

Francis Hamabe's Maine: A Life in Art

Carl Little

Guest Curator

In coming up with a title for this summer's show, the Castine Historical Society's curatorial team—Kate McMahon, Jules Thompson and I—batted around a bunch of defining words. We considered, for example, “legend.” By all accounts, Francis Hamabe (1917-2002) earned that designation as a brilliant artist and an all-giving friend and teacher to so many. “Legacy” also came up, but seemed a bit heavy-handed. I think Hamabe might have found both terms highfalutin.

We wanted to recognize the amazing multi-faceted nature of Hamabe's art: paintings, prints, puppets, pottery, etc. One idea: *A Man for All Media*, playing on the title of a famous 1960s movie *A Man for All Seasons*. Too clever by half...

Maine played a central role in our deliberations. The Orange, New Jersey-born artist called the greater Blue Hill Peninsula his home for much of his life and place meant everything to him. As he once stated, “You can find anything you want here. For an artist, it is one of the most inspirational states in the country.”

Considering these various parameters, we settled on *Francis Hamabe's Maine: A Life in Art*. There you have it: the man, Maine, and an amazing lifelong devotion to creativity.

The exhibition represents a mini-retrospective of a highly productive artist; one could easily devote an entire show and then some to any one of Hamabe's artistic pursuits. That said, we tried to provide as full an accounting of his wide-ranging output as the space allowed.

Hamabe was especially prolific in the graphic arts, designing everything from notecards to signage. The show features an assortment of this work, including his renowned and prized screenprint posters of Maine and its villages. About those prints, artist and Maine art trailblazer Mildred Burrage (1890-1983) observed, “They bring the flavor of our coast, its magic, its weather, and they do it by extraordinarily simple means.”

Considering the venue for the show, we wanted to highlight Hamabe's connections to Castine. The artist led workshops here, painted various motifs, and made several castinehistoricalsociety.org



screen prints highlighting its coastal setting.

As we sought out materials for the show, collectors came forth, including many Castiners. Not only did they have Hamabes to share, they also offered work by some of his students. The latter paintings reflect his influence, but also his ability to bring out the artist in the amateur.

We owe special thanks to the Blue Hill Library, which loaned us several key pieces, including one of its true treasures, the circus painting *Flying Wallendas*, among Hamabe's largest works. The library is an outstanding steward of the artist's archives, donated by his widow, Phyllis Hamabe (1923-2016), and organized by Karen Wyatt and the library staff. We had fun looking through the materials, but also found it daunting: so much from which to choose!

Another special thank-you goes to Jennifer Mitchell who is working on a catalogue raisonné of the artist's work, no small task considering Hamabe was prolific for much of his life. Mitchell represents the artist's estate and has promoted his work for many decades. Our visit to her home and shop in Blue Hill was one of the high points of the hunting and gathering. We came away with several works for the show, including one of his stunning Japanese sumi ink abstractions.

While practicing an array of art forms, Hamabe played a key role in the creation of several major Maine institutions. He was the first art instructor at the Farnsworth Art Museum, the first art director of *Down East* magazine, the art and staging director for Maine's first public television station in Orono, and a founding member of Maine Coast Artists, which became the Center for Maine Contemporary Art and will be celebrating its 75th anniversary next year. I guess “legacy” is an appropriate descriptor after all.

Francis Hamabe’s Maine: A Life in Art

“Francis Hamabe’s Maine: A Life in Art” has personal resonance. Hamabe and my uncle, the painter William Kienbusch (1914-1980), were like brothers. Uncle Bill visited Frank and his first wife, Sydney, in their South Blue Hill home many times in the 1950s and ‘60s and the two men frequently corresponded, sharing news of their lives.

When I moved to Maine in 1989, Hamabe took me under his wing and introduced me to several of his friends, including the legendary University of Maine professor and painter Vincent Hartgen (1914-2002) and Jane Crowell Morse (1922-2011), an authority of Beatrix Potter and widow of a favorite poet, Samuel French Morse (1916-1985).

Hamabe was also generous with his art. When I admired a print/collage of a blueberry rake on a visit to his home, he gave it to me. My brother David also received a gift, the night harbor silkscreen in the show. Hamabe’s chart print of the Cranberry Isles, inherited from Uncle Bill, served as the “Save the Date” card for my daughter Emily’s wedding.

I sought opportunities to write about Hamabe and exhibit his work. His art delighted me, from whimsical Christmas cards to the quintessential renderings of the Maine coast. His work also surprised me. For a show at the Ethel H. Blum Gallery at College of the Atlantic in 1999, he arrived with a group of recent abstract collages bearing titles like Counterpoint, Arabesque, and Rhythm Section.

When Phyllis Hamabe approached me about writing a book about her late husband, I leapt at the chance. We were fortunate to be able to entice Karin Wilkes at Courthouse Gallery Fine Art to design and produce the monograph. It is among my most cherished publications.



A classic canvas tote featuring a plethora of Hamabe’s cat drawings

I thank former Castine Historical Society Director, Lisa Simpson Lutts, for getting the Hamabe show ball rolling and Kate, Jules, and graphic designer Mina Cheong for making it happen. A special nod to Kate, who mastered a new exhibition design software called SketchUp. As we considered the layout, she employed this program to show the individual pieces in their places in a manner that brought extra clarity to the process.

With this exhibition, I foresee an exponential expansion of the fans of Francis Hamabe. His art is spirited and timeless and expresses a singular love of Maine. We invite you to have a look—and get hooked if you aren’t already.



A classic canvas tote featuring a plethora of Hamabe’s cat drawings

Guest Curator, Carl Little, lives on Mount Desert Island. He is the author of many art books and has an active freelance practice. In 2021, the Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Foundation presented him with a Lifetime Achievement Award for his art writing. He curated the Clark Fitz-Gerald exhibition at the CHS in 2022-2023.



A View from the Common
Executive Director’s Letter

Kate McMahon, Ph.D.

What a year it’s been! I am close to my one-year anniversary as the executive director of the Castine Historical Society, and it has been such an inspiring year.

I am eternally grateful to the staff of the CHS, Mary Durost and Jules Thomson, who have supported me while I transitioned into this new role. I am also deeply in debt to former Executive Director, Lisa Simpson Lutts, and the CHS board, for their support and answering the many questions that I’ve had over this past year.

2025 and early 2026 saw significant change and exciting developments for your historical society. We brought in many collections, including the archives of rusticator cottage Moss Acre, which was owned and loved by Molly Dewson and Polly Porter for many years. We are grateful to the Bourne family for entrusting us with these voluminous archives, which tell such an important story about Castine — and American — history. This winter, we were lucky enough to win an important document at auction, Josiah Hook’s appointment as customs collector for Castine. Signed by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, this document gives us a glimpse of our town’s importance in the early republic as a critical port for maritime trade.

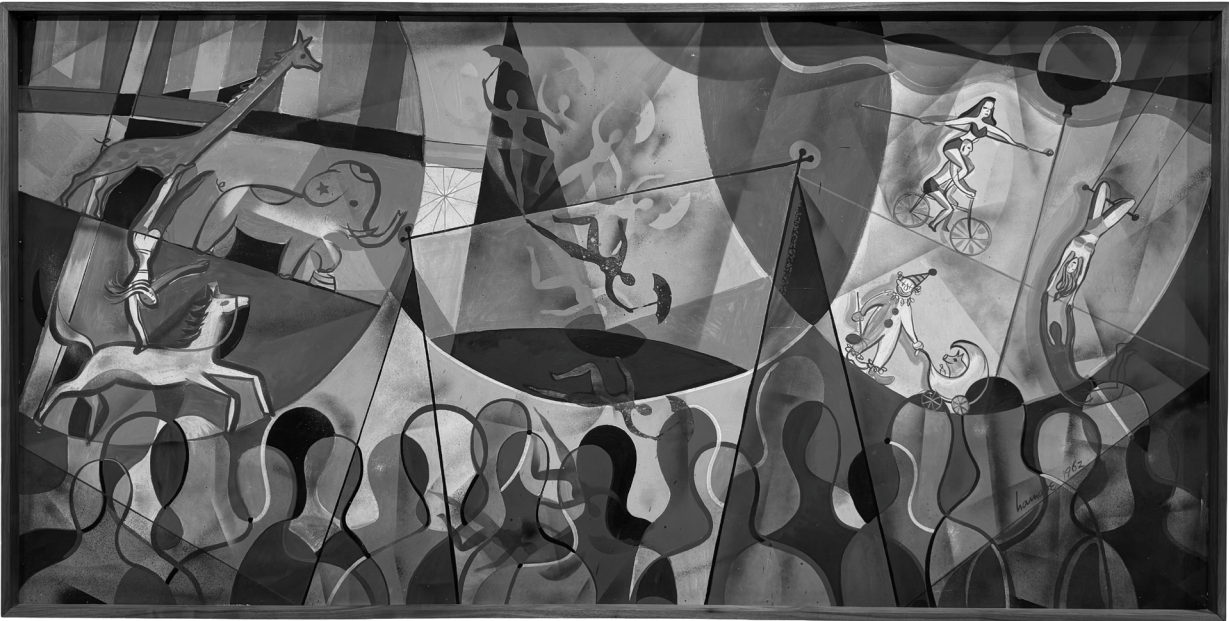
In the fall, we closed out our fantastic 2024 — 2025 exhibition, A History of Castine in 40 Objects. This exhibition drew visitors from around the world to get a slice of Castine’s history through our collections. It was a true success and a testament to the work of the CHS staff,

including Lisa Simpson Lutts, and our Exhibits Committee.

We spent the winter preparing for our 2026 — 2027 exhibition, Francis Hamabe’s Maine: A Life in Art. Curated by critic and curator Carl Little, this exhibition is the first retrospective of Francis Hamabe’s long career as a working artist in Maine. Hamabe was born in New Jersey and moved to Maine just following World War II. He lived and worked in the Blue Hill area for nearly fifty years. He is most well-known as a printmaker, creating town posters from Bucksport to Machias, that evoke the lively, charismatic Maine coast. He was also a painter, sculptor, graphic designer, teacher, and puppeteer. We are thrilled to be able to show more than forty of his works of art, which were all loaned to us, most from private collections. This is a truly community-driven exhibition, and our 2026 programs reflect this, with a focus on bringing all members of the community, both in Castine and beyond, into the CHS this summer.

We are so excited for our 2026 House & Garden Tour on July 24! Offered only every four to six years, this tour will allow visitors to explore twelve incredible Castine homes and three beautiful gardens. This event draws 1,000 people to Castine each time it is offered, and is sure to be an event that cannot be missed!

As always, we are so grateful for the support of our community, and we hope to see you at one of our events this summer.



What's New in the Gift Shop

We often hear people say we have the best gift shop in town and this year it is even better! We strive to offer unique, high-quality items that make good souvenirs or special gifts.

We are excited to show you some of the new products we will be offering this season. Over the winter, the staff sought out new products that will make the perfect gifts for friends, family, or yourself. And best of all, your purchases support the work we do at Castine Historical Society.

Our new exhibition, *Francis Hamabe's Maine: A Life in Art*, provided the inspiration for most of our new products this year. Frank was obsessed with his cats, and his cat doodles look great on our new t-shirts, tote bags, tea towels, and mugs. We have t-shirts, car magnets, notecards, and postcards with Frank's Castine block print. And we now carry art kits and books to allow young and old to channel the inner artist.



A classic canvas tote featuring a plethora of Hamabe's cat drawings

We have added more designs of our small and medium-sized birch wood trays. We continue to carry our navy fleece jackets but have now added a quarter zip pullover option.

Stop by the gift shop during our hours of operation. If you don't live locally or wish to shop when we are closed, you can shop online. Go to our website, castinehistoricalsociety.org, and click on the SHOP button. Your purchases can be shipped directly to you, or you can opt for local pick up.

*And don't forget the **10% member discount** for current members. Just type **MEMBER** in the discount box at checkout and the discount will be applied.*



Navy blue half-zip with CHS logo



Hamabe inspired mugs, postcards, t-shirts and more!

Collections Corner

In February of 2026, with the generous assistance of 14 individual financial contributors, CHS purchased one of our most compelling archival documents to date.

It joins a rarefied batch of early historical material that includes the first town and church records and original maps and letters from the Revolutionary War. On the surface, the new acquisition might not look like much; it's essentially a form letter from 1802 with boilerplate text and blanks filled in by hand. On closer inspection, it's signed by both President Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of State James Madison. It's the official document appointing a man named Josiah Hook as customs collector for the "District of Penobscot" - a geographical region of which Castine comprised the main port.

It's the story, or stories, encapsulated by this record that are particularly thrilling and which we look forward to sharing with the public in future exhibits. For one thing, it evokes Castine's past importance as a federal customs port, one of the main contributors to the town's early prosperity. Although the customs dues themselves were paid to the federal government, the fact that vessels were required to put into port in Castine meant that its economy flourished, paving the way for the once sleepy village to become a mercantile and shipbuilding powerhouse by the mid-19th century.

Josiah Hook's personal story is also fascinating, and includes thrilling incidents of piracy, warfare, murder, corruption, and swashbuckling worthy of an action movie. His tenure as collector also encompassed major political events in U.S. history, such as the Embargo Act and the War of 1812, both of which profoundly affected his life and career.

CHS staff encountered some initial confusion when we began to research Hook, as our access to written resources was quite limited. Eventually, we discovered that there were fewer than four immediate generations of fathers and sons named Josiah, with overlapping life dates. To further confuse matters, the spelling of the surname fluctuated between Hook and Hooke - the Hooke with an 'e' spelling was mainly adopted by Benjamin Hooke Jr., the nephew of the Castine customs collector, and retained by that family into the modern era. Special thanks are owed to former Director Lisa Lutts, who volunteered to untangle the surname spellings, life dates, and various residences of the four Josiahs.

The customs collector appointed by Thomas Jefferson



was the third Josiah of the line of four, Josiah Hook Jr. (1774-1827), who moved to Castine for the position, although his father, Captain Josiah Hook Sr. (1743-1829), was also resident here by 1810, and both are buried in the town cemetery. Josiah Jr. was the second collector for the District of Penobscot, following John Lee who served from 1789-1801.

The role of customs collector was a dynamic and sometimes dangerous one. Other than the collection of duties and the overseeing of staff, collectors also boarded and cleared vessels, tested the proof of alcohol, issued bills of health, and attempted to detect smugglers. They also delegated some of their enforcement activity to private individuals who were authorized, via commissions, to arm a vessel and hire a crew to patrol for and seize smuggled cargo.

The first five years of Hook's tenure were relatively peaceful, but restrictions on trade imposed by Jefferson in 1807 and 1810 led to a spate of smuggling. In 1808, one of Hook's enforcement team, Lazaro Bagodanovich, was murdered by smugglers near Isle Au Haut, in a multi-day saga that included kidnapping, transport of illegal cargo from Bucksport, and finally a dramatic capture on the high seas by Hook and his crew. The offenders were transported to the Castine jail and charged with murder. Weeks later, a heavily armed mob disguised as women stormed the jail and helped the eight prisoners escape. Four were recaptured, and when tried, no witnesses came forward. They were released on a plea of "hung jury."

Then came the War of 1812 in which trade with British vessels was forbidden, and smuggling proliferated once again. Hook was forced to flee Castine before the British occupied the town in 1814. He took the customs records and cash with him and set up a new office in



**Francis
Hamabe's
Maine:**

A Life in Art

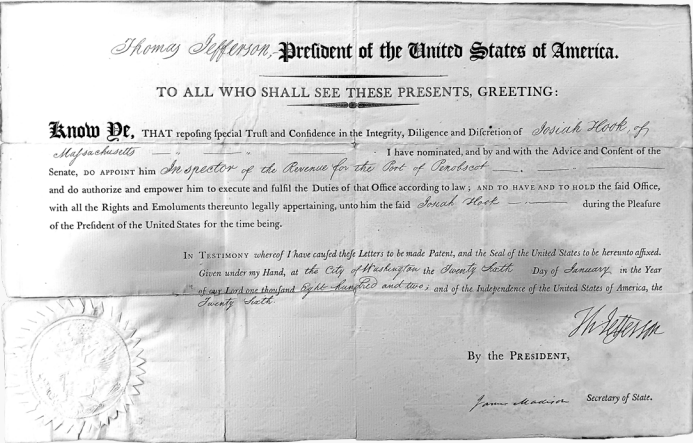


2026 – 2027 Exhibition

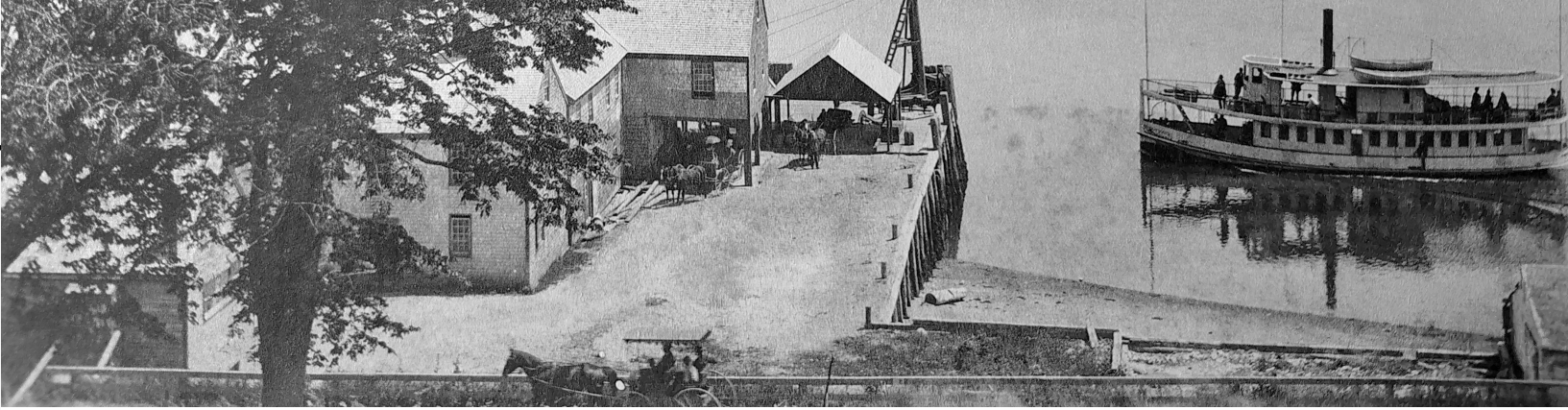
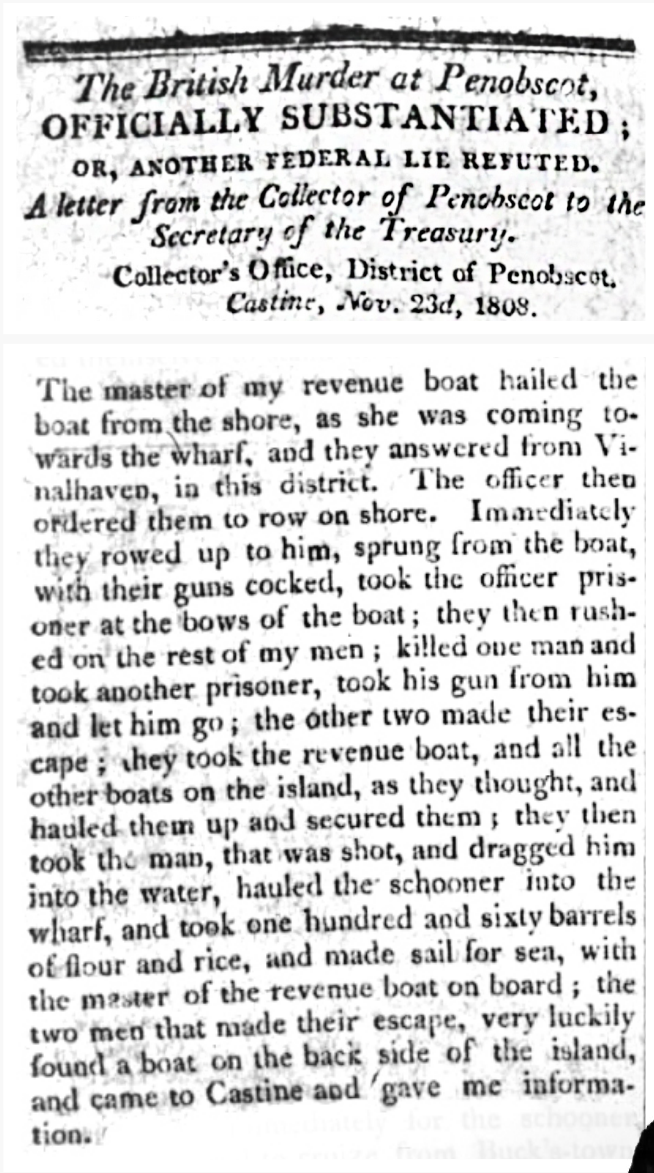
Collections Corner

Hampden. Meanwhile, enemy soldiers seized his furniture, household goods, and real estate. He continued to fight the “provisions trade” from Hampden, impounding 23 cattle bound for Fort George, “intended for the supply and support of said enemies.” Unbelievably from a modern perspective, a local jury sided with the smuggler, and Hook was forced to pay \$1,000 in reparations (the cattle had already been sold). It was not until ten years later that the decision was repealed via an act of Congress.

As evidenced by these rousing anecdotes, even a single piece of paper can sometimes open up a goldmine of interesting history. We look forward to delving even deeper into the story of customs enforcement in Castine and



making connections with wider patterns of coastal trade, social attitudes, and criminality during Maine’s inter-war years and beyond.



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2026 House & Garden Tour

This year, the Castine Historical Society will host its House & Garden Tour for the first time since 2022.

Twelve houses and three gardens featuring the work of prominent historic and contemporary architects, leading interior designers, and garden designers will be open for one day only, offering visitors a rare glimpse of our well-preserved historic village overlooking Castine Harbor.

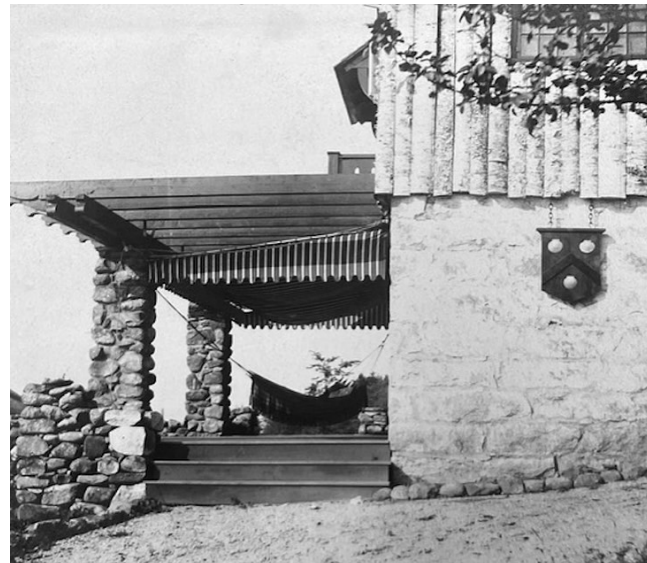
Held every four to six years, the event welcomes over one thousand attendees to the village of Castine, one of the oldest towns in New England and distinguished for its well-preserved 18th and 19th century architecture and stately elm-lined streets.

Proceeds from the House and Garden Tour benefit the Castine Historical Society and the exhibitions and educational programs the CHS offers free of charge. A portion of the funds also go to help support community-based projects in Castine. Lead sponsors for the event are Saltmeadow Properties and HM Payson, with *Down East Magazine* as the media sponsor.



Included on the tour:

- A beautifully restored sail loft where sails were made during the 19th century for the many boats in Castine's active harbor
- An 18th century house that is the only known residence to pre-date the Revolutionary War
- A 1920s Spanish Colonial villa designed by the New York architect William Bottomley
- A cedar shingled house attached to an historic windmill which was delivered to the site around 1910
- A garden based on the traditional French potager built upon the foundation of an old barn, with stone walls that hold heat and create a microclimate that encourages growth of grapes and apples
- A newly created space surrounding a village home that is designed to produce vegetables and fruit that will nourish food insecure people in our community





Castine Historical Society

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Francis Hamabe

2026 – 2027 Exhibition:
Francis Hamabe's Maine: A Life in Art
May 23 – October 12, 2026

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