Tom & T.M. Nicholas: A Father & Son's Journey in Paint

by **Judith A. Curtis**

It is perhaps remarkable that two family members have each achieved top honors and celebrity in today's artistic world. However, this winter the Cape Ann Museum of Gloucester, Massachusetts, is featuring an exhibition of selected works from the long and prestigious careers of Tom Nicholas, National Academician, and his son, T.M. Nicholas. In a location noted for its artistic history, it is hardly surprising that the elder Nicholas, a native of Middletown, Connecticut, should have made Rockport, Massachusetts, his home, seeing it as the perfect place to paint and—together with his wife, Gloria—raise a family. A yellowing photograph in a scrapbook of news clippings shows the two of them in Tom Sr's Rockport studio: the father with more than two decades of experience and awards under his belt and the young T.M. on the threshold of his own artistic journey. From an early age, Thomas Michael, known professionally as T.M., evinced a propensity for art and it was no surprise to anyone when he began following in his father's footsteps. However, for all the commonalities between them, there are just as many differences in artistic training, viewpoint and working methods.

Tom and T.M. Nicholas: A Father and Son's Journey in Paint is on view through April 12, 2020, at the Cape Ann Museum, 27 Pleasant Street, Gloucester, Massachusetts, 01930, 978-283-0455, www.capeannmuseum.org. A 44-page full-color catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

Tom Nicholas went from grade school to the Horace C. Wilcox Technical School in Meriden, Connecticut, where he was mentored by instructor Ernst Lohrmann, a graduate of the Munich School. Lohrmann

ABOVE: Tom Nicholas, *Acadia from Southwest Harbor*, oil, 30 x 30, Mr. and Mrs. William Riker.
RIGHT: T.M. Nicholas, *Venetian Waters*, oil, 24 x 30, Dr. David and Gail Vastola.
LEFT: T.M. Nicholas, *Warming Up, Gloucester*, oil, 30 x 40, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Bianchini.

insisted his students practice basic principles for at least two years, working with pencil and sketch pad to learn the precepts of graphic design before moving on to color. "Tom always did more than was expected of him," Lohrmann recalled. "He was the most perceptive boy I ever had as a student." During these years, Nicholas was awarded a three-year scholarship to New York City's School of Visual Arts. Despite his angst with city living, Nicholas matured as an artist under the guidance of illustrator

LEFT: T. M. Nicholas, *Isle of Shoals*, oil, 24 x 24, Mr. and Mrs. Seth Rosenzweig.
BELOW LEFT: T. M. Nicholas, *Monhegan Fishermen*, oil, 30 x 30, Mr. and Mrs. William Riker.
RIGHT: Tom Nicholas, *Morning Light, Siana, Greece*, w/c, 14 x 19, Walter Robert Gewecke and Deborah Strombeck Gewecke.
BELOW RIGHT: Tom Nicholas, *Castellated Ravine*, oil, 30 x 30, Mr. and Mrs. William D. Newcomb.

Harold Fisk. Nicholas didn't want to be an illustrator; instead his goal was to be an easel painter. Leaving New York, he took a factory job assembling typewriters in Hartford, Connecticut, clocking extra hours to earn money for art school. Eventually, Nicholas registered at The Famous Artists School in Westport, Connecticut, and within a short time had developed to such an extent he was asked to join the staff. That was 1958, the year Nicholas won his first major award: The Grand Prize in Watercolor at Meriden Arts & Crafts Association, Connecticut, was just one of several accolades that year from diverse groups such as the Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, Connecticut; First Prize in Watercolor from Academic Artists Association, Massachusetts; First Prize in Watercolor at the North Shore Arts Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts; and First Prize for Drawing, Black & White Exhibit, Salmagundi Club, New York City. He also received an Honorable Mention at the Rockport Art Association signifying his early relationship with Cape Ann's major art organizations, even before he made the Cape his home in the early 1960s.

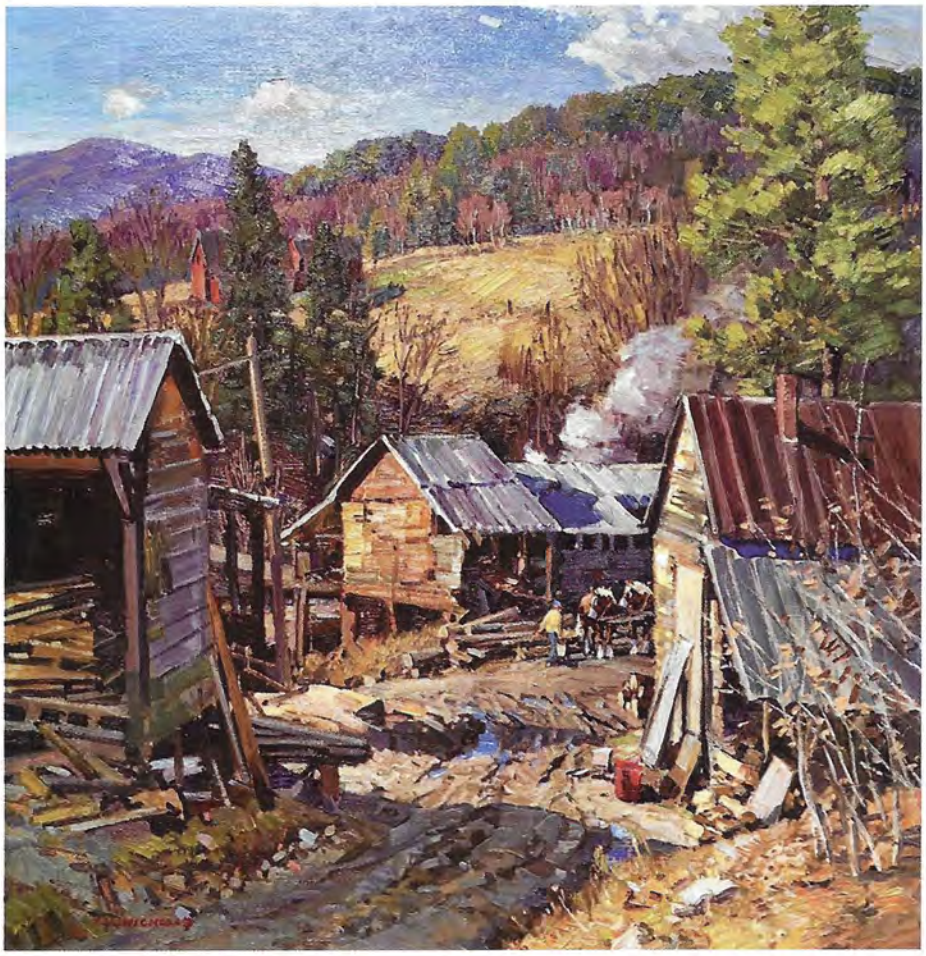
In 1961, as the recipient of an Elizabeth T. Greenshields Scholarship, Nicholas took a leave of absence from teaching and together with his bride, Gloria, commenced on a one-year painting trip in Europe, beginning in England and continuing through France and Spain. In accordance with the Greenshields policy, Nicholas sent regular reports of his activities during the year and presented a selection of work on his return. Impressed with his portfolio, the Directors quickly renewed his grant for a further year. Nicholas resigned from the Famous Artists School and moved to Rockport. The following year, his first one-man watercolor show in 1962 New York was a critical success, bringing his name to

the forefront of young artists to watch.

This then was the foundation of Tom Nicholas's outstanding career as an artist and teacher and he developed a simple credo, "There's one thing about growing in your knowledge of painting: you run out of excuses. No matter how well you may have done in the past, you think: now, maybe, I'm on the verge of doing some significant work!"

Growing up in a creative family, within the artistic community of Rockport, T.M. Nicholas had an advantage over many of his peers. He began painting seriously at the age of fourteen, inspired by sitting in his father's studio as a youngster and watching him paint. The elder Nicholas, however, was careful not to push his son into a particular direction. They even worked in separate studios. "My dad," T.M. recalled, "[felt] it might put the pressure on me too much or I might tend to paint...like him. Plus painting is a personal thing—You like to be left alone."

In order to broaden his perception of things, T. M. studied with local oil painter John C. Terelak at his Gloucester Academy of Fine Arts, as well as signing up for fig-



ABOVE: Tom Nicholas, *Still Life with Brocade*, oil, 12 x 24, Mr. David Zipfel.
LEFT: T.M. Nicholas, *Resting the Horses, Wardsboro, VT*, oil, 30 x 30, Daniel E. Ross.
RIGHT: T.M. Nicholas, *Winter Evening in Jamaica, Vt.,* oil, 25 x 30, Union Gallery, Lambertville, New Jersey.
BELOW RIGHT: Tom Nicholas, *Sunlight and Shadows, Hong Kong*, oil, 24 x 36, Union Gallery, Lambertville, New Jersey.

ure painting at the nearby Montserrat School of Visual Art in Beverly, Massachusetts. In addition to this formal instruction, T.M. received criticism, advice and encouragement from his father throughout his early years, and the youngster's progress can be charted by the steady acquisition of awards and accolades from the numerous art organizations to which he already belonged, including the Rockport Art Association, American Artists Professional League, Hudson Valley Art Association and Academic Artists of America.

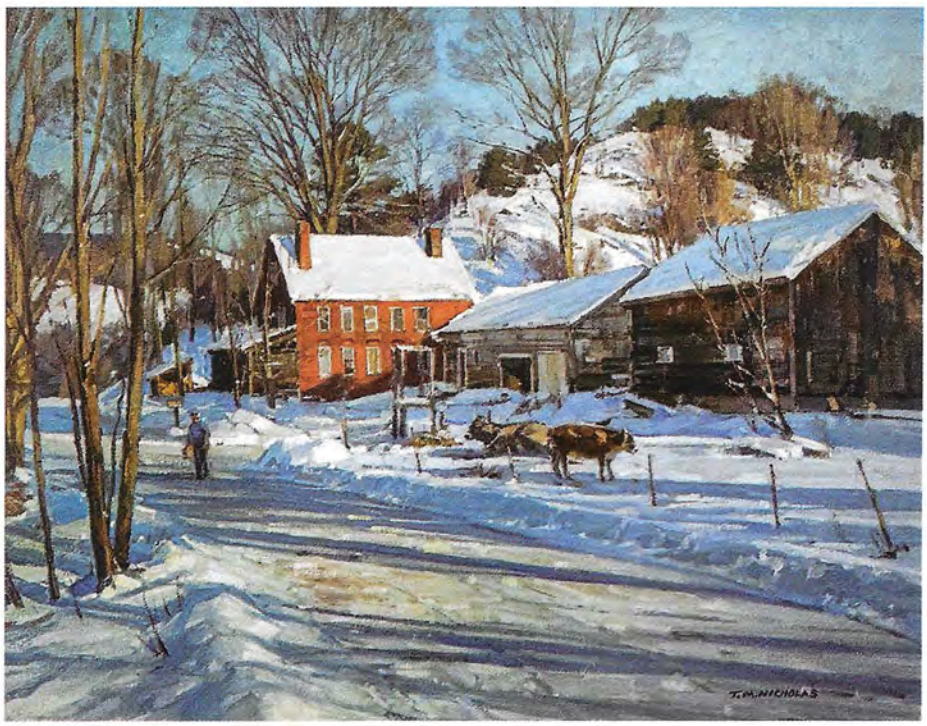
T.M. also inherited, from both his parents, a love of travel, which was nurtured from an early age by the simple expedient of Tom Sr. taking Gloria on his painting trips, and Gloria bringing along their small son who was only three on that first sojourn. For T.M. it set in place a way of life, and later when he married Laurel and they had a family of their own—four daughters—they thought nothing of packing everyone up together with the painting paraphernalia and setting out for various exotic locations: California, Canada, Hawaii, Greece, France and Italy.

Both artists paint oils and watercolors featuring landscape, marines, and still life, however Tom Sr. describes his work as "romantic realism" whereas T.M. favors

American Impressionism. It is good to observe the diverse nature of their work which allows both artists to pursue a personal work ethic and point of view.

"[My father]," says T.M. "taught me to paint outdoors, which is what I enjoy most and where I spend 75 percent of my painting time.... Nature and landscapes are my inspiration. I don't often include people in my compositions. I like to show the landscape as it has been perennially, and then convey what I feel about what I'm seeing."

Tom Sr's attitude is based on a similar "painting is hard work" philosophy, but with decades of experience behind him, he is able to build on commonplace possibilities through dynamic composition and skillful brushwork. At his peak, Nicholas would sometimes paint twelve hours a day.



In addition, he built up "a 'memory bank' of nature that's supplemented by...sketches and color notes" allowing him the freedom to create in his studio, regardless of weather conditions, and giving him a chance to better indulge his imagination within his chosen theme.

Any conversation with Tom Sr., who became an Associate member of the prestigious National Academy of Design in 1963, and full member in 1970, is an art lesson unto itself. "I enjoy changing media, from watercolor to oil and back again. Each helps the other, and each has its own enticement: the excitement of a first wash, for example, or the textural effects of paint applied to canvas with a palette knife."

"As my approach to painting varies so does my choice of medium. I never think about it. It's intuitive.... After painting fundamentals are learned the choice of medium eventually becomes second nature...."

ABOVE: Tom Nicholas, *Pigeon Cove*, oil, 36 x 36, Mr. Robert Bosselman.
RIGHT: Tom Nicholas, *View of the Island* (aka *Blue Island*), w/c, 20 x 36, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas G. Davies.
ABOVE LEFT: T.M. Nicholas, *Old Harbor, Gloucester*, oil, 30 x 40, Leonard Parco.
LEFT: T.M. Nicholas, *Morning Chores*, oil, 24 x 30, Dr. David and Gail Vastola.

However, he continues, "Only when I gave design priority over nature did I begin to make some progress.... I had to be willing to change, flatten and elongate nature in order to develop my own sense of design. There was a time when I was so captivated by nature that I wouldn't dare change it! I realize today that nature is beautiful because it is nature. A work of art however is another story. Creativity in art is found in the artist; nature provides the inspiration; the artist uses her as he will to create art."

One has only to look at a body of work of these two highly respected and talented artists to appreciate the parallels and disparity. Not a conflict of styles, merely a divergence of approach. Both use a thorough

(continued on 96)

in this community that Glackens and his family bought their own summer/weekend home, closely located to the head of Watchogue Creek (then commonly known as Brewster's Creek after the nearby Brewster boatyard) and where during the early 1920s he would spend time painting sketches along its shore.

The Huntington Museum of Art's collection also comprises a large number of works by other notable American impressionists. Paintings in the exhibition include those created by Ernest Albert, Frank Swift Chase, Charles Harold Davis, Hayley Lever, Frank Loven and Arthur Meltzer.

It is these types of impressionist paintings that have, since the late nineteenth century, captured America's imagination and led so many later artists to adopt this style of working. Indeed, many regionalist artists adopted the style as a way of not only recording but presenting their individual locales to greater audiences. In terms of museum shows, there is anecdotal evidence showing a correlation between exhibits including the word "Impressionism" or "Impressionist" in their title and the increased number of visitors they tend to draw. Regardless of the reasons we tend to enjoy these particular types of works, it is a style that is ever popular and here to stay, perhaps to the chagrin of some notable artists of the past.

—The information in this article is drawn from a number of sources, including the research files of the Huntington Museum of Art.

Nicholas *(continued from page 87)*

grounding in the basic principles of fine art, but take a different path leading to the finished painting. It is this confluence of styles that brings both artists together and yet offers a highly personal point of view that blends well, but allows their individuality to stand out.

With one hundred years' experience between them (sixty-three years for Tom and thirty-seven for T. M.) plus countless awards and distinctions, it is little wonder that these two artists are considered in the upper echelons of American art. There are few who can compare with them for skill and longevity!

As the Cape Ann Museum honors Tom Nicholas, N. A. and T. M. Nicholas for their outstanding artistic achievements, it is interesting to hear what this *Father and Son's Journey in Paint* means to them. Tom Sr, who has won more than 300 awards over the years—not to mention membership of the National Academy—is modest of his successes and claims his proudest accomplishment "is that I instilled in my son a need to be ethical in his lifestyle and to have integrity in his work." A worthy achievement, indeed. T. M., too, sees fulfillment from a very personal point of view. "As a kid," he says, "I dreamed of the day when my father would look at me as another artist. Now I look forward to those times when we go off as two artists to paint and talk about art. It's wonderful."

A Father & Son's Journey in Paint not only offers an exhibition of forty plus works covering the gamut of oils, watercolor and graphite, but the vibrant experience of viewing the traditional plein air painting scenes of "père et fils," contrasted with the romantic idealism of studio work. A journey not to be missed.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to: American Art Review, P. O. Box 1090, Stratham, NH 03885-1090. Printed in USA.

American Art Review (ISSN 0092-1327) is published bi-monthly by American Arts Media, Inc. at 12807 Sagamore Road, Leawood, Kansas, 66209. The subscription price is $27.95 for six issues. Foreign subscriptions are no longer available. Periodicals postage paid at Shawnee Mission, Kansas and at additional mailing offices.

INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

Altshuler, Daniel....26
American Painting Fine Art....14
Antique's Collaborative....16
Argosy Gallery....34
Artisans Way....28
Avery Galleries....Cover IV
Barrett, Joseph....22
Brown Rabbit Studio....24
Budden, Mike....31
Buzgo, Jean Childs....22
Charles Fine Arts....21
Cincotta, Eva....26
Clean Oil Paintings....12
Cooley Gallery....Cover III
Cortez Studio, Jenness....33
Curtis, David P....32
Dempwolf, Karl....20
Dewing Catalogue Raisonné....10
Egeli Fine Art, Carolyn....16
Egeli Gallery....16
Eisele Gallery....34
Force Fine Art, Debra....2
Garzoli Fine Art, Joel B....4
Gertenbach, Lynn....28
Godel & Co....Cover II, 1
Gratz Gallery....9
Green River Gallery....10
Hagberg, Robert....34
Hanson, Curt....6
Harrington, Evan....22
Harrington, Glenn....22
Heritage Auctions....11
Hughes, Neal....19
Jung, Michelle....23
Kearns, Stapleton....35
Klingelhofer, Carroll....25
Knowles, Ken....18
Kushnir, Andrei....14
Lussier Gallery, Barbara....34
MacDonald, John....29
Main St. Gallery....16
Mandell, Jonathan....22
McDonough, Kathleen....28
McRory, Desmond....22
Mercier, Nell....27
Moeller, Stan....17
Moran Auctioneers, John....7, 9
Nilsson, Leif....28
Pagliarani, Vail....21
Poitevin, Susan....24
Prospect Hill Home Gallery....35
Przewodek Fine Art....15
Questroyal Fine Art....3
Rainone Galleries, Inc....12
Reilly, J W....22
Rockport Art Association....12
Rodgers, Jim....22
Hansen Rolli, Jennifer....22
Shrager, Anita....22
Sharp, John T....32
Silverman Gallery....22
Spring Street Studio....28
Stier, David....22
Stonecourt Studio....32
Tankersley, Nancy....30
Thomaston Place Auction....13
Troika Gallery....16