

Robert Hamilton *Paper Moon*

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Robert Hamilton: *Paper Moon*

BY SUZETTE McAVOY

*You say it's only a paper moon
Sailing over a cardboard sea
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me*

One of the most idiosyncratic and noteworthy artists of post-War American art, Robert Hamilton (1917-2004) taught painting and drawing at the Rhode Island School of Design for thirty-four years. Yvonne Jacquette, Richard Merkin, George Lloyd, and Dean Richardson were some of his many students. For Hamilton, who flew over 100 missions in WW II as a P-47 fighter pilot, earning him the Distinguished Flying Cross, the picture plane was a stage for depicting invented narratives brimming with humor, pathos, and an unquenchable zest for life. His experiences during the war profoundly influenced the imagery in his paintings, which often feature figures from history and from art, bon vivant characters and animals, blithely enjoying life and defying the inevitability of death.

Trained academically at RISD as an undergraduate before the War, Hamilton studied under John Robinson Frazier, whom he called “one great teacher.” Frazier, he said, “taught Eakins,” and Hamilton’s early paintings reveal his adeptness at figurative realism. Returning from Europe after the War, Hamilton was recruited to teach at the college beginning in 1948. “I got on a train and went to Providence,” he later recounted. “I took a look at myself, and I knew there was no point in being Eakins or John Singer Sargent. I had to be anything else. Since I was crazy about Jazz from the minute I heard it in the 1930s, I knew that the life of Jazz was spontaneity and improvisation. I said to myself...your pictures have got to be spontaneity and improvisation.”

Coming of age aesthetically at the height of Abstract Expressionism, Hamilton was keenly aware of the movement and while he embraced its general tenets, “I couldn’t let go of certain objectives, like a consistent light, and objectives like balance of volumes, balance of form, and negative space.” He was drawn instead

to the figurative abstraction of Francis Bacon, who was “the truest improviser in my view.” He also admired the work of Max Beckmann, “the absolute top influence,” whose paintings taught him “there’s nothing in the world that brings color to life like a big whack of black next to it...black is what makes his color so delicious, so juicy, so wonderful.”

During the 1950s and 60s, Hamilton exhibited widely at galleries and museums in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, and elsewhere, and in 1974, he was artist-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome. By this time, he had established a particular, individualistic method of painting that he essentially followed for the remainder of his career. “When anything became possible, and the future opened right up, was when I found a system of putting down a lot of exciting abstract expressionist paint and covering it up with a coat of lamp black, and then, uncovering, and when I uncovered it, after a while, it looked like something.” Using the side of his hand as a squeegee, followed by brushes, and sometimes paper towels to imprint a delicate pattern, Hamilton coaxed figures, settings, and action out of the blackness and the recesses of his consciousness.

Theatrical and cinematic in scope, each composition, ranging in scale from 16 inches square to more than six by eight feet, functions as a stage, “a place for something to occur...little pictorial events, little plays.” References to art history, his favorites were Piero della Francesca and Velázquez, popular culture, Jazz, sports, comics, especially *Krazy Kat* and *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, and his war experiences abound. Stalag Luft III, the prisoner-of-war camp that held captured Western Allied air force personnel, and the subject of the film *The Great Escape*, makes repeated appearances. As does the artist’s snub-nosed P47 Thunderbolt, both in its “serious” form, and later, “before I knew it, it was a toy...zipping along a few feet above the ground.”

In his characteristic make-do fashion, Hamilton mostly used house paint from the local hardware store, stretching his own canvases or more often working on Masonite panels. He fabricated and painted his own bespoke frames, adding a Baroque, old-world flair to his dreamlike compositions. In the late 1970s, he largely withdrew from the art world, choosing to exhibit his work primarily at The Octagon, an eight-sided gallery he built on his property in Port Clyde, Maine, where he and his family had spent summers since the 1950s, and where he lived full-time after retiring from RISD in 1981.

“What neither he nor anyone familiar with his work could have predicted was how much his paintings now strongly resonate with the current contemporary art scene, including the work of such interiorizing, untamed, new imagist painters as Amy Bennett, Katherine Bradford, and Peter Doig,” wrote Chris Crosman, former director of the Farnsworth Art Museum in 2020. Crosman, who knew Hamilton personally, organized one of the artist’s last institutional exhibitions at the Farnsworth in 1999. Fiercely independent and battling reduced vision from macular degeneration in his later years, Robert Hamilton adopted the motto, “If you’re falling off a cliff, you might as well try to fly, you have nothing else to lose—I love that, I’ll be passing that on.”

Note: All quotes by the artist from *Robert Hamilton: Maine Master* (2001; 27 min.) documentary film, Kane Lewis Productions and the Union of Maine Visual Artists.



Robert Hamilton, *Paper Moon*, 1992, Oil on board, 39 × 39 in.



Robert Hamilton, *A Fish in Trouble*, 1998, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Big Eyes and Red Fez*, n.d., Oil on canvas, 57 × 70 ³/₄ in.



Robert Hamilton, *Come Back Little Nemo*, 2000, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Come Back Sweet Mama (Boy in Museum)*, 1990, Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 in.





Robert Hamilton, *Vicky in Red Helmet*, n.d., Oil on Masonite, 40 × 40 in.



Like spindrift blowing across an ocean ledge in
Muscongus Bay, his was a world of shifting, floating
recollection, never to be fixed or finished, warning of
unfathomed depths and pulling, cross-tidal currents.
The work of Robert Hamilton has rightly been called
“the best kept secret in Maine.”

—Chris Crosman

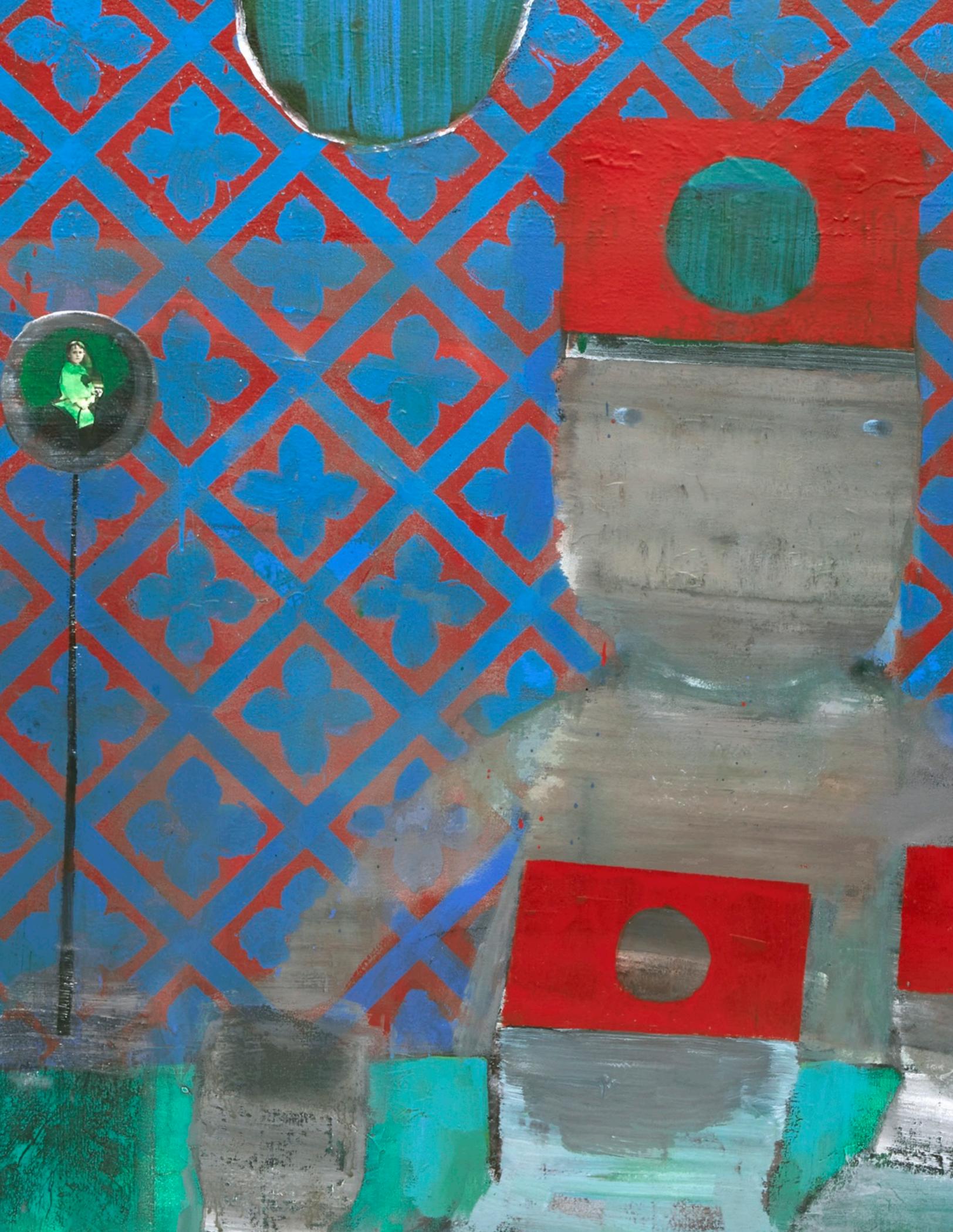
Robert Hamilton, *Dream '44*, 1991, Oil on canvas, 29 × 39 ¼ in.



Robert Hamilton, *Fortune Teller*, 1997, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Father and Son with Wallpaper*, n.d., Oil on canvas, 67 × 69 in.





Robert Hamilton, *Look Out the Sky is Falling*, 1998, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Nu, So It Doesn't Whistle*, 1994, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Tarot Card Reader*, n.d., Oil on Masonite, 16 × 16 in.





Robert Hamilton, *Revised Blondie*, 2003, Oil on Masonite, 24 2 x24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Untitled (Foot and Cat)*, 2002, Oil on board, 16 × 16 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Untitled (Red Carriage)*, n.d., Oil on Masonite, 15 ½ × 16 in.





Robert Hamilton, *Your Average Hero at the Stick*, 1999, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 23 ¼ in.



Robert Hamilton, *Adolescence*, 1997, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Fish Bomber II*, 1994, Oil on Masonite, 15 ½ × 15 ½ in.



Robert Hamilton, *Pretty in Pink*, n.d., Oil on board, 16 × 16 in.



Robert Hamilton, *Portrait of the Artist*, 1994, Oil on Masonite, 24 × 24 in.

Robert Hamilton

Born 1917, Seneca Falls, New York; died 2004, Port Clyde, Maine

Professor of Painting, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, 1948-1981
Artist in Residence, American Academy, Rome Italy, 1974
Rhode Island School of Design, BFA, 1947
Captain, United States Air Force, fighter-bomber pilot, 1943-1945
Art Students League, New York, NY, 1940
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, 1935-1939

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Dowling Walsh Gallery, Rockland, ME, 2020, 2021, 2023, 2026
Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME, 2011
St. Gaudens Memorial, Cornish, NH, 2005
BigTown Gallery, Rochester, VT, 2005
Leighton Gallery, Blue Hill, ME, 2001
Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, RI, 1999
Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME, 1999
Frick Gallery, Belfast, ME, 1994
Icon Gallery, Brunswick, ME, 1990, 1995, 1997
Virginia Lynch Gallery, Tiverton, RI, 1986, 1994, 1997, 1999
Lily Iselin Gallery, Providence, RI, 1982
Alpha Gallery, Boston, MA, 1966, 1968, 1969
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1967
DeCordova Museum & Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA, 1961, 1963, 1964
Kanegis Gallery, Boston, MA, 1957, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962
A.D. White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1960
University of Illinois National, Urbana-Champaign, IL, 1959, 1960
Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, 1959
Cambridge Art Association, Boston, MA, 1958

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

The David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, RI
M.I.T. List Art Center, Cambridge, MA
DeCordova Museum & Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Tougaloo College Art Collections, Tougaloo, MS
Ewing Gallery of Art & Architecture, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, TN
Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME
Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, RI

GRANTS

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