



Illustrated By Jack Woolheiser  
Janet Barkas

## WHO'S WHO IN EAST HAMPTON PART 1: ARTISTS

- Alfonso Ossorio A.
- John Little B.
- Ibram Lassaw C.
- Willem de Kooning D.
- Lee Krasner E.

When Thomas Moran arrived in a horse and buggy in 1878, East Hampton was just another farming community on the eastern end of Long Island. Moran—remembered for his enormous landscape paintings of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite and other natural wonders of the West—and his wife, Mary Nimmo, a noted etcher liked East Hampton and made it their home for the next 50 years. They generated interest in the community among their artist friends and soon many illustrators, painters and musicians were spending time in that provincial town.

The first influx—including Stanford White, Augusta Gaudens and William N. Chase—was replenished by a younger group of noted artists: Child Hassam and Albert and Adelle Herter. By 1907



East Hampton had become a summer colony with most of the houses along Main Street taking in borders.

Why did they choose East Hampton? Southampton—closer to the city and quite lovely—had been settled for generations by the upper crest of Manhattan society and it was difficult for an artist to be accepted into that community. Land surrounding the village of East Hampton was not considered of prime value and artists could afford enough acreage to build a separate studio.

A surge of interest in East Hampton began in 1938 when Gerald and Sara Murphy, friends of F. Scott Fitzgerald, invited Ferdinand Leger and Lucia and Roger Wilcox to stay at their home. Soon Max Ernst, aided by Roger Fry, fled from the Nazis and came to America. Ernst, an acclaimed German Expressionist, married Peggy Guggenheim, who had already established a reputation as a supporter of young American artists. They settled in East Hampton. Robert Motherwell, another promising painter, soon joined the group.

Though the artist colony in East Hampton was growing, the area would still not have had achieved prominence in the history of American painting if Jackson Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, did not abandon Greenwich Village and head for the serenity of Long Island. Pollock, who died in 1956, did more than any artist to stimulate international recognition for this school of American painting. He was a man who generated enthusiasm by his every movement and creation.

I spoke to Lee Krasner at the Marlborough Gallery in Manhattan where her most recent paintings were on exhibit in April. A strong and dignified woman who speaks directly and explicitly, she told me of their move to Long Island. "We visited eastern Long Island for the first time in 1945. We went to see our friends, Barbara and Reuben Kadish. Reuben is a sculptor. Afterwards I asked Jackson if he would like to try spending a winter there. He looked at me as though I had lost my mind. Then we accompanied some friends house hunting out there. When we got back to Manhattan, he had a delayed reaction and asked if I'd

like to move there permanently. It was just like Jackson not to want to try it at first." She told me they moved into a 19th-century farmhouse in Springs in November 1945. After that they rarely went into Manhattan, but they did attend those gallery shows that were considered an absolute necessity.

Ms. Krasner said she was not conscious of an art colony evolving around her and her husband. She did note that she and Jackson would go bicycling and on their way discover these delightful old houses. Friends would visit, such as Ibram Lassaw the sculptor, and painters John Little and Alfonso Ossorio. They would fall in love with country living and the houses, and make the move, although many kept their Manhattan lofts.

I had visions of a united front of artists developing and asked Lee Krasner if she got the same feeling.

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"I don't believe in that kind of provincialism," she quickly replied. "Certainly not when it comes to painting. I don't even believe in it when it comes to our country." She answered my queries about whether the country affected Jackson Pollock's paintings with her philosophy that "everything effects one's painting. But neither Jackson nor I were that tied down to a tree being a tree."

I wondered if she had noted East Hampton's changes in the past 30 years. "I was never that in touch with the outside community," she said. "There were more changes in the art community that I noticed. Now it reads like a social register, but when we came there was nothing. But no one really gained fame out there . . . either they had it before they got there or they never got it."

Lee Krasner did not find the

growing number of artists a deterrent to her and Jackson's work. "There were only about three months of interruptions, and in that sense it was marvelous. We had three months of socializing during those months when you wanted to be outside. Then we'd have eight or nine months of just working."

After Pollock's death she tried to make it on her own, but it got to be too much. "It was hard at first," she said, "damned hard. I'm not the country type. And the loneliness. Finally, five years ago, I took an apartment on the upper East Side. I've had my lofts and it's not exciting anymore. I have a separate room that I use as a studio and I enjoy being able to paint anytime that I want to."

Lee Krasner's painting has continually developed. Barbara Rose wrote in her *New York* magazine review of Ms. Krasner's recent show that "she seems to have come to what used to be termed a 'breakthrough' in terms of arriving at uniquely personal statements." Perhaps that breakthrough is somehow tied to her move to her own home and a more dramatic separation from East Hampton and the years when being Jackson Pollock's wife was more noteworthy than being Lee Krasner.

In contrast to Ms. Krasner's two-dimensional works are the collage paintings of Alfonso Ossorio, an East Hampton neighbor. Alfonso visited the Pollocks in 1949 and took to the semi-rural community. While in Europe in 1951 he heard about the Herters' estate and wrote asking if it was available. He and his companion for over 20 years, Ted Dragon, a former leading dancer with the Paris Opera House, took title in 1952. They purchased the house, the adjoining studio that the Herters used to paint their enormous murals, and the 80 acres of scenic land that surrounded parts of Georgica Pond. Alfonso, who is from the Phillipines, has a style that combines Pollock and Dali in a bold and dramatic way. Poles, hardened discarded plastic, and endless other textures and forms are merged onto huge pieces of wood or glass. One never tires of an Ossorio work.

Through the years Alfonso and Ted have collected artifacts from

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all parts of the world. The house is far better than a museum, for their taste and creativity abound in a multitude of possessions—talking parrots, antique bird cages, stuffed sea turtles. Alfonso and Ted are generous in sharing their world-renowned collection of Dubuffets and Pollocks with visiting art lovers, students at neighboring colleges and the curious.

One of the reasons Alfonso decided to settle in East Hampton was the extraordinary art show that was held during the first summer he came out. "I found it astonishing to find summer people interested in younger artists," he said with his customary gentility and poise. "The visual arts are gaining popularity in America because any well-equipped material nation needs a visual imagery." Certainly Alfonso Ossorio and Ted Dragon have added to the visual imagery of East Hampton. Just driving down Montauk Highway toward their home, "The Creeks", one sees brightly painted posts that mark one of the entrances to the estate. The first entrance is graced by a monumental sculpture in bright red, blue and white. It is a fitting tribute to the land and to the blending of man-made and natural beauty.

One week after I met Alfonso, he came to Lee Krasner's gallery opening. Also present was another East Hampton artist, John Little and his wife, Josephine. Of all the painters who moved to East Hampton, John Little seems most suited to the quiet, natural setting of his secluded home in Three Mile Harbor. It is hard to imagine him in a congested urban environment. His three-century old home was recorded in the Library of Congress when it was a 300-acre farm. Lee Krasner told him about the house in 1948 and he moved in soon after.

What was his life in his New England-style retreat? "I paint all the time when I'm here. I only go into New York City about once every two weeks. Then we camp out in my small studio at Carnegie Hall. But here, I'll make the rounds and look in on my vegetable patch. Then I'll stretch my canvases. That gives me a little break in the routine. I'll work

from 8:30 in the morning till 6 or 7 at night. I often watch the news, but fortunately the television is broken."

We walked through his studio, a large barn about 100 feet from the house. Huge sheets of color hang on a line, drying before they become part of a collage. As he walked he explained, "Society is not responsible for the creative effort, but it should be sympathetic. It is a personal decision if you are to be a creative person or not, and you must be responsible for that decision . . . Art is not like baseball—it's not for the great masses of people. It's for the enlightened." But he concluded his comment on art in America by calling his remarks "rather arrogant."

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gant."

The sense of peace that I felt while speaking to John Little was different from the pulsating emotion that filled my talk with Willem de Kooning, leader of the American school of painting known as Abstract Expressionism. De Kooning's studio is in Springs and he too came to East Hampton after summer and weekend visits with Pollock. About 10 years ago he built a home and adjoining studio—sleek and modern, yet comfortable. "With income tax what it is," he confessed, "I figured I might as well spend it on myself before the government gets it."

His small stature was accentuated by the overpowering canvases that filled the spacious studio. We sat in high-backed chairs and talked casually. Though de Kooning does not encourage visitors, once you are with him you sense that he welcomes the interruption in his intense work schedule.

De Kooning told me he was one of the first artists to get a loft in Manhattan, back in 1929. Odd jobs, such as designing for the A.S. Beck Shoe Company, were necessary for many years. "I was someone who profited by the depression," he said. "Everyone else was doing so badly, an artist didn't

seem so poor anymore. The WPA gave me an opportunity to work. Since you couldn't make more than a certain amount of money a week, I would spend the rest of the time painting."

"Do you enjoy socializing with the other artists?" I asked. "I don't like cocktail parties," he said. "They are rather boring. Besides, I'm not supposed to drink too much and those things are intolerable without it."

Our interview ended with de Kooning laughing when I told him I would have to come back again because I forgot to put film in my camera.

Driving down the road a bit, you come to Ibram Lassaw's house. Lassaw, a noted metal sculptor, moved to East Hampton because of the difficulties of being an artist and living in a loft in New York City in the 1930's. "I had a loft on 12th Street and 6th Avenue for 16 years. My wife

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Ernestine and I had to use a peephole because we could never open the door. We were always afraid of building inspectors and fire marshals. Of course welding was illegal."

Like the other artists, he chose East Hampton because his friends were out here. "We saw the same people here that we'd see in the city when we'd all meet at the Cedar Tavern on University Place. It just seemed the next step after a loft. We built the first room with our own hands and we really settled the land. At first we didn't even have electricity. Of course the community was suspicious of us, 'What are those artists in the woods up to?' they wondered."

Now Lassaw has finally been able to complete a separate studio for his creative jewelry and metal works. The funny part is, when you walk into the studio you feel as if you are in a downtown loft that has been transplanted to the country. But he doesn't have to worry about welding being illegal anymore.

Another painter living in East Hampton is Julian Levi. He is a summer resident, dividing his time among teaching at the New School for Social Research and the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts and his apartment on west 12th Street. Because of space limitations in his modern high rise, he does most of his painting on Long Island. Though he enjoys knowing that there are other artists out there, he is more of a loner than the rest. "I like Springs because the air is fresh. Physically I love the low horizons and being near the sea. I wouldn't have been happy just staying in New York City. What I paint is motivated by the sea coast. It doesn't bear a close resemblance to it, but it comes from it."

Saul Steinberg is still another East Hampton comrade. John Canady, *New York Times* art critic, believes Steinberg will be remembered long after Jackson Pollock. Steinberg chose East Hampton because "It's where all our friends went. It's a perfect environment. Painters like flat land and its bicycle country. You know, bicycle riding is very good for painting."

Probably no other topic will produce unanimous agreement

among this esteemed group of artists than the advantage of living in East Hampton. The noted painter James Brooks knew Pollock and visited him there. Finally he and his wife Charlette, also a painter, took an inexpensive place across the Bay. "We always went back to New York in the winter because I was teaching."

*"... It's where all our friends went. It's a perfect environment. Painters like flat land, and it's bicycle country. You know, bicycle riding is very good for painting..."*

Brooks recognizes the change that has taken place in East Hampton these past few years. "Now it's more part of the New York City scene. The separation isn't as great. In those early days, we didn't have a phone or electricity. But it's still quieter than New York."

Stories about the annual artist softball games are frequently heard in the taverns of East Hampton. Barney Rosset, publisher of Grove Press, Inc., likes to recall that famous game when Harold Rosenberg, the art critic for the *New Yorker*, was a captain. Philip Pavia the sculptor was up at bat. Painters Franz Kline, Lud Sander and Elaine de Kooning took a grapefruit and painted it so expertly that it looked just like a softball. When Pavia hit the "ball" it splashed all over. Then the coconut that had also been disguised as a ball went "Thwack!" To Barney Rosset that game was the end of an era, for once the writers joined the game it became more serious and less fun.

It is hard to believe that so many visual artists thrive within so small an area. Perhaps the cost of land in East Hampton will discourage rising young painters and sculptors from moving out in the years ahead. But regardless of the future of East Hampton as an artist community, it will be preserved in art history books because of the canvases and sculptures that poured forth.