



TELLING NEW ENGLAND'S STORIES

One view near Boston from later this year through March 2021 is a unique new exhibition, *Artful Stories: Paintings from Historic New England*. Its distinctive character derives from the remarkable organization that owns all 45 of its artworks, 14 of which are illustrated here. The backstory of Historic New England (HNE) itself is intriguing and worth relaying.

William Sumner Appleton (1874–1947) was a lifelong resident of Boston and also America's first full-time professional preservationist. In 1910, he founded the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, now known as Historic New England. For the next 37 years, Appleton led and inspired the rapidly growing organization. He defined its purpose; persuaded, charmed, and occasionally hectored the membership; raised money (sometimes covering deficits from his own funds); worked without remuneration; established a sound preservation methodology; and guided the organization successfully through two world wars and the Depression. Appleton's vision has evolved into a thriving heritage organization that now welcomes over 200,000 visitors each year to 37 historic properties in five New England states.

As you might expect of an organization so old, and of a region so history-minded, many artworks and artifacts have been given to, or otherwise acquired by, HNE over the years. Most are items you would see in a historic house, including furniture, ceramics, glass, costumes, jewelry, metalwork, etc. Also gathered have been more than 6,500 works of fine art, but for decades, there has not been a suitable space in which to exhibit them in their own right. That changed in 2017, when HNE opened the 1878 Eustis Estate, a magnificent Aesthetic Movement mansion in Milton, Massachusetts, 10 miles south of Boston. On its second floor is a sequence of unfurnished bedrooms that now function as galleries for thematic exhibitions drawn from HNE's holdings or borrowed from elsewhere.

Since 2018, therefore, HNE senior curator of collections Nancy Carlisle and I have collaborated to assemble 45 paintings that normally adorn 10 of HNE's house museums or rest in its impressive storage facility in Haverhill, Massachusetts, 35 miles north of Boston. The earliest work in our show was painted in the 1730s and the latest in 2018. Many of the paintings are usually viewed from across a room, in the context of their house's particular story. By displaying them together away from those decors — with museum-style lighting, wall labels, and in-gallery informational kiosks — Carlisle and I will watch these pictures take on new meanings as they are admired up close and even perhaps “speak to” each other.

In preparation for this project, Carlisle and I reviewed hundreds of paintings before narrowing the list down to this group of 45 “top hits.” It has been a pleasure to work with her while drawing upon our complementary perspectives to ensure that each painting tells an interesting story. Carlisle's expertise as a social and cultural historian specializing in New England's material culture, and my own knowledge of European art, have dovetailed to offer visitors some fresh insights.

Beyond the research we have undertaken, another joy has been watching the artworks emerge from conservation treatments that have them looking their best again. All of the paintings have been well cared for over the years, but it's only natural — especially in historic houses — that varnishes begin to yellow and nicks appear in a frame's carving. Carlisle and I have also enjoyed collaborating with HNE's educators on the handsome website for Eustis Estate that provides deeper information for both exhibition visitors and those who cannot get there in person. Its content includes historical photographs, maps, and film and audio clips. An array of lively public programs will be offered throughout the show's run, including coffees and cocktails with the curators, painting demonstrations, and a concert of American parlor songs.

Finally, visitors to Eustis Estate will enjoy the impressive display of 19th- and early 20th-century American paintings Nancy Carlisle has been acquiring for the mansion's large ground-floor rooms. All of these relate thematically to the pictures upstairs in *Artful Stories* — connections brought out in some of our website commentaries.

A REGION SEEN FROM EVERY ANGLE

“New England,” wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne, “is as large a lump of earth as my heart can readily take in.” Just as writers have recorded the ever-changing nature of the region and its inhabitants, so too have artists. The paintings in *Artful Stories* reflect what it is about New England that imbues it with such a unique sense of place.

These artworks have been arranged according to four themes: *Land and Sea*, *At Home in New England*, *New England's People*, and *The Wide World*. At first, Carlisle and I sought to avoid arranging the art by genres such as landscapes, seascapes, and portraits for fear of boring visitors. But to our delight, the sheer diversity of this collection has made each of the four galleries a rewarding visual experience. Works of different dates and styles are seen side by side, reminding visitors that their themes are truly timeless. ●

LAND AND SEA

Artists have celebrated New England's scenery for more than 200 years. In lush summer or frigid winter, they have depicted iconic scenes of majestic wilderness and well-organized farms, ordinary meadows and marshes, and towns large and small. Equally alluring has been New Englanders' close relationship with the sea. With so much wealth derived from shipping and fishing, artists' interest was inevitable.

Looming in the backstories of many paintings are the harsh realities of industrialization and urban expansion, which painters generally avoided depicting. And yet, while evading those issues, in some ways these paintings underscore them. Celebrating and preserving New England's natural beauty is of urgent concern today, a fact that makes these glimpses of the region in the past particularly meaningful.



Mount Chocorua is in the southern reaches of the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Part of the Appalachian range, these mountains were among New England's most popular tourist attractions in the 19th century. Artists flocked to the area, drawn not only to the region's beauty, but also to the camaraderie established by the painter Benjamin Champney, whose summer residence and studio in North Conway attracted many like-minded men and women.

BENJAMIN CHAMPNEY (1817–1907),
Mount Chocorua, 1860, oil on canvas,
19 1/2 x 29 in., gift of the estate of Jane
N. Grew

Born in Canada, E.M. Bannister was one of the few black artists to be widely recognized in the U.S. before 1900. Arriving to accept a prize at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, he was refused entry, but finally received the medal after fellow exhibitors protested. Bannister taught at the Rhode Island School of Design and painted local scenery using techniques of the French Barbizon school, which prioritized nature's ordinary beauties over iconic views such as Benjamin Champney's *Mount Chocorua*, illustrated above. In this scene, a woman reads while breezes flutter the leaves and grasses.

EDWARD MITCHELL BANNISTER (c. 1828–1901),
Woman Reading Under a Tree, 1880–85, oil on
canvas, 14 1/2 x 18 1/2 in., museum purchase





Artists have long admired the charm of New England's ports, often ignoring that they are also sites of labor and commerce. The son of a Gloucester sea captain, George Harvey deftly composed this scene using the strong vertical thrust of the ship's sails, which is sustained in its reflection. He married photographer Martha Hale Rogers and they spent many years in Europe before returning to the Cape Ann region. The similarity of her photographs to painted scenes like this reveals the couple's artistic affinity.

GEORGE WAINWRIGHT HARVEY (1855–1930), *Sunny Morning, Gloucester Harbor*, late 1880s, oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 28 5/8 in., gift of the Stephen Phillips Memorial Charitable Trust for Historic Preservation

AT HOME IN NEW ENGLAND

The word “home” has complex meanings, which are expressed in different ways in the *Artful Stories* exhibition. Most familiar is the building we call home, with spaces designated for sleeping, cooking, and working or relaxing. Establishing a home is a creative act — the choices we make in designing, furnishing, and maintaining it reflect who we are and how we want others to see us. At one end of that idea is a grand room created by Henry Davis Sleeper, who built what is now Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House in Gloucester, Massachusetts. At the other end is an anonymous woman baking in an antiquated — yet atmospheric — kitchen.

More abstract is the place we call home — be it a town, farm, or suburb. New England has many places that are multilayered: new buildings coexist with much older ones, and natural and economic factors continually reshape the landscape.

When *Country Life* magazine invited Henry Sleeper to illustrate his rooms at Beauport, he arranged to have them painted by William Ranken, a portraitist introduced to Boston society by John Singer Sargent. Ranken's view of the Chapel Chamber focuses on the important collection of silver by Paul Revere that Sleeper later donated to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Sleeper's eclectically furnished room is a masterclass in color orchestrations and contrasts of light and shadow. Note the brushstrokes that suggest sunlight on the floor, and how Ranken toned down the vivid wallpaper to retain focus on the cabinet.

WILLIAM BRUCE ELLIS RANKEN (1881–1941), *The Chapel Chamber at Beauport*, 1928, oil on paper, 34 3/8 x 25 1/2 in., gift of Constance McCann Betts, Helena Woolworth Guest, and Frasier W. McCann





While images of men working are celebrated in art history circles, in American paintings women are more often recorded at leisure. Here a woman stands before a window, leaning over a table and kneading dough. The curvature of her spine and her strong arms reflect years of hard work. Her kitchen, a room celebrated today as “the heart of the home,” is clearly a work space more than a place to gather.

UNKNOWN ARTIST, *Woman Working in a Kitchen*, 1880–1900, oil on board, 18 x 22 in., gift of the Joan Pearson Watkins Trust

Soon after cofounding the banking firm Kidder, Peabody, & Co. in 1865, Francis Peabody moved from Boston with his family, including daughters Fannie and Lillian, seen in the foreground, to this tranquil location in Arlington, Massachusetts. The cottage at the end of the drive, built in 1843, is a distinguished example of the Gothic style widely promoted in Andrew Jackson Downing’s influential book, *Cottage Residences* (1842). This painting was made early in Frank Shapleigh’s career, not long after his discharge from the Union Army. Later he traveled to Europe to hone his skills.

FRANK HENRY SHAPLEIGH (1842–1906), *A Country Home*, 1866, oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 39 1/2 in., bequest of Amelia Peabody



NEW ENGLAND'S PEOPLE

New England would not be what it is without the cultural, racial, and economic diversity of the people who have lived there. Yet not all residents have had the money, time, or connections to get their portraits painted — and thus to show us who they were. This is why most of the portraits we see today depict privileged white people.

Given this reality, the likenesses in this section of *Artful Stories* are comparatively wide-ranging, recording not only the powerful but also those who worked for a living or struggled to achieve their goals. This section opens with the unexpected — an imagined portrait of a black man who escaped slavery in the 18th century. Historic New England places a high priority on acquiring and highlighting images of people who have traditionally eluded the attention of fine artists.



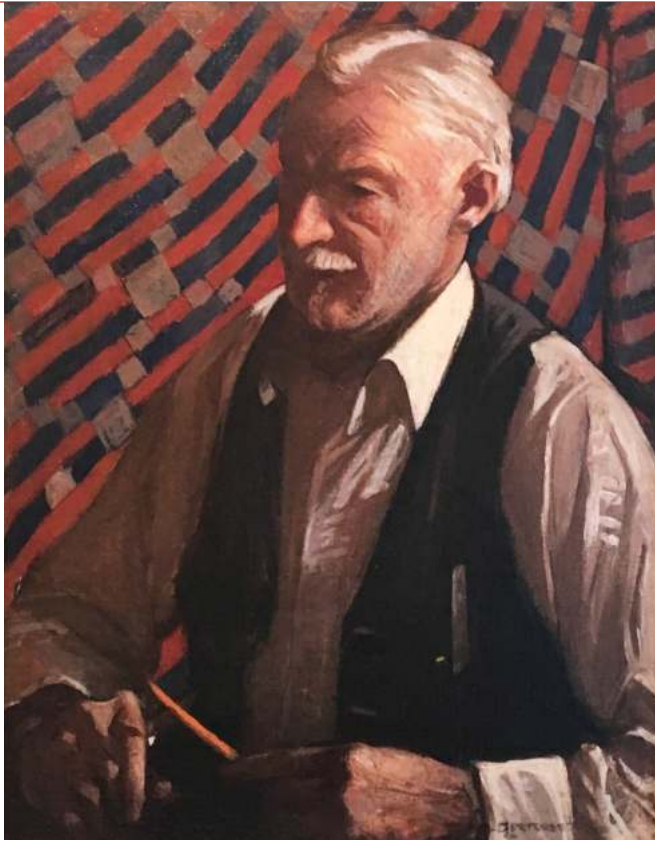
In the early years of the 19th century, when there were few opportunities for genteel women to earn a living, Clementina Beach and Judith Saunders ran one of New England's elite schools for girls, located in Dorchester, Massachusetts. We do not know whether grateful students commissioned this portrait from the great Gilbert Stuart or Beach commissioned it herself. In either case, it is an unusually early portrait of a woman who was painted not because of who her family was but for what she herself had achieved.

GILBERT STUART (1755–1828), *Clementina Beach* (1774–1855), 1820–25, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 30 3/4 in., museum purchase



In 1783, Cyrus Bruce, a formerly enslaved black man, began working for Governor John Langdon in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he was admired for his “gentlemanly appearance.” Few people in Bruce’s situation were recorded for posterity, so in 2018, when Richard Haynes, an African American artist from Portsmouth, undertook a residency at Historic New England’s Langdon House, he had to imagine the servant’s appearance. This pose suggests Bruce’s authority, and his shadow seems to move forward toward new opportunities. Yet the door knocker resembles a question mark, leading us to wonder about Bruce’s fate.

RICHARD HAYNES, JR. (b. 1949), *Cyrus Bruce*, 2018, oil and wax-based crayons on paper, 39 1/4 x 29 in., gift of the artist



Gertrude Fiske enrolled in the Boston Museum School in 1904, when she was 25. Before long she was extolled in newspaper reviews, won medals at international expositions, and sold her work through one of the region's most prestigious art galleries. In this painting she posed her model against a colorful geometric backdrop — a favorite quilt she also chose when she sat for her own photograph. Depicting the model as an elderly woodworker, Fiske used a raking light to emphasize his arthritic knuckles, underscoring the character's lifetime of working with his hands.

GERTRUDE FISKE (1879–1961), *Man Whittling*, c. 1935, oil on canvas, 36 x 29 in., museum purchase

THE WIDE WORLD



New Englanders have always looked beyond the region to engage with the world outside. One driving force has been international trade, thanks especially to New England's maritime prowess; in *Artful Stories*, this factor is glimpsed in a scene from China, where so many mercantile fortunes were made. There has also been an openness to incoming ideas and art forms, particularly through the region's many institutions of higher learning. When we factor in the growing taste for foreign travel and easier transatlantic crossings in the 19th century, this section's artworks make sense. A unique story is told on the wall that highlights the cosmopolitan family of Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908). There is even a reminder that — for some New Englanders — venturing to Niagara Falls in upstate New York was also an exotic experience.

According to her biographer, Elizabeth Adams “dared to believe that a woman might dedicate her life to a profession.” Born to a renowned Boston family, Adams headed to France and Italy when she was 34 and spent more than a decade there devoted to the study of art. This is Adams's copy of the self-portrait of the French court artist Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842) painting Queen Marie-Antoinette. Le Brun was one of the few women ever invited to contribute to the collection of artists' self-portraits at Florence's Uffizi Gallery, and her life story surely appealed to Adams, whose own artistic ambition was realized in 1885 when one of her paintings was chosen for exhibition at the Paris Salon.

ELIZABETH ADAMS (1825–1898), *Replica of the Self-Portrait of Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 1860–74, oil on canvas, 53 5/8 x 46 in., gift of the artist's nephew, Boylston Adams Beal



After the Great Boston Fire of 1872 destroyed many of his properties, Ogden Codman Sr. (1839–1904) moved his young family to the French seaside resort of Dinard, in Brittany. There the Codmans met artist Edward Darley Boit and his family, who also had moved there from Boston. A few years later when the Codmans returned to live in Massachusetts, this painting by Boit came with them. Although a competent artist himself, Boit is best known for the famous portrait of his daughters painted in Paris by John Singer Sargent — now a beloved treasure at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

EDWARD DARLEY BOIT
(1840–1915), *St. Servan Harbor*,
1882, oil on canvas, 23 x 28 1/8 in.,
gift of Dorothy S. F. M. Codman

H.D. Murphy is known for quiet, almost poetic scenes that avoid strong contrasts of light and shade. After studying at Boston's Museum School and spending five years in France, he became an active member of Boston's art community. In 1908 he revisited Venice, where he made this scene highlighting the impressionistic shimmer of water. Equally admirable is the hand-carved frame. Inspired by James McNeill Whistler's belief that frames and paintings should harmonize, in 1903 Murphy co-founded the framing firm of Carrig-Rohane, named after the studio-house he created in Winchester, Massachusetts, that same year.

HERMANN DUDLEY MURPHY (1867–1945),
Venice, c. 1908, oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 38 5/8 in.,
gift of the Stephen Phillips Memorial Charitable
Trust for Historic Preservation





As a son of Harvard University professor Charles Eliot Norton, Richard Norton was destined to be cosmopolitan. He was the director of the American School of Classical Studies at Rome when he commissioned this portrait. Antonio Mancini was a daring choice: the Italian artist suffered from mental illness but was championed by John Singer Sargent, who introduced him to American patrons like Isabella Stewart Gardner. Mancini's colorful scratchings on Norton's face are bold; even less conventional are the exuberant brushstrokes of lush foliage. The square impressions seen at the top left of this painting are evidence of Mancini's unique use of a perspective grid system that helped him see his sitter and canvas more clearly.

ANTONIO MANCINI (1852–1930), *Richard Norton* (1872–1918), c. 1905, oil on canvas, 47 x 31 3/4 in., bequest of Susan Norton, the sitter's daughter



This painting descended in the Norton family whose members had deep connections to European artists and intellectuals. The London-trained artist of this painting developed similar transatlantic connections when she married American journalist W. J. Stillman. After her marriage Stillman lived in Italy, where she immersed herself in Renaissance culture. She painted dreamlike images of women that epitomized her generation's notion of ideal beauty — long limbs and fingers, flowing red hair. Here her model holds a pomegranate and peacock feather, both attributes of the goddess Hera. As Hera was the patron of brides, this may have been intended as a wedding gift.

MARIE SPARTALI STILLMAN (1844–1927), *Hera*, late 1880s, watercolor, gouache, likely waterglass (sodium silicate) on paper stretched on wood panel, 28 1/4 x 24 5/8 in., bequest of Susan Norton

Information: historicnewengland.org, eustis.estate. The texts that accompany the illustrations here were written by Nancy Carlisle and Peter Trippi. The exhibition is supported in part by Historic New England's lead sponsor Dr. Janina A. Longtine, with additional support from Jeffrey P. Beale, The Felicia Fund, Robert and Elizabeth Owens, Mrs. George Putnam, Kristin and Roger Servison, Robert Bayard Severy, and Angie and Bob Simonds. HNE also recognizes the generosity of the members of its Appleton Circle..

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