

Left: *Sonniger Herbsttag*
Sunny Autumn Day
Otto Modersohn, c. 1904
Worpsweder Kunststiftung
Worpswede

Artists in Search of Inspiration: The artists' town in Europe

John Hudson

"pour la localité, contre le localisme"
Kenneth White in conversation with Jean-Yves Kergulen

This book explores the stories of two artists' towns, Kirkcudbright and Pont-Aven, two towns that although rare, are not unique in Europe. The cultural, social and economic forces that gave rise to artists settling or regularly passing through both Kirkcudbright and Pont-Aven was part of a European-wide phenomenon. Around the turn of the nineteenth century there were over eighty artists' colonies in rural locations across eleven European countries. This artistic exodus from the city was unprecedented in Western art practice and led to a revolution within the arts, art history and the way in which we view the artist today.

Why did artists, traditionally resident in urban centres, abandon sophistication and patronage in huge numbers to find remote rural settings and establish or join artists' communities? Towns such as Pont-Aven and Honfluer in France, St Ives and Staithes in England, Kirkcudbright in Scotland, Skagen in Denmark, Worpswede and Dachau in Germany, Ascona in Switzerland and Capri in Italy, Egmond in Holland, Varberg in Sweden, Modum in Norway, Terveuren in Belgium bustled with artists painting in the open air during the day and buzzed with conversation and the chink of glasses in bars in the evening. Artists' towns



La Famiglia (detail)
The Family
Marianne Von Werefkin,
1922
Museo Comunale di Arte
Moderna, Ascona

became centres for theorising and experiment. They were loosely knit, bohemian universities for the creative spirit, a chance to indulge social and personal trial and error. The artist could find mutual support among like-minded people while food and accommodation were cheap and subjects to paint were plentiful.

Three thousand artists across Europe, including four hundred women artists, abandoned the city for years at a time, while the majority of practising artists of the day visited one or more of the rural centres for a season or two. Many of the big names of nineteenth and early twentieth century art are associated with one or more artists' colonies: Gauguin, van Gogh, Becker, Maufra, Kandinsky, Knight, Hornel, Werefkin, Serusier, Mondrian and Klee, and there were a huge number of less well known but very influential artists who congregated around these major figures. Suddenly, it was fashionable for artists to live and work in a rural location and be among their friends far from the madding crowd. Art was never to be the same again.

Many towns that were adopted by this new, adventurous breed of painter, are ports or near the sea - such as Kirkcudbright or Pont-Aven. It is often said that the quality of light attracted artists to these locations, however it is just as likely that the



De Fiskere Traekker en Baad
Three Fishermen Pulling a Boat
Peter Severin Kroyer, 1885
Sammlung Kunst der Westkuste Alkersum Insel Fohr

inhabitants of these towns showed a greater openness to new arrivals and accommodation and bars were more readily available. Ports are inevitably susceptible to a wide range of influences through the coming and going of boats, and the locals in towns such as Pont-Aven would have spoken French, unlike small towns in the heartland of Brittany whose tongue was still strongly Breton.

Very importantly, artists could get to these towns with a degree of ease unknown before the Industrial Revolution and the arrival of trains, steamships and occasionally, but rarely, better roads. To some extent, such an exodus happened because it could happen, the conditions were right, but for something so important there must have been a motive behind it, call it a philosophy or a dream which acted as a propelling force.

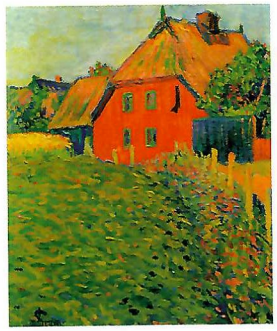
The city had grown increasingly brutal as the Industrial Revolution expanded, and artists went in search of, and found, something of spiritual importance elsewhere, in remote and rural locations. That "something important" was made more valuable for, even in these remote areas, it was under threat of extinction. Ironically, that threat came from the technology and commerce that allowed artists to discover these new, spiritual havens. With hindsight, the artists' quest for the authentic in a world of rapid mechanical change and social exploitation seems like a



Jeune Cousant (detail)
Woman of Grez, Sewing
Ella Blackburn, 1908
Mairie de Grez-sur-Loing

race against time that could never be won and the beginning of the quest for sincerity in a world of illusions which typifies the quest of modern art.

There is in the phenomenon of the artists' town a symbol of radical change in Western society. Western culture had spent the previous century prior to 1860, investing its aesthetic, spiritual and economic capital in urbanisation. Before this and for much of our history, wealth lay in the land but the Industrial Revolution placed power in the city, apparently once and for all. The Industrial Revolution revealed a hidden power in nature - coal became heat that produced steam that turned the wheels of mills, of trains, of farm equipment and pushed huge iron boats across oceans. This change in humanity's awareness of Nature was revelatory and created a zeal akin to religious fervour in industrialist and artist alike. As the mill owner made his fortune by harnessing the power of nature, so Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude* in praise of that power. Opposites these men may seem but they worshiped at the same altar. Man was in awe of Nature as never before and it is ironic that a phenomenon, the Industrial Revolution, that gave rise to some of the most miserable social squalor in the history of mankind also gave rise to an awareness of the sublime, of Nature as an active spirit. Romanticism was born alongside the dark satanic mills.



Das Rote Haus in Althagen (detail)
The Red House in Althagen
Dora Koch-Stetter, 1911
Kulturhistorisches Museum, Rostock

Romanticism readily mingled with the Idealism of the eighteenth century and a new utopian myth was created, a utopia tinged with nostalgia. Nature became a moral force while Man, industrial Man, was seen as corrupt and corrupting. The peasants, still tilling the soil of the European countryside as they had been doing for generations, and still practicing the rituals of their forefathers, rituals rooted in the land, were the only people left in Europe who were closer to that natural innocence described by Rousseau in the eighteenth century and championed by the Romantics. It was this potent mix that formed the spur to turn certain artists into revolutionaries, while others, less ambitious, were content to seek a better way of life.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), trained to be a stockbroker in Paris, turned his back on the city to paint the wildness of Brittany and the naturalness of the Breton peasants. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), product of a religious, bourgeois family, identified whole-heartedly with the impoverished potato eaters and tried vainly to find solace in Arles in 1888. Cézanne (1839-1906), forced from Paris by the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, had little enthusiasm to return and in 1886, the same year as Gauguin arrived in Pont-Aven, he headed for the seclusion of Provence. Not all were as extreme as Gauguin and van Gogh, two famous icons of radical modernism, but all shared a belief that there was something better to be found outside the city and each went to different lengths to find it.



ath in the Forest of ontainbleau
ászló Paál, 1876
agyar Nemzeti Galéria, udapest

As cities in the nineteenth century grew in size, patrons were supplanted by the proletariat. The nouveau riche set up house in the countryside while housing estates to house the workers in the manufacturing industries spread up hillsides, down dales and around long-established urban centres. There was a migration from the land as families sought work, often building the machinery that had supplanted their labour in the fields. Many artists who had lived in the city in poverty now lived in ugliness too, especially with regard to their surroundings, and artists, like the rest of us, do not enjoy either poverty or ugliness - quite the opposite. Indeed, many well-known, successful artists during the centuries before the Industrial Revolution mixed with the wealthy, their patrons, and enjoyed the benefits of sophisticated company and surroundings at least some of the time. The new breed of bourgeois art collector acted through galleries and agents and as sophistication and beauty left the cities, so did many of the artists.

However, it was not as final a separation as it may seem. Trains spread rapidly in mid-nineteenth century Europe and made much of the continent a smaller place by reducing travel times. Trains could transport newly painted works of art back into the urban market place to the dealers who sold to wealthy clients. The train was also a rapid escape route for

Right: *The Sermon (detail)*
Gari Melchers, 1886
bequest of Henry Ward
Ranger through the National
Academy of Design, National
Museum of America Art,
Smithsonian Institute,
Washington D.C.

artists to return to the city and a means for them to keep in touch with the urban arts' scene. In such circumstances, there was little reason for the artist to remain in the crowded streets breathing the increasing pollution. Leaving the city could be regarded as a shrewd career move for many of the artists of the time.

Towns far from the city offered a mixture of "back to nature" idealism, alongside hedonism, stimulation and a relatively cheap way of life. Underpinning the lives of these artists gathered closely together, working, dining, singing and playing together, their organised picnics and parties, was the belief that they were creating a better world by drawing upon the relatively unspoilt customs and lifestyles of people and land as yet uncorrupted by the excesses and ugliness of industrialism. It had a "golden age" naivety tempered by the practicalities of having to earn a living - no matter how meagre. It is perhaps ironic that the roots of modernism as planted by artists such as Gauguin, lie deep in the past, prompted by a rejection of the then present.A further reason for the rise of the artists' colony in Europe is to be found within the practice of art itself. Art is about much more than applying brush to canvas and simply producing pretty pictures; it requires a complex social, psychological, emotional and intellectual framework. Without this framework it is very difficult to be creative. For example, an



artist looks inwardly to his own emotions and dreams, and also has to relate to his public outwardly by finding emotions and dreams which we all share. Hence, an artist's work has a personal and a social function, and the social function works at several levels: the group of friends, the immediate community and society as a whole - even societies spread across diverse locations and across time! The artist needs to comprehend the past and address the future. His work requires a visual language in common with the viewer but that language must not be clichéd or worn-out by over use. Artists need to test their work on the public and test themselves. They also need to find in their immediate community a degree of protection, from the philistine, from prejudice and, worst of all, from indifference.

The artists' colony met many of these demands and provided the best conditions for artistic growth in a free and open environment. Otto Modersohn, one of the artists who lived and worked in the town of Worpswede, Germany wrote:

"A society impedes personal, individual freedom... The more strictly organised a state is, the less value is accorded to the individual. ...Our relationships must be as loose as possible, we must not experience any pressure or compulsion. That saps artistic powers."



enue of Old Charms,
ervuren
ppolyte Boulenger,
11-73
ntinklijke Musea voor
hone Kunsten van België,
ussels

Just as the city was replaced, for these bohemian colonists, by the rural life, so in the artists' colony indoor academic painting was replaced by outdoor painting, the monumental was replaced by the intimate, the hero by the peasant, and the institutional bond of the academy was replaced by the free and open association of friends with common pleasures and interests.

Subjects painted by artists in these colonies that sprang up the length and breadth of Europe were remarkably similar, even with regard to composition: peasants at work, at play or at rest, forest scenes, social gatherings in devotion or in mourning, landscape and seascape. As ideas flowed and theory developed, the impressionist concern with capturing light gave way to a fascination for myth, symbol and flat areas of colour. Simplicity of form became synonymous with sincerity. Truth became apparent through the application of paint and not the telling of moralistic tales. Whether you were a peasant in the field with a scythe or artist "en plein air" with an easel and brush, Truth lay in working, not knowing. For many painters working in colonies, the hunger for Truth, Beauty and Goodness through the subjects he or she painted became a religious quest. Modern art, that dominated the twentieth century, was born of this idealism and radical paring away of the inessential.

Right:
Madchen mit Schubkarre
Girl with Wheelbarrow
Adolf Holzen, c. 1900
Zweckverband Dachauer Galerien und Museen, Dachau

When we read art history, we cannot escape "isms": impressionism, fauvism, modernism, post-modernism, realism. Such terms are helpful, if only to organise our thoughts. Other art historians like to look at characters. Sketching critical biographies, they enjoy Gauguin, the Christ-martyr-rogue; van Gogh, the self-destructive visionary; Picasso the superstar and fatal lover. Yet, since the phenomenon of artists' colonies around Europe, there is another manner in which we may look at art history, a manner open to generalisation and compelling: we can look at it through the places that inspired art's creation. These places have much in common and they provided the visual raw material that clothed the passion and idealism that built modern art. It was due to the artists and the localities in which they lived that art developed in the manner it did in the twentieth century all over Europe.

As the twentieth century advanced most artists' colonies declined. Few parts of Europe were left untouched by two world wars. After the mass, industrialised slaughter, idealism seemed an indulgence that no artist could justify. Transport improved so much that even the remotest areas could hardly retain that ring of unspoilt truth that the artists sought. The troubled searching, that typifies the greatest artist, drove people like Gauguin, as early as the end of the nineteenth century, even further afield to the South Seas where he was to die in 1903.



By 1945, the artists' colony and its upbeat optimism must have seemed a thing of the past. The clearest symbol of this is the artists' town of Dachau near Munich in southern Germany which was one of the largest and most international artists' colonies of Europe. Between 1880 and 1905 nearly 850 artists are recorded as having come to paint there, attracted by the local costume and the fame of many of its permanent members. Today Dachau is remembered for other reasons.

However, the artists' town is once again rising to prominence even if the reasons for this are less idealistic and more economic. The continued decline in rural economies across Europe has led to the need for new initiatives to maintain local infrastructures and employment. Artists' towns, with their colourful histories and desirable locations, make for attractive holiday destinations for the more culturally curious visitor. Walk around the streets of St Ives, Honfleur, Pont-Aven, Skagen or Collioure today and they are filled with galleries and studios. Towns that have more recently began to recover their past, like Kirkcudbright, have an increasing number of arts related businesses or projects. The motives and the results for these redevelopments may be very different from the original motives of the artists of the mid-nineteenth century. One could argue that these latest developments demonstrate the complete victory of the bourgeois over the peasant where technology and industry have made a slave of the wild and free. However today, in the twenty-first century, we can safely say that the artists' town is here to stay and here to be enjoyed by everyone.