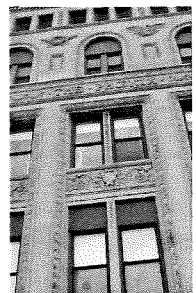
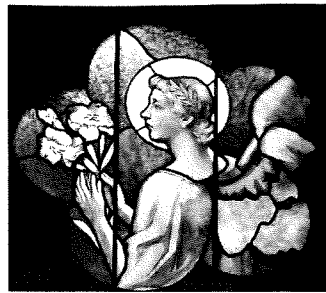


FITCHBURG
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



125
years



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From Belgium to Fitchburg

Painter Valentin Henneman Finds His Audience in Fitchburg

Valentin Henneman was born on July 7th, 1861 in the Belgian village of Oostkamp, a small rural community, about 7 kms (5 miles) away from better known Bruges. Although his parents earned a living by farming, they were not without means as they possessed some land. Valentin's father also served several times as a member of the village council. Valentin was raised in a family of 10 children.

He was the oldest son, only preceded by an older sister, and received some vocational training as a clog maker. When Valentin reached his adult age he went to the art academies of Bruges and Antwerp where he took lessons in drawing and painting. In the meantime his parents had moved to Bruges where they started a tavern, just outside the city gates. After returning from Antwerp Valentin settled as an artist, eventually becoming a famous and frequently solicited portrait painter. He made paintings of many important local people, such as mayors, aldermen, bishops, artists, noblemen,... Before the turn of the century Valentin had participated in several exhibitions in his hometown and beyond. He also participated in a pilgrimage to Rome where he was allowed to make a painting of a praying Pope Leo XIII. This picture became the official painting of this pilgrimage.

Three of his brothers started their own business, running a bay tree nursery. During the 19th century Bruges was the Belgian capital of this kind of enterprises, especially because of its mild sea climate which was favourable for bay trees. Although Valentin was not involved in this business personally, he assisted his brothers by inventing a machine for drying bay trees before they were sent abroad.

One of Valentin's younger brothers, Arthur, moved to

the United States around 1900. He settled in Saint Louis, Missouri, where he painted theater canvasses. Later he would open his own shooting hall. He married a Swish immigrant with whom he had one son. They would return to Belgium in the Thirties as making a living in the amusement sector proved to be hard during the recession.

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Valentin Henneman, courtesy image

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(continued from pg. 1) In 1904 Valentin participated in the art exhibition at the world fair of Saint Louis. The Belgian pavilion was one of the largest on the compound; art works of more than a hundred Belgian artists were presented. Valentin travelled to Saint Louis where he undoubtedly met his brother. Still, this was not the main reason for his trip. In Belgium he had already met some American artists, amongst others Arthur Watson Sparks. This painter had probably introduced some of Valentin's portraits to friends and relatives in the U.S. As a result, Charles Marshall Cox, a businessman from Boston invited Valentin to paint his portrait. Valentin's first stay across the Atlantic lasted much longer than probably intended, since he returned only in the first months of 1906. Some sources mention that he painted an altar piece for a Catholic church in Helena, Montana, but until now no evidence for this has been found.

Valentin stayed at several places (Fitchburg and Providence) where he not only taught painting classes but was present at some exhibitions as well. Newspapers such as the Fitchburg Daily Sentinel often devoted large articles to his art work. One of these exhibitions took place in the Peterson Studio where he exhibited not less than 50 paintings. Valentin set up a studio in the premises of the YMCA where he instructed 16 students. In order to conduct these classes at night, Valentin had electric lights installed. It seems that this was something extraordinary since it got much attention in the local newspapers. Valentin was quite busy in this first year in the U.S. Besides travelling to nearby places such as Gardner and Lunenburg to make autumn paintings, he also made portraits of Frederick F. Woodward and Henry A. Goodrich.

Frederick F. Woodward was a native and lifelong resident of Fitchburg. While still in high school he enlisted in Co. A, 53rd Massachusetts Regiment, and served for one year in the Civil War, most of which was spent in Louisiana. For eight years he was a partner in the hardware business of Wright, Woodward & Co. He was cashier for the Safety Fund National Bank for ten years. He then moved on to the grain business in April of 1892. He was a director in the Rollstone National Bank, a trustee of the Worcester North Savings Institution, a director in the Fitchburg Mutual Fire Insurance Company, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce, Boston. He was Alderman in 1898, president of the Merchants' Association in 1898, Vice-president of the Fitchburg Historical Society, and a member of the school board for thirteen years.

Henry A. Goodrich ran one of the largest men's clothing stores in the state during the 1870's. The Goodrich family dates back to before Fitchburg was incorporated as a town. By the time he was 19 years old he was an overseer in a woolen mill. At 23 he opened his own business in downtown Fitchburg, which he soon expanded into branch stores in Fitchburg and Brattleboro, Vermont. In 1868 he bought the American House, a hotel with store fronts near the railroad station. Soon after he built two large buildings on Day Street known as the Goodrich block. He was one of incorporators of the Worcester North Savings Bank. During the Civil War he served on a committee that travelled to battlefields and hospitals to care for the sick and wounded soldiers of Fitchburg. In 1870 he was elected to the state legislature. He also served on the Hoosac Tunnel committee.

Early 1906 we meet a different Valentin when he gives a speech on Belgian Congo. His audience mainly consisted of members of the First Baptist Church of Fitchburg. Before returning home Valentin was present at an exhibition at the Crocker Hotel. On one of the last days of the exhibition Valentin guided ladies of the History and Literature Department of some unnamed organization.

We know that it did not take Valentin long before he got acquainted with some major artists. One of them was Asa G. Randall, art teacher in Fitchburg. Valentin stayed for a while at Randall's place, 383 Blossom Street. Randall was a restless soul looking for a place where he could start his own art school. Eventually he found his favorite spot while cycling the coasts of Maine. In 1905 he bought a small photographer's studio in Boothbay Harbor where he started teaching painting classes. The next year he literally moved this studio to Mount Pisgah at the other side of Boothbay Harbor. As such he laid the foundations for the Commonwealth Art Colony in which Valentin would be involved from the start.

From that point on Valentin travelled to the States several times. He would arrive just before summer courses at the Art Colony would start and then return to Bruges for winter time. Valentin bought his own small lodge on Mount Pisgah, not far from the premises of the Colony. Before World War I the colony was highly successful, with more than 200 students during summer. It provided classes in landscape painting, portrait painting, drawing, applied arts and later also in music and theatre. It was not uncommon for Valentin to take...*(continued on pg. 3)*

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(continued from pg. 2) his students to the islands (Squirrel Island and Monhegan) off the coast of Maine. We found an entry with Valentin's name in the guest book of the Monhegan House (the principal hotel) dating from 1917.

Valentin was not only considered a good artist, he exhibited some other talents as well. From his letters to his family we learn that his students often invited him to tell stories, especially eerie ones about his hometown in Belgium. He must have been a good narrator since he also gave talks on Congo, Belgium's colony, and (when in Belgium) on the United States.

During World War I it was hard for Valentin to return home, so he decided to stay on in Maine. This was also the result of his acquaintance with a student of his, Mabel Dealing from Bangor. The couple married on December 31, 1917 and moved into Mabel's family house in Bangor. Mabel herself was a gifted artist. She worked as an art teacher in many schools in and around Bangor. A strange event occurred to Valentin at that time, reflecting in a way the tensions caused by World War I. While working on a painting on Bangor's Hay Market a young boy kicked his easel trying to prevent Valentin from continuing. The aggressor considered Valentin a German spy making paintings for the enemy. Valentin's German sounding family name did not really help to settle the quarrel with the boy, who was eventually condemned to pay a small compensation to Valentin. The fate of the Belgium people during the war left a big impression on Valentin. He tried to help them by finding a way to send seaweed to feed the suffering Belgians.

As a married man Valentin still remained very active. He kept on teaching at the Art Colony until 1930 when it was forced to stop. He also made several beautiful paintings of Bangor and Maine and he produced a bust of Hannibal Hamlin, the 15th Vice President of the U.S. and a native of Bangor. In winter time Valentin amused himself and the inhabitants of Bangor by making ice sculptures in his garden and in public places. He also exhibited several times, mostly at the Public Library of Bangor.

It seems that while still a renowned artist, at the end of his life Valentin got into financial problems. Rumor has it that he had to give or trade away most of his paintings.



Unfortunately, because of this unofficial bartering much of his work has disappeared in the mists of history. We feel lucky that some of the paintings stayed at the Public Library of Bangor or were acquired by some museums in New England. Recently, after a call for crowd funding, the Dover Museum (NH) was given money by an anonymous donor in order to have repaired the portrait of Joseph Bowne Sawyer, a local business man.

In 1928 Valentin and his wife still managed to travel to Belgium where Mabel would meet his family for the first and only time. This journey made such an impression on her that she wrote very cheery letters to her friends and pupils.

During the last years Valentin also suffered from illness, making him unfit to paint. He died on Friday May 23rd 1930. His wife would survive him for 13 years.

While we already do know a lot about Valentin's life in the United States we would be glad to find additional information. We are also looking for people or families that may possess one or more paintings by Valentin. Please contact us at patrickvandenbergh@gmx.net

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