

Arts & Entertainment

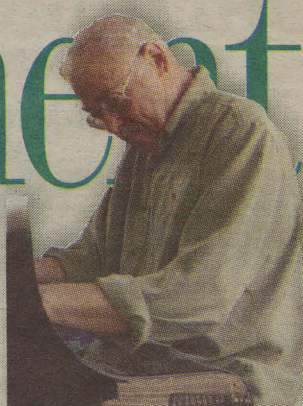
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Putting **BENEKER** in his place

Art Association holds first-ever retrospective of artist's paintings

By Susan Rand Brown
BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Walking

along the beach in the East End you see a scattering of ancient pilings poking up fifteen feet from the sand. These weary stalk-like totems are remains of the wharf leading to the Consolidated Cold Storage (now the Ice House Condominiums), one of dozens of working piers dotting the bay in the early 20th century.

Into this mythic Provincetown with its vibrant waterfront stepped painter Gerrit Beneker. "Moments in Time," the first retrospective of the almost-forgotten artist, who died almost 70 years ago in his Truro home, opens at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) beginning this Friday and continuing through Sept. 11. Works chosen by Beneker's granddaughter Katrina Beneker, with PAAM director Christine McCarthy, include two entire walls of town scenes, wharf scenes, fishermen and trades people.

This groundbreaking exhibit, drawn from eight lending institutions including the Smithsonian Institution, and more than a dozen private collections, brings Provincetown gems together with paintings of New York City bridge-building, robust industrial workers (for which Beneker was best known), still lifes and magazine illustrations. Many have never been shown, or have been removed from public view for decades. Finally the sweep of the work is presented in its entirety.

When the Banner caught up with Beneker granddaughter Katrina (she prefers Trina), it was in PAAM's artists' studio, infused with the lingering whiff of oil paint. A PAAM founder as well as a founder of the Beachcombers Club across the street, Beneker would have been pleased.

Born in 1882 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a bustling manufacturing hub, the young Beneker first earned his living sweeping up shavings in a furniture factory. With this money he went to art school, Chicago first

and then in 1905 to New York, on scholarship to the Art Students League. He married his high school sweetheart, settled over a handkerchief factory in Brooklyn, and made his living as an illustrator. His early subject matter included the building of the Manhattan Bridge, baseball games and eventually the opening the Cape Cod Canal.

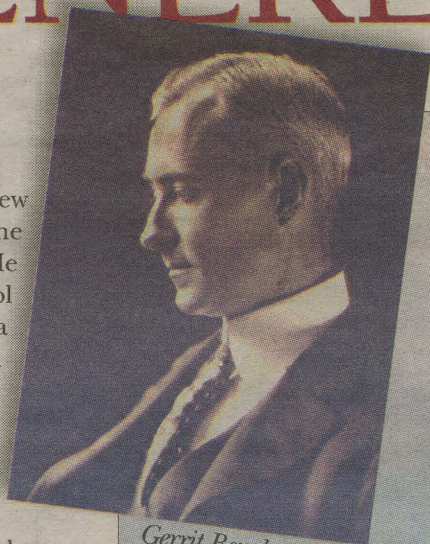
The moment was ripe. Charles Webster Hawthorne, founder of the artist colony in Provincetown, had set up his Cape Cod School of Art in 1899. Here students would paint on the beach, en plein aire, just as the Impressionists had. Already a talented illustrator, Beneker was after more. Hawthorne could teach him about light and color. In 1912 he came to study, and by the summer of 1913 Gerrit Beneker had moved his family to a house on the "Back Street" (Bradford Street) near Bangs. After two years, Hawthorne praised young Beneker's productivity and ability, predicting a good career.

His first studio in Provincetown, Trina says, was at Knowles Wharf, at the base of Pearl Street. There he painted wharves, boats, fishermen, church spires: the entire town would have presented itself as an irresistible still life, glowing in north light. By the time Beneker's work was done, he had painted more than 120 wharf and schooner scenes, and dozens of fishermen.

In 1920 he and his family bought an unheated Truro farmhouse near Long Nook Road. Truro was to remain home base; in winter the family packed up for cities where Beneker got hired by companies like Hydraulic Pressed Steel. Paid by the bosses, he sided with labor, producing heroic portraits of factory workers that earned him a reputation as a leading painter of men and their work. His studio is as he left it when he died in Truro in 1934. Burial was in nearby Snow Cemetery. The homestead remains in the Beneker family.

Trina sought to understand her grandfather's role in American art history after reading arti-

■ **BENEKER** continued on page 36



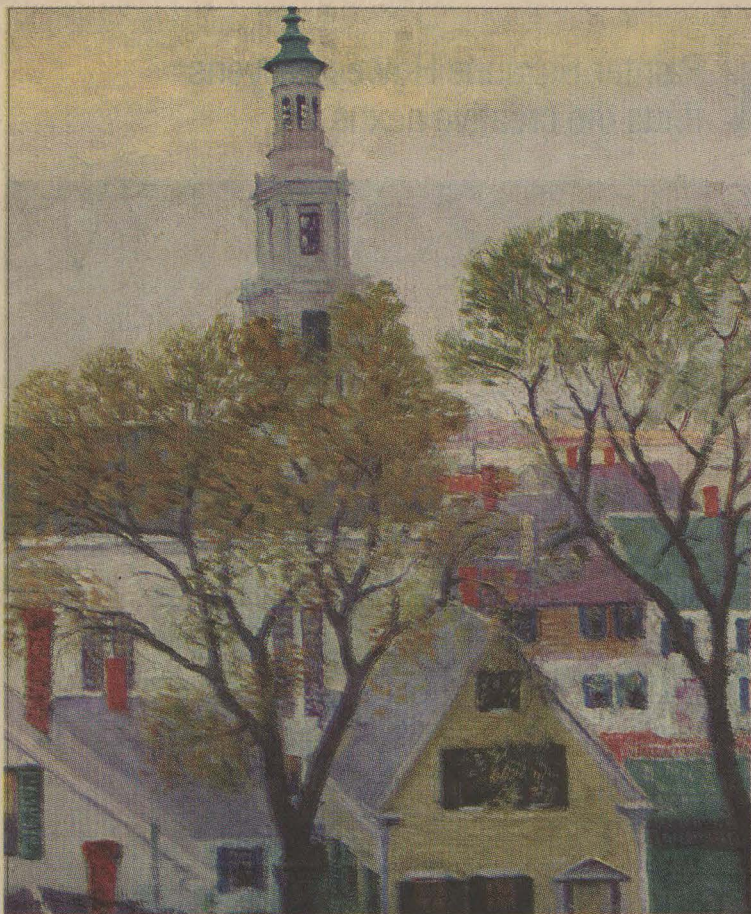
Gerrit Beneker



"Fisherman of Truro" by Gerrit Beneker. The subject is Sebastian Veara (1867-1943) who came from Faial in the Azores as a young boy, where he signed up on the whaling ships. Veara settled in Truro in 1904 and spent his life there as a trap fisherman. His descendants still live in his home.



"Beachcombers Wharf, 1917" by Gerrit Beneker.



"The Christopher Wren Tower, 1929" by Gerrit Beneker.

BENEKER continued from page 33

cles characterizing him as "forgotten" or "underrated." Throughout his lifetime, he was widely known and exhibited. Soon Trina was a familiar sight at the Smithsonian, pouring over boxes donated by the family decades earlier, stuffed with Beneker's papers, journals, letters, posters and photos.

Restoring the "forgotten" Beneker to our times became the family mission. Studying journal entries, Trina tracked down much of the work. She consulted books and photos to pinpoint his Provincetown pic-

tures. Trina would like this significant exhibit to travel to lending institutions in Michigan and Ohio, where the Benekers also have roots.

As of this week a Beneker website is up and running, at www.gbeneker.com. Trina will continue to add images and text to this historical resource.

Three generations of Benekers will attend the PAAM opening. A follower of New England philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, Beneker believed that art could play a role in everyday life, uplifting spirits and inspiring creativity. Like the work itself, the message is timeless. □

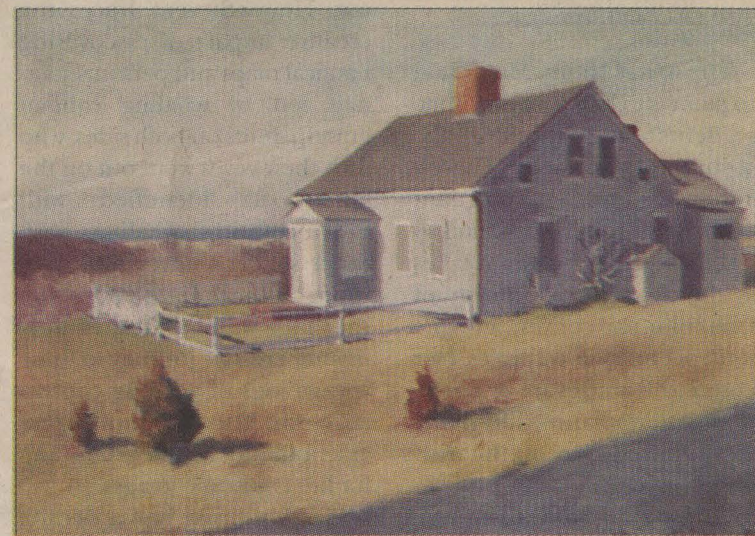
Work by artist couple added to CMFA collection

The Cape Museum of Fine Arts in Dennis has just acquired pieces from Tom Watson and Francie Randolph of Truro for the museum's permanent collection. CMFA added "Fiddlehead Reach" by Randolph, a mixed media painting from her "In the Moment of Unraveling" series, and "Dunn's House," a large oil by Watson. Both artists showed previously in the CMFA Botanica exhibit and the acquisition of their work was recommended by Robert Douglas Hunter.

Randolph shows locally at the DNA Gallery in Provincetown and the Munson Gallery in Chatham. Her work often draws on imagery from the mundane such as a thistle from the garden which she photographs and then duplicates, mirrors and otherwise manipulates to create a base that she then paints and glazes over. She says this year's work is about reflection and metamorphosis.

Watson primarily paints landscapes working from life and from memory. His pieces are often scenes from the Cape and from the Adirondacks.

Watson and Randolph are husband and wife and are expecting their second child momentarily. They hold open studios in the barn they share in Truro from 9 a.m. to noon on Wednesday mornings or by appointment by calling (508) 349-1631. □



"Dunn's House," by Tom Watson.



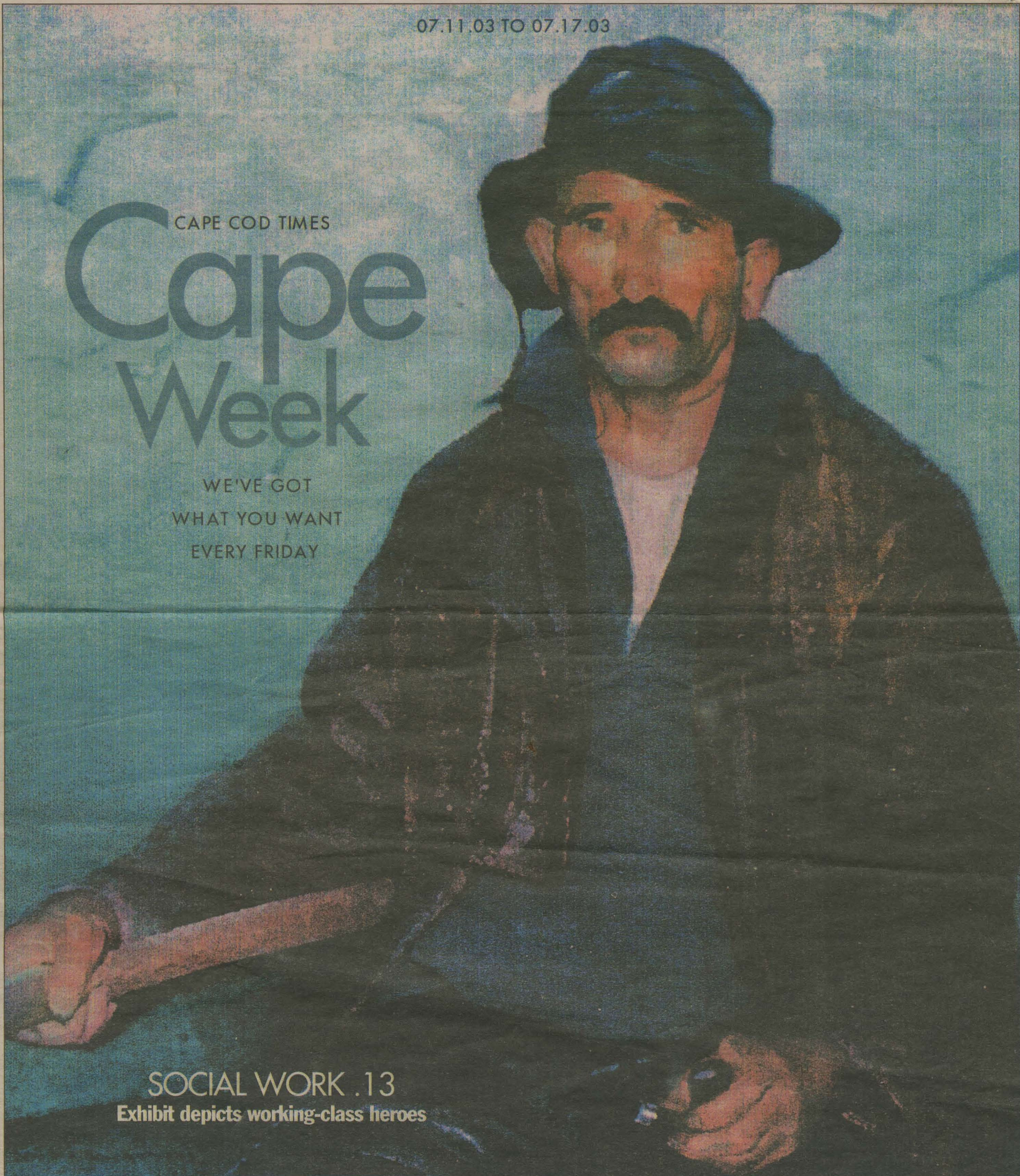
"Fiddlehead Reach," by Francie Randolph.

07.11.03 TO 07.17.03

CAPE COD TIMES
**Cape
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SOCIAL WORK .13
Exhibit depicts working-class heroes



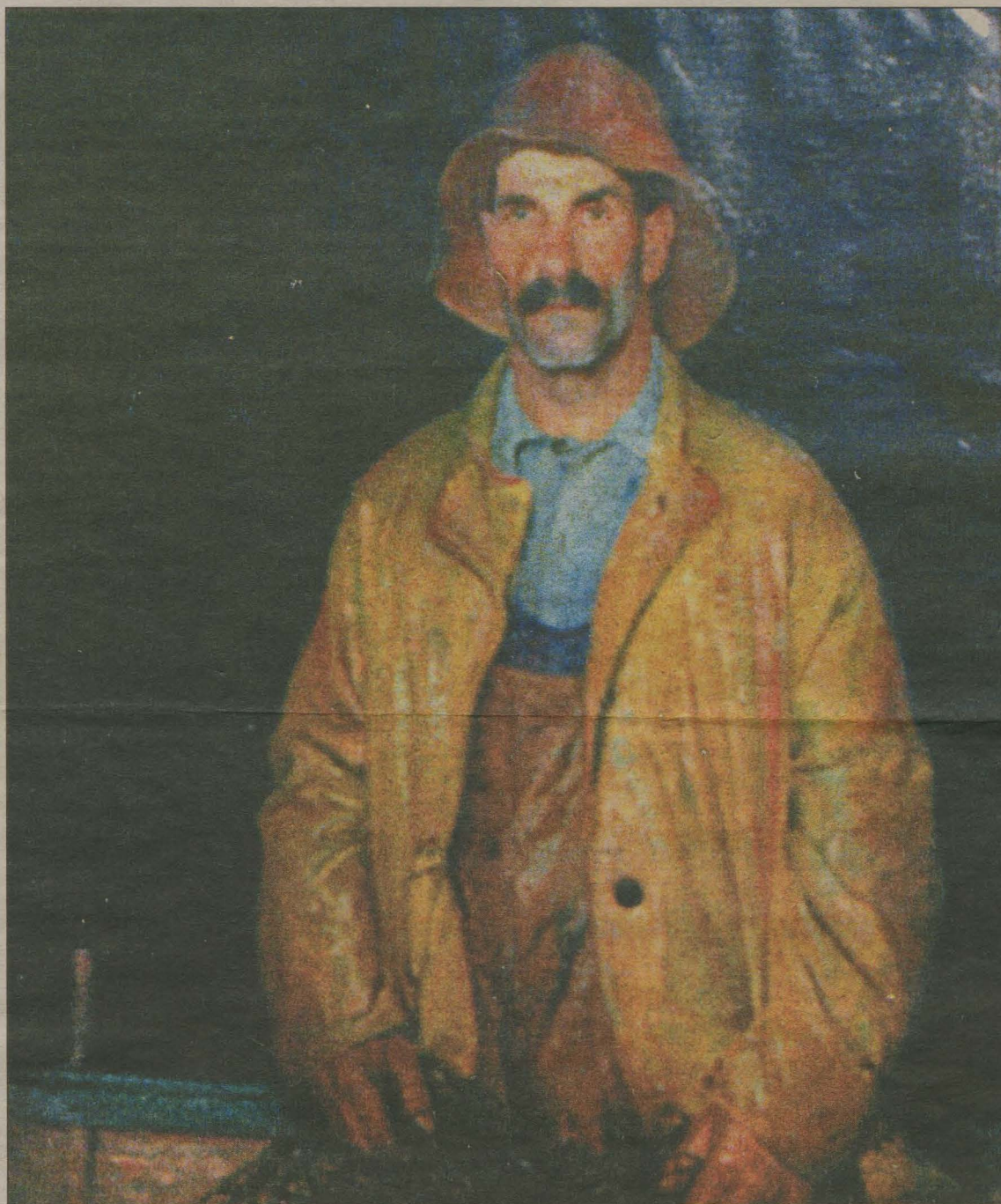
Labor of Love

Beneker
retrospective
recalls
champion
of working class

BY ANDRÉ VAN DER WENDE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Beneker's "Beachcombers' Wharf" (1917) is set in Provincetown.



Gerrit Beneker's "We Have Toiled All the Night and Taken Nothing" (1922) depicts Antone (Tony) Joseph (1872-1954), captain of the traps in Truro.

At 6-foot-2, Gerrit Beneker was a gregariously fearless and self-reliant presence. A former high school athlete, he was forthright and idealistic, yet personable enough to engage the trust of the working men – and occasional woman – he painted. Toiling in steel mills and foundries, hoisting bridges and skyscrapers, these workers – all sinew and heroic stoicism – were depicted with an honest dignity and respect.

Throughout the first quarter of the 20th century, Beneker's illustrations of workers and every-

men adorned scores of magazine covers, posters and illustrations for the war effort. The print run for his famous Victory Liberty Loan poster was close to 3 million alone and iconic enough that you can still buy it in reproduction today. Through his illustration work and industrial paintings, Beneker gained a reputation as a "champion of the people" and was successful enough to support a family of four.

He moved to Provincetown in 1913, and until

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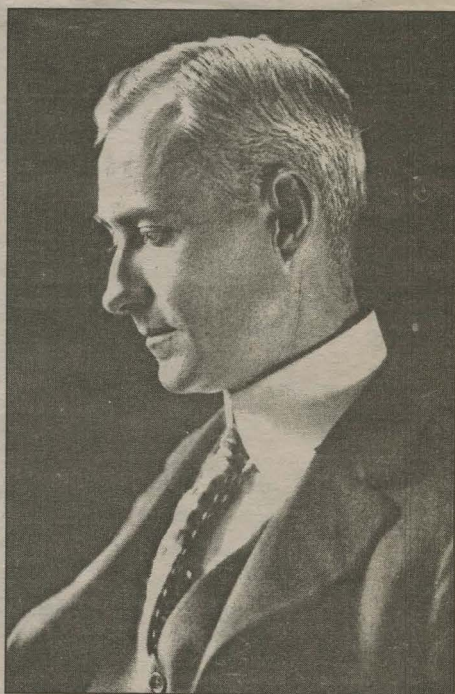
his death in 1934 – at a somewhat tender 52 – Beneker made huge contributions to the artistic community, including being one of the original five artists who formed the Provincetown Art Association, inaugurated only a year after his arrival. His work flourished here, opening up, softening and relaxing, but since his death he slipped into obscurity.

Now the very institution he helped create, the Provincetown Art Association and Museum at 460 Commercial St., is welcoming Beneker back with a retrospective curated by his granddaughter Katrina Beneker.

Opening Friday and running through Sept. 7, “Moments in Time: Gerrit Beneker, A Retrospective” chronicles his

Gerrit Beneker was one of the five artists who formed the Provincetown Art Association. He moved to Provincetown in 1913. He died in 1934, at age 52.

Below: Beneker’s “Under a Wharf” (1914) features a mottled surface of dense impressionism.



career from the first flushes of success as a young illustrator in New York City, with examples of the magazine covers, posters and industrial paintings for which he became known, as well as a collection of his “home pictures,” paintings indigenous to Provincetown and made under the duress of only his own time and demands.

These are the landscapes, views of the harbor and town dotted with familiar wharves, lavender rooftops and spires, as well as inspired portraits of the local fishermen and merchants. In Provincetown Beneker produced enduring images of the Cape light that show he was more than just a captain of industry.

He came here to study with Charles Hawthorne, whose influential school of impressionistic vigor Beneker sought to reinvigorate his own work. With Hawthorne “he wanted to learn color, he wanted to learn

light, he wanted to soften his images,” his granddaughter says.

“He had been an illustrator, so his work was rather rigid, his colors were limited,” she notes. “And I think the experience with Hawthorne was invaluable to him because it gave him a different way of looking at things, it softened the way that he painted. It provided a more naturalistic view, and it also got him to experiment.”

For an entrenched realist, Beneker’s tenure with Hawthorne produced great results. “Under a Wharf” from 1914 has the mottled surface of dense impressionism as he freely coaxes his forms out of a heavily textured interplay of color and light. Other paintings, such as “Provincetown Houses” from 1917, show not only an acute color sense of soft turquoise, hushed blues and creamy yellow, but the flattened forms of the houses into simple shapes with

If You Go

- **What:** “Moments in Time: Gerrit Beneker, a Retrospective”
- **When:** through Sept. 7
- **Where:** Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial St., Provincetown
- **Information:** 508-487-1750

questionable perspective sends the work teetering toward the magically naive.

In his “home” paintings, Beneker could be divorced from the constraints of the socially conscious and set free to roam. But he never strayed too far. In postulating a social art, a democratic art that was for and of the people, he pledged a strong allegiance and commitment to art with a message.

“What he was really doing was trying to emphasize the value and honor of the work of the laborer,” says Ms. Beneker. “He felt that the important thing about the art was that it would have some social change, that it would make a difference.”

“I am trying through art and philosophy,” he once said, “to touch that divine spark which our creator put within each one of us.” In a superb portrait made the year he died, Beneker painted his daughter Helen within a smooth layering of tonal shifts. In surprising works of quiet intensity like this the artist may well have succeeded in his divine mission.