



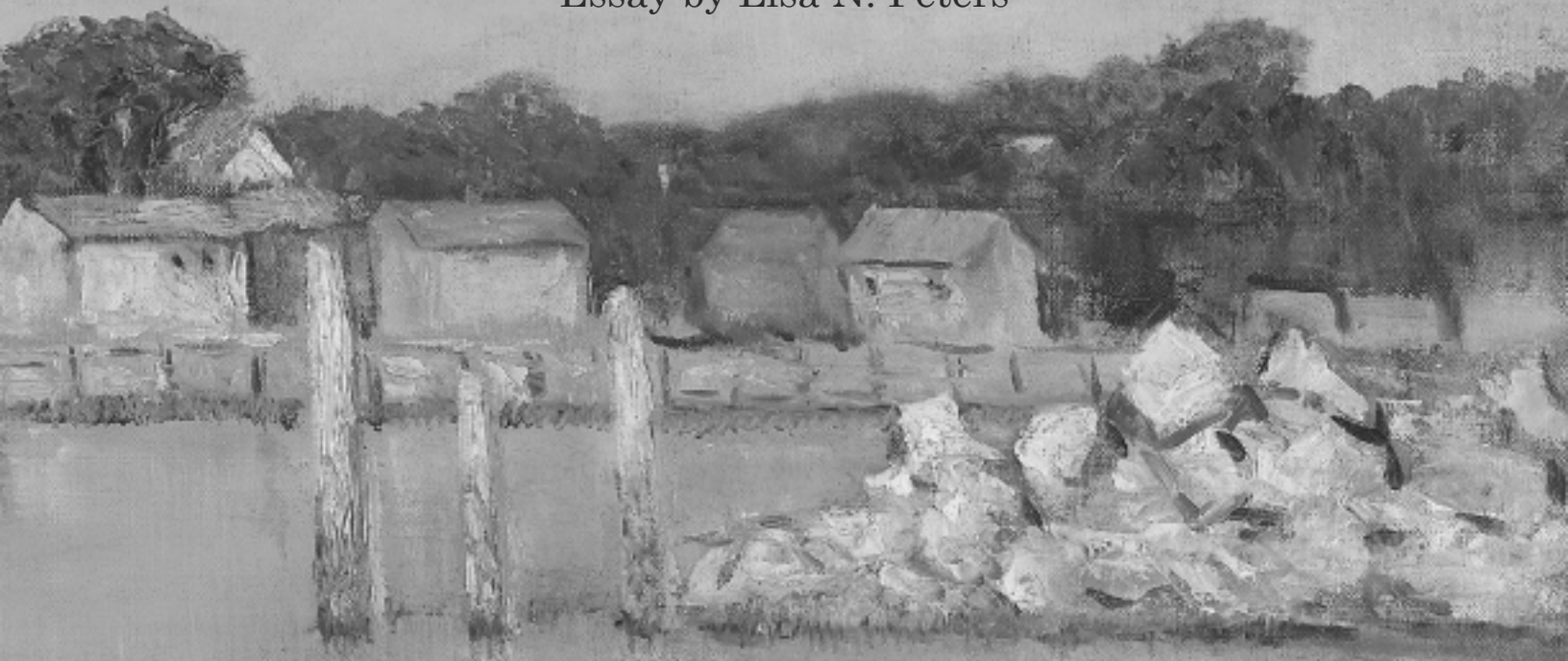
EDITH PRELLWITZ & HENRY PRELLWITZ
Painters of the Peconic

EDITH PRELLWITZ & HENRY PRELLWITZ

Painters of the Peconic

Curated by Christine Berry

Essay by Lisa N. Peters



June 7 – July 7, 2012

The exhibition can also be viewed at
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Spanierman Gallery, LLC
45 East 58th Street New York, NY 10022 Tel (212) 832-0208
Gallery hours: Monday through Saturday 9:30-5:30

COVER: EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ (1864-1944), *Harbor Scene*, 1910s, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in.

In its cohesive unity, the art of Edith and Henry Prellwitz expresses the harmony and creative interchange that flowed between two soul mates.¹ The images the artists rendered in Cornish, New Hampshire, from 1894 to 1898, in Peconic, Long Island, from 1899 through 1938, and other locales, reveal their constant quest to find beauty, reflecting the fact that due to their joyous marriage, they were able to exist in a suspended state, enjoying a charmed life above the tensions and banality of everyday life.²

This synchronicity suggests that they were of one mind, seamlessly working in unison and having the same vision of the world. However, this is not the case. The two not only came from very different backgrounds, but also had divergent and in many ways opposite personalities. Henry was an outgoing and carefree bon vivant. He had a passion for a life steeped in literature, which he read voraciously and recited frequently. Perhaps because of his broad-ranging



FIG. 1. HENRY PRELLWITZ, April 1886, photograph, Prellwitz Family Collection



FIG. 2. EDITH MITCHILL, New York Studio, ca. 1890, photograph, Prellwitz Family Collection

interests, he found it difficult to concentrate on his work. Edith had a similar intellectual bent. Yet, by contrast with Henry, she was introverted and filled with self-doubts. Extremely driven, she had high aspirations and worked relentlessly to achieve them. It was the coming together of the two artists that provided each of them with what they needed, achieving just the right equipoise for them to assure their happiness and spur their art.

Edith came from a wealthy and cultured household. She was born in South Orange, New Jersey, the second of three siblings. Her father was businessman Cornelius Smith Mitchill and her mother was Helen Emma Mitchill, whose father Almet Reed owned stores, print works, and commercial sloops in upstate New York. Edith embarked on her first trip abroad in September of 1882, sailing to Germany on the *S.S. Frisia* with several female friends and chaperoned by her Aunt Addie. In the year that followed, she studied German, traveled to a number of cities in Germany, visited museums and churches in Rome, went “wild over Florence” in seeing the Medici Chapel and the work of Michelangelo, and spent time in Paris, where she poured over the “art treasures” at the Louvre. She returned to America on the *S.S.*



FIG. 3. MORNING LIFE CLASS, ART STUDENTS LEAGUE, 1887, photograph, Prellwitz Family Collection (Edith Mitchill is in the second row from the top, three from left), Prellwitz Family Collection

Servia in October of 1883. The next period of her life was one of struggle. She entered the Art Students League, in New York City, in the fall of 1884, studying under George de Forest Brush, William Merritt Chase, Walter Shirlaw, and Kenyon Cox. Although coming quickly to the realization that she wanted to be a great artist, she was tormented by what she perceived as her own shortcomings. She worked feverishly, but worried her pictures wouldn't be worthy and that in painting them she was being selfish. In December of 1884, she enrolled in the first life class for women at the league (Fig. 3). For fear of her parents' disapproval, she told them that this "deed was done" only after she had begun the class, while writing in her journal that "a stronger tie" was holding her than that she felt toward her family. Meanwhile, social pressures bore down on her to marry and in the process abandon her career. As her friends took this route, she refused to conform. In following a separate path, she saw herself as some "kind of anomaly," and she wrote in her journal that she wished she were a



Fig 4. CAMPAIGNING FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE, before 1920, Prellwitz Family Collection



FIG. 5. EDITH PRELLWITZ, Peconic, New York, Prellwitz Family Collection



FIG. 6. EDITH AND EDWIN PRELLWITZ, ca. 1915, Prellwitz Family Collection



FIG. 7. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Sunset Road, Peconic*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 15 1/2 x 10 1/2 in.

man. She stated: “I will not be a dabbler, I can not and care not to marry. I would rather die than live long in this humdrum way.” Even when a man of whom she was fond proposed marriage to her, she declined, while bemoaning the loss “not only of a suitor but her best friend in the art world.” She compensated by immersing herself in reading. In 1885, she recorded in her journal that she had read the works of Bacon, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Carlyle, Spinoza, and Hegel. Yet, she felt that even this activity did not meet with social acceptance. In her journal, she copied down Carlyle’s statement that “one pays dear for any intellect one may have.”

In March of 1888, she began working as an apprentice at the Tiffany Glass Company. She remained through the following December, but left due to her desire to focus on fine art. In the same year, she became the women’s vice-president of the league, and in January of 1889, she started a “woman’s art club,” along with Adele Frances Bedell, Anita Ashley, and Elizabeth Cheever. This organization evolved into the National Association of Women Artists, which will celebrate its 125th anniversary in 2014.

In 1889, Edith departed again for Europe, this time going to Paris. There she honed her skills as a figure painter at the Académie Julian, training under the noted academicians William-Adolphe Bouguereau and Tony Robert-Fleury. During her eighteen months in the French capital, she also received criticism from the painter Gustave Courtois, possibly at the Académie Colarossi.

Henry Prellwitz was in Paris at the same time. His own trajectory had taken him there in the fall of 1887, and he remained in Paris, as well as visiting the artists' colony in the Normandy town of Giverny, famed for the presence of Claude Monet, through 1890. One of five sons, Henry was born in New York City to Randolph Prellwitz, an immigrant from Eastern Prussia, who first worked in a cigar factory, but had a love for music, and his wife Margaretha, whose family had been farmers in Mainz, Germany. Henry attended public school before entering City College, where he studied classical literature and took classes in art with Professor Solomon Wolff, the head of the art department. After being initially rejected for entrance to the National Academy of Design, he enrolled at the Art Students League, where he was admitted to the antique class taught by Thomas Dewing. There Henry was a memorable figure. The artist Louise Howland King, who would marry Kenyon Cox, recalled that he was one of the “more colorful and popular students at the league.”³ Dewing was later replaced as the antique class



FIG. 8. FROM LEFT: Henry Prellwitz, Edith Mitchell Prellwitz, Annie Lazarus, Maria Oakey Dewing, Elizabeth Bartol Dewing, and Thomas Dewing, ca. 1898, photography by George Fletcher Babb, Prellwitz Family Collection

teacher by Kenyon Cox, but it was Dewing who mentored Henry, inspiring his passion for seeing the world through a lens of mystical gentility. Dewing



FIG. 9. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Boat Launch, Richmond Creek, Peconic*, 1910s, oil on canvas, 13 1/4 x 16 3/4 in.



FIG 10. EDITH PRELLWITZ, HER SON EDWIN, AND HER FATHER CORNELIUS MITCHELL, Peconic Bay, New York, Prellwitz Family Collection

hired Henry as a studio assistant in 1885; in the following year, Henry also began to work for the architect Stanford White, creating decorative drawings. In the summer of 1887, Henry accepted an invitation to visit Dewing and his wife, the artist Maria Oakey Dewing, in Cornish, New Hampshire. It was on Dewing's recommendation that Henry departed for Paris in the fall of 1887, where, he, like Edith, enrolled at the Académie Julian. Henry spent part of that summer in Giverny, a time when the American artists' colony was emerging there. He visited the 1889 Paris Exposition and again stayed in Giverny in December 1889–January 1890, returning to the United States in the spring of 1890.

After a summer in Cornish, Henry settled in New York, serving as an assistant to Augustus Saint Gaudens, whom he had come to know in Cornish. With the help of the income he received, in

1892, he took a studio in the Holbein Building on West 55th Street, which turned out to be directly across the hall from that of Edith Mitchill. In the period that followed, the artists began a romantic relationship, as is reflected in the long and affectionate letters they wrote to each other when they were apart. While quoting literature, they planned their lives together. In the summer of 1894, Henry addressed Edith as his wife, vowing that “it must not be later than Oct. 2d” for their wedding. Yet, there seems to have been some concern for both that Edith’s family would not approve of Henry, perhaps because of his lower economic status and his chosen profession, but he was persistent. He urged Edith not to mention their plan to marry to her parents until he came to see them, writing: “I will have big invincible arguments.” To Edith, he expressed his love, while vowing a support for her career that was astounding for a day when it was believed



FIG. 11. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Seaside Cottage*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 10 1/2 x 13 3/4 in.



FIG. 12. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Dunes, Great Pound, Long Island Sound*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 9 x 13 in.



FIG. 13. EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ, *Moonlight*, ca. 1899, oil on canvas, 18 x 22 1/4 in.

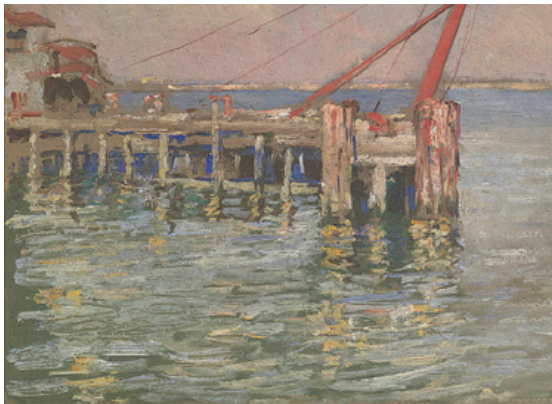


FIG. 14. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Docks, Long Island Sound*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 6 5/8 x 9 1/4 in.

women could not both marry and work or have equality in marriage. He wrote: “Remember darling our marriage is the best thing that could ever happen to your art—for you know I respect and value it—and promise faithfully, on my honor and love, to aid you in every way to develop it. . . . We are sadly incomplete alone. But will develop together. Working winter, Cornish summers.” Henry kept his promise throughout their lives.

While Henry alleviated some of Edith’s insecurity, she provided a steadying influence for him and the model of an ethic of hard work. In 1891, Maria Oakey Dewing had written a strongly worded letter to Henry, that no doubt affected him. Dewing wrote that although it was legitimate for Henry be happy in life, he was of an age when he had to decide of what his happiness would consist. She warned: “you live too much from day to day from hand to mouth, as it were, that you lack purpose & intention as to yr fortune.” She told him that he wouldn’t want his maturity to take him by surprise, and that it wouldn’t be consolation for him at that point to say that he had “friends and opportunities.” She felt he would be unhappy to find himself a “nobody in art” and “living without the carelessness of youth.” She was prescient

in stating her feeling that Henry would never do anything in his profession until he married, but when he did so, he would have the ambition to prove himself an important person to the woman before whom he would be working. Dewing stated clairvoyantly that his wife would be his other half. She cited to him the example of her husband and Saint Gaudens, saying that they worked with intense application all the year round, without loafing or losing sight of “the very ideal of their art.” She urged Henry to do the same, distinguishing himself rather than wasting his youth in entertainment.

When Henry and Edith married on October 6, 1894, he expressed his complete joy to her, stating in a letter that his “hopes had come true.” By the time of their marriage, both artists had achieved significant success. Despite the concerns Maria Dewing had expressed to Henry, works he had exhibited at the National Academy of Design had garnered high praise, and



FIG. 15. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Incoming Tide*, 1910s, oil on board, 11 3/4 x 16 in.



FIG. 16. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Richmond Creek, Peconic*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 21 x 31 in.



FIG 17. "PRELLWITZ'S SHANTY," Cornish, New Hampshire, ca. 1894-98



FIG. 18. EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ, *Sketchy Landscape, Cornish, New Hampshire*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 18 x 22 in.

his painting *The Prodigal Son* (location unknown) won the third Julius Hallgarten Prize at the academy in 1893. Edith was given this honor in the following year, with her painting, *Hagar* (location unknown). The two worked together in 1894 on a design for a mural competition held by the Municipal Art Society for the New York Court Building. They did not win, but their entry received a favorable response. Despite Edith's wealthy upbringing, the artists struggled to get by, causing Edith to worry. She was therefore relieved when she was awarded the Norman W. Dodge Prize for her painting *Legend* (location unknown), shown at the National Academy of Design in the spring of 1895.

From Edith's prize money, the couple was able to construct a summer home in Cornish. Built of "boards and paper," their modest shack was dubbed "Prellwitz's Shanty" (Fig. 17). The artists enjoyed participating in the lively community of artists and writers in Cornish, join-

ing the Dewings, the Saint Gaudens's, Charles Platt, and other artists and their respective families for evening tableaux and alfresco dinners. Henry painted many views of Mt. Ascutney, which he climbed with fellow artists. Edith focused on more intimate scenes, portraying the gardens of Cornish, including that of Augustus and Augusta Saint Gaudens. In her Cornish scenes, such as *Sketchy Landscape, Cornish* (Fig. 18), Edith combined impressionist and tonalist methods, applying layers of subtle color and a broad treatment of forms to engage the viewer in an awareness of the lushness of the landscape. Edith's *Lady in a Garden, Cornish, New Hampshire* (Fig. 20). In the impressionist spirit, a female figure in a flowing gown leans against a tree while drawing or painting the scene before her. The canvas suggests the idea present in the art of both Edith and Henry that to capture nature, the artist must not stand apart, but instead be absorbed directly. Henry had taken photographs of just such scenes that the artists may have used as a basis for their compositions (Fig. 19).

On July 9, 1896, Henry and Edith's son (and only child), Edwin, was born. In the years ahead, the artists experienced the delights of parenthood and had notable success in their art. Both were elected to membership in the Society of American Artists, and in January of 1899, they had a joint exhibition, held at the Charcoal Club in Baltimore and Pratt Institute. The previous summer was their last in Cornish as lightning had struck



FIG 19. SCENE IN THE LANDSCAPE OF CORNISH, NEW HAMPSHIRE, ca. 1894-98, photograph by Henry Prellwitz, Prellwitz Family Collection

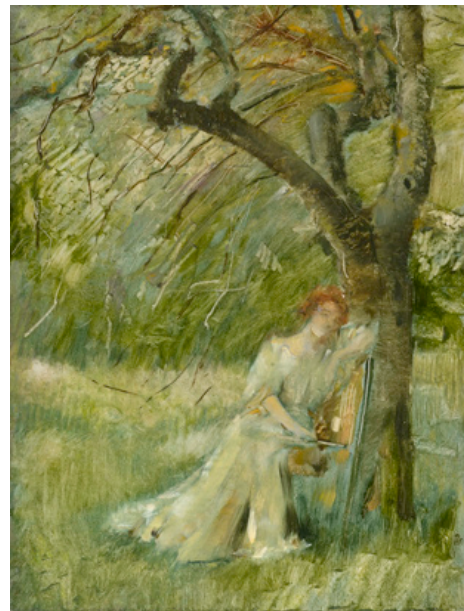


FIG. 20 EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ, *Lady in a Garden, Cornish, New Hampshire*, ca. 1894-98, oil on board, 12 x 9 1/4 in.



FIG. 21. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Peconic Bay*, 1910s-20s, oil on board, 12 7/8 x 19 in.



FIG. 22. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Pond in Winter, Richmond Creek, Peconic*, ca. mid 1910s-20s, oil on board, 9 x 13 in.

and burned their cottage. No one was injured and the artists' work was unscathed, as it was stored in New York in preparation for the upcoming exhibitions.

In the summer of 1899 the family rented a house in Peconic, on Long Island's North Fork. The choice of Peconic may have been due to friends Edward August Bell and Irving R. Wiles, who had established summer homes and studios in the area. But both Edith and Henry quickly became personally attached to Peconic, which drew them for its beauty as well as its greater accessibility to New York. Purchasing the home they had been renting and building a studio behind it, the family spent long summers in Peconic, creating art and enjoying a life of intellectual and emotional fulfillment.

While driving through Long Island one day in 1911, Henry spotted an old house in Aquebogue that was slated to be torn down. Known as "High House Josh" after its first owner, Joshua Wells, the house was a well-known landmark.

Henry not only chose to preserve it, but to dismantle and tow it across Peconic Bay, where he re-constructed it on land the couple had recently acquired overlooking the bay. Two years later, Henry and Edith sold their New York City home and began living year-round in Peconic, where they built side-by-side studios. Although they remained in close contact with the New York art world and re-established a New York City residence from 1924 through 1938, Peconic would be the place where they felt most at home. Balancing each other, Henry provided Edith with a sense of joy and pleasure in life that emerges in her art, while she inspired him to believe in himself and find passion in painting the subjects he loved, a feeling that comes across in the vitality and freshness of his Peconic art.

In Peconic, Henry turned from a focus on figural images in the manner of Dewing to creating landscapes in a style merging elements of tonalism and impressionism. He drew his subjects from his immediate surroundings, making use of a sharpie boat he had turned into an “aquatic studio.” This vessel, nicknamed The Tortoise, provided



FIG. 23. EDITH PRELLWITZ, *GARDEN BENCH*, PECONIC, NEW YORK, Prellwitz Family Collection



FIG. 24. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Garden Seat*, *Prellwitz House, Peconic*, ca. 1910, oil on board, 12 x 16 in.



FIG. 25. HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Swirling Clouds in the Moonlight, Peconic*, ca. 1910, oil on canvas, 18 x 22 in.



FIG. 26 HENRY PRELLWITZ, *Moonlight on the Water, Peconic Bay*, 1910s, oil on board, 13 x 19 in.

him with the means to travel around the bay in search of motifs that held his attention. Of Henry's works in the show, *Garden Seat, Prellwitz House, Peconic* (Fig. 24) perhaps evokes the spirit of the artists' daily life in Peconic best. The subject is the view from the artists' Peconic home looking toward the bay. Henry's tonal approach and the lithe movement of his brush express the quiet and calming feeling of this vista, where the leaves of garden foliage that rise above the retaining wall reveal the artists' personal involvement in their shared environment. Peconic Bay was also one of Henry's favorite motifs. He often painted scallop dredgers sailing across its waters and old docks with their weathered pilings. A subject that the artist found particularly mesmerizing was that of nightfall on the bay, and he recorded a particularly dramatic night sky in *Swirling Clouds in the Moonlight, Peconic* (Fig. 25) capturing the magical and heightened sense of life in Peconic that the artists shared. The frozen landscape of Peconic in winter also provided Henry with the impetus for some of his most abstract works (Fig. 22). Reducing his scenes to broad areas of water, land, and sky, he created quiet

arrangements devoid of human activity or architectural reference. Working directly, he captured the feelings he received from nature in images of the dunes and creeks of Peconic.

While Edith continued to create allegorical works in Peconic, she also felt compelled by the beauty of her surroundings, producing pure landscapes that express the emotions that her sites evoked. Her works range from a view of a serene harbor, where the forms of houses and pilings form a unified circular design (Fig. 28), to a hazy, abstract image in the manner of Whistler (Fig. 27), to a scene of a secluded bay lit romantically by both lingering daylight and the rising moon (Fig. 13). Such works express the artists' absorption in Peconic in a poetic experience, as they contemplated the mystical and spiritual presence underlying the natural world.

Lisa N. Peters

1. All quoted journal entries and letters are courtesy of the Prellwitz Family Archives. For help in identifying the subjects in photographs, we would like to thank Wendy Prellwitz and Dr. Susan A. Hobbs.

2. Sources on Edith and Henry Prellwitz include Ronald G. Pisano, *Henry and Edith Mitchell Prellwitz and the Peconic Art Colony*, exh. cat. (Stony Brook, N.Y.: The Art Museum, The Museums at Stony Brook, 1995). Pisano's essay was reprinted along with an essay on the art of the two painters by William H. Gerdts in *Painters of Peconic: Edith Prellwitz & Henry Prellwitz*, exh. cat. (New York: Spanierman Gallery, 2002).

3. Autobiographical Notes by Louise Cox, 1945, Kenyon and Louise Cox Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



FIG. 27. EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ, *Boat on Bay*, 1910s-20s, oil on panel, 14 x 22 in.



FIG. 28. EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ, *Harbor Scene, Peconic*, 1910s, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

EDITH MITCHILL PRELLWITZ (1864–1944)

Boat on Bay, 1910s–20s
Oil on panel
14 x 22 inches

Harbor Scene, Peconic, 1910s
Oil on canvas
25 x 30 inches
Fig. 28

Moonlight, ca. 1899
Oil on canvas
18 x 22-1/4 inches
Fig. 13

Lady in a Garden, Cornish, New Hampshire, ca. 1894–98
Oil on board
12 x 9-1/4 inches
Fig. 20

HENRY PRELLWITZ (1865–1940)

Boat Launch, Richmond Creek, Peconic, 1910s
Oil on canvas
13-1/4 x 16-3/4 inches
Fig. 9

Docks, Long Island Sound, 1910s–20s
Oil on board
6-5/8 x 9-1/4 inches
Fig. 14

Dunes at Great Pond, Long Island Sound, 1910s–20s
Oil on board
9 x 13 inches
Signed lower left: *H. P.*
Signed and inscribed on verso:
Dunes at Sound / Great Pond / Henry Prellwitz
Fig. 12

Garden Seat, Prellwitz House, Peconic, ca. 1910
Oil on board
12 x 16 inches
Signed and inscribed on verso:
Henry Prellwitz / Garden Seat
Fig. 24

Incoming Tide, 1910s
Oil on board
11-3/4 x 16 inches
Fig. 15

Moonlight on the Water, Peconic Bay, 1910s
Oil on board
13 x 19 inches
Fig. 26

Peconic Bay, 1910s–20s
Oil on board
12-7/8 x 19 inches
Fig. 21

Pond in Winter, Richmond Creek, Peconic, ca. mid-1910s–20s
Oil on board
9 x 13 inches
Signed lower left: *H. Prellwitz*
Fig. 22

Richmond Creek, Peconic, 1910s–20s
Oil on board
21 x 31 inches
Fig. 16

Seaside Cottage, 1910s–20s
Oil on board
10-1/2 x 13-3/4 inches
Fig. 11

Sunset Road, Peconic, 1910s–20s
Oil on board
15-1/2 x 10-1/2
Fig. 7

Swirling Clouds in the Moonlight, Peconic, ca. 1910
Oil on canvas
18 x 22 inches
Signed lower left: *H. Prellwitz*
Fig. 25

