

Bermuda paintings, watercolours & drawings history – a brief overview

Painting in Bermuda: 1609 to 1950.

It is said that Bermuda is the second most remote island in the world. In spite of her isolation, Bermuda has played congenial host to a great many important artists.

Early Bermudian art was particularly influenced by the colony's dependence on its founder, England. By the late 1800's, there was a sea change. Britain's colonial empire building waned as the industrial revolution was driven forward in the Americas. Where once she looked eastward to Mother England, Bermuda began to look westward for influence.

Bermuda's 'golden age' of painting (from 1880 to 1925) parallels the burgeoning American industrial economy and, more importantly for Bermuda, the rise of tourism. The American zeitgeist was one of pressure to produce. Entrepreneurial success gave America its first patrons of the arts, and at the same time, modern art arrived on America's shores. Incessant industry (with the Depression providing a notably different sort of pressure) could not help but trickle down to American and Canadian artists in particular. As travel became increasingly easy, indeed fashionable, North American artists of the time found Bermuda to be a place of rest and refuge. They also found it to be a place where they could literally see their palettes in a new light.

Sir George Somers and the Bermuda Company: 17th century painting in Bermuda (1600 – 1699)

Before Sir George Somers claimed Bermuda for England in 1609 (and it is to be noted that Bermuda celebrates this anniversary in 2009) it is fair to say that Bermuda's only visual representation was as a cartographical feature in a wider Atlantic world. It would be centuries before the Bermudian landscape per se would be painted. There are no existing studies of Bermudian life from this period that we know of. Examples of seventeenth century painting in England's oldest colony are limited to a few portraits but might be said to include portraits of the original shareholders in "The Bermuda Company", which received its Charter in 1615. The Bermuda Company was made up of 118 'Adventurers' (investors) including noblemen, knights, gentlemen and London merchants. Among the most famous were the nine Bermuda Elizabethan patrons: William Cavendish, 1st. Earl of Devonshire (1552-1626), James Hamilton, 2nd. Marquess of Hamilton (1589-1625) to name but two after which we get many names of places in Bermuda still today. These men surely figure large in Bermuda's history and therefore art history though almost nothing has been made on the island of this connection to the tap-root of our art historical beginnings?

It is generally true to say that at this time, generally, people of significant means or great importance sat for portrait artists as patronage was costly. For example, it is thought by many that Dutch artist Paul Van Somer (c. 1577- 1622) painted Sir George Somers. The portrait now hangs in the Bermuda Historical Society. The truth is that it is unlikely that work is by Van Somer though the jury is still out on this point.

The itinerant artists: 18th century painting in Bermuda (1700 – 1799)

In the eighteenth century, the relationship between the painter and the sitter continued to be a commercial one. One of the most influential “American Colonial” painters, Scottish artist John Smibert had a connection with Bermuda. His painting entitled “The Bermuda Group” (also known as “The Berkeley Entourage”) hangs at Yale University, and was painted in 1729. This painting features a group of 8 figures, 5 men (including Smibert), two women and a child, and is considered the first important group portrait painted in America during that period. Smibert was to teach art and architecture at Dean (later Bishop) Berkeley’s college, to be founded in Bermuda for the conversion and education of American indigenous people. The project foundered, but Smibert married and remained in America, painting many portraits of prominent early colonists.

Two other itinerant painters, Joseph Blackburn (British or American, painted in Bermuda in 1752 and 1753) and John Green (origins unknown, painted in Bermuda in 1765) worked on commissions in Bermuda. Before the advent of photography, it became fashionable to hire an artist to ‘fix’ the sitter’s likeness on canvas, thus recording the subject’s appearance for both family and posterity. Both artists have left portraits of Bermuda’s important citizens of the day which remain in local collections.

There are no known “Bermudian” painters from this period.

From portrait to landscape: 19th century painting in Bermuda (1800-1880)

The orientation of Bermudian art changed in the 19th century. Bermuda’s first landscapes were painted due to the arrival of the British military. Once considered a minor colony, Bermuda gained strategic importance after the American Revolution deprived Britain of the American colonies. Bermuda became the sole and vital British possession between Canada and the West Indies. As a centre for British naval activity in the North Atlantic, it was hoped that the Island stronghold would threaten the naval strength of the new United States and France, and maintain communications throughout the northern Atlantic.

Almost all the British artists who portrayed Bermuda in the first half of the nineteenth century were naval or military officers. Their watercolour images and lithographs became the first extensive visual records of the island, which had hitherto been seen only as a two-dimensional feature on a map. Their recordings, for which they had been prepared as part of their military training, were mostly used much as any other reconnaissance might be carried out by an army, to record the surroundings in which they found themselves and to report back – in this case to London

In military and naval colleges, officers in training were taught topographical drawing. These officers, who came from Britain's middle and upper classes, knew that topographical drawing was considered inferior by polite society. Society encouraged classically inspired and visually harmonious images and yet the Crown wanted accurate sketches of terrain and coastline. The most artistically talented officers aimed to serve both masters.

Talented or otherwise, these artists could not help but portray Bermuda from a hierarchical British perspective. The artists tended to use devices and symbols which emphasized British dominance. Sweeping panoramas suggested visual command. The use of classical composition, a European aesthetic, implied that a cultured Briton had mastered a foreign landscape. It was customary to insert lounging locals in the foreground while the background showed bastions of British order or harbours busy with British naval traffic.

These images reached their height of popularity in the 1830s and 1840s. When the first photographers arrived in Bermuda, the need for accurate topographical renderings evaporated. The long tradition of the military artist gradually came to an end. However, these idealised renderings of Bermuda's landscape presaged the 'en plein air' images that would become the motif of Bermuda's 'golden age' of painting.

A Bermudian named William Tucker (1804-1854) was also painting watercolours at this time. However, because of the damp climate and lack of necessary environmental awareness toward works on paper in a semi-tropical climate, many of his paintings have been damaged beyond salvaging. The work of British naval artists fared better; these paintings were removed to drier climates overseas.

The Golden Age: Art in Bermuda from 1880-1925

A surprising number of artists, now recognized as important artists, visited Bermuda in this period. This influx was due to a complex set of circumstances. In 1877, Bermuda received its first high-profile visitor. In many ways, the arrival of Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, initiated tourist travel to Bermuda. Twain's lifelong enthusiasm for Bermuda seems to have had a profound influence on popular opinion. As the tourist trade blossomed, Bermuda provided an increasing number of well-heeled Americans with a genteel respite from colder climates. As the ads of the day said, one could go from "frost to flowers" in the span of a short voyage from the East Coast. The Morgans, Rockefellers and DuPonts came to soak up the sun, be revived by a simpler way of life, and delight in the charming "Britishness" of the place. Increasingly, artists also visited our fashionable destination.

As word of Bermuda's idyllic ambiance passed throughout the north-eastern states of America, larger and larger numbers of artists came to Bermuda. Like the industrial barons and their families, artists were lured here by Bermuda's beauty, climate, proximity to New York, and the camaraderie they found with others painting here. Conversely, there were those who came to be alone, to leave the pressures of their studios behind, to

paint outdoors and even to try new media, as Winslow Homer famously did in 1901. Although only known to have made one trip to Bermuda, it is thought that he made a second trip. His low key visits allowed him to work peacefully with watercolours and his coastal views executed in Bermuda represent a marked departure from his previous work.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, 1913 was held at the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory in New York. “The Armory Show” is considered the official dawn of American Modernism; certainly, those who exhibited there are generally given great attention nowadays. By 1914, the North East coast was an economic juggernaut, and the art world was buzzing with the first important “modern” American works of art.

From the very earliest days, painters brought not only their palettes, but also their ideas from overseas. The Boston School, Connecticut Impressionist School, in Old Lyme, The New Hope School in Philadelphia, the urban modernists and rural modernists; these are the sometimes simplistic but traditional parameters or styles into which American painting of the period is codified; “Bermudian painting” followed suit as well.

In addition to Winslow Homer, hundreds of well-established artists came to Bermuda to “refresh their palettes”. Albert Gleizes, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, Prosper Senat and E. Ambrose Webster among other avant-garde painters, all created important works of Bermudian art in this period.

They painted mostly en plein air, taking advantage of Bermuda’s unusual light, Bermudian architecture, highways and byways, scenes of Hamilton, St. George and Somerset, coastal views and botanical subjects all of which feature prominently. Still life composition and interior work was generally much more rare.

Homegrown painters like the Tucker sisters and Bessie Gray were also painting during this period.

1930 – 1950: Post depression to Post World War II

The fun and sun-seekers of the Roaring Twenties gave way to those who were interested in the exclusivity of Bermuda as a tourist destination. Florida was available to all, but Bermuda was a place for the wealthy to escape. Bermuda became a beacon to those who had retained their wealth and needed a place to recover their equilibrium.

Artists came as well in large numbers including Georgia O’Keeffe, Jack Bush and Frank D. Allison.

In 1939, tourism took a steep dive. The Royal Naval Dockyard was alight with activity; it was a potent reminder to Americans of the harsh realities of a war they had not yet entered. The Atlantic was no longer a safe place to be at sea. Thankfully, for a country now dependent on tourism, there was another sort of arrival. Two thousand personnel were billeted in Bermuda when it became Britain’s principal censorship station.

After the war, the island had a new airfield and a new American naval base. Tourists began to return to a place that was once again accessible by sea and air. The Island's economy, shaken by the tourism drought during the war, needed a boost. Once again, Bermuda's unique geographic position, its centuries-old stable government and its beauty made it an attractive place to do business. The colony was poised to become an international business centre, perhaps in part because it is neither fully a part of the New World or the Old.