

# PARADISE

a continuum of art

PARADISE VALLEY | MIDDLETOWN, RHODE ISLAND

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## PARADISE: A SACRED SETTING IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN ART

Paradise is a picturesque section of Middletown, Rhode Island on the southeastern tip of Aquidneck Island. In the Seventeenth Century Aquidneck Island was known as the “Eden of America.” In 1743 the burgeoning town of Newport was divided in two, with one half retaining the original name and the other being given the name Middletown, for its location between Newport and Portsmouth. The area known as Paradise is bordered by Second Beach, Paradise Avenue (originally Swamp Road, then Paradise Road), Green End Avenue, and Third Beach Road. Its topography includes open farmlands, gently rolling hills, rugged cliffs, and a dramatic coastline with stretches of grassy dunes and sweeping white sand beaches. Across Paradise from north to south range a series of seven puddingstone ridges, running to the sea, sometimes submerged but sometimes breaking the surface into what are called the Paradise Hills or Paradise Rocks.

Paradise is one of the most celebrated settings in the rich artistic heritage of Newport and the Narragansett Bay, and one of the most important in the history of American art. The writer Henry James, friend of artist John La Farge, in 1876 described the “lovely meadows” of Paradise, “where in the most primeval solitude it is possible to get far-reaching views of the sea. . . . It is like a grand landscape in miniature.” The distinctive natural beauties of Paradise inspired generations of the most influential and well-known artists in America, among them: David Maitland Armstrong; George Bellows; Albert Bierstadt; Jasper Francis Cropsey; Winslow Homer; William Morris Hunt; John Frederick Kensett; John La Farge; Homer Dodge Martin; William Trost Richards; James Augustus Suydam; John Henry Twachtman; Elihu Vedder; and Worthington Whittredge.

Paradise encompasses: the hill now the site of St. George’s School, begun in 1901 and its chapel completed in 1928; the Maidford River (formerly Paradise Brook); and St. Peter’s Rock (also called Great Rock), named for farmer Peter Barker (1787-1875) and quarried by Peckham Brothers beginning in 1893. The heart of Paradise is the valley occupied by the Gray Craig estate and Nelson’s Pond, which once supplied John La Farge with abundant water lily subjects for his

paintings, and is depicted by La Farge in his oil, *Paradise Valley* (1866-68) and by John Twachtman in his *Paradise Rocks* (circa 1889). The site was owned by Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont and used to house his menagerie of exotic animals. The Norman Bird Sanctuary (opened to the public in 1950) is within Paradise, as is: Paradise Brook; Second Beach (Sachuest Beach); Sachuest Point; and Purgatory Chasm. Paradise also contains the favored nineteenth-century picnic destination called the Last Valley (also called the Lost Valley and Happy Valley), bordering the Sakonnet River tidal plain; Paradise Pond; and the puddingstone ridge that culminates in Bishop Berkeley's Rock (Hanging Rock, also Bishop Berkeley's Seat), said to be the meditative retreat of the 18th century British clergyman-philosopher who lived for three years in Middletown. It also contains Gardiner's Pond, named for farmer Benjamin Gardiner; and Third Beach.

Some art historians consider the body of artworks created by John La Farge while living in rented farmhouses along Paradise Avenue in the 1860s and early 1870s to be the first Impressionist experiments on American soil and some of the most original, precocious and memorable artworks of his time. Thus, this unique region of paradise is a sacred setting in the history of American art.

It is very fitting that the Norman Bird Sanctuary has taken the lead in celebrating the artistic heritage of Paradise and is encouraging current day artists to seek creative inspiration in the sublime Paradise landscape and protected flora and fauna.

William Vareika  
Newport, Rhode Island  
July 31, 2013

# THE PAST

The Norman Bird Sanctuary was founded on the basis that the land merits preservation and that it should be a resource for the community. Long before the sanctuary was established, the southeastern tip of Aquidneck Island, otherwise known as Paradise Valley, was an inspiration for many early nineteenth and twentieth century artists. As a steward of Paradise Valley, the Norman Bird Sanctuary is entrusted with protecting the birds, plants, and animals that thrive on the 325-acre property; but also to maintain the restored buildings, scenic landscape and history.

Throughout the years many artists including John La Farge, Winslow Homer, William Morris Hunt, William Trost Richards, John Frederick Kensett, Louisa and Helena Sturtevant, among others, have stood on the ridges, rolling hills, and beaches of Norman Bird Sanctuary to capture the beauty of this Paradise forever in their artwork.

The Norman Bird Sanctuary's 325 acres is situated in one of the most culturally significant landscapes in Rhode Island: Paradise Valley.

The landscape is defined by numerous natural factors. Thousands of plant and wildlife species flourish in the area. Its geology— with the puddingstone ridges, the sloping hills, and, of course, Hanging Rock — is the most defining feature. It could also be argued that the breathtaking views of the shoreline are what make this place unique.

Yet it is the combination of all of these factors — the ocean, hills, rocks, plants, trees, and wildlife — that give Paradise the Arcadian quality synonymous with its moniker. Artists have sought to capture that quality for nearly two centuries.

William Trost Richards was an American landscape artist associated with the Hudson River School. Richards is highly regarded for his finely rendered, realistic scenes. The majority of his coastal depictions were created in watercolor.

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WILLIAM TROST RICHARDS

American, 1833-1905

*Paradise Valley, Middletown, Rhode Island*

1881

Watercolor, gouache on grey, oatmeal wove paper

Newport Art Museum

Purchase made possible through the generosity of many donors, the descendants of the artist and the efforts of William and Alison Vareika

2002.003.001



At the time that the Hudson River School was taking shape, Paradise was positioned perfectly, geographically and socially, to become fodder for artists. Paradise's close proximity to Newport as well as Boston and New York fostered its accessibility. Boston and New York were the largest urban centers in the country in the mid-nineteenth century. It was common for this circle of artists to spend the winter months in either city, where they were able to cultivate patrons and maintain associations with artistic institutions such as The National Academy of Design. Seeking respite as well as subject matter for their work, these artists frequently spent the summer months traveling to sites like the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the Rockies, the Catskills, and coastal New England. Paradise was one such site. These artists' depictions brought not only Paradise but Middletown and Rhode Island into the museums, homes, galleries, and texts enjoyed by the larger public. Their work continues to do so today.

One of the most well-known and respected artists to portray Paradise is John La Farge, master of an array of genres such as still life, landscapes, murals, stained-glass, art instruction and more. La Farge painted some of his most notable works in Paradise Valley including his famous, *Last Valley- Paradise Rocks*.

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JOHN LA FARGE  
American, 1835-1910  
*Evening Study, Newport (From Hazard's Farm, Paradise Valley)*  
1871  
Oil on panel  
12 1/4 x 16 1/2 inches





It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that landscape painting became widely accepted as a genre. As industrialization left an increasingly evident impact on the land, the conservation ethos grew as well, and nature came to play a larger role in art and literature.

John Frederick Kensett was an American artist and engraver. Kensett is best known for his landscapes of the New England and New York coast in the Luminist style. He was of the “second generation” of the Hudson River School whose work was characterized by fine brush strokes depicting scenes radiating with an atmospheric light and a spiritual quality.

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JOHN FREDERICK KENSETT

American, 1816-1872

*Paradise Rocks, Near Newport, Rhode Island (Middletown, Rhode Island)*

1859

Oil on canvas

14 x 24 inches



Hanging Rock, or Bishop's Rock, has been depicted by artists for nearly two centuries. There are various legends about the magical nature of this location and the power of the rock. Gaugengigl's painting captures Paradise Valley through its playful depiction of a magical scene.

Gaugengigl was mostly known for his portraits and highly realistic studio interiors. He did not paint many landscapes, which makes this outdoor, whimsical scene rare for this artist.

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IGNAZ MARCEL GAUGENGIGL

American, born Bavaria

1855-1932

*The Idyll: Bishop Berkeley's Rock*

circa 1885

Oil on panel

Newport Art Museum

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Vareika, 1991.009.002



Some of the nineteenth century's most prolific figures in American art painted Paradise, including: John F. Kensett, William Trost Richards, Worthington Whittredge. John La Farge, James Augustus Suydam, and John Henry Twachtman.

John Henry Twachtman was an American painter known for his landscapes and Impressionist style; however, he was considered to be stylistically experimental among his peers and he worked in many styles throughout his career. He was associated with "The Ten," a group of artists formed in 1898 who exhibited their work together.

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JOHN HENRY TWACHTMAN

American, 1853-1902

*Paradise Rocks, Newport*

circa 1889

Oil on canvas

31 1/2 x 47 inches



Helena Sturtevant was born in Middletown, Rhode Island. Sturtevant was a founding member of the Newport Art Association and took on the role of Director in 1913. She is well known for her work developing diverse art programming and for her luminous paintings of the natural areas and historic buildings of New England.

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HELENA STURTEVANT

American, 1872-1946

*Paradise Valley, Middletown, Rhode Island*

circa 1915

Watercolor and gouache on paper

16 5/8 x 11 1/2 inches





George Wesley Bellows was a painter and lithographer whose bold style depicted early 20th century life. He is well-known for his realistic and gritty cityscapes and portraits. Bellows was associated with the “Ashcan School.” Some of his most widely known works are paintings of New York City and boxing scenes; this landscape signifies a unique departure from Bellows’ typical subject matter. Bellows passed away at a young age but remains one of the most highly regarded artists of his time.

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GEORGE W. BELLOWS

American, 1882-1925

*Sun Beams and Rain (Middletown, Rhode Island)*

1919

Oil on canvas

18 x 22 inches



Mabel Norman Cerio was the founder of the Norman Bird Sanctuary and lived and painted there until her death. She was a painter noted for her portraiture and she famously depicted Maud Howe Elliot, the founder of The Newport Art Museum, in a finely crafted portrait. By creating the Norman Bird Sanctuary, Cerio set the stage for the preservation of Paradise Valley. Today hundreds of artists visit the 325 historic acres of Paradise each year.

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Photo of Mabel Norman Cerio (1875-1949)  
Founder of the Norman Bird Sanctuary



# THE PRESENT

It is rare that a large plot of land in such a desirable place would remain relatively untouched. It is rarer still that such a place would continue to be used as it was more than 150 years ago. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Paradise has provided a wellspring of inspiration for artists and writers and it continues to do so today. The Norman Bird Sanctuary continues to have a strong connection with artists and provides innovative opportunities to foster creativity and honor its unique history. This continuum is unique and warrants thoughtful preservation and encouragement.

David Dewey, born in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, is an American Painter residing in Maine. He is well known for his radiant water colors of the New England Coast, his unique use of color and mastery of his medium. Dewey is the author of *The Watercolor Book: Materials and Techniques for Today's Artists* and has taught at many institutions over his career including; Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, National Academy School of Fine Arts, Parsons School of Design and New York Academy of Art.

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DAVID DEWEY

Born 1946

*Second Beach*

2003

Watercolor on paper

Newport Art Museum

Purchased through the gift of Robert G. Manice, 2003.006.001





Tom Deininger is an artist residing in Bristol, Rhode Island. Deininger is mostly known for his innovative approach to creating images. His collage-based works made out of everyday items and trash have been exhibited extensively throughout New England. Deininger is also a highly skilled sculptor, painter and landscape artist and has painted the scenes of Paradise Valley for many years.

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TOM DEININGER

Born 1970

*Paradise*

Oil on canvas

2000



Noted Newport painter John G. MacGowan lives and paints in Newport, Rhode Island. John is a plein air painter whose work captures the best of nautical scenes and traditional landscapes. Over the past decade, MacGowan has caught the attention of many collectors with his ability to capture the distinctive and hearty beauty of the New England coastline, from Monhegan to Newport.

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JOHN G. MACGOWAN

*Hanging Rock*

Oil on canvas

2005



Richard Grosvenor is a painter based in Newport, Rhode Island. Richard is best known for his watercolors, oils and multi-paneled paintings. His work reflects the sea and coast and since he is a pilot, his paintings have a certain perspective that comes from being airborne. All of Richard's paintings are rooted in a sense of place and his affinity for Narragansett Bay. In 1953, he was appointed to head the Art Department of St. George's School which overlooks Paradise Valley in Middletown, Rhode Island where he taught for 40 years. He was honored recently by having his name included on the new Fine Arts Building at the school.

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RICHARD GROSVENOR

Born 1928

*Up the Hill from Hanging Rock*

1992

Oil on canvas

Newport Art Museum

Gift of George Frost, 2006.011.001



Sue McNally was born in Washington D.C. and has lived most of her life in New England. She currently lives and works in Newport, Rhode Island and rural southeast Utah. Sue received her BFA from the University of Rhode Island in 1990 and her MFA from Savannah College of Art and Design in 1994. She has been a resident artist at The Vermont Studio Center, Yaddo and The Ucross Foundation. Sue has painted throughout the United States and in Venezuela, East Africa, and Portugal and continues to travel extensively throughout the United States by car. Sue is well known for her highly detailed, vivid landscape paintings and has worked extensively from the historic locations of painters past in Paradise Valley.

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SUE MCNALLY

Born 1967

*the last valley-paradise rocks*

2009

Oil on canvas

162 inches by 84 inches

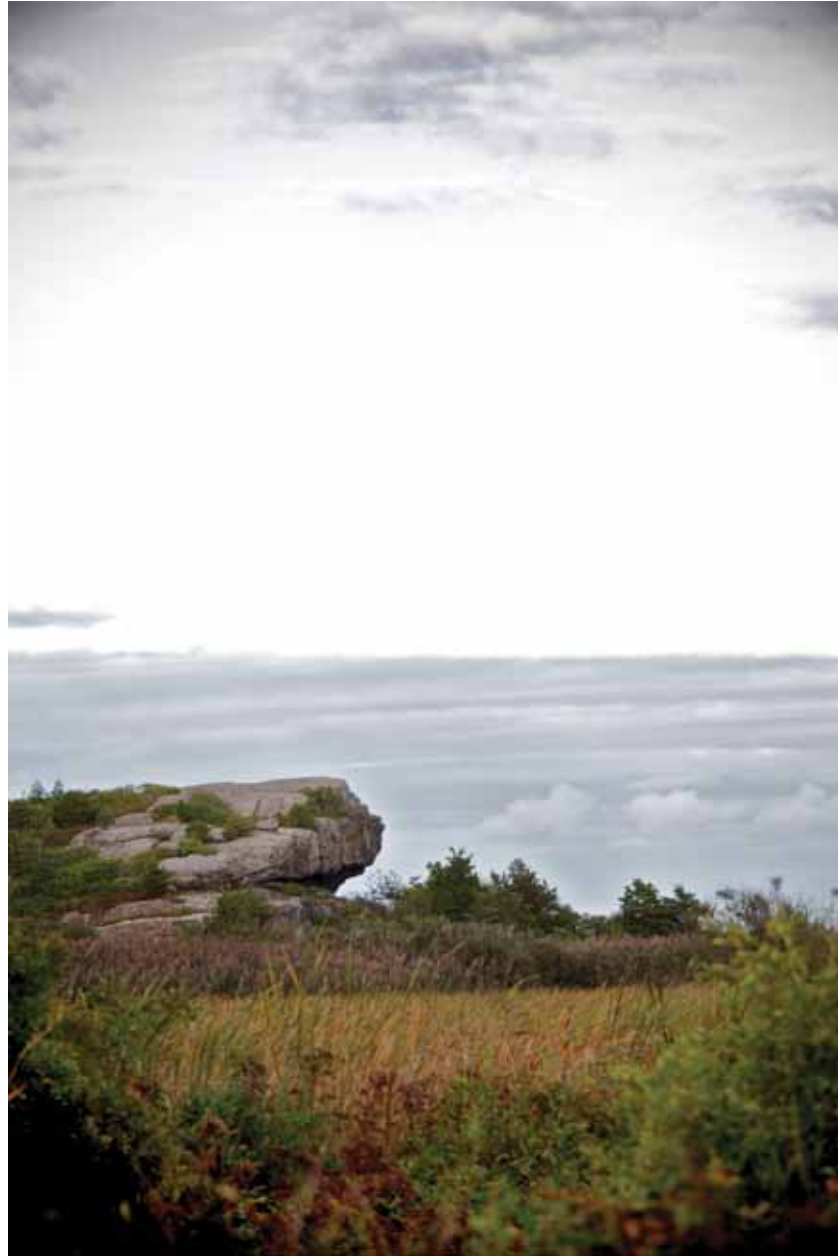




Kim Fuller is a 1986 graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design with a BFA in photography and has been a freelance photographer in the Rhode Island area since 1989. Kim is well known for her portraits and has an eye for capturing the atmosphere of the landscape. Her approach to shooting is with an interest in the moment and the story those moments captured can tell.

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KIM FULLER  
*Hanging Rock*  
Photograph  
2012



# THE FUTURE

We are fortunate that we don't have to visit historic paintings from centuries past to experience the slice of utopia that is Paradise Valley. This breathtaking part of history is safe from harm right at The Norman Bird Sanctuary. The 325 acres will continue to be thoughtfully preserved for the artists of the future, and the creative continuum will be encouraged for the next generation of painters, photographers, musicians, filmmakers, dancers, philosophers and writers.

The Norman Bird Sanctuary is a living, breathing museum whose legacy will live on in perpetuity.