

George Inness, Jr., in Tarpon Springs, Florida

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George Inness, Jr., was one of the most celebrated citizens of early Twentieth Century Cragsmoor, a charter member of the group of Golden Age artists who created the Cragsmoor artists' colony and brought it international recognition. Inness built Cragsmoor's most notable home, Chetolah, in the first years of last century at a reputed cost of \$1 million. He and his wife, the heiress Julia Goodrich Smith Inness, were founders and patrons of the Cragsmoor Federated Church, and for more than a quarter-century Inness spent his summers in Cragsmoor until his death at Chetolah on July 27, 1926. His most famous painting – *The Only Hope* – was painted in Cragsmoor, and he died here while completing his last painting, *The Lord Is in His Holy Temple*. It served as the backdrop for his funeral that summer in Cragsmoor.

But Inness also had a strong and important connection to another small community, Tarpon Springs, Florida. It was there that he spent his winters from 1902 until 1926, and it is there – in the Unitarian Universalist Church – that his most famous paintings hang today.

George Inness, Jr., was, as we all know, the son of one of the most famous American artists of the 19th Century, George Inness. Inness Jr. was born in 1853 in Paris, where his father, not yet famous, was studying. When Inness Sr. returned to the United States, he began to gain notoriety for his large tonalist landscape paintings and was recognized as a prominent member of the second generation of the Hudson River School. In 1870, father and son returned to France, where Inness Jr. became a student of the most celebrated art teacher in France, Leon Bonnat, who taught him to paint portraits and animal paintings, which dominated Inness Jr.'s early work.

Inness Jr. returned to the United States and eventually opened a studio in New York City, where he met and married Julia Smith in 1879. Julia was the only daughter (and heiress) of Roswell Smith, the founder and president of the Century Publishing Company, who had been an early collector of the paintings of Inness Sr. Century was the publisher of *Scribners Monthly*, a very successful endeavor. Blessed with the considerable success of his own father and the wealth of his wife, George Inness, Jr., was freed from any concern about earning a living and was able to pursue his art full-time.

In 1890, the Innesses first came to Tarpon Springs, both father and son. Up until then, Inness, Sr., had spent his winters in Thomasville, Georgia, where many wealthy northerners maintained seasonal homes. The City of Tarpon Springs, Florida, had been incorporated in 1887 when the railroad was extended to the area north of Tampa, and wealthy investors built impressive homes around Spring Bayou.

The Innesses spent five winters in Tarpon Springs, where Inness Sr. painted some of his most famous works. Their very names reveal their geographic origin, such as *Early Morning, Tarpon Springs (1892)* and *Orange Road, Tarpon Springs (1893)*. Inness Sr. died in 1894, and his son moved back to Paris to study at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*. He was determined to free himself from the weight of his father's legacy, so much so that he destroyed more than 100 of his own paintings because he felt they were too derivative of his father's work. Inness Jr. remained in Paris for four years.

When he returned to the United States, he and Julia bought 75 acres in Cragmoor from the artist Eliza Greatorex and built the magnificent home that they called Chetolah, reportedly an Indian word for "love." Work began on the house in 1901, and the cost at the time was reported to have been close to \$1 million (the equivalent of \$32 million today). In that house, Inness Jr. created many of his most famous works.

But he also remained devoted to Tarpon Springs. His father had purchased a home on West Orange Street which his son then occupied and eventually enlarged to 27 rooms, with a large painting studio and artists' cottages for the group of artists he invited to join him in the warm Florida sun. These artists included Charles Courtney Curran, Winfield Scott Cline and Rachael Hartley. He also built a rustic retreat and studio on the Anclote River, calling it "Camp Comfort."

After his father's death, Inness Jr. developed an entirely new artistic sensibility. A founder of the Federated Church in Cragmoor and a member of the Unitarian Universalist ("UU") Church in Tarpon Springs, he had a deep spirituality. Two of his Paris works that now hang in the Tarpon Springs UU church reveal that faith, *The Last Shadow of the Cross (1898)* and *The Centurion (1897)*. He believed in the divine relationship between man and nature in which the primary symbol of God is expressed through light. He summed it up this way:

*All that I work for, all that I hope for,
All that I pray for, in my art, is that
I am able to arouse a spiritual emotion.*

Years later, in the fall of 1918, as World War I was drawing to a close, a tornado-type storm hit Tarpon Springs and blew out the windows in the UU Church. Because glass was difficult to obtain in the aftermath of the Great War and craftsmen hard to find as well, Inness Jr. volunteered to paint a triptych to replace three of the windows. The result, entitled *Promise, Realization and Fulfillment*, was installed in 1920, just over 100 years ago.

Four years later, Inness Jr. created a second triptych based on the 23rd Psalm. The titles are *And Beside Still Waters, He Leadeth Me, and In Green Pastures*. It was painted at Inness's Camp Comfort studio and is a meditative compliment to the earlier triptych. It continues the soft-edged tonalist style, mystical light and his signature coloration, often referred to as "Inness green," that he developed after his father died. It was installed in the church on January 26, 1924.

His career attained his pinnacle in the next two years. That summer, he painted his masterwork, *The Only Hope* (1924), while at Chetolah. The painting was unveiled at the Tarpon Springs church and attracted immense crowds, who marveled at its imagery and enigmatic meaning. Inness explained it this way:

In our picture, we will let self and greed and hate prevail until they bring a war that with fire and sword shall destroy this wondrous city.

Its grin and battered, blacked walls shall stand out gaunt against the sky. No human life remains – the only thing that stirs is the miasmic-mist that rises from the river . . .

But as the gazer looks, he will see the sun arising in the east, and it will grow and sparkle into life and cast its rays until the very heavens are aglow!

The Only Hope went on a national tour, and thousands of people came to see it. When it was shown at Florida Methodist College, Edward W. Bok, the retired editor of *The Ladies Home Journal*, offered to buy it for \$100,000, which Inness refused. Bok had wanted to put it on tour to emphasize that the United States should do more to promote world peace.

Eventually, it was shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., where President Calvin Coolidge came to see it. He had allocated 10 minutes for the painting but became transfixed and studied it for 40 minutes and then lobbied to have it permanently displayed in the Capitol Rotunda. But Inness responded that he had painted it for Tarpon Springs and that is where it would be displayed. President Coolidge understood and wrote this:

The opportunity to see The Only Hope painted by Mr. George Inness, Jr., is an experience which I shall always appreciate. The great canvas has a peculiarly spiritual appeal. The first impression is that of desolation, of civilization in ruins. Hatred and conflict have reached their logical conclusion. But, as we look again, we see a small but distinct figure of the Bird of Peace, and over it is gleaming the promise of the sun struck with a suggestion of redemption. It is a representation of wrath overcome by love.

Inness's career had reached its peak. *The Only Hope* was supposed to be displayed in New York City, but a group of non-Christians objected that it was too Christ-centered after Inness explained that "*the sun, the Christ, [is] spreading the light of love through the world. It is the Only Hope.*" Following that criticism, the painting fell out of favor and disappeared from the national media.

After the painting was installed in the Tarpon Springs church, Inness began work on a companion work, *The Lord Is in His Holy Temple*. It was mostly completed by the time he died, on July 27, 1926. It was displayed at his Cragmoor funeral and then installed in the Tarpon Springs church.

Inness's connection to Tarpon Springs went beyond his commitment to the Tarpon Springs church. When he was at the pinnacle of his success, local developers in Tarpon Springs made plans for a grand, Inness-themed real-estate development. At its heart, this development would have featured the Inness Memorial Art Institute, dedicated to Inness Sr. It would have included an art gallery, art studios and an auditorium. And of course, there would be the beautiful Mediterranean Revival homes to be built on Inness and Park Drives. In May of 1925, a crowd gathered to celebrate Inness Sr.'s 100th birthday, unveiling a plaque and a large painting by Inness Jr. entitled *Sunset on the Bayou*, dedicated to the memory of his father. But the real-estate bust of 1926 put an end to those dreams, and in that same summer, Inness Jr.'s own life came to an end.

Today, the works of George Inness, Jr., can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Massachusetts, and the Montclair Art Museum (where he and his wife maintained yet another grand house). During his lifetime, he was elected to the Society of American Arts and the National Academy of Design and served as President of the prestigious Salmagundi Club in New York City. In 2019, he was installed in the Florida Artists Hall of Fame, his candidacy supported strongly by the Tarpon Springs UU Church. Cragsmoor is proud to share this legacy with Tarpon Springs.