

Waldo Peirce

Brief life of a vibrant artist: 1884-1970

by WILLIAM GALLAGHER



WALDO PEIRCE '07/'08/'09 almost didn't graduate from Harvard. By his own admission he spent too much time in Leavitt and Peirce (no relation) playing pool. He recorded his poolroom days in a comical poem that can still be found in that venerable tobacco shop on Mass. Ave.

Peirce did find time to earn his letter as a center on the football team and attend the classes of his favorite teacher, Charles Townsend Copeland. Once off probation, he earned his degree in 1909; in 1910 he hopped a cattle boat, bound for England, with John Reed '10, the future revolutionary. But Peirce changed his mind about the shipboard accommodations; he jumped from the vessel as it was leaving Boston harbor and swam ashore—an act that became a constant topic, with changing details, in interviews over the years. He then booked passage on another ship and reached England just in time to appear in court and save Reed from being charged with his murder.

After considering the options open to the son of a lumber baron from Bangor, Maine, Peirce eventually settled on painting. He studied in Spain with Ignacio Zuloaga and in France at the Académie Julian: scores of letters to his mother describe the often riotous times of an art student in prewar Paris. He launched a career as a modest yet successful Impressionist; by 1915 an exhibition in New York City was displaying his work alongside that of George Bellows, John Sloan, and Edward Hopper.

But in 1915 he also volunteered for the American Field Service ambulance corps. Though he escaped the front occasionally for weekends in his Paris apartment, most of the time he was surrounded by battlefield horrors; he was awarded the Croix de Guerre for conspicuous bravery at Verdun. Peirce was often viewed as a Rabelaisian character lacking in sensitivity, but one has only to read his contributions to the memorial volume *Friends of France* to realize the depth of his concern, caring, and empathy for his stricken friends and fallen soldiers. Certain passages can easily compare with those found in *A Farewell to Arms*.

Living and painting in Paris off and on in the 1920s, Peirce became friends with many of the notables who defined this period in the arts: Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Sylvia Beach, Bernice Abbott, Archibald MacLeish, LL.B. '19, John Dos Passos '16—and Ernest Hemingway, another wartime ambulance driver. He and Hemingway stayed friends for life, a relationship not sustained by many other Hemingway associates from the Paris days; their letters to each other were filled with news, gossip, and witty passages, often interlaced with Spanish and French asides. Both men were voracious readers. Both were remarkable presences in a room, regaling others with ribald tales, great stories, and vivid

word pictures. Their six-foot frames and beards were as impressive as their artistic talents. (Peirce was occasionally referred to as the “Hemingway of American painting,” but said once that made as much sense as “calling Hemingway ‘the Peirce of American literature.’”) Both men shared a formidable gusto for life and adventure—each married four times—and possessed an unending, consuming curiosity about the world around them. Fishing was their passion, and several times Peirce joined Hemingway in the Dry Tortugas and the Marquesas Keys. Never without a sketchbook, he captured these expeditions in oils and watercolors. When Hemingway's face graced the cover of *Time* in 1937—he had just published *To Have and Have Not*—the magazine used a Peirce portrait of his friend holding a fishing pole, eyes focused on the line. The two can also be found together in other Peirce paintings—fighting bulls in Pamplona, drinking in Sloppy Joe's in Key West, catching tarpon in the Gulf Stream.

A prolific painter, Peirce had early successes in his career with one-man shows all over the country; his canvases are found in leading museums and in many private collections. (He enjoyed giving away paintings to friends and acquaintances.) In collective recognition of his talent, the College class of 1907, which Peirce claimed as his own, purchased a painting of Harvard Yard festooned for the 1936 Tercentenary and donated it to the University. He had returned to Maine in the 1930s; in later years, his colorful life was a bit restrained by more focus on his family, and his works reflected a Regionalistic influence. Some critics judge that his talent waned, yet the vigor and the color of his scenes of the Maine countryside—its people, flowers, and animals—and his many portraits, still give joy to those who see them.

Maxwell Perkins '07, Hemingway's editor at Scribner's, encouraged Peirce to write his autobiography and once advanced him \$500 for the project. The work was never completed, but a vivid sense of the man can be found in his voluminous, often vigorously illustrated, correspondence with family members, buddies, and notable personalities. Time and time again one finds “great” being used to describe him. Hemingway once asked his young son Jack, “Who is the greatest man you know?”—expecting to hear “Papa.” Jack quickly responded, “It's Waldo.”

William Gallagher, M.D. '60, a Hemingway Society member living in Bangor, Maine, is writing a study of the intertwining lives of Peirce and Hemingway.

Opposite: Peirce by Peirce, a self-portrait painted in 1924. Above: Peirce and Hemingway show off their catch in a detail from a 1928 photograph that they sent to their friend, the publisher Sylvia Beach.



Portrait courtesy of the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.

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