

## **Earl Cunningham's America**

Earl Cunningham (1893--1977) was a master of the unexpected. In his America, flamingoes wade along the Maine coast, schooners share harbors with Indian canoes, and Viking ships anchor in the brown waters of Florida's swamps. He drew on myths, legends, and a deep belief in man's ability to live in harmony with nature to fashion a world in which past and present merge and time is defined by sunsets, dawns, seasons, and storms.

Cunningham was a creative and restless individual who grew up in Edgecomb, Maine, near Boothbay Harbor. He left home at thirteen to work as an itinerant tinker and peddler. As a young man, he studied coastal navigation, earned a license as a harbor pilot, and sailed on a schooner carrying cargo between Maine and Florida. And he painted--mostly pictures of ships that he sold for fifty cents each. During the 1920s and 1930s, he spent winters in the south, excavating relics from Indian mounds, collecting coral that he sold to the summer tourist trade in Maine, and storing away ideas for his pictures.

In 1949, Cunningham settled in St. Augustine, Florida. He opened an antique shop on St. George Street that sold crockery, old magazines, and curios and displayed his paintings with a sign that read "Not for Sale." He worked constantly and exhibited occasionally, although at first critical attention proved elusive. By the mid 1970s, exhibitions at the Loch Haven Art Center in Orlando and the Daytona Beach Museum of Arts and Sciences generated positive reviews and, finally, a measure of public recognition.

Cunningham had suffered from bouts of depression at least since his arrival in St. Augustine. Journal entries record harassment by neighborhood youth and his fear that arsonists would set the gallery on fire. Although he wrote only occasionally, each passage reveals a troubled mind, and, on 29 December 1977, Cunningham took his own life. He left behind more than 450 paintings. With a few exceptions, they show harbors, inlets, and islands that offer protection from high winds, turbulent seas, and, metaphorically, the difficulties Cunningham faced living in mid-twentieth-century America.

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The exhibition and catalogue are dedicated to the Honorable Marilyn Logsdon Mennello.

### **Gathering Clouds Off Little River Inlet**

1962

oil on fiberboard

Collection of Marilyn L. and Michael A. Mennello

Cunningham's love for his paintings ---he called them his "brothers and sisters"---prompted him to take great care in their creation and presentation. He worked on fiberboard panels and used expensive artists' paints as well as colors he bought by the gallon at a local hardware store to achieve jewel-like surfaces. Many are framed with molding he crafted; some of these frames are toned to match the hues of the work.

### **The Everglades**

about 1960

oil on masonite

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

Cunningham joined the St. Augustine Art Association shortly after his move to Florida in 1949, and in the early 1950s sent paintings to the organization's exhibitions. They did not attract the attention he hoped for, so he determined to market his work himself. In January 1961, he sent *The Everglades* to First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy at the White House.

### **Spoonbill Point**

about 1950

oil on fiberboard

Collection of Frederick and Susan Weingeroff

Cunningham moved constantly between the specific and symbolic to situate his pictures in place and time. Lighthouses, covered bridges, horse-drawn carts, and old mills are classic calendar, greeting card, and folk art motifs that locate meaning in an ambiguous and nostalgic past. Wells for drawing water---identifiable by arms that lift and lower buckets---are tiny, but insistent features in *Spoonbill Point*.

### **Goose Rock Beach, Maine**

about 1960

oil on fiberboard

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Walter F. Dowman

Cunningham's sense of place was strong. *Goose Rock Beach* is named for its distinctive rock formations and is just one of many paintings titled after locations he may have visited by schooner as a youth or later in his camper truck, the *Dirigo*.

### **Safe Harbor---Perkins Cove**

about 1930

oil on fiberboard

Private collection

The entrance to Perkins Cove in southern Maine near the New Hampshire border is open to the northeast. As in the painting, the inlet widens into a basin that offers protection during storms. The schooners lined up at anchor resemble photographs of vessels moored around Boothbay and Bath in the early years of the twentieth century.

### **Sanctuary**

1934

oil on fiberboard

The Mennello Museum of American Art, Gift of Michael A. and Marilyn L. Mennello

Cunningham filled his paintings with birds that fly, wade, and perch in trees. Some are decorative, adding notes of color to sky or shore. Others---including flamingoes, roseate spoonbills, ibises, and storks---are identifiable by conformation and coloring. In the 1930s, extensive logging and plans for a canal between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico threatened south Florida's birds and plants. In *Sanctuary*, an owl observes the destruction of its natural habitat. Cunningham must have been relieved when, in 1947, the Everglades was declared a national park.

### **Norsemen Discovering the New World**

about 1930

oil on fiberboard

Collection of William E. Heyler

Viking lore was a popular topic during Cunningham's youth. Stones that reputedly bore Norse inscriptions were found at Popham Beach, Monhegan, and Matinicus, reinforcing the legend that Viking ships had landed on the coast of Maine.