



Christyl Cusworth, inside her studio in Lambertville, working on a painting attributed to John Singer Sargent.

PHOTO BY JUNG WI

# The Fixer

Art conservator Christyl Cusworth has repaired thousands of pieces over the past three decades, among them works by Keith Haring and Claude Monet. Her next assignment: A long-neglected painting of Washington crossing the Delaware.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI

**C**all it kismet.

When author Patricia Millen was researching her book, *Washington Crossing: Images of America*, co-authored with Robert W. Sands Jr., she explored the many ways in which George Washington's historic crossing of the icy Delaware River, on December 25, 1776, had been depicted in paintings. She never expected to uncover a version that had been lost to history.

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## The mural will present Cusworth with some significant conservation challenges.

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Of course, the iconic representation of General Washington's sneak attack on nearly 1,000 Hessian mercenaries at Trenton, a pivotal victory in the Revolutionary War, is Emanuel Leutze's 1851 painting, prominently exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. But when Millen came upon a reference to a 1921 mural depicting the passage by Philadelphia artist George Matthews Harding—a painting that was owned by the state of New Jersey—it took her breath away. Millen, a founding member of the Washington Crossing Park Association, had never heard of this mural. "It really jumped off the page," she says. "I thought, 'Where is it? Why haven't I seen it?'"

Millen read a newspaper article that told a dramatic story of conservators rescuing the mural, which hung behind the staircase in the lobby of the Taylor Opera House in Trenton before its demolition in 1969. The oil on canvas—fifteen and a half feet wide and nearly

ten feet tall—was shipped to Ringwood Manor in Ringwood State Park in Passaic County for storage, and there it languished, forgotten for over half a century.

After confirming its existence through photos supplied by Ringwood Manor, Millen immediately enlisted the help of the park association. "We all had the same thought: It would be exciting if the mural was salvageable," she recalls. But the painting needed some serious restoration, and it was imperative the park association find an expert conservationist who was also local. Millen knew just who to call: Lambertville fine art conservator Christyl Cusworth, who had earlier saved a nineteenth-century landscape painting—possibly from the Hudson River School—that Millen inherited from her grandmother. "Christyl's reputation and skills are stellar," Millen says. Meanwhile, the park association has embarked on a campaign to raise \$60,000 to restore the painting.



PHOTO BY JUNG WI

*In Cusworth's work, color matching is a meticulous art in itself, requiring knowledge of when and where a work was created.*





PHOTO BY JUNG WI

*The work of a conservator is part technician, part investigator. With this painting, Cusworth is removing residual dirt and discolored old varnish from the surface.*

Cusworth launched her business in her house in Trenton in 1994, moved it to a barn in New Hope, then to The People's Store in Lambertville before purchasing her current building, on South Main Street, in 2007, a half-block from the house she'd bought eight years earlier. Over the past three decades, she has conserved more than 7,000 paintings, wood and plastic objects, mosaics and murals from the fifteenth century to today, including pieces by such luminaries as Claude Monet, Keith Haring, and Louise Nevelson. Certified by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Cusworth's client list includes museums, galleries, auction houses, fine art and antiques dealers, artists, and collectors.

Cusworth studied art at The College of New Jersey and later worked as a carpenter, then a bronze caster. But in the mid-1980s she moved to New Orleans, where she scored an apprenticeship with Hudson and Salah Art Conservation Studio and worked as an assistant preparator at the Contemporary Arts Center. She has studied at the American College of Greece in Athens, as well as the University of New Orleans and New York University.

When a potential client brings a work to Cusworth, she asks to examine it in person and suggests that it be appraised to determine whether it's worth fixing. There is, she says, no single approach to conservation. "The pieces are all very different," Cusworth says. "Each one is his own person."

If a work is stable, Cusworth will first clean it by removing discolored varnish and residual dirt. Then, using reversible materials, she will fix damage caused by water, flaking, paint loss, shrinking, cracking, fungi, and insect infestation. She often needs to repair torn or punctured canvases.

This is where the job becomes part technician and part investigator. Running an ultraviolet light over the canvas reveals overpainting by earlier restoration. "The difference between conservation and art restoration is conservation paints are very reversible," she says. "The UV light illuminates dark spots where someone has retouched or repaired it. The paints we use are designed to do that so that honesty is seen. From there, we can get rid of mistakes and discover and match the original color."

Color matching is a meticulous art in itself. "You make your palette based on the colors that you see in the painting," Cusworth says. "And then you have to know as much as you can



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRISTYL CUSWORTH

*There is no single approach to conservation, Cusworth says. These photos show the progression of one painting's restoration.*



PHOTO COURTESY OF WASHINGTON CROSSING PARK ASSOCIATION

Cusworth (second from right) beside the painting, by Philadelphia artist George Matthews Harding, discovered last year by Pat Millen, co-author of *Washington Crossing: Images of America* (Arcadia Publishing/2022). With Cusworth are, from left: Stan Saperstein and Michael Mitrano, trustees of the Washington Crossing Park Association, and Ken Ritchey, the association president.


about the painting so you can determine the specific colors. So, not just brown but *this* brown because the painting is from Wales in a certain period, for example. But when you know this, it's amazing how much easier it is to make your color and get it right. It's like putting a puzzle together."

Her clients, Cusworth says, bring her a great variety of art in many states of disrepair, from family heirlooms with little more than sentimental value to others that might fetch close to \$1 million. "I love when people see the painting when it is fixed and say 'Oh, it looks so wonderful,'" she says. "Some even cry—and that makes me feel good."

**W**hen the Harding painting of Washington crossing the Delaware was removed from the Taylor Opera House, conservators prepared it for storage by covering it with wheat paste and rice paper to protect it before rolling it off the wall and onto giant steel cylinders. "It was not intended to sit for so long, and the

steel pipe did not go all the way through, which caused some canvas deformations where the mural bowed," Cusworth says.

The mural will present Cusworth with some significant conservation challenges. She will add a new structural support lining, remove varnish and mold, fix tears, fill cracks and voids by inpainting, revarnish the entire painting, then place it onto a new stretcher. Cusworth says she hopes to have the restoration completed by the end of the year, after which the painting will assume a

place of prominence in the River Towns—displayed as the centerpiece of a new visitor's center and museum that's set to open by 2026 at Washington Crossing State Park in Titusville, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding. 

*Patti Zielinski, a former executive editor at Art & Antiques, is the chief arts writer for River Towns.*

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

*The Burning of Center Bridge, 50¼-by-56 ¼ inches, oil on canvas, painted in 1923.*

One hundred years ago this summer, the noted Pennsylvania Impressionist Edward Redfield stood among the mortified masses, watching helplessly as a fast-moving fire destroyed Center Bridge. Known mostly for his Bucks County winter landscapes, Redfield documented the tragedy in one of his most famous paintings.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI



# PAINTER OF FIRE AND ICE

For almost 110 years, Center Bridge stood watch above the Delaware River, the passageway between Stockton and the village that bore the bridge's name on the Pennsylvania shore. Over the century, the wooden structure—named for its location midway between the Trenton Bridge and the Palmer Bridge connecting Phillipsburg and Easton—weathered damaging floods and stared down threats of fire. Center Bridge was completed in 1814, and by 1923 it reigned as the oldest remaining nineteenth-century timber-covered bridge along the Delaware. But by the evening of July 22, 1923—one hundred years ago this summer—the bridge was gone.

A bolt of lightning struck Center Bridge, sparking a blaze that sent ignited soot, blown by stormy winds, downriver, endangering homes on the shoreline. Firefighters from Stockton and New Hope rushed to the scene. Scores of villagers poured to the riverbank to watch, helpless, silhouetted by amber flame against the night sky. They looked on in horror as the span on the New Jersey side collapsed. According to an account in *The Intelligencer*, twenty-five firefighters were plunged into the churning waters thirty feet below. The structure itself crashed down upon rock and sandbar—"crushed like an egg shell," according to an account in the *Trenton Evening Times*. Miraculously, all the men survived.

Electricity was cut off in Stockton, pitching the already dark night into blackness—except for the fire, fanned by the wind, ravenously feeding on Center Bridge's weathered shingle roof and dry timbers, still burning hot and spreading. While the fallen firefighters scrambled to shore, and to safety, their colleagues, conceding defeat, left the bridge to suffer its fate while onlookers watched the glowing timbers cascade to the river and float, still aflame, to distant shores.

Before dawn, the inferno would reduce the historic structure to charcoal.

Among the crowd was Edward Willis Redfield, the renowned Pennsylvania Impressionist and co-founder of the New Hope School of painters. Redfield had been traveling home with his family when he spotted the blaze in the distance. Concerned the fire was at his Center Bridge home, just steps from the bridge's base, he hurried to the river, where he watched the drama unfold alongside fellow painter William L. Lathrop. Later recounting the night, Redfield said, "Lathrop said it was a pity it couldn't be painted. So I took out an envelope and made some notes and painted all the next day."

The resulting work—fifty and a quarter inches wide and fifty-six and a quarter inches tall, an oil-on-canvas titled *The Burning of Center Bridge*—was the only chronicling of the event as it transpired and a rare work that Redfield, who otherwise worked solely *en plein air*, painted in his studio from memory.

"We have this image of Redfield in the midst of this spectacle, one of many who came out to see the fire," says Laura Igoe, chief curator at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, where *The Burning of Center Bridge* is prominently featured. "He had the presence to take out an envelope and make sketches and color notes so he could do this painting in the studio, which is one of many reasons why it is one of his most important. Redfield was known for his impressionistic landscapes, but *The Burning of Center Bridge* is a history painting. It has a narrative in the landscape that we don't see in his other paintings. The only other historical reference to this event are photographs taken the day after. At the centennial of the creation of this great work, we encourage people to visit and see first-hand how powerful this canvas is."



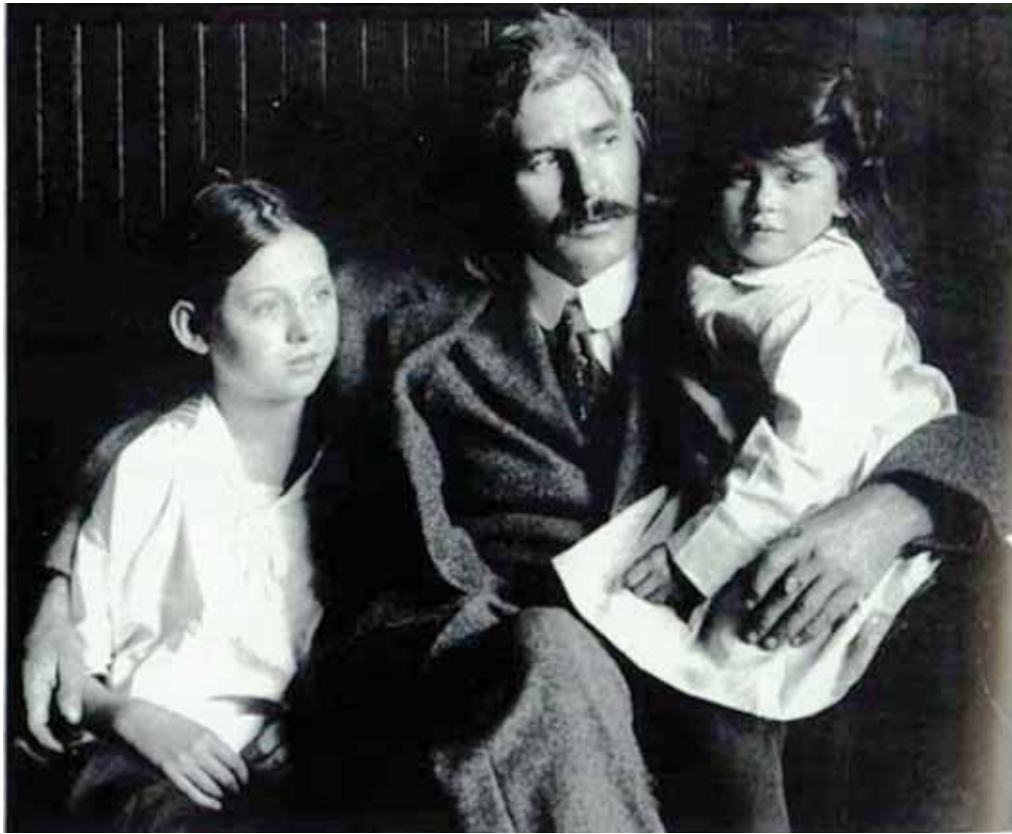


PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM FOLK

Redfield, circa 1915, with his daughters Louise (left) and Frances.

Today, nearly sixty years after his death in 1965, at age 95, Edward Redfield remains among the most popular of the vaunted Pennsylvania Impressionists. As recently as June 2020, the Philadelphia auction house Freeman's sold five Redfield paintings for a combined total of more than \$1 million. Redfield's 1926 painting *Spring at Point Pleasant on the Delaware River*, sold for \$483,000, the auction's top lot.

Born in 1869 in Bridgeville, Delaware, and raised in Camden, New Jersey, Redfield recognized his talent early. To hone his skills—and to better prepare himself for admission to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia—Redfield took drawing and painting lessons from commercial artist Henry Rolfe, who advised him that paintings should be made at “one go” and directly from life. That approach defined Redfield's painting style for the rest of his life.

From 1887 to 1889, Redfield studied under Thomas Anshutz, James Kelly, and Thomas Hovenden at the Academy, which emphasized painting from life, working quickly, and drawing with the brush. While there, Redfield formed a friendship with fellow realist Robert Henri, who went on to be a leader of the Ashcan School, a movement that depicted daily life in New York City's poorer neighborhoods.

In 1889, Redfield traveled to France, where he continued his studies at the Académie Julian with the intent of becoming a portrait painter. In Paris, his admiration grew for Impressionists Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and, notably, Frits Thaulow, a Norwegian Impressionist known for his masterful painting of snow. Redfield's passion for portraiture waned as he became increasingly seduced by depicting nature, particularly snowscapes and maritime scenes.

Redfield began experimenting with tonalism, a somber style of painting in neutral colors. In 1891, with Henri, he traveled to Brolles, near Fontainebleau. “In Fontainebleau,” Igoe says, “he likely became familiar with The Barbizon School of painters, who gravitated to realism in art and painted in the forests in a very atmospheric way. These works are very moody, the colors a little murky, almost like you're looking at a scene through a fog.”

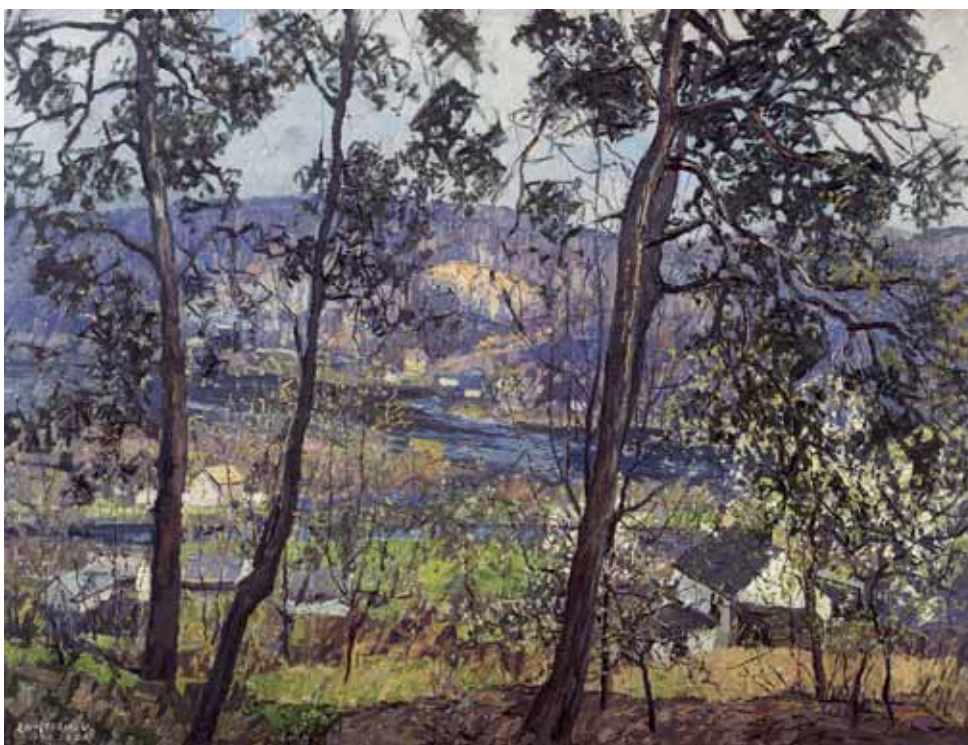


PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

Early Spring, 38-by-50 inches, oil on canvas. Note Redfield's signature ("EW Redfield") and the date ("April 29.20") in the lower left.

It was in Brolles that Redfield painted his first snow scene, outside the Hotel Deligant, where he fell in love with the innkeeper's daughter, Elise Deligant. The work, *Road—Forest of Fontainebleau*, was accepted by the Paris Salon. In due course, Elise accepted his hand in marriage.

Redfield returned to the United States with Elise, and in 1898 the couple bought an island farm in the village of Center Bridge, set on 127 acres between the Delaware River and Delaware Canal. Redfield had long loved the river, having spent summer vacations as a child in Frenchtown, then a peach-shipping center, while assisting his father, who owned a produce business. Redfield would later say he was drawn to the New Hope area "because this was a place where an independent, self-sufficient man could make a living from the land, bring up a family and still have the freedom to paint as he saw fit."

By the time of the Center Bridge fire, Redfield had been living in the namesake village and romancing the surrounding countryside on canvas for more than two decades, known particularly for his snow-covered scenes around New Hope and serving as a magnet for other artists who would eventually form the New Hope Art Colony.

"He found the New Hope area an ideal location—between New York City and Philadelphia—with easy railroad access to the two metropolitan hubs for exhibitions, teaching, taking classes or meeting colleagues," Igoe says. "The land was comparably cheap and attainable and had all four seasons. Redfield was attracted to the idea of living in a rural area and embraced that as part of his persona."

Once Redfield resettled in Bucks County, his reputation as an artist grew. The Pennsylvania Academy mounted a one-man exhibition of his landscapes, and by the end of his life he had earned more awards than

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

The Trout Brook, 50-by-56 inches, oil on canvas, painted in 1916.





PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

*Left: Redfield seated in his riverfront home in Center Bridge, circa 1950, facing the Delaware and the rebuilt bridge. He's surrounded by paintings and furniture that he made. Below: An aerial view of Redfield's latter home in Center Bridge, just a short walk from the bridge.*

any American artist besides John Singer Sargent. "Much of his brushstrokes are very clearly delineated, and you can imagine him quickly moving the brush across the canvas," Igoe says. "In general, artists were embracing the French Impressionists like Monet, which then was an avant-garde, controversial style, but Redfield painted in a moody, tonalist way."

This liveliness and energy was noticed by other artists. They moved to the New Hope area to be close to Redfield, who, along with Lathrop and Daniel Garber, are regarded as founders of the New Hope School. "The New Hope School happened somewhat organically: Redfield told friends about the beauty and convenience of the area," Igoe says. "This was a time when there

was a rise in immigration into the cities and industrialization. Artists were looking for a way to escape. In addition, students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts would move out to study with him or be near him and just stayed."

Unlike Garber, who fostered an artistic community, teaching students at the Pennsylvania Academy and gathering with fellow artists at Lathrop's Sunday afternoon teas at Phillips Mill, Redfield preferred to keep to himself, Igoe notes. "He always struck me as this rugged individualist, but because he achieved big-name recognition in American art, artists came to the area because they wanted to be near him or paint in a similar style," she says. "He was a big advertisement for the area."

The names of artists Redfield influenced read as a Who's Who of American Impressionism—Walter Elmer Schofield, Walter Emerson Baum, John Fulton Folinsbee, Kenneth Nunamaker, Charles Rosen, George Sotter, Robert Spencer—all contributing their distinct styles and points of view in capturing the spirit of New Hope and the surrounding landscape.

According to Lambertville gallery owner James M. Alterman, author of the 2005 self-published tome, *New Hope for American Art*, Redfield's "best period" stretched from 1907 to 1925.



PHOTO BY JUAN VIDAL



“Around 1905–06, Redfield’s style was coming into its own, employing thick vigorous brush strokes tightly woven and layered with a multitude of colors,” Alterman wrote. “These large plein-air canvases define the essence of Pennsylvania Impressionism. By 1907, Redfield had perfected his craft and, from this point forward, was creating some of his finest work.”

**T**he basis for this exceptional work was indeed Redfield’s love affair with nature. He could only truly paint what he experienced with all his senses attuned. “There is a vast difference between people who copy and people who feel what they see,” he said. He would journey to a location time and again, studying it, understanding it, seeing the light at different times of day, in different seasons, before starting a canvas. History recounts Redfield painting with bravado: How working *en plein air*, he braved the brutality of winter, squinting against the glare of the snow as he created works with an impasto technique, layering paint heavily with thick brushstrokes without preliminary sketches and completing paintings “in one go,” even if it meant standing in snow for up to eight hours. “I go into the field with my fifty pounds of equipment and a fifty-by-fifty-six canvas, and do not leave until I have completed my work,” he said. Stories are told of Redfield strapping the backs of large canvases to trees to mitigate the wind.

The resulting canvases are bold, with an impasto buildup of paint. “*The Trout Brook*, in our collection, is a great example of the layers of paint,” Igoe says. “If you look at it from the side, it’s like a mountainous landscape, with the paint sticking up, even curling off of the canvas. Painting snow is challenging. People think you just paint snow white, but there are many colors—purples and blues—and many nuances when painting snow. It takes a lot of technical skill, and I think that’s why he was particularly drawn to winter landscapes.”

Redfield documented other seasons—notably during his summers spent with his family in Boothbay Harbor and Monhegan Island, Maine, painting the coast—and subjects, such as New York City, where he joined his friend Henri for six months in 1909 creating an important series of city views in the moody tonalist style he had embraced in the forests of Fontainebleau. His nocturnal New York scenes are a direct contrast to the bright winterscapes, but they foreshadow *The Burning of Center Bridge*, which is also set in darkness but with pinpoints of light from the soaring embers rather than urban illumination.

Ultimately, the career of this painter of ice, like Center Bridge itself, culminated in a blaze. In 1947, devastated by Elise’s death and with his eyesight failing, Redfield destroyed the paintings he deemed inferior: “I did burn I guess about seven hundred canvases,” he later recounted.

The following year, while in Maine, Redfield completed *Linekin Bay*. It was the last painting he made from nature, although he continued to create the traditional Pennsylvania crafts he embraced throughout his life: Windsor furniture, hooked rugs, painted chests.

Until the end of his life, Redfield remained enchanted by nature. He would spend hours at the picture window in his home, gazing at the canal and the ever-flowing Delaware as it passed beneath the bridge whose predecessor’s fiery demise decades

earlier had inspired one of his grandest creations. “I sit here and look out the window,” Redfield said. “I never get lonesome. To me, it’s a continuous show.” 

*Patti Zielinski is a regular contributor to River Towns. She profiled the Frenchtown landscape artist and gallery owner John Schmidtberger in the Spring issue.*

Edward Redfield’s works can be seen at many nearby museums, including the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. One of the two Redfield paintings in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C., is *The Brook at Carversville*.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICIA ROSS AND JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

*Top: Redfield painted his own house, inside and out, numerous times, including Our Home, 26-by-32 inches, oil on canvas. Below: A recent photograph of the house from the same perspective as Our Home.*



PHOTO BY JUAN VIDAL