

Frederick S. Wight

Frederick Stallknecht Wight is arguably Chatham's most famous artist from the 20th 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.