

An impressionist painting of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a brown cow stands on a grassy slope. In the middle ground, a two-story wooden house with a chimney is visible, surrounded by bare trees. The background shows more trees and a hazy sky. The overall style is characterized by visible brushstrokes and a focus on light and color.

# *Landscapes*

Landscape painting in Wilton emerged as a popular art form starting in the late 19th century when European Impressionism began taking hold of American artists and audiences. Influenced by their travels to European and French art schools, painters like J. Alden Weir and William Merrit Chase returned to the United States and developed a unique American version of what was produced overseas. American Impressionism emphasized vibrant colors and light, with an emphasis on capturing the tranquility of the countryside. Many Impressionists favored the Northeast, specifically the rural communities surrounding the artistic and cultural center of New York City. Art schools and artists societies soon began popping up in the city, founded by well-known American Impressionists. Aided by new portable paint tubes which enabled mobile “en plein air” (or “outside”) painting and inspired by the beautiful scenery and changing seasons of Connecticut, Impressionist artists ventured out into the local rural landscapes.

Wilton was still a small farming community of under 2,000 residents near the end of the 1800’s and it represented the perfect setting for many emerging artists. In 1882, J. Alden Weir, a leading figure in the American Impressionism movement, acquired a farm and studio on the Wilton-Ridgefield border, which is now memorialized as the Weir Farm National Historical Park. Other artists followed Weir - for both short- and long-term stays - including Childe Hassam, John Twachtman, Mahonri Young, and Sperry Andrews.

Henry Grinnell Thomson, another Impressionist and contemporary of Weir, arrived in Wilton in 1879 and established a studio of his own in Wilton Center. Thomson frequently displayed his work in New York City, but was active in the local community as well, serving as president of the Wilton Group of Artists and contributing to exhibitions produced by the Silvermine Artist Guild located in South Wilton, Norwalk, and New Canaan.



# *Lives and Landscapes*

From the town's beginnings in early 18th century, work depicting the people and landscapes of Wilton have reflected the ever-changing artistic tides of subject matter, materials and styles of the next three centuries. Throughout that time, Wilton has served as inspiration for a wide variety of creators. Whether simply passing through or ensconced as a long-time resident, pushing the boundaries of artistic expression or fulfilling commercial contracts, Wilton's artists produced a diverse body of work.

Members of Wilton's colonial upper class, such as the Lamberts, commissioned portraits to help display their wealth and power. The work of itinerant painter Ralph Earl was prized – Earl's patron's included Founding Father Roger Sherman – as were the portraits produced by the renowned Gilbert Stuart's nephew, Gilbert Stuart Newton.

Over time, landscapes rose in popularity. Wilton's sparsely populated countryside of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries provided beautiful scenery to be captured on canvas and a quiet place to work undisturbed, while Wilton's proximity to the cultural hub of New York City ensured a large audience was easily accessible. Artists working in the new Impressionist style, seeking vistas to be painted "en plein air" populated the area – one of the leaders being J. Alden Weir and his "great good place" Weir Farm. Others like H.G Thomson followed soon after. In the early to mid- 20th century, a new group of artists emerged. Many congregated in the Silvermine area enjoying both the setting and the proximity to the city. Works produced in Wilton could quickly be placed in any of New York's numerous museums and galleries.

Lives and Landscapes explores Wilton's artistic legacy through a selection of rarely seen work from Wilton Historical's permanent collection. These works capture something of the personality of the town through the faces and places depicted. They tell the stories of not only the subject matter of the piece, but the story of a town.





# Portraits

Beyond just a form of artistic expression, portraiture in 18th and 19th century America served as a status symbol for the subject and their families. Having a portrait painted was time consuming and costly, and as a result generally unaffordable for the lower classes. Art became a way to celebrate the success, riches, and prominence of the person or family being captured in the work. Portraits served as a way to document the subject's significance for future generations. In some cases, family portraits often included a written genealogical history in the background of the painting.

Because portraits were so expensive, families would want these portraits to be hung in a place of prominence in the house so that everyone could see. This also meant that portraits were meticulously organized and planned. The long process of choosing clothes, hair, and even which members of the family were allowed to be in the portrait all came from the desire to create a perfect portrait that could be hung for public display.

The wealthy families of colonial New England created high demand for talented portrait painters. Rich patrons provided ample business for popular artists such as Charles Willson Peale, Jonathan Trumbull, and Gilbert Stuart. Desire for portraits created an opportunity for many American craftsmen to turn to portraiture as a side job to supplement their income. These self-trained portraitists created unique styles all their own.

Due to their wealth and prominence in the community, some of the well-known Wilton families of the time, such as the Grumman, Comstock, and Lambert families, were able to commission portraits for various family members. The portraits range from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century and were completed by widely recognized painters such as Ralph Earl or Gilbert Stuart's nephew, Gilbert Stuart Newton.