.

Frederick Wight has carefully placed several elements in the triptych that further amplify the biblical text. His Crucifixion takes place on a bluff overlooking the sea with a lighthouse in the distance. The lighthouse

2 Cape Codder, Cate Chapman, Friday October 2, 1987

3 The Chatham 1900 Census record Ernest as born to Ernest Eldridge and Angie B. (Long)

4 <sup>5</sup> The Chatham Census records give Caroline Taylor as her given name and her surname as Crosby. She was born July 15, 1916

resembles the Stage Harbor Lighthouse going into Nantucket Sound. Is this Stage Harbor near his home viewed from a bluff overlooking the water with shanties along its shore? The lighthouse is more than a decorative element; it is a carefully placed symbol that recalls Jesus saying, “I am the light of the world.” The background sky has been painted in such a way to appear as a dark torn curtain hovering in the sky, reminding us of the passage in Matthew’s Gospel that the curtain of the temple was “rent in two” at the moment of his death. Wight divided the sky to shape a *mandorla* like glow of light around the crucified Christ to focus attention immediately on the central figure of the sacred event. It is interesting to note that an early black and white photograph, along with two news articles relating to the showing of this painting had neither the lighthouse nor a separation in the curtained sky when it was shown at the New School of Social Research in 1933 or at the Methodist Church in 1936. Probably wanting to add more visual meaning and weight to the scene, Wight strategically added these important elements after the painting was removed from the Methodist Church. This also means that this exhibition is the first time Wight’s *Modern Crucifixion* has been in an exhibition with his final changes.

One of the most curious and befuddling questions at the scene is the identification of the three women. Usually it is easy to recognize the women at the Crucifixion—Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the wife of Clopas, as found in John 19:25, but in Wight’s painting, questions arise. The older woman sitting on the ground to the right of Jesus is certainly Mary, his mother, being helped by John. But who are the other two women?



Both seem to play another role in the life of Mary, Jesus’ Mother. The woman to the extreme left holds up a baby as if to offer the child in an act of sacrifice or worship. Is this the Mary with baby Jesus who “pondered these things in her heart” knowing that he would someday die, or is this her in the temple for his dedication? The third young woman is dressed in blue, a typical and symbolic color for the Virgin Mary, possibly recalling Mary at the Annunciation. Did Wight somehow embed into this Crucifixion scene a theme of Mary? Or did he, having a very close relationship to his famous artist-mother, use this composition to reflect his thoughts on motherhood?

Since it is certain Wight had a solid knowledge of art history, and there is no historical precedent or example in which the Virgin is simultaneously depicted at the two sides of the cross, a more probable reading of the scene would conclude that the women were the three separate Mary characters traditionally present at the Crucifixion scene: Mary the Mother of Jesus, aged and sitting on the ground to the right of the cross; the young woman in blue modern dress is possibly Mary Magdalene; and the third remains a question since historically other crucifixions have not included a woman holding a baby.

Another angle from which to view *Modern Crucifixion* by Frederick Wight is in the light of the Social Justice movement that had begun to sweep the country. With the impact of the Great Depression, the

plight of the worker was a human and political concern. Wight was associated with the New School of Social Justice in New York City known for its advocacy for the troubles of the worker. Wight had certainly met or known of Thomas Hart Benton. Benton's mural paintings showed who Americans were by depicting a wide range of workers from every facet of American life. In *Modern Crucifixion*, Frederick Wight has taken us to the outskirts of Jerusalem where Jesus was hung as a criminal on a cross along with two other thieves, but he has done this by placing ordinary workers from a seacoast village of the 1930's at the scene. The townspeople pictured are the fishermen who risked their lives every time they went to sea, the boat builders and sail makers who strove to master their craft, and all those that lived in the quaint town nestled between the barrier beach and the mainland of New England.

By depicting the Crucifixion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wight continues a long tradition of placing "us" at the scene of the cross. Wight's painting helps us contemplate how the Crucifixion was not just an event that happened 2000 years ago, but how all our sins and personal failures continue to crucify the Lord. Christ died for all the sins of the world, both then, now, and for future generations. Wight understood this theological concept.

Frederick Wight's testimony to the Crucifixion preserves some of the faith history of the village of Chatham, Massachusetts. Wight realized that the Crucifixion is not a sterile incident, but one charged with strong and weighty import. It is not just a nostalgic, pretty event that happened 2000 years ago. From a Christian theological perspective the Crucifixion is the pivotal event of human history. It is the crux of a Christian's personal spirituality upon which we are commended to contemplate and pray. Frederick Wight has challenged us, some eighty plus years later, to study his interpretation of the Crucifixion and consider its implications and importance in a world far removed from his quaint fishing village on the coast of Cape Cod.



*Mystical Crucifixion, Marc Chagall*



photo Karen Wight

## FREDERICK WIGHT

Frederick Stallknecht Wight is arguably Chatham's most famous artist from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was born in New York City to Carol Wight and Alice Stallknecht in 1902. In 1910 the family moved to Chatham, MA. Wight said that there was 'a sense of odd' that existed between his family and the people of the village and art became his refuge. On foot and then on a bike he traversed the Cape with brush, paint and a pad of paper recording the local environment in a series of watercolors. His mother arranged from him to go to Boston to meet John Singer Sargent. She wanted Sargent's opinion on her son's watercolors. Frederick is quoted in Alice Stallknecht's Autobiography, "I was fourteen. He spent a long time with me...and the murals which he was working on were standing all around the large room."

He graduated from Chatham High School in 1917, at 15 years old. His uncle paid for his University of Virginia education and then further financed his European endeavors for two additional years of study at the Académie Julian in Paris.

He returned to Chatham in 1925 hoping to support himself as a portrait painter. Many of the sea captain portraits in the Atwood Museum were painted during this time. It is also during the early 1930s that he painted his large *Modern Crucifixion* mural using all local models for the various figures present at the biblical event. There he also established himself as a writer and his first novel, *South*, was published in 1935. In his second novel in 1936, *The Chronicle of Aaron Kane*, he turned to describing life on Cape Cod.

After marrying Joan Bingham from England, they traveled in Britain and the South of France for two years. In 1938 they returned to Chatham where he had success in his literary career as novelist and short story writer. It is also during this time that Frederick probably made some changes to his *Modern Crucifixion* by adding the lighthouse in the distance and altering the sky to encircle the Christ with a kind of *mandorla* encasement. In 1942 their only child was born in Hyannis.

World War II erupted and he joined the Navy, forever changing the trajectory of his professional life. During the war he was assigned work as an illustrator, but when his literary talent became evident, and he was appointed editor of the amphibious forces newspaper. Near the end of the war he made drawings of the Normandy beaches in preparation for the invasion of 1944.

Discharged in 1945 he again returned to Chatham, this time realizing that with a family to support he needed a more stable career. Using his G.I. Bill of Rights, he enrolled in Paul Sacks' museum training program at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. After receiving his master's degree in 1946, he was Director of Education, then Associate Director at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, working on major exhibitions of people like Louis Sullivan, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius.

In 1953 UCLA made him an offer to teach and direct the university's new art gallery. Over the next twenty years he became chair of the department and oversaw the development of a stellar exhibition program. He is credited with helping to shape Los Angeles' engagement with modern art to become a major art center. With a limited budget he managed to bring an impressive array of modern artists to the LA community—people like Paul Klee, Francis Bacon, Edvard, Munch and Henri Matisse. Upon retirement in 1973 the UCLA Art Gallery was named the Frederick S. Wight Gallery in his honor.

Wight had painted throughout most of his life, but his art career took off with a surprising force when he retired from his museum work. He is known for his luminous California landscapes that radiate with light. The Louis Stern Fine Art Gallery wrote that the expressive landscapes were of "celestial fireworks, planets in motion, dramatic sunsets and sunrises, ominous winds and clouds, powerful mountain ranges and seismic shocks."

How amazing that an artist of this stature had his roots in the little fishing village of Chatham on Cape Cod. It is important that Frederick Stallknecht Wight be remembered for the full breadth and depth of his work—even his religious painting of the *Modern Crucifixion* set in the landscape of the town on the Atlantic shore looking out to the sea, especially since the characters he portrayed are historical residents of his home town.



*Crucifixion, Lovis Corinth*



*Crucifixion, Pablo Picasso, date*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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