

Henry Snell: Impressions on Paper

by Louise Feder

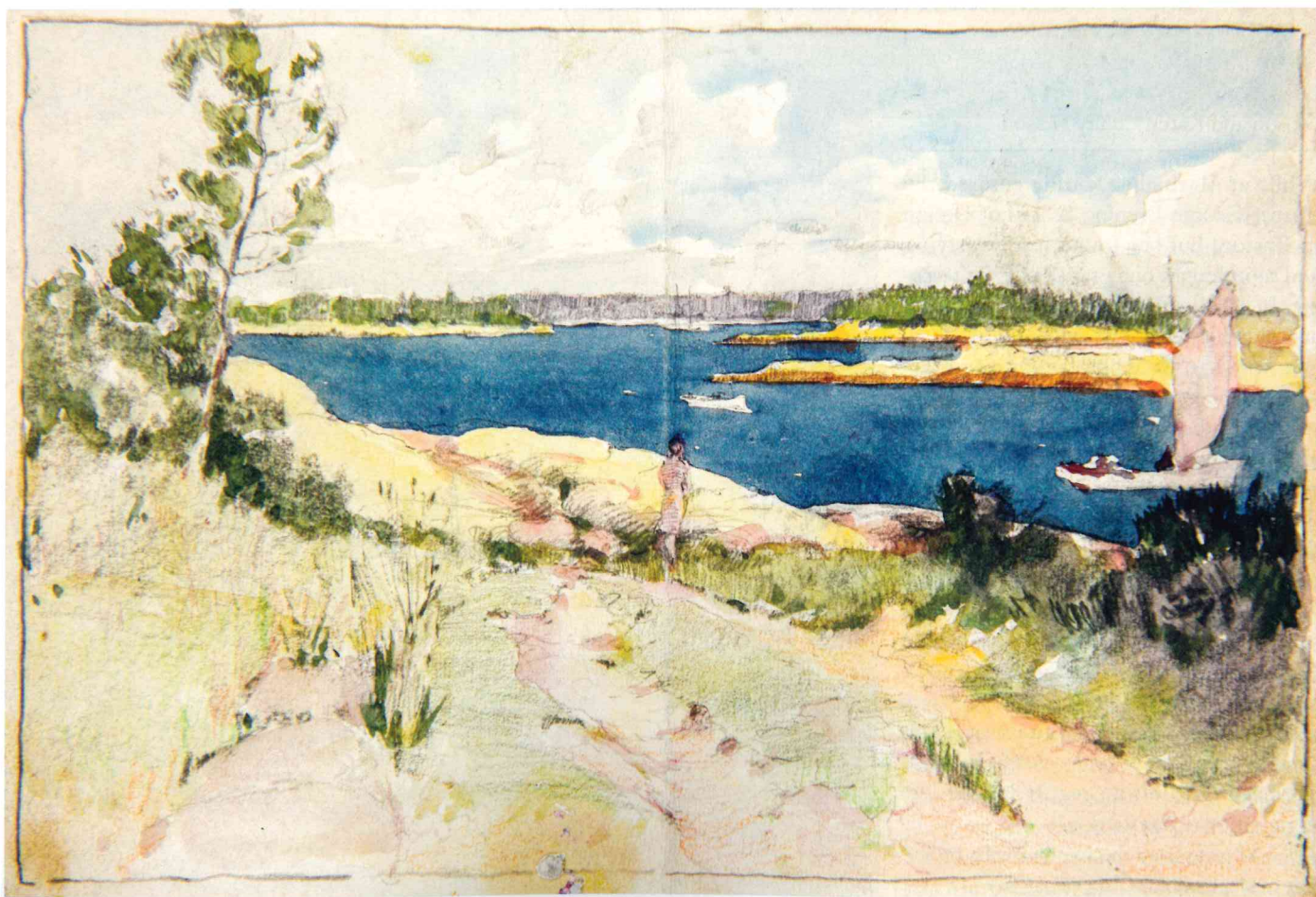
The first in a planned series of exhibitions, *Impressions on Paper: Henry Snell* offers visitors a special glimpse at drawings that rarely leave the James A. Michener's vault as well as a close examination of a regional painter's process before putting paint to canvas. Henry Snell (1858-1943) was born and raised in Richmond, England, but immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen to study at the Art Students League in New York. Before completing his studies, in 1888 he married Florence Francis, who was also a painter and also native to England.¹

Like so many of the painters who even-



Henry Snell: Impressions on Paper is on view through August 5, 2018, at the James A. Michener Art Museum, 128 South Pine Street, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 18901, 215-340-9800, michenerartmuseum.org.

tually settled in New Hope, Snell's first introduction to Bucks County came via William Lathrop, a former colleague at the Photoengraving Company, in New York City. Fast friends, Snell and Lathrop travelled first to Lathrop's family home in Ohio in the mid-1880s, then the pair went to Snell's home in England. Lathrop made his first trip to the New Hope area in 1898 and moved into a home soon after, where Henry and Florence Snell made





All illustrated images are from the James A. Michener Art Museum, gift of Bob and Marcia Hider.

ABOVE: *Untitled*, Conte crayons and pencil on paper, 5 1/4 x 3 3/8.

RIGHT: *Ragusa*, 1935, pencil and w/c on paper, 10 x 7.

BELOW RIGHT: *Untitled*, pencil, Conte crayon and w/c on paper, 4 x 5.

ABOVE LEFT: *Untitled*, pencil on paper, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2.

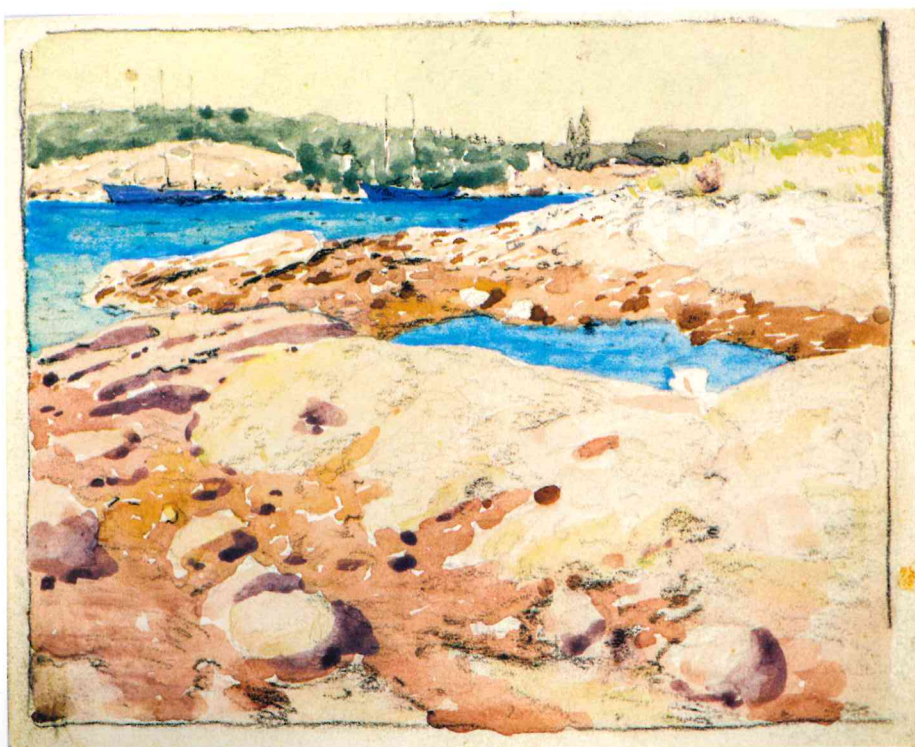
LEFT: *Untitled*, pencil and w/c on paper, 4 3/4 x 7.

many weekend visits.²

In 1899 Snell was accepted a teaching position at The Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art and Design). A well-liked instructor fondly referred to by many students as "Uncle Harry," Snell remained on the school's faculty up until his death at eighty-five in 1943.³ His instruction there was especially influential when it is noted that many of his students were members of the original Philadelphia Ten, a group of female artists who promoted and exhibited their artwork outside the male-dominated Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts scene.

The Snells moved to New Hope permanently around 1925. Though the regional landscape provided plenty of inspiration for Snell, who became well known for his luminous marine scenes and New Hope landscapes, he and Florence often returned to their native England or to other locales such as Italy, Brittany, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal to paint.

Instead of traveling abroad with large, bulky sketch pads or canvases, Snell often





brought along with him small exhibition announcement cards for the various artist associations to which he belonged. These extra, leftover cards offered a portable and convenient surface on which to make quick sketches of his immediate impressions of the surrounding scenery. Some select sketches were embellished with watercolor or ink, but most were taken down in pencil or charcoal, and all demonstrate Snell's technical facility as a draughtsman.

In *Ragusa*, one of the rare titled and dated sketches, his lines are gestural, but his vibrant use of color, particularly in the orange for rooftops just beyond a verdant palm tree, offers a dreamy glimpse into this hot summer day in Sicily. He is also careful to faithfully represent the surrounding architecture, taking special care with the shadows on the scrollwork under the balcony at the left. It is one of Snell's largest sketches in the exhibit, measuring ten by seven inches.

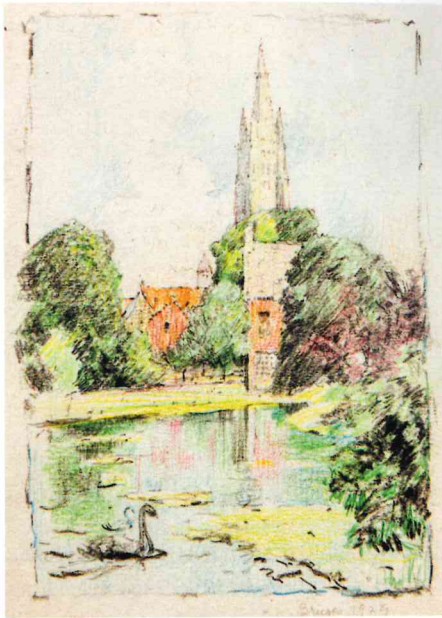
Snell also sought variety in his landscapes along the eastern coast of the United States, teaching in the summers at Gloucester, Massachusetts and Boothbay Harbor, Maine. It was in Boothbay Harbor where Snell also helped establish an art school with Frank Allen in 1921 called Boothbay Studios, where the pair helped mount regular exhibitions.⁴

With a litany of diminutive, untitled sketches from this period, we see Snell working through problems of composition and coloration while out and about on these eastern shores. In one example, the outgoing tide has left a brown, rocky series of "hills" on the beach, which Snell has punctuated by a sapphire tide pool, drawing the eye back to sailboats and green hills beyond. Given his ad hoc framing of the sketch in pencil, perhaps Snell had designs on enlarging this composition beyond its intimate four by five inch measurements.

In still other pencil sketches from his time in New England, Snell experimented with mark making. With precise, regimented strokes he captures myriad clapboard houses picturesquely situated on various hills in measured lines that evoke their architecture without feeling mechanical. Color removed from the equation, Snell's ability to work just in tones reveals his training as a printmaker; his technical precision transcending medium and appearing even in his summer sketches.

Of course, Snell is largely and rightfully





ABOVE: *Bruges*, 1929, Conte crayon, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 65/8 x 51/4.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Untitled*, ink, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 47/8 x 7.

RIGHT: *Untitled*, ink and colored pencil on paper, 51/2 x 41/4.

ABOVE LEFT: *Untitled*, pencil and w/c on paper, 43/8 x 51/2.

LEFT: *Untitled*, pencil on paper, 53/8 x 41/8.

remembered for his robust exhibition history and many awards. A frequent exhibitor at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he also exhibited at the Philadelphia Art Club, among others. He won a gold medal from the Philadelphia Art Club in 1896 and a gold and silver medal in the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, in 1915. However, it is always useful to step back from this painter's impressive resume and dive into his process via close looking at his sketches, as seen on the walls of the exhibition *Impressions on Paper: Henry Snell*.

¹ Mary O'Brien, "Henry B. Snell" in *Pennsylvania Impressionism*, ed. Brian Peterson (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 236.

² Ibid.

³ Bucks County Artist Database, "Henry B. Snell: As Art Teacher," James A. Michener Art Museum, <https://bucksco.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/page/1016/>.

⁴ Paul S. Gratz, "Henry Bayley Snell 1858-1943" in *Henry Snell: A Legacy of Influence, The Philadelphia Ten & New Hope Circle* (Gratz Gallery & Conservation Studio, 2011), 7.

