The energetically abstracted land-and-seascapes of Albert Pinkham Ryder led Jackson Pollock to declare him “the only American master who interests me.” Ryder’s work also had a special attraction for Hans Hofmann, Arthur Dove, and other American avant-gardists, including the organizers of the 1913 Armory Show, who incorporated ten of Ryder’s canvases into their coming-out party for modern art. Yet today Ryder’s influence on the modern artists who came after him is little appreciated, an art-historical oversight that an exhibition at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, the first one the painter in more than thirty years, attempts to correct.

Born in 1847, Ryder spent the majority of his life in New York City, where he studied painting, first under portraitist and engraver William E. Marshall and subsequently at the National Academy of Design. If early Barbizon-inspired pastoral scenes, suffused with soft yellow light and populated by panpipe-playing maidens, draw their inspiration from gentle dreams of the Golden Age—or from the painter’s memories of his bucolic Massachusetts boyhood—the stormy canvases of later years summon all the drama of the Old Testament. In works like Moonlit Cove and The Canal, descriptive detail has been almost snuffed out, leaving behind a tattered pattern of blacks, yellows, browns, and whites that evoke, rather than transcribe, earth, water, and sky. In Jonah, perhaps Ryder’s greatest work, thousands of tiny, darting strokes come together to embody the hostile ocean rising to meet the eponymous sinner. The white-capped waves feel dangerous, obeying no earthly fluid dynamics as they crash almost at right angles, their rafts of yellow foam like zigzagging bolts of lightning. It’s a masterpiece of controlled chaos, and, taking into account the radically flattened perspective that this twenty-seven-by-thirty-four-inch drama occupies, it lands only a hairsbreadth away from action painting.

Betrayed by friends and discouraged by declining romantic prospects, at the end of his life Ryder was living like a recluse, surrounded by detritus he couldn’t bear to part with, and paintings that, with failing eyesight, by then took him years to complete. Yet the rising generation of modern artists saw in his example that of the true artist, waving his brush to conjure—as Marsden Hartley put it—“the immanent in things.”

—Sammy Dalati

A Wild Note of Longing: Albert Pinkham Ryder and a Century of American Art • New Bedford Whaling Museum, Massachusetts • June 24 to October 31 • whalingmuseum.org

A unique pipe
American, circa 1840
Carved maple with brass tack buttons and glass bead eyes
Original painted decoration
6 x 4.5 x 2.25 inches
An unique sculptural pipe in the form of an acrobatic naval officer wearing a bicorn hat smoking a cigar. His lower legs and hat are hinged to reveal a metal lined bowl.

www.usfolkart.com
austin@usfolkart.com | 614-395-8278
155 West Nationwide Blvd, Suite 175-A
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Celebrating America
The New Bedford Whaling Museum is bringing together major masterworks of Albert Pinkham Ryder. Known by his friends as “Pinky,” Ryder (1847-1917) achieved legendary status among artists during his lifetime and is considered one of the most prominent influences on American modern expressionism. This is the first exhibition of Ryder’s work since Elizabeth Broun’s 1990 retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The show will feature pieces from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, The Phillips Collection, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, the Lyman Allyn Art Museum, the Toledo Museum of Art, and private collections. Alongside Ryder’s work will be paintings by well-known modernists such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Jackson Pollock, and Wolf Kahn, as well as contemporary artists who consider Ryder to be a spiritual mentor — a century after his death.

Complementing the exhibition, a book by the same title is available now.