

The Journal

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THE MARVIN PAINTINGS

James Ormsbee Chapin



Fox Hunter, James Ormsbee Chapin, (1926). Courtesy of the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ

James Chapin and the Marvin Farm

My Grandfather

-Harry Chapin

My grandfather was a painter. He died at age 88. He illustrated Robert Frost's first two books of poetry. And he was looking at me and he said, "Harry, there's two kinds of tired. There's good tired and there's bad tired."

He said, "Ironically enough, bad tired can be a day that you won. But you won other people's battles, you lived other people's days, other people's agendas, other people's dreams, and when it's all over there was very little you in there. And when you hit the hay at night somehow you toss and turn, you don't settle easy."

He said, "Good tired, ironically enough, can be a day that you lost. But you won't even have to tell

yourself, because you knew you fought your battles, you chased your dreams, you lived your days. And when you hit the hay at night, you settle easy, you sleep the sleep of the just, and you can say, 'Take me away.' "

He said, "Harry, all my life I've wanted to be a painter and I've painted. God, I would have loved to have been more successful, but I've painted, and I've painted, and I am good tired, and they can take me away."

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One hundred years ago, in June 1924, a fair-haired artist stepped off the train at a station named Stillwater, a rural village in northwestern New Jersey. He liked the name of the town. Divorced, disillusioned, and broke, James Ormsbee Chapin, age 37, needed to start a new life—a cheap one—so he could continue to paint.

He found lodging for \$4 a month in a cabin owned by the Marvin family in nearby Middleville. No plumbing, electricity, or heat, but he stayed for five years. During this time he would create a series of portraits of the Marvin family that, almost overnight, would launch him to the top of the art world.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

James Ormsbee Chapin was born in 1887 in West Orange, NJ. A shy boy, an avid reader, and a loner, he enjoyed canoeing up the Passaic River by himself and sketching scenes. His stutter made him reticent when in a group, but he was a keen observer of others and developed a gift for expressing himself visually.

Against his parents' wishes, he dropped out of school at 16 and went to work as a bank messenger in New York City while taking night classes in drawing at Cooper Union and the Art Students League. When Chapin was 22, he borrowed money from an uncle and headed to Belgium to study at the Royal Academy in Antwerp, which was

tuition-free for those talented enough to be accepted. He distinguished himself as an award-winning student while living a frugal existence. He traveled to Paris and studied the paintings of the French Impressionists.

Chapin returned to the U.S. in 1912 to pay off his debts, taking on commercial work in New York. Eventually hired by the publisher Henry Holt, he was assigned to design and illustrate the re-publication of a Robert Frost poetry collection entitled *North of Boston*. Frost, whose poems celebrated the joys and challenges of rural life, became an important mentor and friend to the younger Chapin, who during his lifetime painted two portraits of the great American poet laureate.

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In 1918 Chapin married Abigail Beal Forbes, his high school teacher. The following year Abby gave birth to a son, Jim Chapin, who became a celebrated jazz drummer and educator. Jim Chapin and his wife Elspeth Burke produced a trio of singer songwriters, the first being Harry Chapin (“Cat’s in the Cradle”) who died in 1981 in a tragic car accident. Brothers Tom Chapin and Stephen Chapin are active in the music world today and are the elders of a burgeoning clan of talented musicians.

While the Chapin progeny flourished, the marriage did not. Shortly after the birth of Jim, the couple divorced, sending the painter on a downward spiral of loss and disappointment. The failure of his marriage was followed by the deaths of his father and his younger brother Elliott. The final blow was the discouraging response to his solo exhibition in New York in 1924, dashing his hopes of supporting himself as a full-time artist. Chapin felt he had no more to lose—no family or funds and no future.

Yet he still had his friend Robert Frost. Inspired by the poet’s ability to renew his creative spirit by carving out a simple lifestyle in the countryside, Chapin envisaged a sanctuary in the wilds where he could live on a shoestring and paint whatever he wanted. Finding the Marvin farm made this dream a reality.

The Middle of Nowhere

The Marvins’ Dutch ancestors had come to America in the 1600s. The farm in Middletown, NJ, was one of several in Sussex County owned by the prosperous Henry Marvin. Henry, who was born in 1771 in Peters Valley, donated land for the Old Dutch Reformed Church and cemetery in 1825. The Marvin family began farming in Middletown before the Civil War when the tiny town was called Gin Point. It offered the services of a general store, a post office, a blacksmith shop, and a tavern, the Mountain Brook House, where a century later Chapin would become a regular customer. The tavern building stands

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today and is now a popular restaurant called the Hyde-Away.

When James Chapin arrived in Middleville, a community within Stillwater, three of Henry Marvin's great-grandchildren were running the farm. Ella was 58 and unmarried; her brother George, 44, was a widower with three children; and Emmett, 41, was single. These siblings would become the subjects of the first of Chapin's acclaimed portraits.

Chapin spent the first several months exploring the farm and sketching scenes such as *Man Sharpening a Scythe* (1924), now in the Newark Museum of Art, and *Willows and Farm Buildings* (1924), acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

These images, so quickly rendered, delighted the Marvins. Chapin soon joined them at work, chopping wood, harvesting vegetables, and shoveling manure. Over time, the artist came to understand their lives, their personalities, and their quirks. He discovered a distinctive beauty in their physical gestures, a formality in their movements. Their body postures, carriage, and gait expressed dignity and pride.

The second year at the farm, he began to work on their portraits. Ella was the first to agree to sit for the artist, and the others soon followed. Chapin wrote in his journal that they all seemed to enjoy the companionship, the conversation, and the escape from their tedious routines. With five portraits completed in 1925 and 1926, Chapin was ready to display his new work.

The paintings caused a stir in New York in the late 1920s. The Marvins, solemn and dignified, dressed in simple work clothes, sit in an austere setting with bare walls. They look you straight in the eye and hold your gaze. Their outsized hands show years of hard work and exposure to the elements.

The public response to the portraits was emotional. In stark contrast to the frivolity and extravagance of the Roaring Twenties, the Marvins stood as a reminder of the country's bedrock values of hard work, honesty, frugality, and self-reliance. One critic described them as "authentic and unvarnished." Past paintings of farm life had idealized and romanticized farmers, not as individuals, but as generic "men of the soil."

The Marvins, in contrast, were real people, and Chapin used their names as titles of the paintings. The portraits reveal the special relationship between artist and subject and show Chapin's understanding, respect, and admiration. The Marvins' trust in the artist is palpable despite their stern expressions.

The Marvin family paintings represent only a thin slice

of the artist's vast body of work. They were the starting point, however, of what became Chapin's artistic mission. He was attracted to subjects he viewed as misunderstood or as missing from the canon of American art. His ever-growing body of work depicted ordinary Americans, including lumbermen, road workers, baseball players, musicians, fishermen, and actresses.

While still living on the Marvin farm, he began to create portraits of prominent African Americans and earned a reputation among Black art critics for his profound, sensitive portrayals. In *Ruby Green Singing* (1928), Chapin captures a deeply spiritual moment during a performance by a nineteen-year-old contralto. Ruby Green went on to perform on Broadway and to work with leading musical stars of the day. Today, her portrait appears in school textbooks, and the painting itself hangs in the Norton Museum of Art in Florida.

Life Beyond Sussex County

The years Chapin spent on the Marvin farm transformed his artistic style and launched his career, but by early 1929, he sought new inspiration. Months before the Wall Street Crash in October, he left Middleville to spend time living and painting in a laundry truck, driving up and down the New England coast in search of new subjects. When he returned to New York, he lived in Greenwich Village, expanding his diverse repertoire of American portraits during a time in history that left many unemployed and impoverished.

Ironically, amid the suffering of this period, Chapin's career exploded. In 1932 alone, he had eight solo exhibitions, and during the 1930s, he took part in group shows at more than 20 museums. His works were bought by celebrities such as George Gershwin and John D. Rockefeller.

The Marvin family, with their look of unrelenting determination, gave Americans hope in the future. They symbolized resilience against adversity and the inevitable triumph of the American spirit.

At the peak of his career, in 1940, Chapin was given a Retrospective Exhibition by the Associated American Artists of New York City. Grant Wood, painter of the iconic *American Gothic*, had become a good friend and wrote the introduction for Chapin's exhibition. Wood pointed to the "infinite human sympathy" that came across in all of Chapin's portraits, describing the paintings of the Marvin family as "the best thing in American art, strong and solid as boulders."

Family Time on the Chapin Farm

Success brought new opportunities. During the 1930s, James Chapin was invited to teach portraiture at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and he accepted a summer teaching job at Claremont College in California. It was there that he met Mary Fischer who



became his second wife. They bought a pre-Revolutionary farmhouse in Hunterdon County in New Jersey and settled into a domestic lifestyle.

Their first son, Elliott, was born in 1942, and his brother Jed arrived two years later. Their birthdates matched those of Chapin's first two grandchildren, Harry and Tom, making the four boys a well-matched gang for shared adventures. They met up on the Chapin farm every vacation.

Tom Chapin, now 70, remembers spending summers in New Jersey from the age of 8. In a recent interview, he shared his memories of visiting his grandfather.

"I thought he was magic," the musician explained, remembering the awe he felt while watching him paint,

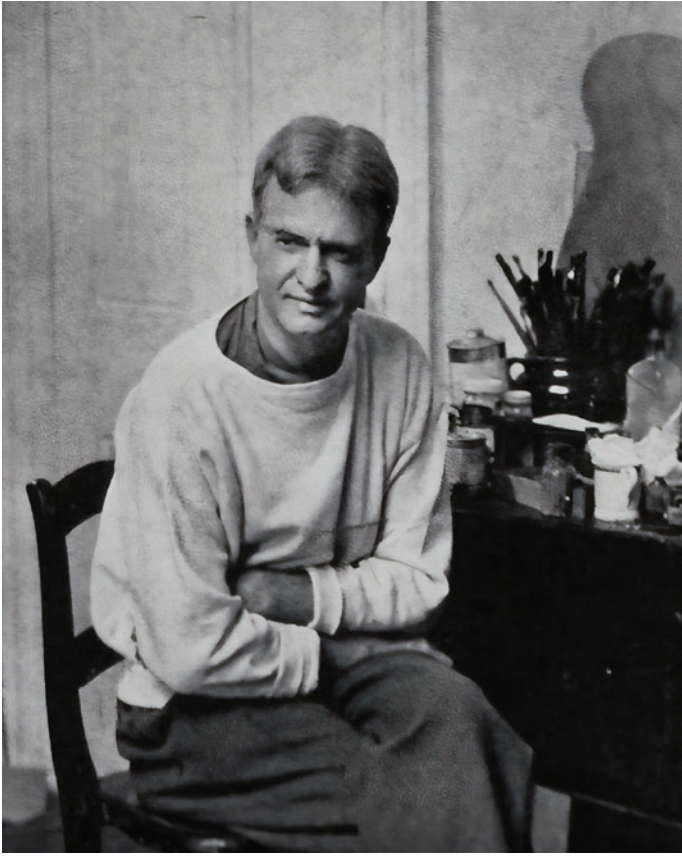
faces slowly emerging on the canvas. "He painted *all the time*," Tom emphasized, but he didn't mind when the four little boys stopped their games to visit him in his barn studio. The artist would pause and chat briefly with them before turning back to his work. The boys would then sit in silence for a while, waiting to see what would appear on the canvas.

"Big Jim" was what everyone in the family called him since he was the father of the younger Jim Chapin. Tom adored his grandfather. He describes him as "gentle and soft-spoken. Every time I saw him it was a lovely surprise."

Big Jim was also a fine tennis player who taught all the Chapin children to play on their homemade clay court on the farm. Tom remembers sitting in the back of his

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James Chapin in his studio, 1940. Robert Schluter Archive



grandfather's car on the way home from the U.S. National tennis tournament in Forest Hills, NY. Then a choir boy in a Brooklyn church, little Tom unexpectedly broke into song, as small children are apt to do. His grandfather's joy and amazement at this spontaneous and passionate performance remains fresh in Tom's memory, seventy years later.

"He was the most positive male in my life," Tom puts it simply, "the one who encouraged me and gave me pride."

Commercial Break

Meanwhile, the Marvin paintings had won the attention of the commercial world that recognized the power of Chapin's depictions of ordinary people. He was offered lucrative commissions, which brought financial security for his growing family. In the 1940s, he painted promotional images for John Ford's film *The Long Journey Home* and designed advertisements for coffee and tobacco, creating down-to-earth characters to endorse the products.

The artist returned to portraiture in the 1950s when *TIME* magazine commissioned him to design a series of covers featuring the most important political and cultural figures of the day. These included Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, baseball star Birdie Tebbets, and writer Boris Pasternak (*Dr. Zhivago*). Some critics thought these portraits represented Chapin's best work, with their favorite being a depiction of artist Edward Hopper. The two artists, both loners, developed a true

friendship cultivated by conversations shared during the many hours of sitting required by Chapin.

Final Reunion with the Marvins

James Chapin's countless paintings clearly illustrate the artist's need to present a new perspective on members of society who are unrecognized, misunderstood, or exploited. He also viewed war from this angle and denounced it as an arena of social injustice that preyed upon the poor. Throughout the 1960s, Chapin openly opposed the war in Vietnam. He voiced his position through a series of deeply disturbing paintings that depicted the inequities and horrors of war and condemned those with decision-making power. In 1969 he moved to Toronto, Canada, and became a Canadian citizen five years later. He died in Toronto in 1975, at the age of 88, and is buried there.

The year before the artist passed away, the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton presented an exhibition of 55 paintings entitled "James Chapin: A Retrospective." Prominent among the works were the five portraits of the Marvin family, which for decades had been in the collections of four different museums. It was a rare family reunion after many years of separation.

On the occasion of the retrospective, Chapin donated the six-foot-tall painting *Marvin Family* to the New Jersey State Museum. After the exhibition, the four other Marvin portraits went their separate ways. The paintings Chapin deemed his "masterworks" now reside in the company of masterpieces by leading artists from around the world.

Ella, Emmett, and George Marvin represented the last generation to farm the plot in Middleville. By 1964, they had all passed, and their descendants had left the county. The property was sold in the 1970s and is unrecognizable today; the hundred-some acres have been broken up into a puzzle of small residential lots.

James Chapin knew he had entered a vanishing world when he painted the Marvins. With artistic virtuosity and human affection, he captured a way of life that might have disappeared unnoticed. The solemn, proud faces of the Marvins have been preserved for posterity and enshrined in some of the greatest museums in America.

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