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DENNIS, Roger Wilson



ROGER DENNIS: A LIFE IN ART

By Scott Timberg Day Arts Writer

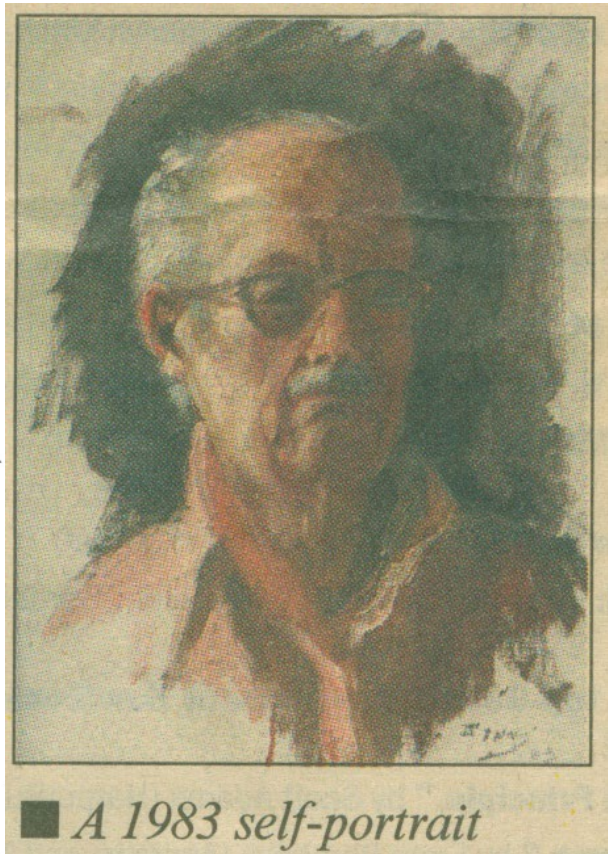


'Nature's Bounty,' from spring of this year, shows Dennis' love of gardens and the bolder style he developed late in his career.

Brush with Greatness

For 70 years of painting, Roger Dennis kept alive artistic ties to the state's great impressionists and to the natural beauty of the state itself

SCOTT TIMBERG
Day Arts Writer



HIS friends recall a gracious man who loved natural beauty and lamented creeping commercialism. Collectors and art historians remember Roger Dennis for the way he exemplified a great moment in American art history.

Dennis, who died last week at the age of 94 after months in and out of the hospital, leaves behind seven decades of oil paintings and watercolors, many of them of Connecticut gardens, beaches, forests and farm houses.

He's important not only for his own work, but for keeping alive the style and philosophy of the Old Lyme impressionists.

Dennis was perhaps the most direct link to the great Old Lyme impressionists of the 1910s, '20s and '30s who he admired so much. These impressionists, among the first Americans to respond to the French painters Monet, Pissarro, Sisley and Renoir, worked and socialized around the Old Lyme mansion of Florence Griswold, now the Florence Griswold Museum.

In his art, he ranged widely but was after something simple: the effect of light on the colors of the natural world.



Unlike realist painting, which shows a crisp, frozen moment, or photographs, which were developing concurrently with late realism, impressionism sees a changing world. The motion in impressionist paintings is usually slow, like gently moving clouds, light glinting on a pond.

The seminal Old Lyme artists included Henry Ward Ranger,

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Frank Bicknell, Nelson C. White, Willard Metcalf, and Childe Hassam (famous for his paintings of Boston streets as well as Old Lyme). These artists were drawn to Old Lyme not only for the amenities of the Griswold home but because of their frustration with modern art, which was becoming ever less realistic. Unlike the melancholy of the Hudson River impressionists, these shoreline artists were lighter in color and emotional tone, and their landscape more cultivated.

These artists, according to the Florence Griswold's director, Jeff Andersen, also resented the way wealthy American collectors considered American art a poor relation to its European equivalent.

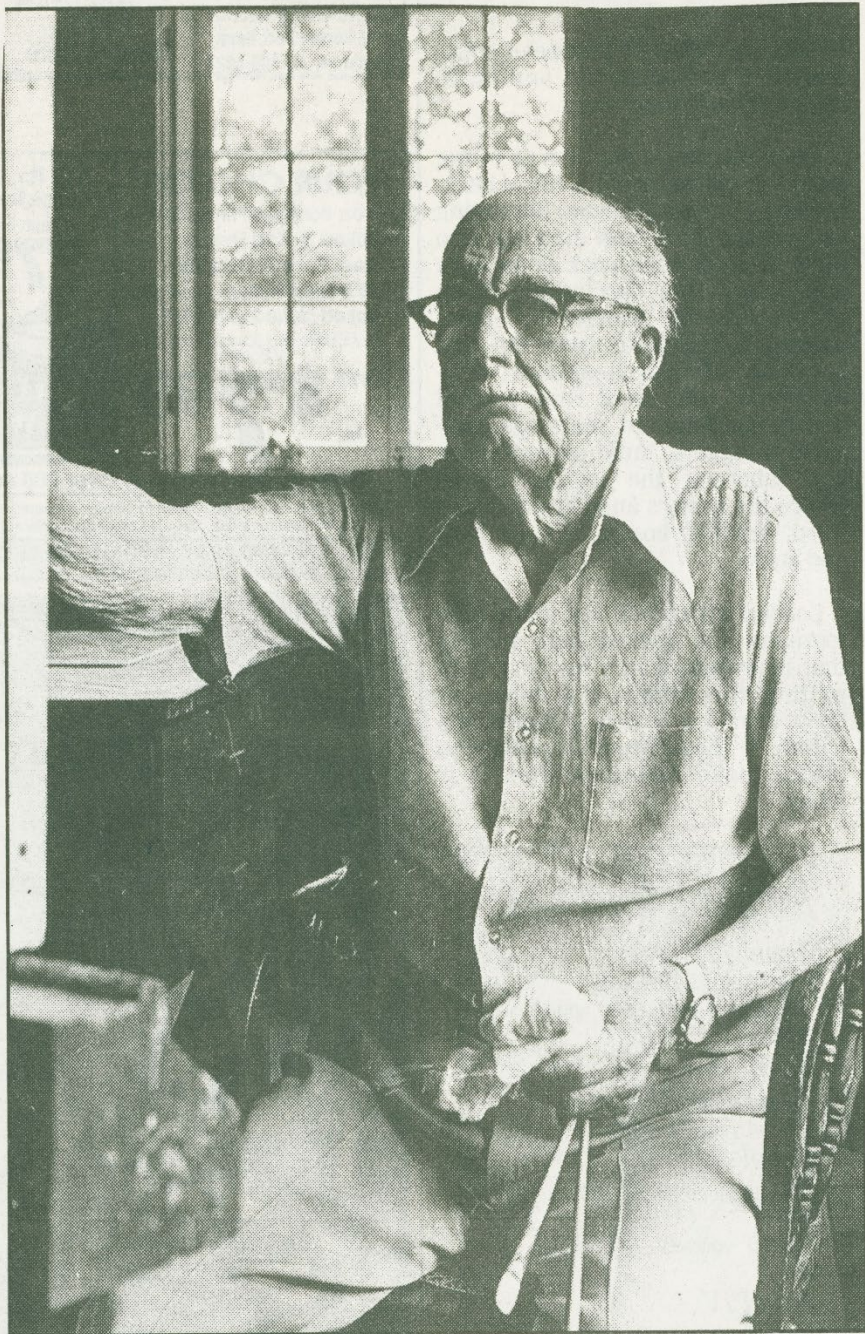
"Roger really sat at the feet of those early Old Lyme artists," says Andersen. "And he would have expressed it that way.

"His loss was a great loss to us (at the museum), because he had a first-hand link" to the heyday of American impressionism, says Andersen.

In 1988, Dennis discussed his philosophy of painting with American Artist magazine: "If John Carlson and the other Old Lyme Impressionists taught me anything, it is that the center of interest is paramount. 'Don't try to put the world on a painting,' Carlson would say. 'Select one thing, put it down first, and subordinate all else to it, for there cannot be two pictures in one painting.'"



Born in 1902 in Norwich, Dennis grew up in a modest home and helped support his family. When he met artist Frank Bicknell in 1916 at an exhibit in Old Lyme, he



Day file photo

■ Old Lyme artist Roger Dennis at his studio in 1984. Dennis, who died last week at age 94, was perhaps the most direct link to the great Old Lyme impressionists of the 1910s, '20s and '30s who he admired so much.



■ *“Beach,” above, painted in Watch Hill in 1989, captures the shoreline’s glowing light, one of his favorite subjects.*



Born in 1902 in Norwich, Dennis grew up in a modest home and helped support his family. When he met artist Frank Bicknell in 1916 at an exhibit in Old Lyme, he began his connection with the artist’s colony there. He often spoke of walking from New London to Old Lyme to paint, get advice, and dine with the painters.

As he told *The Day* in 1988: “It was the greatest privilege of my life just to eat a sandwich with those artists down at Florence Griswold’s house in Old Lyme.”

Dennis’ formal art education was minimal, but he learned from the time he spent in Old Lyme studios. He also worked as a sign painter out of a store front on New London’s Union Street, and for Electric Boat during World War II, a stretch he compared to a prison term. He’s been married twice, and is survived by his wife, Dorothy, and one son, Roger Dennis, Jr., who is now retired.

After World War II, Dennis began the second great apprenticeship of his life — 33 years as the

conservator at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum. There, laboring over great and near-great paintings with scalpels and dentist’s tools in hand, scraping off layers of mildew and working to restore a canvas to its original form, Dennis got as close a look at masterworks as anyone can get.

These years were important to his education and development.

“He had a great advantage over others,” says Tim Foley, a long-time friend and admirer of Dennis’ work. “When you can examine the paintings under a microscope or magnifying glass, you get a real sense of how the original painting was done.”

Foley says he was a boy of 10 or so when he first met Dennis, then working at the museum. “He always delighted in children, and that was the start of our friendship. If anyone expressed interest

in art, especially a kid, he would take time out.”

When not dealing with children or his closest friends, Foley says, “He was fundamentally a very private person.”



Everyone who speaks of Dennis discusses the long drives he would take through the countryside to find the perfect spot to paint. He insisted on doing almost all of his painting “in plain air,” painting outdoors. When he needed to rely on photographs, which he considered a last resort, he only used black-and-white film so as not to corrupt the colors of nature.

His friends talk of his long drives through Maine, stopping at every back road along the way, and of Dennis’ knowledge of every last nook of Old Lyme.

Dennis leaves behind a rich artistic legacy

For this man who loved beauty, the industrial and commercial development of Connecticut was cause for great frustration.

"The number of locations was diminishing," says Foley, "and he found he often had to go north of Norwich to find pastoral scenes."

His favorite spot, Foley says, was Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford. "What he liked about it was the changing seasons and the changing light."

Dennis often talked about the freedom he felt when he could paint on a farmer's land, or travel without hindrance, in the early part of the century.

He told the Pictorial Gazette in 1990: "In those days, you could walk or ride in a wagon all across the land. ... I'm still partial to painting this area, but it's getting to the point where it's impossible to park."

This urge to paint in plain air extended to his last days, says Patricia Shippee, who operates a gallery in Old Lyme devoted to Dennis' work.

"Roger would wake up and see the light in the sky and say, 'Dot, this would be a wonderful day to go up to Windham to paint.' And she would say, 'OK, I'll be ready in 15 minutes.'"

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Dennis' admirers also return to his color palette. As musicians define themselves by the tones and keys they use, poets by the words they choose and return to, so painters often identify themselves by their use of color — and the colors they leave out.

Many note the simplicity and brightness of Dennis' palette, and the artist's willingness to use primary colors. In *American Artist*, Edward Feit noted that Dennis never used more than 10 colors in a single piece, and often got by with as few as four.

According to Shippee, the artist was always reading about and making copies of others' palettes.

Though he talked most of all about the palette of French impressionist Camille Pissarro, he was always trying to incorporate new things into his own work.

Shippee still has the record of a phone message from 1993, in which he called her after seeing another artist's paintings and said, "I'm in the throes of a terrible transition."

Despite these occasional transitions, Shippee sees in Dennis' work no grand design he followed from the beginning to the end of his career.

"What Roger did was paint according to his mood and feeling — and they could change from

month to month."

It's difficult to summarize 70 years of creativity, and responses to Dennis's career can be as subjective as impressionism itself.

Some collectors and art historians speak of Dennis' consistency, not only in his painting but in his love of the impressionists and his disdain for all politicians who weren't Harry Truman.

Others, like Sharon Griffis, director of the New London Art Society & Gallery, see an artist who began as a realist, with crisper lines and flatter colors, and developed a looser, more romantic style, with more vibrant colors.

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■ "Sunrise," below, a 1927 oil painted at his Colman Street tenement in New London, pushes into abstraction.



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Shippee says the artist's most popular canvases have always been his garden paintings. So many local people have had their gardens painted by Dennis that she's planning for a memorial service this spring at New London's Sapphire House. Those paying their respects to the artist will be encouraged to bring his garden paintings for display.

During the '60s, '70s, and '80s, she says, Dennis' most popular paintings showed women and children on beaches.

But she emphasizes how wide he ranged as an artist, and how hard he worked to experiment and change.

"He always lamented his lack of formal education," Shippee says, "and he was constantly in search of learning and improving himself."

Shippee's gallery holds not only Dennis' well-known canvases — mostly landscapes and gardens with vibrant colors — but uncharacteristic pieces that reveal

the artist's range.

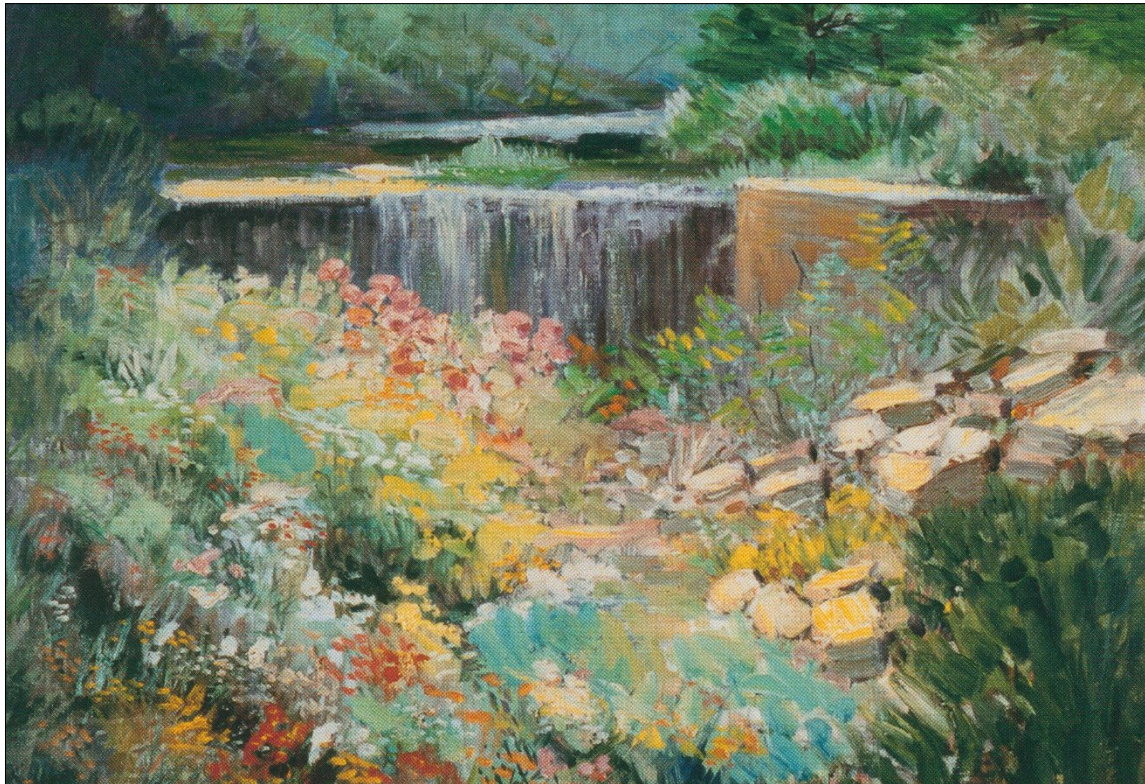
These include much darker, moodier paintings like "Gloucester Harbor;" a painting of the rocky Rhode Island coast with deep blues and greens; a painting of Vermont in which some of the canvas is left blank; "Sunrise," a 1927 painting from the window of Dennis' Colman Street tenement that is almost abstract; and "My Dining Room," which recalls 16th century Dutch masters. Dennis also produced some fine watercolors.

The artist's work is not hard to find in Connecticut. Besides Shippee's gallery, his work hangs in the New Britain Museum of American Art, the Lyman Allyn, the Florence Griswold, the William Benton Museum of Art in Storrs, the Slater Memorial Museum in Norwich, and in New London's City Hall.

Nelson H. White, a Connecticut impressionist a generation younger than Dennis, thinks the artist's draftmanship is often overlooked. He emphasizes Dennis' skills as a realist painter who could turn out powerful portraits as well as lovely paintings of Harkness park.

Sharon Griffis points out that death focuses an artist's reputation. No longer, generally, are all of an artist's works displayed, but only the best.

"I think once they sort through the body of his work, they'll come to the paintings that are the consummate Dennis — and I think they'll hold their own with the best of American impressionists."



Bradbury Mill, Old Lyme, 1993