



Courtesy images

ABOVE: "Morning Coffee, Rockport," a 1996 oil work by Tom Nicholas, from a private collection.

BELOW: "Gloucester Barge Workers," a 2011 oil work by T. M. Nicholas, from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Nicholas.



BONDED THROUGH ART



Tom Nicholas speaks with guests during the January opening for "Tom and T. M. Nicholas: A Father and Son's Journey in Paint" at Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester.



T. M. Nicholas, who drew inspiration from his father's career in the arts, welcomes attendees to the reception for their joint exhibit, which runs through April 12.

Like father and son Tom and T. M. Nicholas, the Cape Ann School painters share an unrivaled tradition

Cape Ann's roaring seas and tranquil waterfronts, working fishing vessels and quiet streets – all are treasured scenes captured on canvas over and over again.

Artists – both native and those who have traveled here – continue to immerse their creative spirits in the quintessential New England scenes that are as bountiful in the region as flowers in a summer garden.

In the case of Tom Nicholas, an accomplished and nationally recognized artist, he would make Rockport his home and raise his son here.

That son, T. M. Nicholas, marveled at his father's talent, work ethic and the magic of his studio. He hoped one day

he would be able to measure up to his father's artistry.

Clearly, the son's art achieved a level of success, too, because these artists' works are now the featured exhibition at Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester in a show titled "Tom and T. M. Nicholas: A Father and Son's Journey in Paint."

Tom Nicholas, 85, has received more than 250 awards, including special awards and distinctions, and 45 medals, including gold, silver and medals of honor. In 1958, early on in his career, when he worked primarily in watercolor, he became a member of the American Watercolor Society, later earning the distinction of Dolphin Fellow. He also achieved a coveted membership in the National Academy of Design in New York City.

By GAIL MCCARTHY • *Photos by* RYAN MCBRIDE



Stephen Dexter, of Gloucester, studies the paintings of Cape Ann artists Tom and T. M. Nicholas at the opening reception for their exhibition at Cape Ann Museum.

T. M. Nicholas, 56, a father of four who now resides in Essex, has received 131 awards, including special awards and distinctions, and 18 medals, including gold, silver and medals of honor.

For the elder Nicholas, he has had an affinity with the outdoors and nature since he was a boy. After convincing his parents to allow him to study art at a trade school, his path was set. He later won a scholarship to the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

He says his appreciation of the magic of nature has provided him with endless inspiration as an artist.

"Nature is a wonderful excuse to make a painting," he says, a sparkle in his eye. "I have a love of the outdoors and I love to paint. I could fulfill both passions."

Tom readily became a plein-air painter, enjoying the art of painting outdoors.

"I am a firm believer in working from nature and working to understand her many moods," he writes in the museum's exhibit catalog.

One of the lessons he imparted to his

son is that it is an artist's personal interpretation that develops his or her style.

"We develop through trial and error as well as our successes," he says, adding, "Serious artists expect to do battle with their work."

T. M. Nicholas learned well the lessons of a working artist and the need for continual introspection.

"As an artist, you evolve and change over the years. Some things I have retained, but whenever you study art, you try different things and experiment," he says. "I often experimented outdoors as well as inside with impressionistic techniques or thinking more abstractly about composition.

"But in the end, it all goes through the filter of your personality and comes out in the way your paintings look – in your particular style."

He notes that he took to heart some words from Willard Metcalf (1858-1925), a prominent landscape painter, who suggested that artists let the subject matter decide the treatment of their paintings.

"If you know a lot of different ways of

showing light and color and composition, the more you can take advantage at any given time about how to apply these things to your work," the younger Nicholas says. "The thought process can never be underestimated. The more you have a slant or idea of what you are looking at is where the art comes from.

"People who paint outside, it's a blend of themselves and what they are looking at – in essence, the more you think or bend nature to your desires, that's where I feel the art starts to come in."

In homage to plein-air painters past and present, both father and son were selected to be included in a 431-page coffee-table book, "Art of the National Parks: Historic Connections, Contemporary Interpretations," originally published in 2013. Each had six paintings featured.

"One has only to look at a body of work of Tom and T. M. Nicholas, who are both highly respected and talented artists, to appreciate the similarities and differences in their approach to painting. Not a conflict of styles, merely a divergence



Courtesy image

"Old Harbor, Gloucester," a 2018 oil work by T. M. Nicholas, from a private collection.

the Cape Ann School was essentially a "school" of like-minded artists, often landscape painters.

"Mulhaupt had a great influence initially. He was almost a generation older," Kearns says. "And Hibbard was a game changer, a leader, a baseball player. He was like a John Wayne with a paintbrush. The Rockport Art Association (grew) out of discussions in his studio.

"They were a generation past the great blossoming of impressionism and tonalism. But they all come together in Rockport and Gloucester with this idea of a new impressionism, a little more expressive or stylized. They are making paintings that people put in their homes, and that affects what the paintings look like. They were well aware of the world art movements. Everyone became an impressionist by about 1890. These skills were being taught at art schools all over. That was the norm in that era."

But these artists ultimately began working more broadly, with more individual styles.

"They were deliberately personal and deliberately decorative," Kearns says.

A proud tradition continues

The interest in the Cape Ann School endures into the 21st century. Last year, the New Hampshire Antique Co-op, on its 35th anniversary, presented an exhibition titled "The Cape Ann School & Rockport Art Tradition."

Hackler, the owner of the antique co-op located in Milford, New Hampshire, says his family business has always done well with Cape Ann School paintings. At the start of the year, the shop housed works by both Tom and T. M. Nicholas, in addition to pieces by many other Cape Ann School artists, like Hibbard, Gruppe and Stevens.

Two paintings associated with the Cape Ann School – a winter scene in Vermont by Hibbard and a depiction of the iconic red fishing shack Motif No. 1 in the heart of Rockport – were recently sold to a buyer in Texas, Hackler notes.

"Public response for Cape Ann paintings has always been strong, and we usually always have around 20 to 30 Cape Ann paintings in inventory," he says, adding the co-op's winter landscape show also featured pieces by Cape Ann artists.

He believes these works remain in demand because of the sense of place they exude, noting in a previous exhibition statement that the Cape Ann School



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On view

- ▶ **What:** "Tom and T. M. Nicholas: A Father and Son's Journey in Paint"
 - ▶ **When:** Through April 12
 - ▶ **Where:** Cape Ann Museum, 27 Pleasant St., Gloucester
 - ▶ **How much:** Admission \$12 for adults; \$10 for seniors, students and Cape Ann residents; free for 18 and under and museum members
 - ▶ **More information:** capeannmuseum.org
- Related talks**
- ▶ **Saturday, March 14:** Gallery talk by Judith Curtis, 9:30 a.m.
 - ▶ **Saturday, April 4:** Gallery talk by T. M. Nicholas, 9:30 a.m.

inspired many painters in the first half of the 20th century to lighten their palettes following their visits to the region.

"There is something about the Cape Ann School that captures the feeling of New England," Hackler says. "These paintings travel all over."

Artists of the Cape Ann School strive to uphold the traditions and quality of their predecessors.

Kearns first arrived in Rockport in 1983 at the age of 30 with only \$60 to his name and the clothes on his back, along with a burning desire to fulfill his dream of being a professional artist. He would persevere and achieve that status. He talks about some of the common elements shared by artists of the Cape Ann School.

"Rule one is everyone ought to have their own style," he says. "You don't mistake one for another and that is not always true of other schools of painting. You wouldn't mistake a (Anthony) Thieme for a Hibbard. Each has a strong personal style, and they shouldn't look alike."

Even though he moved to New Hampshire 17 years ago, Kearns says he still considers himself part of the Cape Ann School.

"The Cape Ann School exists to this day," he says. "It's about being a serious painter. Back in the day, if you were a serious young artist, you could hang out with the old guys and even go along on painting trips with them."

Many of these artists, even today, will start their paintings outside on location and finish them in their studios.

"Design is real important," Kearns says. "Everything else is 'slaved' to design. Design is that part of the painting that is neither color or drawing."

When T. M. Nicholas gave lessons,

he emphasized to his students that each painting had to be its best.

"I (would) tell them that your name goes on that painting and it's there forever and it's going to represent you," says the younger Nicholas. "I (would) tell them to make sure that every time you must do your best, because people may only see one of your paintings, and you will be judged on that."

As devoted artists, both T. M. and Tom Nicholas continue to experiment with paint and explore. They enjoy traveling and painting, often with other artists.

"I play around with color schemes

and compositions and different ways of thinking. Sometimes you use a reduced palette or sometimes you use a more expanded palette," T. M. Nicholas says. "If you paint all the time, you have to keep challenging yourself and thinking of new ways of doing things and new subject matter."

"As for painting outdoors, I love being in Vermont in the winter and fall, getting lost in the middle of nowhere on a farm or side of the road and never seeing a car go by all day. You can think about painting without all the other distractions."▲



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of approach," says Gloucester writer and art historian Judith Curtis. "Both use a meticulous grounding in the basic principles of fine art, but take a different path leading to the finished painting."

Inside the Cape Ann School

Tom and T. M. Nicholas are both devotees of the Cape Ann School of Painting, the elder becoming part of the thriving art colony when he settled in Rockport in the early 1960s.

The preeminent collection of painters arose in 1921, when a group of artists came together to form the Rockport Art Association, which is now among the oldest art colonies in the nation.

"These Cape Ann artists captured everyday life in the region and their tradition of painting became known as the Cape Ann School," says Jason Hackler, a second-generation antiques dealer. "Closely aligned with the Boston School, they took inspiration from American impressionists and were some of the first American artists to employ plein-air painting techniques."

Curtis says back in the early 1920s when Rockport became popular as an artistic location, few painters were native born. The vast majority came to Rockport from all points of the country as summer visitors, she says, while others, such as Nicholas, as well as Aldro T. Hibbard (1886-1972), Harry A. Vincent (1864-1931) and Paul Strisik (1918-1998), fell in love with the area and made it their home.

"When we talk of the Cape Ann School of Painting, we don't mean a brick-and-mortar building, but rather the genre of place," Curtis says. "For decades, a regional group of painters has been drawn to Cape Ann by the diverse subject matter of landscape, coastline and dock scenes with their accompanying 'wharf rats' and fishermen at work. The long summer days and impressive roseate light are added benefits."

Missouri-born Frederick J. Mulhaupt (1871-1938), referred to as the "dean of the Cape Ann School," came to the region in 1907 and became a Gloucester resident by 1922. In the wake of the Great Depression, he participated in the New Deal's Works Progress Administration. His murals continue to grace Gloucester City Hall and elsewhere.

Noted artists of the era also included Anthony Thieme (1888-1954), Emile Gruppe (1896-1978) and Rockport's own William Lester Stevens (1888-1969).

Stapleton Kearns, who gave a lecture at Cape Ann Museum in conjunction with the Nicholases' exhibition, says



"Late Autumn, Rockport Harbor," a 2006 oil work by Tom Nicholas, from the collection of Anne and William Newcomb.

Courtesy image

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