

# ASMA JOURNAL

## Notes From Brush Hill

by Charles Raskob Robinson  
Brush Hill Studios, Washington, CT

This is the fifteenth anniversary year of this column which started out with articles addressed to ASMA members noting (thus Notes) the tools, innovations and inventions I employed in my studio here at “Brush Hill” (the name given this modest pre-Revolutionary farm house in Eighteenth Century deeds). Over the years the audience has remained the same but the focus for more than a decade has been on what our members have to teach us by their life example, professional techniques and approaches. The thorough presentation and documentation in these articles of the lives of our American artists have prompted the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, the T. J. Watson Research Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and other institutions to collect them for posterity. In order to enhance the reading experience while still providing the expected documentation I present credits as endnotes (designated alphabetically) at the end of the article while I keep matters related to the story conveniently located and in large font as footnotes (designated numerically).

In the last issue we met our Managing Fellow and Board Member, Russ Kramer, and tracked his meteoric rise to national attention as an artist in the last decade following a career in newspapers. In this issue we meet Peter Quidley, Signature Member, and follow his life-long career in painting and his particular success as a marine artist. And then we stop in to



“Windshift” • Oil on Canvas • 40” x 60”

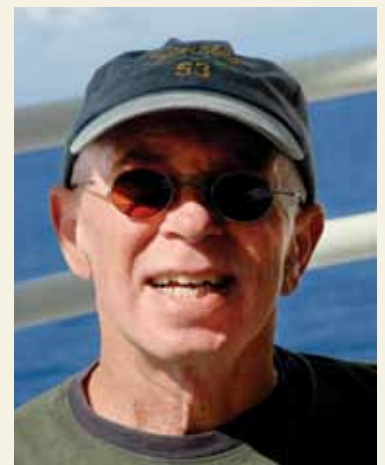
visit one of our very first but now retired Fellows, Frank Handlen. He continues to be an example for all of us for he and his wife, Mary, are very active even in their mid-nineties. Frank is and has been for decades a dedicated plein air artist year round – even in the dead of a Maine winter!

**PETER TAYLOR QUIDLEY, SIGNATURE MEMBER, SOUTH CHATHAM, MA**

Web site: [quidleyandco.com](http://quidleyandco.com)

Over thirty-five years ago, Paul Lunde wrote the following in the Saudi Arabian magazine *Aramco World*:<sup>a</sup>

“Peking, Lhasa, Timbuctu, Harrar, Medina and Mecca – these were the forbidden cities that for centuries captured the imagination of the West.



**PETER TAYLOR QUIDLEY, SIGNATURE MEMBER, SOUTH CHATHAM, MA**

Web site: [quidleyandco.com](http://quidleyandco.com)



“Last Laugh” • Oil on Panel • 12” x 18”

One by one they have given up their secrets to intrepid travelers until all are open to anyone with sufficient patience and the right political credentials. All, that is, but Mecca and Medina – the two holiest cities of Islam.

By law Mecca and Medina are strictly forbidden to non-Muslims. But that is now. In the past, although prohibitions were equally strict and although the pilgrimage was long, difficult and dangerous, intruders were not at all uncommon. Between 1503 and 1931, for example, some twenty-five Westerners visited Mecca and returned to write about it. They included a Renaissance tourist, an English prisoner of war, a Spanish spy, an Italian deserter, and the incomparable Sir Richard Burton, translator of the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>1</sup>

Had the article been written today, it

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Congress appropriated funds to build a lighthouse on Cape Hatteras in the late Eighteenth Century. It became operational in 1803 and received improvements over subsequent generations until 1871 when the existing, black and white helical tower, replaced it. The hurricanes, blizzards and the decades-long but futile battle between man and the encroaching ocean make the saga of this historic landmark fascinating reading – right down to the most recent chapter in 1999 – 2000 when, after much political turmoil and many court battles, it was successfully moved a half mile inland to save it. One can learn more about Amasa Quidley and other Hatteras keepers in the book edited by Cheryl Shelton-Roberts, *Hatteras Keepers: Oral and Family Histories*, Outer Banks Lighthouse Society, 2001, ISBN-10: 0971009201 ISBN-13: 978-0971009202, 134 pages.

would go on to say:

“The most recent Western intruder who strayed through the harsh Saudi desert to the holy city of Mecca was an American marine artist, one Peter Taylor Quidley. He was apprehended and jailed. His art equipment raised further suspicion when interrogation revealed it included a palette quite foreign to marine painters for it was devoid of greens and blues. Rather it consisted only of burnt sienna (red), raw umber (yellow), indigo (blue) and white. The prisoner argued that this was ideally suited for desert paintings. After further questioning he was eventually released and returned to his seaside home on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. But unlike the Western intruders of earlier centuries, Quidley has not written about the experience.”

So here we have yet another unusual ASMA life story. But this one has had quite a torturous path. In the end Quidley found and developed his talent and has enjoyed success and professional recognition but fate certainly conspired against him along much of the way. From a distance, one can see his life fall into three broad chapters: A hectic youth; mid-life as a media professional; and finally, the career as professional artist.

The families of both his father (Taylor Quidley, 1918 – 1989) and his mother

(Carol Alexander Quidley, (b. 1924) can trace their American roots back generations. His mother’s are in New England and go back to the *Mayflower* while the Quidleys date their arrival in Virginia from England to the 1640’s. The sea was in Peter’s heritage: On his mother’s side it included a Cape Cod whaling captain from while his paternal grandfather, Amasa Quidley, was the keeper of the Cape Hatteras Light House, the nation’s tallest and one of its most famous.<sup>1</sup> Peter’s father served eleven years in the Coast Guard including duty on light ships in the Atlantic and WWII action in North Africa; he had three ships sink under him. While in the service he met his mother in Massachusetts. Peter arrived in Boston December 20, 1945. He was their only child and spent his boyhood in the inland town of Brockton, twenty miles south of Boston. But he kept his maritime heritage alive by visiting his extended family on Cape Hatteras during the summers. “Hatteras had neither roads nor electricity at that time – and no indoor plumbing. It was as it had been for centuries. The family would routinely gather to share family lure and this experience became an important element in my narrative approach to art decades later.” Art appears to have come from Peter’s maternal grandmother. She was an artist - as were many in her family – and since he spent a lot of time with her as a boy, she had ample time to encourage his evident interest in art.

**No Steady Course:  
A Young Man in Choppy Seas**

Peter’s early years went smoothly enough. He attended the Hancock Elementary School in Brockton – a four-room schoolhouse that accommodated six grades – and continued to learn about art from his maternal grandmother. At ten he showed sufficient talent that his parents enrolled him in a Saturday art course in Brockton. “It was for adults and I was the only kid in the class but it was really good. They started us off with plaster casts, a study of values, drawing and all the basic stuff. From the beginning

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I was interested in marine art. I have in my attic some marine paintings I did then that I sold to a relative for twenty-five cents, which he returned to me when he went into a nursing home. I only did that for a year or so but it was a good formal start for me."

"Then my family bought a house on the coast a few miles away in Duxbury that dated back to the 1600's so I continued my schooling there, graduating from the local high school in 1964. My path to a career as an artist might have been much more direct had the high school offered any art classes. But it did not so I gravitated towards engineering." (His father was a steam engineer in the Coast Guard and continued in this capacity in the steam-driven mills of Brockton, then an important shoe-manufacturing city.) After graduation he enrolled in the Lowell Technological Institute in Lowell, MA but realized after a while that he did not like what he was doing so he dropped out and began at a new school, the College of Advanced Science in Canaan, NH.<sup>2</sup> But, after about a year and following the divorce of his parents, he left and moved south to Ft. Lauderdale, FL and enrolled at the Broward County Junior College to study art. There in August 1966 he met a fellow student from Grand Rapids, MI, Pamela Ziontz. She was a steady influence in his life and would remain so until her death from cancer in 2008. "Divorce had also rocked her early years - her parents split when she was but two years old. Her father, a doctor, obtained custody - a good thing because by the time she was ten, her mother was on her seventh husband."

In art school Peter used to help Pamela with her frames but eventually the roles reversed and she became Peter's framer. She had a special knack for framing that was only explained years later when she

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>2</sup> Lowell Technological Institute is now part of the University of Massachusetts while the College of Advanced Science no longer exists.

<sup>3</sup> This Boston based institution was established in 1924 and played an important role in training and developing generations of artists - including a number of ASMA members - before it closed in 1983.

learned that her maternal grandfather, whom she never met, had emigrated from Russia to Chicago and was a professional frame maker. Pamela managed to get many of his tools and used them to make Peter's frames.

The couple married on August 26, 1967 and decided to honeymoon in Massachusetts but stopped on Cape Hatteras to visit Peter's father who was then a commercial fisherman. There, while traveling at high speed the steering locked and Pam crashed the car into a sixty-foot utility light pole. Although no one was injured, they were stuck there for six months while they worked to cover the damages - he, hosing out septic systems and digging ditches and she, cleaning toilets. They also had to drop out of school. "Eventually we made it to Massachusetts where I signed



"Navigators"  
Oil on Panel • 36" x 30"



"Off Nantucket" - Oil on Panel • 24" x 36"

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up for night courses in advertising design at the Vesper George School of Art<sup>3</sup> while I worked a day job at Atlantic Research, an explosives plant that manufactured land mines. But then the plant blew up, killing thirty-eight people. For me it

NJ to attend the Army's photography school. While there, my wife delivered Christopher on December 17, 1968.

"Since I finished third in my photography class of twenty-five, and

fever and at the peak of the crisis his doctor committed suicide. Christopher recovered and I returned to the States in the spring of 1970 but was scheduled for another 'volunteer' tour of duty in Viet Nam a month later. But with some outside prodding the Army finally discovered how my original recruiter had lied and promised things he could not deliver in order to meet his recruitment quotient. The long and short of it was I suddenly received an honorable discharge." And thus began his next chapter.

## The Media Professional

While in the Army, Peter had no time for painting but thereafter he continued to paint in acrylics. He describes his work of that time as severe and abstract, most probably reflecting his own experience in Viet Nam. After the Army he worked day jobs but he continued to paint. In these endeavors he met a woman who had an art shop in Fort Worth, FL and who did large canvases with subtle washes of oil paint and Liquin. Peter tried his hand at it both in oil and using acrylic in a spray gun. "The works sold in Palm Beach and I even had a one-man show there at the Gallerie Juarez. I became looser and looser and then began to introduce figures that I copied out of magazines. Soon I had evolved from abstract acrylics to figurative oils."

"As for my day job, when I got out of the Army, I became an Art Director for a commercial photographic studio for a few months until WPTV TV of West Palm Beach hired me as Cinematographer. I did a lot of commercials and even a weekly show. I recall clearly seeing on this show some representational marine artists interviewed, including Jim Gray.<sup>4</sup> This was quite unusual in a world flooded with modern abstract art – and I marveled that one could make a living producing what I thought was dramatic and dynamic work. WPTV TV was a great job and I rose to Director of Photography but the pay was poor and my family grew with the arrival of our daughter, Heather, December 22, 1972. In 1973 I began doing freelance commercials



"Foggy Finish" • Oil on Panel • 24" x 36"

meant I lost my job and draft exemption. On top of that my wife was pregnant and we were living in a house with no heat. It was a tough time." Faced with the draft that offered no choice and usually meant combat infantry, he opted to enlist to improve his options, hoping to become a combat photographer. "Having lost my job to the explosion and while waiting for induction, I became an Electrolux vacuum salesman but selling was not my thing so I moved my wife back to Florida and got a job painting seascapes for Westinghouse Hotel rooms. I did about 250 of these, each 18" x 24" and also a half-dozen large murals measuring six feet by four feet. I was painting day and night until I was inducted in the fall of 1968. The program I had enlisted in allowed me to choose from my top priorities if I did well in my entrance exams. I had done well and was sent to Ft. Monmouth,

knowing I was to be assigned to one of my three choice priorities (Art, Photography or Surveying), I was surprised to learn that the Army had my choices down as Infantry, Artillery or the Medical Corps and had "volunteered" me for Viet Nam where I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. Although I was totally against what was going on there, as an Army photographer I had a good deal of freedom to do as I wished and go where I wanted to – in contrast to the soldiers in the 101st who were confined to base except for combat forays. I had twenty photographers and lab technicians reporting to me, had a jeep and a buddy who had a helicopter to fly me about. I took thousands of pictures. Some I provided to a new museum in Kentucky commemorating the 101st and others I kept. I still have some – they would upset a lot of people so I rarely show them."

"Not all of my concerns were about Viet Nam for while I was there our young son came down with scarlet

### (Footnotes)

<sup>4</sup> Jim Gray, a long-time member of ASMA and past Board Member from Tennessee, is a versatile painter and sculptor as well – from Abraham Lincoln to Dolly Parton.

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with a partner but in May 1974 I moved to Lakeville, Massachusetts to take a job with WTEV TV in New Bedford. I started as an editor and became a photographer and moved around a good bit covering stories – I really enjoyed it. But in the end I was promoted to News Producer, a job I did not like. So in the fall of 1976, I quit and went to a school in Virginia to get my FCC 1st Class License – this was the time of transition from film to video tape and direct broadcast so the FCC was increasing the standards. When I got back, I could not find a job in media so I became a town planner for an industrial park in my town of Lakeville. That lasted for a year when, in February 1978, I saw an ad for a job as a TV Media Specialist in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Jobs were still tight and we had been wanting to build a home on the Cape for some time and this highly paid tour of duty would enable us to finance it.”

“So I signed a two year contract, sold the house, car and such and moved my family to Jeddah, the Saudi port city on the Red Sea and disembarkation point for the millions of pilgrims making their Hajj to Mecca. I worked in a state-of-the-art TV studio run by Raytheon – an amazing facility that served the media needs of the Kingdom. In spite of the marked differences in social practices – women’s dress, women not allowed to drive cars, no alcohol, etc., we lived comfortably in a Saudi military compound and the kids went to a school run by TWA Airlines. But it surely was not Massachusetts – my next-door neighbor outside the compound was the notorious Idi Amin in exile from his native Uganda where his regime killed 300,000.”

While Peter provided the services as a TV Media Specialist, he continued to paint and use his professional skill as a photographer to capture painting subjects. And the more figurative work he did, the more important this marriage of his talents of brush and camera became. He participated in international art exhibitions in Jeddah but once crossed the line unintentionally and had one of his

works pulled from the show for it showed the naked wrist of a woman. Plein air painting and taking images of people generally was not a good idea in a country that frowned on such. But our Western photographer/artist was drawn to what he saw in this new world so he was determined to capture it on film and canvas. “First I found the ‘brown bag’ approach worked pretty well – a hole cut into the bag so a lens of a concealed camera could see through. But I needed greater latitude so I began strapping garbage bags and the like on the outside of my car to hide the camera while operating it from within. I was able to get a good deal of reference material and did a lot of painting based on it. I even developed a special limited palette (described earlier) that seemed to work perfectly for the colors of Saudi landscape.” One can see how all of this would culminate in his arrest in Mecca.

At the end of his two-year contract, the family returned to Massachusetts for a couple of weeks before returning to Saudi Arabia under a one-year contract extension. During this brief period, they contracted to build a house on the Cape and arranged supervision to oversee it in their absence.

Back in Saudi Arabia, Peter also found both his talent as an artist and photographer opened up doors to the kings and princes of Saudi Arabia. He was contracted to video the three-day wedding of the son of a very wealthy Saudi. It was an extravaganza: Bedouin ceremonies in the desert at night with 6,000 lights and



“Nantucket Summer” • Oil on Panel • 28” x 22”

clouds of incense hovering over eight hundred sofas spread out on four acres of Persian carpets; fifty leading chefs brought from fifty countries around the world to feed the guests; and, of course, a heavily be-jeweled bride. The groom apparently had a sense of humor for he presented his bride with a Lamborghini – knowing full well that, as a woman, it was illegal for her to drive it. I had done seven portraits of Saudi royalty and was commissioned to do one of this bride. I completed hers after I returned to the States and when it was ready, her family flew to New York City and took a floor at the Plaza Hotel to receive the work.” A curious aspect about these portraits is the commissions called for them to look exactly like photographs. That was because the kings and princes are known by their ubiquitous photographic images so a

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painted portrait, if it is to be recognized, should look like the photograph!”

## Career as a Professional Artist

Peter’s plan to build a house on the Cape with money he earned from his Saudi tours and to have it ready upon his return so he could begin a new life as a professional artist was carefully thought out. But reality intervened, for when he brought his family back he found gross negligence where he hoped to find a house. “Paying contractors up front turned out to be a poor idea. I ended up having to spend a number of years completing the house myself while trying to paint. I sold my works in local art shows, flea markets and even Art Expo in New York City. But I found that the tourists who visited the Cape were not the same crowd that browsed in the art galleries of Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard. This point was driven home when two women spent the longest time studying one of my works in a local art show but were shocked to learn that the “\$800” price tag was indeed \$800 and not \$8.00. I knew I had to get into a Nantucket gallery and set about to do it.”

As we have seen, Peter did marine paintings from the age of ten on. They disappeared in his severe abstract phase in the years after the Army but started to reappear as he got back into figurative painting and, when he had a chance during his media professional years, he painted marines from time to time – even a couple in Saudi Arabia. But now he was free to paint anything he wanted to, so he thought. The truth was he needed to support his family and he realized that he would be better off painting what buyers wanted. So it was when he started with a leading gallery in Nantucket. They had a stable full of marine painters including some of the best so there was no “toe in the door” using his marines. However, Peter realized that they might be attracted to a work he had just done of three women in white on a beach – a romantic sort of image of bygone days - but he had just sold it to a wine store. So he bought it back and took it to the Nantucket gallery

where it sold for three times the price he had just paid to repurchase it. That was the beginning of a long period of successful sales of similar paintings.

“My interest in the narrative – dating back to tales of family lure when I was young – surfaced in these works. They relate my own experience with my family on beaches but the “white” came about because I did not want color of clothes to interfere with the scene. I found white takes on the reflected color of what is around it – skin tones, beaches, surf, sky, making it all more harmonious. But one thing hinges on another, and I soon found I built up quite a collection of antique white women’s dresses and garments. I even have one gown that graced Lincoln’s first Inaugural Ball.” Since Peter had an attractive wife and daughter, he did not have to go far for models. Although the market demanded more and more of his “women in white,” he also found the market appreciated his still lifes. He continued marines but his gallery had other sources for such so he did not paint as many of those as he would have liked.

In marked contrast to the brief period of weeks when Peter cranked out 18” x 24” marine paintings at an astounding rate for the Westinghouse Hotel chain prior to going into the Army, he developed a glazing technique that requires a great deal of time to produce a painting. In part this can be traced back to the woman who introduced Peter to oil washes in Florida but more fundamentally he recognizes it comes from a fascination he had with light coming through translucent material – plastic toys, colored glass, etc. – when he was a boy. In the house he built there is homage to this phenomenon in the form of stained glass windows that he installed.

An article in *American Art Collector* entitled “Loving the Luminosity” states, “One of the most prominent qualities of a Quidley painting is the level of luminosity he is able to achieve. This comes from years spent trying to perfect this style as well as serious attention to the way the paint is applied to the panel and technical

aspects that surround it. I was painting on canvas but still incorporated the wash technique with glazes while staying with translucent pigments. Over the last fifteen years, I have continued to do this but without an underpainting so that I can get as much luminosity as possible. Then, in 1991, I made the switch to panels to also affect the luminosity of the painting.”

The article continues, “Quidley enjoys painting on panel because of the surface quality it offers him and also because it negates some of the effects of the pigment that can occur when it is used on canvas. “You just don’t have all the little nooks and crannies, and you don’t have the small shadows that develop from the thickness of the pigment because the surface is so flat. About ten years ago, I also started sanding the panels and using pumice on the last step so that the painting ends up having a very high gloss on it.”<sup>b</sup>

Peter loves the sea and apparently has from the beginning. But ever since his son Chris sailed on his Stonehill College sailing team in Easton, MA, he has had more direct experience with it. “Chris started introducing dinghies as props when I would photograph my modeling wife and daughter at the seaside and we began more aggressive pursuit of subject matter off shore. Since I believe in the old saying ‘Know what you paint,’ I got into sailing and have owned a number of sail boats.” This resulted in some stunning paintings, one of which appeared in the ASMA Thirtieth Anniversary (14th) National Exhibition, *Nantucket Sunshine* which in narrative style depicts the *Reliance* emerging from the fog into a patch of sunlight while participating in the race around Nantucket, the Opera House Cup Race. Typical of his methodical attention to detail and translucent engineering of paint, this 24” x 30” took over two months of work to complete.<sup>5</sup>

Chris has played another important role in his father’s career. In 2005 he established Quidley & Company in Nantucket with a high school friend, Robert Giacchetti who “has a lot of



*Peter Quidley's magnificent studio*

business sense” and began to represent his father. Although the market still has Peter in a gilded cage – demanding more of his “women in white,” he is now able to offer more of his marine paintings. “I have many ideas about how to combine my interest in the narrative approach, my interest in figures and my love of the sea and I am looking forward to translating them into paintings. The sea offers so many circumstances that elicit emotions from people, be it alone or with others in a storm at sea, the excitement of a race, the peacefulness of a summer day or first light of morning. I have so much to do and so little time!”

One way many of Peter’s ASMA colleagues have dealt with this problem is to expose themselves to the demands of plein air painting where changing light forces one to paint quickly. Fellow William Davis, another exceptional studio painter, recently talked about his introduction to plein air painting in this

(Footnotes)

<sup>5</sup> See Page 49 of *Contemporary American Marine Art: American Society of Marine Artists, 30th Anniversary Exhibition*, Library of Congress Number 2003116597.

column: “Speed – that was another thing I came to learn,” he said. “No time to draw the bark on the trees with a pencil; in fact, no time for drawing anything with pencil – use the brush!”<sup>c</sup> Peter tried direct painting outdoors twenty years ago “but the techniques I use did not work. I am a studio painter.” And his constancy at that is notable. “I have to paint every day. I couldn’t even stop when I was taking care of my wife in her last years.”

Of the many unusual aspects of Peter’s story, perhaps the most is a fact he keeps citing, namely, that he never took any painting lessons. What art schooling he had dealt with drawing, composition, etc. – but not painting. Moreover, “I never went to a museum until the mid-Eighties.” (When he was about forty and well along in his career as a professional artist.) The unexpected benefit of this sheltered existence has been the development of his own very effective technique based on repeated experiment and persistence that results in strikingly beautiful, rich narratives of the sea.

## **FRANK WILLIAM HANDLEN, FELLOW (RETIRED), KENNEBUNKPORT, ME**

Website: [www.frankhandlen.com](http://www.frankhandlen.com)

One of the first Fellows in our Society, Frank Handlen has served on our Board for several years and was active for twenty-two years before he retired at the age of eighty-five. (At the time this was the only way to shed Fellowship responsibilities; since then the Society has created a new category, Fellow Emeritus, which achieves this end). But he and his wife, Mary – now both in their mid-nineties – remain very active. A long-time devotee of plein air painting, you can still find Frank out with his pastels and paints even in the dead of a Maine winter. Clearly, he is an example for all of us so we thought we should visit the couple.

This, however, is more difficult than it might first appear. First, it has taken me a couple of years to get Frank to agree to this interview and then, when he did, I was faced with the taciturn and stoic Down East attitude: “If you can’t improve upon silence, don’t try.” Or, when I greeted him on the phone with, “How are you, Frank?” his reply, “Eulp, sitting up and taking



**FRANK WILLIAM HANDLEN, FELLOW (RETIRED), KENNEBUNKPORT, ME**

Website: [www.frankhandlen.com](http://www.frankhandlen.com)