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NICE SAVE • A rare mural by acclaimed Cape Ann artist Emile A. Gruppé is rescued and preserved by a thoughtful homeowner



GWEN RYAN'S DILEMMA WAS VEXING: Her beach house was a tear-down, but the mural painted on the bathroom wall 50 years ago was precious. Long after she had finalized plans for a handsome replacement for the tired 1959 one-room cabin at Wingaersheek Beach in Gloucester, Massachusetts, she delayed the project, searching for a way to save the art before bulldozing the house.

"Emile Gruppé was a good friend of my godparents,

who owned this cabin before me," Ryan says. "He and my godfather loved to fish. Afterward, they sat on the porch, looking out at the water, drinking and talking."

One of the best known of the mid-20th-century artists of the Cape Ann School, Emile A. Gruppé (1896–1978) was drawn to Gloucester by the now-iconic paintings of American Impressionism, a movement that took hold there after the turn of the century. He considered himself an Impressionist painter, and while his early paintings lean on historic pointillism, his mature work displays a muscular

TO REMOVE THE mural, located in the tiny cabin bathroom, Marc Sears braced the wall behind it as Jacob Smith looks on (INSET, LEFT). The salvaged painting, now set in a frame (INSET, RIGHT), was presented to homeowner Gwen Ryan.

yet lyrical style well suited to the wharf scenes he liked to paint.

“One day he came out of the bathroom, complaining that the wall was terribly boring,” says Ryan. “He spent the next several days painting the mural.”

Roughly 4 feet square, the mural dominated the rudimentary 5-by-7-foot bathroom. Classic nautical Gruppé subject matter is depicted against the backdrop of Cape Ann’s northern coastline, garnered from the cabin’s expansive view.

“He kept looking through binoculars to get it right,” says Ryan, who dates the work to the early 1960s. “Murals weren’t Gruppé’s usual art form; I’ve heard of another in Florida, where he fished and painted during his later winters. Apparently, he only did them in friends’ homes, and only on terribly boring walls.”

Unsigned and offbeat, the mural is nonetheless the recognizable product of an artist whose star has risen. “During his lifetime, Emile Gruppé was unjustifiably considered a ‘tourist painter,’” says Gloucester artist Charles Movalli, who studied with



THE ONE-ROOM Wingaersheek Beach cabin where Emile A. Gruppé relaxed on the deck after a day of fishing with Ryan’s godfather.

Gruppé and authored several books with him.

“He was very successful and sold a lot of paintings, but now that he’s been dead for over 30 years, he’s becoming a historical figure,” Movalli says. “Today, his work is sold at Sotheby’s and displayed in prestigious galleries. A Gloucester beach scene recently sold for just under \$50,000.” Gruppé’s Gloucester Harbor scenes, he says, are the most desirable. “His Vermont landscapes are superb, but he is known for his Cape Ann work.”

While Ryan and her friends continued to brainstorm options for the mural’s removal, the solution came to her through work.

A promotional marketing consultant, she had recently created staff apparel for the Essex, Massachusetts, architectural firm Carpenter & MacNeille.

“I had learned about the guys in the shop and the Home Services Division. I called Marc Sears, who said, ‘Gruppé? You have a Gruppé mural?’ Before that, I knew it was special, but I was afraid that no one else would care enough to approach the removal job with reverence.”

The division provides a range of services, including carpentry. “We have secured permits and put in moorings, responded during storm emergencies, done seasonal maintenance, and built a vestibule entry that’s taken down in spring and put back up in fall,” says Matthew Wolfe, who, with Sears and Jacob Smith, removed Ryan’s mural one cold winter day. “This, however, isn’t like anything we’ve ever done.”

Approaching the mural from a small closet on the wall's backside, they hammered braces into the studs to stabilize the $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch drywall under the paint. To gain access to the studs, they first removed plumbing and vent pipes, some made of cast iron.

Sears and Smith bolted a large Lexan-covered frame built in their carpentry shop to the wall around the mural. The two passed a machete-like handsaw back and forth through space left by the medicine cabinet, alternately bracing the wall and sawing through it. Thus, they were able to carefully remove an intact section of bathroom wall, complete with Emile Gruppé's mural.

Braced, framed, its surface under Lexan, the mural now weighs 50 pounds by Sears's estimation, though it is nonetheless portable and easier to display than it ever was.

"What a difference!" Ryan says. "You could never see the painting from more than 2 feet away; it's a whole other experience. And it can be viewed by more than one person at a time. Of course," she says with a laugh, "it looks better when it's not next to an ugly old sink and toilet." ■

FAMILY BUSINESS

The Gruppés paint as the Wallendas fly: generation after generation. Since Canadian native Charles P. Gruppé (1860–1940) went to the Netherlands and became a dealer for Dutch painters in the United States, painted for the Dutch royal family, and was elected to The Hague's Pulchre School, the Gruppés have produced a succession of artists and art dealers. Charles moved to the States with the advent of World War I. In 1929, his son Emile established a gallery in the 1858 Schoolhouse in the Rocky Neck section of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where his brother, the sculptor Karl Gruppé (1893–1982), their watercolorist sister, Virginia (1907–1980), and their father all joined him. All produced work at the gallery. Emile's son, Robert Charles Gruppé, now works in that same Rocky Neck studio. His Impressionistic oil paintings draw on the local waterfront for light-filled harborscapes rendered in a palette of vibrant colors. They have clearly grown out of his father's and his grandfather's work, but they are distinctly his own. In Jericho, Vermont, his sister, Emilie Gruppé Alexander, exhibits and sells her father's paintings from a renovated 1860s sheep barn.

① The Gruppé Gallery, 32 Rocky Neck Avenue, Gloucester, MA; 978-283-2720, gruppegallery.com.
The Emile A. Gruppé Gallery, 22 Barber Farm Road, Jericho, VT; 802-899-3211, emilegruppegallery.com.



PAINTINGS BY Emile A. Gruppé (LEFT): "At Dock" (ABOVE) and "Beach with Pier and Shacks."

