

The NHP&CC artist and president, Frederick Lester Sexton (1889-1975)

Many artists won't display much (or any) of their own work at home - but we definitely do hang art. The pieces some of us collect often differ significantly from our own efforts, or represent methods or styles we would love to master. Still, others speak to us for more personal reasons. A landscape in the collection in our home checks all the boxes. Like this collector, the artist who painted the landscape, Frederick Lester Sexton (self-portrait, figure 1, right), had strong ties to several Connecticut locations and institutions, and to some of its long-standing art associations.

Sexton was born in Cheshire, CT to a local minister and his amateur artist wife. While still very young, Frederick suffered serious burns to his right hand, forcing it closed for the rest of his life. However, this didn't prevent him from practicing art, first at home with his mother, and then when he studied with the well-recognized painters and Yale faculty members Augustus Tack and Sargent Kendall. He received a BFA from Yale in 1917, as well as highly coveted travel and self-study awards. During his tours and military service in Europe during WWI, Sexton was greatly influenced by the French impressionists and the Spanish so-called modernist artists of that era. After his return to the states, he settled in New Haven and taught art at local and regional schools throughout Connecticut, and gave private art lessons at home.

One of Sexton's first public showings was in a 1913 exhibition by the New Haven Paint & Clay Club, Connecticut's oldest continuously active art society, who offered him active



artist membership in 1921. He won an NHP&CC named award for a landscape painting in 1928, and a purchase prize in 1939 for a portrait entitled *Old Man's Son* (figure 2, left). This image in the Club's collection is strongly reminiscent of *The Fisher Boy* by the well-known Cape Cod artist Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872-1930), painted in 1908 and owned by the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT. It is also analogous in palette and subject matter to the 1886 painting *Eight Bells* by Winslow Homer (1836-1910),

owned by the Addison Gallery of American Art at the Phillips Academy, Andover, MA. Those artists and their works significantly preceded Sexton's *Old Man's Son*, but their



classical influence on this painting is hard to ignore. Sexton's grandson David Christie thinks that the model used in *Old Man's Son* is likely to be Frederick Lester Sexton himself, based on his familiarity with his grandfather and his grandfather's works. Supporting this, the family has yet another Sexton self-portrait with the artist wearing the same hat. Mr. Christie believes that the vessel partially portrayed in *Old Man's Son* is the legendary *J. Lloyd Hawkrige* (built in 1905), which was the last all-sail coastal schooner to work Long Island Sound, may have been used in the area's oyster harvesting industry, and was docked in New Haven harbor until its destruction. He further relates that Sexton, who was also an avid sailor and boat maker and who painted the *Hawkrige* on several occasions, probably created *Old Man's Son* as an imaginary montage that included himself and the boat and the harbor he knew and loved so well. The *Hawkrige* is featured



in a large painting which Sexton created while the schooner was still nestled in New Haven harbor (figure 3, left), and which remains in Mr. Christie's personal collection. Sexton contributed consistently to NHP&CC shows throughout his lifetime, and was its president twice, first in 1943-1945 and then in 1962-1963.

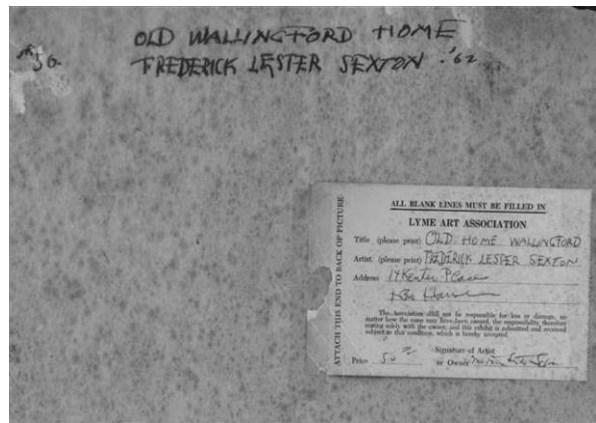
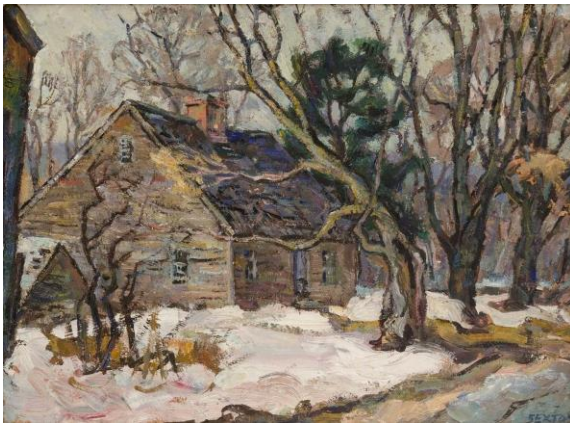
Perhaps based on his characteristic style and the preponderance of like-minded artists in the area of Old Lyme, CT, Sexton was strongly drawn to that region in the late 1920s. Sexton developed numerous artist friendships there

and, beginning in 1933, regularly contributed to shows at the highly selective Lyme Art Association. Sexton built his second home in Old Lyme on property that he obtained from Guy C. Wiggins in 1936, and then gained LAA membership, which required local home ownership during that period. Wiggins himself had moved permanently from his New York studio to Old Lyme in or about 1920, and ran art schools in Old Lyme and in Essex, CT, and for one season in 1930, within the city of New Haven itself, where he was also a member of the popular NHP&CC.

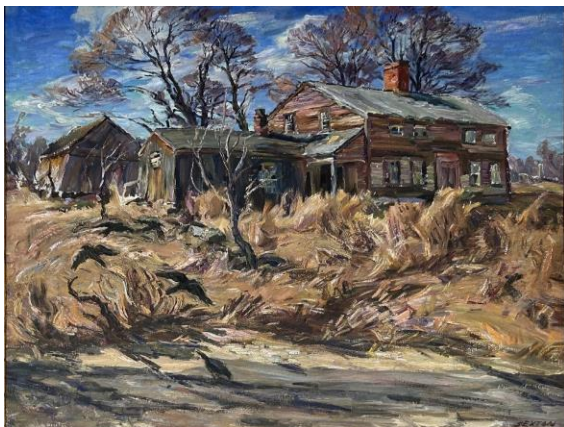
Sexton was also an early member of the Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts where Wiggins was president, and he helped the CAFA forge bonds among several art associations throughout the state. Sexton continued painting in eastern Connecticut for many years, forming many close relationships with neighboring artist friends until his passing in 1975. Sexton, Wiggins, and indeed many other regional artists, all belonged to these important early art groups where their memberships were solid and significant to them as artists and leaders in their field. Sexton's works are held in many well-known public and private collections

The landscape by Sexton in our collection is indicative of the post-impressionistic, regionalist style often found in his plein air work. It depicts small structures engulfed by

large trees, with running water in the foreground, all covered or bordered by snow (figure 4, right). The brushwork, which is quite typical of his early style according to his grandson professor John Christie, is strong and almost frenzied, as if the snow is still falling. The pallet in this painting echoes other snow-loving artists in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, upstate New York, and Vermont in that era, with the overall impression being appropriately chilly. It portends Sexton's 1962 painting "Old Home, Wallingford" (figures 5a and 5 b, below), offered for \$50 back then (about \$500 today), and shown in his memorial exhibition at LAA in 1976. Both paintings are oil on hardboard,



analogous in size, pallet, and signature, and clearly of the same outlook and hand. Another much larger painting by Sexton (figure 6, below left), in the estate of the Christie brothers' late mother and Sexton's daughter, Dorothy Sexton Christie, shows analogous highly active brush work as well as his more typical last-name-only signature.



Works by Frederick Lester Sexton continue to surface at auction and at private sales, where they usually gain or well exceed the prices of similar sized paintings by today's regional artists. Notably, they are strong images that recall a significant era in the history of the many Connecticut art associations, including the NHP&CC, where Sexton had a strong and influential presence. And for this collector, his works assemble more than a few elements that make collecting art an essential part of the practicing artist's life.

The author is grateful for conversations with artist and historian Jack Montmeat and with Sexton's grandsons, Professor John Christie and David Christie; for biographical information assembled by Helen Fusscas (The Connecticut Gallery, 1987) and by Dorothy Gall (The New Haven Paint & Clay Club's 100th Anniversary Exhibition catalog, 2000); for Ira Hillyer's recollections of Sexton (published on AskART.com, 2005); for archived material on Eldred's.com (2016); and for many public sales records collected on the findartinfo.com website.

Figure Legends

Figure 1, Self-Portrait. Frederick Lester Sexton. Oil on canvas, 1940. Lyme Art Association - Internet Archive. The estate of Dorothy Sexton Christie, courtesy of Professor John Christie.

Figure 2, Old Man's Son. Frederick Lester Sexton. Oil on canvas, 1939. The New Haven Paint & Clay Permanent Collection.

Figure 3, The J. Lloyd Hawkrige in New Haven Harbor. Frederick Lester Sexton. Oil on canvas, date unknown. The collection of Mr. David Christie.

Figure 4, A Home in the Woods, Winter. Frederick Lester Sexton. Oil on board, date unknown. The author's collection.

Figure 5a, Old Home, Wallingford. Frederick Lester Sexton. Oil on board, 1962. Lyme Art Association - Internet Archive. Current location unknown.

Figure 5b, Reverse of figure 5a. Courtesy of Robert C. Eldred Co., Inc., East Dennis, MA.

Figure 6, Old Farmhouse with Crows. Frederick Lester Sexton. Oil on canvas, date unknown. The estate of Dorothy Sexton Christie, courtesy of Professor John Christie.