

# Witnessing Inspiration at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park

Heather Heckel

A continual reliable source of inspiration for me is traveling and giving myself time to work on my art during the summer. A perfect opportunity for this is the artist-in-residence program through the National Park Service. Typically, artist residencies provide housing in the park for several weeks in exchange for the creation of original artwork about the park, and a public program such as an artist talk or workshop for visitors. To date, I have been an artist-in-residence at 17 park sites, and the new sights and sounds, and total immersion in a place for an extended period of time, provide energy and vision in my artwork. Inspiration comes from learning the history of the park, the events that happen while I'm there, the park staff's knowledge, the creativity of others, experimentation with various artistic mediums, and teaching others. I have found that each park experience has caused my style to shift, and I now have a visual record of how my process has evolved over time – evidence of how my shifting viewpoints have been inspired by what I have noticed in each of the parks.

This past summer I was awarded an artist residency at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock, Vermont, and I was inspired by its history and purpose. The park opened in 1998, preserves a sprawling mansion that was built in 1806, and conserves over 550 acres of forest. The Marsh, Billings, and Rockefeller families lived in the mansion over several generations, and

each left its mark. According to the National Park Foundation (2023), George Perkins Marsh grew up on the grounds, and was “one of our nation’s first global environmental thinkers” (para. 2). Frederick Billings, the next owner, was a conservationist who lived on the property, and managed the forest on the land. Most recently, his granddaughter, Mary French Rockefeller, and her conservationist husband, Laurance S. Rockefeller, continued the tradition of forestry management on site. Ultimately, the park captures a common theme, “this is a story of stewardship, of people taking care of places - sharing an enduring connection to land and a sense of hope for the future” (para 3). It was interesting to learn how the three

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families possessed similar values for environmental conservation over several generations. This park is unusual because it is the only national park site that is actively managing its forest land, which includes responsible logging. During the farming boom in the 1800s, Vermont’s forest was reduced to just 20 percent, but today, due directly to conservation efforts, the state is now covered by 80 percent forest. Planting trees certainly helps, but as Marsh warned, we are starting to see the negative effects of the damage that we have done to our environment.

This residency experience was a first because my stay was directly impacted by extreme weather created by climate change. This residency did not provide housing, so I was staying at a ski resort in Ludlow, Vermont. Surprisingly, the tiny town of Ludlow made national news when it became the epicenter of historic flooding in Vermont, and I was stuck in my apartment for two days since all the roads in and out of town had been washed out. My artwork and supplies were at the park in Woodstock, so I had some forced free time to reflect on what is happening to our environment, and how our actions today will impact the future of our planet. This event further inspired my desire to document the story of this park and contributed to the realization

that the history and values of the park align with my own. Every day I try to live my life in a way that best supports our environment, so that future generations of all living beings may enjoy their time here too. It

is an honor to be an artistic advocate for the mission of the National Park Service, which is to “preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations” (National Park Service, 2016). In alliance with this mission, the park staff were incredibly generous with their time while I was conducting research.

I gained inspiration from the knowledge shared by park rangers and staff, who gave me several tours of the mansion,



Figure 1. South Side of the Bungalow, with Porcelain Bunnies, Green Grass, and Lingonberries, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 4. Interior of the Belvedere, with Mounted Saifish, Amur Maple Trees, Brown Bats, and Wild Roses, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 5. Garden Fountain, with White Spruces, Wood Frogs, and Feathered Amaranth, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 2. South Side of the Belvedere with Pool, Lily Pads, and Dragonfly, Colored pencil and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 3. East Side of the Belvedere, with White Oaks, Red Clover, and Squirrel, Colored pencil and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 6. South Side, with Beech Trees, Oxeye Daisies, and Hermit Thrush, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023

which included the history of many antique pieces of artwork and figurines that the families had collected over the centuries. One theme that interested me in particular was the collection of porcelain rabbits throughout the house. One of the Rockefeller sons kept rabbits to learn the principles of business, so I decided to feature them as wild animals in one of my pieces of artwork (Figure 1). There is also a building on the grounds called the Belvedere (Figures 2 & 3), which has a bowling alley inside, with a mounted sailfish on the wall; a ranger told me that there was a ball of paper in the fish's mouth to prevent bats from roosting in it, so I chose to feature bats as the animal in that piece (Figure 4). The mansion was historical, but was preserved in a way that communicated how it had been very much lived in. I also met with the museum specialist, who showed me archival documents, photographs, and let me take pictures of dozens of specimens in the herbarium that were collected by Elizabeth Billings beginning in the late 1800s – it was fascinating to see plants that have been preserved for over a century. I explored some of the original carriage trails that snaked through the forest and provided gorgeous views of 400-year-old trees, a manmade pond full of frogs and dragonflies, open fields, and mountaintop vistas. The grounds included formal gardens (Figure 5), wildflowers, and an impressive amount of ferns that were planted by Elizabeth Billings, all of which I featured as flora in my series of artwork. To further celebrate Vermont, I chose to feature the state bird, the hermit thrush (Figure 6), and the state flower, the red clover (Figure 3), and featured native trees in the backgrounds. Another unexpected source of inspiration was fellow artists working in the park.

During my previous residencies I have worked alone on my artwork. However, this park had several opportunities for artists to work on their individual projects simultaneously. I met two student resident artists, Gabriella and Jordan, who were making art in the park for school credit, and I met a returning artist-in-residence, Amy, from last year. There were a few days where

our schedules overlapped, and I had a wonderful time talking with them and interacting with visitors in our carriage house studio in the park. It was wonderfully refreshing and inspiring to feed off their artistic energy, and to find the similarities and differences among our work. I am always in awe of how artwork of the same subject can turn out so varied – in both my own practice, and among my students.

The variety of media I chose to work with for this residency inspired my process and the finished outcomes. In this case, I imagined layering triplicates, one layer to represent each of the three families. This inspired me to order translucent Yupo paper, which ties into the concept of conservation since it is recyclable and tree-free, and I was excited to try something I hadn't used before. I also wanted to use watercolor, but I read that it doesn't dry quickly on that surface, so I ordered another novel supply for me, alcohol-based Copic markers. At the park I tried layering the translucent paper, but it wasn't working how I imagined because the layers were still too opaque. So I decided to try a third method I have no experience with, which was to incorporate collage and weave elements through one another. In this case, material inspiration came from experimentation, and trial and error, which is a concept that I model in my art classroom. The visual result helped me to capture the vision of how a place can shape and inform identity by guiding family members on certain trajectories. I wanted to tie together the idea of a family tree with actual trees, by showing the concept of growing up in a place both figuratively and literally (Figures 6, 7, 8, & 9). The park inspired my ideas, and I encouraged the same from visitors during my public outreach.

Part of the residency experience involves conducting public programs for visitors that enrich their experience in the park. I created an adult workshop where we made layered landscapes focusing on foreground, middle ground, and background using the same materials I was using in my artwork. I created a children's workshop where we made pop-up cards based in the

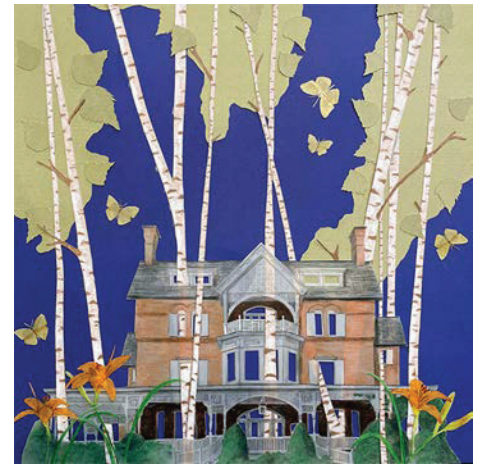


Figure 7. East Side, with Birch Trees, Orange Daylilies, and Clouded Sulphur Butterflies, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 8. West Side, with Maple Trees, Ferns, and Black-capped Chickadees, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023



Figure 9. North Side, with Pine Trees, Downy Woodpecker, and Cinquefoils, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2023

park. I also conducted an artist talk about my experience, but it was delayed due to the flooding. It ended up being a blessing to have to conduct the talk virtually after the fact because I was able to reach a wider audience,

and have it recorded as a video (link provided). As an art educator, teaching others has always informed my own practice.

Ultimately, I believe a change of scenery leads to a change in my artistic process and finished artwork. The living

history that the National Park Service provides allows us to time travel through interpretive themes, and that is a deep source of inspiration for me. I believe that I had an artistic breakthrough during my time as an artist-in-residence, one where I was able to transcend mimicry and mere

documentation to embrace conceptual ideas while focusing on compositional design using shape and color. I'm eager to see what inspiration next summer will bring, and how this school year will prepare me for that.



*Dr. Heather Heckel, EdD is an artist and art educator living in New York City and teaching on Long Island. Her award-winning artwork has been shown internationally, is in several national permanent collections, and is featured regularly in the Park Slope Reader. She is a lifelong learner who loves to travel, and has been awarded 17 artist residencies through the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management. She is in her eleventh year of teaching public school art, and has taught at the college, high school, and middle school levels. She earned her BFA in Illustration from the Ringling College of Art and Design, her MAT in Art Education from the School of Visual Arts, and her MFA in Painting from the Savannah College of Art and Design. Most recently she*

*earned her Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of the Cumberlands, where her research investigated the relationships between art education, leadership, and creativity. She is a member of the Society of Illustrators, National Art Education Association, and the New York State Art Teachers Association.*

You can view her portfolio and learn more at [HeatherHeckel.com](http://HeatherHeckel.com).  
Instagram: [@HeatherHeckelArt](https://www.instagram.com/HeatherHeckelArt)

#### References

National Park Foundation (2023). *Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park*. <https://www.nationalparks.org/explore/parks/marsh-billings-rockefeller-national-historical-park>  
National Park Service (2016). *About Us*. <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/aboutus.htm>

#### Links

To learn more about the National Park artist-in-residence program please visit: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm>

To learn more about my artist residency experiences please visit: <https://heatherheckel.com/residencies.html>

To listen to my Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP Artist Talk please visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJQdyUhTdfQ>

