



Ken Fulk's Love Letter to Provincetown, America's Original Bohemian Mecca

Four hundred years on, a creative Shangri-La on the Cape shelters a new generation of artists, writers, and free spirits.

BY KEN FULK AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

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STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

Perhaps there's something in the water. Or maybe it's the light that shelters this sliver of sand at the very tip of Cape Cod. For as long as history has been recorded around these parts, Provincetown has been a refuge.

We tend to forget that the Pilgrims, America's original renegades, landed here in 1620 before deciding Plymouth was more to their liking—safer, less complicated. Those who followed them here, to what some call Land's End, sought something riskier but far more sacred, a sanctuary from conformity.

Exactly 400 years later, this New World oasis is a friendly port again, this time from the turbulence of 2020. Right on the harbor, at the heart of what's known as the historic district, the former home of the journalist and labor organizer Mary Heaton Vorse, an early 20th-century Pied Piper who lured many like-minded radicals here, is serving its original purpose as de facto roundtable for the area's mavericks and misfits.



From left: Actress-writer [Hari Nef](#), artist [Mark Adams](#), and curator [Joe Sheftel](#) in the garden of Mary Heaton Vorse House, recently restored by West Coast designer [Ken Fulk](#).

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My husband Kurt and I restored the neglected dowager of a cottage and turned its eight bedrooms into artist residences, which are much needed in a town with precious little affordable housing.

We volunteered the first floor of the house and the grounds for use by local organizations through the Provincetown Arts Society, an extension of our San Francisco creative incubator, [Saint Joseph's Arts Society](#). It's our love letter to this queer little hamlet that has given us so much.



Anna Weyant's painting *Summertime* is flanked by 19th-century leather armchairs in the parlor, and Leilah Babirye's sculpture *Abambowa* is perched on the mantel, which, like other elements in the home, was rebuilt by artisan Nate McKean using salvaged materials.

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I came to Provincetown nearly 30 years ago and, as Vorse wrote in her memoir, *In Time and the Town*, I felt something “as definite, as acute, as falling in love at first sight.”

Kurt and I eventually purchased a house, despite the fact that we lived nearly 3,000 miles away. Much like P’town itself, the homes here are charmingly eccentric, much smaller than their fancy cousins on nearby Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard but twice as personable.



The original walls in the barroom, with an antique French bulldog under a portrait by John Dowd.
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Three years ago Vorse’s granddaughters **Sally O’Brien and Gael Poltrack** approached us with the irresistible mission of buying and rescuing their grandmother’s 18th-century relic, which had been under their custodianship since her death in 1966 and was crumbling, across the street from ours.



Designer Ken Fulk in the Vorse House library.
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In its heyday the house had been the nerve center of Vorse's circle, which included Louise Bryant, John Reed, Sinclair Lewis, and future Pulitzer Prize winner Eugene O'Neill, who performed his very first play on a makeshift stage donated by Vorse to the Providence Players.

To this day intellectuals, iconoclasts, and rabble-rousers, from the magazine editor Adam Moss to the TV superproducer Ryan Murphy, continue to be drawn here, **“one of the few places in North America that does not merely tolerate eccentricity but prefers it,”** as another Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, Provincetown resident Michael Cunningham, puts it.

By the time we came along, Vorse's house was literally sinking into itself, but we loved its ragged character. While the **Provincetown Historical Commission** safeguards the façades of many old buildings, interiors are often lost, and

this was an opportunity to preserve one of the town's most precious links to its past.



An 1898 Hardman Peck & Co. piano and an antique English club chair below the painting *Boxes* by Hugh Steers.

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Despite the extraordinary circumstances of the past year, the Shangri-La on Commercial Street has a pulse once more. Its impossibly steep, timeworn staircase, beat-up floorboards, and unfinished beams are exactly as we found them, thanks to the heroic reconstruction work of local artisan Nate McKean.

But its formerly barren walls are now lined with works by artists young and old, some still with us, some long gone—from the late provocateur Paul Cadmus to the sensitive photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya—and its hallways and private quarters are brimming with the voices of a new avant-garde, carrying on a conversation generations in the making.



A portrait by Judith Shahn hangs over a student chair and pharmacy light, along with a donkey footstool Fulk found at the Battersea Antiques Fair in London.

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Ken Fulk is an interior designer based in San Francisco.