

# MAURICE FREEDMAN

POETRY IN PAINT: A CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE 2004





Maurice Freedman 1930, Saint-Tropez

# MAURICE FREEDMAN

## POETRY IN PAINT: A CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE

Retrospective Exhibition  
Curated by Mary Sherman

Introduction by Elizabeth Ives Hunter  
*Executive Director, CMFA*

AUGUST 14–SEPTEMBER 19, 2004

CAPE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS  
Dennis, Massachusetts

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks go out to Mary Sherman for curating this exhibit and penning its text; her enthusiasm is inspiring. Philip May continues in the tradition of his father, Morton May, to provide support and understanding. Julie Heller, who has exhibited Maurice's work for thirteen seasons in Provincetown, has shown true dedication in recognizing my father's talents. And, finally, my deep appreciation to Marjorie Morrow who has made an extraordinary effort in producing this catalog; by her knowing Maurice personally she has helped to bring his vision to us all. *Bravo and thank you!*

Alan H. Freedman



*Rockport Quarry Dock* 1933

Oil on canvas. 24 x 30 inches (FIG. 1)

First exhibit, 1934,  
Midtown Galleries, NYC .

Design: High Noon Graphics, NYC

Photography: Ed Watkins / Joel L. Freedman

Photographs of the artist courtesy of Alan H. Freedman

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Cover: *Fort Hill View* 1974

Oil on canvas. 24 x 30 inches

Back cover: *Maurice Freedman* 1940

Hunterdon County, NJ

## INTRODUCTION

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We are indeed fortunate to be able to host the Maurice Freedman centennial exhibition POETRY IN PAINT. In many ways, Freedman epitomizes the essence of art in America from the 1920's through the 1970's. He lived and worked at a time when traditional methods of painting and seeing were being challenged by new, if not revolutionary, perspectives. Freedman traveled and studied so that he could merge the varying influences of the twentieth century into a highly personal style. His work stands on its own as a visual experience whose execution points the viewer in the direction of other art forms, such as poetry and music.

The Cape Museum of Fine Arts is indebted to Alan and Joel Freedman, and to Mary Sherman, for making this exhibition possible.

Elizabeth Ives Hunter

*Executive Director, CAPE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS*



*Through the Living Room* 1967 Oil on canvas. 22 x 40 inches (FIG. 2)

## MAURICE FREEDMAN

### *Poetry in Paint: A Centennial Tribute*

by Mary Sherman

Maurice Freedman's paintings are welcome rarities. In a fast paced society obsessed with one-minute sound bites, their engaging visual revelries expose a glimpse of existence, so compelling as to stop viewers dead in their tracks.

Coming of age in the 1920s and working up through the 1970s, Freedman created images that span the period from European Modernism to Abstract Expressionism. His landscapes, still lifes and portraits unabashedly delight in the physical manipulation of paint, speaking eloquently of the joy of encountering life, even its most seemingly insignificant moments.

"He learned from Andre Lhôte and others in Paris how to draw with the loaded brush, how to handle rich and strong color without letting it get out of hand, and how to give individuality to the objects of the everyday," writes *New York Times* critic John Russell of Freedman's 1982 retrospective at New York City's Midtown Galleries. "He has never lost that initial vigor of the hand or the driving curiosity as to what may come of it. There are paintings in this show that deserve to go straight into the history of American painting of this century."

"America is lucky to have a painter like Maurice Freedman," echoed Morton D. May, the great Max Beckmann patron, who also remained Freedman's steadfast supporter.

Like many brilliant painters of his generation, Freedman's talents became unfairly lost in the crush to promote Abstract Expressionism as the quintessential American style. Associated

with artists such as John Marin, Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove, Freedman's art draws from the past and moves forward with a decidedly American twist. His art was borne of hard-won experience, the experience of slowly and carefully looking at a scene and transforming it into paint.

His work is best beheld in person, making a centennial exhibition such as this a requisite trek. His paintings both deserve and require the dying art of slow looking. They require face-to-face encounters with paint surfaces, nuances of color and compositional forays.

Freedman was a consummate romantic, looking longingly for the poetry in the everyday. In this regard, his work is linked to the French movement Intimism, whose artists focused on domestic interiors, commonplace occurrences and how particular instances—as when a cloud passes overhead, a sliver of sunlight brushes the edge of a table, a flower reaches full bloom—can offer a glimpse of transcendence, the sense that hope and meaning lies within the smallest action.

His subjects, from the Cape's dunes to his studio interiors, are the sights that surrounded him. They are not bombastic or theatrical. As Bonnard defined the works of the Intimists, they draw emotion from “everyday acts of life.” In the same way that Giorgio Morandi approached his bottles, Eduoard Vuillard his wall paper patterns or Henri Matisse his studios with their wrought iron windows, Freedman approached his objects with a certain understanding and tenderness. The items that occupy his canvases have their own personality, often appearing in other pictures, slightly aged or, alternately, more vibrant. As Freedman said, *“In a still life I'll discover certain personalities in the various objects.”*

In Freedman's paintings, small moments are elevated to visual leitmotifs. They tease, invite, and take us on journeys along their different painted surfaces, offering up varying passages of delight. His art insinuates; it never merely describes.



*Goldfish and Egyptian Cat* 1947 Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 inches (FIG. 3)

*"If you are sensitive to what's there,"* Freedman noted in an interview with his son Joel, *"it's like a door that suddenly opens and then you slowly walk in. You look around...you see the relationships of the various colors and forms, the organic structure that goes on, a sense of logic which you recognize in so many other forms. All this is so reassuring to your life that you go on living because it's so beautiful."*

Freedman found his own way of speaking directly to his audience by filtering his life through an engagement with tradition—the traditions that shaped the artistic tenets of the past, those of his day, and those still alive in the best works today. As May said of Freedman, "In everything he puts on canvas you can see his gentle spirit, his understanding and his feeling for nature. When he puts in very strong mountains, roads with automobiles speeding along, or boats in harbor, you feel his personality. Maurice Freedman is in the things he paints."

At a very early age, Freedman exhibited an aptitude and passion for art. His student works, such as *Still Life with Apples, Grapes and Jar* (FIG. 4) belie his academic training. As a high school student, he attended classes at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, followed by studies at the

Massachusetts College of Art, then known as the Normal School, and another stint at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where he received a scholarship. By the time he had finished this training, he had thoroughly absorbed how to translate form into color and value, producing remarkably assured still lifes and landscapes. But, by then, New England seemed stultifying.

Tempted by the excitement of New York City, Freedman moved there in 1926 and, not long after—like many American artists—he took off to Paris to study the avant-garde tendencies of the day. He studied with Lhôte, absorbing the principles of German



*Still Life with Apples, Grapes and Jar* 1926  
Oil on canvas. 22 x 28 inches (FIG. 4)

Expressionism and Fauvism—whose artists negated a picture's traditional foreground, middle ground, and background by painting elements with equally intense color. Pattern unifies these surfaces, and, for Freedman, the physicality of paint and the joy in its manipulation became more and more pronounced.

In his own self-portrait (FIG. 7), the background pushes forward, angular white arched clouds surround the artist's head, compressing the distance between the background and the face. In the narrow space behind Freedman stands a lighthouse on the right and a lone boat on the left, the artist between the two. Echoing the white bands, his right eyebrow is cocked, as if asking which way he will go, to the safety of the shore or out to sea. It is a somewhat melancholy picture, thickly painted in broad swipes of creamy paint, but questioning all the same.

At this point, Freedman had already joined New York City's Midtown Galleries, who represented his work for six decades. His dealer there, A.D. Gruskin, aptly noted in his foreword for Freedman's first show at the gallery in 1934, "[Freedman] gives evidence of marked ability to handle pigment with subtly handled tone gradations, to organize his canvases soundly and to infuse into his work a highly emotional quality."



*Drying Cod, Gloucester* 1936  
Oil on canvas. 20 x 30 inches (FIG. 5)



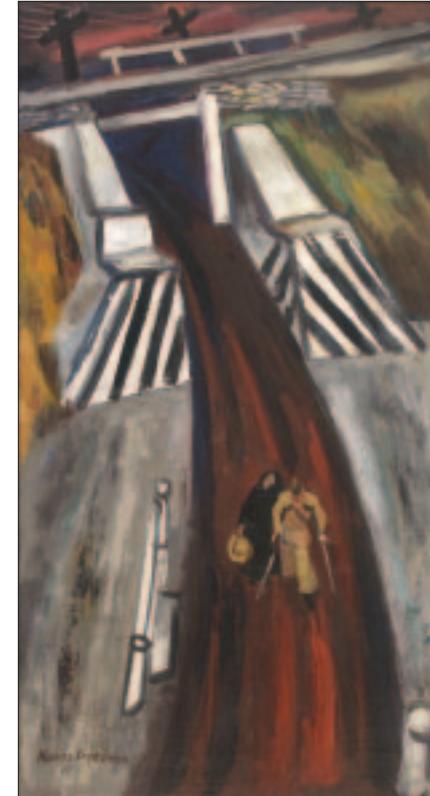
1930 Paris Oil on canvas.  
19 7/8 x 24 inches (FIG. 6)



*Pemaquid Self Portrait*  
1938  
Oil on board.  
20 x 16 inches  
(FIG. 7)

In 1939, Freedman married the Vassar graduate Louise Arnstein, who later went on to be an outstanding artist, helping to found the influential Serigraph Society. As he had done since moving to New York, he continued to support himself first as Art Director for Pathé Studios and then RCA Studios and, later, for Columbia Pictures, leaving him free to paint as he wished. Painting excursions to Monhegan Island, the Adirondacks, the rocky coasts of Maine, the Delaware River region, New Mexico and Cape Cod, as well as side trips to Italy, Spain and France, reinforced his interest in light and pattern.

In the 1940s, however, the darker colors and gritty realism of life in New York stalked such works as *Into the Subway* (FIG. 9). Executed in dank, moody tones, Freedman's inventive warping of space foreshadows George Tooker's claustrophobic nightmares. In these works by Freedman, as in Cubism, space unfolds over time. One reads a painting like *Into the Subway* from left to right, from inside one bay of the platform to the unfolding of another bay and another. Later in his life, this kind of compressed spatial panorama reappears in lighter tones in *Through the Living Room* (FIG. 2), again underscoring Freedman's own synthesis of abstraction and figuration.



*The Homecoming*  
1944  
Oil on canvas.  
30 x 16 inches  
(FIG. 8)



Maurice and Louise Freedman, 1950



*Into the Subway* 1942  
Oil on canvas.  
37 x 26 inches (FIG. 9)

*Off Whitehead* 1940  
Oil on canvas.  
20 x 30 inches (FIG. 10)



*Road to Washington Crossing* 1945  
Oil on canvas.  
18 x 42 inches (FIG. 11)





Always Freedman is present in the work, but not in a typically anecdotal way. Instead, his images regale the viewer with his passionate intensity—the way a stroke of paint will be left, defiantly smacked up against a contrasting color as in *Low Tide Formations* (FIG. 14). There, a rusty red rushes up from the painting's bottom edge, butting up against a swirl of bluish purple. Similarly the thick bands of viridian green leap off the top of the canvas and then return with just enough authority to transform them into a dramatic sky.

As an American, Freedman's work retains a certain raw physicality. His touch is rarely light, nervous or tenuous. He perfected a clean stroke and extroverted color. He injected fresh syncopated rhythms and gaiety into the legacy of French Intimism. In *Saraceni Positano* (FIG. 16), a bold black line confidently splinters the seascape into a series of irregular rectangles; in *Night Highway to New York* (FIG. 13), a series of small daubs refuse to gracefully leave the picture plane, but instead remain steadfast at the bottom and top of the canvas; and in *Mad River Falls* (FIG. 12), two horizontal slashes of red paint insistently accent the canvas's upper left hand corner.

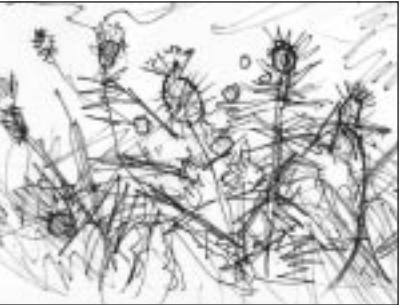


FACING PAGE: *Mad River Falls* 1963 Oil on canvas. 40 x 20 inches (FIG. 12)

THIS PAGE: *Night Highway to New York* 1950 Oil on canvas. 20 x 36 inches (FIG. 13)

CENTERSPREAD: *Low Tide Formations* 1951 Oil on canvas. 20 x 40 inches (FIG. 14)





Even Freedman's drawings are marked by an equally jaunty and sure touch. Often he drew with a thick, felt tip marker, making firm lines that couldn't be retracted. Expertly, he modulated such strokes, with smaller dashes and quick trills across the page. This perfectly pitched play of subtle surface incident, creates the visual music that permeates Freedman's work. From the staccato-like dots used to describe a bunch of flowers, to the vivid lyrical passages that express an expanse of land, or the full throttled thrusts and jabs reaching up the picture plane to suggest thick foliage, Freedman was never just describing the elements in a scene; he was expressing its underlying harmonies, shimmering dissonances and improvisational riffs.

Often from the drawings Freedman translated his sensations directly into paint; but he did so in the studio. There, he distilled his observations of the world into tightly nuanced orchestrations, enhanced by his understanding of color and inventive techniques.



*From the sketchbooks of Maurice Freedman*



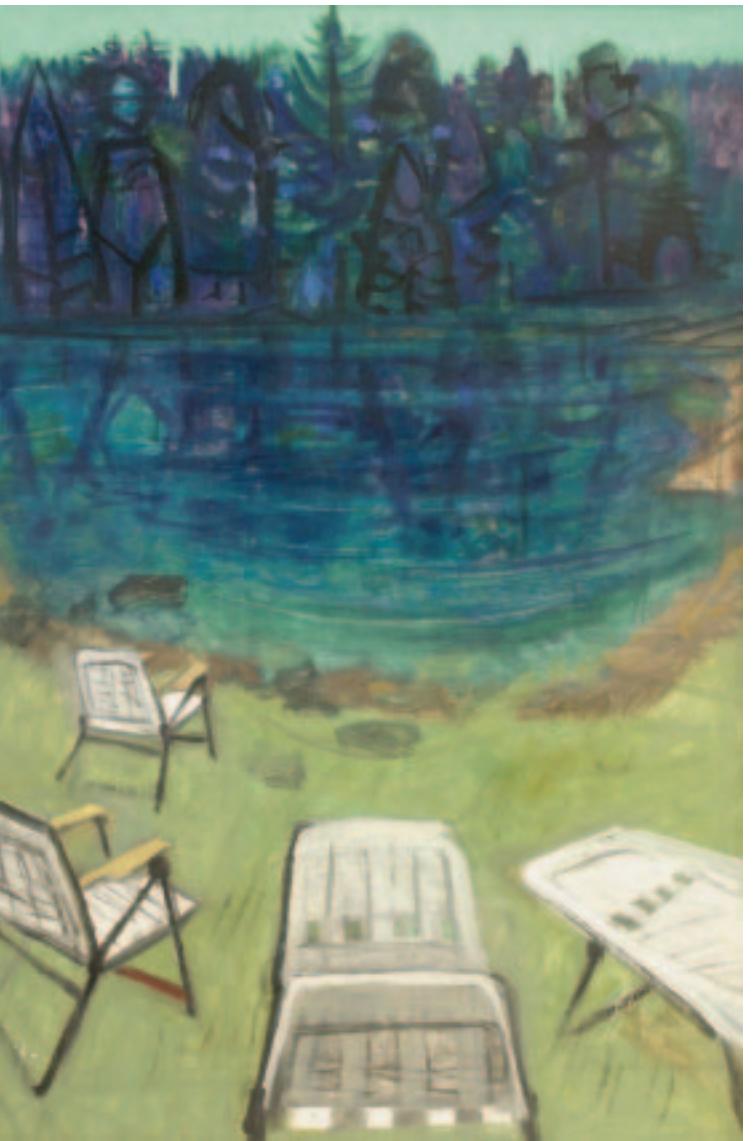
*Duo* 1962 Oil on canvas. 16 x 20 inches (FIG. 15)



*Saraceni Positano* 1979 Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 inches (FIG. 16)



*Rising Fog* 1977 Oil on canvas. 50 x 72 inches (FIG. 17)



*Silent Pond Revisited* 1972  
Oil on canvas. 30 x 20 inches (FIG. 18)

Basically, a stroke of paint is a rudimentary but versatile mark. Paint strokes are used for establishing color and value, setting boundaries and creating shapes; but for Freedman, the common stroke of paint also can be used for expressing the inexpressible. In Freedman's paintings and drawings, there is little indication of an imposed system or doctrine at work. Instead, there is a sense that the works have grown out of a keen and focused sensitivity, awake to every nuance of their making—no matter if the marks are as bristling and explosive as in *Fire Dance* (FIG. 19), or as luminous as the blue-green marks that stretch across the water of *Silent Pond Revisited* (FIG. 18), or as halting, rectangular and rambunctious as in the blocky forms of *Road into the Forest* (FIG. 20).

In other instances, as seen in one of the smallest canvases in the show, Freedman narrows his expressive use of color to a few essentials to suggest the intense luminosity of a setting sun. A stroke of ultramarine acts as a line of division that allows the real horizon to be negated without confusion. Its formal necessity cancels out any need for it to stand as an accurate visual representation. The

*Fire Dance* 1982  
Oil on canvas. 30 x 36 inches  
(FIG. 19)



*Road Into the Forest* 1964  
Oil on canvas. 24 x 30 inches  
(FIG. 20)



result is a serene, undefined space in which a brilliant dash of color streaks across the surface. It is almost shocking to see something so concise and simple pack such a huge punch.

A hint of melancholy, however, continues to linger in these spatial confines as well as something—to use a word that Freedman often did—thrilling. Even in the otherwise languid *Through the Living Room* (FIG. 2), the opaque daylight touches of paint punching rectangular patches throughout the canvas are surprisingly enlivened by the free invention of Freedman's brushwork and a sparkling dot of electric yellow off to the side of the table.



poraries—such as Milton Avery, Karl Knaths, Dove and Hartley—were abstracting reality to create a tense balance between abstraction

In his later works, the improvisations grew more pronounced. Like anyone in complete command of their medium, Freedman exploited it to the hilt. At a time, when his contemporaries—such as Milton Avery, Karl Knaths, Dove and Hartley—were abstracting reality to create a tense balance between abstraction

and figuration, Freedman added a fierce interest in the physicality of paint—the ability to scrape it down to a smooth haze, enlivened by lyrical trails to describe the atmospheric effects in *Rising Fog* (FIG. 17). Or in other cases, turning to the other end of his brush, scratching lines, into his paint surfaces to suggest, for instance, the diamond pattern under the floor of his two sons playing music, Joel at his cello and Alan at his guitar, in *Two Brothers Sterne House* (FIG. 15).

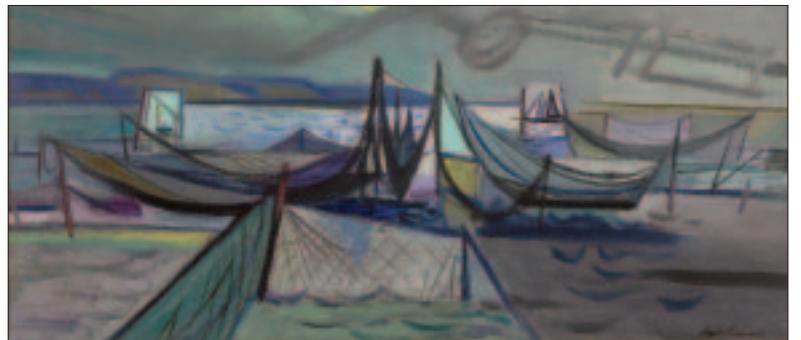
Much of the exquisiteness of Freedman's work lies in this kind of concern with inventive nuance, both obvious and suggestive. In *Mast and Stars* (FIG. 21), riotous colors, closely cropped, smacked against one another and separated by an intense, opaque black, create a play of light and translucency that is as seductive and alluring as it is clearly a by-product of the varying application and stunning juxtapositions of wet paint. The atmospheric quality of the light—the element that so captivated Matisse—and the taut accent of the black outline stabbing through the colors form a subtle myriad of visual relationships that are so palpable, you feel you can touch them, that they can be navigated the way a blind person reads braille. This process is revealed to the person who takes the time.



*Mast and Stars* 1950 Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 inches (FIG. 21)

*"Things usually evolve as painters work,"* Freedman said, *"Things happen. Certain paths open up, which artists take advantage of, and it shows—a kind of spirit of curiosity and following through various color suggestions or divine directions. There becomes a more inspiring performance."*

As such, Freedman's paintings are best seen as a steady accumulation of visual encounters, the experience of slowly and carefully looking at an art object. Recalling the madeleine cake that unleashes Marcel Proust's unconscious in *In Search of Lost Time*, Freedman's paintings are "like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfalteringly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence the vast structure of recollection."<sup>1</sup>



*Hindu and the Weirs* 1961 Oil on canvas. 18 x 40 inches (FIG. 22)

Stylistically, Freedman's works are classically based, predicated on idealized forms; and they are more than that. His paintings are filled with subtle inflections and rich suggestiveness. These intimations are reflected in the paint. The sensuousness of his paint handling defines his bold and striking images and therein lie the seeds of modernism. In this way, Freedman helped set the stage for all that was yet to come. □

Mary Sherman, 2004

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MARY SHERMAN is an artist who recently was Artist-in-Residence at M.I.T and currently teaches at Northeastern University and Boston College. As a critic, her writings have appeared in *ArtNews*, *ARTS Magazine*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *Art New England*. She is also the founder and director of the award-winning, international arts collaborative TransCultural Exchange.



*Bay Studio* 1959 Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 inches (FIG. 23)

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*. (New York City, Modern Library, 2003), p. 63-64.



*Rock Harbor Inlet* 1946 Oil on canvas. 22 x 34 inches (FIG. 24)

*Flight Over Truro* 1951  
Oil on canvas.  
36 x 20 inches (FIG. 25)





*Stonington Lily Pond* 1957 Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 inches (FIG. 26)

## MAURICE FREEDMAN

### BORN

November 14, 1904, Boston, MA

### DIED

January 27, 1985, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

### EDUCATION

School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,\* 1919–1921

Massachusetts Normal School of Art, 1922–1926  
(now Massachusetts College of Art)

Art Students' League, 1927

Studies with André Lhôte, Ferdinand Léger,  
Amedee Ozenfant, Paris 1928–1931

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Cape Museum of Fine Arts, Dennis, MA:  
2004 Centennial Retrospective

Greenhut Galleries, Portland, ME: 2004

Julie Heller Gallery, Provincetown, MA:  
1991–2004 annually

Midtown Galleries, New York: 1934, 1939, 1944, 1946,  
1948, 1952, 1956, 1959, 1963, 1965, 1969, 1971,  
1975, 1977, 1979, 1982 Retrospective, 1985, 1987

Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY: 1989 Retrospective

Hobe Sound Galleries North, Portland, ME: 1987

Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis, MO:  
1972 Retrospective



\* The Maurice Freedman Memorial Scholarship Fund, established in 1986 by Janet Freedman, awards a stipend annually to a student of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Maurice Freedman 1955, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, NY

Art in Embassies Program, Washington, D.C.

Art Institute of Chicago, IL

Brooklyn Museum, NY

Butler Institute of American Art, OH

Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, PA

Columbus Museum of Art, OH

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Denver Art Museum, CO

The Jewish Museum, NY

Maine Coast Artists Gallery, Rockport, ME

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Midtown-Payson Gallery, NY

Midtown Galleries, NY

Museum of Contemporary Art, Madrid, Spain

National Academy of Design, NY

Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, PA

Shaw Gallery, ME

Toledo Museum of Art, OH

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, VA

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

Whitney Museum of American Art, NY

### PERMANENT COLLECTIONS / AWARDS

Allentown Art Museum, PA—*Hasam Purchase Award*

Anchorage Museum of History and Art, AL

Audubon Society, NY—*40th Anniversary Smith Binney Award*

Brandeis University—*Commissioned Work*

Brooklyn Museum, New York

Butler Institute of American Art, OH

Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, PA

Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH

Dayton Art Institute, OH

Denver Art Museum, CO

Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY

Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL

(continued)

## PERMANENT COLLECTIONS / AWARDS

(continued)

Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, Austin, TX  
LaJolla Museum of Contemporary Art, CA  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA  
Milwaukee Art Museum, WI  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MN  
University of Missouri Museum of Art, MO  
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC  
Weatherspoon Art Gallery  
Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, PA  
St. Lawrence University, Richard F. Brush Art Gallery, Canton, NY  
The St. Louis Art Museum, MO  
Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, FL  
Tel Aviv Museum  
Washington University Gallery of Art, Steinberg Hall, St. Louis, MO  
Wichita Art Museum, KS

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All paintings are in the collection of Alan Freedman and Joel Freedman except "Off Whitehead" (FIG. 10) and "Drying Cod, Gloucester" (FIG. 5) from the collection of Philip May.

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CAPE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS  
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