

# A Love of Art and of Place: The Prellwitz Family of Peconic

BY SARA EVANS



A century separates the painter Wendy Prellwitz (b. 1950) from her great-grandparents, the artists Henry and Edith Mitchill Prellwitz. Yet by working in their studios in Peconic, a hamlet on Long Island's North Fork, and by living in the adjacent home they shared so happily, she feels informed and inspired by them both. Like her ancestors, she has chosen Peconic, cherished by many artists for generations, as the place to evolve as an artist.

The North Fork is a 30-mile-long spit of land bordered by Great Peconic Bay to the south and Long Island Sound to the north. It is a quiet area of woods and farmland, punctuated by coves and inlets, creeks and harbors. The North Fork's position



Edith Mitchill Prellwitz (1864-1944)  
*East Wind or The Bathers*  
c. 1922, Oil on canvas, 36 x 27 in.  
Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City

Edith Mitchill Prellwitz (1864-1944)  
*The Open Door*  
1915-20, Oil on canvas, 22 x 27 in.  
Prellwitz Family Collection

between two major bodies of water fills its skies with shifting cloudscapes, and its waters reflect the constantly changing light. "Painting outdoors in Peconic," Wendy explains, "is a form of devotion. The moving patterns, the buoys, docks, and reflections, the ever-changing, unknowable light — I love to paint here in every season and in all weathers."

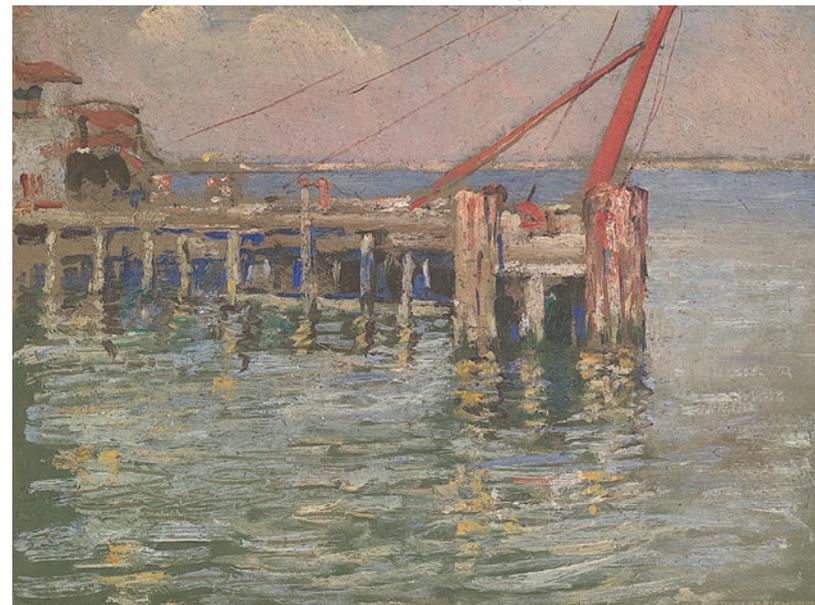
## AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE

Henry Prellwitz (1865-1940) was a son of Prussian immigrants who lived in the German community on New York City's Lower East Side, where they kept a cigar store. An extroverted, multilingual, literary *bon viveur*, he attended City Col-



Edith Mitchill Prellwitz (1864-1944)  
**Sailboats, Peconic Bay, Long Island**  
 1910s-20s, Oil on canvas, 21 x 26 in.  
 Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City

lege and then enrolled at the Art Students League of New York in 1882, training under Thomas Dewing (who became his friend and mentor), Kenyon Cox, Robert Reid, and others. Like many Americans of his day, Henry left to study at the Académie Julian in Paris between 1887 and 1889. He also traveled through Germany and the Austrian Tyrol, and spent time at Giverny with such artists as Philip Hale, William Hart, and Theodore Robinson. In 1890, Henry accompanied Dewing to Cornish, New Hampshire, where a lively group of artists and writers spent their summers. There he painted the rough landscape, assisted Dewing, and met the sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens. Back in New York City that winter, he



Henry Prellwitz (1865-1940)  
**Docks**  
 c. 1910s-20s, Oil on board, 6 5/8 x 9 1/4 in.  
 Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City

assisted Dewing, St. Gaudens, and the architect Stanford White.

Edith Mitchill Prellwitz (1864-1944) was the daughter of Cornelius Mitchill, a successful businessman, and Helen Reed Mitchill. Her family was on Mrs. Astor's famous list of "the 400" in New York society, and they lived in great Victorian comfort in South Orange, New Jersey, roughly 17 miles southwest of Manhattan. When she was 18, Edith took a grand tour of Europe, where she learned German and fell for the art she saw in Florence and Rome, Paris and London. Upon her return in 1883, she, too, entered the Art Students League, studying under George de Forest Brush, William Merritt

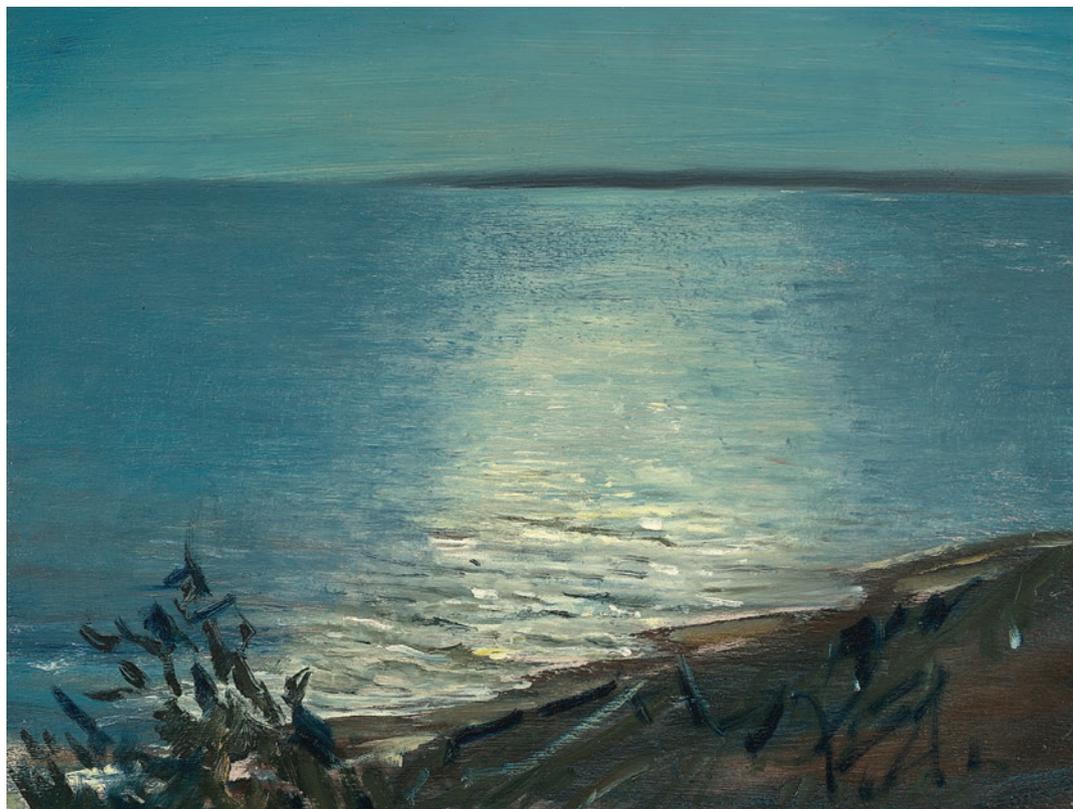
Edith Mitchill Prellwitz (1864-1944)  
**The Book and the Rose**  
 1896, Oil on canvas, 54 1/2 x 31 1/2 in.  
 Prellwitz Family Collection



Henry Prellwitz (1865-1940)  
*Lotus and Laurel*  
1904, Oil on canvas, 30 x 60 in.  
Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City



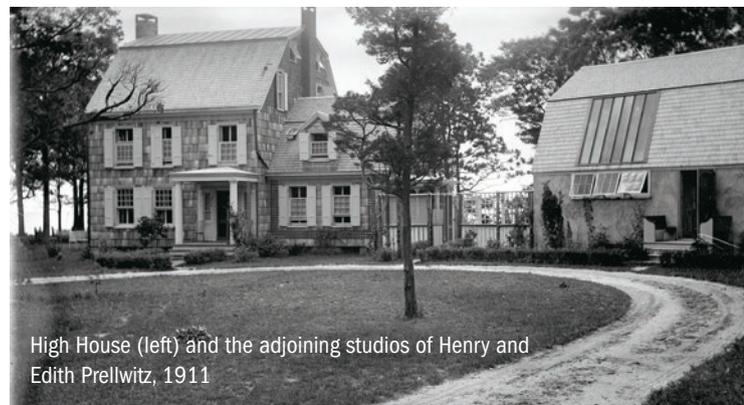
Henry & Edith Prellwitz, c. 1890s



Henry Prellwitz (1865-1940)  
*Moonlight Bay*  
c. 1910s-20s, Oil on board, 12 x 16 in.  
Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City



Henry Prellwitz (1865-1940)  
**Richmond Creek**  
 c. 1910s-20s, Oil on board, 21 x 31 in.  
 Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City



High House (left) and the adjoining studios of Henry and Edith Prellwitz, 1911



Wendy Prellwitz (b. 1950)  
**Passage, Peconic Bay**  
 2012, Oil on board, 16 x 18 in.  
 Collection of the artist

Chase, Walter Shirlaw, and Kenyon Cox. There Edith enrolled in the first life-study course offered to women, worried that her parents would disapprove. Remarkably, they didn't.

Like most women of her generation, Edith felt pressured to marry. Even early on, however, she believed that conventional marriage was simply out of the question because becoming a homemaker and an artist were mutually exclusive. Edith was determined to be as good and successful an artist as possible: "I will not be a dabbler," she wrote. "I cannot and care not to marry. I would rather die than live long in this humdrum way."

Edith read deeply — Hegel, Kant, Carlyle, and Locke, among others — and she kept extensive diaries that record her feelings. In 1888, she apprenticed at the Tiffany Glass Studios, and was elected women's vice president at the League. A deeply committed feminist, she co-founded the Women's Art Club of New York because, though many females studied art, they had few opportunities to exhibit and sell their work. Addressing this vacuum, the club flourished and eventually became the National Association of Women Artists; it ultimately welcomed such important members as Mary Cassatt, Rosa Bonheur, Laura Coombs Hills, and Cecilia Beaux.

In 1889, Edith began studying at the Académie Julian under William Bouguereau and Tony Robert-Fleury. Though her path may have crossed Henry's in Paris or at the Art Students League, today the Prellwitz family believes that they met at the Holbein Studio Building in Manhattan. Edith rented a studio there in 1891, and the following year Henry took a studio across the hall. Henry was smitten, but Edith resisted: "I cannot marry you and be an artist," she wrote. In an era when social backgrounds counted, theirs varied greatly, and then there was the perception that Henry was a social gadfly. Dewing's artist wife, Maria Oakey Dewing, even chastised Henry about this: "You live too much from day to day, from hand to mouth ... you lack purpose and intention..." (Little could she have known that Henry, as the National Academy's treasurer, would convert its holdings from stocks to gold in March 1929, thereby saving it from ruin during the Great Depression.)

Henry pursued Edith with single-mindedness, and he always kept his early pledge to cherish her as an artist and to promote her career alongside his own. He wrote: "We are



Wendy Prellwitz (b. 1950)  
**August Morning, Richmond Creek**  
 2012, Oil on board, 12 x 24 in.  
 Collection of the artist

sadly incomplete alone. But will develop together.” Henry prevailed, and the couple married in 1894. By then, each had achieved considerable recognition, and Edith became the first woman to win a National Academy prize for which artists of both genders were eligible. Both were firmly grounded in the academic tradition, with subjects mainly mythological and allegorical. His came with such titles as *Boy with Dolphin*, *Venus Steps from the Sea*, and *Dante and Virgil*, while hers included *Andromeda*, *The Book and the Rose*, and *Penelope and a Suitor*.

The summer following their marriage, the couple traveled to Cornish. Using prize money she had won, they built a flimsy shack known as “Prellwitz’s Shanty.” There Henry and Edith sketched and painted, socializing happily with other members of the colony. The following summer, their son Edwin was born. By then, however, the shanty had been struck by lightning and burned to the ground. Thus, in the summer of 1899, the couple rented a house in Peconic. Their artist friends Irving R. Wiles and Edward August Bell already had homes and studios there, drawn not only by its natural beauty and extraordinary light, but also by easy rail access to New York City. Other artists soon arrived. They saw themselves merely as a group of friends who painted, but in 1985 the scholar Ronald G. Pisano first identified them as “The Peconic Art Colony.”<sup>1</sup>

#### MAKING PECONIC HOME

In 1911, while driving west of Peconic, Henry spotted a fine old farmhouse (“High House”) about to be demolished. He promptly had it dismantled and meticulously reassembled on property perched above the beach, close to the Peconic studio that E.A. Bell had already built. In 1913, Henry and Edith sold their home in New York City and began living in Peconic year-round. This date is significant, as it coincided with the Armory Show that rocked the American art world. (Please see page 47 for more on the Armory Show.) It is surely over-dramatizing to infer that the couple was fleeing the newly modernized New York art scene, but Henry certainly made no bones about his dislike for modern art. Alongside High House, Henry proceeded to build two connected side-by-side studios; these epitomize the couple’s “separate but equal” relationship, a rare and happy marriage built on deep love and mutual respect.

Scholar Lisa N. Peters believes that “Henry provided Edith with a sense of joy and pleasure in life that emerges in her art, while she inspired him to believe in himself and find passion in painting the subjects he loved....”<sup>2</sup>

The move to Peconic profoundly affected both artists’ work. The dearth of models there meant that Edith painted fewer allegories and classical subjects. Her work began to emphasize domestic subjects, such as doorways and set tables at High House, gardens, local people, pathways to the beach, and swimmers returning home. She also painted landscapes and seascapes, sailboats scudding across the bay, and the moon rising over the water.

Peconic and its surroundings exerted a similarly powerful pull on Henry. He painted High House, boats, and moonlight, but he also favored the starkness of winter landscapes, with barren fields and icy creeks. Despite his professed dislike of modern art, his work became increasingly abstract, and many of his winter paintings are almost monochromatic — landscapes stripped to their very essence.

From Peconic, Henry and Edith remained in close touch with

Wendy Prellwitz (b. 1950)  
**Nightglow #8**  
 2006, Monoprint, 17 1/2 x 19 in.  
 Private collection





Wendy Prellwitz (b. 1950)  
**Conversation #2**  
 2012, Oil on board, 12 x 12 in.  
 Collection of the artist

the New York art world 95 miles to the west. From 1924 through 1938, they kept an apartment in Midtown Manhattan, where Edith became entranced with the cityscape, the qualities of its light, and especially with the skyscrapers then sprouting up. Indeed, scholar William H. Gerdts believes that “Probably the most unusual development in Edith Prellwitz’s artistic evolution is her fascination with New York as a skyscraper city.” Like Henry’s, her work became increasingly abstract.

In the decades after Henry and Edith died (in 1940 and 1944, respectively), Peconic buzzed with rumors about their locked studios crammed with valuable paintings. In fact, the couple’s son Edwin lived at High House for 25 years with his wife, Eunice, and many younger family members came to summer there. All recognized and appreciated the painted treasures in their midst. Wendy Prellwitz remembers idyllic summers with her grandparents (Edwin and Eunice), playing on the beach and diving from the oft-painted dock. “I was an incredibly curious child,” she recalls. She spent countless hours in the twin studios, drinking in the beauty of the hundreds of paintings there, reading letters and diaries, and poring through Henry’s photographs. This immersion proved transformative for Wendy: “Spending summers digging around the studios, living in High House with the mundane pieces of their lives, their furniture and teacups, Henry and Edith became a living presence for me.”

#### WENDY PRELLWITZ’S ARTISTIC INHERITANCE

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Wendy painted and drew constantly, then attended Rhode Island School of Design, and went on to become an architect in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yet somehow the art of her great-grandparents and the lure of Peconic were always in her mind. She and her father, the retired engineer Sam Prellwitz, often discussed the lack of recognition accorded Henry and Edith in modern times, not to mention the worrisome condition of their unheated studios. In 1981, they invited Ron Pisano for a visit, and of course he was amazed by the trove of more than 300 paintings he saw, comparing himself to the archeologist Howard Carter entering Tutankhamen’s tomb. That experience culminated in a landmark exhibition curated by Pisano in 1995 for the nearby Museums at Stony Brook, *Henry and Edith Mitchell Prellwitz and the Peconic Art Colony*. Reviewing it in *The New York Times*, Marjorie Kaufman felt that the Prellwitzes were “among the best-kept secrets in art history.” Wendy proceeded to contact the Spanierman Gallery in Manhattan, which agreed to handle the Prellwitz estate and has held several major exhibitions of their work, raising public awareness and affirming the couple’s importance in the history of American art.

Wendy herself has always kept painting, and is now transitioning from architecture to concentrate on her visual art. She paints outdoors and

in Henry’s studio, inspired by her ancestors’ palettes and visions. Not content to record just what she sees, Wendy is constantly thinking about gradients and qualities of light and hue, of movement and stillness. Inevitably, many of Henry and Edith’s subjects — docks, boats, fields, and the area’s unique light — are echoed in her work. Yet Wendy is thoroughly modern, making strong and expressive landscapes that reach toward abstraction. Water is a preoccupation; she reveres “its impermanence yet endurance ... the sea’s cyclical certainty of rise and fall, and the vast, boundless quality of an infinite beyond.” Also a printmaker, Wendy is always experimenting, often applying printmaking techniques to her paintings; sometimes she embellishes them as if making monotypes, with additive paint overlays and subtractive scrapes. Whatever the medium, making art yields a sense of discovery, “that wonderful sense of surprise.”

Scientists have not yet discovered the gene for artmaking, but clearly it’s in the Prellwitz family’s DNA. For Wendy, this is a time of continuity and of new beginnings: “In Peconic, I wake up to golden dawn light spilling over the bay into my bedroom, and walk on the beach in the morning, soaking in the atmosphere and light effects. Feeling the sun on my skin, watching the waves, ripples, and tide turning, noticing the reflections of clouds — every day is different. And so is every day in the studio, interpreting the visceral feelings I’ve experienced, capturing my sense of time and place.” ■

**Information:** *Henry and Edith Prellwitz’s artworks can be seen regularly at Spanierman Gallery (New York City). Wendy Prellwitz is represented by Dragonfly Fine Arts Gallery (Martha’s Vineyard), McGowan Fine Art (Concord, New Hampshire), and South Street Gallery (Greenport, New York).*

SARA EVANS co-edited with Geoffrey K. Fleming the book *A Shared Aesthetic: Artists of Long Island’s North Fork* (Southold Historical Society/Hudson Hills: 2008). She is editor of *Art of the Times*, an online magazine covering the fine and performing arts.

#### Endnote

1. Ronald G. Pisano, *Long Island Landscape Painting: 1820-1920*, New York Graphic Society, 1985.
2. Lisa N. Peters, *Edith Prellwitz & Henry Prellwitz: Painters of the Peconic*, online exhibition catalogue (New York: Spanierman Gallery, LLC, 2012).



Members of the Peconic Art Colony, 1915