

# Bringing to Light

Theodore Wendel (1857-1932)





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(left) *Rose Arbor*, circa 1905-1915  
Oil on canvas mounted to wood panel  
30 ½ x 21 ⅞ inches  
Signed lower right: *Theo. Wendel*

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(front cover, detail) *Moonrise on the Farm*, pg. 9



## *An Unsung Impressionist*

By Courtney S. Kopplin

For generations, Vose Galleries has welcomed the opportunity to shine a light on the work of ‘unsung artists’ throughout art history, and in the sphere of American Impressionism there is perhaps no artist more deserving of this attention than Theodore Wendel. As part of the first wave of Americans to visit Giverny in the summer of 1887, joining John Leslie Breck, Willard Metcalf and Theodore Robinson, Wendel became one of the earliest painters to apply impressionist principles to his plein air interpretations of the French countryside; sources later reported that the master himself, Claude Monet, who limited his interactions with the Americans, thought highly of Wendel’s work. In March of 1889, shortly after settling in Boston, Wendel organized a three-day viewing of his pastoral landscapes at a studio on Boylston Street, coinciding with Metcalf’s exhibition of foreign paintings held nearby at the St. Botolph Club. Both artists garnered positive reviews from the local press, and over the next several years Wendel maintained an active exhibition schedule, including a two-person show with Theodore Robinson in 1892, featuring both oils and pastels; several solo and group shows with his fellow Boston artists at the St. Botolph Club; and a solo show at Chase Gallery in 1894 which inspired the following reaction from the *Boston Evening Transcript*: “Mr. Wendel has been influenced by Monet and his ilk very much, but his work is the least mannered and the most conscientious of any of the so-called impressionists on this side of the ocean, and it appears to us to have more of nature in it than the majority of the ultra modern landscape painters.”<sup>1</sup>

As the decade progressed, Wendel began adapting his new technique to subjects closer to home, specifically those found in Gloucester, where he taught summer classes in the early 1890s. Critics again lauded his paint handling and intuitive color harmonies, and were charmed by his unique brand of Impressionism as it applied to the clearer sunlight and rich tapestry of the New England landscape. Wendel’s teaching post in Gloucester was not his first; he gave lessons to women artists in Newport, Rhode Island, in the mid-1880s, before going abroad to France, and from 1892 until 1897 he was an instructor at Boston’s Cowles Art School, where he met his future wife Philena Stone. The extra income teaching



Theodore Wendel painting daughter Mary,  
Upper Farm, Ipswich, circa 1915

provided, combined with his steady roster of exhibitions, allowed Wendel to feel more financially secure in his profession and in 1897 he and Philena were married, with artist and lifelong friend Joseph DeCamp serving as best man. Following a year-long honeymoon spent exploring France and Italy, the Wendels relocated to Philena’s ancestral homestead in Ipswich, where the village and the family’s lower and upper farms on Argilla Road would serve as the artist’s personal version of Giverny for the latter part of his career.

Although firmly planted in Ipswich, Wendel remained involved with Boston’s exhibition circuit for the next two decades, soon adding the Guild of Boston Artists to his résumé in 1914, and earned the respect of the era’s foremost impressionist artists. Edmund Tarbell applauded his abilities, commenting in 1909, “I know of no landscape painter whose work represents so many of the effects of nature...or who can put down what he sees with greater truthfulness.”<sup>2</sup> Wendel also sent work to venues outside of New England, including annual displays at the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Corcoran Gallery, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which awarded him the prestigious Jennie Sesnan Gold Prize for *Winter at Ipswich* in 1908 and acquired the painting for its permanent



collection. Despite this personal triumph, Wendel never quite attained the same level of name recognition bestowed on his impressionist peers, particularly those who had established strong ties to New York City. He took part in a few annual shows of the Society of American Artists and the National Academy of Design in the early 1890s, but this was the limit of his interaction with the city. Years later, Wendel and several Boston painters were overlooked by the Academy when conferring associate memberships, causing Philip Leslie Hale to counter, “there is not a better painter of landscape in America than Theodore Wendel, and yet one sees pitiful fakers succeeding in a material way where he only scores ‘un success d’estime.’”<sup>3</sup> Working steadily among the picturesque environs of the North Shore, Wendel became the embodiment of the painter’s painter; his transcriptions of the New England landscape, rendered in all seasons and with an eye for capturing the essence of nature, found no shortage of admirers among those who truly know the craft.

Wendel’s inherent modesty may have played a role in his relative obscurity today, an opinion best surmised by his friend Frank Benson in a letter to Philena upon hearing of the artist’s death: “He was really a true artist, and a very fine one, only he did not know what it meant to make his candle shine in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the artist suffered and eventually recovered from an infection of the jaw in 1917, after which his output was markedly curtailed until his death in 1932. This, combined with a studio fire at the turn of the century in which a collection of early landscapes may have been lost, leads to a scarcity of paintings on the market from which one can grasp the true breadth of Wendel’s talent. After his death, his work was tucked away by the family until a 1976 collaboration between the artist’s son Daniel and John I. H. Baur, director emeritus of the Whitney Museum in New York, reintroduced Wendel to the art world in his first solo show in generations. At the time, Vose Galleries was privileged to assist Daniel with the logistics of lending several paintings to the exhibition, including three featured in this catalog: *Pitching Hay*, *Upper Farm* (back cover); *Haying in Front of Heartbreak Hill*, *Ipswich* (pg. 15) and *The Lower River*, *Ipswich* (pg. 11).

Since the 1970s, Vose Galleries remained close with the Wendel family and we have been fortunate to handle and place his work in important private and public collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Bos-

ton. This connection now extends to Wendel’s great-grandchildren, who have entrusted us with the nearly thirty landscapes and figural paintings comprising this exhibition, the first in decades in which the merit and quality of Wendel’s Impressionism can be observed and appreciated. We are grateful to take on stewardship of their great-grandfather’s work. The majority of these paintings have never before been offered for sale and we hope discerning collectors of American Impressionism will embrace the opportunity to restore Theodore Wendel to his rightful place among his contemporaries.

Our efforts would not have been possible without the dedication of Laurene Buckley, Ph.D., Museum Consultant and Art Historian. Her recently-published monograph on the artist, *Theodore Wendel: True Notes of American Impressionism*, is the culmination of years of research and an invaluable source for this introduction and the contemporary reviews of Wendel’s work sprinkled throughout this catalog. Our gratitude is equally beyond measure. Available through the Artist Book Foundation, the 172-page volume offers an in-depth narrative of the painter’s life and legacy, from his Midwestern upbringing and early training under Frank Duveneck in Germany, to finding his calling in Giverny and his years faithfully interpreting the scenery of Gloucester and Ipswich. It has reaffirmed our belief that Wendel deserves to be better known, and we hope to do our part in bringing his brilliance to light.



*Theodore Wendel: True Notes of American Impressionism*

1. “The Fine Arts,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 2, 1894, 6.
2. “Honors and Praise for Mr. Wendel,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 30, 1909, 5.
3. “New Associates of National Academy,” *Boston Herald*, June 7, 1908, 1.
4. Letter dated December 25, 1932. Wendel Family Archives.







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(above) *Turkeys on a Wall*, Giverny, circa 1887-1888  
Oil on canvas, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 21  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

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(left) *The Harvest Gleaners*, Giverny, circa 1887-1888  
Oil on canvas on wood panel, 13  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 16  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

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“There is still a very great charm in the uncommon character of light and color here [in Giverny] for me especially (especially in sunlight) that I have not met with elsewhere. This iridescent shimmer in the land provokes experiment, and tends to run up large color bills. You, too, would feel its sway...” (Letter from Wendel to Anna Hunter, July 17, 1888. Anna Falconnet Hunter, *Diaries*, Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island, box 98.)



“[Wendel] is not a blind follower of Monet. He has seized the motive power of the master’s work; and, returning to America, after a couple of years of hard study, has evolved a method and manner of his own, simple, broad, beautiful.” (Helen M. Knowlton, “The New School,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 11, 1892, 6.)

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(left) *Hydrangeas, Ipswich*, circa 1915  
 Oil on canvas, 38 x 31½ inches  
 Signed lower right: *Theodore Wendel*

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“Mr. Wendel presents his flower studies modestly and makes no pyrotechnical display of gaudy color or startling high lights, but it is evident that the beauty and charm of these fragile things appeal to him deeply.” (Jean Nutting Oliver, “Wendel Landscapes Excite Interest of Boston Art Colony,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 22, 1918, 5.)





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(above) *Woman in Flower Garden, Cape Ann*  
Oil on canvas, 12  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 18  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

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“Of all the Giverny school of landscape painters, disciples of Claude Monet, impressionists, modernists, luminarists, iridescentalists, and other children of their century, we prefer Mr. Wendel.” (“The Fine Arts: Mr. Wendel’s Pastels at the St. Botolph Club,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 12, 1895, 13.)





“A great wave of interest in art has swept over the North shore, so-called. It brings earnest and skilled workers fresh from art schools of the large cities, and makes them ask for the best teaching that the country affords. . . . Mr. Frank Duveneek is here with a class from Boston, and very strong work comes from under their white umbrellas. . . . During Mr. D’s [Duveneek’s] absence for a week the class was under the charge of his friend, Mr. Theodore Wendel of Newport, a young artist, who is studying deeply into the mysteries of light upon color. No browns and blacks enter into his scheme of painting. Pure color, fresh from the tube, will not produce what the modern colorist sees in nature.” (Helen M. Knowlton, “A Home Colony of Artists,” *Studio 5 Magazine*, July 14, 1890: 326-327.)

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(above) *Ploughing the Field, Ipswich*  
Oil on canvas, 17 7/8 x 28 inches

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(right) *Moonrise on the Farm*  
Oil on canvas, 30 1/2 x 40 1/4 inches

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“Back in America, Wendel refined his art, experimenting with freer handling and higher color — perhaps in response to the character of American light and atmosphere. Some of his most successful canvases were painted in Ipswich between 1900 and 1915.” (John I. H. Baur, *Theodore Wendel: An American Impressionist*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976.)



“The subjects are not extraordinary. These coves, marshes, old streets, and river views, have no doubt been shown on canvas before, but Mr. Wendel brings these everyday places before us in such a simple, unhackneyed and understanding manner, and his point of view is so original, that the pictures make a strong and fresh appeal.” (John Nutting, “Pictures by Theodore Wendel Exhibited,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 27, 1909, 4.)

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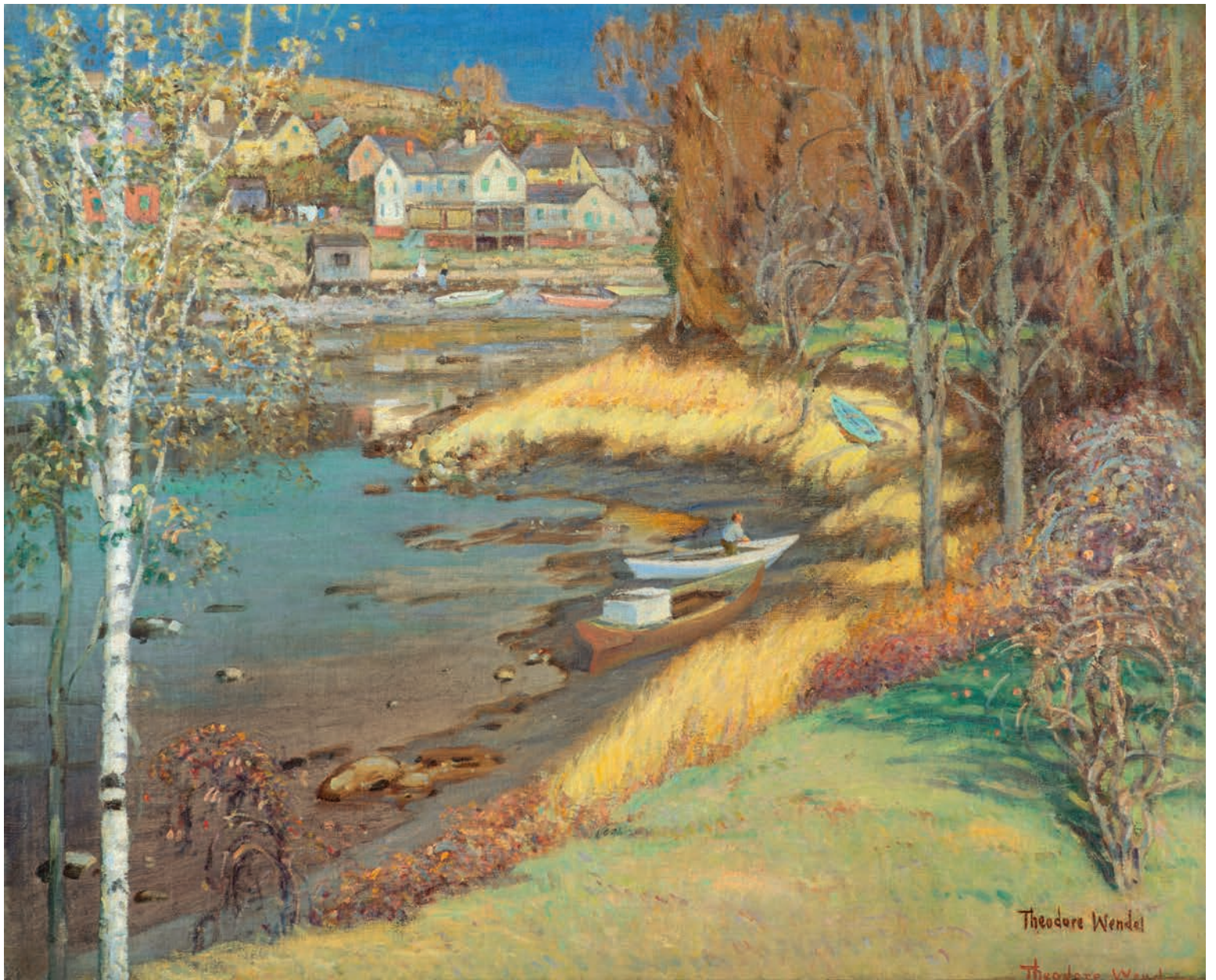
(above) *Corn Sheaves on Castle Hill*, circa 1905-1913  
Oil on canvas, 22  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 26  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

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(right) *The Lower River, Ipswich*, circa 1908  
Oil on canvas mounted to panel, 30  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 37  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Signed lower right: *Theodore Wendel*

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“[Wendel] was clearly, I think, the equal of or better than such other Impressionists as Bacher, Benson, Breck, Frieseke, Metcalf, Perry, Reid, Tarbell, Vinton, Vonnoh. He was, in addition, one of the first among them to espouse Impressionism and to adapt it with sensitivity to American subjects and American light. He deserves to be better known.” (John I. H. Baur, “Introducing Theodore Wendel,” *Art in America*. November-December, 1976, 105.)

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(left) *Figure along a Rocky Shoreline, Gloucester*  
Oil on canvas  
24  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 21  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

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“Strikingly original and unacademic in composition, several of the Gloucester harbor motives [sic] are captivating. . . the coves, rocks, inlets, snug little white houses, white sails, wharves, dories and all the picturesque material found in a fishing town are much appreciated by Mr. Wendel, who has the faculty of making constantly new combinations of picturesque design out of them.” (“The Fine Arts,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, December 29, 1903, 10.)

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(above) *Fishermen's Houses along a Cove, Gloucester*, 1916  
 Oil on canvas mounted to panel, 25 x 37 inches  
 Signed and dated lower right: *Theo Wendel 16*

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(above) *Trees along the Marsh*  
Oil on canvas, 22 x 30 inches

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“Mr. Wendel makes landscapes that in their fidelity to the actual color or tone of rural New England are certainly as good as any achieved hereabout. No one is better fitted than this Munich trained veteran to disprove the popular impression that there is something raw and acrid [sic] about the landscape of this corner of the country—to refute the average New Yorker’s belief that somewhere in the vague beyond New Rochelle lies a bleak coast peopled by still bleaker people of the sort

painted by Winslow Homer....With allowance, of course, for the moods of a changeable climate the characteristic note of the district dominated from Boston is one of light cheerfulness; a topography modeled into soft curves by the winds and waters of a million years; a color that is unusually fresh and tender. This high-keyed charm is the note that Theodore Wendel strikes.” (“Landscapes by Wendel on View,” *Boston Herald*, March 11, 1915, 11.)

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(right) *Haying in Front of Heartbreak Hill, Ipswich*  
Oil on canvas, 30 ½ x 40 ¼ inches  
Signed lower right: *Theodore Wendel*

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“The size of the Wendel’s farm has been variously described as 60 or 98 acres, depending on the source, and came complete with 60 cows. . . . From the lower farm, Wendel’s choice of subjects was endless. In one direction, he had a spectacular view of the marshes and Ipswich Bay. In another sweep, he could take in the rolling hills and farms upland from the marshes.” (*Theodore Wendel: True Notes of American Impressionism*, 77-78.)





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(above) *Women Gathered around Fountain, Venice*, circa 1897  
Oil on canvas, 21 x 31 inches  
Signed lower right: *Theodore Wendel*

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“There is no one who has had more discernment in rejecting what is ephemeral in the fad and retaining what is valuable in the movement....He has survived the baptism of light, and having sucked all the available sweetness out of the new school, has gone on to conquer yet newer worlds in his own way.” (“Mr. Wendel’s Studio Exhibition,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 11, 1891, 4.)



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(right) *Portrait of the Artist's Wife Philena*,  
*Venice*, circa 1897  
Oil on canvas, 22 ¼ x 16 ⅝ inches

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“One gets an impression that he [Wendell] does not have to go far afield to find something fascinating to paint. His quest for good pattern, withal, is not especially tense or insistent. Its whole effect is of composure rather than of composition.” (F. W. Coburn, “In the World of Art,” *Boston Herald*, January 27, 1918, 2.)

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(back cover) *Pitching Hay, Upper Farm*  
Circa 1915  
Oil on canvas, 26 ¼ x 33 ½ inches

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VOSE GALLERIES

238 Newbury Street • Boston • MA • 02116  
617-536-6176 • [www.vosegalleries.com](http://www.vosegalleries.com)  
[info@vosegalleries.com](mailto:info@vosegalleries.com)