

Gordon Peers
Chronology
Born: March 17, 1909
Died: 1988

Mr. Peers is a painters' painter, a man whose canvases are not apt to please the general public but more the art student and professional painter."

Del Deo Providence Journal 1951

Early Years 1931-1940

Gordon Peers showed promise early as a painter. After receiving a diploma from Classical High School in 1929 he studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and did a 3 month apprenticeship with Dutch painter Jan van Empel. He graduated in 1933 under the tutelage of John Frazier. Peers went on to study at the Beaux Arts Academy in New York in 1934 working for a time with American realist Thomas Hart Benton. John Frazier further mentored at the Summer School of Art in Provincetown. Early works in the 30's and 40's show Peers as a strong realist painter who was interested in tightly rendered images, exacting composition and homage to nature. An independent and disciplined painter, Gordon Peers acquired technical and theoretical art sophistication early in his career.

1931

Providence Art Club "Younger Rhode Island Artists"

Gordon Peers handsome composition of a boatyard is notable for its broad treatment of light and full of warm glowing color. Providence Journal April 22, 1931

1932

Peers' work is again included in a show of "Younger Rhode Island Artists" at the Providence Art Club where he is praised in an article as being *focused on wringing the utmost in color out of his generous palette.*

1933

Peers exhibits at Providence Art Club work from John Frazier's Summer School of Art in Provincetown – of students from the School of Design, "Cemetery". *Gordon Peers who has been at Provincetown during the last three summers, exhibited a portrait in the exhibition of the Provincetown Art Association this was one of the outstanding pictures in the show.*

1934-1936

Peers heads the painting department at RISD and teaches classes in painting and drawing.

1935

Providence Art Club Little Pictures Exhibition
Showed oil painting, "Gray's Weather"

Peers and RISD student, Wesley Noble, embark on a summer journey through rural Mexico where they sketch and paint the local people and picturesque landscapes.

1936

Peers is selected, along with five other Rhode Island artists, to participate in the National Exhibition of American Art in New York.

1936-1937

Peers takes a leave of absence from RISD and fills in as Assistant Professor of Art at Rockford College in Illinois.

Exhibits paintings at the National Exhibition of American Artists in New York.

1938

Peers has his first One-Man show Providence Art Club where he exhibits paintings and drawings. The show is favorably reviewed by F.R. Sisson who says: *It gives a full scope of the artist's present stage of development with the medium of oil paint, showing a healthy and workmanlike approach to the painting problem, and a recognition of meanings involved in the relationships of form and color that achieves significance in some of the canvases of the current show, and holds forth promise of interesting development in the future work of this artist.*

A RISD museum show displays the work of Peers and four other painters who were allowed to document the destructive effects of the hurricane on Rhode Island's coast.

1939

Exhibits paintings at the World's Fair in New York and Golden Gate Exhibition in California; "Great Dune, Race Point, Provincetown, Massachusetts"

1940

Exhibits paintings at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; "Highland Bluffs North Truro"

During the War Years 1941-1946

On December 7, 1941 every American life changed with the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II. Gordon was a member of the faculty at Rhode Island School of Design and obtained a leave of absence to become an officer in an army camouflage unit. WWII touched all facets of American life and challenged the careers of many Rhode Island artists. The structured and precise painting style of Gordon Peers (1909 - 1988) pre-war evolved to meet the new realities of a post war art world. The artist did not paint war themes but looked to the emerging art movements of Geometric Abstraction and Surrealism by the American vanguard artists to better understand his choices as a painter. The transformation in color, composition and surface paint are significant. His subject matter ranges from still life, flowers and Cape Cod landscapes of Highland Beach and Truro, Massachusetts actively avoiding war theme art. In the Rhode Island servicemen exhibits at the Providence Art Club in 1946 he exhibits imaginative paintings of objects and landscape.

1941

Peers marries fellow Rhode Island painter Florence Leif.

During 1941 Peers not only married fellow Rhode Island painter Florence but joined other young artists, exhibiting at the Providence Art Club “The Beginnings of a Rhode Island Renaissance” or “Scott’s Rebellion” referencing Rhode Island Poet Winfield T. Scott. Works in this show embody Scott’s desire for the young artists not to paint in *old ways, worn ways and other people’s ways* but to experiment with new ideas. Exhibiting his “imaginary” works the Providence Art critic found the artwork not that revolutionary but rather *impressive in its qualities of excellent craftsmanship, and in meaningful formal relationship*. **Providence Journal**

1942

Peers is involved in a Camouflage Course at RISD, which experimented with landscape design to confuse hypothetical enemy airmen.

Scott’s Rebellion: Memorial Exhibition at the Providence Art Club *This show has in general a greater maturity than that of last year... The biggest advance I should say is in Peers and Leif, particularly in their still life canvases. By their own statement they are clearly thinking through their problems and are striving toward definite objectives*. **F.R. Sisson Providence Journal**

Peers participates in an art exchange in which Providence artists’ works are displayed in the Worcester Museum while Worcester artists show in the RISD museum.

1943

Exhibits “The Ivory Tower” at the Carnegie Institute.

1946

With the end of the War, Peers had the important accolade of being selected for a nationally juried exhibition “Paintings of the Year” sponsored by Pepsi-Cola. His “Moon Descending on the Earth” was among 267 paintings selected across the country. Notable artists Leon Kroll, Robert Gwathmey and Milton Avery were selected as well as his wife Florence Leif.

Peers participates in a show titled “GI Art” at the Providence Art Club that featured works by Rhode Island servicemen. While most of the art on exhibit was of war themes, Peers is among the few exceptions showing a still life and the oil “Conversation Piece”. Art critic Frederick R. Sisson notes, *Peers aside from his beautifully painted still life, is following the theme of imaginative reality that was attracting his interest before the war.* **Providence Journal March 3, 1946**

Post-War Years 1947-1959

Peers will not be confused with the more radical and modern painters to emerge post war in the United States. Rather, Peers' paintings evolved slowly paying particular homage to the work of Cezanne. This influence is notable in his landscape paintings from the late 40's and early 50's in his use of unusual colors and freer brushstrokes. While he departs from strict realism, he never relinquishes a respect for sound draftsmanship and the refined craft of painting. The works of this period strongly reference the style of Cezanne as they *give way to a more impressionistic use of color that is closely correlated with strongly marked and intricately designed pattern. This emphasizes the design in painting and from the evidence of these canvases, indicates a thoughtful use of various themes of color.* **F.R. Sisson Providence Journal**

1947

Peers obtains his BFA from RISD.

1948

Providence Art Club exhibition

We have in this exhibition evidence of change and searching for new direction in the work of some artists. Indications of this are apparent in the color and brushwork of the excellent still life by Gordon Peers. **F.R. Sisson Providence Journal**

Exhibits at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

1949

His current exhibition, with works dating from 1941 to the present, shows a marked change of direction following the interval of war service. **Providence Journal May 8, 1949**

Rhode Island League of Artists exhibits Peers paintings dating from 1941 forward.

The earlier pieces show, *a fine balance of delicately painted textures and a true inventiveness of design in a well clarified spatial concept.* **F.R.Sisson**

Tenth Annual Rhode Island artists Exhibition at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

1950

Twelfth annual Independent Artists of Rhode Island Artists at the Museum of Art, RISD, Judged by MoMA director of painting and sculpture department, Andrew Ritchie. Peers actually exhibited a war related artwork, "The Ships" that is *an obscure, impressionistic view of what may be a battleship in action on a extremely misty day... My guess is that he painted a battleship in action – incorporating in his work the gun flashes, parts of superstructure and rigging, and perhaps the range elements in a gun sight. And all as seen on a very misty day.* **Frank Pembrton Providence Journal**

1951

January exhibit at the Providence Art Club demonstrates some stylistic changes in Peers' work. In a review of the show, Salvatore del Deo notes Peers' *great freedom and spontaneity* and that he *gives his imagination free reins and comes through with very appealing effects.* **Providence Journal**

1952

Peers exhibits at the Terry Arts Institute in Florida and receives Honorable Mention for his entry. He travels to Italy and other parts of Europe.

1954

Receives second prize in the Boston Arts Festival.

1955

Receives a prize at the Boston Arts Festival.

Receives first prize from the Providence Art Club for his drawing.

Gordon and Florence spend four months painting along the northern coast of Spain.

1956

Peers is awarded a prize by the Newport Association. He also participates in the Boston Arts Festival for the American Federation of Arts traveling exhibition.

1957

Article in the Spectator covers the visit of British lecturer from the Royal College of Art in London, Basil Taylor. During that visit he attended a Gordon Peers critique and commented: *At the Rhode Island School of Design, I attended as painting class criticism which I have never seen equaled for lucidity, sympathy and constructive comment.*

1958

Exhibits in the Boston Arts Festival. Receives first prize from the Newport Art Association. Gordon returns to Europe for four months with his wife to paint coastal areas in Italy.

1959

Exhibits at the Newport Art Museum in August.

Arsonist sets fire and Gordon Peers and Florence Leif have twelve of their works destroyed or damaged.

Later Years 1960-1988

In his later years, Gordon Peers becomes more introspective about the process of creating art and, by extension, teaching art and is rewarded with recognition in “Outstanding Teachers of America.” He is faced with numerous challenges including the death of his wife and the loss of his mentor, John Frazier. *He is a painter of the first rate whose search for realization has spanned many years. He has persevered against all sandtraps along the way and the work he is doing now, in his seventies, is full of sensuality, thought and purity. This is an amazing combination of diverse qualities. To find them all in one artist’s work is a miracle, a treasure chest to be looked into again and again...Gordon Peers’ paintings are full of the subtleties and surprises of the living world. A person could look at these paintings for hours or days or years and still find something new to marvel at.* **Paula Martesian Providence Eagle 1981**

1960

Peers has a one-man show at Providence’s Dattorro-Tonoff Gallery. *The most satisfying one-man show of painting that I have seen locally in a long time is the Gordon Peers exhibition...Peers has several elements in his painting, perhaps the most important of which is his respect for the paint itself. He uses this stuff you squeeze out of the tube with integrity. The result is an intense esthetic satisfaction with the painterly quality of his pieces.*

Providence Journal December 1960

RISD becomes the first American school to have a satellite Europe site. Under RISD president, John Frazier, along with \$75,000 from the CI, this Europe visual set up headquarters at the Villa Iacovotti with the goal to *provide outstanding students with the opportunity to live and work in a cultural environment close to the sources of western art and live in company with select professionals in the host community and to provide both the students and faculty alike with the broadest possible outlet for creative energies.*

Peers exhibits drawings and watercolors at the Newport Art Museum.

Peers analyses teaching at the School of Design. *Our interpretation of the pursuit of excellence leads us to search for problems for the painting department which will have continue throughout the student’s life, which will bring to bear on these problems his accumulative knowledge which will be referable to similar philosophies among all his other teachers and will make abundantly clear to him that the responsibility for the successful solution to them lies squarely within himself.* **Providence Journal**

Painting vases of roses would scarcely be considered fashionable today... Peers has not only succeeded in making a fresh lyrical statement about such subject matter .. Over and over again he has taken a trite subject and endowed it with a quality which elevates the painting above its hackneyed predecessor and contemporaries... In a world obsessed with the mere manipulation of paint as the be-all and end-all of painting, it is intensely satisfying to find paint being manipulated for some deeply-felt esthetic purpose and in a way which enables the artist to communicate with any beholder willing to bring an honest esthetic receptivity to his viewing. **Bradford Swan Providence Journal**

1961

A March 15 article announces Peers as the head of the European Honors Program, where he created the format of study for the program. He said that *the chief critic must, as a creative artist in his own right, be able to be of assistance in every way to the varied individuals of the Honors Program.*

1962

Peers continues as chief critic of the RISD European Honors Program in Rome. He writes in a field study: *Sensibility- by definition mental receptivity, ready discernment, as of truth- is probably one of the most important human traits available to the artist. To possess for one's self the conviction that greatness has been understood requires an experience so pure that it only occurs in the silent communication between student and art form.*

Exhibits his painting of the Italian Riviera at the fifty-first annual exhibition of the Newport Art Museum.

1963

Peers presents his oil painting, "Pagan Gods" at the Newport Art Museum.

1964

Peers takes a leave of absence from the RISD faculty to spend time painting in Providence and in Venice, where he studies the work of early Italian painters.

Exhibits "The Museum" and "The Room" at the Newport Art Museum.

Edwin Safford comments, on April 6, 1964: *It seems redundant, perhaps, to point out the ... magnificent use of color and the way he combines it with compositional detail.*

1968

Gordon's wife, Florence, dies of a brain tumor at the age of 55.

1969-1973

Returns to RISD as a professor of painting and chairman of the Division of Fine Arts.

1969

Providence Art Club 85th annual open painting exhibition.

Providence Art Club medal for "Ruins Ostia"

1970

Peers is selected for the 1970 edition of "Outstanding Teachers of America."

1974

Peers is artist in residence at RISD. He exhibits "Amber" and "Pompeii" at the Newport Art Museum.

1981

RISD Faculty show.

1984

In January, there is a survey of Peers' work, from still life to later cubist pieces.

1985

An October 10th article in Standard Times, New Bedford, Massachusetts announces his exhibition at the Virginia Lynch Gallery.

1988

Gordon Peers dies. To commemorate his life, his painting “Misquamicut” is displayed in the foyer of the RISD museum accompanied by the following quote:

His life, like teaching, was characterized by a passionate adherence to the highest standards of quality, self-discipline, and dedication of art, this passion impressed many generations of students even into the 1980's as a model to them and numerous friends and colleagues. RISD Archives

Exhibit Text – timeline

Analysis Frederick R. Sisson 1949

“ It was gratifying to see again the group of canvases, many of them very small ones, painted in 1941 and 1942. There is in this work a fine balance of delicately painted textures and a true inventiveness of design in a well clarified spatial concept. The imaginative slant is perhaps best typified in the study called “Moon Descending to the Earth.”

At this time there was a considerable interest in Surrealism, or magic realms, and the direction of painting influence some of Peer’s work at the time.

The still life and landscape canvases that make up the group of recent work undoubtedly are strongly influenced by the Cezanne tradition. The interest in carefully studied textures and clearly defined spatial dimension here gives way to a more impressionistic use of color, that is closely correlated with strongly marked and intricately designed pattern. This emphasizes the design in painting and from the evidence of these canvases indicates a thoughtful use of various themes of color.

Paula Martesian, Providence Eagle, March 5, 1981

“Gordon Peers does not soil his intention with image-making. Each piece of paint exists not only as a spot of color on an object, but as part of a larger organization of relationships he has seen.”