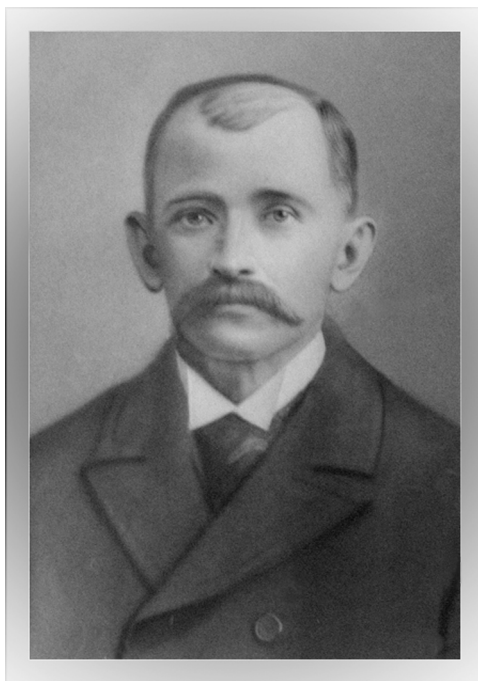


The Hamilton Stillwell Collection, 1916-1918



Curated by Adam Blue
AVA Gallery 2008

When my family and I moved into an old Cornish farmhouse in the summer of 2006, we were excited by the possibilities that lay ahead. I searched the nearby woods, hoping to find an abandoned outbuilding in which to build a studio. Beyond the property line, I discovered a hut that had been sacrificed to the elements. It was obvious that the winter cold and summer growth had alternately dominated the space for years. I could never have anticipated what I found inside – an unknown cache of some of the most revolutionary work of the early 20th century.

Hamilton Stillwell, whose only recognizable image is captured in this portrait (unknown photographer, 1916), was an essential but forgotten member of the Cornish Colony. He was an artist whose creative output is only now being recognized for the prescient expression of his vision.

A world traveler, a logician, and an infamous bootlegger, Hamilton Stillwell's contributions in alcohol alone were central to the social activities of the Upper Valley at the turn of the 20th Century. Some have suggested that his incendiary temper, enflamed by the product he distributed, was responsible for his erasure from history. Others argue it was his immigrant status, his deficiency of blue blood in the eyes of the Cornish Colony's chroniclers. Perhaps it was his occasionally combative insistence that geometric forms were a higher mode of representation than the regional neo-classical aesthetic. In any case, Stillwell's story was omitted from the epoch's historical narrative, and it is only by good fortune that we have access to his works today.

Hamilton Stillwell was born to modest means in Montreal, Quebec in 1890. His father (second generation British from Colebrook, New Hampshire) was a baker who immigrated to the urban environs of Canada. Hamilton spent his teenage years assisting in the family bakery, becoming fluent in his craft as well as in French and English. During this time, the young Stillwell produced loaf after sculptural loaf for his father. His innovative bread designs were surprisingly successful and garnered culinary fame for his family. Unfortunately, none of his early works remain, as they were consumed promptly after their creation.

In the spring of 1908, as a youth of 18 years, Stillwell decided to seek his fortune on the continent of Europe. He signed onto *The Concord*, a notoriously speedy vessel that marked its transatlantic departures with a “boom” of cannon fire, a peculiar feat for an unarmed merchant ship.

After a period of vagrancy in France, Stillwell secured work at *Fondations*, a Parisian patisserie. Scholars find proof of his rise and fall in the needy behavior he manifested during these starter years.

The owner of the patisserie, Marcel Contreneau, was an artisan of the highest order and was firmly committed to the proletarian lifestyle. Though the Parisian elite patronized his bakery, Contreneau preferred the company of tradesmen, artists, and musicians, and reserved his finest loaves to sustain their cultural production. He insisted that Hamilton deliver the bread directly to the artists’ studios. During this period young Stillwell befriended many marginalized visionaries: Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Delaney.

Though never spoken of in public, it was no secret that Marcel Contreneau was a hedonist who found other uses for the yeast he had in his bakery. It was rumored that he produced the finest beers and distilled liquors in the Arrondissement. It was known that he held the finest parties. His assistant Hamilton figured prominently in the scene. Stillwell grew into a champion of fiery late night talk, of casual dances turned sensuous, of bravado displays of will.

In 1915, Hamilton Stillwell was called back to Montreal when his sister fell ill. Though he dreaded his return to North America and the responsibilities that lay ahead, the journey itself changed him in unexpected ways. On his second crossing, he shared a cabin with Henri d’Agnon, a philosopher and master logician from Nice. Their conversations ranged from the trivial to the sublime. By the end of the voyage, Stillwell’s perspective was profoundly impacted. He was newly able to interpret the world through patterns, through relationships defined by vectors, angles, and volumes.

Shortly after Stillwell was reunited with his family, his sister died. Unusual circumstances complicated her passing. A photograph of her body set among a lattice of transecting lines ran in the local press. The rumor mill confused Stillwell’s progressive rites with satanic ritual, and he was forced to leave Montreal under cloak of darkness. Almost a century later, *The DaVinci Code* spring-boarded to success with an opening scene of suspect, parallel structure. Once again, it was not Stillwell’s time.

He sought amnesty in the United States, traveling to the rugged landscape of northern New Hampshire. Stillwell heard word of the Cornish Colony, and drawn as he was to creative and artistic perspectives, he assumed he would find an environment like the one he had known in Paris.

Hamilton Stillwell set up his Cornish studio shortly after he arrived in the summer of 1916. He mingled among the artists, but lived within the community of subsistence farmers, sheep ranchers, and tradesmen.

His progressive perspectives on geometric art alienated the neo-classical Colonists; his absent birthright diminished him in the eyes of the native born. Neither group took him into their fold, but all welcomed his Parisian tinctures. So he was received, to a degree, wherever he wandered.

Stillwell's artistic production in the years 1916-1918 can be interpreted as a fusion of the emergent cubism that he witnessed during his time in France and his new philosophy of pure expression through geometric form. His choice of materials, particularly the use of quotidian industrial artifacts, was revolutionary and would not enter the popular sphere of American art for another fifty years.

Outcast, yet confident, this was a productive period for Hamilton Stillwell. The pieces shown here, which are those I found in the abandoned hut, are evidence of his talents. Unfortunately, the region could not accommodate his creative vision and he was never awarded a show. After two years of artistic rejection at every turn, he grew despondent.

In the summer of 1918, Stillwell aggressively tried to settle his accounts with the merry-making artists. His tactless debt-collecting strategies further alienated him from the leadership of the Cornish Colony. And then one night, he was gone. Some assumed he went back to Paris, others thought to Boston. A rumor circulated that he had been arrested in a bar fight in Portsmouth, NH, but no one knew if it was true. He had vanished as abruptly as he had arrived.

Hamilton Stillwell's presence in the Upper Valley challenged the normative structure of the arts community at the turn of the 20th century. Once he was gone, it was decided that his name would not be uttered, and that his unusual work would not be shown. This course has been preserved for the last ninety years, until now...