Chapter 7 – Summary

The body of material offered by this study-region provides the best fully-representative evidence yet to explain the increasing waves of interest late-nineteenth century artists had in forming settled rural groups and why the sandy coast, in particular, was one of the most advantageous long-term options. There are ample grounds to justify the assumption that many pragmatic considerations sustained their enthusiasm once the initial ideological choice had been made to engage closer with the countryside.

Artists’ colonies were not planned, but such rural social creativity was predictable, given the ever increasing number of topographical painters seeking greater realism further from the cities. Most of the artists who went to these villages were not the extreme avant-garde but were youthful modernisers, looking for an edge. It only needed a change to a few, yet common, practical factors for them to risk this move to a village. Economic advantage and technological innovations greatly influenced all decisions, but many methodological reasons soon became apparent the longer they stayed. Reflecting the adventurous age, these painters were pushing at the boundaries of what was acceptable as fine art, in subject matter and in technique, and, consequently, found official resistance. Many factors were directly born out of frustrations with the Academy-Salon System, state orthodoxy and the in-built conservatism it bred amongst collectors. In addition, financial pressures on their careers were never far away after mid-century, in part because of the arrival of fast-improving mechanical competition, namely lithography and photography.

As with all cultural movements, there were push and pull forces at work. Major transport improvements made the countryside more easily accessible, but they also accelerated its change and brought in competition, especially more art students, foreign painters and tourists. Painters first tried to document the unspoilt character of the countryside, in part as it was under threat, but they often got bogged down in tradition. Artists’ colonies, at best, were seen as progressive and radical, not backward looking utopias. They were open-minded, healthy rural forums for fresh talent and new ideas; not parochial gatherings but international in consensus and outlook. By the 1880s, the biggest physical and social changes were not yet so apparent in farming districts, but they were along the coast. Fishing communities were seen as emblematic of a nation’s traditional character and stoic qualities, then, suddenly, these same villages were host to some of the most profound new cultural forces, namely mass-tourism, high-fashion, organised recreation, leisure and sport. Modernists in these coastal artists’ villages were quick to evolve and became as dynamic as the landscapes they inhabited.

The work produced in these artists’ villages had a freshness, a lightness and a naturalism, which appealed to collectors world-wide. The pictorial representation of the sky and clouds was highly important to impressionist painting, along with light on water, all prominent along the coastal plains. A special bright atmosphere is generated by and over the vast stretches of sands around the North Sea. The dune-sheltered hamlets offered unspoilt geographies and traditional folk dramas to realists, yet they also continued to provide elemental stimulus for further abstraction, seen in the extreme yet stunning works of Mondriaan at Domburg, one of many kinds of expressionist to find favour with the nature of this coast.

The nature of the collectors themselves and what was collected also altered radically during this period. Leading artists continued to produce monumental works annually, despite their criticisms of the official salons, but the majority produced ‘pot-boilers’ that were unassuming, easily-accessible and affordable. Plein-air painting produced bright, colourful, airy
views that found favour with the new art markets, the *nouveau-riche* and connoisseurs alike. Artists’ colonies gained reputations for producing certain kinds of narratives, strongly coloured by regional identity and topographical character, yet whose appeal often transcended time and place. The choice of an international contextual study, here, is therefore vindicated, for the evolution of these groups was more than mere imitation of early, French rural models.

The critical moment in the rise of artists’ colonies arrived in tandem with the grudging official acceptance of realism in landscape painting. The formation of *ad hoc*, non-religious groups of painters was a relatively new notion, for trade guilds and professional associations often proved too inflexible and out of touch. With the well-publicised rise of the School of Barbizon, in particular, the concept finally took hold amongst artists everywhere as providing the best resolution to many financial, technical and philosophical problems. A strong sense of place was important and by using the village name eponymously helped with simple recognition, being un-sophisticated and un-aligned. Although broadly in sympathy with regional identity and the working classes, they were an eclectic mixture of individuals, common in late Romanticism, with little or no social, religious or political agenda.

The whole process of modernism was accelerated when one or more of a colony’s leader’s gained success, consequently, further advertising each community’s ethos, tone and depth of character. The majority of artists’ communities, in this study, did not have or require a charismatic leader, but they did all have a settled core-group of founders, who achieved success through innovation either in subject matter, method or by exploiting the new media. The impact of certain artists’ colonies, such as Worpswede, Skagen and Laren, was far-reaching, to the extent that almost all modern art in their respective countries was touched by their achievements, seen in collections, in exhibitions and in the new art magazines. There are strong links between the rise of artists’ colonies and the spread of the modern movement. It was not only that modernists formed into rural groups and made fine art together but, for the first time, they took greater control of marketing themselves. They did this in imitation of and in collusion with the new generation of art dealers. The economy of artists’ colonies is therefore inexorably linked with the rise of the Dealer-Critic System. The end of the pioneering stage in artists’ colonies is, therefore, generally marked by a greater self-determination, individually and seen by the formation of their own cooperative societies and village art galleries. By the 1920s the term artists’ colony was a useful marketing label, a brand-name or a corporate logo.

Artists both fed the public thirst for imagery of the countryside and helped stimulate its interests. Artists’ colonies were, by the 1890s, seen to be successful and at an exciting forefront of modernity, in every country across Europe. They were supportive cultural environments for the re-examination of tradition and the application of fresh creative observation. The pioneers were adept at absorbing innovative ideas and technology, which all increased towards the end of the century, affecting personal career development and entirely in tune with the rise of new art markets. These colonies offered sanctuary, however briefly, and peer-group support, where practical information was exchanged and tested away from the restraints of institutional control and reactionary opinion. This study concentrates primarily on painters and illustrators yet valuable contributions came from a wide range of artists, including poets, composers, sculptors, architects and writers.

It is almost impossible to state with absolute accuracy just how many painters participated in the formation of artists’ colonies, even in this study region. Some individuals had a profound affect on the community spirit yet only paid one brief visit, such as Stoltenberg at Skagen. Historians have greatly under-estimated the number of artists influenced by this
movement; a figure well in excess of ten thousand is plausible. The North Sea coast area alone includes at least six well-recognised village groups whose participants, before 1920, approached three thousand. The study of overnighting artists at Katwijk, alone, records 440 foreigners and this figure doubles when one adds the number of registered Dutch artists. Volendam’s data shows similar figures, yet both situations, and Laren’s, cannot take into account the frequency of artist ‘day-trippers’, especially after 1884 when trams linked them to the larger metropolitan centres. By this time, even the remotest rural artists’ colonies were all within a one-day’s journey from their capital cities.

After the 1850s, new steam-powered printing presses revolutionised the media, thus newspapers, illustrated journals and fine-art printing rose in importance. Good draughtsmen found a new source of income and soon copyright fees supplanted standard price structures. Such financial opportunities enabled artists to further distance themselves from the traditional means and centres of art production. Recent theorists point towards a crafting, or manipulation, of the image of the countryside by such artists, yet print-publishers and dealers were businessmen, interested in profits and popularity as much as aesthetics, so that replication, simplification, stereo-typing and symbolism were part of the whole process. Whilst selective picturesqueness and sentimentality are to be found in the iconographies of village artists’ colonies, the huge variety of pictorial styles, techniques and graphic method produced by these groups testifies to the healthy state of independent inquiry and unhindered creativity.

The state academies failed to make sufficient reforms, for there were ever more art students and more professional painters annually, all competing against ‘the old guard’ for visibility. The official salons failed to keep pace with evolving tastes and conditions. Increased demand caused fees to rise, especially for models and studio space, most noticeably in Paris. Cheaper alternatives were sought. Independent art academies proliferated. The demand for materials and equipment also accelerated, stimulating further investment by manufacturers in new pigments, paints and materials, that all helped liberate artists from their urban ateliers. The choice of village depended on its cheap accommodation and the attitude of its hosts, as much as the fascination of its topography. This study reveals the many shared aspirational motivations between artists and certain innkeeping families, in contrast to the atmosphere in the more-famous French prototypes, namely Barbizon’s Auberge Ganne. The proprietors and artists often shared many common aims of the self-employed: a useful sense of detachment; independence; controlled risk-taking; and, also an adaption to changing circumstances, all in the face of prevailing cultural conservatism. Crucially, both were able to re-apply traditional knowledge to the new situation in creative ways.

The art collections and galleries connected with famous artists’ inns, here including Hotel Hamdorff in Laren, Hotel Spaander in Volendam and Hotel Brøndum in Skagen, demonstrate the goodwill generated by the pioneers, yet also, in their content and layout, offer valuable insights into many of the complexities of the social life in these communities. The gratuitous decoration of these hotels and their extensive picture collections best illustrate the natural atmosphere of these villages, the villagers, the innkeepers and the painters, their relationships, collective humours and sorrows, quite unlike anywhere else. The artists’ hotels were also the first places fresh work was put on display, and work in progress, for peer group affirmation had an important function, part of their feelings of mutuality and sense of purpose.

Artists’ hotels played a crucial role in the development of these colonies. They offered the peripatetic painters a sound base that they could call their own. The formation of these
hostels was the first visible marker of territorial gain. They also served as social centres, club-houses, debating societies, cafés, restaurants, exhibition rooms, laundries, shops, suppliers, model agencies, bars, party and dance venues, travel agencies and, of course, provided ateliers. This study also promotes in importance the role played by the innkeepers’ wives and daughters to this homely atmosphere, supporting a social framework that was more familial than hierachical.

The basis of the painters’ fellowship was forged from working together out in the field, or on the same beach, as, usually, only a minority had prior friendships from the state academies. These open communities offered valuable practical experience, support mechanisms and networks for advancement, irrespective of subject, age, sex or style. What they talked about at the village inn was soon tested in the field. This situation helped the disadvantaged the most. The pioneers were usually not young, in their mid- to late-twenties; mostly graduates still looking to craft their own styles and reputations. Women participants increased towards the end of the century, as they found a higher level of professional acceptance, encouragement and security within these rural artists’ colonies, more than in the more-formal urban art circles.

In the light of this research, there is sufficient evidence to show the need for a pragmatic reappraisal of the development of artists’ colonies. By applying an interdisciplinary, international, comparative methodology the number of general variable factors was reduced, allowing improved analysis. The choice of a single geographical region, the sandy coast of the North Sea, lent itself well to this approach. It offers a good cross-section of differing national art histories, yet also many contextual similarities, that help to explain the huge appeal this environment held for so many artists. An element of determinism is evident, especially financial and technological. The practical and social benefits of this movement of artists is affirmed by the constancy of their appearance amongst almost all European countries, as artists sought to resolve their common problems by experiencing, even for a short term, the support structures freely offered by joining a rural group. Having gained confidence and a degree of self-determination, having consolidated their reputation, the pioneers either left or settled down in the village. It can be seen from this study area that they achieved most when a social structure was maintained, usually based on a chronological hierachy, in other words, having a lasting core-foundation group. The Rural artists’ colonies were often physically remote when they began, yet they cleverly maintained close links with the urban art markets and, in most aspects, they may be seen as integral to the development of the modern movement in the host country, back in their native lands and globally.