



■ THE ARTS

Painting the sea, Maine's moving target

BY STEPHEN MAY

Homer and Marin are hard acts to follow, but it is impossible not to try.

The sea, with its constant movement, changeable colors, turbulent moods, and powerful interaction with land, has long intrigued and challenged artists the world over to capture it on canvas and paper. Maine's long and rugged coastline, buffeted by the mighty Atlantic Ocean, has been the greatest single attraction for a virtual Who's Who of artists drawn to the sea's mysteries. Over the course of 150 years, a Maine seascape tradition has been ennobled by their collective brushstrokes. But what does this mean for artists today? How does one improve upon Winslow Homer's wave or Marsden Hartley's rocks? To what extent do contemporary artists measure up?

By the mid-19th century, Mt. Desert's dramatic vistas and surging surf, as dramatically depicted by the likes of Thomas Doughty, Thomas Cole, and Frederic Church, had influenced a generation of painters. Formal and informal art colonies, from Ogunquit to Mohegan Island

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Above: Alan Fishman works on a painting in his Belfast studio.

"I'm not drawn to realism," says Alan Fishman, who cites Matisse, Monet, Picasso, and Klee as influences.

school in Ogunquit, he encouraged students to follow his example by painting motion-filled, dramatic marines. To drive home the point, he told his students to "Paint in verbs, not in nouns." Many followed his advice.

Early American modernists, especially Marin and Hartley, used Homer's coastal pictures as models, but also brought an avant-garde sensibility to their depictions of the sea.

Marin (1870-1953), whose work was championed by art impresario Alfred Stieglitz, brought a sense of energy and movement to works about New York and Maine. From 1914 to his death, he divided his time between New Jersey and locations fronting the Atlantic in the Pine Tree State, from which he captured the sea in works that juggled his commitments to nature and to modernism.

Marin's enthusiasm for Maine is suggested in his observation that "this is one fierce, restless, cruel, beautiful, bellish, and all the other ishes place." His oils and watercolors reflect this exuberance, utilizing tilted compositions, abstract and exaggerated shapes, calligraphic lines, and animated blue water to convey the dynamics of Maine's sea.

Marin started out in Small Point, in Casco Bay, where he purchased a small, uninhabitable island on which to paint and stayed at Alliquippa House. In 1919 he moved further north to Stonington for the

first of several summers. There he began familiar boat depictions, such as his magnificent *Pertaining to Stonington Harbor, Maine, No. 1* (1926, Philadelphia Museum of Art), in which a sailboat is set against a backdrop of the tightly packed village. His sunset views of sea and islands are also arresting.

After 1933 Marin summered in a cottage in Cape Split, on Pleasant Bay, near South Addison. He observed the sea 25 feet from his doorstep and cruising among the islands on his lobster boat. "Here," he wrote Stieglitz in 1936, "the Sea is so damned insistent that houses and land things won't appear much in my pictures."

The longer he stayed in Maine, the more powerful the ocean became in Marin's work. His late, broadly brushed images, punctuated with calligraphic touches, convey the restless force of the sea in all its guises, calm or agitated, gray or filled with color, luminous or leaden. Prime examples include *Wave on Rock* (1937, Whitney Museum of American Art) and *Movement—Sea and Sky* (1946, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

Marin's nervous brush and melding of abstraction and realism inspired many artists who followed him to Maine.

Hartley (1877-1943), who grew up in Lewiston and moved around New York, Europe, New Mexico, and Mexico before returning to his native state in the late 1930s, conveyed a marked respect for the power of the sea. Hartley identified with Homer, who he observed "gets as near in the sense of immediacy in sea life as one can get."

Sojourning restlessly around the state in places such as Portland, Ogunquit, Georgetown, Vinalhaven, Bangor, and finally Corea, a remote fishing village near Ellsworth, Hartley composed increasingly riveting, heavily impastoed, and solidly composed views of the coastal sea. Much of their power emanates from the manner in which he pared down forms to their essentials, underscoring a sense of durability, energy, and solidity in keeping with the subject matter.

In *Stormy Sea No. 2* (1936, Farnsworth Art Museum), Hartley employed energetic brushwork in somber dark blues, blacks, and grays in depicting a lone schooner riding on choppy waves under threatening skies. In this and other works Hartley, like Homer and Woodbury, suggests man's insignificance in the face of the forces of nature.