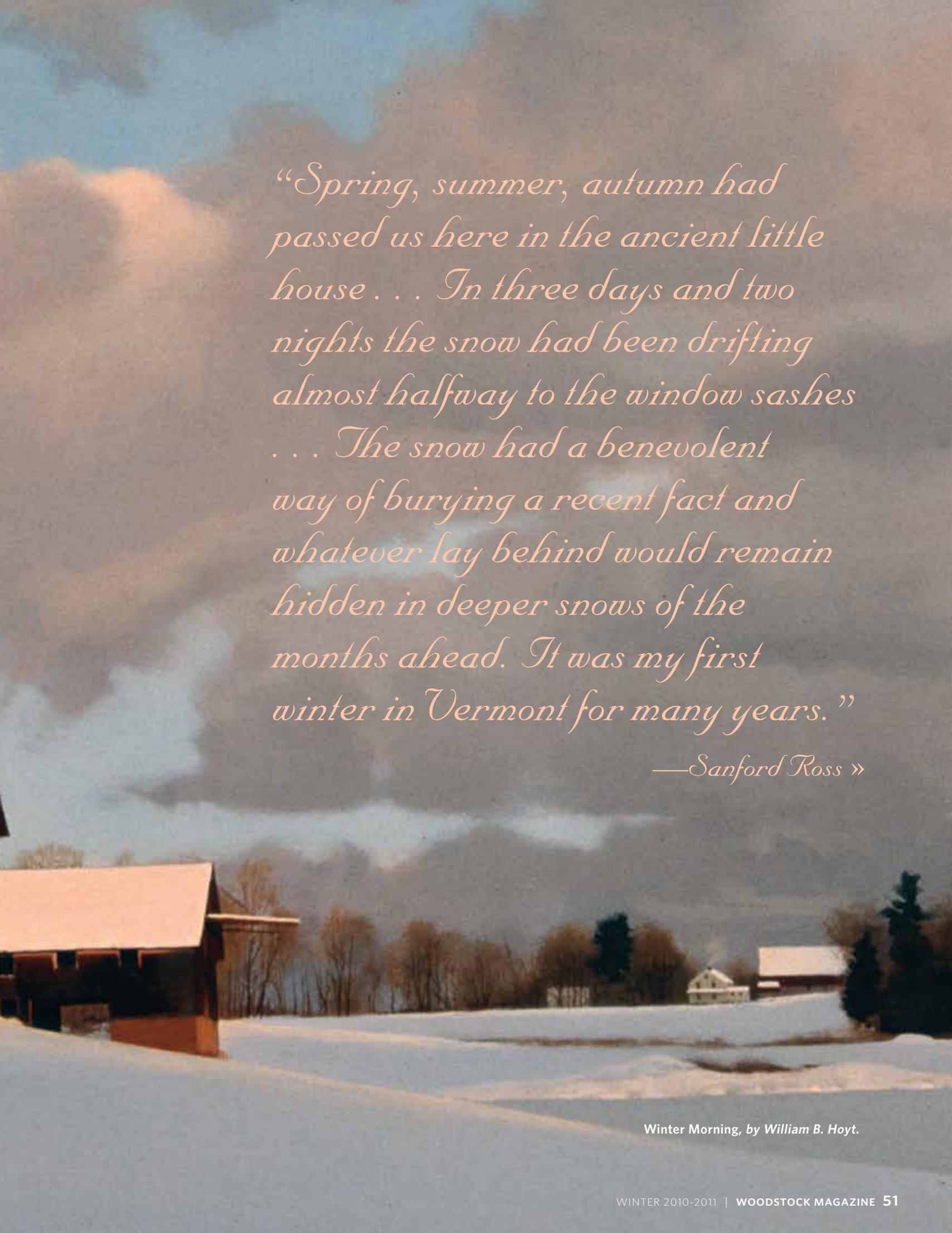


Uncommon Views

VERMONT LANDSCAPE
INSPIRES THREE ARTISTS

BY SARA WIDNESS



“Spring, summer, autumn had passed us here in the ancient little house . . . In three days and two nights the snow had been drifting almost halfway to the window sashes . . . The snow had a benevolent way of burying a recent fact and whatever lay behind would remain hidden in deeper snows of the months ahead. It was my first winter in Vermont for many years.”

—Sanford Ross »

Winter Morning, by William B. Hoyt.



This is a thumb-nail sketch of three artists drawing inspiration from a landscape that begins to caress the heart on Route 12 north out of Woodstock, a landscape that creates a near lover’s frenzy as it snuggles into Silver Lake and climbs from the hollows to Pomfret before stretching over to East Barnard or floating below Cloudland Road. The works of Sanford Ross (1907–1954), William B. Hoyt (1945–present), and Sabra Field (1935–present) reflect a locale that has been their home and sometimes muse.

Even without an art history course under your belt, if you’ve wandered through museums or pored over coffee table art books, the dots connect. “Aha,” you say, peering from a bell tower in

Title, by Sanford Ross.

Italy. “I’ve seen vistas like this before. Now which artist was it?” If you’ve visited the setting of Barnard’s Lakota Club,



Title, by Sanford Ross.

you may recognize this lakescape as uncannily resembling the 19th-century Hudson River School of painting. Artists who delve into landscapes often embellish what they see around them; or, reflected poet Alexander Pope, “True wit is nature to advantage dressed, What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed ...

ROSS CAPTURES THE “FEELING” OF VERMONT

These artists have dressed Barnard and environs again and again to expressive advantage. Take for example, Sanford Ross. While circulating amongst a community of prominent artists in Manhattan, he also moved in Dorothy Thompson’s circles in the 1940s, the halcyon days at Twin Farms. “When he got married and settled down, that was when his love affair began with Vermont and with Barnard,” said his stepdaughter, Nina Patterson. During the war he moved his family to Barnard.

In his unpublished novel, Ross wrote: “Here there were nature’s mysteries come back to me after years in New York, here I could see the seasons really change . . . and here I could watch the wonders of growth. . . . I had been removed too far and

too long from the strings of the deep country and from my associations with natural reality which had been so close to me long ago. Violence, from which I had claimed immunity, had left its scars, but perhaps life could begin all over again, and this was as good a time as any. It would be my second beginning.”

“I think he fell in love with Vermont, with the beauty of Vermont,” said Patterson. “He was aware of the passing of the old farm culture and the beauty of that and he wanted to record that with his paintings. That’s really why he stayed.” She remembered that her stepfather, who studied, among others, under Thomas Hart Benton, would drive over the Vermont countryside taking photographs and using those for his paintings. “One of the things about his paintings, he really captures the skies and the whole natural feeling of Vermont. I think that was what interested him the most. The Vermont he saw was not prettified or quaint, which speaks to me having grown up there in that tiny, drafty house through all the seasons,” Patterson said.

Ross wrote of the Barnard group of his time “as being my kind—a community that had earned the reputation



Title, by Sanford Ross.



for being more bizarre and still representing more ability than any comparable cliques of artists in the county. They were closely knit by political beliefs and I suppose it was the bond in our professions.”

Another artist in the Ross circle was William James, related to William James, the father of psychology, and author Henry James. He lived in Pomfret just past the Teago General store and did a portrait of Ross’s wife, Patterson’s mother.

HOYT’S SILVER LAKE INSPIRATION

William B. Hoyt, a full-time artist since the mid 1970s, at one time lived and worked in the studio on the Ross prop-

erty. About Ross’s work Hoyt said, “I remember a lot of watercolors. He was attracted to bare trees, things that reflected in rain. Those images stand out as representative of his work.” While Hoyt never met Ross, he did know Winona Chickering, a sister of Ross and whose son Roger was a school friend. Hoyt’s artist-mother did a portrait of Chickering. Though too young to be part of the Dorothy Thompson scene, Hoyt is a link to that world and the artistic circle that followed.

Artist Rockwell Kent (1882–1971) lived in an old cape with a barn and studio on Schoolhouse Hill Road near the Doton Farm in Barnard. Later artist Irwin D. Hoffman (1901–1989) lived in that cape and Hoyt was a friend of



Cider Apples, by William B. Hoyt.

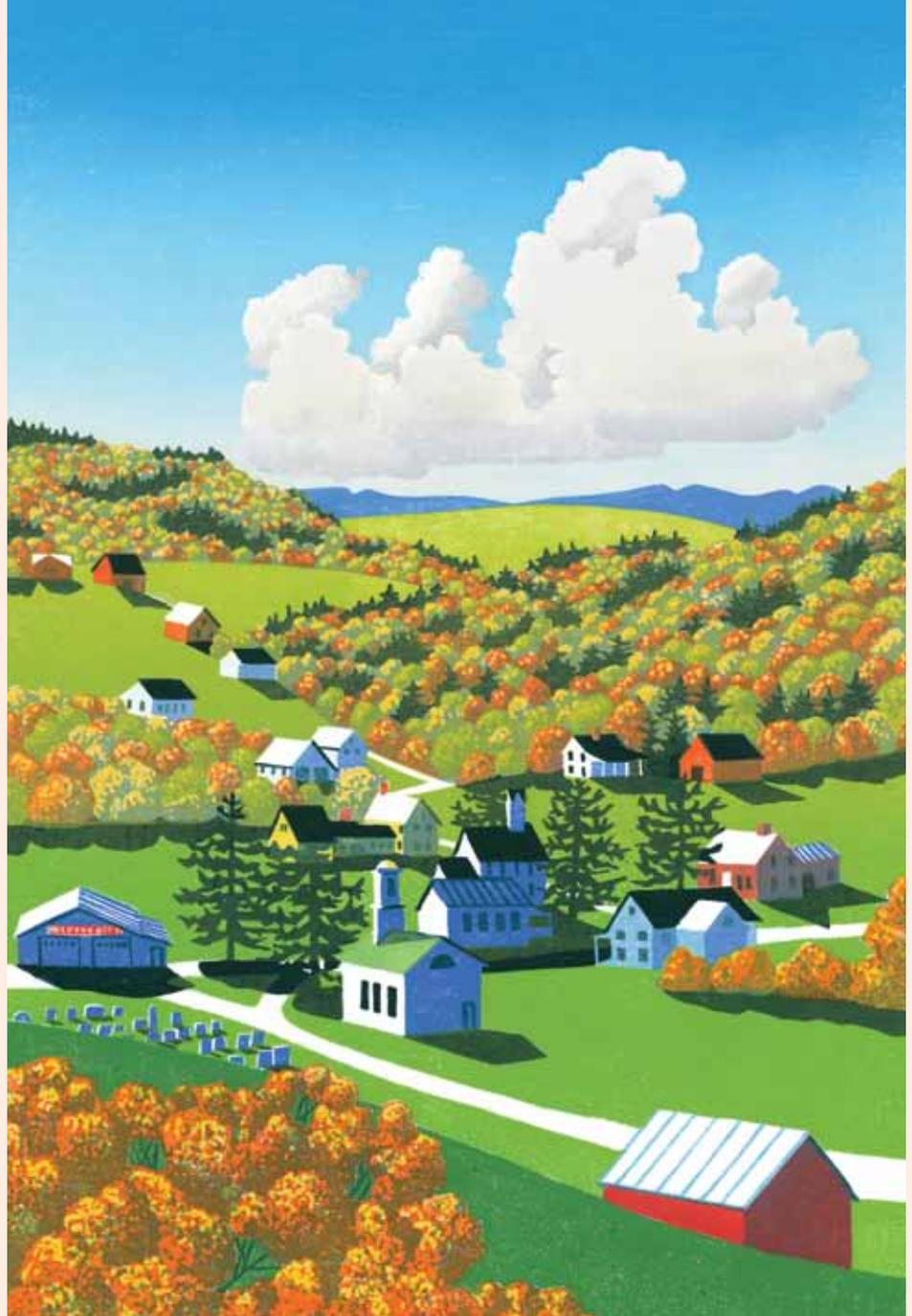


Barn on North Road, by William B. Hoyt.

Hoffman. Hoyt remembers that Hoffman was “very ambitious. His works reminded me of socialist realism.” “Hoffman didn’t have any children; I think he was looking to make us (Hoyt’s wife and daughter) his children. He actually was going to give us some land to build on. We had built a platform on the land and spent a summer there.”

As Dorothy Thompson’s social group faded, a second wave of artists earned the patronage of Barnard summer resident Lolo Sarnoff, said Hoyt. Along with Charlotte Davenport, this area’s doyenne of sculpture, “six or seven of us would meet pretty regularly and hire a model or pose for one another. We were the Barnard Art Clinic. We had a little platform we’d stick the model up on—whoever got chosen. We would invite people over for dinner and then make them pose,” recalled Hoyt. His first wife, Pamela Bryan, and Hope Cannon of Woodstock were two of the models. “I was painting from locale. I would spend a lot of time at the beach at Silver Lake. I drew and drew—paintings of people swimming and beach activities and driving around the area—farmyard scenes, animals, the Tunbridge Fair, the Lewis farm on Route 12,” he said.

Not even winter stopped Hoyt. He designed a series of fold-up boxes backpacked to frozen Silver Lake where the boxes transformed



Leaf Light, by Sabra Field.

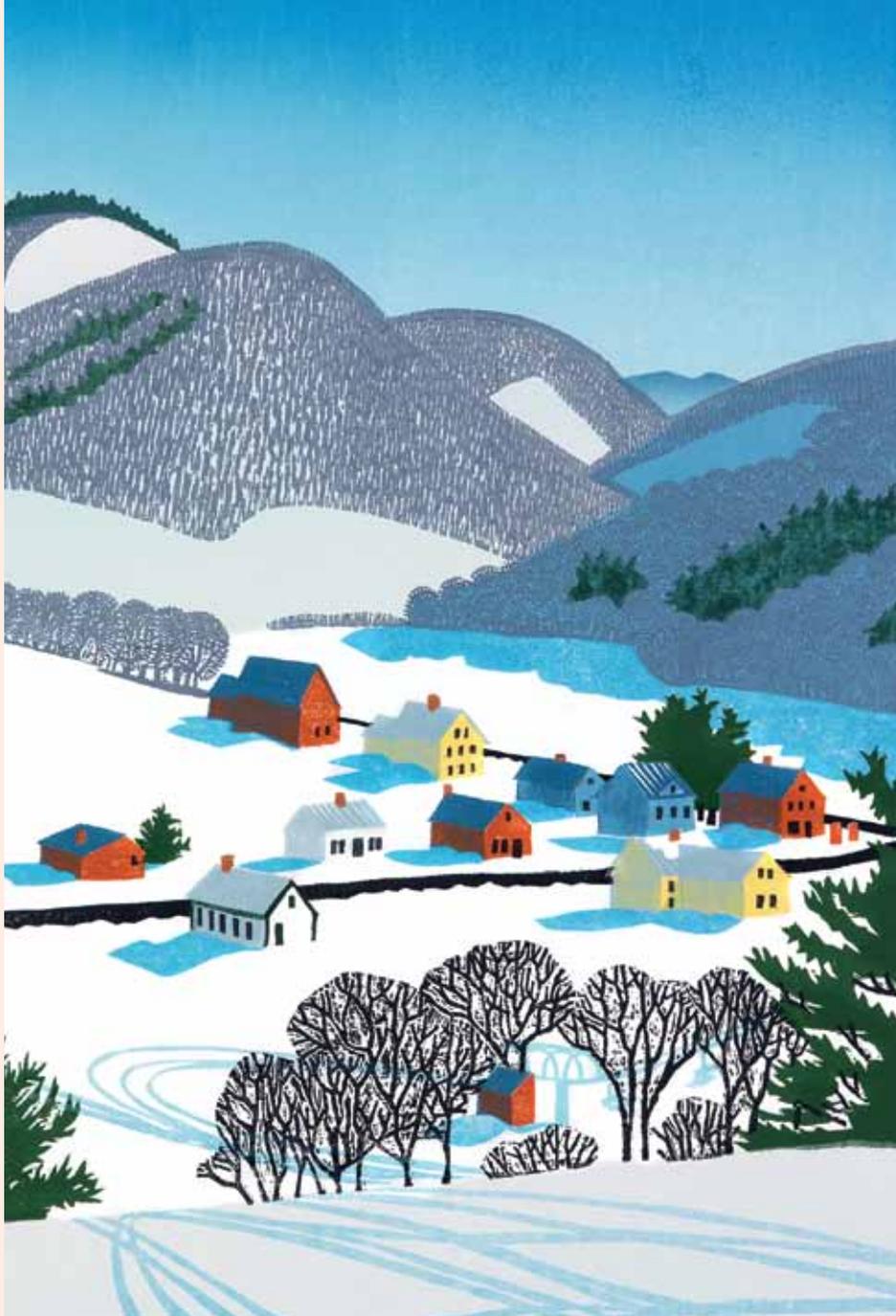
into a small hut with a plastic window and kerosene stove where he would paint. “I painted in that quite frequently. It might be 18 degrees below zero with about a 30-knot wind, snow flying. I would sit cross-legged with the little camp stove. It was a lot of fun and very challenging. I took great pleasure wandering around in the wintertime doing watercolors in it,” he said. “It’s the scale of landscape. I love the lake, walking up from the house with the evening light hitting on the far side of hill. In different seasons that was always inspiring.”

Over the years Hoyt’s work moved beyond this locale. With East Barnard artist and friend Sabra Field and their

spouses, Hoyt traveled a few years ago to a region in Italy’s Apennines of familiar human scale and intimacy.

EAST BARNARD NATIVE SABRA FIELD

Sabra Field moved to East Barnard in 1967. She knew of Sanford Ross after meeting his granddaughter who summured in Barnard. “Barnard is not so much the point as East Barnard, my home town,” said Field. “I am very fond of the sort of small-scale landscapes of this land of high horizons as opposed, say, to the Champlain Valley. Our area that is accessible only by dirt roads still has an intimate scale that we are very fortunate to have. It still



Snow Light, by Sabra Field.

has an agricultural base that provides a backdrop; instead of being a tunnel of trees we have vistas. We also have a housing and agricultural building stock, which has a unity of style and scale and function. I think we are very fortunate to have that.”

Field explained that she was in her mid 30s before moving to Vermont and had been living in a place “where the landscape wasn’t very interesting. When I got here I was very challenged by the ups and downs, the high sky-lines, and the changing points of view as you walk and ride and ski.”

In part because of the landscape, her work changed. This change can be seen in the woodcuts that secured her

reputation here and elsewhere. “I got better at it. I was able to depict more things that had greater challenges.

I learned how to make proscenium drops and start penetrating space in a more sophisticated way. I always want large resting places. But it has been a challenge and a joy to learn how to show shadows and light from different directions and surfaces of various sorts. It took me a while to learn to do the tassels of corn, for instance. For a long time I couldn’t figure out how to do nighttime. I had forgotten how hard that was,” she says. “I love the pastoral landscape. I find it a metaphor for many things and charming in and of itself.” 