

MAKING A PLACE FOR ART

50 Years at the Grand Marais Art Colony

When artist Birney M. Quick drove up U.S. Highway 61 toward Grand Marais that summer of 1947, he was not on another fishing trip to one of his favorite spots along Lake Superior's North Shore, though he may have had fishing in the back of his mind. He was traveling with his wife, Marion, to the remote town of 855 people, located 250 miles northeast of the Twin Cities and 40 miles short of the Canadian border, to launch the first session of

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Quick's Lake Superior, oil on canvas, 1956

the Outdoor School of Painting. As a new faculty member at the Minneapolis School of Art, Quick had proposed the idea to school president Edmund Kopietz. A summer art colony in Grand Marais, where students would have the opportunity to paint dramatic landscapes of the rocky shoreline, would offer an appealing and valuable complement to classes in the city. Working in Grand Marais, Quick argued, students would develop “the eye of a scientist,” “the dedication of a clergyman,” “the skill and technique of a cabinet maker,” and “the vision of a poet.” “The reason,” he wrote, “is that the student is near to nature, in other words near

the source of material which most great art has come from.”¹

The Minneapolis School of Art, forerunner of the current Minneapolis College of Art and Design, decided to give the colony a try and appointed Quick director and chief instructor. The business of summer art colonies, after all, was not new. Since the late nineteenth century they had sprung up across the eastern and southwestern United States. A decade earlier Quick himself had been at the artists’ colony in Woodstock, New York. Now, with Highway 61 paved from Duluth to Two Harbors and improved as far as the Canadian border and with

¹ “Eight Weeks of Outdoor Painting on the Beautiful North Shore of Lake Superior,” brochure, Birney McNabb Quick Papers, microfilm edition, R[oll] 2, F[rame] 373, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Birney Quick, “The Grand Marais Project” [ca. 1946] manuscript, Marion Quick collection, Grand Marais; Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, *The WPA Guide to the Minnesota Arrowhead Country* (1941; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 127.

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new river bridges and groomed trails built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s, Quick's idea of attracting art students to Grand Marais was not far-fetched. His students would join the renewed waves of visitors to Minnesota's Arrowhead region, where tourism had first skyrocketed in the 1920s.²

Birney Quick's dream of creating a vital summer art colony in Grand Marais took hold with remarkable tenacity. In 1997 the school he launched—known as the Grand Marais Art Colony—celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Its current director, Jay Andersen, has led the school into a year-round organization with strong ties to the town's public schools.

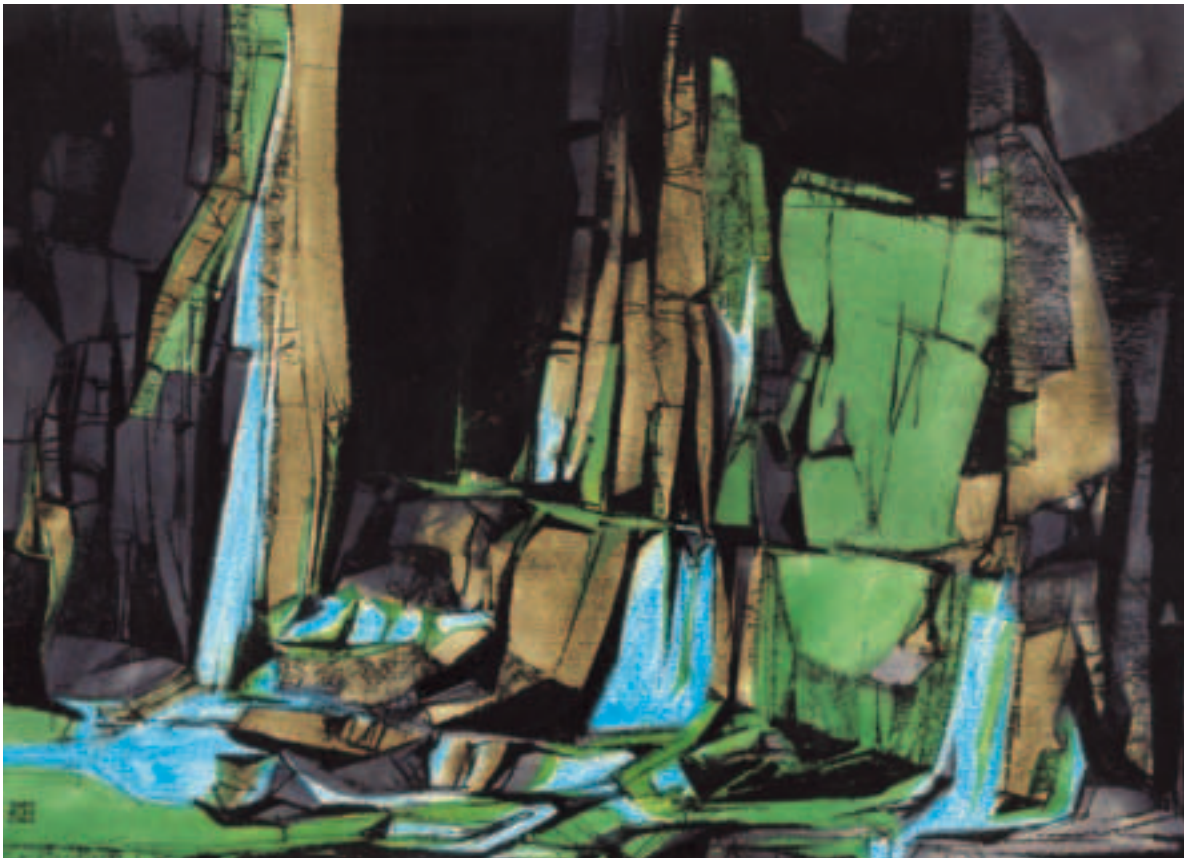
A visitor to Grand Marais today might easily overlook the art school. Its current home, up the hill from the town's main drag, is a small, white, wood-frame building, the former St. John's Catholic Church. Yet the colony's long presence is highly visible downtown in the

many galleries and businesses that display works by local artists. Tourists throwing stones into the harbor cannot miss the Bear Tree sculpture, created by students and teachers in the mid-1950s. Or visitors may find themselves strolling out to Artists' Point, named for its popularity as a place to paint the stunning Superior shoreline where the Gunflint Trail winds into the state's Boundary Waters. These prominent features of the town's cultural landscape owe a good deal to Quick's Grand Marais Art Colony.

How did Minnesota's longest lived art colony take hold in Grand Marais, so far from the mainstream art world? And how was it able to last half a century? Its story is a tribute to the vision of those who founded it, to those who reinvented the organization in times of change, and to the local community that welcomed artists into its midst. Its edge-of-the-wilderness location helped keep the vagaries of the art world at a psychological, as well as geographical, dis-

² *Ely Miner*, July 16, 1942, clipping, CCC newspaper articles, Cook County Historical Society, Grand Marais; *Duluth News-Tribune*, Aug. 11, 1935, p. 1; *WPA Guide to Arrowhead*, 161.

Keith Havens's Rock Wall Study, watercolor and charcoal on paper, about 1970



tance, allowing the school to focus on training artists. Its powerful landscape served as setting, subject, and inspiration.

Underpinning the colony's story is the special status of the North Shore for Minnesotans and other visitors. The rugged coast and its inland expanse of waterways, forests, and wilderness is a "place" in the sense of being "a center of meaning," a notion geographer Yi-Fu Tuan employs to describe landscapes that acquire charged meanings. Minnesota's Arrowhead region is a spiritual center of the state, one reason why its use and future are hotly contested. It is a place where art that explores relationships between artist and landscape has come to fit into the scheme of things.³



Quick painting Ben Bonneville, 1936

Birney Quick was not exactly an outsider when he arrived in Grand Marais. Born in 1912 and raised about 100 miles away in Proctor and Duluth, the young Quick always loved the North Shore landscape, especially the big lake and the many good fly-fishing streams and rivers that flowed into it. It was in Proctor that the fourth grader drew a robin that earned a blue ribbon in a state-fair art show, the first of many awards. After graduating from Duluth's Denfeld High School in 1930, he studied further at the Vesper George School of Art in Boston. Although art was a less than practical career choice as the Great Depression took hold, his parents were supportive. Quick's mother believed he should be an artist from the time of his first award, and his father, a railroad worker, was a "poet at heart."⁴

As an art student, Quick shifted his interest from illustration to fine arts, as he "dropped the uniform and attitudes of the advertising man, put on the clothes of the rebel Bohemian." In 1936 at age 24, Quick spent time at the Woodstock Art Colony, a day's drive upstate from New York City, where scores of artists regularly escaped urban heat and congestion. There, Quick claimed, he learned to be a professional artist.

Art colonies such as Woodstock had become a major cultural trend in small scenic towns in the United States at the turn of the century, following several decades' growth in Europe. At colonies artists enjoyed less structured situations than found at formal art academies. Emphasis was placed on painting "en plein air"—or outdoors—in natural light, and the artists often found inspiring subjects in the landscape and colorful local characters—farmers, fishermen, and villagers. By gathering in small towns, artists created stimulating communities that gave birth to associations and schools, often in opposition to urban academies. Of necessity experienced artists often supplemented their income by teaching classes. Like Woodstock, communities in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and Taos, New Mexico, became magnets for artists—and for tourists who enjoyed watching the artists.⁵

³ See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

⁴ Here and below, Quick, *Adrift in Aesthetic Latitudes: For Those at Sea about Art* (Bloomington, Minn.: Voyageur Press, 1980), 5–6, 8.

⁵ On art colonies, see Karal Ann Marling, *Woodstock: An American Art Colony, 1902–1977* (Poughkeepsie: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1977); Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 17–41; Charles C. Eldredge, "The Faraway Nearby: New Mexico and the Modern Landscape," in *Art in New Mexico, 1900–1945: Paths to Taos and Santa Fe* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution with Abbeville Press in New York, 1986), 147–80.

Birney Quick's attraction to artists' communities in picturesque natural settings probably heightened after 1936, when he was awarded a prestigious fellowship by the Tiffany Foundation. Living at the Louis Comfort Tiffany estate on Long Island near other art colonies and summer art schools, he came to believe that nature recharged artists after winters spent in the studio, refilling their "wellsprings of creativity." These experiences no doubt influenced his idea to try an art colony later in Grand Marais, which had many elements in common with other areas that had spawned colonies—dramatic scenery, colorful local cultures, and, by 1947, accessible transportation.⁶

Returning home to Duluth in the late 1930s, Quick set up a studio on the second floor of a frame shop. The studio's only heat seeped up from the floor below, requiring him to wear an overcoat and gloves when painting. For income, he taught private students and classes at St. Scholastica College.

Quick soon became Duluth's most acclaimed artist. At the age of 25 he was commissioned to create some of the largest murals done at that time in Minnesota at the Duluth Chamber of Commerce, including a 55-foot landscape with fishermen, farmers, and lumberjacks. The public was invited to an open house every afternoon between three and four to watch him work. Next Quick got a lucky mural commission in a public school on the Iron Range, arranged by a contractor whom Quick had helped choose building paint colors. That job gave him the income and the confidence to marry his Duluth sweetheart, Marion Riedel. Like many other artists who survived the depression on commissions for public artworks, Quick found his ideas shaped by these experiences. Although his work represented his personal vision executed with an expressionistic display of emotion, Quick very much believed that art should connect with the community.⁷

In 1942, Quick entered the Army Air Corps, where he painted mess-hall murals and portraits of officers. After discharge in 1946 and still

wearing his army greens, he stopped at the Minneapolis School of Art. When the registrar told him classes were full, Quick mentioned that he had some teaching experience, and the school director hired him on the spot. During his first year he developed his idea for a summer art colony in Grand Marais and the following year made good on his dreams.⁸

The Minnesota Arrowhead, where Quick chose to locate the school, already had forged an identity as a tourist destination. The area had long been traveled by European explorers and French traders, but it had been closed to settlement until the 1854 Treaty of La Pointe with the Ojibway residents. Speculation about finding copper and other precious metals brought more settlement, though few riches materialized. Grand Marais, begun in the 1870s as a trading stop, survived on the lumber business and commercial fishing.⁹

Barely had Grand Marais been incorporated as a town when the first tourists arrived from Duluth by Lake Superior steamer. By 1903 they were camping in tents along Grand Marais Bay or lodging at the Lakeview Hotel and Howenstine House. Though ambitious resorts like the Naniboujou Club east of Grand Marais faltered during the depression, tourists continued to seek out the North Shore and the Gunflint Trail for their natural beauty.¹⁰

Artists also visited the Grand Marais area to record its natural beauties and the lives of its inhabitants. Eastman Johnson lived at nearby Grand Portage in 1857–58, creating 15 oil paintings and 20 charcoal drawings of Ojibway people and their villages. Minneapolis-born Dewey Albinson revisited the same area, devoting summers from 1922 into the 1940s to painting the landscapes and Ojibway residents. His images of the ancient, gnarled "Spirit Little Cedar Tree" inspired other artists to depict the natural marvel growing out of pure rock on the Superior shoreline.¹¹

Francis Lee Jaques also drew inspiration from the Lake Superior region, having spent his adolescence in Aitkin and moved to Duluth

⁶ Here and below, Quick, *Adrift*, 8–9, 10, 76.

⁷ Unidentified newspaper clippings, 1937, R2, F8–9, Quick Papers; Quick, *Adrift*, 11; Marion Reidel Quick, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 1, 1995.

⁸ Quick, *Adrift*, 11–12.

⁹ *WPA Guide to Arrowhead*, 3; Willis H. Raff, *Pioneers in the Wilderness: Minnesota's Cook County, Grand Marais, and the Gunflint in the 19th Century* (Grand Marais: Cook County Historical Society, 1981), 107–08.

¹⁰ Raff, *Pioneers*, 60–66; Jack Stone Pardee, *The Naniboujou Club* (Duluth: Stewart-Taylor Co., 1927), n.p.

¹¹ Patricia Condon Johnston, *Eastman Johnson's Lake Superior Indians* (Afton: Johnston Publishing, 1983), 8; Mary T. Swanson, "Dewey Albinson: The Artist as Chronicler," *Minnesota History* 52 (Fall 1991): 265–77.

in 1916. He became one of the most accomplished naturalist artists of the century, creating stunning dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the James Ford Bell Museum of Natural History at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Jaques and his writer wife, Florence, traveled to his home state many times before permanently settling in Minnesota in 1953, and their works included two classic nature travelogues, *Canoe Country* (1938) and *Snowshoe Country* (1946).¹²

Other artists who called the area home fostered a visibility and legitimacy for the visual arts in Grand Marais. Anna Carolina Johnson, for instance, who married trader Charles J. Johnson and settled on the North Shore in 1907, had studied painting at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. She put her training to use in creating numerous northwoods landscapes in her adopted hometown. Artist George Morrison, born in 1919 in Chippewa City, an Ojibway settlement just to the east of Grand Marais, attended the Minneapolis School of Art (MSA) and went on to an important career as an abstraction artist and teacher. The long presence of these artists fostered traditions of acceptance by local residents and display of artwork in homes and in public places.¹³

By the time Birney Quick returned to his old stomping grounds on the North Shore in the late 1940s, tourism was already beginning to pick up after the war. Several recent publications had brought renewed attention to the area, including *The WPA Guide to the Minnesota Arrowhead Country* (1941), Grace Lee Nute's *The Voyageur's Highway* (1941), and the earlier *Canoe Country*. New accommodations could be found everywhere. Visitors could stay at the lodge at Lutsen Resort, built by architect Edwin Lundie in 1948 and again in 1949 after fire destroyed the first one. Or they may have been lured by the new promotional booklet distributed by the Minnesota Arrowhead Association touting the many amenities of Grand Marais—cabins, gas stations, shops, restaurants, and the newly built

gateway marking the entrance to the Gunflint Trail. Many of the students Quick would attract in the coming years had first visited the North Shore and Grand Marais as tourists.¹⁴

Most art teachers agree," Quick later reflected, "that you cannot teach anyone to be an artist; however, I believe that you can provide an environment that will assure the student of an opportunity to grow." In 1947, the first year of the Grand Marais Outdoor School of Painting, Quick and his wife, drafted to be school registrar, set out to provide the right environment for the 20 students who registered for the eight-week session. Most were former soldiers studying at the MSA on the G.I. Bill. The school's first brochure stipulated men-only enrollment, but the next year Jean Ranney, daughter of MSA instructor Glen Ranney, who also taught at the art colony, registered. "That first year was kind of exciting," reflected Marion Quick, "because the students were almost as old as we were. Some of them were pretty tough cookies that had come home from some pretty tough action in Europe." Classes met in the elementary-school gym, but the outdoors was their main studio.¹⁵

The Quicks and other instructors fostered camaraderie by launching what became one of the most time-honored and beloved traditions at the colony: Monday-night fish fries. Gathering at the Grand Marais harbor, students and art instructors cooked herring caught by fishermen whose fish houses lined the shore. The students, who roomed at resorts or in private homes, thus had the chance to get to know each other over good food, as well as to know the landscape of the town. The harbor, Coast Guard Point with its picturesque lighthouse, fishermen with their boats, fish houses, nets, and high stacks of logs waiting to be floated to papermills in Wisconsin all would become frequent subjects for their artwork.¹⁶

Keith Havens was a student in this first class. After four years in the army, he had enrolled at

¹² See Donald T. Luce and Laura M. Andrews, *Francis Lee Jaques, Artist-Naturalist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹³ "Anna Johnson," brochure [1995?], and Ade Toftey, "A Brief Story of Painting Art in Grand Marais, Minnesota and Cook County as a Whole," manuscript [1990?], 2, Johnson Heritage Post Art Gallery files, Grand Marais; Raff, *Pioneers*, 373; George Morrison, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Portage, Aug. 8, 1995.

¹⁴ M. J. Humphrey, Adolph Toftey, and Willis Raff, eds., *Faces and Places II: A Cook County Album, 1930–1960* (Grand Marais: Cook County Historical Society, 1985), back cover.

¹⁵ Quick, *Adrift*, 15; brochure, R2, F373, and enrollment list, R2, F303, Quick Papers; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 22, 1948, Picture sec., 4–6; Quick interview.

¹⁶ Quick interview.

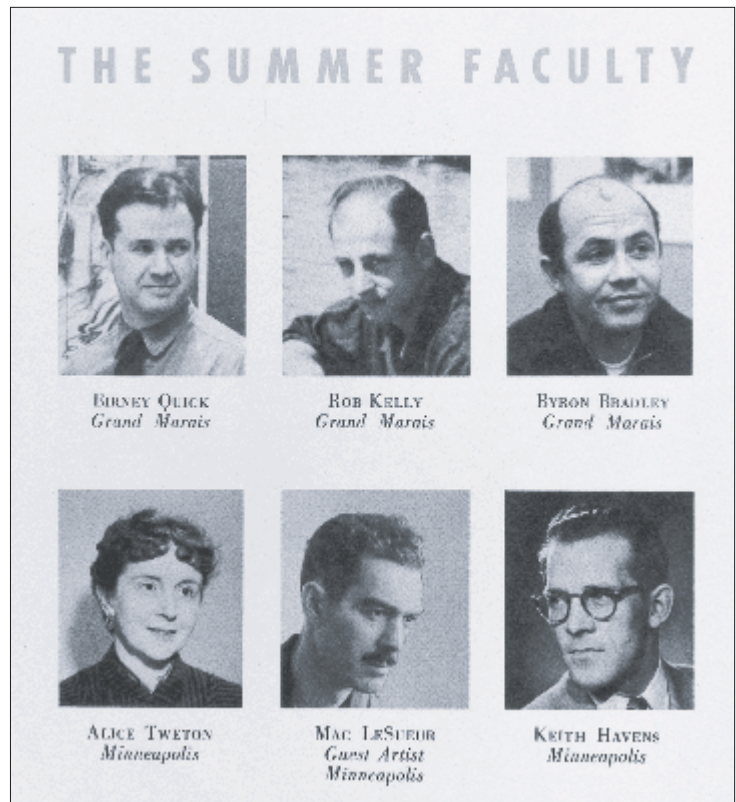
the MSA, and when he heard about the Grand Marais summer school, he immediately signed up, wanting to return to a place that had impressed him when he visited before the war. That summer instructors Quick and Ranney led the students to all sorts of nearby places where they painted landscapes—down to the lake-shore, up the forest trails, and along the streams and waterfalls. Quick and Ranney would demonstrate techniques, then let the students try their hands. “The thing that impressed me so much,” Havens remembered,

and so many other artists, I think, was the fact that there were so many ways to go to be motivated by the magnificence of the water, and the boats, and the logs floating in the bay, and “the Point,” and the foghorns, and the little town, and the fish houses, and the dock formations that went out, and the rock forms that held the water at bay to keep it from splashing all over the highway and washing it away. . . . Finally, you say, “Hey, this is paradise.”

Havens and cohorts Bob Olafson, Larry Green, Clyde Anderson, and Bob Deljen (whom Havens described as bearded “wildmen” that first summer) took their art seriously but also made time for fishing excursions, beach campfires, and drives into the forest, including one trip in a coupe that almost landed them over a precipice.¹⁷

Havens’s experiences in Grand Marais strongly shaped the rest of his life, which he devoted to teaching and making art. He became a colleague of Quick at the MSA, where he taught until the late 1950s, and then moved on to the St. Paul School of Art and the Minnetonka Art Center. He also bought land on Pike Lake outside of Grand Marais, where he and his wife, Marian, summered and then retired in the early 1970s.

Despite the success of the first two years of the Grand Marais Outdoor School of Painting, MSA administrators thought the long trek to the North Shore impeded faculty from offering lectures and students from attending. Housing for the summer could be hard to find and expensive. As a result, Quick and his program were transferred to Red Wing, southeast of the Twin Cities, for three summers



Summer faculty members at the Town Hall Art Colony and Minneapolis School of Art, 1955

beginning in 1949. There a community center offered rooms for art classes and the YMCA provided low-cost housing. The town on the Mississippi River, school administrators believed, offered a great variety of scenes to paint.¹⁸

This turn of events caused alarm in Grand Marais, where village leaders regretted the loss of the art students who not only brought business but also served as good ambassadors for the area. Efforts were made to entice Quick and the MSA to reconsider, and by 1952 the art colony was returned to Grand Marais. This time the town provided free use of the upper floor of the old town-hall building, above the library and one-engine firehouse, and the school was renamed the Town Hall Art Colony.

From 1952 to 1958 Quick’s summer art colony became a mainstay of both Grand Marais’s cultural life and the MSA. Classes were held at school, though students fanned out along the lake shore and into forests and old

¹⁷ Here and below, Keith Havens, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 10, 1995.

¹⁸ Here and below, unidentified newspaper clippings, ca. 1948, R2, F320, Quick Papers.

farmsteads in search of subjects. They took core classes in oil and watercolor painting, as well as sculpture, printmaking, and ceramics, depending on the visiting faculty. Grand Marais residents were usually too busy with the summer tourist season to enroll for the long session, but they dropped in for Wednesday-night classes, and local children could take Saturday-morning offerings. Quick taught most of them, supplemented by other MSA faculty and sometimes by prestigious visiting faculty. In 1953, for instance, John Groth from the Pratt Institute and Art Students League in New York City taught drawing and illustration, MSA instructor Raymond Gormley handled drawing and sculpture, and the MSA's Rob Kelly ran a Saturday class for children.¹⁹

Quick himself became a familiar figure around town. His earlier ties to the North Shore and, not to be overlooked, his skill as a fisherman (he could talk tackle and technique with the best) made for his easy acceptance by townfolk. Garrulous and charming, Quick befriended many Grand Marais locals over morning coffee at the cafes, and residents helped find places for his students to stay and work, some offering rooms in their own homes.

Adolph (Ade) Toftey became Quick's close friend and an important advocate for the art school. As editor and publisher of the *Cook County News-Herald* from 1928 to 1971, Toftey wrote countless articles covering art-colony activities. It didn't hurt either that Toftey was a painter. In 1926 Toftey had been one of the first art majors to graduate from Carleton College in Northfield. He continued to paint until his death in 1991, producing more than 250 canvases, most of which depict the beauty and power of nature along Lake Superior. As the youngest of 11 children in a Norwegian family that had helped to establish the fishing town of Tofte 20 miles down the shore from Grand Marais, Ade Toftey conferred the approval of a local settler on his friend Quick's endeavors.²⁰

In 1954, with the school firmly settled back in Grand Marais, Quick made a move with lasting impact by inviting Minneapolis artist Byron

Bradley to join him as an instructor. Quick and Bradley had met at the MSA when Quick was a teacher and Bradley a student. After four years, Bradley earned the school's Van Derlip Scholarship, which he used to attend the Skowhegan School in Maine. Following four months in Europe, Bradley returned to Minneapolis and continued painting in his Gateway Building studio on Washington and Hennepin Avenues. In 1951 Bradley started a gallery with studio neighbor Robert Kilbride in another room in the same building. Other artists paid membership to belong to the Kilbride-Bradley Gallery, where they hosted regular shows and sold their paintings for under \$50. By 1953 Bradley had become Quick's colleague at the MSA, teaching evening drawing classes and eventually day school.²¹

They soon became a successful team, teaching and promoting the art colony long past the MSA's support for the summer school. Quick was the flamboyant showman to Bradley's quiet craftsman, a contrast noted and appreciated by many art-colony students and friends. Toftey described them in action:

When they gave demonstrations before a class, Birney bounded around, throwing paint at will, slashing and stabbing with his brush, and when he had finished a vibrant collection of strokes, that made a striking whole. On the other hand, Byron approached his work in a calm, easy-going manner, often redoing portions of his picture to make more precise declaration.

Though Quick was always the more public of the two, both artists became familiar faces in Grand Marais through a growing number of colony activities open to the public, such as the Monday-evening painting demonstrations held at the high school or the lectures, concerts, and dances arranged by the art colony.²²

Dance and music performances came to the North Shore with the Town Hall Music Series, one of the colony's most ambitious undertakings. Quick and Bradley worked on them with assistance from the MSA's new director, Wilhelmus Bryan, who had bought a cabin in

¹⁹ Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1953, probably *Cook County News-Herald*, R2, F15, and summer-session brochure, 1953, R2, F383, Quick Papers.

²⁰ *Cook County News-Herald*, Aug. 19, 1991, p. 1, 10; Ade Toftey files at Cook County Historical Society, including transcribed oral interview by Reinert Reinertson, Feb. 14, 1956; Byron Bradley, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 14, 1995. See also Toftey, "Brief Story," 18.

²¹ Bradley interview by author; Byron Bradley, interview by Thomas O'Sullivan, Minnesota Artists Oral History Project, 1992, Minnesota Historical Society; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 26, 1996, B4.

²² Toftey, "Brief Story," 10.

Ball by the Boat: The scene which took place on the banks of the Grand Marais colony of Lake Superior and is presented by the group of artists who are now here...

School Director: Mrs. Frank Brown of St. Paul is seen in the picture looking on at the group...



Arts on the Rocks Flourish In Grand Marais Colony

By NEAL BRADLEY, The North Shore Staff Writer

GRAND MARAIS, Minn.—A town that once was a quiet fishing village has become a center of artistic activity...

Dancers meet painters on the shores of Lake Superior, 1956

Hovland, east of Grand Marais. Bryan would help enlist talent from the Twin Cities, while local arrangements, including selling tickets and finding lodging, fell to the colony instructors and their wives. In 1955 Friday-night lectures featured MSA teachers such as Gustav Krollmann and Eric Erickson. In 1956 four musical concerts brought the first chairs of the Minneapolis Symphony to the high-school audi-

torium. The tour de force of the summer was a performance by Ballet Concertant, a Minneapolis troupe.²³

These events gave the Town Hall Art Colony widespread visibility, prompting the *Minneapolis Tribune*—and many Minnesotans—to realize that an art colony existed in Grand Marais. “The arts have come alive on the North Shore,” the *Tribune* crowed in an article featuring a pho-

²³ Bradley interview by author; Quick interview; Town Hall Art Colony brochure, R2, F394, Quick Papers; *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Aug. 23, 1956, Women’s sec., p. 1.

tograph of artists with brushes poised to their canvasses before the unlikely scene of several ballet dancers *en pointe* on the Lake Superior shoreline. Another newspaper reported that 550 people had attended the ballet performance. The 1956 season closed with an exhibit at the high school coinciding with the final concert, with the local P.T.A. serving lunch and coffee to visitors.²⁴

Quick dreamed grandly of writers, philosophers, photographers, painters, musicians, and dancers working together at the art colony and inspiring each other. A lover of all kinds of music, he invited the Dixieland jazz group of Doc Evans and piano player Frank Gillis to perform in 1957, the tenth year of the art colony.²⁵

Pulling together these lively events stretched the limited staff. Marion Quick recalled how much work the series could be, sometimes requiring that they haul a grand piano up from

Duluth, find lodging for musicians and speakers, and sell tickets for the events themselves. Yet many current residents trace the development of other arts in Grand Marais—for example, the Grand Marais Playhouse, which recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary—to the broad vision of the arts that Quick, Bradley, and others helped to foster during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁶

In the 1950s the Town Hall Art Colony took a public role in the Fisherman's Picnic, a North Shore tradition since the 1920s that had settled in Grand Marais as a summer festival. Instructors and students organized "clothesline exhibits" with art literally clothes-pinned to ropes stretched between downtown buildings. For a few dollars residents and tourists could purchase an original artwork. Students often created an art-colony float and wore costumes for the festival parade. In 1954, when the parade

²⁴ Unidentified newspaper clippings, probably *Cook County News-Herald*, R2, F19, 25, Quick Papers.

²⁵ *Duluth Herald*, July 22, 1957, R2, F33, Quick Papers.

²⁶ Quick interview.

Clothesline art sale in Grand Marais, 1947



was still a boat procession in the harbor, the art colony created a raft carrying a large male student dressed as a mermaid.²⁷

In 1953 the art colony made a more indelible mark on Grand Marais when instructor Raymond Gormley and his students created a steel-and-concrete sculpture for a site near the harbor. Featuring a northwoods image of two bear cubs climbing to the top of a tree, the piece was done “in appreciation to the Village for its cooperation in fostering the Town Hall Art Colony.” Its dedication by former Minnesota Governor J. A. O. Preus, a regular Grand Marais visitor since 1906, was covered by television, radio, and newspapers across the state. According to one commentary, “The ‘tree’ is expected to vie with the Paul Bunyan figures at Bemidji as a public spot of interest, except that this is expected to be a thing of beauty.” Today, the sculpture is the centerpiece of Bear Tree Park, a focal point of Grand Marais that serves as the town square.²⁸

Alice Semrud (Powell) and Mary Bouton (Lucca), two students at the MSA in 1958 who traveled to the art colony by Greyhound bus, remember the summer experience as a great adventure. “Doughnut runs” each morning before class and pooling money for gas fostered a sense of camaraderie. Daily routines took them to local spots to sketch or paint if the weather was good. Quick and Bradley took turns with classes, demonstrating ideas, letting the students try their hands, and following up with teachers’ critiques. Quick would sometimes demonstrate a painting technique and then turn to fishing, having students paint him as their subject. Powell recalled that once they “were up on a farm on Maple Hill [when a] . . . cow came wandering through.” One of the students “had left his oil palette laying there and was off doing something else, and I looked over and that cow was licking his palette clean.”²⁹

Powell and Lucca rented rooms from local people and worked at the Rustic Inn restaurant to support themselves. On nights off, they would gather with other students at Northern Lights, a Grand Marais bar, where they sometimes sketched each other or other patrons. Resident E. J. Croft played honky-tonk piano

many nights—sometimes wearing mittens to impress the students. The two women recalled the atmosphere of Grand Marais and the art colony as very open and free, commenting, “It was an excellent environment to be creative in.”

About this time, the art colony took advantage of a bigger classroom space available in the



Quick with art students on dock, 1960s

Maple Hill school and moved the enterprise up the hill. After 1958 financial support from the MSA ended, as well. President Bryan was pressured by his board to concentrate time, energy, and funds in Minneapolis because the school was working toward its accreditation as a degree-granting institution.³⁰

Quick and Bradley, however, had become rooted in Grand Marais. Both had built summer homes there. They decided to try to continue summer art classes and cover expenses through tuition fees. Their connections in the Twin Cities art scene—at the MSA and through the K-B Art Gallery run by Bradley—helped them find students. Although not officially involved, the MSA continued to support them

²⁷ Humphrey et al., *Faces and Places*, 31–33, 35–36; Bradley interview by author.

²⁸ Undated newspaper clippings, probably *Cook County News-Herald*, R2, F336, 344, Quick Papers.

²⁹ Here and below, Alice Semrud Powell and Mary Bouton Lucca, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 11, 1995.

³⁰ Bradley interview by author. See also Jeffrey A. Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy: The First 100 Years of the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, 1985), 66–67.

by donating easels and equipment and by allowing students to earn credits toward degrees.³¹

In the summer of 1959, Quick and Bradley re-opened the school as their private business, renaming it the Grand Marais Art Colony. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, they made it successful and built an even larger circle of friends and supporters. In response to increased popular interest in painting and the need of high-school art teachers for refresher education credits, they added one-week classes. Jane Burley, now a permanent resident of Grand Marais, recalled belonging to the “Part Time Painters Group,” which roomed at Nani-boujou Lodge and took classes at the art colony. In love with art and with Grand Marais, Burley saved one week of summer vacation to spend on the North Shore. She greatly admired Birney Quick as a teacher.³²

Harvey Turner was another seasonal visitor who eventually became a permanent resident. Working as an engineer, he and his wife, Lois, ventured to Grand Marais from 1959 to 1965, and he fed his artistic impulses with two-week classes from Quick and Bradley. He recalled how inspiring and funny Quick could be:

It used to amaze me how he could put paint together and make a painting. I remember one time we went out together to paint. . . . It started to rain. He quickly folded up his easel and got out his fly rod, caught about four fish, and then went back to painting. I painted my picture with watercolor and it got wet, while he used oils.

Lois Turner remembers Quick’s use of the forest as an art studio: “As we walked through the woods, every once in a while [we’d] find one of Birney’s pictures nailed to a tree, way up in these inaccessible places almost. He’d leave it there and then the next day work on it again.”³³

Harvey Turner’s experiences at the school eventually led him to return to the University of Minnesota in 1965 for a degree in art education. Then in 1966 Quick and Bradley asked Turner to join them as an instructor of classes for young students. Some of Turner’s Mounds View High School students such as Dean Trisko



Byron Bradley (left) and Quick at a Monday-night herring fry, about 1974

joined him at Grand Marais. Until the early 1980s, Quick, Bradley, and Turner were the artistic trio of the colony, while their wives—Marion, Emmie, and Lois, also known as “the ladies’ auxiliary”—provided indispensable administrative and social support.³⁴

In 1963 the art colony finally found a lasting home when Quick and Bradley bought the old St. John’s Catholic Church on Third Avenue and Second Street and moved the art colony down the hill again. Although small, the church had an open nave, high ceilings, and large windows along the north side that offered good light and space. Monday-night fish fries now took place in the yard behind the church, with the “ladies auxiliary” providing cakes, pots of baked beans, and homemade relish for the fried

³¹ Bradley interview by author.

³² Jane Burley, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 3, 1995. On the interest in amateur painting in the 1950s, see Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 59–84.

³³ Harvey and Lois Turner, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 5, 1995.

³⁴ Turner interview; Dean Trisko, conversation, Grand Marais, June 9, 1996. Trisko recalled that Birney Quick, the first “professional artist” he knew, made a huge impression on him.

fish. After the meals an instructor would do a painting demonstration for students and any townspeople or tourists who wished to attend.³⁵

Beyond Grand Marais, however, the art world and art pedagogy were changing. With the MSA's installation in 1963 of a new president, Arnold Herstand, the school continued its transformation from a regional vocational institution into a nationally known college that trained professional fine artists. The school became the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD) in 1970.³⁶

These changes prompted changes in the demographics of the summer art colony. Fewer art students could afford to take classes there, and as minimalism and conceptual art became influential, many young students were uninterested in outdoor landscape painting. As a result the art colony attracted more amateurs and high-school teachers taking refresher courses than full-time art students, and registration shifted to include more women.

Despite major changes in the national art scene, styles at the art colony remained based in representational landscape painting. "Objective painting," Byron Bradley recalled, "was pretty much in vogue." Quick, after all, had come of age in the 1930s, when painting the American scene was his bread and butter, and Quick and Bradley both believed that artists had first to be technically accomplished in order to express themselves in painting. Dr. Alex Ratelle, Quick's longtime friend from the Twin Cities who became a permanent resident of Grand Marais, recalls, "Birney Quick felt that when you got one inch beyond his fingertips, there wasn't an art world. The art world was the way he saw it. We talked about modes and movements and whatever, and I suppose the best word to use is that he scoffed at them."³⁷

The North Shore provided a place of refuge from art-world trends as much as a place for reflection and inspiration, and in that way it was no different than other art colonies that bucked new artistic styles. In the 1970s Quick may have found himself disillusioned with the new regime at MCAD. Student Jane Burley remembers Quick telling her about Lake Superior,

"When I come up here and I see that great big straight horizon line, all the crooked thoughts in me straighten out." Most likely Quick's time in Grand Marais was becoming all the more important to him. Several works commissioned over three decades in Grand Marais affirmed his standing in the community—including a recent mural at the new St. John's Catholic Church. His prolific output continued, and his work was recognized through sales and an occasional solo exhibition in Minneapolis.³⁸

Throughout the 1970s the two artist partners found it a continuing challenge to attract students. Bradley increasingly felt the strain of maintaining his business, now K-B Art Materials, in Minneapolis and teaching in Grand Marais, which often meant weekly trips back and forth during the summer months. Yet it was also in these years that Quick, Bradley, and Turner mentored a new crop of students who would become instrumental in the art colony's sustenance. Illustrator Betsy Bowen moved to Grand

QUICK LEGACY

Several murals by Birney Quick remain on view today.

Coleraine

Greenway High School (1937)

Duluth

St. Louis County Heritage and Art Center
[Depot] (Duluth City Hall panel, 1938)

Grand Marais

Shoreline Hotel (1954)
Grand Marais State Bank (1961)
Cook County North Shore Hospital (1968)
St. John's Catholic Church (1974)
Grand Marais Congregational
Church (1976)

St. Paul

Skyway YMCA (Minnesota Mutual Life,
1959)

³⁵ "Art Colony: Changes and Challenges Over 44 Years," manuscript, 1991, Grand Marais Art Colony files, Grand Marais; *Cook County News-Herald*, June 27, 1963, R2, F49, Quick Papers.

³⁶ Hess, *Splendid Legacy*, 70.

³⁷ Bradley interview by author; Alex Ratelle, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 7, 1995.

³⁸ Burley interview; Sharon Roberts Macy, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, June 9, 1996; Cheryl N. Thies, "Biographical Sketch," 1986, R2, unnumbered introductory frames, Quick Papers.

Marais and took classes at the colony beginning in the late 1960s. “There was a sense of import or seriousness about art,” Bowen remembered, “about what we were doing as art, as part of the big—*capital A*—Art picture.” Similarly, Sharon Roberts Macy was strongly influenced by Quick at MCAD where she earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1978. Macy attended the art colony for a few weeks that summer and in 1980 moved to Grand Marais to teach in exchange for classes.³⁹

Quick had recently finished the commission to paint a mural in the community hall of St. John’s in Grand Marais. He filled a 43-by-10-foot wall with Biblical scenes set in North Shore landscapes. In a sense, he had come full circle from the mural work of his early career in Duluth. In 1977 he had retired at age 65 to become MCAD’s first emeritus professor. Over his lifetime, Quick had painted more than 10,000 works, sold to museums, patrons, and friends. When he died in 1981, the people of Grand Marais mourned his passing. In his eulogy for Quick, Ade Toftey wondered how the art colony could function without him. Yet in his 34 years there, Birney Quick had built a solid base of friends, supporters, and artists who would rally to carry on his North Shore legacy.⁴⁰

Could the school survive without the charismatic founder? Byron Bradley and Marion Quick tried to keep it going for two summers but soon realized that the responsibilities of recruiting and teaching were more than they could handle. They explored the pos-

sibility of selling the business. Hazel Belvo, an art teacher at St. Paul Academy who summered in Grand Portage, seriously considered the proposition. She had found an ongoing subject for her own work in the Spirit Little Cedar Tree. But Belvo decided to devote her summers to her art rather than to the intensive teaching and administration that the art school would require.⁴¹

By the 1980s, however, a group of Quick’s friends, students, and colleagues who had relocated in Grand Marais helped reinvent the art colony. Frank Gillis, a jazz pianist who first visited with Doc Evans, had retired as a musicology archivist to live near Devil’s Track Lake. He talked to Grand Marais’s mayor, John LaVine, who agreed that the art colony was important to the town. Gillis and others helped form a group to transform the private business into a nonprofit community organization, Grand Marais Art, Inc., that would be eligible for arts grants. The Resource Development Council of Cook County provided some financial support in the interim.

Money from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council assisted in the transition.⁴²

When Sharon Macy became chief administrator in 1988, she enlisted a roster of instructors to teach week-long workshops rather than six-week sessions. Artists Belvo and George Morrison became important figures in the colony’s transformation, and other faculty from MCAD, including Dawn Sperouleas and Elizabeth Erickson, filled out the teaching ranks. Macy recalls that this transition saved the organization but, nonetheless, was a time of struggle. She faced challenges of recruiting and registering students, arranging for instructors,



Betsy Bowen's Trees, from Antler, Bear, Canoe, 1991

³⁹ Bradley interview by author; Betsy Bowen, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 17, 1995; Macy interview.

⁴⁰ *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 20, 1979, p. 4B; Thies, “Biographical Sketch”; Ade Toftey, “Tribute to Memory of Birney Quick,” manuscript, Dec. 13, 1984, Marion Quick collection.

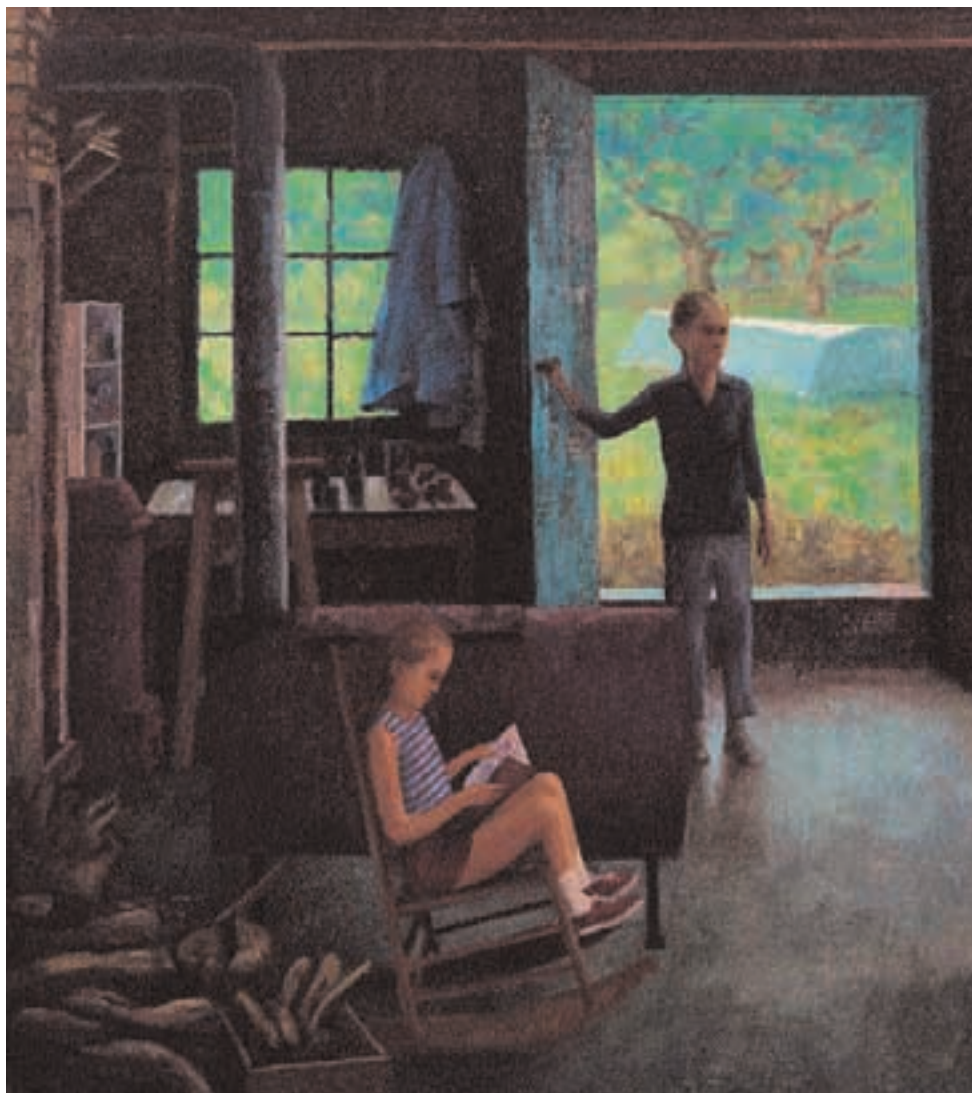
⁴¹ Joanne Hart and Hazel Belvo, *Witch Tree: A Collaboration* (Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1992); Hazel Belvo, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 9, 1995.

⁴² Frank Gillis, interview by author, notes, Grand Marais, May 17, 1996.

promoting classes, and fundraising. She even tried to maintain the earlier culture of the colony by continuing the Monday-night fish fries, doing most of the cooking herself. Paid only \$3,000 annually, Macy supported herself with other jobs, including cleaning fish. She persevered partly out of respect for Quick, her former mentor.⁴³

Building a new identity, the colony diversified its offerings. It added writing classes to its repertoire in recognition that the North Shore had attracted a growing writing community. MacArthur Fellow Patricia Hampl, for example, spent summers on the shore, writing *Resort and Other Poems*, published in 1983.

Writer Jill Breckenridge collaborated with Belvo on a class about making personal art based on daily journals in words and images. During this time, Belvo, an important mentor for new artists, had helped form the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota (WARM) in the Twin Cities. Interested in feminist exploration of personal perceptions and experiences and imbued with a deep respect for nature, Belvo inspired many students in Grand Marais and at MCAD, where she became dean of fine arts in 1990. A forceful and supportive teacher, Belvo drew many students to her classes. The reformed organization was able to buy the colony building from Marion Quick and Bradley in 1986. Two years later Jay Andersen, a former arts administrator and editor of the *Mille Lacs Messenger*, became executive director of the Grand Marais Art Colony after the separ-



Byron Bradley's Sarah and Lydia in Jane Burley's Fishhouse, oil on canvas, 1977

ture of Macy and interim director Cindy Nielsen.⁴⁴

Believing that the school's stability depended upon it being a year-round organization eligible for grants, Andersen first secured a furnace so he could work at the school in the winter months and then began building programs linked to area schools. A solid group of younger artists living full time in Grand Marais—Macy, Bowen, Liz Sivertson, and Tom McCann, to name a few—provided a pool of teaching talent that has helped fulfill that vision.

⁴³ "Art Colony Future Brightens," probably *Cook County News-Herald*, 1984, Marion Quick collection; Macy interview.

⁴⁴ Here and below, Jay Andersen, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Marais, Aug. 15, 1995.

The ongoing impact of the art colony is plainly visible throughout Grand Marais. In addition to landmarks at Bear Tree Park and Artists' Point, Grand Marais probably has more original art per capita than any other town in Minnesota. Visitors can see or purchase original pieces at many local galleries—Sivertson's Gallery and the Johnson Heritage Post being the most prominent—shops, hotels, and businesses or at the public library. Countless works by colony teachers, students, and local painters grace the walls of homes and cabins. One resident artist claims, "One out of every ten people who live here is an artist."⁴⁵

Importantly, the art colony has helped reshape Grand Marais as a place where artists live year around and where residents and visitors feel their special presence. In addition to those connected to the colony's early days who have made Grand Marais their home, a younger generation, including Betsy Bowen, Liz Sivertson, and Tom McCann, has made a place for itself.

Despite the hardships of its economy and climate, Grand Marais's natural beauty continues to motivate artists. Bowen has observed, "There's something about the sense of geography here, too, that sort of eternalness. . . . The rocks and the lake are so visible and so much of a presence here to everybody. You can't not be touched by that. . . . That sense is part of why you can keep doing something always tenuous in some other ways."⁴⁶ Bowen's comments suggest the importance of the North Shore as a place where people live with heightened awareness of their surroundings.

Historian John Sears has written about powerful places in the American landscape such as Niagara Falls and Yellowstone and their development as tourist sites in the nineteenth century. He calls them sacred places, embodiments of earlier notions of "the sublime," where ordinary experience gave way to altered and deepened perceptions. The North Shore acts as a "Minnesota sublime," a place where perceptions of the landscape inform our understanding of

ourselves. These concepts are seen in many artists' works, such as Belvo's studies of the Spirit Tree or George Morrison's images of Lake Superior's horizon line and rock formations. Philosopher Arnold Berlant has argued that humans respond to beauty in the environment in much the same way that they respond to art. In this context the artistic activities of the Grand Marais Art Colony help to make visible the much broader aesthetic responses residents and visitors feel toward the region's natural beauty.⁴⁷

Yet Grand Marais's remote wilderness location has been balanced by its position as a crossroads. The natural harbor and, later, wagon roads and highways have made the town an intersection where people meet on their way to and from Canada, the Boundary Waters, and the Gunflint Trail. Today the most prominent businesses along Highway 61 are gas stations, where carloads of canoe campers meet up with logging trucks and families on vacation converge with locals filling their gas tanks. The crossroads of the highway and the trail require the Grand Marais community to remain open-minded about outsiders, fostering lively cross currents of thought and culture.

When Bob Dylan of Hibbing, just the other side of the Arrowhead, sang of Highway 61, he sang of this road that runs from Canada down the North Shore into the heartland of the nation. His Highway 61 is a testing ground, sometimes of mythical proportions.⁴⁸ Artists and campers recognize that, too. This is a place to test your mettle, whether through physical feats or artistic challenges—the scary presence of a blank canvas or an empty page. Both kinds of endeavors take courage and persistence. That testing is why artists have come to the art colony in Grand Marais for more than 50 years. It is what visitors sense in the artwork they see or buy. This is what Birney Quick recognized when he first chose Grand Marais as a place for an outdoor school of painting in 1947, and it is worth remembering as the Grand Marais Art Colony begins its second half century.

⁴⁵ Timothy Young, artist and former director of the Johnson Heritage Post Art Gallery, conversation with author, Grand Marais, Aug. 1992.

⁴⁶ Bowen interview.

⁴⁷ John Sears, *American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3–11; Morrison interview; Arnold Berlant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited," on *Highway 61 Revisited* (sound recording), 1965.

All the photos are from the Birney M. Quick Papers, MHS, except p. 262, which is courtesy Marion Quick, Minneapolis. The artworks are in the MHS collections, except p. 264, which is courtesy Betsy Bowen.



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