



Exhibitions at
PAAM

Avital Sagalyn

Mid-Century Provincetown

CURATED BY BETSY SIERSMA
ON VIEW JUNE 5–AUGUST 2, 2026
IN THE DUFFY GALLERY

“Avital Sagalyn: Mid-Century Provincetown” is an exhibition of mainly ink and gouache paintings and drawings made during two summers Avital Sagalyn spent in Provincetown in 1945 and 1946.

She was at that time a young fine arts student at Cooper Union in New York. In the mid-century, Provincetown was populated by many Portuguese immigrants, and fishing boats dotted the seashore – a reminder to Avital of the warmth of her teenage stay in Lisbon, awaiting a refugee visa to the United States.

She was drawn to Provincetown for its vibrant artistic community and its unique confluence of land and sea. During one of these summers Avital rented a fisherman’s shack, and she painted and drew the town and the water near her shack. Her themes included the ever-changing sea, the busy wharf, the boats and the beach.

Avital had a powerful artistic and emotional response to place. She revisited the same subjects and experimented almost endlessly until she felt she had found the essence of the subject. “I often paint the same subject many times,” she said in 2017, going on to explain, “It’s a variation on a theme. And once I achieve what I really wanted to say, I stop painting it.”

Avital was fascinated with light. In her Provincetown works she captured her visceral and artistic responses to sunlight, moonlight, and atmosphere. Among her influences she cited J.M.W. Turner’s transformative treatment of light, with “Rising Moon, Sinking Sun, Provincetown” as a

case in point. Avital’s variations on “Boats in Fog” are examples of her impressions of light and atmosphere. Often in her work there is no implied light – rather there is a blurring of the horizontal boundary that separates sea and sky.

I met Avital in the late 1970s when she was a member of the Acquisitions Committee of the University Gallery, University of Massachusetts Amherst. She brought a critical eye and a solid grounding in mid-century modern and contemporary art, having lived and studied in Europe and the U.S. After I retired as director of the University Gallery, I learned from a fellow artist that Avital was an artist herself, a fact she had never shared with me. I helped reconnect Avital to my former museum in 2017, which led to a decision to offer her a retrospective exhibition.

This exhibition debuts publicly and in depth works from Avital’s Provincetown days, augmented by a handful of works from subsequent eras in which the artist explored similar themes. All works shown were created by Avital Sagalyn (1925–2020), and the exhibition is lent from the collection of Daniel R. Sagalyn and Elaine M. Grossman. For me it was a great pleasure to have known Avital – her graciousness and warmth were redolent of another place and time.

—Betsy Siersma, Curator

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work has always been direct and intuitive. I have absorbed the influence of many artists, including Turner, Rembrandt, Picasso, Brâncuși and a multitude of other artists across the globe. I feel close to the atmospheric canvases of seascapes by the Hawaiian painter Reuben Tam, whom I met when I was studying at Cooper Union. But I have always been guided most strongly by the quality of light and how it transforms what I see.

When I came to Paris on a Fulbright in the 1950s, I spent a long time at the site of Notre Dame. I wanted to paint the cathedral and its setting in the diffuse light; it seemed to disappear in the whiteness and to have a mystical quality. Earlier when I was in Maine, I painted the boats almost fading away on the horizon. I think there is an immaterial element that illuminates some of my canvases and papers.

When I was in Gordes en Provence in Southern France, I found the light was blinding and brutal, and everything I painted looked very sharp and geometric, with an absence of color apart from the blue sky, black shadow and white houses. More generally, color is not only a descriptive instrument in my work: it renders the spirit of a place as much as its physical aspect.

I am fascinated by many of nature's creations: shells with strange spines, flies that look like ink-spots, the thin legs of a mosquito, the exaggerated distortion of a frog when it leaps. In Siena during the Palio horserace, it was the tension between the vertical riders and the horizontal movement of the horses that struck me.

I did many drawings and paintings of Siena's Piazza del Campo from memory, each time finding a different balance between the sloping shell-shaped square and the buildings of the town, with the lines of the piazza converging towards them. I often paint the same subject many times until I reach its essence. These drawings and paintings are not repetitive, but variations on a theme just as musicians improvise when they play jazz.

—Avital Sagalyn, 2019

The late artist's son and daughter-in-law, Daniel R. Sagalyn and Elaine M. Grossman, gratefully acknowledge the significant support for this exhibition provided by generous contributions from friends and family:

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ARTWORK LIST

Rising Moon, Sinking Sun, 1945-46
Oil on Masonite board, 24 1/4" x 31 7/8"

Boats in Fog, Provincetown Wharf, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 8 7/8" x 11 15/16"

House at Water's Edge, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 9 1/16" x 12 1/16"

Fishing Boats in Drydock, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 8 1/2" x 10 7/8"

Two Fishing Boats in Drydock, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 8 7/16" x 10 7/8"

Boats Along Provincetown Shore, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 8 7/16" x 10 7/8"

Pilgrim Monument, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 10 7/8" x 8 7/16"

Sand Dunes and Pilgrim Monument, 1945-46
Pen and ink on paper, 7 9/16" x 9 3/4"

Boats in Fog: Red, Blue and Gray, 1945-46
Gouache on paper, 11 7/8" x 8 15/16"

Sailboats in Fog, 1945-46
Ink on paper, 8 15/16" x 11 15/16"

Whale Vertebra, II, 1945-46
Artist pencil on paper, 11" x 12 1/2"

Whale Vertebra, I, 1945-46
Artist pencil on paper, 11" x 12 1/2"

Boats in Harbor Fog, 1945-46
Ink on paper, 7 3/4" x 9 11/16"

Seagulls and Boats in Harbor Fog, 1945-46
Ink on paper, 7 7/8" x 9 15/16"

Four Boats, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 10 15/16" x 8 7/16"

Telephone Poles in Provincetown, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 9 7/8" x 12 7/8"

Wharf at P. Town, 1945-46

Lithograph print with black ink, Plate: 6
15/16" x 8 5/16"

Shacks on Wharf, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 8 7/16" x 10 7/8"

Seagulls Flying Over Wharf, 1945-46

Ink and gouache on paper, 8 15/16" x 11
15/16"

View from End of Pier, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 8 5/8" x 10 1/16"

Telephone Pole and Pilgrim Monument,
1945-46

Graphite on paper, 11 7/8" x 8 7/8"

Bedroom at Provincetown, 1945-46

Gouache on paper, 7 15/16" x 10"

Sand Dunes, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 7 7/8" x 9 15/16"

Sand Dunes with Flora, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 7 15/16" x 9 15/16"

Provincetown Waterfront, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 8 7/16" x 10 7/8"

Sand Dunes with Shack, Peaked Hill Bars,
1945-46

Ink on paper, 7 13/16" x 10"

Fishing Boats in Harbor, Low Tide, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 8" x 11 7/8"

Boats in Fog, Blue and Gray, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 10 15/16" x 14 13/16"

Fishing Boats in Fog, Orange and Blue, 1945-
46

Ink on paper, 8 7/8" x 11 15/16"

Provincetown Harbor at Twilight, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 8 15/16" x 11 15/16"

Fishermen Delivering Their Catch, 1945-46

Gouache on paper, 8 15/16" x 11 13/16"

Shack at End of Wharf, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 9 1/16" x 12 1/16"

Sailboats in Cape Cod Bay, 1945-46

Ink on paper, 9 1/16" x 12 1/16"

Martha's Vineyard Piers, c. 1990s

Gouache on paper, 6" x 8"

Martha's Vineyard Sailboats and Pier, c.
1990s

Gouache on paper, 6" x 8"

Boothbay Harbor, Maine, 1947

Ink on paper, 9 1/16" x 11 9/16"

Tall Shells, Casey Key, c. 1970s

Graphite on paper, 17" x 14"

Murex Shell, Casey Key, c. 1970s

Gouache on paper, 14" x 17"

Crab, Casey Key, c. 1970s

Red ink on paper, 8 7/8" x 11 7/8"

Lobster, Maine, 1953

Pencil, pen, gouache, and ink on paper, 12"
x 16"

Bird at Casey Key, c. 1970s

Ink on paper, 3 15/16" x 3 15/16"