

Last Duel Between Two Painters: Old House Stirs History Lesson

By JEFFREY SCHEUER

SOME SUMMER RENTALS COME WITH a beach sticker; some come with a ferry reservation. Mine came with homework and a field trip. Call it credit toward a degree in Vineyard studies. And the inside dope on the last duel fought up-Island.

I'm something of a history buff to begin with, and I try, as much as possible, to live in the past. I like older things: boats, houses, books, and people. So when I saw an ad in the Gazette last winter for the summer rental of an antique farmhouse in Chilmark, I pounced.

The house, as the owner explained when I dropped by for a spring visit, was one of the oldest on the Island, "built in 1760 from recycled parts." And carefully restored by said owner. It had been in the Tilton family for a few centuries. When I noted some floral designs hand-painted on the interior doors, the owner imparted a bit more Island folklore.

The previous owner had been Denys Wortman Sr., the artist and cartoonist. Wortman was a friend of the artist Thomas Hart Benton, a longtime summer resident of (then) Gay Head; and my parents were Tom and Rita Benton's Chilmark neighbors on Menemsha Pond. Rita used to wave to us while digging for clams on their beach near Herring Creek. Everything connects.

But there was more. I learned that in 1953 Tom Benton challenged Denys Wortman to a duel — using brushstrokes rather than swords — to see who could paint the better portrait of whom. Wortman initially declined the challenge; but as he later recalled, "Sitting for hours with that pirate glowering at me with his superanalytical stare and his sketch book was too much for me. I had to defend myself." So finally he took up the dare. The portraits were painted.

That's what led to my field trip: a mid-July detour to New Britain, Conn., on my way to the Vineyard. Just outside Hartford, the New Britain Museum of American Art houses the twin portraits, Benton's Wortman and Wortman's Benton — and much else worth seeing.

Founded in 1903, the museum is the oldest in the nation devoted entirely to American art, and it has a wonderful collection: nothing definitive, but a broad sampling of great American artists. It is not the catch of a harpooner but of a trawler.

An entire room is devoted to a Benton mural series, the 1932 Arts of Life in America series, which was commissioned by the Whitney Museum in New York. New Britain acquired it in 1953, the year of the duel, when Benton's stock was down. "The New Britain Museum," Benton wrote in 1959, "is my favorite museum . . . over the years it

has been the most friendly [to] me and my efforts."

Sharing a wall in a small adjoining room are the precocious twin portraits. They still seem to vie for the attention both deserve. Wortman's depiction of Benton painting Wortman is witty and warm; Benton's rendering of his friend painting Benton is magnificent — to my eye, among the strongest in his oeuvre. End of duel.

But there was more. Nestled between the two large portraits is a small but striking oil painting of Benton's son, T.P. Benton, sailing on Menemsha Pond. (Years later, I used to see T.P. occasionally sailing his homemade boat on the pond; he only went out in heavy weather.) This little gem was executed by T.P.'s sometime babysitter, and Benton's model and studio assistant, Jackson Pollock.

Another Vineyard subject is Rained-in Vacationers, Stevan Dohanos's cover for the July 31, 1948 Saturday Evening Post. It depicts the Sea Breeze cottage, which was originally part of the Methodist revival camp in Oak Bluffs, but was moved to Hart Haven after it was bought by the Hart family of the Vineyard and New Britain.

In New Britain's panorama of American art some important figures, such as Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keefe, inevitably get only token representation. But there is much to see here: serene landscapes and seascapes, dramatic shipwrecks, somber colonial portraits by the likes of Copley, Stuart, and Sargent, works by the Eight Group and the Ashcan School. Another Benton work, *Strike in Fall River* (1935) powerfully reflects the artist's Depression-era sympathy for factory workers.

A strength of the collection is in the Hudson River School. Thomas Cole's *The Clove, Catskills*, from around 1826, warmly greets the eye of a visitor familiar with the Hudson Valley. George Henry Durrie's *Winter in New England* 1851 is another unsuspected delight. Complementing the collection, the museum itself has just moved into the new Chase Family Building, an elegant, understated limestone edifice designed by Ann Beha Architects of Boston.

Thus enriched, I proceeded to the Vineyard and enjoyed my stay in the old farmhouse, eagerly absorbing its lessons. Life is a coincidence. The Vineyard is a small Island. Art is where you find it. Duels are a thing of the past, but not always silly. Close the windows when it rains. And, as George Santayana might have said, those who do not remember the past are condemned to re-paint it.

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