

Preserving the legacy of James Fitzgerald

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By Bob KeyesStaff Writer

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James Fitzgerald didn't make much effort to sell his paintings. The artist most closely associated with Maine's Monhegan Island believed the act of marketing his work distracted from his primary task, which was to paint. He worried his vision would be compromised by the messiness of the art market, the complicated nature of exhibitions and the stress of money.

If the work is good, people will remember it. If not, so be it. His legacy, he reasoned, would be left to others after his death.

Nearly a half-century since Fitzgerald died, his legacy is receiving renewed attention. The James Fitzgerald Legacy, a volunteer nonprofit organization that operates in coordination with the Monhegan Museum atop Lighthouse Hill on the island, has published a massive catalog of the artist's work, "James Fitzgerald: The Drawings and Sketches," that's based on the artist's sketchbooks.

It's the first of what is expected to be at least two catalogs and a series of exhibitions that will mark the 50th anniversary of Fitzgerald's death, in 2021.

Many painters – Sunday painters and professionals alike – have made Monhegan their personal playground. A dozen miles off the coast, the densely forested island has attracted generations of painters who are drawn by the saltiness of the fishing community, the rugged and dangerous cliffs and the mysterious forests. And the views.

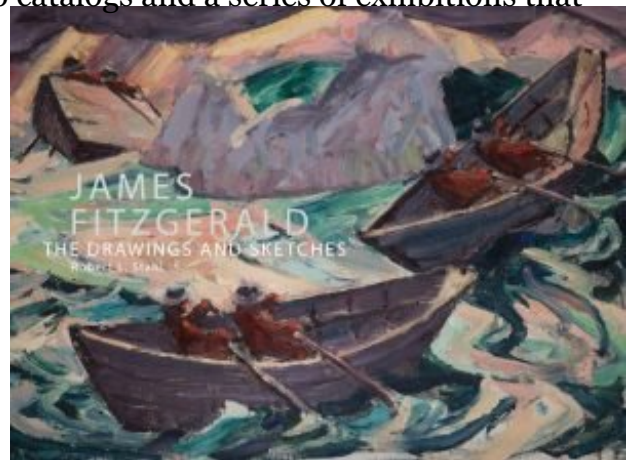
Fitzgerald embraced the island as much as any artist, living there in all seasons and becoming part of the year-round community.

Boston-born, he visited the island as a young man and returned in the 1940s, staying until his death three decades later. Like Rockwell Kent before him and Jamie Wyeth after, Fitzgerald made paintings from the island that reflected its mystery, mood and complexities, going beyond the bold beauty of the place. He also dedicated his artistic attention to Mount Katahdin in the woods of Maine, staying in the same wilderness camps as Frederic Church and Marsden Hartley.

The story of James Fitzgerald and the preservation of his legacy is a uniquely Maine do-it-yourself story. Fitzgerald, who died while on a painting adventure in Ireland in spring 1971, left his estate, including his Monhegan home and studio and all the work inside, to his island friends, Anne and Edgar Hubert. They were fans of Fitzgerald's paintings and became his patrons. In addition to buying his art, they paid off his mortgage and cared for him when he was sick. After he died, they were tasked with telling the story that Fitzgerald never cared to tell about himself.

The Huberts were not museum people and lacked curatorial experience, "but they did a remarkably good job," said Robert Stahl, the current director of the Fitzgerald Legacy, who, like the Huberts, also lacked professional art training and took the job because he loved the art and admired the artist. "They developed a database that involved old-fashioned family photo albums, with 3-by-5 photos and 3-by-5 index cards that would say things like 'title, dimension, year, medium, exhibition history' and so on. That was their system, and it was an amazing system. They had 1,400 entries in 15 photo albums."

The Huberts organized exhibitions and promoted Fitzgerald's work among museum curators, placing more than 150 paintings in 28 museums from Maine to Alaska. When Anne Hubert died in 2004, she left the Huberts' collection of Fitzgerald paintings, his library, archive and all materials related to his life and work, including his home and



A new catalog numbers 340 pages, is illustrated with more than 750 images and costs \$95 through the Monhegan Museum.

studio and a Grand Banks dory, to the Monhegan Museum. His home and studio, which were built and occupied by Rockwell Kent and are now recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, are open to the public. The dory, which Fitzgerald bought in 1965 and used as a model in his paintings and to row around the island to explore the cliffs from the perspective of the water, sits on the museum lawn and has been a favorite subject of artists and photographers over the years.

Stahl got involved 25 years ago, about the time he and his wife, Carol, married and became island regulars. Just as the Huberts had done a generation before them, the Stahls became enamored of Fitzgerald's art. They loved the vigor of Fitzgerald's oil paintings that conveyed the wild, dangerous essence of Monhegan and appreciated the carefully considered immediacy of his watercolors.

Stahl detected something in Fitzgerald's art right away that distinguished it from hundreds of other Monhegan painters, though it took him years to identify it. Fitzgerald's goal was never to replicate what he saw before him, but to interpret it, place it in context with its environment and capture its spiritual core. As a painter, he took his cues from Eastern art and philosophy, which hold that all things have a spirit. Fitzgerald's goal was first to understand that spirit and then find a way of capturing it.

Stahl likes to recount a story about Fitzgerald standing for hours, arms folded, studying a subject. When someone asked what he was doing, he pointed to his head: "Photographing."

He took mental notes, Stahl said. He never painted from photos and stopped painting outdoors altogether in the 1930s, before he became closely associated with Monhegan. He was a keen observer and made mental notes, with which he returned to his studio and began sketching, working out the composition endlessly before committing it to paint. Very few people recalled ever seeing him actually paint, Stahl said. Fitzgerald was intensely private about his art and socially awkward. He had many friends but cared most about his art.

The Stahls became friendly with Anne Hubert in 1995, when they met on Monhegan. The Stahls traveled each winter to visit Hubert at her home in Dover, Massachusetts, and stayed with her on Monhegan before they bought their own place.



James Fitzgerald

She requested an audience with Stahl in 2003 to talk over a few things. Stahl was a physician with a background in hospice work, and Hubert, who was dying, was grappling with the realization that she likely would never return to the island, Stahl said. She also wanted to talk about Fitzgerald. She was thinking about leaving her estate to the Monhegan Museum and wanted to run her ideas by Stahl.

Soon after, she announced the gift of the estate, which was transferred when she died in 2004. Ed Deci, the Monhegan Museum director, asked Stahl to take over Hubert's work on the Fitzgerald Legacy.

"It was overwhelming to think about," Stahl said in a phone interview from his home in Atlanta, where he lives during the winter. "I am not a museum professional. My background is not in art history. But I thought, 'This is exactly the recipe the Huberts used when Fitzgerald died in 1971.' They were not museum professionals, either, and they did a fabulous job. I decided to take it on."

The first catalog took years to produce, and the effort shows in its heft. "James Fitzgerald: The Drawings and Sketches" is 340 pages and illustrated with more than 750 images. It costs \$95 through the Monhegan Museum.

Among those who contributed an essay is Karen Sherry, a former curator at the Portland Museum of Art who now curates at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond. She met Stahl while on PMA business to the island several years ago.

When he learned that she was an expert on drawing, they began talking about the sketchbooks of Fitzgerald and his prolific output as a draftsman. The Smithsonian Institution owns nearly two dozen of Fitzgerald's sketchbooks. The legacy owns eight.

Fitzgerald learned to draw as a youngster and apparently was pretty good. He once said that he was a poor speller because he was always drawing in class. His parents enrolled him in the Mechanic Arts High School in Boston, a vocational school related to engineering, architecture and industry. Later, he studied at the Massachusetts Normal Art School, which would become Mass College of Art. He graduated in 1923 with a certificate in painting and drawing and then studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.



Fitzgerald devoted considerable artistic attention to Mount Katahdin. This is "Moonlight, Katahdin," a watercolor on paper.

His formal education led to his exceptional skills as a draftsman, Sherry said in a phone interview from Virginia.

“He created beautiful, refined, exhibition-quality drawings,” she said, noting that his portrait of John Steinbeck – Fitzgerald lived for many years in California after college before returning to New England and eventually Monhegan – “is one of the most knockout drawings ever done.”

He also made loose drawings, which were highly abstract and almost illegible. “He was an artist who was deeply invested in observing nature and recording his response to it,” Sherry said. “His drawings really varied greatly, from highly finished to loose and abstract, almost notational scribbles and anything and everything in between.”

Sherry had access to hundreds of objects, in Maine and at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

Other than the art itself, what impressed her most was the dedication of Stahl and his work with the Fitzgerald Legacy. The catalog, she said, “was a monumental undertaking on behalf of the legacy, but an important one. I am thrilled to be a part of it.”

The publication of the catalog was part of a process that began when Stahl succeeded Hubert as director of the Fitzgerald Legacy. His first task was digitizing the database that the Huberts compiled, bringing it up to museum standards. Many art interns from the University of Southern Maine worked on the project over the years, he said.

They began compiling high-resolution images in 2011, starting with about 600 works the Huberts left to the museum and the other 150 they placed in other museums. The next step was creating a [website to share those images](#). There are about 1,000 images online now and another 1,000 or so to come, Stahl said. “We actually have high-res images of close to 2,000 of the known 2,400 works,” Stahl said.

It’s been a huge and costly undertaking for the volunteers. The Stahls hired photographers to take pictures of the paintings and drawings and arranged for the catalog’s publication. Stahl noted that the book was designed and printed in Maine, by Mahan Design of Bowdoinham and Penmor Lithographers of Lewiston respectively. “The fact that we could do this all in Maine and not send it abroad to be printed is something we are really happy about,” he said. “Everything came together the right way.”

The next step is putting another catalog together. The first one covers much of Fitzgerald’s work in Maine, with chapters dedicated to Monhegan and Katahdin, with deep dives into his interest in dories, gulls and the village architecture. The next one will cover his life in California and his travels to New Mexico, Vermont and other locations, as well as other work from Monhegan not included in the first catalog.

There are other projects, as well. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Monhegan Museum, and the 2018 summer show will focus on the history of Monhegan from an art perspective, and the Fitzgerald studio will host an exhibition of his blockbuster paintings. In 2021, the museum and the legacy will work together for a solo exhibition of Fitzgerald's work, and Stahl is organizing mainland exhibitions in Maine and elsewhere, including, he hopes, in California.

Like the Huberts before him, Stahl cannot resist the draw of Fitzgerald.

“It's not just a love for the art that he produced,” Stahl said. “It's the whole thing – the tradition, his work ethic, his life. He was highly intelligent and extremely well-read and deeply philosophical. That appealed to me, and it's become a whole part of my life. Working on the legacy every day, it's been quite an adventure.”

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