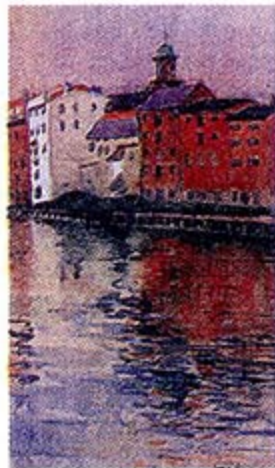


Portsmouth then and now displayed in seldom-seen paintings



By Joel Brown
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — The images are familiar: the North Church steeple, the salt pile, the busy harbor and Memorial Bridge. But most of the 34 paintings have kept a low profile, hanging in quiet corners of public buildings or in private homes, or even stored away. And when the "Painting Portsmouth" exhibition at Strawberry Banke Mu-

seum ends on Oct. 31, they will go back whence they came.

"We wanted to put up pieces that people had never seen before, and we achieved that in spades," said Strawberry Banke's chief curator, Kimberly Alexander. "The 34 paintings we borrowed from 30 different lenders. So it's a seemingly small, simple exhibit that was actually very complicated."

The paintings span the last two centuries, from John Blunt's circa 1832 "View of Portsmouth (N.H.) from Freeman's Point," which has been kept high on a wall at City Hall, to Carol Aronson-Shore's 2009 "Gro-

ceries at Strawberry Banke." But there are no dotcom hipsters, no parking garage, no Starbucks on display in the museum's new Rowland Gallery. Even the most recent works depict a city drenched in history.

"A lot of pieces came right out of Portsmouth's attics and hanging over fireplaces, and then suddenly you find you've got a Charles Woodbury, a very charming etching that somebody had tucked away and hadn't looked at in generations," Alexander said. "We've had so many people come forward" offering works for the museum's exhibition, she said, "that we

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could easily do a second show."

The Navy's presence across the water in Kittery, Maine, adds unexpected surprise to Edmund C. Tarbell's 1926 work "Hollyhocks and Sunshine," as a corner of the dreaded (and now vacant) naval prison peeks from behind mainland flowers. Scott Moore's circa 2006 "Spring Thaw, Portsmouth Harbor" captures the bright light on melting snow in the South End — eyeball it from across the room for the full effect.

"It gives you that appropriate shiver of that late-March, early-April day," said Alexander. "But the light, the reflection, is just exquisite."

The Hancock Street museum has arranged a number of special

events since the show's May opening, including a talk Wednesday by historian Peter Michaud, "Coming of Age in the Piscataqua: John Samuel Blunt's Portsmouth," starting with a reception at 5 p.m.

Alexander co-curated the exhibition with Jamie LaFleur, owner of the popular Banks Gallery on Court Street. Several of the paintings are part of Strawberry Banke's collection, including the show's signature image, "Portsmouth Harbor" by Margaret Jordan Patterson. A new acquisition from a New York gallery, the watercolor is by an artist best known for her woodblock prints, Alexander said, and the museum would not have been able to afford one of those.

"It's been a real sort of shot in the arm for the collection," Alex-

ander said. Of the 20,000-plus items in the museum's permanent collection, only about 100 are paintings, etchings, and the like, she said.

Aronson-Shore said she is especially excited to be part of "Painting Portsmouth." The Chicago native has lived a short walk from Strawberry Banke for 25 years, and for the last few years the museum has been her primary muse.

"As I started working with the subject, I realized it had so many possibilities for me that one painting led to another, and now I have over 40 paintings in the series," she said.

In her "Groceries," the viewer looks out from the shadows into the sunshine.

"It's that strong light and shadows that comes early in the

day or late in the day . . . It was only afterward that I realized I was trying to say something about the two experiences we have at Strawberry Banke, dealing with the past and the present," Aronson-Shore said.

"When we're walking through the streets and on the campus of Strawberry Banke, we have a powerful experience of being in a place that has endured. Certainly the houses and the grouping of houses give you a sense of community. But we also have a very vibrant experience. Even though it's called a museum, it feels very much alive and an extension of Portsmouth."

Many more of her Strawberry Banke paintings will be on display in "The Shape of Color: Carol Aronson-Shore," a five-week show opening Nov. 6 at the

University of New Hampshire Museum of Art.

"Painting Portsmouth" is also a new thing for Strawberry Banke, which is known mainly for historic and craft displays.

"This is not the type of show we're known for doing, a fine-arts show," said Alexander. "I think it's also taken a while for people to get their heads around it locally. Now it's like this great big thing everyone's very proud of it, very involved in it, telling all their friends."

"Painting Portsmouth," through Oct. 31 at the Strawberry Banke Museum, 14 Hancock St., Portsmouth, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., free with adult admission (\$15). For details, call 603-433-1100 or visit the museum's website, www.strawberrybanke.org.