Birth of a Notion
Cover: Jack Bush, St. George’s, Bermuda, 1939
Birth of a Notion
TODAY, THE MASTERWORKS FOUNDATION

stands at the pinnacle of artistic endeavour in Bermuda: a revered institution that repatriated major works inspired by the island, now housed in its state-of-the-art Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art. It is an inspiration to generations of Bermudians, and a bellwether of the island’s cultural identity.

But more than 30 years ago, this triumph was barely a dream for Founder and Creative Director Tom Butterfield, who had returned from Toronto after studying and working in photography. Butterfield was invited to join an advisory committee for a 1984 Heritage Month event celebrating the visual arts, and his ensuing “Bermuda Inspirations” exhibit in 1986—showcasing works on loan from overseas institutions and individuals—was a huge critical success. Andrew Wyeth’s watercolour *Royal Palms* was the star of that first show, a harbinger of much more to come.

Opposite: **George Ault**, *St. George’s Park*, 1922
This was the moment Butterfield realised his mission: to repatriate and collect important works of art inspired by Bermuda, and by doing so create for Bermudians “a better sense of who we are.”

This was the lightbulb moment: the Birth of a Notion. Within the year, Butterfield had established the Masterworks Foundation, in 1987.

Decades later, Masterworks houses more than 1,600 pieces of prestigious artwork, both international and local. It serves its audience via a range of popular events: free workshops, school outreach, artists-in-residence and major annual exhibitions on Bermuda themes—all linking the art itself with Bermuda history and traditions. The central ethos is the Bermuda muse, and the avowed intention is to bring art to all Bermudians, residents and visitors.

But in the early days Butterfield, and Curator Elise Outerbridge, who joined his quest one year into the project, faced a barrage of criticism and doubt: “You can’t get there from here” was a typical comment. Undaunted, they launched into the project with what was to become their defining spirit. Against apparent odds, and with a $60,000 loan, they purchased a
Ogden Minton Pleissner, St. George’s, c. 1950
dozen works of art—Butterfield calls them the “Twelve Apostles”—including pieces by Prosper Senat, Ogden Pleissner, Thomas Anshutz and a pencil sketch titled simply *Bermuda* by George Ault. The latter turned out to be a prophetic acquisition; it was found to be a study for Ault’s Precisionist oil painting, *St. George’s Park*, which Masterworks acquired through a generous gift nearly 20 years later. Over the next five years, working with dealers, acting on hunches and sleuthing by phone and fax, Masterworks continued to build an admirable collection. Pleissner and Albert Gleizes boosted its stature, but the first significant coup came in 1990, when Masterworks bought Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Banyan Tree Trunk* and then in 1992 an artwork many thought impossible to acquire—Winslow Homer’s *Inland Water, Bermuda*. The vaunted watercolour was secured by a Bermudian family trust and given to the Foundation on permanent loan. “That single painting changed our lives—it really put us on the map,” says Butterfield. “We had titled ourselves with what some had thought a grandiose name, but accumulating ‘masterworks’ was always our goal. Suddenly doubters were silenced and everyone was paying attention. The bankers stopped laughing. It sent a signal to the outside world as well. From then on, we were taken seriously.”

✶ Opposite: **Georgia O’Keeffe, Banyan Tree Trunk, 1934**
✿ Winslow Homer, *Inland Water, Bermuda*, 1901
☆ Winslow Homer, SS “Trinidad,” 1901
In 1995 Masterworks solidified its reputation by acquiring a second Homer, SS “Trinidad,” fittingly depicting the steamship that carried artists to Bermuda for winter-long working sojourns from New York at the start of early tourism in the late Victorian era. Masterworks bought a third Homer, Opposite Ireland Island, in 2003. “In my lifetime, I never thought I’d see one Winslow Homer as a permanent part of our collection,” says Butterfield. “To think we now have three is a testament to our credibility and success.”

In 2019, the Masterworks Collection comprises art in many forms of media, from pastels to photographs made by visiting and resident artists. “There are very few paintings that have gotten away from us,” says Butterfield—although he still yearns for a Bermuda Wyeth to join the permanent collection.

From the start, the guidepost to collecting was “first and foremost that the muse or subject matter had to have a connection to Bermuda,” says Butterfield. “We took the view that there would be a variety of aesthetic interpretations, of form, colour, content, subject, and fortunately we were right—our search generated a broad range of works that were cubist, abstract, mixed media, etc. Some were by artists who had not even come to Bermuda, but all of them had
✩ Albert Gleizes, *Portrait de Juliette Roche*, 1917
Charles Demuth, *Architecture*, 1917
been inspired by the Island.” Henry Moore, for example, created charcoal sketches of shells brought to him from Bermuda by a colleague; the artworks were given to Masterworks on permanent loan in 2007 by the Henry Moore Foundation. Janet Fish, the granddaughter of Clark Voorhees—who bought a Somerset home in 1920—made a still-life of flowers, Waimea, loaned in 1994, whose colour scheme she attributes to her Bermuda childhood. “What was our driving force? It was more than the sheer joy of the hunt,” says Butterfield. “It was a combination of things—a union of people, a vacuum of culture, the void of an aesthetic visual history, the need to fertilise minds. It’s good to bring these pieces home.”

Believing that Masterworks could raise the profile of Island culture and history by linking Bermuda to world-renowned art, Butterfield and his team identified a wishlist of foreign and local works that suited their intentions. This included illustrious pieces—the Homers, the O’Keeffes—and works by influential artists such as Albert Gleizes, Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley. They may not be household names, yet they blazed revolutionary trails, thanks in large part to their Bermuda works that helped determine the direction of the American Modernist movement.
✶ Marsden Hartley, *Sunken Treasure*, 1935

✶ Opposite: Janet Fish, *Waimea*, 1990
Over time, Masterworks gained traction and credibility. Butterfield, Outerbridge and their team lectured, published, promoted, proposed, persuaded, exhibited, staged telethons, auctions and interviews, and courted the limelight with publicity stunts. Several years in a row, Butterfield bicycled 1,000 miles through Britain to rack up sponsorship; he raised $55,000 in donations to Masterworks by finishing the 1994 London Marathon; and he ran the blisteringly hot Bermuda Day Half-Marathon wearing a pink tutu. Through it all, Butterfield—decked out in an avant-garde array of polkadots, bow ties, top hats and garish footwear—wooed support from the wealthy while appealing to a sense of national pride shared by ordinary Islanders.

Making art central to everyday lives—its images, its education, the history it holds, the social healing offered in a visual form—has been a central tenet of Masterworks’ mandate.

No one understands the mission better than Elise Outerbridge, a former fine arts student at New York University, whose New England family traces its roots to Gloucester, MA—where Homer began painting in watercolours in 1873. She has curated every major
Masterworks show in Bermuda, including grassroots crowd-pleasers like “Our House,” “In a New York Frame of Mind,” “We Are Sailing” and “Floral Lane.” “We realised that through artwork you could discover a lot of things about your past,” she says. “That’s why we knew very early on that even though building a museum was important, it wasn’t as important as collecting the artwork.”

Indeed, Masterworks led a nomadic existence for its first 15 years, moving, with the art collection in tow, between venues in Hamilton. “We invented the ‘pop up’ long before it became a fashionable business model,” says Butterfield. While the hunt for a permanent home continued, Butterfield and Outerbridge decided to take their show on the road, touring major art museums up and down the Eastern Seaboard and in London. With the help of its North American support charities, the American Friends of Masterworks Inc. and the Bermudiana Foundation of Canada, the touring collection was exhibited in Philadelphia, New York, Toronto, Boston, Charleston and Halifax.

In 2002, by arrangement with the Bermuda government, Masterworks secured the former Arrowroot Factory
E. Ambrose Webster, *Sisters*, 1922
at Paget’s Botanical Gardens as its permanent headquarters. Six years and a $9 million capital campaign later, it opened the Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art with Prince Charles as principal patron. The new premises allowed new forms of art to also be showcased, such as photography and music.

**WHAT HAS** Bermuda symbolised for countless visiting foreign artists? For many, like O’Keeffe, Bermuda with its luminosity, languid lifestyle, floral exotica and eye-popping hues, helped heal jaded urban temperaments and awakened an artistic muse, reinvigorating their work, style, and vision. Others, like Demuth, Hartley and Gleizes found the freedom to experiment with new movements, developing trends that would turn the art world on its head. Many found solace in the Island’s natural beauty; some, inspiration from its unique architecture—an art form in itself. Still others were energised by Bermudians they met and portrayed in their works. “Several persons have asked me why, or then when, I became so sure shadows in sunlight are purple. I always thought so, but was not positive until I went to Bermuda where I now go every winter,” said Ambrose Webster in 1919. “The light is so dazzling, you can’t even see what you’re doing unless you manufacture some shade,” says New
Yorker Jennifer Bartlett, whose 1998 abstract pastels captured the form of local cottages in a variety of moods. “The flowers were dark, purplish red, large and heavy—and hung down. Each petal had a row of little white flowers under it,” observed O’Keeffe of the fecund banana tree blooms she sketched in graphite in 1934. “I bought postcards to send to my friends,” rhapsodised her predecessor Hanna Rion in 1909, “and inscribed thereon: ‘molten turquoise sea, amethyst sky, liquid emerald sea.’” Homer himself said his turn-of-the-century Bermuda watercolours were “as good work as I ever did.”

Works now owned by Masterworks have changed the way Bermuda’s people look at their country and themselves, intuitively responding to the Masterworks Collection as a symbolic reflection of who they are. “A national collection like this one serves to express the identity of a place—our inner soul,” says Butterfield. “In effect, it helps to redefine the national character. We see ourselves and our homeland depicted in emblematic art, and that mirrors a self-image we hold on to.

“Great art has the power to change lives. When its subject matter also holds sentimental or patriotic relevance for an audience, something pretty amazing can happen.”

Opposite: Hanna Rion, Rocks, Bermuda, 1899
❖ E. André Biéler, Front Street, 1922
❖ Opposite: Alfred Birdsey, Bermuda Doorway, 1937
*Vivien John, Vivien John’s Mother, “Dodo,” 1949*
Unknown artist, *Dinghy Racing*, c. 1900
Ross Sterling Turner, *Fairylands*, 1885

Opposite: Frank O. Small, *The Welcoming Smile*, c. 1900
忸 Catherine Tucker, A Street Scene in St. George’s, 1934
Charles Fraser Comfort, Third Hole, Mid Ocean Club, 1978
Frank Carson, *Late Afternoon*, 1932


✶ Opposite: Donald M. Kirkpatrick, *Gospel Hall*, c. 1930

✶ Opposite: Eliot O’Hara, *Bermuda Gate, St. George’s*, 1931
Eliot O’Hara, *Bermuda Steamer at #1 Shed*, 1931
Emma Fordyce MacRae, *St. George’s*, 1950
George Swanson, *Plantation by the Sea*, 1935
*Jack Bush*, *St. George’s, Bermuda*, 1939
Isabel McLaughlin, *Taut Sails*, 1961
Opposite: Jack Bush, *Old Maid’s Lane Gate*, 1934
Bermuda Botanical Gardens, 183 South Road, Paget
Monday–Saturday 10am–4pm
1-441-299-4000
www.bermudamasterworks.org
#learningmatters
‘Enriching the community through art and education’