

Seeing the Sea

From her perch overlooking Cape Cod and the Atlantic Ocean, artist Anne Packard captures the many moods of the winter sky and sea

The sea churns under a spitting sky, and gray clouds gather in giant clumps. Despite the ominous forecast, at least one person in this quiet New England town is happy about the winter storms rolling in. Artist Anne Packard sits on the only piece of deck furniture not put away, cigarette in one hand, paintbrush in the other, and a brown felt hat pulled down around her ears. She listens to high tide slosh against wood pilings she built in front of the deck to keep the foundation of her Provincetown, Massachusetts, house from washing away. "When I first bought this place and before I built that bulkhead," she says, "I could see the ocean come and go under the floorboards in the living room. The upstairs bedroom still rocks in storms like a ship at sea, but living on the edge is a privilege. Not a day goes by that I don't appreciate what I see."

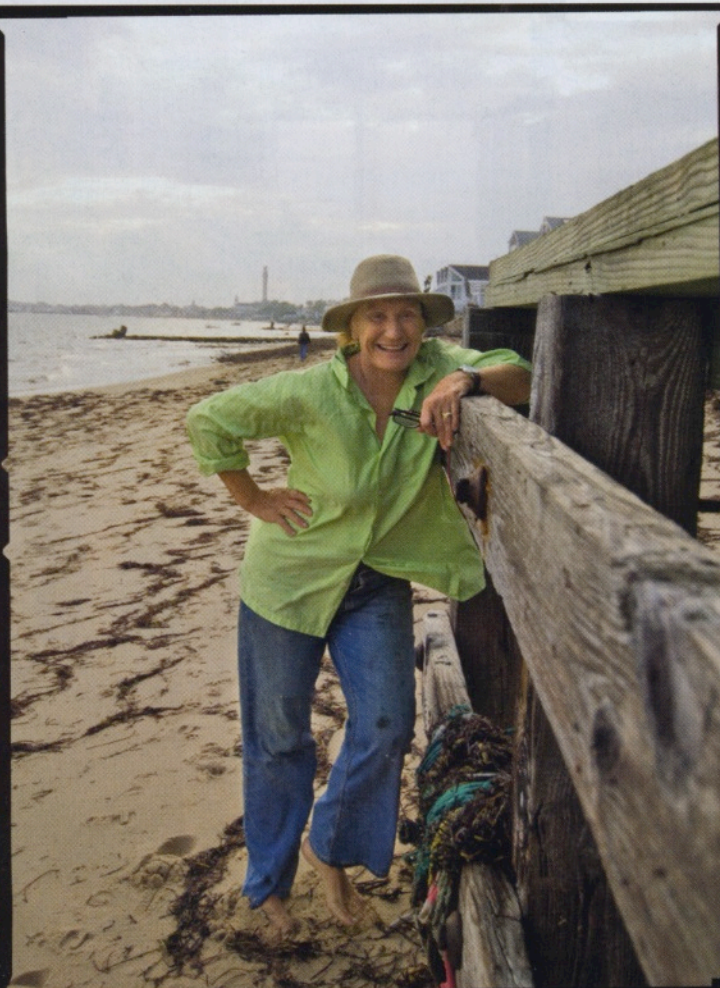
From a second-story studio in her Cape-style house, the 76-year-old artist captures the light and weather, solitary boats, vast skies, and empty dunes of Cape Cod primarily in oil paint applied to canvases. Now, she's using her grasp of nature's idiom to move inward, "possessed," she says, "with this desire and need to paint not just what I see but something beyond that—a yearning."

In her studio now are the beginnings of winter storm paintings, one reason she may be smiling into the one approaching. "The melding of the sea and sky in a storm gives me endless opportunities to imagine and dissolve myself into the paint," she says. "I'm holding my breath right now because I'm in the first stages of what I've got on the easel. I've thrown a painting out the window before when I've been frustrated. Am I going to be able to do it today? Each day, I never know if the paint will be glue or magic."



THIS
IS ANNE'S
HOUSE

The seascape around Provincetown's Outer Cape becomes art inside a cottage Anne first rented in 1975 and then bought so she could stay for good.



Motifs Anne loves—solitary boats, sand flats, the horizon—are always in sight.




What's now a well-known and critically acclaimed career got off to a humble start. Newly divorced in 1975, Anne arrived in Provincetown with five children in tow to make her living with a paintbrush. She'd spent childhood summers at The Grand View, a cottage her grandfather, famous Postimpressionist Max Bohm, owned on the East End. With natural talent fostered by instruction from local artists Philip Malicoat and Jerry Farnsworth, the determined single mother began selling 4- by 5-inch marine scenes that she painted on wooden boards for \$10 to \$20 outside the house she rented on Commercial Street.

The unexpected opportunity to buy that ramshackle Cape prompted Anne to commit to year-round life in Provincetown, despite bone-chilling nights in uninsulated rooms and the raw isolation of the lower Cape in the bleak off season. Solitude proved to be a boon; it helped forge Anne's emotive style. "I love winter," she says. "I prefer the angst of the stormy season to sunshine."

After a hurricane sent a storm surge through the house in 1989, Anne remodeled and winterized the structure. Tall windows placed in a row across its bay side overlook the ocean advancing and retreating over a long stretch of sand. Resting between three-hour stints of painting upstairs, she hears the tide move in, the gulls call, the gales batter the windows. Most of Anne's work is now executed in her studio. At her age, she's less inclined to paint outside, she says, "where curious people can break my concentration." Besides, experience has taken over: "I can almost paint the sea with my eyes closed."

HISTORY OF ANNE'S HOUSE

The house was originally the 19th-century summer home of the famous Provincetown American Impressionist Charles Hawthorne's sister; her son, Hawthorne Bissell, rented out rooms and ran a small breakfast & dining room called Cast Anchor, where Anne waitressed when she was 13. The house was known as Bissell's when New York bohemians Mark Rothko and Norman Mailer rented rooms in the mid-20th century.



"I was in my studio seven years ago when I painted *Storm Watch*," Anne says of the piece on the easel. "It depicts no specific place or time but came from my being—because I live right here, on the edge, and I see it all the time. It's my favorite painting; I'll never sell it. It says everything I want to say on canvas."

"People ask me how long it takes to do one of these, and I'll say, '30 minutes on this canvas but a lifetime spent by the sea'" —ANNE PACKARD



Notes from the artist

1 Ocean View "This came from a trip up and down the Maine coast that I concocted under the influence of Winslow Homer. I liked the way he did rocks and water sprays. I painted the spray like I'm looking through a scrim of it. I can't think too much when I'm painting; I just go with my gut feelings."

2 Two Dories "I was in Panic Harbor, a small inlet in Truro, and saw these boats very early in the morning. I sketched them at 8 a.m. and then went right to work back at the studio. I had them in me and wanted them to come out on the canvas."

3 Wharf "My son is a fisherman and keeps his boat here in P-Town. I feel connected to the sea through him. We go to the wharf early and talk weather, water, fishing. He's out there 12 hours a day. The painting has a nostalgic feel of drifting in time because the fisherman's way of life is vanishing."

4 Marsh "I went for a long walk and saw the marsh at low tide. I made a sketch and took notes on the colors, their softness and values. I always have a sketch pad in my car. I knew I'd use three or four values to convey the softness of the day. I knew the beautiful green that would go against the blues." 🌸



WHERE TO SEE AND BUY ANNE'S ART

Anne's most recent paintings are showing at Galerie SoNo in South Norwalk, Connecticut, from November 5 to December 23. Her work is on continuous display at her Packard Gallery on Commercial Street in Provincetown. Selected works are housed in the permanent collection of the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Brewster. For more information, visit packardgallery.com.



“If I don’t like
the actual image, I’ll add
or subtract on canvas
until I do. I hang
unfinished paintings
on nails in the wall
to critique them, some
for six months, or
I’ll turn them against
a wall to come
back to later when
my eye is refreshed”

—ANNE PACKARD

