

OVER 50 NEW IDEAS FOR PAINTING INNOVATIVE SEASCAPES

Creative Seascape Painting

BY EDWARD BETTS, N.A., A.W.S.



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WATSON-GUPTILL PUBLICATIONS/NEW YORK

For Jane, again

First published 1981 in the United States and Canada by Watson-Guption Publications,
a division of Billboard Publications, Inc.,
1515 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Betts, Edward H. 1920—

Creative seascape painting.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Marine Painting—Technique. I. Title.

ND1370.B47 1981 751.4 80-24929

ISBN 0-8230-1113-5

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Manufactured in Japan

First Printing, 1981

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My very deepest thanks to all the excellent painters whose work is reproduced in these pages. Whatever merit this book may have is due far more to their presence here than to any words of mine. This book is really theirs, for it could not have been put together without their unfailing friendliness, enthusiasm, and cooperation.

I am grateful to all the art galleries who were so generous in supplying photographic material, and to all the art collectors who graciously agreed to allow work in their collections to be reproduced here.

Once again, I am eternally grateful to Donald Holden of Watson-Guptill Publications, who conceived this sequel to my *Creative Landscape Painting* and served as my working editor. Whenever I had questions or problems, his insights were invariably helpful. I am also indebted to Bonnie Silverstein for her keen eye and painstaking care in dealing with the nitty-gritty of shaping up my prose. She was a joy to work with. And, as always, I appreciate Bob Fillie's expert and imaginative design, a contribution that too seldom receives the recognition it deserves.

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INTRODUCTION

The sea has always been a source of fascination. It can be soothing and it can be terrifying. It can be hypnotic and awe-inspiring. And it is virtually limitless in its variety of color, light, and texture and its constantly shifting form and movement. From the painter's point of view, it is also an unending source of picture material.

The visual aspects of the sea are indeed so varied and appealing, so picturesque and downright beautiful, that they can become a deadly trap. The unwary painter who succumbs only to the ocean's most obvious attractions will produce pictures that are equally obvious and cliché-ridden, more akin to picture postcards than to profoundly felt emotional and aesthetic responses. Seascapes, like paintings of any other subject, above all should be an experience in paint, and only secondarily should they be views of water or shoreline.

Many of the greatest masters in the history of painting have at one time or another felt the strong attraction of ocean and shore and have produced superb seascapes—not just renderings of pretty scenery, but first-rate works of art—because they interpreted the sea in *painterly* terms. When you examine the work of master artists of many eras and cultures, you can see the tremendous variety of approaches that are possible. Among the masters of Chinese and Japanese ink paintings, there are the splashy breadth and freedom of Yosa Buson and Sesshu Toyo; the wildly abandoned, juicy washes of Chu Ta; the brevity and lyricism of Tao-Chi; the shorthand styles of Sesson and Shih-t'ao; and the elegance and expressiveness of Wen Cheng-ming. Among European artists, there is the concentration on light or atmosphere of J. M. W. Turner, John Constable, Claude Monet, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler; the sharp-focus romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich; the interpretation of the sea by the colorists Eugène Delacroix, Edouard Vuillard, and Pierre Bonnard; the search for color as space, volume, and structure of Paul Cézanne; and the simplified slabs and bold masses of color of Nicolas de Staël. Among the Americans, we have the panoramic vistas of Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Church; the brooding, eerie lighting effects of Martin J. Heade; the preoccupation with sharp-focus treatment of forms and reflections of Fitz Hugh Lane; the haunted, visionary seascapes of Albert Pinkham Ryder; the vigorous brushwork of Rockwell Kent and George Bellows; the excited splashiness of John Marin; the lyrical, delicate combinations of wash and line in Lyonel Feininger; the somber starkness of Marsden Hartley; the severe simplifications of Georgia O'Keeffe and Milton Avery; and the rigorous but expressive design evocations of Monhegan Island (Maine) surf, cliffs, and pines of Morris Kantor. All these artists, and others, brought individual concerns, attitudes, and styles to their paintings of shore and sea.

As I write these lines in my summer studio in Maine, I am watching a group of painters, possibly in

art class, perched on the rocks, painting the drama of the smashing white surf, and the thought occurs to me that sea paintings are among the very best and the very worst in American painting. More depressingly, still another thought occurs to me: painters of seascapes are, as they say, a dime a dozen.

This is not meant to be a harsh criticism of the state of seascape painting, especially since that art has long been my passion and my obsession. It is simply that too few seascapists are making the most of their material. It strikes me that all too many marine painters work at the level of what I call the "tourist snapshot." Yet the finest seascapes come from artists who disdain the quick visit and the documentary snapshots in favor of an intense, prolonged, contemplative contact with the sea and its neighboring areas. It is this difference in attitude that separates the true seascape artist from the mass of minor painters of seascapes.

Thus, knowing the vast range of approaches—historical, cultural, and individual—possible in painting the sea, and yet finding myself increasingly aware of the limited variety in seascapes today, I have undertaken the writing of this book in an effort to change this fact by encouraging artists to deal with the seascape in other than standard, conventional ways.

WHAT IS A SEASCAPE?

Perhaps at this point I should define what I mean by "seascape." Seascape falls under the larger heading of "landscape." In fact, many of our most eminent sea painters were equally at home painting both subjects. When I speak of a seascape, I don't only mean a painting of rocks and foam; I use the term in its broadest sense to include cliffs, dunes, tide pools, tide flats, salt marshes, driftwood, storms, boats, regattas, harbors, boat yards, lighthouses, fishing gear, fishing shacks, underwater scenes, seaweed, mussels, and periwinkles. In fact, the term "coastal painting" might be even more accurate, since it is the whole coastal environment, where ocean and continent mix and come together, that is the fundamental source for the seascapist's art.

Here I should repeat what I have written elsewhere: that no matter what the medium, most of the best contemporary seascape paintings are done in the studio. Although paintings done on location have a spontaneity and an immediacy often lacking in paintings from the studio, they lack the sense of considered order, the adjustments of color, space, and design, and the controlled orchestration of all the pictorial elements that are expected of a painting destined to be shown in a major gallery or a national exhibition. A painting may be started outdoors and later completed in the studio, but the most common practice, and the one I strongly recommend, is to just sketch on location and do the actual painting in the studio.

There are plenty of excellent instructional books on how to paint water, surf, waves, and rocks in a representational manner. But the major concerns in

such books are usually a specific medium (oil, acrylic, watercolor) or technique (the mechanics of applying paint). That is not my concern here. I am more interested in *process*, and by that I mean the creative process, the internal means by which an artist creates a pictorial organization out of his or her response to the raw material in nature. I am much less interested in teaching specific techniques than I am in helping my students to develop personal methods of employing those techniques toward purposes that transcend mere description, skill, or virtuosity. How, then, can we go about all this?

From my own experience in painting and teaching, I have come to believe, though this is undoubtedly a generalization and a simplification, that the painter's creative process breaks down into a sequence of four phases: observation, assimilation, synthesis, and revelation.

OBSERVATION

Observation is where it all begins. For the painter, perception and contemplation open the door to the entire creative process. Since we are dealing with a visual medium, everything hinges on what the eye perceives in nature. Thus, continual study of the sea and its environs are an absolute necessity to a marine painter. We know, for instance, that many Oriental masters studied their subjects for a long time, absorbing them through contemplation rather than sketches or studies, and only after they had thoroughly understood the essence of the subject did they finally start the painting. As the painter Max Beckmann put it, "To grasp the invisible, one must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible."

We know, too, of seascapists, such as Winslow Homer and Charles Woodbury, who built their studios on rocks at the very edge of the ocean in order to observe better the action of waves and surf, atmospheric effects, patterns, color, and light as daily recurring phenomena under all possible conditions of weather and season. Those painters not lucky enough to live right at the water's edge were inveterate beach walkers and cliff sitters, either studying rock and beach forms at close vantage or contemplating the vast panorama of the ocean rolling in ceaselessly toward the land. Then, of course, there was J. M. W. Turner, who at the age of sixty had himself lashed to a ship's mast so that he could observe at first hand a raging tempest out at sea. While this was carrying the idea a bit far, it did indeed provide the sort of information that imbued Turner's sea paintings with a sense of direct personal involvement with nature's forces.

Painters who have watched the sea over a long period of time are bound to produce pictures that possess a conviction, an authority, and a sense of design or poetry, that cannot be matched by someone who has relied on the information contained on a dozen rolls of color film. Constant observation leads to an intimate knowledge impossible to obtain in any other way.

I am reminded here of a passage from D. W. Prall's *Aesthetic Judgment* (Apollo Editions paperback, New York, 1967): "The use of wave forms in

Japanese prints serves as a reminder to those who would forget man's dependence on nature for even the beauties of expressive design in art, that the vigor and richness of design itself draws upon natural sources, from which by long and patient observation the greatest artists have extracted beauties from obscuring contexts, to give fresh life and meaning to design itself."

You should keep in mind that at this stage the act of observing is just that and nothing more: no drawings or sketches, simply a soaking up of the look of nature through the eyes alone. For one thing, this absorption enables you to memorize the visual specifics of the way the coast looks in all lights and seasons. But aside from the documentary aspects of looking at nature in order to paint it convincingly, this is also a means of accumulating a rich and varied mental repertoire of shapes, colors, and textures to be later dipped into and used as a painting may require.

Finally, observation can spark your mind into suddenly imagining pictorial possibilities—that mysterious moment of intensity or inspiration in which a new painting is conceived. Even painters who arrive at their sea imagery by improvisational methods or accidental manipulations of their medium tend to identify those emerging images through their associations with things they have observed and known. So, when all is said and done, it is what passes through your eyes that is ultimately the basic stimulus for embarking on a creative adventure in paint.

ASSIMILATION

The next stage, assimilation, is one of digesting what has been seen. It is usually a period in which on-location drawings are made, followed by color sketches done on location or from memory in the studio. On-location drawings are factual and representational, documenting the scene pretty much as it actually looks, with a minimum of rearrangement or distortion. This is a way to become further acquainted with the subject, to get deeper into it, to understand how the forms are constructed and how they relate to each other.

Depending on the subject, each artist assimilates the material in his own way. Some artists make rather careful, objective, detailed drawings that record all the information they might possibly need as reference. Other artists make highly emotional, spirited sketches that do no more than suggest the motif while capturing its essential qualities. They don't wish to be hindered or distracted by details but want only to preserve—or even intensify—the aspects that first attracted them to that motif.

The drawing medium used is also a personal choice. Some seascapists like to use a pencil or pen and ink, both of which are fundamentally linear in character. Other artists take a more painterly approach and sketch with a fluid medium, such as ink and wash or monochrome watercolor washes. Such media, they believe, are considerably closer to the look and spirit of a marine painting and so are a clearer indication of how the final painting might actually appear.

Whatever drawing medium you select, drawing brings you closer to your subject, forcing you to look

more carefully and specifically at the scene before you. It forces you to put down on paper some sort of visual statement, which means that you must find a way to describe or suggest the subject in purely graphic terms. In other words, you are beginning to explore your subject matter on a level different from that of just passive observation.

You might follow these drawings by color studies in oil, gouache, watercolor, or pastel, also done on the spot. Again, these studies are usually representational, primarily informational, to be used later in the studio as reminders. In them you would note colors, edges, transitions, passing effects of light or clouds, and other pertinent details that would not likely remain long in your memory, amplified perhaps by written notes in the margins. The main point is to become as familiar as possible with every aspect of your subject, studying the motif from several angles or viewpoints and perhaps trying out varying lighting conditions and sources so that in the end, in preparation for the next phase, you feel you have really absorbed your subjects and made it a part of you.

SYNTHESIS

The next stage, synthesis, is the bringing together of all that you already know about your subject to coordinate the content of your painting with the formal means of expression. This means exploring your subject on still another level and involves a number of new considerations. First, you must identify exactly what it was that first attracted you to the scene. You must never lose sight of that first response. If you can't remember what stimulated you to paint the picture, you'll never be able to communicate it to someone else. Also, your reason for doing the picture will strongly influence your choice of color, mood, pattern, design and any distortions or other departures from reality you will make in the final painting.

This is also the time to experiment. You might want to explore light and dark patterns, shape relationships, line versus mass, simplification and condensation of the design, and so on. This might then be carried further into reversing light and dark relationships and positive and negative shapes, playing with size and scale, trying both horizontal and vertical formats and compositional variations, imagining different light sources, or substituting invented colors for those that actually existed in nature. All of these are ways to extend your knowledge of the subject matter and to seek out its full potentialities as a painting.

Although studio studies may be a great help in making major decisions and in minimizing unnecessary fumbling later, you may prefer to save some of your problem solving for the actual painting. Many professionals do this because they feel that too many studies carried too far may lessen their enthusiasm for tackling the painting itself. Instead, they hold themselves partially in reserve, so that there will still be some problems to be solved and challenges to be met during work on the actual painting. Nothing can be more unexciting than having all your problems

solved too neatly and completely beforehand, reducing the act of painting to little more than a rendering process, a mechanical chore.

The synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity, of emotional response and the formal aspects of picture-making, is an essential step, and most of your really creative decisions will be made then. If you are not an experienced painter, try to explore and assimilate your material in a thorough, orderly fashion before beginning a painting, coordinating and interrelating your responses, memories, thoughts, and feelings with the esthetic considerations of medium, design, color, pattern, space, and texture. You may later be surprised to find that most or even all of the synthesis will take place not in sketches but in your mind.

The whole thrust of the synthesis phase is to work toward a complete integration of subject, expression, pictorial structure, and technique, all wrought into a unified whole. Although such an ideal balance of those various elements may not always be possible, it is most certainly worth a try. At any rate, if most of the synthesis can be even tentatively worked out at this stage, everything will proceed a lot more smoothly in the final phase.

REVELATION

The culmination of the three preceding phases is found in the final phase, that of revelation in the form of a painting. The picture that is the outcome of all the preparatory work is a summation of all that you have observed, known, and felt about your motif, presented to the viewer in essentially painterly terms. It is a matter of your communicating to an audience, of revealing essences by translating external appearances into either an emotional or intellectual experience in paint.

You may or may not refer to your preliminary sketches and studies as you work. Sometimes they may furnish a clear indication of the path to be followed in developing your painting. Other times, if followed too slavishly, they might hinder your ability to flow with the painting and inhibit your willingness to accept unexpected alternatives, even when the picture itself may seem to require them. Some painters, having done the studies, put them out of sight and rely on their memory of the scene and the spirit of their sketches to sustain and guide them through the actual painting process. You will have to find out which method works best for you.

The main thing to remember is that the picture you paint should be more important than the subject that inspired it. A truly fine painting is a *painting* above all else. It does not merely copy or reproduce nature, but it is a self-contained pictorial statement that might refer to nature but does not compete with it. Obviously, if resemblance were all we asked of painting, photography would probably do a much better job.

But we do ask more than that, and you as a painter should be less interested in factual accuracy than in revealing your innermost responses, emotional or cerebral, to what you have seen and experienced. You should do this through brushstrokes, color, impasto, glazes, and washes and an application ranging from

delicacy to muscularity and from tight control to wild abandon. The intention is not to record the surface appearance of a particular scene but to search deeper for more universal aspects: timeless fundamental shapes, rhythms, movements, and forces.

In this phase, revelation, you utilize your powers of invention and imagination to their fullest, sharing with others your personal vision of nature—in this case, the seascape. This means you must make every effort to avoid clichés and conventionality and to shun any subject that is too obvious or picturesque. To be sure, subject matter is important; without it there would be no seascape painting. But whether you paint realistically or abstractly, your subject is only a point of departure. It is your interpretation or transformation of that subject that creates a work of art.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is directed primarily to the person who has already had considerable discipline and experience in painting the coastal environment, especially in the traditional modes of painting representationally directly from nature. If you are thoroughly familiar with the seashore and have reached a certain level of technical competence, then you are probably ready to press on to the next level of interpreting it more creatively.

Perhaps you have reached a point at which you can sense that your pictures are painted reasonably well, but you feel that they are somewhat bland and predictable, too similar to a great many other realistic seascapes. Or you may not have fared well with art juries and are wondering where to turn next to discover ways to push your ideas further and to add freshness and vitality or a more personal slant to your work. If this is so, then this book is for you.

Above all else, this is a book of ideas and concepts aimed at suggesting a wide variety of approaches to seascapes, including unusual viewpoints, compositional alternatives, various ways to use color, to expand your range of marine subjects and to view the

coastal scene more creatively and on a more advanced and less banal level. In short, this book is an attempt to help you improve your seascapes in as many ways as possible.

The format of this book is based closely on that of my previous book, *Creative Landscape Painting*. I have assembled here fifty different approaches to coastal painting. Some are compositional, others are concerned with viewpoint, lighting, unusual subjects, or design in nature, while still others concern various aesthetic attitudes in contemporary American seascape painting. After describing each concept, I suggest ways to apply it to your own paintings. In addition, to stimulate your pictorial inventiveness, each of these fifty concepts is illustrated by the work of a contemporary artist that demonstrates a striking or innovative approach to the seascape.

The color section contains thirty-two full-page reproductions of some of the best representational and abstract seascapes by American painters of our time. In the caption accompanying each plate, I discuss the use of color and other pertinent aspects of each painting. The final section, "Studio Notes," contains the most frequent remarks I find myself making to my students in classes and workshops.

When you find yourself in a rut, a glance through this book will remind you of alternatives to ways in which you have become too secure, stale, and accustomed. Through this book, I hope to stimulate and encourage you to reevaluate your current seascapes in the light of new ideas and to open up fresh avenues for exploration. I also hope to shake you up a bit and put you in a state of mind in which you gain courage and become more willing to take risks and surprise yourself now and then. Perhaps you will find a means of solving a seascape problem that has long eluded you. Or perhaps you will be stimulated to try something you've never thought of doing before. And if *that* should happen, I would consider the writing of this book to have been worthwhile.

1. PANORAMIC VIEW

CONCEPT The panorama is an all-encompassing view of enormous expanses in nature. It has long been used for Alpine landscapes, prairie scenes, and such overwhelming natural wonders as Niagara, Yellowstone and Yosemite Falls, and in the nineteenth century, it became a favorite way in which to depict the vastness of the American western wilderness. Because enormous areas of sky, vast spaces, and limitless distances are often involved, it is only natural to assume that the panorama may be used with equal effectiveness in paintings of the ocean and seacoast.

A panoramic composition offers the best way to arouse the feeling of large coastal expanses by creating paintings that dramatically evoke nature's own size and grandeur. It is only through sheer size that a picture can begin to rival, or at least attempt to suggest, the tremendous breadth and vastness of ocean and shore. Precisely because the panorama is unusual and unconventional enough to strike the eye immediately with a sense of space, its heroic proportions and long vistas are bound to give a

painting considerably more visual impact and scope than the conventionally-sized seascape.

Of course, panoramic views do not have to be painted only on large canvases. They can be done on a more modest scale by compressing all the areas into a smaller format, although the result may lack the breadth and shock value of a huge painted surface.

Some marine painters interpret their subjects through an exceptionally wide format—an elongated horizontal proportion—to give a strong impression of the expanse of ocean as seen across great distances of water. Others work from a high vantage point and look directly into the distance down the coastline. Still other painters give the sky unusual prominence, thus reducing the sea and its shore to a tiny strip that traverses the very bottom edge of the painting. The way in which the panorama is handled depends a great deal on the subject itself and the viewpoint selected and indeed on whether or not painters really require this view to most effectively put across their responses to that particular subject.

PLAN When you want to capture a sweeping view of a large section of a coast, think of your composition as being seen through a very wide-angle camera lens that includes a greater amount of the scene than your range of vision would normally include. (If you were to paint a smaller section of the shore in a more conventional seascape treatment, your picture would lack the sense of immense stretches of distance and space.) To get a panoramic effect, don't look just straight ahead of you but turn to both sides to depict the entire sweep of shoreline much in the manner of the old banquet cameras. As a matter of fact, if you are using a camera to supply detailed information not included in your sketch or drawing, you can photograph the entire spread of the scene in a sequence of three, four, or five separate shots of continuous sections of the seascape. You can then piece the prints together into a single elongated image by taping them together on the back to form one wide panoramic view of your subject. I once took a series of views through a standard camera lens that, taped together, formed a print over two feet wide!

For variety, instead of viewing the panorama from sea or ground level, you can look down the coast from a higher vantage point such as a high sea cliff, a tree, a rooftop, or a hillside that commands an extensive view of ocean and shore. Sometimes this viewpoint will give your painting a fairly high horizon. This can intensify and reinforce the sense of openness, the feeling of the seascape stretching in all directions, not only on either side of you but also into the deep space directly in front of you. Harbor scenes by Oscar Kokoschka and tidal flats by Leonid (Berman) often use this vantage point to obtain a panoramic spread that is not quite as easily perceived at sea level.

One point to remember when painting a panoramic view is to maintain a constant interest throughout the painting. See to it that there are no dead spots—areas lacking in any sort of visual interest—that would allow the composition to go slack. Every section must have enough in the way of subject matter, detail, pattern, color, or texture to sustain the viewer's interest at all times.



GREAT TIDE

by Laurence Sisson.

Oil on Masonite,

44" × 72" (112 × 183 cm).

*Courtesy Dalzell Hatfield Galleries,
Los Angeles, California.*

Laurence Sisson's paintings have long been associated with the Maine coast, though he is equally at home in using his personal oil technique to depict the spacious rocky landscapes of the Southwest. In this expansive coastal view, he has chosen a high vantage point in order to see as much as possible of the varying shapes and textures of ocean, tidal flats of sand and stones, beach, rocks, pines, and the headland and offshore island in the distance. A scene that might in some hands look rather ordinary has been made exciting by Sisson's

intense interest in textures that include flat, washy passages, scumbling, spatter, and drifting paint. Note that he has used aerial perspective to enhance the feeling of depth, progressing from clarity and detail in the foreground and middle distance to grayer, softer, misted areas in the far distance. Observe, too, his handling of the sky in simple masses and broad strokes that serve as a foil for the intricate, detailed treatment of the lower section of the painting.

2. SELECTIVE VISION

CONCEPT One of the first lessons beginning painters are taught is to select and simplify their subject matter, a process that is less a choice than an obligation. The opportunity to select, to retain only those elements that are really important to the painting, is an advantage the painter has over the photographer. Although a photographer can move about to get a different view of his subject to eliminate or at least minimize what he considers unimportant or distracting, the painter can work from his chosen viewpoint and simply omit any elements that are not necessary to his composition.

In spite of the fact that selective vision is assumed to be part of an artist's equipment, too many paintings are overburdened with superfluous details that contribute little or nothing to their overall impact. Merely because an object is present doesn't mean it must be included in the painting. One of the aims of art is to see with how *little* a picture can be made, not with how much.

If the artist is not selective, the finished painting is apt to have distracting areas that weaken the main idea. But selectivity and simplification will enable the painter to direct the viewer's eye and to lessen the risk of having a spectator get tangled up in areas of the work that are not essential to the main statement.

John Sell Cotman was one of the greatest of the English watercolorists. Yet his true greatness lay not so much in his technique as in his extraordinary ability to select and simplify. Many of his seascapes, such as *The Needles* and *The Dismasted Brig*, are rigorously simplified into powerful flat shapes and masses, strongly and compactly designed within a severely limited range of values. Detail is virtually nonexistent, and every touch counts for something. Indeed, in his own time, Cotman was known as "the master of the art of leaving out." Of course, there are other marine painters whose work is characterized by their ability to say much with little, who painted, when they chose to, with economy and brevity: Turner, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Delacroix, Louis-Eugène Boudin, Whistler, Homer, Emile Nolde, Marin, and Avery.

Selectivity is not a moral issue—like a form of censorship—but a pictorial necessity. It is in painters' own best interests to edit their subject matter because, by paring away the unnecessary, artists can project their responses more directly. It is certainly not the job of a viewer to weed out distracting material. Rather it is not only the artists' prerogative but it is also their responsibility to clear out the mess and offer an uncluttered vision of nature.

PLAN The first step in pictorial selectivity usually takes place in the sketchbook. When you sketch, you probably won't take the time or trouble to include things that don't interest you but will probably jot down only those shapes and areas that mean something and seem to be most pertinent to the fundamental aspects of your motif. This kind of selective vision, which is an integral part of the process of sketching and drawing, should be continued into the painting stage, right up to the finish.

If you are in the habit of relying on photographs as the only source for your paintings, this business of simplification and selection is a more conscious and more difficult task (and it probably serves you right!). You must constantly ask yourself how much in that print or slide you *really* need in order to put across your idea in the painting.

As you do preliminary drawings based on photographs, draw at first only the absolute essentials that interest you most, and if you can't omit all the details,

at least try to reduce them to masses wherever possible. Strive constantly for economy of means, for ridding the composition of distractions that get between you and the clearest expression of your subject matter. Be brutal. Be hard on yourself. Try leaving out much more than you think you need to, and then add it later if you see you really need it. Don't put anything into the composition thoughtlessly, and take nothing for granted.

Be just as tough when the painting is finished. Don't kid yourself, but look at it coldly and analytically, condensing and simplifying whenever possible. If there are areas in the picture that you are pleased with, eliminate any passages that might distract a spectator from seeing and enjoying those areas. Think about the architectural maxim that "less is more," and keep in mind that development of your selective vision is crucial to your success in learning to translate nature into art.



DOWN TO THE SEA
by Al Brouillette, A.W.S.
Acrylic watercolor on paper,
14" × 21" (36 × 53 cm).

There are no wasted brushstrokes in this painting. The subject here is simplicity itself. Closing in on a small section of coastline, Al Brouillette's selective eye has seen to it that no distracting textures or details interfere with the enjoyment of his almost Oriental brushwork. There are three simple masses—sky, rocks, and beach—accented by a few deft jabs of the brush to suggest the smaller stones at the water's edge. That's all there is, and that's all that is needed. It was not necessary to include a boat, a lighthouse, or a boy and his dog, since

Brouillette's sole aim was to translate a few basic coastal forms into a series of direct washes and touches of color. The values are clearly separated into lights, middle tones, and darks. The treatment is spontaneous but straightforward and unselfconscious, and the only suggestion of texture is an occasional spatter. The painting verges on abstraction, since detail and description are suppressed in favor of allowing the marks of the brush and paint to carry all of the pictorial interest. This is brevity and economy of means at its best.

3. THE CLOSEUP

CONCEPT “Avoid distant views; paint objects close up,” Charles Hawthorne told his classes at Provincetown on Cape Cod. The great teacher had a point. A view that includes too much can, in the wrong hands, become a disorganized hodgepodge, in which too many unrelated things are happening. The best antidote for too busy or too complex a view is to narrow down the range to smaller fragments of sea and shore—in other words, to paint a closeup.

Although the term “closeup” comes from photography and film-making, it actually offers more leeway to the painter than to the photographer. In painting we speak of a closeup as being a view of something anywhere from ten feet to ten inches away. Of course, pushed to an extreme, a closeup could be an almost microscopic view of substances and textures barely visible to the human eye—“seeing the world in a grain of sand” as it were.

But generally, the closeup is an intimate, concentrated view of seascape or landscape, an investigation of particulars rather than an all-inclusive panoramic

spread. To the painter, this means far greater attention to exact placement and composition than might otherwise be expected in the more traditional broad view of an entire scene. In the distant view or the panorama, details play only a minor part in the large, general scheme; in the closeup, a single detail can become the entire picture. Such a view is often more striking, more unpredictable, and more personal than that of the conventional composition, which is based on large masses of background, middleground, and foreground.

A final point to keep in mind is that the occasional closeup lends variety to a painter’s total output of paintings, so that, in a one-man show, for example, the same distant viewpoint does not recur again and again with monotonous regularity. I always think of an artist who uses the closeup as having a more sensitive awareness to all the possibilities of the subject matter than the painter who is less willing to depart now and then from standard, conventional ways of seeing and composing seascapes.

PLAN Close in on your subject. Forget for the time being the ordinary ways of seeing the coastal environment in a large context. Perhaps in your selected scene, there are two painting views available to you, the long view and the closeup. So much the better. But for now, be selective. Narrow down and zero in on a more intimate view of your material. Instead of taking in the whole scene, concentrate, for example, on a group of worn, textured lobster buoys hanging against weathered shingles. Or on a pile of bright buoys on top of a rock or an overturned dory. Or on a bait barrel and dory half in shadow against the steps of a fishing shack, with a harbor in the background. Or on the patterns of lobster traps stacked on a wharf. Or on the

interlacing of dune grasses blowing in the sea wind, against eroded rock textures and sand. The list is unlimited. Just keep your eyes open and your mind alert to all possibilities.

A closeup for its own sake is usually not enough. It helps to have some reason for choosing a closeup viewpoint, such as the play of light and shadow, interesting textures or patterns, or a study in design or shape relationships. You may even find that, as time goes by, the closeup will claim more and more of your interest as an offbeat pictorial viewpoint, and you will realize, too, that it is just as applicable to abstract treatment as it is to realism.