

# The Merry Merry Month of May

by Millie Wilcox

May Day, Mother's Day and Memorial Day all play significant roles for those of us who enjoy a little history, a little tradition and a lot of celebrations. So join me as we stroll past the May Pole on May Day, May 1, and on to Mother's Day, May 11, considered to be one of the busiest and most celebrated of all holidays and last of all one of the most important and patriotic remembrances Memorial Day, Monday, May 26.



Figure 1 - Anthony Aveni "May Day: A Collision of Forces," *The Book of the year: A Brief History of Our Seasonal Holidays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

## MAY DAY, May 1, 2008

The origin of the May Day celebration goes back to the days before the birth of Christ; just like many other many ancient celebrations it also has ties to Pagan origins. The tradition of Maypole in the middle ages is of special interest to this writer. It seems that each little village had its own Maypole which was cut down from the woods nearby. In the small towns, the poles would be set up for one day, but in large cities, such as London, they were set up to remain permanently. This ritual of going to the woods cutting a tree down to make a Maypole is symbolic of the Christmas ritual.

In other countries May Day is celebrated in different ways. For example, on May 1, 1561 King Charles IX of France was given a lily of the valley as a lucky charm. He decided to offer a lily of the valley each year to the ladies of the court. This gesture became a symbol of springtime. In America, even though the Puritans frowned on May Day, the traditional celebration continues. This celebration consists of dancing and singing around a maypole, tied with colorful streamers or ribbons with garlands of flowers (Figure 1) and selecting a May Queen.



Figure 2 - Cousins Playing by Joyce Norwood, 2008. Oil on canvas, 20x24in. Norwood's fresh approach to painting children on the beach is so realistic one can almost feel the atmospheric quality of the ocean.

## MOTHER'S DAY, SUNDAY, MAY 11, 2008

Mother's Day, Sunday, May 11, continues to be probably the most popular holiday of all. It has been said by hotels and resorts that it is the most celebrated of all the family traditional holidays including Christmas and Thanksgiving--especially 'taking Mother to Lunch.' When one thinks of Mother's Day and the spirit of this special date, it immediately brings to mind



Figure 3 - Au Square, Henri Evenepoel, 1897-1899. Lithograph, 33x23cm. This pictorial illustration shows the influence Toulouse Lautrec had on Evenepoel.



Figure 4 - At the Beach, Edward Henry Potthast. Oil, 16x20 in, Collection of Mrs. Melvin Steiner, Courtesy of Hammer Galleries, New York City. Potthast, long a favorite captures the mood of the seashore better than almost any artist. Like Boudin, master of the skies, both artists mastered the use of black in their paintings.



Figure 5 - The Fairy Tale, William Meritt Chase, 1892. Oil on canvas, 16x24 in. Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz. This painting was sketched in front of Chase's house and shows the importance of the family relationship and his love for children.

the artists who portray mothers and children at the beach, such as Cousins Playing by Joyce Norwood (Figure 2). Two other well known painters Evenepoel (Figure 3) and Potthast were also inspired by the ocean and beach activities. Edward Henry Potthast was known as one of the most famous of all artists who captured on canvas children playing on the beach (Figure 4). The image of mother and child is a true symbol of Mother's Day. Another wonderful example is this open air painting, The Fairy Tale (Figure 5) by American Impressionist. Chase became a primary influence on early twentieth century American art. The lady and child in this painting and in most of his paintings are members of the Chase family. Chase enjoyed taking poetic license in most of his paintings and has been known to say "Don't hesitate to exaggerate color and light."

Speaking of Mother's Day, not all of us are mothers but still do not want to be left out of the holiday festivities. In a way we are all mothers nourishing friends, relatives and acquaintances, a motherly activity. Personally, I try to look after the artists I represent. This is a truly a unique experience and one that I find immensely satisfying. The symbolism of Mother's Day is what's important.

## MEMORIAL DAY, May 26, 2008

Memorial Day was originally known as Decoration Day because it was a time set aside to honor the nation's deceased by decorating their graves with flowers. It was first widely observed on May 30, 1868, to commemorate the sacrifices made by soldiers, by proclamation of General John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of former sailors and soldiers. On May 5, 1868, Logan declared in General Order No. 11 that:

"The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country."



Figure 6 - Paying Homage to the Americans, Georges Flanet, 2003. This painting was given to me in France by the artist to be made available to Rotary Clubs to display in America for such memorial services as "Taps at Twilight"

During the first celebration of Decoration Day, General James Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery, after which 5,000 participants helped to decorate the graves of the more than 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried in the cemetery. This 1868 celebration was inspired by local observances of the day in several towns throughout America that had taken place in the three years since the Civil War. In fact, several Northern and Southern cities claim to be the birthplace of Memorial Day, including Columbus, Mississippi; Macon, Georgia; Richmond, Virginia; Boalsburg, Pennsylvania; and Carbondale, Illinois. Today on St. Simons Island, the Rotary Club sponsors "Taps at Twilight", a beautiful program that is well attended and appreciated for its patriotic meaning.

Georges Flanet has painted a memorable scene paying homage to America and its soldiers who liberated France in World War II (Figure 6). The artist has given his permission for this painting to be used by patriotic groups such as the Rotary Club for events such as "Taps at Twilight".

## SPOTLIGHT ON SONIA GRINEVA

For those of you who met Sonia Grineva from Moscow and New York will be pleased to know that she will be making a return visit to St. Simons. Coincidentally, it may be on Mother's Day, accompanied by her Mother who is visiting her from Moscow. Sonia's brightly hued scenes of "Romantic Places" such as the Amalfi Coast, Barcelona and Paris and of course, St. Simons and Sea Island, will be highlighted in an upcoming exhibition. Recently, I met with Sonia at her new studio in New York where I saw many exciting and magnificent paintings, both abstract and impressionist. Her greens, blues, reds give an eternal feeling of spring (Figure 7).

Thus as we come to the end of our little journey about the events of the Merry Merry Month of May we see there is not only symbolism connected to this beautiful month, but also history, art and wonderful memories of celebrations that will continue to be a part of our heritage. **II**



Figure 7 - Russian artist Sonia Grineva standing by one of her color abstract expressionist paintings in New York. Her work is becoming more and more recognized for her unusual palette of greens, blues and reds. However, she says she is enjoying painting the landscape on St. Simons Island which has a slightly different palette.



Mildred Wilcox, is owner of Left Bank Art Gallery, Located at 3600 Frederica Road, Suite 12, St. Simons Island.



Untitled Oil on Paper 20x20 Kempton

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New Look  
at  
Left Bank



Bringing in the Sunshine O/C 40x40 Milan

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ABSTRACTS  
DRAWINGS

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## Left Bank Art Gallery

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