

The Stallknecht Murals

by [Spencer Grey](#)

After living in Chatham for 20 years, Alice Stallknecht resumed painting. In 1931 she began work on her first mural, "Christ Preaching to the Multitude," which was inspired by her knowledge of and admiration for the people of Chatham, whom she had come to know so well. A year later the completed work was installed in the vestibule of the Congregational Church. The event was reported in Boston newspapers, and Time magazine published a picture of the painting, along with an article entitled "Holy Dory." Many members of the congregation welcomed the attention and praise resulting from the exhibition of the work, but others were disturbed by the fact that Christ was depicted as a local fisherman and by seeing their fellow citizens among the "multitude." Some even found the panels blasphemous.

Three years later Stallknecht completed a much larger work entitled the "Circle Supper," which depicts the traditional Wednesday evening supper at the church but with the Christ figure in the middle of the assembled participants. As her son Frederick Wight expressed it, "Here the whole town of Chatham is drawn upon. From sea captain to sailor, to Coast Guard to business man, to the town lawyer, they and their wives are all here." Once again the reaction of church members ranged from acceptance to strong objection. This larger panel was installed on the back wall of the balcony where it was clearly visible from the pulpit. According to one report, the minister found it so distracting while he was giving his sermon that he had draperies installed that could be pulled across the mural.

In spite of the objections of some members of the congregation, the murals remained in the church for another 10 years, but in 1945 the church leaders asked to have them removed, creating a dilemma for Mrs. Wight, as they were too large to be installed in the Wight's home and wartime restrictions on construction made it impossible for them to build a new home for the murals. She and her husband, however, found the solution at the abandoned Chatham Depot, where a former freight shed was available. They had the shed moved to the corner of a meadow on their property and installed Christ Preaching to the Multitude at the end of the shed and the Circle Supper on the right hand wall. But this left a blank wall, which to an artist is a space that must be filled.

Stallknecht proceeded, therefore, to paint a companion piece to the "Circle Supper" which she titled "Every Man to His Trade." Again the central figure is Christ as a local workman, but the other figures are of people of various occupations in town, such as lobstermen, scallopers, oystermen, masons, builders, boardinghouse keepers, voters, teachers, and others. The mural moves from birth to death, with an image of her son and his wife with their infant child in the upper right corner and an image of a mourning woman in a graveyard in the lower left corner.

Next to an opening at one end of the Wight's fence a small sign announced that here were the Chatham Murals. A path mowed in the long grass led to the door that was always open, with a sign next to it requesting the visitor to secure the latch upon leaving to keep the birds out. The only light source for the murals was from a window above the door, making it difficult to see them clearly. Nevertheless this was the home for the paintings until Mrs. Wight died 18 years later at the age of 93.

Shortly after her death, her son Frederick, who was director of the Frederick S. Wight Art Galleries at the University of California in Los Angeles, had the three murals shipped there, where his son George, an art restorer, relined them and performed any necessary restoration. While they were in Los Angeles William Agee, director of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, saw them and was so impressed that later, becoming the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, he organized an exhibit of them, which opened there for the month of May in 1977. Prior to that, however, the murals had been on display for a month at the Municipal Art Gallery in Los Angeles.

From Oct. 15 to Nov. 27, 1977, the three murals were exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., with the title: "A New England Town: A Portrait by Alice Stallknecht."

Although the Chatham Historical Society had expressed an interest in acquiring the murals, they did not have a space for them or funds to create such a place. Fortunately in 1977, Mrs. Edith Nye, a close friend of Alice Stallknecht, provided funds to restore the freight shed and have it moved to the Atwood House Museum, where it was

added to the building.

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