



Painter Ralph Carpentier, a Man for All Seasons, Dies at 87

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by Andrew Botsford

Artist [Ralph Carpentier](#), a longtime resident of Springs, died Friday, February 19, 2016 at the New York State Veterans Home in Oxford, NY, after a long illness. The husband of playwright and retired psychotherapist Hortense Carpentier, he was 87.



Ralph Carpentier. Courtesy
[RalphCarpentier.com](#).

In a career spanning six decades, Ralph Carpentier established himself in the eyes of critics and collectors as one of the leading practitioners of contemporary landscape painting. Diverging from the Abstract Expressionists who arrived on eastern Long Island at about the same time—in the mid to late 1950s—he focused on the play of light, weather and color in representational meditations on the natural splendor of the East End, and mankind's place in it.

As Eric Ernst wrote in a *The Southampton Press* review of an exhibition at Lizan-Tops Gallery in September 2003: "Of particular note, Ralph Carpentier's work continues to resonate with a subtle sense of energy that somehow simultaneously manages to seem enervating and meditative. He accomplishes this with a masterful approach to light, and his effective structuring of the picture plane eloquently balances the elemental beauty of nature with the subtle presence of human components that are powerful and instantly comfortable and familiar."

Carpentier's paintings of local landscapes are held in private and museum collections throughout the country, including at [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton. But it was his activism in the community and his advocacy—for artists, for honoring the history of the East End, and for preserving East End crafts and traditions—that truly made him a man for all seasons.

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"Devon Nocturne" by Ralph Carpentier. Oil on linen. Courtesy of Pamela Williams.

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Among a number of notable accomplishments, having worked from 1959 to 1962 as a commercial

fisherman, he served for a time as an East Hampton Town Trustee. Drawing on his time on the water and his experience as a trustee, he was the founder in 1975 of the East Hampton Town Marine Museum.

From its founding until 1989, he was the museum's director and its curator of marine history, marine life, and what he called "the folklife and culture of the South Fork fisherman." He also developed the museum's Boat Shop in Springs, which he described as "a unique experiment in preservation and teaching of the disappearing skills associated with the craft of wooden boat building."

From 1981 to 1983, while still running the Marine Museum, he served as executive director of the [East Hampton Historical Society](#).

In 1984, Carpentier was a co-founder, with Leif Hope, of the Jimmy Ernst Artists Alliance, now known as the [Artists Alliance of East Hampton](#) (AAEH). In the early days of the organization, Carpentier successfully fought to overcome challenges in the zoning code affecting the rights of artists to have studios as auxiliary structures with heat and running water.

As the artist Beryl Bernay noted in an August 8, 2007 letter to the editor of *The East Hampton Press*, "the original officers of the Alliance and the town worked together for six years to effect the changes made to the code, enabling approval for building 140 legal studios in the past 17 years."

Carpentier was appointed to a committee advising the town on Amagansett historic landmarks. In 1993 he was appointed to the East Hampton Town Architectural Review Board. A member of the Baymen's Association, he served on its board of directors in 1984. He was president of the Long Island Museum Association from 1985 to 1986, and also served as president of the East Hampton Town Committee for Art in Public Places in 1988.

He was a member of the Amagansett Historical Association, the Nature Conservancy, the Group for the South Fork, East Hampton Power Squadron, East Hampton Yacht Club, and the Accabonac Protection Committee.

In addition, he was a teacher who worked with students at every level, from the Hampton Day School, to East Hampton High School, to Southampton College when it was still a campus of Long Island University, to the Art Barge in Amagansett.

In a curriculum vitae that he put together, Carpentier described his occupation prior to 1969 this way: "As a self-employed painter, supported myself through a variety of teaching jobs including New York University, Rye High School and People's Art Center, MoMA."

He made donations to a number of East End causes, from specially commissioned hand-painted ceramic plates for The Retreat's Artists Against Abuse auction to hand-painted cigar boxes for a similar benefit auction for East End Hospice.

He designed stage sets and exhibits, including at the John Drew Theater at Guild Hall in East Hampton in 1960, and did illustrations for a number of books. He created the title design and story for a 20-minute black and white 1962 Sandpiper Films documentary titled "The Beach Seiners." And

he was featured in an LTV television special produced by the Jimmy Ernst Artists Alliance in 1993, "Landscape Painting with Ralph Carpentier."

But before, during and after all of his other pursuits and accomplishments, Ralph Carpentier was first and foremost a painter. He earned his high school diploma in 1947 at the School of Industrial Arts in New York, now known as the High School of Art and Design. After getting his bachelor's degree in education in 1951 from New York University, he received his master of arts degree from NYU in 1955.

Moving to eastern Long Island after the birth of his daughter, Martha Carpentier, in 1955, he became an artist who devoted himself to unlocking the tonal mysteries and mystique of the East End landscape.

Dozens of galleries have come and gone in this area since Carpentier's first of many exhibitions at Guild Hall in East Hampton in 1962. Today, apart from his shows in New York at such venues as the Nabi Gallery and in other parts of the country, a quick scan of his resume going back to the '60s and up through 2015 reads like a history of the eastern Long Island art scene: His range stretches from [Gallery North](#) in Setauket, the [Heckscher Museum](#) in Huntington, and the Bryant Library Gallery in Roslyn to the west, to the Benson Gallery in Bridgehampton and Bologna-Landi, Lizan Tops, the Upstairs Gallery, [Vered Gallery](#), the Evans Gallery, Wallace Gallery and Ashawagh Hall in East Hampton, and Gallery East, Ann Harper Gallery and the [Pamela Williams Gallery](#) in Amagansett in the east.



"Sag Progress" by Ralph Carpentier. Oil on linen. Courtesy of Pamela Williams.

The late journalist, poet and critic Robert Long, writing reviews for *The Southampton Press* in the 1990s, asserted that Carpentier was without equal in his masterful and compelling rendering of clouds of every description and density.

In a November 7, 2007 review in *The Southampton Press* of a landscape show at the Pamela Williams Gallery, Eric Ernst wrote that "Ralph Carpentier conjures painterly reveries of the East End that are also emotional ... because of their nostalgic evocation of a vanishing agrarian lifestyle. These reveries are presented with an elegiac tone that is heightened by the artist's masterful use of light and subtle approach to technique and color."

"Introducing the human component through architecture, such as barns or fishing shacks," he continued, "Mr. Carpentier's pieces derive their greatest strength from his compositional structure, which balances illumination with the insistent geometry of farm fields and shorelines."

Gallerist Pamela Williams, who featured Carpentier's work in many exhibitions at her Amagansett gallery, wrote in an email this week: "The 19th century landscape artists of the Hudson River School

are some that we marvel over today. Twenty-three years ago, when I first saw Ralph's work, I knew that a century on, people would be standing in front of his paintings in awe. He masterfully captured the beauty and the very spirit of the East End. It was my great privilege to have known this extraordinary artist, and to have enjoyed his fine friendship. This is a huge loss for all of us."

Guild Hall Museum Director and Chief Curator Christina Mossaides Strassfield wrote in an email this week that she had included work by Carpentier in several exhibitions she has curated over the years. The museum owns two of his paintings, *Portrait of the Artist's Boat*, a 1967 oil on canvas, and *Stand of Maples*, a 1975 charcoal on paper.



Detail of "Portrait of the Artist's Boat" by Ralph Carpentier, 1967.
Oil on canvas, one of two Carpentier works in the Guild Hall
Museum permanent collection. Courtesy of Guild Hall Museum.

She said of the artist's landscapes that they "captured the lyrical quality of life on the East End that he knew was not going to last forever and that he wanted to preserve on canvas."

In a beautifully crafted [letter to the editor](#) in the February 25, 2016 edition of *The East Hampton Star*, Carpentier's daughter, Martha Carpentier, drew on details, backstories and memories to paint a picture in words of a man whose passionate engagement with his art overlapped with his love for the people and traditions of the place where he lived.

Near the end of the letter she described her father this way: "Ralph Carpentier was first and foremost a creator: a father, a husband, a craftsman, an artist, and also a great teacher, always willing to help anyone who stood at his side and wanted to know how it was made or how to make it."

A graveside service arranged by Yardley & Pino Funeral Home in East Hampton was held on Wednesday, February 24, 2016 at Green River Cemetery in Springs, followed by a reception for family and friends at nearby Ashawagh Hall.