

Written by Carl Little in 2000

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Admiring Arthur Thompson

Off and on for the past ten years or so the painter Arthur Thompson has been brought to my attention by friends and colleagues. First it was former Colby College Museum of Art curator Christopher Huntington trumpeting Thompson as one of Maine's best and most overlooked painters. Then artist Bill Hanson from Northeast Harbor sent me a memoir he had written about Thompson. There I read such statements as "Arthur Thompson's work might appeal to those few quantum science-oriented viewers who tend to see more reality in the flux of life." My curiosity was, to say the least, piqued.

I also heard from Sturgis Haskins over in Sorrento, who spoke highly of Thompson's artistic gift to this small downeast town that served as his base of operations for forty-plus years. And finally Thompson's wife, Rosamond Hilton Grant, and daughter, Jane Sumner, contacted me, suggesting an exhibition of his work at College of the Atlantic. After a visit to their home in Hiram, Maine, to make selections for a show last summer, with distinct pleasure I joined the host of Thompson admirers.

And there is a great deal to admire in the artist's life and work. For starters, Thompson was a survivor. Working from the odds and ends of an education—study with John Whorf, Eliot O'Hara and other painters, stints at Harvard and M.I.T.—he managed to eke out a living as artist and architect. During the depression he worked for the PWA and then the WPA.

There was the daring side of Thompson, who somehow entered into the realm of non-objective art even as he practiced as a professional architect—imagine, if you will, moving back and forth between free line and ruler. Work from the late 1930s into the 1940s displays the modernist aesthetic of Arthur Dove and John Marin, who had been championed by Alfred Stieglitz. The legendary dealer eventually showed Thompson's work in New York.

And finally, and perhaps most relevant to this exhibition, there was Thompson's longtime devotion to the Maine coast. After moving to the

downeast region in 1947, he gave himself over to painting his surroundings. Often it was his own backyard, rendered time and again with a lively eye. A patch of phlox, a clothesline, the dog Mitchell, an angular winter tree, the nearby firehouse, Sorrento village—these and other motifs made up a part of his repertoire.

The coastal prospect was Thompson's forte. Looking Across is the title of one such landscape, and he seemed to favor that line of sight, especially the view from Schoodic, Doan's Point, Corea. Tide pools, ledges, headlands and distant islands are rendered freely. Interested in what he called *the art of drawing with nature,* he sought, in his own words, *to record the instant changes, movements and differentiation of living things, with minimal hesitation between a colored chalk and a record on paper.*

Thompson also went inland, to blueberry bogs, to the ponds, mountains and lakes of Mount Desert Island, Cherryfield, Franklin and elsewhere. His woods views are true to the tangle of trees. He experimented with what he called "multi-views," setting as many as four different scenes on the same sheet of paper.

The artist's skies swirl, his lines twist with the energy of gesture drawing. Along with an expressive approach and striking perspective went a palette that ranged from strong tones reminiscent of Milton Avery's to a more muted array of pastel hues. He was responsive to the season, the starkness of winter, brilliant summer days, autumn's riotous colors. And his light was true to Maine, be it the shroud of overcast or the glow of sunset.

Forty years ago this summer, Arthur Thompson had his first show in Northeast Harbor, in the Neighborhood House. The present exhibition represents a homecoming of sorts. This showing also presents an excellent opportunity to discover, or rediscover, a Maine master. It is a tribute to the artist and his devoted family that his work lives on, as fresh and engaging as the day it was made.

Carl Little, writer, poet, and painter, was the former director of the Ethel H. Blum Gallery at College of the Atlantic. He is the author of many books and articles on Maine artists.