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Art: Painters and watery inspiration



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Painters have been drawn to water since at least the 17th century, when Dutch artists, whose country and national temperament were shaped by the North Sea and the Rhine River, made seascapes a respected genre.

In America, artists congregated at Cape Ann in Massachusetts to paint the ocean and seaside villages, and in New Hope, drawn by the imposing scenery along the Delaware River. The Pennsylvania impressionists are deeply beholden to the river for a variety of picturesque subject matter.

This has always been evident in exhibitions of work by New Hope painters, but if the phenomenon has so far escaped your notice, "Art and the River" at the New Hope branch of the James A. Michener Art Museum should prove enlightening.

Museum curator Erika Jaeger-Smith organized the show of nearly 50 works to demonstrate that the river has inspired artists for nearly a century, and continues to do so. Impressionist paintings are probably the most familiar river views, and the show devotes its opening section to them. Yet fascination with the river has persisted through the modern period and to the present. The section devoted to contemporary scenes is every bit as engaging, and far more varied, than work from early in the last century.

The show comprises about 40 paintings and nine prints, drawings, pastels and watercolors, some from the Michener's collection, the rest borrowed from individuals and other institutions in the region. There's also one photograph - of the Broadway composer Stephen Sondheim floating on an inflatable raft at New Hope during the 1970s.

Visitors who have seen previous exhibitions at either or both of the Michener's venues may find the opening impressionist section a *deja vu* experience. All the important New Hope painters, from Daniel Garber and Edward Redfield to Robert Spencer and William Lathrop, are represented.

Deja vu came into play for me with some frequently exhibited pictures, such as Redfield's *Early Spring*, John F. Follinsbee's *Storm Light*, and *New Hope Millworkers' Cottages* by Harry Leith-Ross. The show's theme imparts fresh resonance, though, because it allows one to appreciate how central the river has been to so many painters of divergent styles.

The modernism segment is relatively brief and doesn't have nearly the same impact, except in two dark, contrasty scenes by R.A.D. Miller and *Winter in the Valley* by B.J.O. Nordfelt, none of which are especially daring.

The contemporary section restores the expansive and romantic view of the riverine landscape practiced by the impressionists. The luminous, shimmering *Bull's Island* by Paul Matthews, which

depicts woods reflected in dark water, and *The Far Shore* by Daniel Anthonisen, which recalls the 19th-century evocation of the sublime, are especially noteworthy in this regard.

In her two inkjet prints, Diane Burko reprises Claude Monet's tactic of filling the frame with water in close-up, animated by reflections and distortions. The river even prompted Alan Goldstein to compose a large abstraction in which the water and a bridge are expressed as elemental shapes.

The contemporary section affirms, though, that the river is more a realist's preoccupation. Abstractions such as Goldstein's really can't do justice to the dramatic spatial disjunction between land and water, or to the evanescent quality of light over the river.

The Delaware demands that the artist address it on nature's terms, which most of the 40 artists here do. The result is a refreshing summer spectacle, with the real thing only a stone's throw away.

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