



Written by Patricia M. Shippee, 1999 "Natures Palette: The Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden"

DENNIS, Roger Wilson

Roger W. Dennis (1902-1996) was a native son of New London County and was often referred to as "our link with the best of the past." He was a young artist in the 1920 's when the Lyme Art Colony flourished, and he was encouraged by many of the pioneer American Impressionist painters there. Frank Bicknell was one of his first teachers; George Bruestle was another. He painted with Will Howe Foote, Charles Ebert, Guy Wiggins, Harry Hoffman, Thomas Nason, Nelson C. White, among others who were part of the Impressionist "school" of painters in Old Lyme at that time.

Dennis was a member of the Lyme Art Association for more than fifty years, and served on the "Hanging Committee" for the exhibitions along with Gregory Smith, Will Chadwick, Fred Sexton, and others. The artistic community in Old Lyme centered around the Florence Griswold mansion (now the Florence Griswold Museum) and the Lyme Art Association.



Located as they were in the bucolic countryside, painting landscapes and gardens en plein air was the custom. Dennis knew these subjects well since he was a farmhand and a gardener in his youth. On painting excursions, he was particularly fond of the month of June when the breathtaking pink and white blossoms of mountain laurel (Connecticut's state flower) were lush and abounding.

During his long career as a painter, Roger Dennis brought to life the beauty of color which is nature's palette. He found unending inspiration

and never tired of the special delight that a New England garden offered. His garden scenes comprised a major part of his work. He revered nature. He painted landscapes and seascapes, woodlands, meadows, mountains and glens, but he took special joy in depicting compositions of masses of color that the garden offered.

He was a prolific painter. On his journeys, near and far, he drew and sketched and notated colors and light in a formulaic way. He sometimes painted on sight, but also used his sketches to compose his larger paintings on canvas, oftentimes changing the floral orchestra to fit his personal artistic expression. He was quite the horticulturist. He knew his flowers. His luxuriant garden was always a marvelous adventure, both for learning and for painting. It was his joy and satisfaction to spend his spring and summer days, particularly at the end of his life, working in his garden -- either with a trowel or with his brush.

It delighted him to paint the flower gardens of his patrons and friends ... from Connecticut to Maine. The Harkness Estate and Gardens in Waterford, Connecticut were a favorite garden subject, particularly since he not only captured the flowering beauty there, but his compositions also included the architectural patterns, the stone paths and wall enclosures, the fountains, statuary, vast lawns with enormous trees, and the nearby marshes, shoreline and ocean. His sojourns to Maine to view and to paint the glorious blues and pinks and yellows and purples of the

lupine fields were a treasured memory often captured in his high-key palette, which he often reconstructed from drawings to canvas in his studio during the winter months.

Early summer morning travels to gardens were his palette's delight. To be dazzled by iris, hollyhocks, poppies, delphinium and roses was pure joy to this artist. He loved the effects of light on nature's palette. It was his passion to record the transformation of nature into art, using his light-filled palette and broad sweeps of vibrant colors. Brilliant geraniums set in stone urns on the stone walls surrounding his terrace garden were part of his "backyard" repertoire. And the same brilliant flowers in pots were often depicted in their winter sun room off-season glory. Over and over, he set his garden to paper and then to canvas. The flower beds, the stone walls, the ginkgo tree, the fence and the simple gray potting shed, appear in many of his garden paintings. His house (formerly a carriage house and part of a large estate) was splendid, filled with art inside and out. In addition to paintings and prints by artists ranging from Bicknell and Wiggins to Constable and Whistler, his studio painting easel had been the easel used by J. Alden Weir and the beautiful Italian carved wood doors and panels in the entry of Dennis' home were from Weir's Windham (Connecticut) farm.

In the 1930's, William Douglas, architect, artist and then-Director of the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, encouraged Dennis to study art restoration and conservation. Dennis was teaching art classes at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum and at Connecticut College at this time. Douglas perceived Dennis' interest and curiosity about the methods, materials and conservation of fine art. With Douglas' encouragement and introductions, Dennis began his studies in art conservation at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in Boston, MA, and at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York. He then set up and ran the conservation laboratory at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum for more than 30 years. His work and research as conservator of paintings gave him the immense opportunity to study paintings by artists such as Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, and a variety of painting styles used in the history of art. He also had the distinct and painstaking experience of restoring to their original luster the famous panels that had been painted onto the walls, doors and mantel at the Florence Griswold Museum by the artists who stayed there early in the 20th century. To investigate the underpaintings, materials, and the diverse palettes used in works of art of the previous centuries was an incredible education, as it would be for any artist.

He was a devotee of the works of Camille Pissarro and Childe Hassam. In the spring of 1990, I had the delightful pleasure of taking Roger and his wife, Dorothy, to see the "Childe Hassam: An Island Garden Revisited" exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. I will never forget the expressed emotions of Roger Dennis, the artist, witnessing the beauty and impact of Hassam's Appledore paintings. His eyes filled with tears as he witnessed the beauty of Hassam's work. Not only was he appreciative of the beauty of Hassam's paintings, but also the technical aspects of color, light and paint application.

Throughout his painting career, Roger Dennis was continually experimenting. His paintings were his own interpretation and expression of the American Impressionist style. One of the last canvasses Roger Dennis completed just shortly before his death, is entitled "Nature's Bounty," a culminating example of his passion for the garden theme. A cacophony of pure color, the animated brush strokes are broad and bold. The blues and yellows of the foreground are striking, the glowing light of a warm, bright summer day plays on the color masses. The painting has an abstract quality, which was a new development as his eyesight began to fade. His high-key palette was even more exaggerated although the surface of this painting is less textural, with areas of thin washes of paint. Experimentation was his life's lesson as an artist, which he continued with gusto to the end. As one of the last great American Impressionist painters of the 20th century, it was fitting to create a painterly garden as a testament to his joyful expressions of light and color on the canvasses he left behind for us. In memory of Roger Dennis, and in acknowledgment of his love of gardens and beauty, the Griffis Art Center created the Roger Dennis Impressionist Garden on the property of its Artist-in-Residence site in New London, which is home for visual artists, writers and musicians. The garden was created with the intention that it will offer the same sense of inspiration, beauty and pleasure to these artists as gardens did for Roger Dennis. (left: Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden, Summer, 1999)

Dennis visited the Griffis Art Center with me on several occasions during his last years. Our weekly conversations, which took place in his studio or at his dining room table with a cup of tea, always included questions about the visiting artists, their work and activities. He was so pleased to hear that painters from countries such as Russia, China, Brazil, Bulgaria, and Switzerland, etc. were attracted to and enamored by the wealth and diversity of painting subjects in and around New London. It recalled for him his earlier years as a witness to another art colony, of which he felt so fortunate to have been a part.

It was upon Roger Dennis' death in December 1996 when Sharon Griffis, Director of the Griffis Art Center and patron of the arts, gardener, and resident of New London, suggested that we create a beautiful garden as a tribute to Roger Dennis. Together with a vision and a team of enthusiastic art and flower-loving volunteers, and a large group of contributors, the Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden was dedicated in June 1997 as a focal point to the artist community. Sapphire House and surrounding buildings are a part of the Griffis Art Center. The three-story mansion and adjacent Gemfire Studio and Skybreak House are occupied by artists who come to New London from all over the world. (right: Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden, Summer, 1999)

The dedication celebration occurred on a beautiful June afternoon. Many private collectors brought their treasured garden paintings by Roger Dennis to share and to display for the afternoon. A dedication catalog included words of the personal significance that Roger Dennis and his paintings meant to them.

Designed in an American/English style, the garden lies beside the historic mansion ("Sapphire House") and is intersected by a natural stone pathway leading to a large carved stone urn at the base of which is a bronze dedication plaque and a circle of lavender. A variety of flowering plants, including many that Roger particularly loved to cultivate and to paint, are fragrant heliotrope, lunaria, phloxes, peonies, daisies, bellflowers, foxgloves, columbine, sunflowers, etc., all of which allow for color changes with the season. Lavenders and whites and gentle pinks create a soft, impressionist palette. "The plants selected for the garden were flowers that Dennis loved to paint, and included some plants from Dennis' own garden. People who wanted to have an active part in paying homage to him could send a contribution toward one of the beauties named on a list provided -- plants like butterfly bush, irises, poppies, peonies...The garden is a breathing memorial that responds to Dennis' style and spirit " said Sharma L. Howard in "Strokes of Beauty," published in The Day, June 2, 1997. (right: Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden, Summer, 1999)

The perimeter is flanked by boxwood on two sides; beautiful and graceful old copper beech and weeping beech trees grant willowy afternoon shadows to this quiet spot. Afternoon sunlight filters through the leaves and forms lacy patterns on the flower beds. Two stone benches invite visitors to sit and to contemplate the peaceful setting. On one side is a prolific arrangement of a mature brilliant pink rhododendron that seems to sing with lush color in late May and early June.

The gifts of flowers by friends and contributors are thriving. Children from a nearby school frequently visit the garden to draw and learn about flowers. We receive letters from the children thanking us for allowing them to enjoy the Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden. Resident artists, visiting artists and their painting classes are delighted to have the fragrant and beautiful oasis for their visual enjoyment and set up their easels to capture their interpretation of nature's palette.

How fitting it was to dedicate a garden to an artist, who, as a young man, was accepted into an artist's colony that changed his life by the nurturing friendships and tutoring he received from the early artists in Old Lyme. As an octogenarian he was invited into the artist colony of the Griffis Art Center in New London, a city Roger Dennis lived, painted and worked in for many years. This was a different experience for him in that he could appreciate and enjoy the concepts and ideas of artists whose lives are taking place at another century's turn.

Unlike Giverny, or even Appledore, the Roger W. Dennis Impressionist Garden is located in a busy former whaling city, abundant in American history and pride; a small treasure to be found for quiet meditation. Children, artists, friends and visitors come to "smell the roses" and remember a man who loved to paint them. The garden is not a shrine or an altar, but rather a symbol of respect and admiration for a dedicated artist and native Yankee son, who so deserved a lasting tribute to his contributions to American Impressionist Painting, and his passionate love of flowers. He carried the tradition of the Lyme Art Colony to a new art colony in New London from one end of a century to another. Roger Dennis was our link with the best of the past. It would please him, I'm sure, to know that his garden will continue to be an inspiration to artists of the next century.