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## **Stewards of the Land & Canvas: painting marlborough By Abby Luby**

There's magic in the hills and rivers of the Hudson Valley – an enchantment that has inspired artists, composers and writers for centuries. Home to 19th century romantic painters Thomas Cole and Frederic Church of the Hudson River School to famed American composer Aaron Copland, today's poet laureate Bill Collins, author Francine Prose and numerous others; all have drawn creative energy from back roads rolling through hills and mountains stretching their feet to the Hudson River.



To this day, there is a plethora of talented visual artists deeply inhaling the beauty of the Hudson Valley and exhaling their impressions on canvas. Attracted by the sense of community, one group of artists in Marlborough paint together outside, capturing the impact of the landscape. They discuss their work, work that mostly reflects expansive vineyards and farmlands replete with craggy red barns near fields dotted with bales of hay

The Marlborough artists have recently organized under the aegis Meet Me in Marlborough, a local, non profit group working to attract business to the area. Artists will show their work on November 3, at a benefit gala at Stoutridge Vineyard. The gala invitation says the show will help 'sustain agriculture.'

About a year ago MMiM organizer Sheila Mannese started contacting artists she knew to take part in a "paint-out," as well as "The Hudson River Valley Ramble," a three-weekend event where a group of artists met and painted at particular

sites in Marlborough. Four Marlborough based artists who joined MMiM and were active in the paint-outs are Laura Martinez-Bianco, Barbara Masterson, Ellen Esposito and Robert Hacunda. The November exhibition will show their work along with about 35 other local artists.

Hacunda, a full time painter who, years ago, worked with famous American minimalist painter Brice Marden, was drawn to the group as a divergence from the isolation artists experience when working alone. He recalls the meeting to plan the paint-out. "We rode around in my van to find different locations where we could paint. I got to meet some artists I never knew. I love to paint outside - the greatest teacher is nature."

Painting outdoors is known as plein-air painting, taken from a French term which literally means 'open air' or painting outside. The practice started in the 1830s by the Barbizon School just outside the Forest of Fontainebleau in France. Painters such as Camille Corot, Francois Millet, Theodore Rousseau, and Charles Daubigny preferred to paint outdoors as opposed to painting from sketches in their studios. Some American plein-air painters are Winslow Homer, William Merrit Chase and George Inness. Britain's John Constable was the first English painter to paint directly from nature.

One of those influenced by the Hudson River School was Thomas B. Pope, a 19th century painter who died in Fishkill Landing in 1891. Pope was artist Mary Whitehill's great grand-father. Whitehill, a Newburgh based artist, will be participating in the MMiM art gala. "Pope was a self taught painter and you could see that he did many of the highlands and boats on the Hudson River," says Whitehill. "My father collected most of his paintings and then sold them all." Whitehill crosses the river to Marlborough to specifically paint the farms and wineries. "It is so unique because it is very hilly and all the vineyards and orchards are just gorgeous."

Rows of fruit orchards, sunlit vineyards, and weathered, aging barns will be gracing canvases in the upcoming November MMiM art gala. Artists will submit several works, but only a few will be chosen by each artist. Whitehill is offering a painting of a garden at Benmarl Winery. Esposito, who marvels at the changing patterns, the color of trees, fruits and crops, will submit a painting of Weeds Farm among others. Masterson plans to submit a painting of a garden belonging to a Jamaican worker at Weeds Farm. Hacunda has a series of nectarine blossoms and some of pear trees in the snow he painted from Clarks Farm. Martinez Bianco's watercolors and pastels are of scenes from Locust Grove Fruit Farm in Milton.

Artists venturing out to capture that vibrant moment of light and shadow on the landscape are also witnessing disturbing changes to the Hudson Valley countryside; the fast creeping urban sprawl. Housing developments are cropping

up in former orchards, making permanent changes to a once familiar countryside.

Because she lives on an active farm, Masterson understands the difficulties of keeping a farm profitable and agonizes over her farmer friends who are forced to sell their land. “You can’t blame people for selling their land if they have to, but it’s hard to watch. Sometimes you go out painting and when you return the next time a bulldozer has changed it. You realize you didn’t get there in time.”

Martinez-Bianco says she wants to document many of the sites before they change. “I grew up in the New Paltz/Gardiner area and now we are seeing a lot of change in landscape and the environment,” notes Martinez-Bianco, mother of three. “My goal is to paint areas I’m pretty sure are going to be developed – to capture them before that happens.” Martinez-Bianco tells of a farm she frequently drove by and always intended to paint. On the day she finally set up her easel to paint the farm, a woman living across the street came out to talk to her. “She told me that houses would be built on the site in six months and she was glad I was painting the farm now. I got there just in time since the view would soon be gone.”

Painter Ellen Esposito sees artists throughout the Hudson Valley driven by this same disquieting concern of artists from the Hudson River School two hundred years ago. “They were romantic and they probably thought what was going to happen is happening now. They felt that nature was being down-trodden by the people. I would like to get a lot more painting done to leave a legacy – so people could say 100 years from now ‘ah - that’s what it was like before it became Brooklyn.’”

Meet Me In Marlborough presents the “Stewards of the Land and Canvas,” a plein-air paint-out “Blooms to Harvest,” with an Art Show and Benefit Gala [w/ local foods, wine, and music] Saturday 11/3 at Stoutridge Vineyard, 10 Ann Kaley Lane, Marlboro NY, from 7-9 PM. The proceeds go to benefit sustainable agriculture in the Hudson Valley. Please contact them at 845.616.7824, or online at [www.meetmeinmarlborough.com](http://www.meetmeinmarlborough.com).