

TRAVEL

The art that ‘escaped’ from Vermont is back home again. Here’s where to find it.

By **Diane Bair and Pamela Wright** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 31, 2023, 10:00 a.m.



Artist Henry Shokler is a favorite of Lyman Orton; among his works in the show is this one, a serigraph called “Old Bondville.” DIANE BAIR

MANCHESTER, Vt. — What does a bottle of Evening in Paris cologne and a painting by Cecil Crosley Bell have in common? Two words: Lyman Orton.

You probably know Lyman Orton's work, albeit indirectly: his parents Vrest and Mildred founded The Vermont Country Store (www.vermontcountrystore.com) in 1946. To stock the stores in Weston and (as of 1967) Rockingham, and fill catalog orders, Orton and his three sons scour the country for unique, hard-to-find, useful items — including nostalgic products like Evening in Paris cologne, Clubman Aftershave, Colorforms, and Teaberry Gum. Those candies Grandma doled out, that you haven't seen since you were 5? They've got 'em. Classic, beloved brands from the past are a major part of the allure at the Orton family's sprawling, homespun country stores. "At The Vermont Country Store, what once was lost has since been found," according to their website.

That zeal for treasure-hunting goes a long way toward explaining Lyman Orton's hobby (OK, obsession) for the past 45 years: Tracking down the art of Vermont that has left the state and bringing it back home.

Now, the art that "escaped" Vermont — as Orton describes it — is back where it belongs. About 200 pieces of art are now on exhibit in the Bennington Museum in Bennington and the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester. Spread between the two venues, "For the Love of Vermont: The Lyman Orton Collection" is on display through Nov. 5. In the words of Bennington Museum curator Jamie Franklin, the work comprises "the collection of Vermont art of the 20th century."

ADVERTISING



"What once was lost has since been found" is a slogan at The Vermont Country Store (Weston location shown here); no wonder Lyman Orton loves tracing down art that has "escaped" Vermont. DIANE BAIR

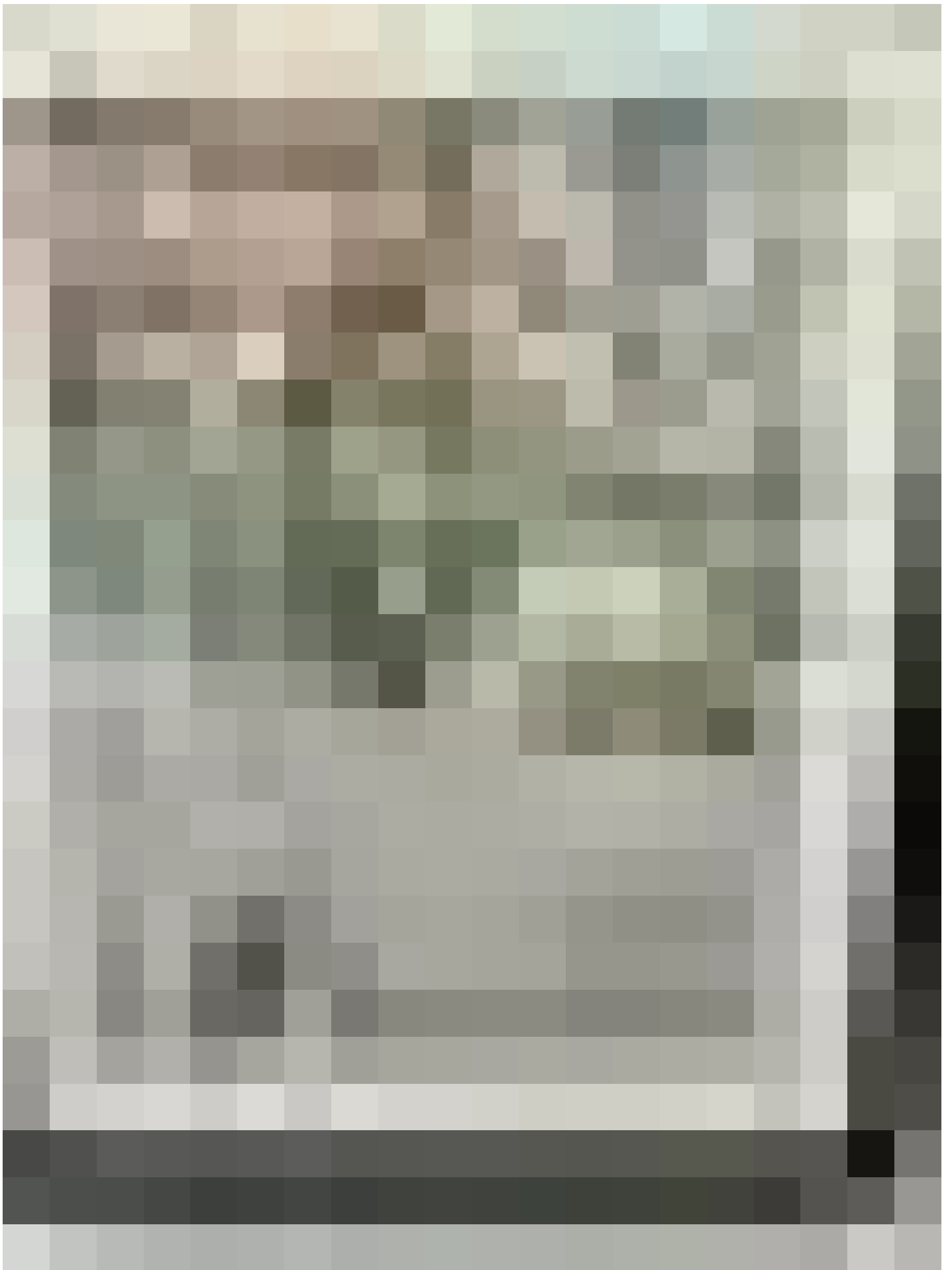
Plus, it's a homecoming of sorts. "Dozens of the artists in the show exhibited together in Manchester, and now here they all are, nearly 100 years later, exhibiting together again — in Manchester! I love that part of the story," says Anita Rafael, who wrote a book about the collection, "For the Love of Vermont," in collaboration with Lyman Orton.

The exhibition features artworks on canvas, board, paper, and mixed media, including originals of Saturday Evening Post magazine cover illustrations. More than 65 artists are represented, including Rockwell Kent, John Clymer, Churchill Ettinger, Paul Sample, Mead Schaeffer, John Atherton, Marion Huse, Kyra Markham, and Bernadine Custer. Many of these artists applied for work with the New Deal and the Federal Arts Project during the Great Depression.

A Vermont time capsule

The show offers a time-travel trip through Vermont. Created in the state, by local artists and visiting flatlanders alike, the art is grouped thematically. “Making a Living” depicts Vermonters tapping maple trees, sawing logs, and working the fields with horses and plows, while “Coming Together” reveals community life and recreation — its subjects are ice fishing, skiing, attending rehearsals at the Weston Playhouse, and congregating at the Equinox Hotel. The “Village Beautiful” section of the show features country stores, covered bridges, and even the Orton family house in Weston, an oil painting by Harry Shokler (1962). Of course, the natural beauty of Vermont is on full display, in paintings such as “Mount Equinox, Summer” by Rockwell Kent and “Dorset Landscape” by Harriet de Sanchez.

Part of the pleasure of seeing the show is discovering recognizable places. That is by design. “I like to get paintings that are identifiable as specific places in Vermont,” Orton says. He buys what he likes, and has probably gotten some great deals at times, and overpaid at other times, but has never suffered buyer’s remorse. He’s still collecting. “The more you find, the more you want!” he says, the collector’s lament. “I’ve become obsessed with this. It’s great fun.”



Scenic Vermont was a popular cover art subject of the old Saturday Evening Post; this cover, featuring Bromley Mountain by Mead Shaeffer, appeared in 1946. DIANE BAIR

The thrill of the hunt

At one time, auctions, art shows, and antiques shows were Orton's main sources for buying art. Now, he gets internet alerts of "lost" Vermont artwork. But the thrill of the hunt endures — kind of like tracking down "The Original Yodeling Pickle" (a real product) for The Vermont Country Store. Not long ago, he spotted a 1957 painting, "Go Boys! Go! Go!" by Cecil Crosley Bell, an artist who summered and painted in Vermont, in Carmel, Calif. "How did it end up 3,000 miles away? Who knows? But I bought it." The night before the exhibit opened in Manchester, he bought another Bell painting, "Evening in the Park, Vermont (1963)" from a New York dealer — and it was hung in time for the show.

Another fun find: A painting by Glen Buck, "Snow Rollers," depicting the precursor to snow plows. "Buck made his own frame and embellished it with seashells," Orton notes. "How incongruous to mix seashells and a snow scene. But that makes it so charming and wonderful."

He also loves paintings of covered bridges, "a subject that the art establishment hates, because they're so touristy." Orton views the bridges (the state still has more than 100 of them, he notes) as symbolic of Vermont. Thus, "I buy every painting I see that's a Vermont-covered bridge!"



Epoch Artisans Gallery, a coop, is just one of several art galleries in and around Manchester Center. DIANE BAIR

We attended the opening at the Southern Vermont Art Center — a beautiful 100-acre property at the foot of the Taconic Mountains — where an estimated 500 guests mingled with Orton, author Anita Rafael, and Anne Corso, executive director of SVAC. The mood was celebratory. “Art that had flown the coop is finally home again!” Orton said.

But why is it so important to “repatriate” (Orton’s word) this art? “The simple answer is, this is where they were created. In, say, Carmel, California, there’s no connection to Vermont,” he says.

Also, as a shopkeeper at heart, he likes to see things out on display. He wants the art to be viewed and enjoyed. Wonderful as museums are, “people give them things, they buy things, but they can’t possibly display it all. Many pieces are stored and never see the light of day,” he says. Now “Vermonters can see this work at two prestigious local museums and feel a sense of pride. And we have so many visitors, it makes sense the art is right here.”

And there’s this: Viewing the pieces displayed together reveals the story of life in Vermont — a random single painting here or there wouldn’t have the same impact. But maybe we’re overthinking this.

As Lyman Orton says, “Let’s not take ourselves too seriously just because it’s art. Let’s have some fun.”

If you go . . .

“For the Love of Vermont: The Lyman Orton Collection” is on exhibit at the Southern Vermont Arts Center and the Bennington Museum until Nov. 5. Southern Vermont Arts Center, 860 Southern Vermont Arts Center Drive, Manchester, Vt.; 802-362-1405; www.svac.org. Bennington Museum, 75 Main St., Bennington, Vt.; 802-447-1571; www.benningtonmuseum.org. For more, visit www.fortheloveofvermont.com.

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