

The Woman's College of  
The University of North Carolina  
LIBRARY



CQ  
no. 243

COLLEGE COLLECTION

Gift of  
Janet Lee Pratt

A STUDY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE  
AND THE CREATIVE WORK OF MAN

by

Janet Lee Pratt

5773

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of  
the Consolidated University of North Carolina  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

1959

Approved by

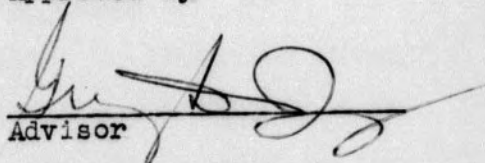
  
Advisor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. NATURE IN MAINE . . . . .	1
II. NATURE THROUGH MAN . . . . .	8
III. WATERCOLOR AS AN EXPRESSION OF CREATIVITY . . . . .	13
IV. EXPLANATION OF THESIS PAINTINGS . . . . .	19
V. BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	22

## NATURE IN MAINE

The essence is in the moist and murky soil, in the smell of frozen trees in winter, and in the ebb and flow of water. The continent closes into sea, and there is a harmonious fusion where the artist may find the past, present and future; this, flowing through the channel of his soul, affects his creative expression in whatever medium he may choose.

This is a world in which the artist may search with satisfaction and knowledge of a growing understanding of the creative drive within himself and the effects of this drive on his painting. This is a world in which life is continued even in the turbulence of heavy surf--the world where the tide covers large areas, then ebbing, uncovers the living of millions of creatures, uncovers the patterns of rock and rockweed, and uncovers a continuing universal process. A study of the ways of this shore and of its creatures can only widen the scope for an artist in his understanding of the ways and elements of design. Here may live the artist.

As man reaches out, and in, to create, so here, life reaches out to live in crystal tidepools or among the ferns that mat the woods. The sense of struggle for life is very keen on such rugged and open shores, for man as well as for smaller creatures. Where the small larva of the barnacle is

forced into the crumbling and tossing water through which it must find its way to life, this struggle is present. The small larva tests out the various rocks until it finds one suitable, perhaps one where other barnacles have colonized, and then it begins the process of trying to cling to the rock until its outer shell has hardened. The biologist tells us that the barnacle with its delicate larva inhabit some of the roughest shores where even the rockweed and many other sea things would find their death. What life does here, the artist has tried to grasp. He had tried to grasp the relationships, the forms, the colors, the rhythms, the force, and the whispered echoes. There is design in an air-view of islands or in the microscopic view of the larva of barnacles, and this is the food for a hungry creative soul. There is sound in wind moving through the trees and dividing the branches, and there is the sound of wind moving over water, of water moving against water, and of water moving and grinding over stones. There is the creation of cracked, worn rock, grain by grain, year by year. There is the creation of soil by bark rubbing against bark in fallen trees. The cycle of birth and death, of formation and destruction, revolves endlessly, and it is in these patterns that the artist may find himself.

This is a young coast where the rocks are not yet ground to sand as on the Southern shores. The land was

filled with mountains when the glacier settled hard upon its back and forced it down until the sea came between the mountain peaks and made islands surrounded by gray rock and ocean. The ocean between these islands is free and breaks violently around and over their shores. The ties to the ancient are near. There is also a memory between the fir and the blue spruce and the undulating kelp which clings to the floor of the sea. This cragged and indented shore drops suddenly into very deep water, thus providing an excellent ground for the development of many different types of life in this marginal area. Small snails live on and under masses of seaweed that provide a stringy cover for the rocks when the tide is out. There are spiny sea urchines, the starfish, blue-black mussels, the flower-like algae, and the barnacles that whiten large areas along the shore. The tide exerts strong pulls, and the low tide uncovers a vast area for the artist to wander over and ponder.

It is this relentless drive for life that sharpens the edge of the artist's senses. It is the relentless drive for creation. The subtidal world moves and breathes with an endless activity which cycles over and over. There are species which constantly change to different locations and newer climates, and there are those who are leaving the sea to seek the land. The past and future are present in this respect. In the area where the sea meets the land, the

artist is apt to find a magical time and a link between the life of the blue-green of the forest and the blue-green of the sea. Life is constantly evolving, the shore and land are constantly changing. Not only is it what the artist sees here, but what he smells and hears. The smell of drying seaweed is uncovered by the ebbing tide, and the sound of fog pats the ocean into quietness. This is the world of creation in which man seeks his own creation through certain relationships in form, color, rhythm, force, and the whispered echo.

The intricate relationships formed on this coast are interpreted by man as the sensations of color, form, and rhythm. The cold Labrador current swings close to the shore, and the warm Gulf stream is pushed out towards the wide expanse of sea. The intricate relationships of the cold and warm provide for the specific type of marine climate that prevails in this area. It could be that the intimate mixing of warm and cold in color provides an atmosphere for the growth of a spiritual creature.

Form is varied in the smooth sculptured hand stones and in the jagged juts of rock that choose to reach out to the ocean. Form comes in the spindles of the sea urchine and in the rounded needles of the spruce. It comes in the sharp sound and in the soft clouds. Most form along the shore is the work of the sea and of the tiny living

creatures that inhabit the shoreline. Barnacles turn a water-worn rock into a surface that cuts and shreds the bare foot of man. The feel of these varied surfaces can, through man, be transformed into something of man's creation.

The feel of coloring here is basically more subtle than on the Southern shores, and in many instances it is extremely so, being very cold and dark. On the other hand, many brilliant colors have been added by man such as his boats and his houses with their red-orange shading in contrast with nature's blue-green. There are also the brilliant colors that are located in the tidepools and in the smaller fauna of the woods and in the sea when the sun is brilliant or when it glows with phosphorescence at night. The color contrasts are uniquely placed as in the rose-colored algae against the green spines of the sea urchine, the purple and brown starfish centered with its orange spot. These colors seem even more brilliant when reflected through the clean icy water that shimmers with light in the sun. Not only are there the brilliant and subtle colors, but also the values in white barnacle-covered rocks against the blue-black of the rocks that are covered with the mussels that attach themselves almost as profusely as the barnacles. Many colors are hard and sturdy while others are transparent and reflect like a glaze on another substance. It is primarily a land and sea of green and blue with the subtle mixing of



the two. The artist has a chance to note these subtleties of color between these two and also the subtleties of how they fit with the other hues. He is also presented with a rich awareness of color and especially those colors for which there is no name, but which the artist may incorporate into a completed feeling.

Rhythm is present in the undulating of the waves that rush in, hit high, fall back, and then retreat. There is the rhythm of trees in wind and the rhythm in sound that moves from one branch to the other. The salt water surges, bringing up the beds of rockweed that float by air captured in small bubbles of jelly in their stalks. Following this surge is a relaxation of the sea that makes the rockweed flop exhausted back to its home rock, arms outstretched in a rhythmic pattern like the weary.

As a painting embodies a force or a whispered echo, so innately does nature. The assault of the sea on the land during storm seasons will sometimes lift huge boulders with its waves and send them crashing down upon other stones. At times the force that the waves exert upon the shore can be measured by the ton. The sea has been known to engulf half an island in a single wave, and the white spray has coated many spruce and fir that live at higher levels. This force moves, pushes and forms its own creation, but never satisfied, continues to change it. After the storm it moves back

to view its creation, to ponder any new changes and with the wind to seek a new attack. It is this force that has given these islands their darker colors as well as their brilliance and their mysterious rhythms.

There is a strong intermixture of this force and a force which is echoed in a whisper. One of these forces that is whispered is fog which creeps between the islands during cold and rainy days, or at the end of a day when fog comes to cool and calm the water which has jumped and sparkled under the sun. Fog is wet and cold and cools the rocks that are hot. This fog is a softer force, and yet a force that presses down upon the sea, as though covering it with a coat to calm what has been violent. There are also the times when fog hides the activities of the sea before a storm and hides the growing waves that roll between the islands while at the same time, fog rolls between the rocks, over the ocean, and through the needles of the spruce.

Both of these forces work together to create their composition of various rhythms, colors, and forms. The composition can be as wide as the eye can see and then beyond, or as closely as the eye can concentrate. This is Maine and its islands and why some men can find their soul in that which is not all manmade and that which is very little disturbed by man except for small stones which man has turned over and over in his hand or by those men whose very existence depends upon the sea and its related land.

## NATURE THROUGH MAN

Nature is the father of human creative activity. Man is attached to nature and yet where the crushing surf pounds relentlessly, he is uneasy. Man is uneasy not because of fear, but because of awe. Here man may lose his sense of time and space. What he must not lose is his sense of the subjective, for man cannot live without beauty as his guide, and he is always seeking the beautiful, the ultimate, and the truth. The artist is seeking this through nature and through men.

Man is thus a constant companion to his surroundings, and beauty becomes relative to the way it is interpreted by man and felt by him. Man is united to nature because his own soul is partially made of and is akin to that light which comes from nature. This light is the channel through which nature travels, is chemically changed, and issues forth in new forms which are capable of living and existing. It is the vibrating and exciting birth of a creature which, in its prenatal stages, was fed by the fog, the sea, and the sky. This creature is not purely sensual but also intellectual. In its creation, the sensual gains first place, then by degrees the intellectual defines and marks out the boundaries of understanding and analysis as a means to an end in the whole encounter of esthetic experience. It is a creature of

two cells, the sensual and the intellectual. These cells are not distinctly separated, but blur through each other, their fibers intertwining like the roots of a dense forest. The perception of beauty cannot exist without there first being emotion nor can it exist in a painting unless there is reason and understanding of this emotion.

The beauty of nature is all the greater as the insight into it by man is more profound. Beauty only exists because of man, artistic expression exists because of nature, and nature exists because of artistic expression. An object is not beautiful unless it radiates to man an essence which is the quality of the thing channeled into man's pleasure. Man interprets this pleasure and man also adds to it by some of the human functions such as the deep breath. Beauty is an inner excitement or joy, and there is no standard by which man may establish this beauty, neither by history, general opinion, or authority. It is not walled in by technical experience or principles, but it is relative to the individual and is valid only in the actual perception of an esthetic experience.

It should be noted, however, that there is a difference between esthetic experience of beauty and that which is functional. Esthetic beauty lives in the inner reality, and functional beauty exists in the outer reality. The experience of an esthetic beauty is an immediate, concrete, though

not physical, involvement that is later followed by the realization of new values.

Man's response to nature is in a created vision of the essence of a thing; it is not a copy of pure form. Picasso has said, "There is no abstract art, for everything must start somewhere."<sup>1</sup> Cezanne said, "To paint from nature is not merely to copy the object, but to realize sensations."<sup>2</sup> The artist has created a thing in which nature has acted as a stimulus and as a check. Without nature man must physically, mentally, and spiritually perish, and most men will perish by not fulfilling the urge to create spiritually. Man turns to nature for its relationships, and though there are many solutions in nature that seem perfect in the eyes of man, there are equally a certain number that seem imperfect, such as the tree struck by lightning. This is only imperfect in the eyes of man, and even then man may interpret these imperfections in a painting, the striving for the perfect in the imperfect. Nature is creation, man is created, and man can create. It is a continuation of process by which man depends on that which has gone before, the creation of nature and of man. The artist, having this urge to create, uses symbols through the visual world to tell, to communicate, and mainly to satisfy his own need for creation. An interpretation into a

---

<sup>1</sup>Read, H., The Philosophy of Modern Art, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup>Meyers, B.S., Modern Art in the Making, p.210.

visual experience is necessary for man because without any interpretation, visual experience is non-existent. Man then channels this need for creative activity into a creative experience.

There is a deep hollow within the soul of man which comes from the inability to express the whole scope of creation. This is the loneliness to which an artist is especially sensitive, but it is more wonderful to live with it than without it. This hollow yearns for light, but the darkness must be content with the glow of foxfire. A glimpse into the real inner reality of man and nature is like a great joy, like a vibrating painting, yet which is touched by sadness because of this unfulfilled desire for the light of the ultimate essence.

Though the artist becomes involved in an esthetic experience, he must keep a distance in order to see, for the close-up vision may become clouded by too much participation in the experience. In memory do some of the greatest creations exist, and through memory are some of the greatest works created.

There is man and nature, and in some instances, man has built and walked without disturbing the dignity or supremacy of nature. Man can create within nature where his object and nature will complement each other and enrich the possibilities of both. On many of the islands in Maine,

where the chief industry is that of the lobsterman, nature has not been disturbed but has gathered men for her admiration, men to climb her shores, and men for whom her life is theirs. Their boats are plain and smell of salted cod, and men wear yellow oilskins that are "cheerful in the fog" and reflect the yellow of the sun to the water. Most boats are white, and on clear days or in the fog they stand out like stark or misty floating icebergs against the horizon and on the plain of sea. These men are artists not only in their colors with nature, but in their habits. They are artists when they breathe a coming storm, watch for its coming, and then sit contented and quiet while wind and rain flood the salt water marshes and clinches tree against tree. This is man in nature, living with nature in an intimate relationship. This is the way many artists may live, and this is the way I must.

## WATERCOLOR AS AN EXPRESSION OF CREATIVITY

Watercolor, as a medium of the expression of nature, is one of the most living and natural mediums for such expression. It is also one of the most difficult mediums in execution, however the various effects that are possible with watercolor are limitless. It is a wild and unexact-ing medium at times in which the artist deliberately lets the watercolor run freely on his paper, or it can also be a very delicate medium due to the subtleties in color and line.

This medium adapts itself well to expression which comes from nature because there is this extreme between the vast wildness and drive in relation to the delicate and intricate. Watercolors may tend towards the vaporous or may be solid with deliberate strokes, however it is a medium which is best suited to the painting of things which can be seen through and beyond, and things which are ever moving, changing, and evolving. This is due to the movement of watercolor itself on the paper. It moves like water and like air and explores the tiny cracks in the paper's surface with shooting and fuzzy spikes. There exists a knit relationship between paper and color which is stronger here than in any other medium in painting. The type of paper therefore has a definite effect upon the totality of the feeling which the artist wishes to encounter.



Paper can be generally divided into two kinds, the smooth and the rough. Smooth papers tend to absorb the color more quickly and give it wider and more gracious freedom. The rougher papers, in confining the color to the tiny valleys and creeks in the paper, let the watercolor act in such a way as the sea itself would worm its way into tiny crevices leaving the actual design of its wanderings behind. The positive surface instead of the negative valleys may be attached with paint, leaving the valleys white, and giving thus a distinct sparkle to the color which is likened to the sparkle of sunlight on water. In a closer view of paper and watercolor, it is the color which may run down the hills and into the streams leaving tiny and perfect gradations of the same hue due to the transparency that is possible in watercolor. This gives the sense of light which travels into the painting, through it, and back to the viewer's eye. This is not an artificial light, but the natural light found in nature.

Many papers cannot be used successfully unless they are moistened first with a damp sponge. Some papers contain a certain amount of size which at first makes the paper repel the watercolor as would an oiled surface. If the paper is moistened first with a sponge or by simply pouring a puddle of water on the paper and smearing it into the paper, the paper in this damp condition will absorb the watercolor more readily without having to scrub with the brush. However,

scrubbing the color into the paper with a brush can be utilized to promote a certain feeling in the picture. Likewise the repelling of the color in little droplets on the paper can be incorporated into the painting. Certain areas may be dampened or drawn in with plain water before the color is applied which gives the abrupt change from the blurred to the drops of color or to the solid area which have been attained by scrubbing in the color. This change can also produce a nice effect from the blurred to the quick stroke across the paper with the brush, giving the sparkle to the color where the white of the paper shows through. There are many papers which do not have this starchy quality, however this is not any criterion since the sized papers in many instances contain more possibilities. The most successful watercolor papers are those which are handmade and which are cold-pressed. There are other papers than these which may be used in watercolor, other than those made especially for this medium, such as cheap newsprint paper with the faint yellowish tint or the heavy illustration board. Many watercolor papers also come in colors.

The shape and size of the brush used in watercolor is also a determining factor in the painting. Besides those brushes which are made for watercolor, a stiffer brush such as that used in oil painting may be used if the artist intends a strong brush line. Strokes can vary from wide and broad

areas to the fine lines obtained from the tip of a Japanese brush. A fine crowquill pen may be used to insert a delicate rendering of line.

Watercolors are sold in the cake and in the tube and are made up of a colored pigment plus a suspending medium of gum to hold the pigment together. The cake is relatively dry, and the artist must often scrub the cake with his brush in order to obtain any color. The tube color on the other hand, is semi-moistened into a paste which enables the artist to load his brush quickly with a new hue. This is of importance because time is one of the major factors in the control of the design. The medium dries very quickly compared to oil painting, and the artist must work fast if he wants to add colors to a wet surface so that they will bleed into and around each other. The process of drying definitely affects the painting. If the paint has been brushed on a wet or damp surface, when it dries, it will tend to dry lighter. Therefore, the artist must make note of this as he applies color to the surface of a wet area. If the color has been put in puddles on the paper, in the process of drying, the center of the puddle is very light in color, and as the color radiates from this center, it becomes darker, the outer edge of the puddle seeming fringed with a dark shade of this hue. Colors that have been mixed together, often in the process of drying, tend to separate and produce very subtle effects. Often these accidental

happenings in watercolor are directly related to nature, and the forms that are produced are many times the forms found in nature. The actual nature of the watercolor can give the effects of the nature in trees, clouds, and sea.

White is rarely used to tint another color, and black is rarely used to shade a color. The paper serves to tint the color, for in the color's transparency, the color will mix with the white of the paper. Black is usually not used to shade a color as it tends to dull the color it is mixed with, and there are other colors which, when mixed together, will give the same shade without the loss of freshness and brilliancy. However, black may be used in its pure state. Once color has been placed on the paper, it is very difficult to place another color over the top when the painting is still wet, for the addition of another color may pick up the original color. The use of glazes after the painting is dry is often used, but these must be applied with care so that the first color will not be picked up by the moisture in the new color.

Watercolor is characterized by immediacy, for the artist must look at or imagine that which he wishes to portray, and then with clean and sometimes broad strokes he must quickly define certain areas, regulating the flow of paint from the brush. The details may then be added while the painting is in the process of drying. Many of the details may be added

by another material other than watercolor such as lithographic crayon or India ink. The lithographic crayon used on damp paper gives a very dark and rich black, while the intense black of India ink has some of the tendencies of watercolor to blur and to spread on wet or damp paper with very intricate lines radiating from the main source of the ink. This is one of the small explosions of light that may occur through this method.

Once the image is recorded on paper, it cannot be painted over as in oil painting, except for slight glazing. It therefore stays forever fresh and scintillating with newness of creation or muddled and muddy, fading into nothingness. It is often the unexpected in watercolor that is the most beautiful and essential. Even the supposed carelessness may turn into something of spontaneity of movement, the quick glide of a gull, or the slipping of stones over stones with the blackwash of tide. It is the exploration and discovery that make the medium so exciting; it is creation of many of nature's forms, colors, and rhythms purely through the union of water, pigment, and paper. Many an essence may lie in this union of nature, man, and watercolor.

## EXPLANATION OF THESIS PAINTINGS

My work has been greatly influenced by the islands in Maine, their coastline, their nature, and their people. The purpose of these paintings is to evaluate the effects of nature on my painting. This is a place which is wild in nature, yet is orderly and full of minute precision. The people here are united to the sea. The sea itself and especially its colors are in evidence in my work. My preference for the variations of the blue-greens and the added brilliance of its complement, an orange-red, are predominant in many of my paintings. Many of these paintings are studies in the subtle combinations of color as well as line. The colors and the lines can be traced to such things as the spines of a sea urchine, the structure in trees and in rocks or the colors in reflected light in water. The picture entitled "Fog" is a study in the subtle coloring in grays.

I have tried to show the moods from nature and the design which has come to me from having lived in such an environment. Most of my pictures will be self-explanatory, but I would like to comment on the two rather distinct groups in this thesis work. One group tends toward abstraction, though not non-objective, while others are definitely in the realistic frame of mind. Many of the supposed abstractions are in reality less abstract than some of the more traditional

"sea scenes" because they were painted from such subjects as tidepools. A tidepool taken in an impression can be merely subtle globs of color that rise and fall with the water that leaks in and out of the pools. There are those paintings which can be justly called abstractions such as the painting called "The Lobster" in which I have tried to give the feeling of the lobster which has been cooked and placed with the joviality of the people of the island. The slight spots are part of the design that adorns his front two claws. The two paintings called "Woods" and "Sea and Sky" hold a very wide and cumulative essence of the islands for me. The "Woods" is done in the blue, violets, and slight yellows that glaze certain areas of woods that are deep, shadowy and many times extremely blue due to the lack of sunlight in certain areas. Spots of sunlight make contrasting shadows on and in the trees and on the earthy floor. The painting called "Sea and Sky" is very simple in construction and is merely what the title indicates. It is basically two bands of varying blue greens with the abstract indication of sparkle in the sea and the sky in its vastness comparative to the vastness of the sea. It is a more solid painting due to the opaque use of the water-color and is more constructive in nature than something fluid and moving. Those of my paintings which tend toward the realistic have helped me to become aware of the landscape, its vastness, and shadows of boats in harbors which in turn

may help me to discover something in synthesis with myself. In this way, I am able to make the memory living and present and yet not something which is totally apart from the environment. Most realistic work that I do is done in the actual location, and when I remember this place it is channeled through me and comes into a new and different existence which can live apart yet not distantly from its original location. It is true that nature and people become more personal when one is away from them, but with each return there is no deflation on the soul, yet an encouragement and an acknowledgement. Once again I begin to store up those things which I had not seen before, the small creatures that live along the shore, the new growths of trees, and the new colors. I am not at all times aware of what I see, but in memory I know what I have seen and how it was heard and how it smelled. My paintings are not only visual but are attempts to incorporate how something smelled and how the soft hiss of wind through trees is like the soft hiss of fog that scrapes along the upper surface of the sea. There is also the noise of stillness that I do not truly know, but yet know exists in the deepness of the sea.

These things are part of my paintings and my feelings. Painting and writing together have helped to clarify just how I have taken these forms, sounds, and colors from nature and have given them into something of themselves in combination with something of myself.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Binyon, Lawrence, The Flight of the Dragon, John Murray (Publishers), London, 1953.
- Carson, Rachel, The Edge of the Sea, New American Library, New York, 1959.
- Editorial Associates, Modern Artists in America, First Series, Wittenborn Schultz, Inc., New York, 1951.
- Lutz, E. G., Practical Watercolor Sketching, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1931.
- Maritain, Jacques, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, The Noonday Press, New York, 1955.
- Meyers, B. S., Modern Art in the Making, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1950.
- Rader, Melvin, A Modern Book of Esthetics, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1957.
- Read, Herbert, The Philosophy of Modern Art, Meridian Books, New York, 1955.
- Santayana, George, The Sense of Beauty, The Modern Library, New York, 1955.
- Venturi, Lionello, Paul Cezanne Water Colours, Bruno Cassirer, Oxford, England, 1944.