

THE NORWAY SUMMER FESTIVAL 2004

Vivian Akers of Norway, Maine, 1886 - 1966 *A Brief Biography*



Vivian Milner Akers, December 6, 1886 - February 27, 1966. Painter, photographer, woodcarver. Curious, inventive, a man the world would have forced into one category or another, but who could never be pigeonholed. Successful at times in the larger world, but always drawn back to his home and friends in Norway. A man remembered with affection and respect, as much for his personal qualities as for his art.

While most of us must work to find our destiny, creative artists often know it instantly. Vivian Akers described his own moment of revelation to a reporter, when as a five-year-old he was given a box of pastels by Olive Hatch, a neighbor: "Miss Hatch thought she was presenting me only a gift. In reality she was founding a career."

However important this immediate inspiration may have been, we know that Vivian already had some experience of the visual arts. Minnie Libby, had studied at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, then returned to Norway to work with a local photographer. In 1885 she opened her own studio, in a building that decades later became Akers' studio.

She was a competent painter, and an excellent photographer. During her early career she made many photographs of scenes or set pieces that used people in costume. As a young boy Vivian Akers was regularly a model in these scenes, an early influence that surely helped to create the interest in photography that was a part of his art for the rest of his life.

Having gone through the Norway schools, Akers was 19 years old in 1905 when he attracted the attention of Don C. Seitz, a Norway native who had become Business Manager of the New York World, under Joseph Pulitzer. Seitz, who never lost his local connections, urged Akers to go to New York where he could study art seriously.

Arriving in the city, Akers went to Seitz for a job, and was put work in the want ad department of the World. This



Akers and Charlotte Young Moore, on a Miss Libby cabinet card.

enabled him to sign up for courses at the Art Students League. After about a year of this study, Vivian's father, Charles, who had been working in the local shoe factory, was appointed Postmaster of Norway, and Vivian was able to return home to attend Hebron Academy, where he graduated in 1908 as Class President, with his cartoons and embellishments decorating the yearbook. It is possible that Akers' relationship with the World continued, since we have a 1906 article about Norway snowshoe maker and fiddler Mellie Dunham, with lettering and graphics clearly by Akers, which may have appeared in the World.

Charles Akers then did something remarkable. A newspa-

per reporter quotes Vivian: “The day I graduated from Hebron father came to me with a proposition: ‘I’ll stake you for the next few years,’ he said, ‘and you can employ your time at anything you wish.’”

“Four of the happiest years of my life followed. I built myself a shack in our apple orchard, where I worked summer and winter on my art. Much of the joy of that idyllic venture was tempered by the fact that it was difficult to find anybody who wanted to purchase the product of my faltering brush work.”

One outstanding example of Akers’ work during this period - and his versatility - survives at the Norway Grange, where a hand-painted stage curtain and a backdrop are both signed and dated 1910.

Eventually he decided to look for a job: “.the local photographic studio became the field of fruitful endeavor.” Available records are not clear, but this studio may have been the studio of Wiggin Merrill, whose photography business, on Deering Street in Norway, Akers purchased in 1914

It was while working as a commercial photographer that Akers first encountered Douglas Volk.

In Don Seitz we see a Norway man whose connections and support for the people of his native place remained strong. Such connections with the world outside Norway were also present in the persons of the many successful and talented people who spent time in the area.

Volk (1856-1935) was a portrait artist of considerable reputation. He summered in Lovell, where he was part of an artists’ colony, and where he had been instrumental in organizing a handicrafts movement.

A Boston reporter quotes Akers: “I never saw a more painstaking painter. His besetting desire was to give his portraits photographic value...I have seen him study his portraits for days at a time to change a few high lights. Then he’d have the picture photographed again. If he was at all dissatisfied he’d undo the work, start all over again and have another photograph taken.”

Here, surely, are the beginnings of the connection between painting and photography that became an integral part of Akers’ art; and of his ability to capture the life of his subjects in their portraits.

Another newspaper interview elicited further comments about early influences: “I owe much to George Howe and George Noyes and Benjamin Newman and John Enneking, among others. Howe interested all the Norway boys in na-

ture and science. Noyes is an artist, his pencil sketches of White Mountain scenes unique and beautiful. Newman studied abroad and won a place in the Paris Salon. Enneking is the first man I ever saw painting Maine in colors as Maine really looks.”

Here are a series of important connections. George Howe, of Norway, was a naturalist, minerologist, and teacher and mentor to several generations of local young people. George “Shavey” Noyes, also of Norway, was an outdoorsman whose journals, their text illuminated by the pencil and watercolor sketches that Akers refers to, reveal a sort of instinctive Thoreauvian who viewed the natural world with religious reverence.



Volk (L.) and Akers, in Akers’ studio

Benjamin Tupper Newman (1858-1940) was a Maine painter who achieved international success with his landscapes. And John Joseph Enneking (1841-1916) was an American painter who worked in France with major Impressionists in the 1870’s. Enneking summered in North Newry, Maine, where Akers first encountered him. Enneking became a painting

companion and a tutor to the younger artist.

We see in these references Akers’ connection not simply to images of the natural world but to the natural world itself, especially the places and scenes in the Oxford Hills that he photographed and painted so often. And we see that Enneking’s version of Impressionism revealed to Akers a way of capturing this natural world in paintings.

At some time after his “sabbatical” and before 1914 Akers spent some time teaching public school, in Strong, Maine and Walpole, Massachusetts (this was a time when school teachers seem to have been quite mobile in the New England region). Then in 1914 he bought the Norway photography business of Wiggin Merrill, including the building, which had at one time housed the original studio of Minnie Libby. From that time until about 1935 Akers seems to have made most of his living from photography.

And it is for his photography that Akers seems to have first been noticed; but it seems to have been his connection with Enneking that brought him to notice. After Enneking’s death in 1916, there seems to have been a series of exhibitions of the late artist’s work in Boston. In conjunction with these exhibits, Akers had an exhibit of his landscape photographs at a Clarendon Street gallery. The Boston Herald said “the Enneking influence is apparent...in a display of photo-

graphs...by Vivian Akers...who was his pupil.”

The newspaper’s comments must have made Vivian proud: “The effects are so unified, the inclusions of discordant...elements so few.... The artist’s evident quest is for the picture which in nature is perfect, without alteration or change of emphasis.”

The photos themselves are of vignettes - trees, clouds, rocks - and one is reminded clearly of the small sketches of Shavey Noyes, with their German Expressionist feel.

By this time Akers was married. On July 7, 1915 he married Edith Verrill, the daughter of Norway native Addison Verrill, then a Professor at Yale, a prolific biologist and student of natural history. The marriage was not a success, and the two separated, apparently not too long afterward. There were no children. The couple was never divorced; Edith died in Norway in 1965.

We do not know when Vivian Akers began to do woodcarving. We do know that by the 1920’s he was actively doing woodworking. It is fair to say that Akers’ character expressed itself through art, and this shows most clearly in the way he turned his environment into an expression of his art. In time his studio became a piece of art, with carved doors and panelling, and handmade furniture.

He did the same for others. Hired to decorate a bunkhouse for the Vivian family at their Lake Pennesseewassee cottage about 1930, he painted in oils a map of the lake about 4 by 8 feet. This huge painting hung over the fireplace, while the room itself was finished with carvings.

Almost certainly this side of Akers’ work was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement. The most obvious connection is with the frames he began making for his paintings. These are clearly related to the work of Frederick Harer (1879-1949), a painter and frame maker from New Hope, Pennsylvania. A newspaper article reports that Akers said that he and Harer became friends about 1935, probably during the time Akers spent in New Jersey. There is a report that Akers actually made frames for Harer for a while.

Akers’ own frames were about two and one half inches wide, flat in the middle, moldings applied on the inside and outside, with carved and incised decorations, covered with leaf, then varnished.

The earliest reported exhibition of Akers’ paintings seems to have been in New York, at the National Academy of Design, in 1930. He was 44 years old. We do not have the details of the exhibit; but it seems to have marked a change in Akers’ life. He had been making most of his living with the photography business, and now seems to have decided to

concentrate much more on his painting.

In 1929 the Deering Street studio was moved fifty feet east, away from Main Street, and given a new foundation and other changes. It would remain Akers’ home and studio for most of the rest of his life.

At the beginning of 1932 the Norway paper reported an Akers exhibition in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, at the Women’s Club. The Wilkes-Barre newspaper is quoted: “...those interested in landscape paintings will find a wealth of composition and color in this exhibition....”

The Wilkes-Barre exhibition was almost certainly a result of Akers’ friendship with Ralph DeWitt, a photographer from that area. We do not know how the connection began;

but in the early 30’s Akers was painting portraits of the DeWitt family; later DeWitt accompanied Akers to Washington to photograph Earl Warren for Akers’ portrait of the Chief Justice.

It seems to be about this time that Akers began to work at portrait painting. Douglas Volk had encouraged Vivian to do portraits, but the younger man had been reluctant to attempt the new form. Finally he was asked by local Judge

George Emery to paint a portrait. Akers accepted, but took time to practice the art by painting portraits of his father and a few others. We do not know the dates of these events; but we do know that by the 1930’s Akers had developed a fine portrait technique based on what he learned from Volk and on his extensive photographic experience.

He told a 1936 interviewer: “I never begin to paint a portrait, now, until I have made, not a few, but perhaps forty or fifty photographic studies of the person, using different lighting and poses and trying to catch fleeting expression that are characteristic, as well as textures and hues of skin and hair.

“It is not that I want to transfer any of these to the canvas. The final portrait represents none. But by observing all I am able to study the person as I could not in any other way.”

This interview was done on the occasion of one of the high points of Vivian’s career, the selection of a portrait of a young local girl, Betty Joslin, with Akers’ Siamese cat, for hanging in the National Academy show of that year.

About 1934 Akers opened a studio in Plainfield, New Jersey, encouraged by the Vivian family. He found a ready market for his portrait work there; the article reports that he had painted 54 portraits since moving to Plainfield, and that “his compensation for each...has run well into three figures.”

Some time after the 1936 interview Akers abandoned the New Jersey studio, and returned, as he always did, to Nor-



Studio, Deering Street, Norway Maine

way. It seems clear that he had chosen, consciously or not, to trade eminence in the art world, which would require him to be a public person, as Douglas Volk had been, for a life in Norway, close to the places and friends that meant most to him, and with the freedom to pursue the interests he chose.

His interests could range widely. About 1926 Akers and Henry Cullinan, a close friend then of college age and a fine woodcarver in his own right, were inspired by the example of Douglas Volk's father Leonard, who had made the only life mask that exists of Abraham Lincoln. They experimented, and produced a set of life masks of themselves and their friends, cast from plaster of Paris.

In 1926, when local fiddler Mellie Dunham was nationally famous on the Keith vaudeville circuit, Akers went to New York to design a publicity piece for the act, using his photos of Dunham and the Norway area. For Mellie's return home after the tour, Akers, Cullinan and others made a giant wooden fiddle, presented to Mellie and hung over the door of his farmhouse.

Akers designed and built a camera to photograph the 1932 solar eclipse, using a lens ground from local quartz. When the downtown gathering spot for Norway businessmen and their cronies, Beal's Hotel, closed, Akers designed the Weary Club, a Classically proportioned one-story structure that still stands on Norway's Main Street.

Vivian's closest companions were George and Freeland Howe. Akers, the Howes and a few others formed a remarkable group of creative, intellectually curious and rather Bohemian Norway natives who lived life in their own way, unapologetically, but left their mark on Norway nonetheless.

Beginning with his time in New Jersey, Vivian's public career as an artist was often bound up with his relationships with seasonal residents of Norway, who helped Akers find commissions outside the local area. He spent 1937 mostly in Switzerland, taking photographs and painting, having arranged the trip through the Vivian family and their New York friends by promising paintings in return for underwriting the trip. Akers' other major painting expedition would occur

about 1942, when he spent time in the Sierras in California.

1939 found him in Cambridge, Massachusetts with the help of Harvard Professor George B. Weston, who summered in Norway. Weston arranged a studio for Akers, who spent some months painting portraits of the Westons and other Harvard faculty.

An exhibition at the Lewiston, Maine Trust Company in 1940 included 23 landscapes and 15 portraits. The highlight of the event was the presentation of a portrait of John J. Butler, late Principal of Lewiston High School, mounted in a Harer frame.

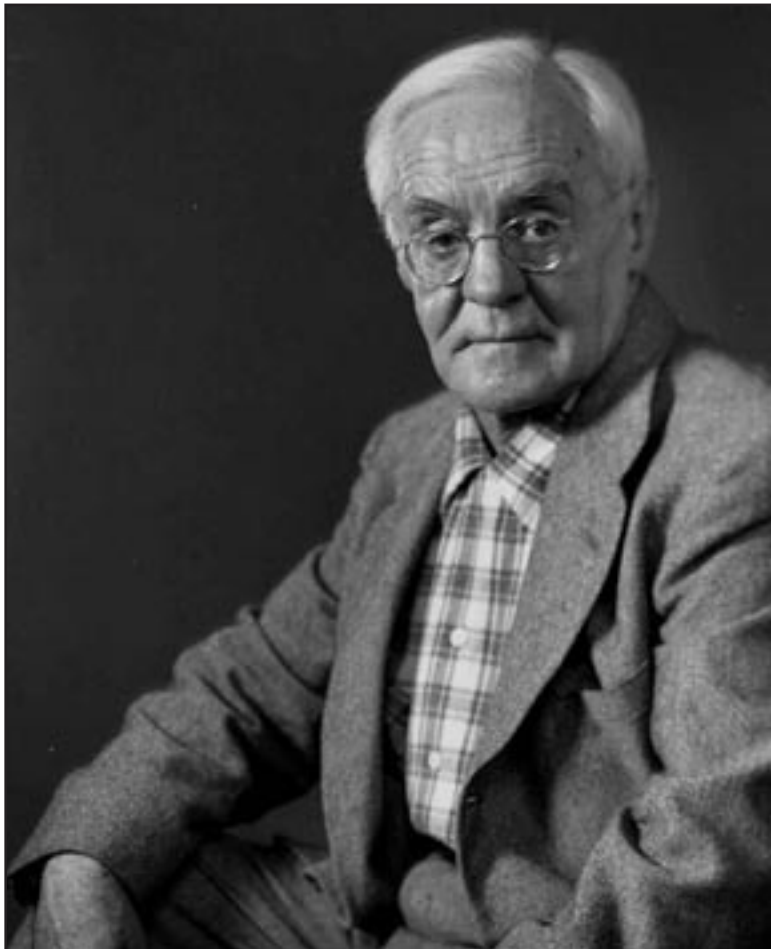
Vivian's largest Norway exhibit was in 1949, at the Universalist Church. There were some 200 portraits and landscapes, many on loan from private owners; a large carved

panel; and 68 of the small landscapes on wood that Akers began painting in the 1930's.

His life by this time was bedeviled by the alcohol that would afflict his later years; but in 1954 when he was commissioned to do a portrait of Chief Justice Earl Warren, which now hangs at Occidental College in California, Warren's alma mater, Vivian responded as professionally as ever, traveling to Washington with Ralph DeWitt to take color photographs of Warren, which formed the basis for the 40x50-inch canvas. The picture was mounted in a wide hand-made frame covered with gold leaf.

Vivian Akers was 80 when he died in 1966, a man who had never sought wide notoriety for

his genius, but who is still respected and remembered with great affection by those who know his work. He had outlived many of his old friends; but his openness and generosity to the young people of Norway has left a legacy of lifelong memories that keep him alive in the community. And some four decades after Vivian Akers' death his paintings begin to command prices that reflect their quality, quality that his friends who have shared their homes with his work understood all along.



Vivian Akers, 1954

David Sanderson, June 2004
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