

HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

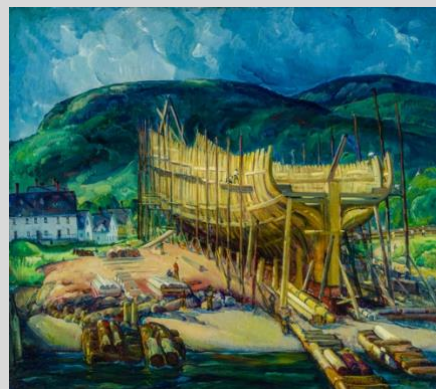
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ABRAHAM LEON KROLL (1884–1974)

Building the Ship

Oil on canvas, 46 x 52 in.

Signed and dated (at lower right): Leon Kroll 1916



RECORDED: Nancy Hale and Fredson Bowers, ed., *Leon Kroll: A Spoken Memoir* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983), pp. 42–43 // Charles Brock, ed., *George Bellows*, exhib. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2012), p. 323, n. 43

EXHIBITED: Venice, Italy, 1930, *XVII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Citta di Venezia*, no. 188 // American Federation of Art, New York, traveling, 1964–66, *Maine—50 Artists of the Twentieth Century*, no. 20 // Maine Coast Artists Gallery, Rockland, Maine, 1969 // United States Department of State, American Embassy, Paris France, 1970–72 // William Farnsworth Museum and Library, Rockland, Maine, October 1979, *20th Century Masters in Maine*

EX COLL.: the artist, until 1969; to Thomas J. Watson, Jr., North Haven, Maine; by gift to his brother, Arthur K. Watson, North Haven, Maine, until 1974; to his estate, until 1976; by gift to the Camden Public Library, Maine, 1976 until the present

In June 1916, Leon Kroll was painting in Eddyville, on the eastern edge of New York's Catskill Mountains when he received a letter from his friend Robert Henri. Henri wrote that their mutual friend, George Bellows, was in Camden, Maine, "lonely and in a rut." "Why don't you go and paint near George? He'd like you to, very much." Kroll responded immediately, recalling that "I took my little car and drove to Maine, and I settled at Camden in a little house right next to the Bellows family." (Hale and Bowers, p. 42. This edited text, based on transcribed interviews conducted in 1956–57, remains the major source on Kroll, with, as a caveat, all the strengths and weaknesses of a first-hand memoir. All subsequent page references in this essay, unless otherwise specified, cite this text.) Kroll met Bellows through a mutual friend in 1911. Bellows introduced Kroll into Henri's circle, which was

coalesced around invitation-only group exhibitions mounted at the MacDowell Club on West 55th Street in midtown Manhattan. In 1913, Kroll and Bellows painted together on Monhegan Island, Maine. After spending the summer of 1914 in Europe (including an emergency evacuation of Americans stranded by the outbreak of war), Kroll went to Ogunquit, Maine, in 1915 in company with Henri and Bellows. In 1921, the three men taught figure painting at the Art Students League Summer School in Woodstock, New York. Kroll and Bellows remained close friends until Bellows' untimely death in 1924.

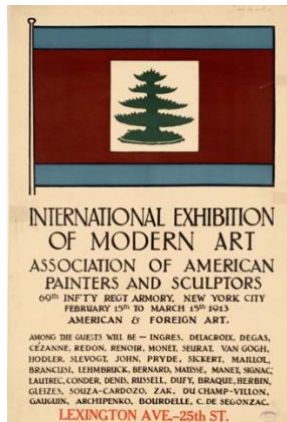


Camden proved productive for both artists. Kroll explained that “the Government was building those wooden ships for the war.... All the shipyards along the Maine coast were building these great big wooden freight ships.” Inspired by the spectacle of a massive hulk under construction, Kroll painted *Building the Ship*. Bellows admired the work. “That’s a beautiful motif. Do you mind if I paint the same motif?” (pp. 42–43). The result was Bellows’ powerful series of paintings that included [*The Teamster*](#) (1916, Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine); [*The Rope*](#) or [*Builders of Ships*](#) (1916, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven); [*The Skeleton*](#) (1916, Wichita Museum of Art, Kansas); and [*Shipyard Society*](#) (1916, private collection).

Leon Kroll, an American born to immigrant parents, came of age just as the nineteenth century was giving way to the twentieth. The historical practice of art as a means of rendering and understanding the seen world faced the reality of the constantly improving technology of photography. The shape of the future of art was in flux, with no path the obvious victor. Kroll, a cosmopolitan New Yorker, applied the lessons of European modernism to a polyglot American sensibility, forging his own path through the schools and tendencies whirling through the making of American modern art. A romantic realist, his work resonates with a multiplicity of influences acquired from rigorous academic training in America and Paris, supplemented by a varied circle of friends and a wide-ranging curiosity. Kroll brought to his art a prodigious technical talent and an appreciation for beauty that garnered him, through the years, a long list of awards and prizes. Best known as a painter of figures, and especially female nudes, he also produced a large body of landscapes, as well as three major murals. The fact that his work defies easy categorization precisely reflects Kroll's prickly independence as well as his personal comfort on the margins of the mainstream.



Abraham Leon Kroll (he customarily did not use his first name) was born into a cultured and ambitious family of German immigrant musicians. Intended by his parents to pursue a “safe” career in math, science, or engineering, he decided, instead, to forgo college and become an artist. In 1900, Kroll found work as an assistant in the mural studio of Charles Yardley Turner, an academically trained artist who had been among the founders of the Art Students League and was a member of the Council of the National Academy of Design. The connection proved fortuitous. Kroll began his formal art education at the League, studying in 1901 with the respected American impressionist painter, John Henry Twachtman. Kroll soon translated his family's urge to succeed into an impressive series of prestigious awards and scholarships in his chosen field. In 1903, he moved to the school at the National Academy of Design, where he notes, “I was by far the best student in the National Academy School.... I think I still hold the record at the Academy school, in all its history, for winning every prize they gave...” (p. 108). In 1907, Kroll won a Hallgarten Fund Special Prize in the Painting School and the First Prize for Composition; in 1908, he took the First Prize for Figure Work in Sculpture Class, the A. A. Baldwin Fund First Prize for Etching, and the Edward Mooney, National Academy Scholarship for Study in Europe. By 1909, Kroll was in Europe, enrolled at the Académie Julian in Paris in the atelier of the academic figure painter, Jean-Paul Laurens, and won First Prize for Painting. Back in New York in 1910, Kroll had a one-man show at the National Academy, where he began teaching in 1911. In 1912, he won the Porter Prize at the Salmagundi Club, and, in 1915, he was awarded a Bronze Medal at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco.



In 1913, Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn, the American organizers of the International Exposition of Modern Art (the so-called Armory Show), invited Kroll to show his big industrial landscape of the New York Central Railroad terminus in Weehawken, New Jersey, *Terminal Yards* (1912–13, Flint Institute of Fine Arts Museum and Art School, Flint, Michigan). The work attracted the attention of Chicago lawyer and art patron, Arthur Jerome Eddy, who negotiated to buy it and eleven other works from Kroll’s studio (p. 32). In 1915, Kroll contributed seven paintings to the Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Between 1911 and 1918, he participated in the cooperative revolving exhibitions that Henri organized at the MacDowell Club. Kroll was living the life of a successful artist, traveling in the summer to scenic locations and spending winter in the studio turning sketches into finished works. In 1916, as we have seen, he was in Eddyville, New York, a town he found so congenial he returned there in 1917. Years later, Kroll recalled Eddyville fondly, his memories sweetened by recollections of a landlady who fed him cheaply, plentifully, and well, and of a pleasant young female companion he found among the local girls.

Eddyville was one of the places I discovered for myself. I found this lovely place on Rondout Creek, just off the Hudson River, near Woodstock. It was between the Creek and a canal and looked like a little Spanish village.... I would climb some big rock and precariously place my easel up there and find a motif.... I went back to Eddyville in the spring of 1917 and I painted some rather nice pictures. There was a picture of old houses in Eddyville which was bought by Adolph Lewisohn (p. 40).

Camden, Maine, was another locale that resonated with Kroll. His productive time with Bellows in the summer of 1916 led to some masterful compositions, *Building the Ship* in particular. As with all of Kroll’s work, *Building the Ship* is skillfully and deliberately composed, reflecting Kroll’s insistence on the importance of structure and design in the making of any picture. “I am always grateful that I’ve learned to see. It’s a very beautiful thing to see.... You look with a purpose.... A photograph is a mechanical vision, whereas the artist’s vision is a personal thing.... All [good] pictures are based on good abstract design” (pp. 102–03). Speaking about a 1921 Central Park landscape, Kroll noted: “I never paint exactly what’s before me. I select out of nature what I need, using it as a sort of encyclopedia of fact, and then compose it” (p. 105). Kroll’s views of Camden incorporate his reaction to seeing Paul Cézanne’s vision of locations in the south of France. Kroll “discovered” Cézanne for himself in a Paris gallery in 1909, marking the beginning of a lifelong enthusiasm for the Frenchman’s work (pp. 19–20). Kroll particularly cited the years 1915–18 as a period of marked Cézanne influence (p. 109). Camden calls itself the place “where the mountains meet the sea.” In *Building the Ship* Kroll summoned his inner Cézanne to paint the spectacle of Mount Battie (780 feet high), and to its right, Mount Megunticook (1,385 feet) looming under a lowering sky. The shipyard, dominated by its

dramatical hulk, is the scene of a flurry of human activity, people, and boat, all confined to the narrow waterfront and town site wedged between the Camden Hills and the waters of Penobscot Bay. If Kroll did not paint precisely what he saw, he also chose to paint only subjects that he liked, commenting that “I like to be moved by my motif...” (p. 112); “I feel like loving everything I do ..., even a tree...”, and “I cannot paint people I don’t like” (p. 113).

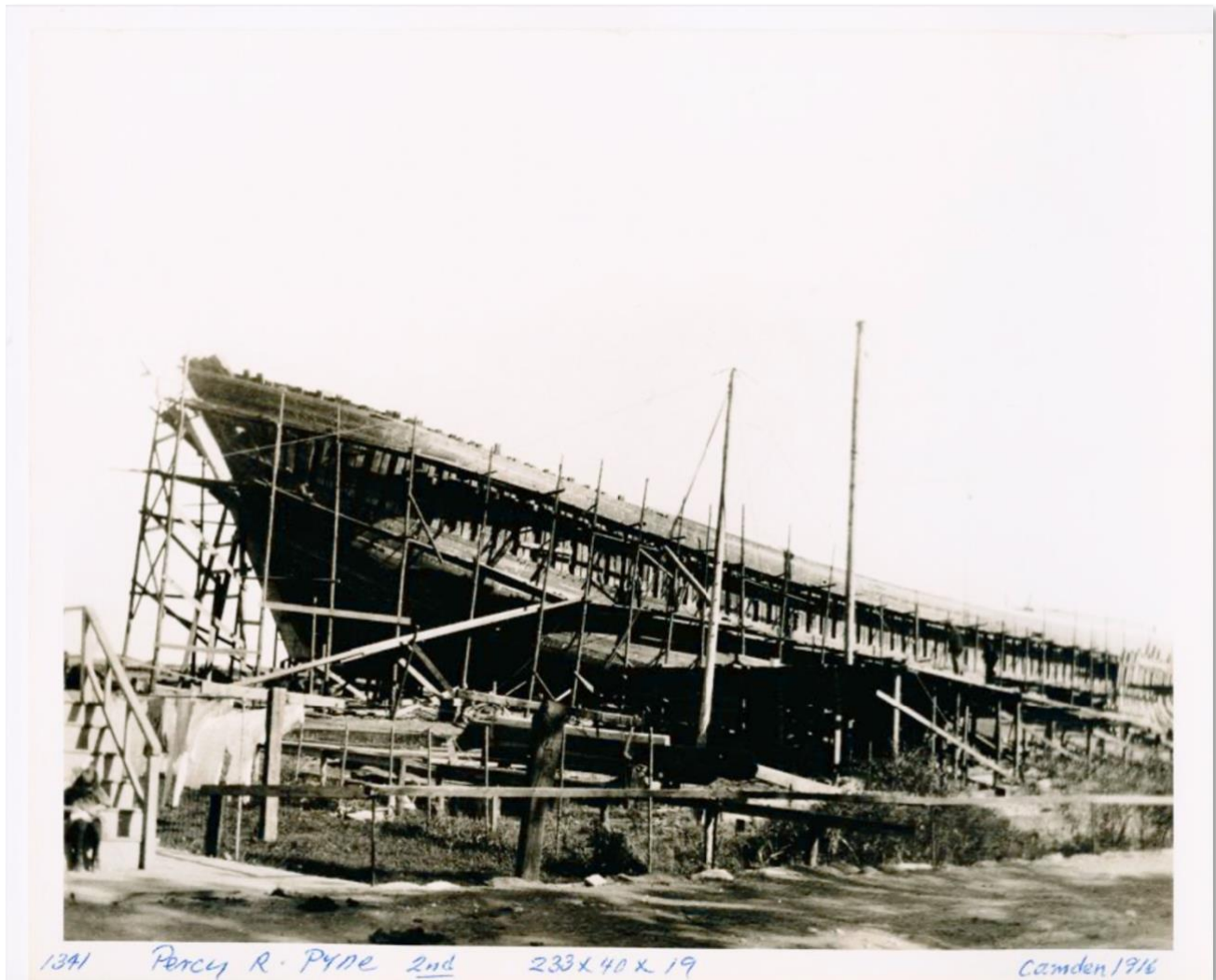


For a visiting artist, a wooden schooner under construction at the Camden boatyard proved an exceptionally attractive subject. From a purely formal point of view, the scaffolding of ribs visible during the building process offered a compelling rhythmic pattern. For the people of Camden, however, the renewed activity at the boatyard was a reminder of the historical identity of their town and their region. In the nineteenth century, the Maine coastline was studded with boat yards, using local timber to build sailing ships that carried commercial cargo along the country’s Atlantic coastline and to ports all over the world.

The boatyards encouraged ancillary industries, including skilled shops making a wide range of ship fittings to outfit the boats with everything required for launching. Boatbuilding became a key feature of regional identity as well as the Maine coast’s engine of prosperity.

The town of Camden was founded by a New Hampshire man who had initially come to the area to cut timber for masts for British ships. In 1792, Captain William McGlathry established the first Camden shipyard. In 1875, Holly M. Bean established his own business in Camden. Bean was a naval architect and master builder who had honed his skills in various Maine yards. In 1891, Bean passed the business to his son, Robert. The Bean Shipyard became famous for building four and five-masted schooners. As the era of the wooden ship passed, Robert Bean struggled to maintain the yard. World War I brought a temporary reprieve as Robert Bean successfully won a series of commissions probably related to the War. Camden saw another resurgence of boat building during World War II. Today the Camden waterfront is still busy with nautical activity, but it is now the site of boatyards and marinas catering to pleasure craft and the occasional lobster boat.

The unusually large four-masted schooner that Leon Kroll and George Bellows painted together has been identified as the *Percy R. Pyne II*. At the time of its construction, it excited local gossip because no one knew who had commissioned the vessel. Barbara Dyer, the late Camden town historian, wrote that when the boat was launched it “had no colors flying.... That had people talking.” Apparently, townspeople thought the boat was German sponsored and intended as a “commerce raider,” i.e., a civilian boat that attacked commercial shipping of enemy nations. (Barbara Dyer, [“Down to the Sea: Camden’s Wooden Boat Builders were Perfectionists,” *Penobscot Bay Pilot*, June 24, 2015.](#))



In fact, it appears that the Pyne likely had a U.S. government connection. It was named for a New York businessman, Percy Rivington Pyne II (1857–1929), who had extensive interests in banking and railroads. Despite its name, it is more likely that the boatbuilding project was the work of Pyne’s nephew, confusingly named Percy Rivington Pyne 2nd (1882–1950). Pyne 2nd was a Princeton graduate who founded a Wall Street brokerage firm. He could have financed the boat himself or through obscured government channels. The family fortune originated with his grandfather, Percy Rivington Pyne I (1820–1895), a New York merchant and President of the National City Bank of New York (1882–91), a forerunner of the present-day Citibank. In the buildup to American entry into World War I, Percy Pyne became involved with The [National Council of Defense](#), a group of prominent luminaries convened to oversee industrialization for the war effort. Like the rest of the council’s stellar figures, Pyne served as a “dollar a year” man, working in the capacity of Assistant Director, Business Manager, and later Acting Director. In 1919, the Belgian government made him a Chevalier of the Ordre de la Couronne for his activities. (See the [War Records of the Knickerbocker Club, 1914–1918](#),

p. 284 illus.) In the years leading to America's declaration of war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Woodrow Wilson faced strong political and popular opposition to American involvement. Early preparations for war had to be undertaken with the greatest discretion and secrecy. The boatbuilding industry in Camden is consistent with a very visible yet stealth project. In retrospect, Leon Kroll said he thought the wooden boats being built in Maine yards were preparation for war but never used (pp. 42–43). (Kroll assumption was correct: many ships were built on the expectation that they would be used when America entered the war, but when that didn't happen, they languished in their shipyards and were eventually destroyed.)

Considering this scenario, Pyne, a bachelor, named the boat for his uncle, whose wife, Maud Howland Pyne (1866–1952), was the granddaughter of Gardiner Greene Howland (1787–1851), founder of New York's China and Pacific Coast merchant company, Howland and Aspinall. The *Percy R. Pyne II* had a short history. In 1920 it was owned by an obscure entity, the Oneida Navigation Corporation, whose sole historical footprint is the record of a commercial dispute that resulted in a Supreme Court case in 1920. By 1923, the boat had been sold and renamed the *Michael Callaghan*, after a ship owner and important figure on the New York City waterfront (see [obituary](#), *New York Times*, May 13, 1954, p. 29). In 1924, the *Callaghan* foundered off the Gulf of Mexico coast near Panama City, Florida. The wreck remained a mystery, since there was no record of a boat named *Callaghan* having been built. [The wreck was finally identified](#) as *Percy R. Pyne II* in 2024.

None of this, of course, would have been known to Kroll and Bellows, nor relevant to their purpose. What they found in Holly Bean's shipyard was a splendid subject for their brushes. Throughout his long and distinguished career Kroll was consistently a natural contrarian who relished embodying contradiction. He went from being a bantamweight adolescent (at 5 feet 4 inches), prone to fisticuffs, to being an artist who headed in the opposite direction when too much popularity loomed. He noted with pride of his days exhibiting with Robert Henri and his insurgent friends at the McDowell Club, "It was a very good group of the best artists. I felt very pleased because I was an Academy product, which was anathema to those people, but I didn't paint the Academy way at all" (p. 30). After a series of well-received cityscapes threatened to pigeonhole him as an Ashcan realist, Kroll cultivated the production of a series of modernist-inspired landscapes and neo-renaissance nudes. "I thought maybe I was beginning to 'produce,' you know, and I didn't like that. I began to paint nudes, which nobody wanted, but it was fun painting them" (p. 30). Kroll taught for twenty years but did not want to be remembered as a "teacher." "Although I was supposed to be a pretty good teacher, after a while I gave it up..." (p. 34). Both academician and insurgent, he mixed elements of Impressionism, Realism, Modernism, and renaissance-inspired figurative painting into his own personal idiom, while freely admitting influences from Rembrandt through Cézanne.

Whatever I was, I was.... I had to be what I am.... Influence ... [is] always intermingled. The men who consciously imitate don't amount to anything.... The influences that come into a

man's work are varied. I can say that in my mural painting, I probably looked at Masaccio and Piero della Francesca and Andrea del Castagno more than anybody else.... My mural pictures are nothing like any of them ... I've developed into a sort of personality myself... (p. 111).

Kroll remained resolutely committed to representational form even as American abstract art achieved international ascendance. In 1956 he noted, "My sort of painting, for the moment ... is not quite the fashion, right now. The abstract babies are still on deck.... But that kind of thing will get to be such a God-damned bore.... It doesn't do anything" (p. 117). Kroll gravitated to leadership positions in professional art organizations although he avoided identification with any faction. "All my life I've been in important positions to be of service to the other artists" (p. 121). Leon Kroll prided himself on appreciating widely and painting distinctively. *Building the Ship* bears witness to his spirit, his cosmopolitan independence, his skill, and, most importantly, his love of beauty. In Kroll's own words, "I always have a happy view of life, and I think life is beautiful" (p. 117).



Building the Ship was still in Kroll's possession in 1969 when he showed it at the Maine Coast Artists Gallery in Rockland, Maine. (For a full discussion of the context and history of *Building the Ship*, and particularly its distinguished provenance, see Michael K. Komaneky, "Two Artists, Two Paintings, One Ship: Leon Kroll and George Bellows in Camden," unpub. ms., 2025.) The painting was purchased by Thomas J. "Tom" Watson, Jr. (1914–1993), son of IBM (International Business Machines) Chairman and CEO Thomas Watson and later its president. The Watson family had been long-time summer residents of North Haven Island, off the coast of Camden in Penobscot Bay. Thomas J. Watson, Jr., was a serious sailor and yachtsman. He gave *Building the Ship* to his younger brother, Arthur Kittredge "Dick" Watson (1919–1974), president of IBM World Trade Corporation, who by the early 1960s owned a large waterfront home on Bay View Street overlooking Camden

harbor and the former site of the Bean shipyard. Kroll's picture would have had special resonance for the Watson brothers. Tom and Dick were among a small group that owned the Wayfarer Marine Company, a yacht repair shop in Camden. In 1963, Wayfarer acquired the site of the old Bean Yard. Over the next two decades, Tom Watson bought out his partners, finally selling the business in 1983. (See ["The Future of Camden's Working Waterfront,"](#) August 2007, pp. 3–4.)

During the Nixon Administration, Arthur Watson served as U.S. ambassador to France from 1970 to 1972. In a sign of how much he prized the Kroll and what it represented to him, Watson displayed it in the American Embassy in Paris during his appointment.

When Tom Watson first saw *Building the Ship* in the gallery in Rockland in 1969, he was a time traveler, looking at an important episode in the historical legacy of Camden, Maine, on a site which he now owned. After Arthur Watson's death in 1974, the painting remained in his estate until 1976 when the Watson family donated it in his memory to the Camden Public Library.

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