

# Painting in Verbs:

## Maine Literary and Artistic Traditions

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MAINE HAS LONG BEEN recognized as a magnet for visual artists. Paintings and photographs of Maine displayed in big-city museums and art galleries have always served as calling cards for the state, encouraging other artists to come here to work, to be inspired and maybe even to stay. The early twentieth-century Ogunquit art colonies are the perfect illustration of this—students at Charles Woodbury and Hamilton Easter Field's competing summer art schools transformed the town and became business owners, homeowners and year-round residents. This was the genesis of the thriving arts community that exists in the area today (*see article on page 34*).

The same phenomenon happened in the American literary world. Authors like Booth Tarkington and Kate Douglas Wiggin were drawn to Maine's summer idylls and ended up putting down roots and becoming part of the fabric of their local communities. Others, like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Sarah Orne Jewett, were native Mainers whose careers and travels took them beyond Maine but who never fully (or even



partially, in Jewett's case) scraped the pine needles from their shoes. In any case, writers as much as artists found in Maine the raw materials for much of their work: the austere beauty of the landscape—such an irresistible challenge to capture in words—and the uninventable, authentic characters that are so much a part of everyday Maine life.

Creative people generally have a way of finding each other. For artists and writers, this undoubtedly has something to do with the eons-old understanding that their respective arts are intertwined. *Ut pictura poesis*, wrote Horace two thousand years ago: "as is painting, so is poetry." In the context of southern Maine and

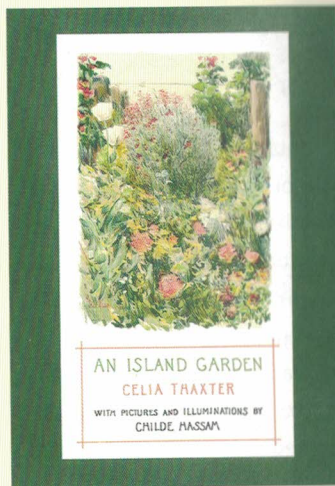
*Shown above:* Slipcase and cover, *An Island Garden* by Celia Thaxter, 1894. Illustrations by Childe Hassam; book design by Sarah Wyman Whitman.

coastal New Hampshire, this concept is nowhere better illustrated than in the example of the poet Celia Thaxter and her circle of artistic friends. The daughter of the lighthouse-keeper and proprietor of the Appledore House hotel on the Isles of Shoals, she made important connections early on. She was not yet eighteen when Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about her beautiful singing voice and her simple parlor, filled with engravings and books on a multitude of topics.<sup>1</sup> It was around this time, too, that Thaxter herself became a published writer, with poems inspired by her beloved islands appearing the *Atlantic Monthly*, among other publications.

Thaxter went on to write four books of poetry and essays and was an accomplished ceramic artist as well. Nevertheless, many today remember her best for her role as muse to artists of both the literary and visual kind. Most were, at one time or another, guests at the hotel, which she increasingly took over the management of as her husband's and father's health failed. She was a lifelong friend to John Greenleaf Whittier and inspired several of his poems. Perhaps more famously, she and her old-fashioned perennial gardens were the frequent subject of paintings by the American impressionist painter Childe Hassam. Hassam's flickering brushwork and sun-spattered

color palette have a delicacy to them that belie Thaxter's tenacity as a businesswoman and caretaker—but they nevertheless effectively

capture the precious brevity of summer on the rockbound New England coast. Memorably, Thaxter and Hassam also collaborated in *An Island Garden* (see left) with words by Thaxter and illustrations in watercolor by Hassam, that was published in 1894.<sup>2</sup>

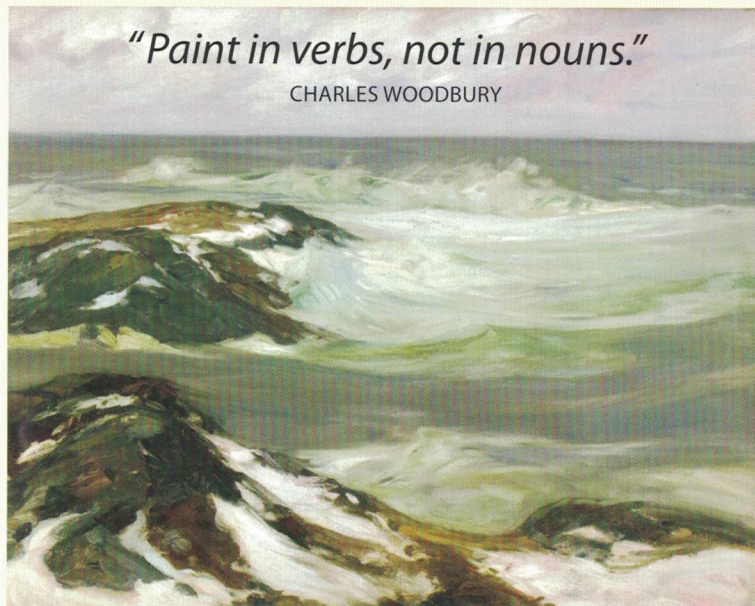


Today the Isles of Shoals remain an attraction for creative and thoughtful people seeking to harness those precious moments of inspiration. The Star Island Family Conference and Retreat Center hosts "Star Arts" and other retreats designed to foster an artistic connection with the islands' raw beauty. Star Island also has a Celia Thaxter Museum, where visitors can see some of her manuscripts and painted pottery; the Portsmouth Athenaeum, too, has deep holdings of her artistic and literary

work. Paintings and etchings by Hassam can be seen in the collections of both the Ogunquit Museum of American Art (OMAA) and the Portland Museum of Art.

Thaxter's influence winds through the artistic and literary landscape of the region. Another important connection is Sarah Wyman Whitman, who was the chief book designer for Houghton Mifflin Co. and furnished the elegant, arts-and-crafts inspired design for the first edition of *An Island Garden*. She may have connected with Thaxter through their

mutual friend, the novelist and South Berwick resident Sarah Orne Jewett, several of whose books Whitman had also designed at Houghton Mifflin. Whitman's cover for *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett's much-lauded portrait of small-town Maine life, while not a literal interpretation of the book's title or subject, nevertheless captures the sense of a place where the dizzying landscape looms out of scale with smaller and humbler lives. Jewett's own home in South Berwick is now open as the Sarah Orne Jewett House Museum and Visitor Center, a property of Historic New England. There visitors can tour the house and view works by Jewett, Whitman, and Thaxter; they can also see stained-glass windows designed by Whitman (on Jewett's recommendation) at nearby Berwick Academy. These lovingly preserved collections are an invaluable record of the network of friendship and influence among these remarkable women.



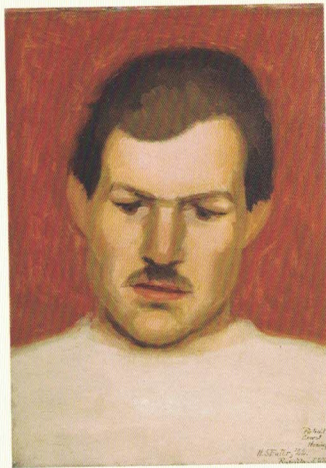
*"Paint in verbs, not in nouns."*

CHARLES WOODBURY

Charles Woodbury, *Winter Coast—Ogunquit*, 1909, oil on canvas, 28.5" x 35.5"  
Ogunquit Museum of American Art, museum purchase.

Although Whitman had important Maine friendships and connections, her impressively polymathic career took place primarily in Boston.<sup>3</sup> Jewett, however, lived in South Berwick all her life apart from some periods of travel, and the presence of this respected and prolific author in the state offered opportunities to some Maine artists as well. In 1893 the painter Marcia Oakes Woodbury (also from South Berwick) and her husband Charles illustrated a special holiday edition of Jewett's first novel, *Deephaven*—and drew raves from some critics who found their artistic “sketches” more successful than Jewett's literary ones.<sup>4</sup> Five years later Charles Woodbury founded the first of several summer art schools in Ogunquit, and then just three years after that the Woodburys and Jewett collaborated again, for 1901's *The Tory Lover*. To this day the books are among the few extant works by Marcia Oakes Woodbury, a talented artist whose career took second place to her husband's. As for Charles Woodbury, his work can be seen, fittingly, at the OMAA, which recently acquired a major Woodbury seascape. Its expressive brushstrokes give visual

weight Woodbury's literary-inflected advice to his students, whom he exhorted to “paint in verbs, not in nouns.”<sup>5</sup>



Henry Strater, *Portrait of Ernest Hemingway (The Boxer Portrait)*, 1922/23, oil on board, 13" x 9.5", OMAA Permanent Collection, Gift of the artist.

The OMAA offers several additional tantalizing points of connections between Maine art and major figures of American literature. The museum's founder, artist Henry Strater, was a friend of several lost-generation writers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. In fact, according to Strater, a fishing trip that he and Hemingway took together in the Florida Keys served as inspiration for *The Old Man and the Sea*. Photographic documentation exists of the enormous marlin they caught on that trip, although their stories vary as to who really deserved the credit

for the catch.<sup>6</sup> The on-again, off-again combativeness of their relationship is evident in Strater's famous portraits of Hemingway in the OMAA's collection, notably the so-called “Boxer” portrait. The OMAA is also home to the art collection of the poet William Carlos Williams, which his widow bequeathed to the museum in 1967 and which includes *Still Life with*

*Eel* by Marsden Hartley, a native of Lewiston, Maine. The painting is an icon of Maine modernism, with all that Hartley had learned in his travels in France and New York distilled into this highly symbolic—and yet recognizably Maine-themed—semi-abstract, a sort of visual equivalent of Williams’s imagistic free verse.



Marsden Hartley, *Still Life with Eel*, circa 1917, oil on canvas, 30" x 25", Ogunquit Museum of American Art, gift of Mrs. William Carlos Williams.

The artist/writer friendship between Williams and Hartley, which also included Maine poet Wallace Gould, was conducted largely in New York and is more or less Williams’s only connection to the state.<sup>7</sup> He never lived here, and his work has no particular connection to Maine. By contrast, the painter Abbott Fuller Graves and the writer Booth Tarkington became friends in Kennebunk, a town that went on to appear, through various filters, in each of their work. Graves was a recent transplant from Boston, where he’d had success as a painter but was unhappy. Tarkington, famously, was from Indianapolis, the source for the Midwestern setting of his novels *Seventeen*, *Alice Adams*, and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, among others. They met in Kennebunk shortly after Tarkington visited there on his honeymoon, and their friendship deepened through the author’s annual visits and after he eventually built a home in town that he named “Seawood.”<sup>8</sup> Seawood’s elegant colonial-revival columns and old-fashioned gardens—along with other similar houses in Kennebunk and Portsmouth, New Hampshire—inspired much of Graves’s best work. (Examples can be seen at the Brick Store Museum in Kennebunk, which is the only museum in Maine with any substantial holdings of Graves’s work). Tarkington wrote, “When you look at one of Graves’ gardens you think you have seen that garden somewhere; and



Abbott Fuller Graves, *Yankee Peddler*, circa 1910, courtesy of the Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk.

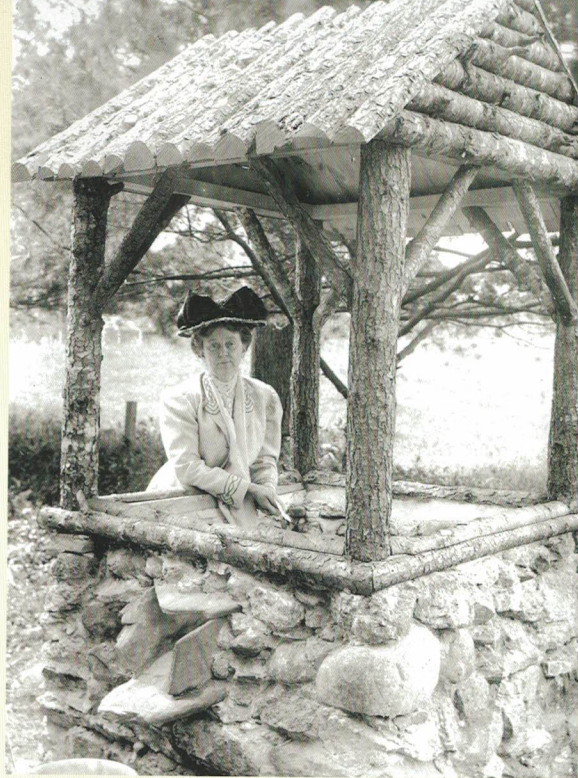
you have, because it is a garden you have dreamed about.”<sup>9</sup> For Tarkington’s part, a fictional Maine town suspiciously resembling Kennebunk is the setting in several of his plays and books from the 1920s.

The southern Maine coast has been the site of several other important artist/writer friendships and collaborations as well, including Kate Douglas Wiggin of Hollis and Saco photographer Charles Frederick Moody, whose greatest claim to fame is a widely distributed portrait he made of Wiggin, and a memorable book collaboration between Portland native Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Winslow Homer, who famously lived at Prouts Neck. The area has continued to nurture writers and artists of national prominence to this day. They include artists Frederick

Lynch (Saco), Jonathan Borofsky (Ogunquit) and Celeste Roberge (South Portland; native of Biddeford), as well as writers Anita Shreve (Biddeford) and Nicholson Baker (South Berwick).

The controversial Baker offers a relevant concluding example. In addition to his novels and erotica, Baker has also written widely on the need to preserve original literary material—physical books, newspapers, and other printed pieces—despite the trend toward digitization.<sup>10</sup> His ardent preservationism has earned him ridicule as well as accolades, with some accusing him of being a Luddite or some kind of strange paper fetishist. And yet, when one thinks of the material literary tradition of where he lives—the elegantly typeset novels of Sarah Orne Jewett, interleaved with inky seascapes by Marcia and Charles Woodbury, pressed between Sarah Wyman Whitman’s gold and green fabric covers—one can’t justify an argument that a digital version can adequately replace the original. They are collaborative, interactive, populist works of art, and thankfully—just like the paintings and prints by the artists who illustrated them—they are preserved in Maine’s public collections.

1. In his *American Note-books*, published on his death in 1864. A comprehensive chronology of Thaxter's life, as well as many other resources, can be found online at [seacoastnh.com/celia](http://seacoastnh.com/celia).
2. For more information, see David Park Curry, *Childe Hassam: An Island Garden Revisited* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990).
3. For more on Whitman, see Betty S. Smith, "Sarah Wyman Whitman: Brief Life of a Determined Artist: 1842–1904," *Harvard magazine* (January–February 2008). For more on the Berwick Academy windows, see Wendy K. Pirsig, "Renaissance Woman," *Preservation magazine*, online edition (November 7, 2001).
4. "The designs are pictures where the text is a sketch." Anonymous, "Miss Jewett," *Atlantic Monthly* 73 (January 1894): 130–133.
5. Michael Culver, *Charles H. Woodbury and his Students* (Ogunquit: Ogunquit Museum of American Art, 1998).
6. Michael Culver, "Sparring in the Dark: Hemingway, Strater and *The Old Man and the Sea*," *The Hemingway Review* (Spring 1992). For more on the Hemingway portraits, see Frederick Voss, *Picturing Hemingway: A Writer in his Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 14–17.
7. For more about the personal and professional relationship between Williams, Hartley, and Gould, see Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 15ff.
8. Sharon Cummins, "Booth Tarkington in Kennebunk, Part I" and "Booth Tarkington in Kennebunk, Part II," [seacoastonline.com](http://seacoastonline.com) (August 16, 2012 and August 23, 2012).
9. Booth Tarkington, foreword for *New England Gardens* (Boston: Vose Galleries, 1913). See also Joyce Butler, *Abbott Fuller Graves* (Kennebunk: The Brick Store Museum, 1979).
10. Especially in the book *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York: Vintage, 2002)



Charles Frederick Moody, *Rebecca at the Well* (Portrait of Kate Douglas Wiggin), 1908. Collections of the Dyer Library and Saco Museum.

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