Gruppé is Gloucester
by David Jermain
FOREWORD

The Gloucester400+ Stories Project is honored to share this story of artist Robert Gruppé and his family legacy.

ABOUT THE COVER

Three generations of Gruppé artists grace our cover. On top, Charles Gruppé painting in his studio, circa 1920s; Emile Gruppé, circa 1950s; and Robert Gruppé, circa 1990.
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Celebrating Artist Robert Gruppé and His Family Legacy
BY DAVID JERMAIN

When President Franklin Roosevelt’s yacht made port in Gloucester in 1933, the city wanted to present the president with a gift that was unique to Gloucester. They chose to hand the president a painting by Emile Gruppé of the *Gertrude L. Thebaud*, one of Gloucester’s fastest fishing schooners and a contender for the Lipton Cup.

The Gruppé family name is synonymous with the city of Gloucester throughout the world because of their extraordinary artistic skills and work depicting Gloucester and its fishermen. For almost 100 years, the Gruppé family has lived on Rocky Neck, producing a prodigious amount of artwork, influencing fellow artists, and teaching thousands of professional and amateur painters.

In most families, it is very unusual for extraordinary gifts of intellect, artistry, or athleticism to be present in more than one generation. Certainly, there are examples, such as the sons and daughters of famous athletes or actors who have found success, but for most of us, the noteworthy talents of our ancestors were “one-off” events. In contrast, consider that Robert Gruppé (son), Emile Gruppé (father), and Charles Gruppé (grandfather) have provided the art world with over 100 years of world-class paintings. Emile’s siblings were also gifted sculptors, musicians, and painters, as was Robert’s cousin Charles.

Born in 1944, Robert Charles Gruppé has lived in a world framed by the daily rhythm of fish-
ing draggers steaming out past his Rocky Neck home before dawn and the rain-like dapple on the surface of the inner harbor caused by schools of tinker mackerel. He was surrounded by artistic talent and expression, not only of his father and grandfather, but also the greater community of artists who were friends of the Gruppé family.

Robert painted his first painting at age 12. His apprenticeship with his father started at age 6 when paintings were shipped around the country in wooden boxes, and Robert was tasked with removing the nails that secured the covers. As Robert began showing an interest in painting, Emile would set up one of his paintings and have Robert work to copy it as best he could. While Emile taught thousands of painting students, it is a testimony to both Emile’s skill as a teacher and Robert’s awareness of that skill, that Robert refers to his father as “the best painting teacher in the world.” It is perhaps more common for sons to rebel against the world of their fathers and to only appreciate their father’s gifts and kindness upon reaching middle age. How fortunate that at a young age, Robert had the judgment most of us didn’t have, to appreciate his family legacy and what he could learn from his father.

Robert’s grandfather, Charles, was born in Canada but moved at age ten to Rochester, NY after his father died. Eleven years later, Charles had the nerve and pluck to travel to Europe to further his career as a painter. He established himself as a skillful landscape painter in the Dutch School style, so much so that Queen Emma and Queen Wilhelmina of Holland purchased his paintings.
As further evidence of Charles’ painting skills, it is said that Queen Wilhelmina supported Charles’ desire to build a new studio on the basis that she, the architect, and the builder would each be paid with one of Charles’ paintings. With the approach of World War I, Charles gave up his work in Holland and moved with his family back to the United States, where he continued his painting in New York City.

Robert’s father, Emile, could have used his artistic talents to become a cellist, but his brother Paulo was already studying cello. There was some discussion of the merits of two cellists practicing under the same roof. The result was that Emile decided to play string instruments as a hobby and turn his aspirational efforts toward something else. He chose painting.

Both Robert and his father studied under their respective fathers. Emile first studied under Charles before studying at the Hague in Holland and then at the Art Students League in New York City.

Emile studied with John F. Carlson at his school in Woodstock, NY. Like his father, Emile had great talent and “pluck and nerve.” In Emile’s case, he also possessed a keen eye for entrepreneurship. While taking classes from John Carlson in the mornings, he began teaching lessons himself in the afternoon, noting that his students “learned from me in the afternoon what I learned this morning.” Not only was Emile a good teacher, but he was also inventive and “people smart.” He required any of his afternoon students to also be students of Carlson so as not to offend his mentor. It may seem incongruous that Emile, an artist, purchased a number of Model T cars at that time and rented them on weekends to the students at the nearby college. The ease with which Emile connected with people and his entrepreneurial spirit would serve him well throughout his career.

We may think of artist colonies such as those in Gloucester, Provincetown, and Key West, as always having existed, but they owe their existence to those “pioneer” artists who recognized the unusual quality of light and subject matter in a given locality.

After Emile returned from painting in Paris in 1925, he attended a show of Frederick Mulhaupt’s work in New York. Emile was struck by the subject matter of Frederick’s Cape Ann paintings and decided to get to Gloucester to see what it was all about.” After making a trip to Cape Ann, Emile and his father moved to Rockport to live and paint.
Gruppé family lore suggests that it was the destructive effect of Rockport’s angular granite paving stones on their Model T car tires and the vastness of subject matter in Gloucester that caused Emile and Charles to move from Rockport to Gloucester.

In 1929, while the effects of the Great Depression gripped the entire country, Emile bought what had been Rocky Neck’s one-room schoolhouse to be his new studio. This studio is the same one on Rocky Neck Avenue that Robert works from today.

It was not easy to feed your family during the Depression, even if you were a skilled painter. Soon after purchasing his new studio, Emile tapped his entrepreneurial skills, hung a sign outside, and began welcoming student painters, both professionals and amateurs. Years later, in 1942, Emile’s school was accredited by the U.S. government as the Gloucester School of Painting, which operated until 1970. Emile’s skill as a teacher is exemplified by the nearly 7,000 students that came to learn from him.

In 1941, Walt Disney contacted Emile and asked for help recruiting the skilled draftsmen needed to produce the prodigious number of illustrations that were key to Disney’s animated movies. Seven of Emile’s best students went to California to work for Walt Disney.
Emile may be fairly credited with doing much to pioneer the Gloucester art community. His recognition of the magic that is Gloucester and the enormous success of his painting and teaching career truly cemented Gloucester’s future as the artist’s colony that we recognize today.

Dynasty may not be exactly the right word to describe the Gruppé family, but it suggests the longevity of a family that has been able to capitalize on the strengths of prior generations while bringing to bear new perspectives and actions that propel it into the future. Robert’s father and grandfather were extremely talented painters, but it was Robert with his deep understanding of commercial fishing, that led the Gruppé family to study and paint the interplay of men, boats, nets, and fish on a heaving sea.

As a striped bass fisherman, Robert would often tie his boat alongside the pocket of the Santapaola fish trap off Kettle Island, waiting for the chance that Joe or Jimmy Santapaola would pass him a bucket of live mackerel for bait. Those mornings alongside the trap, Robert watched as the men in the big dory dried up the twine, making the bowl of the trap net smaller and moving the fish toward where the trap boat Buddy and Pal was tied to the cork line. This experience helped shape Robert’s appreciation of the incredibly intelligent and complex relationship between fishermen, the ocean and the fish they sought to catch. He watched as the men leaned back in the dory, straining to haul the heavy, wet netting over the gunnel and as
the school of bright, green mackerel began to swim in such a tight circle that they created a spinning vortex at the water’s surface.

We are often surprised when our fathers show themselves to be “just human” rather than the imposing figures we have grown up with. Robert painted “The Trap,” which depicts the Santapaola men in their dory, working the fish back towards the Buddy and Pal. Upon showing his father the finished painting, it was clear to Robert that Emile was struck by the movement and energy he had captured. Emile’s paintings soon began to focus more often on Gloucester fishermen, their nets, and boats, but surprisingly, he never acknowledged to Robert that the shift in his focus was due to Robert’s innate understanding and skill at rendering the work of fishermen.

As Robert’s painting skills continued to improve, his father encouraged him to strengthen the foundation of his painting by further developing his drawing skills. Robert was recognized with a scholarship from the Elizabeth Greenshield Foundation in Canada, which led to his drawing study under the noted sculptor George Demetrios. Although Robert’s apprenticeship with his father cannot be minimized, Robert notes that the four years he spent studying drawing under George were pivotal to his ability to become the painter he became. Those four years were the start of a close and long friendship between Robert and George. It didn’t hurt that George enjoyed fishing and Robert was very good at helping George catch striped bass.

Like his father and grandfather, Robert is a skilled painter and an innovator. In the late 1970s, Robert had a 28’ purse seining boat built in Essex for seining mackerel in and around Gloucester harbor. Unfortunately, his efforts were undermined by a surge in the
presence of voracious bluefish, not seen in Cape Ann waters since the 1800s, which scattered the schools of mackerel and drove them to deeper water. While exploring the possibility of a larger purse seine operation, he inadvertently received information on Scottish seining.

Scottish seining is a system of using long coils of heavy rope to encircle groundfish such as yellowtail flounder or haddock, then drive them into a small box net as the ropes are hauled back. At a time when fuel costs had risen decidedly and delivering the highest quality fish on every trip was necessary to make fishing financially viable, Scottish seining caught Robert’s eye. There are so many factors involved in net fishing that must be in exact alignment to catch fish, including tuning the design of the net, the avoidance behaviors of different fish, the tides, the weather, the seasonal variability of each species, etc., that it was financially very risky to experiment with fishing gear and methods that had never been used in the United States.

In 1977, Robert built a 48’ boat specifically for Scottish seining, ordered his nets from Scotland, and is believed to be the first to bring this innovative fishing technique to the United States.

It is sometimes true that a man or woman’s physical limitations become one of their strengths. Robert has only one good eye, but he dismisses it as an impediment to his work because he believes having only one good eye helps him focus.

Like a hawk circling high above a field, a good fisherman sees many things with an eye trained to see details. A hawk might see a dried oak leaf move when there is no wind, then the dark shape of a field mouse as it moves again in the leaf litter. Likewise, a good fisherman’s eyes become trained to look for the details that are exceptions to the normal movements of the water, indicating the presence of fish. A patch of darker water not caused by clouds blocking the sun or a small storm petrel hovering and dipping over a glassy section of an otherwise ruffled water are the details a good fisherman sees.

Robert’s fishing experience allows him to see and capture the ocean’s mood in ways that most other artists cannot. He recently described returning to Gloucester harbor after a day’s fishing trip. The wind was strong from the southwest, blowing the surface water, flotsam and jetsam into the harbor. It was afternoon, and the sunlight had that warm, moist, and soft character of a late summer day. The dark red Tarr and Wonson paint factory building was aglow in the afternoon
light, as was the surface of the harbor and the myriad of painted lobster pot buoys. “Stop the boat,” he said, and they drifted as he soaked it all in.

Although Robert’s paintings may often be described as more colorful than that of his father or grandfather, he feels that the key elements of painting are (in descending order) design, light/dark values, and color.

Gloucester was the location of many of Robert’s paintings, but Naples, Florida, has also been his home for part of every year. Drawn initially to Florida by trips made with his father, he remains captivated by the unusual overhead light that shines down through the tropical green water in that area, the distinctive fishing boats of Florida, and sight fishing for a delicious local fish known as pompano.

Robert and Emile painted together for 23 years and throughout that time were very much involved in both the Rockport Art Association and the North Shore Art Association. Robert took advantage of the chance to learn from other painters teaching nearby. He was also an avid reader of books written by or about other skilled painters, such as Edward Seago in the U.K., Winslow Homer, and Charles Hawthorne, in an effort to understand how they thought. Robert and his father have been honored with dozens of prestigious awards for their work. Their paintings hang in private and permanent collections as diverse as the White House and the Marco Island Historical Society in Florida.

There is a good reason that many authors dedicate their books to the love and support of their spouses. Robert and Jennifer Gruppé have been married for 21 years and have enjoyed each other’s company since the 1980s. Trap fisherman Joe Santapaola was Jennifer’s godfather,
making her no stranger to the world of fish boxes and net mending. As she notes, each painting of Robert’s brings to mind a memory of that day, the light, and the subject matter. Whether around Gloucester or on the shores of Naples, Florida, many of Robert’s paintings are a record of their experiences together.

Look at those smiles! Robert and his wife Jennifer at the wedding of Francis Langford Evinrude to Harold Stewart, circa 1990s in Stuart, Florida. Bob Hope was the best man for the bride, yes the bride.

Jen and Robert at a fundraising party for the National Oceanographic Society in Stuart, Florida, circa early 1990s.

Asked what he considers the highlight of his artistic career, Robert replies that thinking ahead to the next painting pleases him most. His goal is to create a painting that is not a map or detailed depiction but rather an expression that people will feel. Quoting his mentor, George Demetrios, who felt that discussing artwork was missing the point, Robert says, “Art is for your eyes, not your ears.”
EDITOR’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to volunteer writer David Jermain for submitting this story and to Stefan Mierz for contributing photos of Robert and Emile Gruppé’s paintings. Our gratitude also goes to Larry Maver for photo restoration. Last, but not least, we extend our appreciation to the entire Gruppé family for their contributions to Gloucester’s art community.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Cape Ann native, David Jermain worked in the international seafood business for forty years. When not behind a desk or in a fish filleting plant, he has enjoyed working as a commercial fisherman including time spent on the Gloucester swordfishing boat, the Jaguar, and Jerry Hill’s Yankee Fleet boats.

David’s great-uncle Everett Sirois was a violin maker and painting student of Emile Gruppé. Family legend is that Emile traded Everett one of his paintings in exchange for repairs to one of Emile’s instruments. Emile’s painting remains a treasured heirloom and a remembrance of their relationship.