



# Salute to Vermont

*Paul Sample's extraordinary work of art narrates the story of Vermont from prehistoric times to the late 20th century.*

A HUGE AND IMPORTANT PAINTING DEPICTING 350 years of Vermont history has found a permanent home at the Vermont Historical Society's museum in Montpelier. The painting, a 50-foot-long mural entitled *Salute to Vermont*, is the work of the American regional artist Paul Sample, who taught art at nearby Dartmouth College.

The National Life Insurance Company donated it to the historical society last year; it had been installed in the company's Montpelier headquarters for some 55 years. National Life had originally commissioned the work in 1961. It was moved to the Vermont Historical Society (VHS) museum and installed in a front gallery this past winter.

VHS Executive Director Steve Perkins said the painting will greet visitors to the museum and will be used to orient them to the museum and introduce them to Vermont history. "We'll bring school groups into this gallery and pull a theme out of the painting and discuss it," Steve said. "It will give us an opportunity to offer them a way to look at history."

The artwork was valued at \$100,000 when Paul Sample painted it in 1961. Today, it is a priceless work of art that narrates the story of Vermont from prehistoric times to the late 20th century. It was one of Paul Sample's last major works, and his most extensive exploration of Vermont's history. The mural is, essentially, narrative art; it "reads" from left to right, just like words on a page.

Paul faced two significant artistic problems as he contemplated his assignment. First, he wanted to express all of Vermont's lengthy history in a single mural, and second, he had to work with an extremely long, rectangular space—the mural covers a wall that is roughly six times as long as it is tall. The resulting mural is 50 feet in length and 8 feet high.

He handled both of those formal problems adeptly, and the painting offers strong testimony to his vision as an artist, his skills as a draftsman/illustrator, and his understanding of Vermont's colorful past. Paul solved the spacial problem by dividing the mural's long, rectangular space into seven, maybe eight,





Paul Sample at work during 1961 on the fabulous, 50-foot-long painting, a narrative of the story of Vermont from prehistoric times to the late 20th century.





The painting, actually considered to be a mural, covers a wall roughly six times longer than it is tall, and consists of several separate sections that altogether recount Vermont's social and economic progress.





smaller panels (depending on how you count) and employing a rhythmic, rising-and-falling compositional structure bridging those panels. In style, the mural is direct and easy to understand. The story it tells is basically a story of economic and social progress.

On the extreme left, in the section visitors will first see as they enter the museum's foyer, the mural shows Samuel de Champlain as he discovers the lake that now bears his name and, just below, settlers are depicted as they move into the new territory on foot and by canoe. The eight-foot-tall painting is fitted to the walls of the VHS museum's front gallery. Its visual "narrative" concludes (as of 1961, when the mural was unveiled) in the panel on the far right, with a Vermont that is a prosperous, technically and educationally sophisticated subset of the United States with a budding recreational economy and its agricultural heritage working and intact. Progress, the social *leitmotif* of Paul Sample's time, has been accomplished.

To the immediate right of the first panel, which depicts discovery and settlement, the second panel combines images of the clearing of the land, early farming activities—including a rugged frontier woman plowing the soil—and the Revolutionary War, symbolized at the top of the painting by Ethan Allen rallying his supporters, the cannon of Fort Ticonderoga, and a section of the historic Battle of Bennington flag, believed to be the first use of stars and stripes to symbolize the emerging young nation.

Next are images of the beginnings and growth of industry and agriculture, a flock of sheep, and an inset of the first Vermont statehouse—the beginnings of state government. Paul clearly knew his Vermont history. Not only is the early statehouse accurately drawn, but the artist has taken pains to make his sheep curly-horned and deeply wooly; these are Merino sheep, the breed that fueled Vermont's first sheep craze in 1830s and '40s.

A blacksmith pounding on his anvil is the dominant figure in the third panel and is partially a metaphorical image; it shows not only a particular form of early work, but also implies the forging of a new state. The mural also illustrates the first industrial machine manufactured in Vermont: a hydraulic pump. And above the curved handle of the pump, an early foundry is shown, both references to Vermont's rich industrial past.

Other 19th-century enterprises important to Vermont are included: a Lake Champlain steamship, an early railroad, marble production, and ice cutting for food storage. The role of religion in bringing civilization and growth to the state is evidenced in a church steeple and praying hands and, farther to the right, a church organist.

Paul was careful to work in a couple of references to his patron, the National Life Insurance Company. At the top right of the large 19th-century panel he has a rendition of the company's founder, Dr. Julius Dewey, who traveled about the countryside on horseback, tending to the sick and selling life insurance. The company's first headquarters in Montpelier fills the upper-

right-hand corner of that panel. Dr. Dewey, here shown talking to a young family, was the father of Admiral George Dewey, the hero of Manila Bay. In the lower-right-hand corner of that same panel, the gold dome of the third and present-day statehouse is painted.

Several wintry images—a sugaring scene and the old snow roller near the top of the mural—are probably meant to metaphorically represent the "winter" of the late 19th century, when Vermont suffered an economic decline, many hill farms failed, and young people left the state in droves. Juxtaposed with those images of winter are the collapsing buildings and rusted machinery of an abandoned farm,

and an auction scene shows people bidding on relics of just such a failed farm.

However, as the story continues to unfold, more positive images are painted: a Morgan horse, a happy rural school scene, and a busy granite quarry. Continuing, we see active farm images, a church and choir, and a pair of hands holding a centering tool, a reference to the machine tool industry in Springfield, once one of the most important industries in the state.

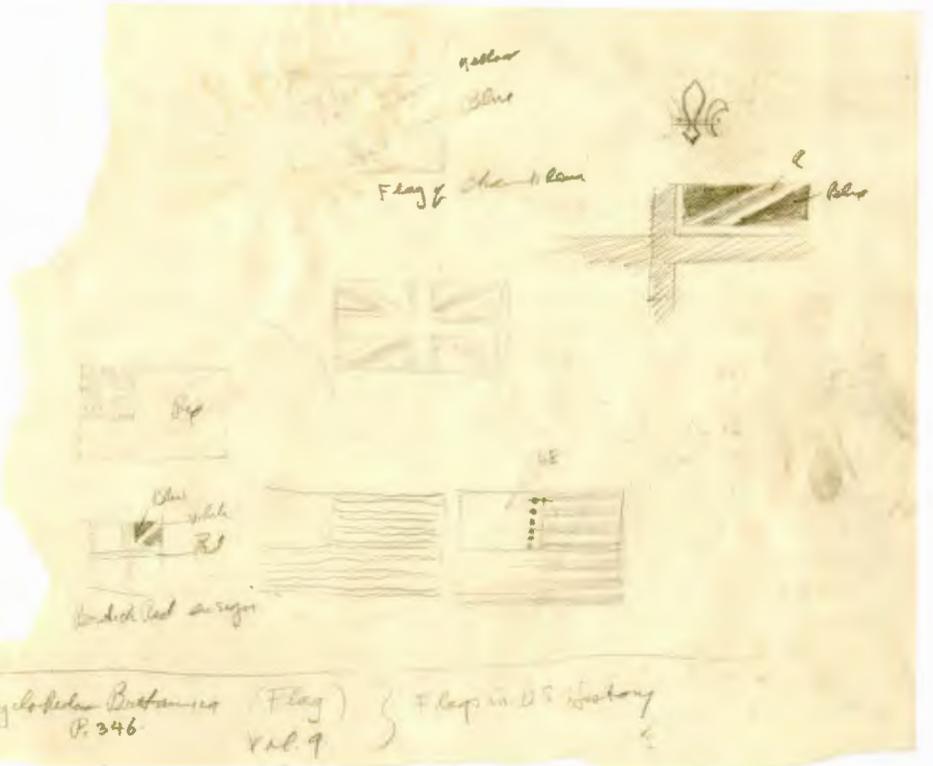
Paul noted that the images of hands across the breadth of the mural—gesturing, praying, working, holding a diploma—became one of the unifying images of his composition. He also used Vermont's incomparable countryside in mini-landscapes sprinkled throughout the mural. The frozen landscapes into which the settlers find their way, the lake scenes of Champlain's discovery and the steamship, various farm scenes, and mountain scenery behind a little rural school all attest to the artist's affection for the Vermont countryside.



This photograph of Paul Sample at work, taken some 56 years ago, gives one a perspective of the incredible size of Paul's mural, and the staggering amount of work he put into its creation.



Many of Paul's preliminary sketches attest to the level of detail he sought; when it came to human figures, he used several people (including some from the Norwich, VT and Hanover, NH area) for models, as well as his son, who posed for Paul dressed in 1700s garb.





Paul and Deane Davis (later to become Vermont's 74th governor in 1969) inspect the mural at National Life headquarters in Montpelier.

The final panel concludes the story with a haying scene and an agricultural fair (a combination, according to the artist, of impressions from the Tunbridge, Barton, and Caledonia county fairs) juxtaposed with skiing, more high-tech items, an American flag and, finally, a college graduation. Progress will continue to be made, the artist seems to be telling us, through education.

Paul painted the mural in his studio at Dartmouth and then rolled up the individual panels and brought them to Montpelier, where they were installed in the National Life lobby. The same process was employed last winter to transfer the painting from National Life to the VHS museum.

In a letter written in 1962, Paul identified several of his models for the individuals, objects, and buildings in the painting. A Dartmouth student, he said, posed in costume for the figure of Champlain and his companion. Three young girls from the Episcopal Church in Norwich were models for a church choir in the painting, while a Mrs. Robertson, also from Norwich, was the model for the painting's church organist. Paul used his own son, Tim, for several figures in the work, including Dr. Dewey, the National Life founder.

"I rigged him up in boots, frock coat, and a top hat, and we saddled up my gray hunter so he could sit astride while I made my drawings," Paul wrote. "The fact that Tim looked in no way like old Dr. Dewey, nor my horse like...Dr. Dewey's horse made no difference."

Paul Sample ended his painting's story, of necessity, in the mid-20th century. VHS Executive Director Steve Perkins not-

ed recently that it is interesting to speculate on what the artist might have included had he painted his mural in our present time, more than a half-century later. The coming of interstate highways, the growth of information technology such as television and the internet, the withering of the machine-tool industry, the changes and problems faced by Vermont agriculture, and other changes continue to transform this small state.

Yet even though some details of Paul's interpretation of contemporary Vermont might be altered, the essence of his vision—a small state progressing into a prosperous future, yet holding on to the best of its rural past—still inspires Vermonters today.

Paul Sample (1896–1974) is an important American artist who has been categorized as both a regionalist and a social realist, yet is perhaps best known to New Englanders as a landscape artist. In fact, his work spanned and to a certain extent combined all three categories.

His best-known paintings—*Church Supper*, *Janitor's Holiday*, and *Beaver Meadow*—portray his New England neighbors in typical social activities, usually in a landscape setting recognizable to anyone who has lived in northern New England. Sometimes his paintings comment wryly, or critically, on the people he represented, but often Paul was content to simply show them deployed in the New England countryside, which he painted as lyrically as any 20th-century artist.

He was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and during his youth, his family moved several times to different parts

of the United States, which gave Paul an appreciation and understanding for the differing landscapes and lifestyles of diverse parts of the country. He entered Dartmouth College in 1916 where he was, by most accounts, an indifferent student. He slept through his art history classes, it is said, focusing his energies on sports and music.

In 1921, he contracted tuberculosis and spent four years recovering in the Adirondacks in upstate New York. There he became a student of the Norwegian-American impressionist painter Jonas Lie and began to develop his talents as an artist. He later studied at Greenleaf Art School in New York City and Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles.

In 1926, he became a faculty member at the University of Southern California School of Architecture and began showing his paintings in prestigious galleries and accepting commissions as an illustrator for *Fortune* magazine. In 1934, *Time* magazine named him one of America's most important living painters, and in 1937, The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased *Janitor's Holiday*.

Stylistically, Paul Sample remained a realist throughout his life. Because he never painted in the prevailing abstract expressionist style, after World War II his work fell out of fashion. Nevertheless, he continued to use his exquisite skill as a draftsman and his fine painterly technique to produce important works of art until his death in 1974. ▀

Tom Slayton is a writer and editor who lives in Montpelier, VT.

## JUST THE FACTS

### Vermont History Museum

109 State St., Montpelier, VT 05602  
Call (802) 828-2291 or visit  
[vermonthistory.org](http://vermonthistory.org).

### Vermont Heritage Galleries at the Vermont History Center

60 Washington St., Barre, VT 05641  
Call (802) 479-8500 or visit  
[vermonthistory.org](http://vermonthistory.org).

Galleries are generally open  
Monday–Friday, 9:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

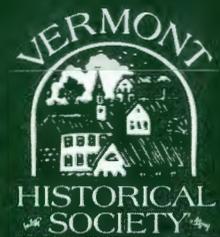
# - THE NEXT CHAPTER OF - VERMONT'S STORY

is about you.

Vermont History Museum

*Share. Connect. Discover.*

.....  
[vermonthistory.org](http://vermonthistory.org)



## Carolyn Bates PHOTOGRAPHY



Wheel Pad by  
LineSync Architecture

[www.CarolynBates.com](http://www.CarolynBates.com)