

Russell Cheney  
Manchester's  
Impressionist



MANCHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Incorporated in 1965, the Manchester Historical Society is dedicated to preserving historic Manchester landmarks and acts as a watchdog group to save valued antiquities. It manages the Cheney Homestead and the Old Manchester Museum. The Society recently purchased one of the Cheney mills and has commenced efforts to transform it into its new headquarters and museum.

Old Manchester Museum  
126 Cedar Street  
(860) 647-9983  
Open Sunday 1-4; Monday 9-1  
[www.manchesterhistory.org](http://www.manchesterhistory.org)

Cheney Homestead  
106 Hartford Road  
(860) 643-5588  
Open Friday-Sunday 10-3  
[Cheneyhomestead@aol.com](mailto:Cheneyhomestead@aol.com)

Admission to each site: \$2; free for members and children 16 and under (when accompanied by an adult)

The Cheney Homestead  
Manchester, Connecticut

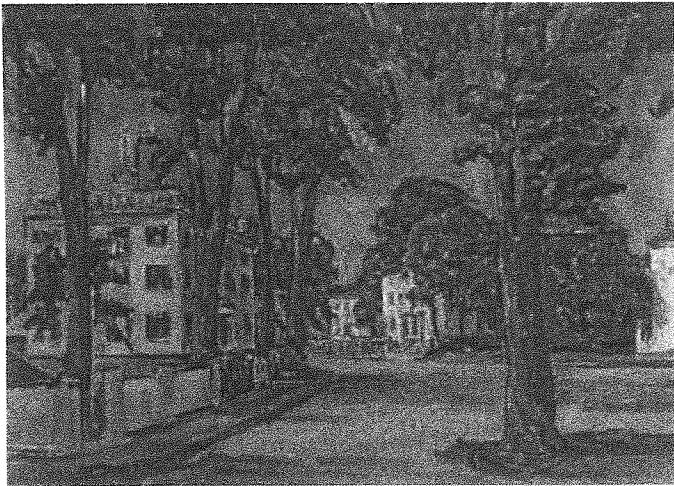
June 8-10, 2001

Cover: Photograph of Russell Cheney, 1921 (Collection of Carol Cheney)

Catalogue text and design by Mary Dunne

## RUSSELL CHENEY

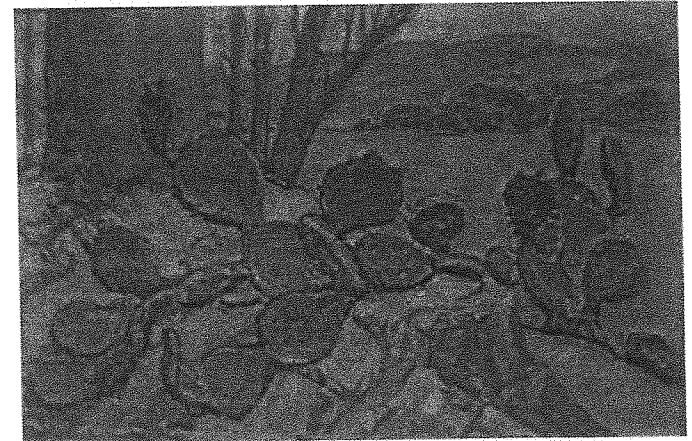
Russell K. Cheney was born in Manchester, Connecticut on October 16, 1881. He was the youngest of eleven children of Knight Dexter and Ednah Dow (Smith) Cheney. He was also the grandson of Charles Cheney, one of the founders of the silk industry in Manchester. Cheney attended Yale University, where he was a member of the Skull and Bones Society. He graduated from Yale University in 1904. Although possessing a



*House on a Tree-Lined Street*

strong sense of family tradition, he did not, as each of his four brothers had done, enter the family silk business. Instead, he chose to follow in the footsteps of his great uncles, John and Seth Wells Cheney, both of whom were notable steel engravers. He would later recount to his friend, Phelps Putnam, "Sooner or later my personality and my job will

meet.... What a funny ... figure of a feller to have trailed his course through Paris and New York ... always kept from really tackling his job by the confusion of his

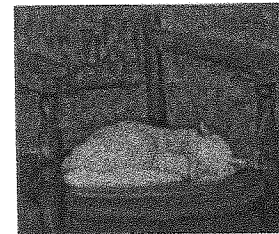


*Cactus*

person. Must be a pretty damn strong urge for it back there to overcome every mental and moral inaptitude. John and Seth must have been very similar."

After studying at the Art Students

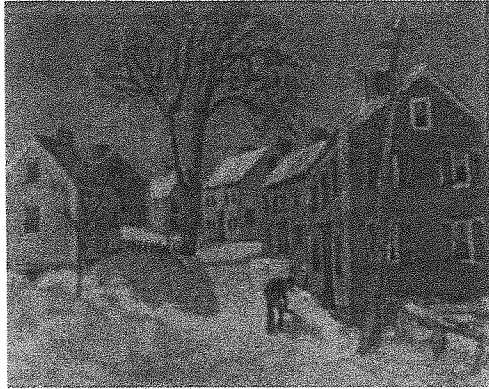
League in New York and the Academie Julian in Paris, Cheney created a studio for himself in a barn on the property of his parents' estate in Manchester and spent several years painting there. Ultimately, however, he would travel all



*Cat Sleeping on a Rush Chair*

over the United States and Europe in his quest to

develop his artistic voice, and become recognized as a serious talent. He spent



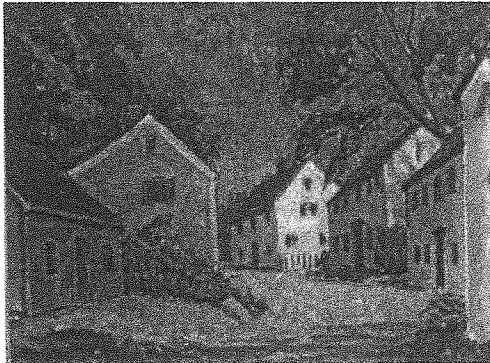
Maine Winter Scene

several summers in France and Italy and, plagued by ill health for much of his life, spent many winters in the American Southwest.

For the last fifteen years of his life he lived in Kittery, Maine.

He chose Impressionism as his chief means of artistic expression and identified closely with artist Paul Cézanne. Cézanne was an early impressionist whose work eventually evolved to a more cubist form. His influence can clearly be seen in many of Cheney's works of linear expression and restrained color.

Over the course of his life, Cheney's work was exhibited several times at



Newcastle, Kittery, 1939

galleries in New York City. Today, museums from across the United States, in-

cluding the Wadsworth Atheneum and Yale University Art Gallery locally, include his work in their collections. Russell Cheney died suddenly of a heart attack on July 12, 1945 at his home in Kittery. He was buried in Manchester. A prolific artist, he left behind not only a large body of work but, in his personal letters, a record of his development as an artist.

The paintings in this exhibit are gathered from many of Manchester's residents and businesses. It is a rich and varied collection, which includes works from almost every place he created art. Together they help illustrate the story of Manchester's native son.

#### For Further Reading

*Paintings by Russell Cheney* (New York: Redfield-Kendrick-Odell Co., 1922) is a pamphlet chronicling Cheney's exhibition at the Babcock Gallery in New York; it contains a brief foreword by Christian Brinton. F. O. Matthiessen's *Russell Cheney, 1881-1945: A Record of His Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947) provides biographical details and a lengthy discussion of many of Cheney's paintings. *Rat & the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1978), edited by Louis Hyde, reprints much of the long-term correspondence between Cheney and his closest friend, Matthiessen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## THE PAINTINGS

### Manchester Impressions

This grouping spans from 1919 to 1939, six years before Cheney's death. Born to a large family that for over a century had a pivotal influence on the history of Manchester, Cheney was close to his siblings. Although circumstances would lead him to places far from Connecticut, his memories of home are present throughout his work.

1. *Cheney Gardens* (Oil on canvas: 36" x 36").

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Clarke)

By several accounts, Cheney was an avid gardener. In a letter to his friend F. O. Matthiessen, he describes a family ritual of rising early on his mother's birthday to gather flowers for the breakfast table. This tradition lasted even after her death. As will be evident throughout the exhibit, he was a lover of flowers and landscapes and used them often as primary subjects in his work. Here, Cheney depicts the gardens outside the old homestead.

2. *Mrs. Clifford Cheney* (1919. Oil on canvas: 36" x 30". Manchester Public Library)

Cheney painted several interiors of the Cheney Homestead during 1919 and 1920, including this picture of his sister-in-law reading by a window in the Homestead. The next two paintings depict the old Cheney homestead, which was destroyed in 1960.

3. *A Manchester Home* (c. 1939. Oil on canvas: 29" x 29". Unsigned. Collection of Alexander Urbanetti)

4. *House in Manchester* (Oil on canvas: 25" x 36". Unsigned. Collection of Alexander Urbanetti)

### New York, 1921-1922

Cheney first exhibited in New York at the Babcock Galleries during 1921 and 1922. Included in that exhibition were several paintings he had completed during a summer in France, including his impression of Chartres Cathedral and possibly his painting of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, in Paris. Also included in the exhibition was his painting *Vitrine*, which he completed while visiting his sister in Santa Barbara the

previous year. Throughout his career, Cheney would consistently use the motif of flowers against a mirror or a window. Flower arrangements were a constant source of still-life subjects.

5. *Chartres* (Oil on canvas: 24" x 21". Collection of Vivian and Thomas F. Ferguson)

6. *Notre Dame* (1921. Oil on panel: 18" x 21". Signed. Private collection)

7. *Vitrine* (1921. Oil on canvas: 24" x 36". Manchester Public Library)

### Travels in Europe

Because Cheney was born into wealth and comfort, all during his life he tried to avoid being labeled a dilettante, and so he constantly strove to find a unique and sophisticated voice as an artist. During the mid to late 1920s, he traveled extensively throughout Europe seeking inspiration and meeting and learning from other artists. This painting is illustrative of his travels.

8. *A Harbor in Provence* (1924. Oil on panel: 19" x 22". Signed. Private collection)

### Floral Still Life

In these two works, Cheney presents a startling juxtaposition of brilliantly colored flowers on a dark background. Flowers were a recurring subject for Cheney, and he was versatile in his treatment of them.

9. *Larkspur* (Oil on canvas: 32" x 36". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Roger Olcott)

10. *Yellow Roses* (Oil on canvas: 31" x 31". Collection of Vivian and Thomas F. Ferguson)

### Early Efforts

These are two early works by Cheney. According to friends at the time, paintings like these represent his first attempts at painting in the impressionist style.

11. *Monticilo Valley, California* (1915. Oil on canvas: 24" x 36". Manchester Public Library)

12. *Farm Landscape* (1920. Oil on canvas: 36" x 36". Savings Bank of Manchester)

### The American West

Cheney suffered from tuberculosis. In pre-antibiotic days, the disease was treated by periodic visits to sanatoriums. Cheney was also encouraged to spend winters in warm, dry climates. Consequently, he spent time in California, New Mexico, and Texas. During the winter of 1926, he stayed with his sister, Mrs. W. H. Cowles, in Santa Barbara. While there he made many trips into the desert near Palm Springs, to paint the landscape. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "I got all excited over some great rain clouds across the valley ... mountains, plains, clouds, rain, cactuses, God knows what all."

13. *Cactus* (c. 1925. Oil on canvas: 24" x 30". Manchester Public Library)

### Feline Studies

No matter where he lived, Cheney always had a cat for a companion. In letters to friends and family, he included sketches of various cats and related anecdotes or other tales about them. The seemingly innocuous subject of this painting actually represents a significant element of Cheney's life and emotional well being.

14. *Cat Sleeping on a Rush Chair* (Oil on canvas: 24" x 24". Manchester Public Library)

### Further Experimentation

By the early 1940s, Cheney began to suffer from asthma. Several times cautioned by doctors against spending winters in New England, Cheney made the first of three visits to the home of his sister in Boerne, Texas, in 1943. There Cheney wrote extensively about the artistic process and recorded the evolution of his works. *Garden Pool* appears to be one of a series of paintings incorporating rich color and whimsy. Notice, for instance, the beached fish on the stone edge of the fountain. In a later letter to his friend Matthiessen, he wrote of toying with the idea of draped cloth, jars, vases, and plants. *Pink Lilies* is

undated but bears striking similarity to some of his descriptions in his writings at this time.

15. *Pink Lilies* (Oil on canvas: 36" x 36". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Roger Olcott)  
16. *Garden Pool with Green Jar* (1943. Oil on canvas: 24" x 30". Manchester Public Library)

### Maine and Environs

Cheney first traveled to Kittery, Maine, in 1927, and stayed for the summer and fall that year. After buying a house there in 1930, he quickly became an established presence in the small coastal town. Kittery would be the place he called home until his death in 1945.

17. *York Village, Kittery, Maine, 1937* (Oil on canvas: 24" x 30". Manchester Public Library)  
18. *House on a Tree-lined Street* (c. 1940. Oil on canvas: 21" x 30". Unsigned. Cheney Homestead of the Manchester Historical Society)  
19. *Maine Winter Scene* (Oil on canvas: 24" x 30". Signed. Cheney Homestead of the Manchester Historical Society)  
20. *Newcastle, Kittery, 1939* (1939. Oil on canvas: 22" x 28". Signed. Cheney Homestead of the Manchester Historical Society)  
21. *Point's Graves, Portsmouth* (Oil on canvas: 22" x 26". Signed. Collection of Alexander Urbanetti)