

Alice Stallknecht Murals, Chatham Historical Society Gam Session 1978.012.001

Brief Description: This session takes us through the reading of an article about Alice Stallknecht, her murals, and reflections by her son, artist Frederick Wight. As well as a question and answer period after the reading of the article.

SPEAKER: This may be repetitive, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Now, when we conduct gam sessions, we discuss the individual models in the murals. But Sally requested a more general approach for today, with some information on the artist, whose portrait hangs on the entrance wall.

Fortunately, a friend of mine dropped off this article that I am going to read to you. It was written in 1983 by Paul W. Campricos (?) for the Cape Cod Life Magazine, and is so well written and so accurate, that I have decided to read it so that you may better understand and capture the flavor of the times during the period in which the paintings, the murals, were painted and hung. It will take about fifteen minutes, so please bear with me, and I will inflict my dulcet tones upon you.

The article is entitled, "1930 Murals That Pleasured, Puzzled, and Sometimes Angered Chatham." "The year was 1910, and Alice Stallknecht Wight, her husband, Carol, and their 8 year old son, Frederick, stepped off the train at the Old Colony Railroad Depot in Chatham, and climbed aboard the horse-drawn wagon that would carry them, hopeful and uncertain, to the start of a new life. It was evening as the wagon left the station and rattled toward their lodgings at the Chatham House, recently demolished, on Cross Street. In the darkness, lying on the quiet, sea gate village enveloped them like a velvet cloak.

Alice Stallknecht was born in 1880 in New York City, grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey, and studied briefly at a New York art school. She married Carol Wight in 1901. Frederick, their only child, was born a year later.

Carol Wight (and this is Carol Wight, right here), Carol Wight was a natural scholar but entered the world of business. The pressures took their toll. In 1903, he had a severe breakdown and turned to carpentry. Eventually, the Wights decided to leave their home in Philadelphia for a harbor of refuge, and Chatham was their choice.

Chatham was worlds removed from the city bustle of Philadelphia. The town was little changed from colonial days. It had no electricity, no telephones, no streetlights, and only two cars. It's stark population included worldly sea captains, who had sailed square riggers to China, put down a mutiny in the Pacific, and, but for five white-collared professionals, most of the town's inhabitants scratched a hard living from the soil and the sea.

For the Wights, the years to follow were a struggle simply to feed themselves. Carol Wight fished and scalloped and farmed their 5 acres near Stage Harbor. Frederick Wight would write much later that for his mother, the next two decades were years of anxiety, poverty, and dependence on relatives. In time, this emotional ferment produced an explosion of artistic genius that has become (ah, excuse me), artistic energy, that has become appreciated only recently for its artistic genius. In the late 1920s, Carol Wight regained his health and pursued his studies of Greek at John Hopkins University, where he later became a professor.

Nearly 20 years after she arrived in Chatham, and finally relieved of some family pressures, Alice Stallknecht began to paint, and when she did, she painted with a power and strength that amazed those who knew her. Her paintings pleased some, puzzled others, and angered a few. Her style was innovative and forceful. It has been compared to the works of George Brooks and other German realists, but without their cynicism.

Frederick Wight writes that his mother's painting was simply her way of seeing under emotional pressure, and as such, it was immediately complete. Her first paintings were shown at the Ferragut Gallery in New York in 1931. They were merely a prelude. Alice Stallknecht, as she signed her paintings, attempted to catch on canvas, the fiercely independent character of her friends and neighbors, their basic humanity, and their deep-rooted spirituality.

In the Chatham of the early 1990s, Frederick Wight recalls that everyone was on, everyone was on his own, as if you were at sea. Yet, his mother was deeply involved in this environment. It was a whole world and refuge to her. She was able to view her neighbors as one large family and as a unifying theme that she could use in painting.

She found in these neighbors her common denominator, and in the summer of 1931, she began painting a mural called *Christ Preaching to the Multitude* (which is to my left). The multitude were the members of the Congregational Church, known as the Atwood Church because many of its people were from the Atwood family. They are dressed in contemporary clothes and stand or are seated on the shore, listening to Christ. Christ is God in work clothes, and stands in a dory, where two disciples man the oars. The character, in his beardless face, is strong and uncomplicated. The size of the mural, 3 panels with a total measurement of 9 by 20 feet, amplifies the impact.

Three years later, Alice Stallknecht completed a mural twice the size of the first one. It was entitled *The Circle Supper* and depicted fifty-two Chatham townspeople (and that is the one on your right, over there). Christ, dressed again in work clothes, is giving the benediction before a dinner. Although some suppose, erroneously, that the mural portrayed the Last Supper, the artist insisted that it was simply the traditional Wednesday night coming together in the church vestry. The mural has twenty separate panels, most of which show groups of three seated at a table. Christ is seated alone. Two people sit at another table where an empty chair is reserved for the viewer. Alice Stallknecht never revealed the name of the Christ model. She intensified or generalized his features to make them less identifiable. "People asked who he was," says Frederick Wight, "and my mother said quite flatly she wasn't saying." (Laughter). It was possibly an open secret however, he admits, that the model was the late (Unintelligible speech) Slim Hutchins, a former Chatham selectman.

Time was a factor in preparing the murals, so Alice Stallknecht painted people she knew, and only asked the models to stay for one hour. "My mother painted very rapidly (Now, I've lost my place. Let's see, where ...), very rapidly." Mr. Wight remembers. She wore an apron that covered her from the neck down. She would quickly draw in the person's head with charcoal, and fix it. And by the end of the hour, she had the head blocked in. Full-length portraits took longer. It was quite a whirlwind when she was painting. There was paint all over the place. Her face was all painted because she held the brushes horizontally in her mouth.

Her style, according to her son, might be described as impressionistic exaggeration. She was not a naïve painter, but she was a naïve person, and unaware of the nature of her work. Her

approach sometimes startled those who expected a more photographic painting. “Strangely,” Frederick Wight muses, “the less people knew about painting, the more they understood, perhaps instinctively what the artist was trying to do.”

One of those pictured in the *Circle Supper* is Mrs. Alba N. Ivanoff. (She is the lady in second panel up, in the middle of the two older ladies; the younger person with brown hair.) (Mrs. Ivanov. Let’s see now. I shouldn’t take my eyes off of this. Oh, here we are.) She was about nineteen when Alice Stallknecht called the house one night and said “she would like to have me come and pose. The artist had a forceful personality,” Mrs. Ivanov recalls, “and models, more often than not, were told, not asked, to pose.” Mrs. Ivanov’s mother knew Alice Stallknecht and gave her daughter permission to pose. “Many of us didn’t know what we were posing for, until it appeared later.” said Mrs. Ivanov. Nor was everyone pleased with the result. A lot of people thought she was caricaturing them, and the paintings were greeted unenthusiastically, particularly by the older people. Personally, Mrs. Ivanov says she didn’t object to the painting but she notes that in the ‘30s, the muralistic kind of painting was not very popular.

When finished, the murals were installed in the front entrance and upstairs in the back balcony of the Congregational Church, where they elicited a mixed response. Some people were troubled at seeing religious paintings of any kind, to say nothing of portraits of their neighbors in a protestant church. Others did not understand the impressionistic technique. “It was a very small congregation,” Frederick Wight recalled, with Atwoods on one side of the aisle or the other. The multitude were all cousins, more or less.

Still, the angry, impressed, and curious alike were drawn to the church to view the murals. Financially, the murals were good news for the small church. The contributions of the many visitors made for a healthy poor box.

The murals not only attracted local comment but drew national media attention as well. When *Christ Preaching to the Multitude* was placed in the church, it was reproduced in Time Magazine over the caption “Holy Dory.” (Laughter) (And that is in the showcase, out there, as you go *Unintelligible speech*). The *Circle Supper* was given a full page in the last edition of the New York Rotogravure.

Despite the acclaim the murals received, as each new minister arrived at the small church and saw the murals for the first time, Frederick Wight recalls that he proselytized the new man until he became adjusted to the paintings. (Laughter)

During World War II, while he was abroad, and couldn’t do his usual selling job, the decision was made to remove the murals from the church. This could have been the result of a built-up resistance to the paintings and may or may not have been related to the new minister. Alice Stallknecht had an old railroad freight shed moved next to her house, and the murals were hung there. The two murals took up exactly half the walls of the 20 by 40 foot shed.

In 1945, she began to fill the blank wall with, what many have called her masterpiece. (And of course, you realize we’re in the shed *Unintelligible speech*). Alice Stallknecht had ... the mural is called *Every Man to His Trade*. The central figure, once more, is Christ the Carpenter (We’re speaking about this one, here). Frederick Wight has described the canvas beneath the Christ figure, with its dozens of town peoples as a Thanksgiving still life, and on either hand are the townsmen at their trades: fishermen, lobstermen, quahog rakers, scallopers, oystermen, masons, builders, boarding house keepers. There are scenes of the town voting; of the town

meeting; of the selectmen giving alms to the poor; of shipwrecked Nova Scotia fishermen being helped on their way home.

During the 1950s, the smaller works of Alice Stallknecht were shown at prestigious galleries in and out of the country. But the murals, whose powerful lines represented the flowering of her talent, were never exhibited outside Chatham because she wanted them near her. They languished in the old shed where visitors were welcome.

When Alice Stallknecht died in 1973, at the age of 93, the murals were taken to Los Angeles, where their fading colors were brightened with a hot wax process. William Agee, Director of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, saw the murals, and was so impressed by them that he arranged the 1977 showing at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, where he had become Director. The same year, the murals were exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Home for the murals would always be Chatham. Realizing this, a benefactor, who had known Alice Stallknecht, contributed to the restoration of the railroad shed. It was attached to the Atwood House owned by the Chatham Historical Society and the gallery was dedicated in 1977 at a ceremony attended by Frederick Wight and some of the subjects of the painting

Frederick Wight, a noted painter himself, as well as a prominent art critic, gallery director, and author of numerous articles and several novels prefers not to think of the controversial road the murals traveled. "I like to think of them as eventually being recognized." he said, "They are a little more sanctified by time."

Time has covered the controversy and brought forth calmness, more like those of Agnes Mongan, Curator Emeritus of drawings at the Harvard Fogg Museum. She wrote, "It has taken us a generation to recognize the eloquence, the atmos, and the historical relevance of the series."

At the other end of the pictorial balance, it may be, but it is as perceptive in recording the Yankee ideals as the Italian frescos were of renaissance (Unintelligible speech), and the world it represents has receded into almost a distant past. It was a world visible and recognizable from Cape Cod to beyond Mt. Desert on the coast of Maine. More than those who passed their summers on Cape Cod or on the Maine coast, who saw boats built, fish caught, and forests felled, who, though not members of the congregation were yet welcomed, will have a sense of gratitude to the painter, who has preserved, with sympathy, understanding, and wit, a vanished way of life."

SPEAKER: Thank you for your attention. (Applause). And now I'd be glad to answer any questions that you may have, if I can do so.

Sally: Or, rather let Willie, who is our (Unintelligible speech) speak for a few minutes, or would you rather take some questions that are directed and back and forth between you both.

Willie: I'd just as soon sit quietly and help (Speaker's name) answer any questions.

Sally: Fine, so that we can get double answer, double answer up there.

SPEAKER: Are there any questions?

Attendee: Yes. Where are you?

SPEAKER: Pardon? Where am I?

Attendee: You're not here.

SPEAKER: Well, then, the artist didn't think that I had enough character in my face, or I had too much, so she didn't paint me. (Laughter)

Attendee: That's your brother.

SPEAKER: My father and mother and brother are in the top right-hand panel next to the geraniums up there.

Sally: Father, mother, and brother.

SPEAKER: Right.

Sally: I can see your question, why you asked it. (Laughter)

Attendee: How many people are still alive?

SPEAKER: Oh, I wish Eleanor were here, she could tell you. The last count was, Millie, do you remember, eleven?

Millie: About 11, I think.

SPEAKER: Before Morris Tuttle died recently, and of course, they would all be the younger ones, who were children in the picture. Most of them (Unintelligible speech) alive.
(Unintelligible Speech)

SPEAKER: I'm sorry?

Millie: At that time, Mr. Small was still alive. He's in the picture right there. He was a selectman. But he has since died.

SPEAKER: Oh yes, a lot of them have died.

Millie: A lot of them have died.

SPEAKER: They all have died, except about 10, and they would be the children.

Sally: Now somebody told me they were one of the Girl Scouts. Now who told me that? I can't remember.

SPEAKER: That represents ... You see now this is what, um, you didn't want me to get into. You want me to generalize.

Sally: Well ...

SPEAKER: Which I will, if you want me to.

Sally: Not particular ...

SPEAKER: You know, it can get to be lengthy. As she, as the article says, this represents all the occupations in town, and that top panel represents the, ah, children's organizations. You have the Sea Scouts, the Boy Scouts, the Brownies, and the Girl Scouts. And that girl in the Girl Scouts there is Helen Hammond.

(Unintelligible speech)

SPEAKER: Eddie Crawford (?), that's right. Willard and I, and Jane and, I don't, maybe a few others, I can't remember, knew all these people. And I might say, when our generation is gone, there won't be anybody left that grew up with us.

Attendee: Is that Natalie?

Willie: No, that's Ellen Wilson. Ellen, used to be Wilson. John Wilson's sister.

SPEAKER: Yes.

Willie: There's one thing that (Speaker's name) didn't say that maybe some of you aren't aware of, um, on each side of the room there's all pictures in there with all the names under each person. Some of you didn't realize that. Every person is named in each one of these things on each end of the room So if you every want to know who somebody is, all you have to do is look at that.

SPEAKER: And if you become a docent for this barn, gallery, I'm in the process of cataloguing all the faces, by number: who they were; what they did; and to whom they were related. And you'll find about 11 of them in here are Atwoods. (Laughter)

Sally: The president, ah, Dan, the president of the Historical Society says that they are in the process of purchasing a viable tape recorder and, let's, with 10 people left, let's get some of them, some of these taken down. And anybody that's either an expert in that to never care to become one, I think that would be a tremendous project for one of the docents to take on. I don't know – one, two or three, probably. Somebody think seriously about that. I just noticed, you had said before, the um, the nail wounds ...

SPEAKER: Oh, yes. Christ's hands. You see where the nail wounds ...

Sally: Certainly, no denying, it's Christ (Unintelligible speech).

Attendees: (Unintelligible speech) Librarians. Who were the old librarians?

Willie: Edna Hardy was the old librarian when we were kids. Edna Hardy is up here somewhere.

SPEAKER: This lady, right here, is Edna Hardy, who is an aunt of Bob Hardy. This lady, right here. And I think this one, right here, is her mother.

Attendee: Is her sister there, too?

SPEAKER: No. This lady here, Mrs. Smith, ah, what's her first, do you remember her first name, Millie? I don't have, wouldn't know ...

(Unintelligible speech)

SPEAKER: She was the widow of Willie Smith, who wrote the history of Chatham. You can see how proper she was. She probably would have worn a turtleneck in this day and age.

(Laughter)

Attendee: It hides the wrinkles.

Attendee: Helen (?), where ah did Alice live around Stage Harbor? Is the house still there?

SPEAKER: The house is still there. And if you go down, and you get to Bridge Street on your left, go right by it, I think. Willie, correct me, I think it's the next house on the right.

Willie: Last house on the right before you turn to go up the hill. It sits back, a white house.

SPEAKER: And that's where this shed sat, and she moved it down there in back, in fields. And then, as you heard me say, somebody, a bank benefactor, paid for it to be moved up here. And, um, is that where the storage room is, under here?

Willie: I don't know. Oh, yes. A big storage area under this building now. Mrs. (Unintelligible speech)

Attendee: Where did, ah, (Unintelligible speech) come from originally? I mean, was it up from the railroad ...?

SPEAKER: Railroad Depot.

Attendee: Right here in Chatham?

SPEAKER: Right. Where the museum is. The railroad. It was off on one of the spurs, track spurs. Some say it was a shed. I say it was an old engine barn. Who knows.

Attendee: Are there any descendants of Wight in town.

SPEAKER: I don't ... No, I don't think so, because, see, while her son has recently died and I don't know where the widow is.

Sally: Did they have children?

SPEAKER: See the first panel, up there, beside the church spire. That is her son and daughter-in-law and grandson. That son has recently died, and it was the grandson, I believe, who was instrumental in getting these murals all out to California to have them, um, the hot wax process, which, I guess... they did a beautiful job.

Attendee: I think he did some of it himself.

Willie: That was George Wight, he's the baby.

SPEAKER: The baby, yes.

Willie: George was, at that time, a conservator in Los Angeles County Museum. And he and his friends got together and historic ... He's still alive

Attendee/recorder: I gave George his first bath when he came home from the hospital.

(Laughter)

SPEAKER: You did? You did?

Attendee/reorder: Yes. His mother was afraid to. (Laughter) I had a 6 months old baby so I helped. (Unintelligible speech). Yes, and he was as slippery as a frog. (Laughter)

Willie: George. George is still alive, and lives in California. He is now, I think, a sculptor. At one time he did some painting but his mother, who is still alive in Los Angeles, wrote the other day and said that he no longer (STATIC). He was here to see the murals in this location and (Unintelligible speech), who was the donor of a sizable gift to bring the barn up and put it in place. And we decided that we needed to have storage areas so the full basement is there with a small vault, a fire proof vault as well. (Speaker's name) didn't say that Frank Hutchings, (Unintelligible speech) son, was president of the Historical Society before (Unintelligible speech) was, and he said that when he brought his children here to see the murals, they said, "Oh, Grampy." So, there was enough to be recognized. (STATIC)

Sally: Um, Slim, we used to recall, ran a car repair shop – a garage.

Attendee: Garage. (Unintelligible speech) over where the Texaco station is now, and we called it Slim's Garage (Unintelligible speech).

Willie: Famous location: Slim's Garage (Unintelligible speech)

Sally: We, at that time, my father was very much a summer person, but quite active, I think he was quite active in the local town. So, he used to attend every summer persons' meeting and work on the dairy farm. Later on, he was told that Slim had been quoted, "Let 'em all talk during the summer. We'll retract it all in the fall." (Laughter)

SPEAKER: He was talking about summer town meeting, no doubt.

Attendees: Yes.

SPEAKER: "We'll veto it in the fall." (Laughter) Well, if no one else has any questions ...

Attendee: How 'bout just; I'd rather just get up and walk around and look.

SPEAKER: Whatever you want.

Attendee: There was a ... What about the picture of George Washington and some politician?

Attendee/recorder: Sally, I'd like to talk before they get up.

Willie: I think that was true, wasn't it, Sheila?

Attendee/recorder: I'm sorry, I didn't hear.

Willie: The portraits of Washington and others she had done.

Attendee/recorder: What about them? I never saw them.

Willie: She also did Saltonstall and some other people.

Attendee/recorder: I never saw them.

Willie: Some of those, I think, were sold. I don't think any are in the Portrait Gallery in Washington, because at that time, when these were shown there, they were privileged to go there because they were portraits from life, and at that time, according to the gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, they accepted for display only portraits from life. So Saltonstall and the others were declined. (STATIC)

SPEAKER: Referring to the article that I read, if you remember, it mentions that there was a great deal of controversy within the church about this mural and that mural being hung. And, um, of course, she is correct when she said, "This is a church vestry supper. I have attended many of them, with many of these people there." And it is very true that the controversy about these murals. People even said they were sacrilegious, and "Get them out." So anyway, I mean you know it was a very narrow-minded town in those days. (STATIC) and I personally know was true. There were many, many Atwoods on both sides of the aisle. And I don't think it (STATIC) and I think you will find that the congregation finally said, "Get them out." Yes?

Attendee: You know that there was one thing I remember about the Saltonstall painting was he was presenting a Medal of Honor to a soldier, and he had just left, ah, lost his own son. And I always thought that was a good (STATIC).

Willie: So, this piece of (Unintelligible speech) back here is presented to Mrs. Wight, Alice Stallknecht by the Congregational Society of the church, so at least some of the (STATIC) (Laughter).

SPEAKER: That was probably after they took it off. I was away during those years, so I don't know what happened.

Willie: Wasn't it also true, though, that (STATIC) found it disconcerting to be standing in the pulpit during sermon, with these portraits staring at him (STATIC) and he had a curtain that could be drawn across.

SPEAKER: I heard that, yes. Because they distracted him. That would be the one at the back balcony. When he was preaching from the pulpit, all these things, here, were looking at him. (Laughter)

Sally: Can you, can't you imagine being tempted to try to match the faces and (Unintelligible speech).

SPEAKER: In conclusion, I just have to tell you this. I don't know if you are familiar with the "Burt and I" records from the Down Maine Humor. Well, my son gave me a tape recently called "Postcards from Maine." Now, the reason I'm telling you this is because part of it, to me, is Chatham, and this man says, um, to the congre-, to the audience, he says, "Well," he says, "there's three types of people up here." He said, "There are natives, and you know who you are. And I am one, and my records out in the hall. And then there are those people who have moved in, and you know who you are." And then he says, "And then you've got your transplants, and you know who you are." (Laughter) "Now," he says, "there's nothing wrong with any of that. Many of those people in those groups are fine people, but the only problem comes when one group tries to slide over into the other." (Laughter)