

A BRUSH WITH *Maritime Art*

They say a picture's worth a thousand words but when artists try to capture the colors, texture and ethereal look of the ocean, perhaps a million words is more like it.

The space where land ends and the water begins is like no other place on Earth. Anyone who's spent time on boats has savored the mixture of salt air, sunlight and reflections that combine to create a constantly changing palette. Artists have long struggled to capture and interpret marine subjects in their own personal style and today a revitalized interest in maritime art has produced a welcome flood of high caliber works, both for sale or just for enjoyment.

The latest high tide mark for marine paintings and sculpture was recently reached in Wilmington, DE, where the 12th National Exhibition of the American Society of Maritime Artists (ASMA) was on display. Some 100 works in the juried show appeared at the First USA Riverfront Arts Center

last fall, appropriately just a stone's throw from the meandering Christiana River and its tall marsh grasses. The exhibit had already appeared at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts in Dennis, MA. Organizers with the Society say they are already working on the next exhibition, two years hence.

For many people, say the words "art" and "museum" and stiff, static paintings of old ships come to mind. Not so anymore, although there are quite a few highly successful artists working today who do paint ships of old.

"It's not maritime art just because it has a boat in it," said Leonard Mizerek, an artist with a work, *Early Departure*, in the show who also helped organize the exhibit. "Today there's a much broader definition of maritime art

that is more open and inviting - everything from skipjacks and Maine schooners to scenes of wildlife."

In the past, exhibits of maritime art were mainly what's known as "ship portraits,"



Contrasting styles among today's maritime artists are seen in *Light Fragments on Sail*, a watercolor by Sue Lynch, while Charles Raskob Robinson captures a race of replica 19th century "sandbaggers" in *Of Fortune & Dreams*; *The Bull and The Bear Off Ellis Island*, oil on canvas.

which are exactly what they sound like, but today, there is much more emphasis on small boats. The ASMA exhibition included exquisite scenes of children in Optimist prams, marinas, racing sailboats and a still life of a freshly caught trout, to

name a few.

Quite a few of the artists at the top today began their careers as illustrators for books, magazines and museums and their attention to detail is evident. "Boaters are very technical themselves, said Mizerek. "They would spot an error in an instant."

A panel of ASMA artist-members judge submissions for each national exhibition and set high standards for artistic excellence and accuracy in the work, said Robert C. Moore, of Hampton, VA, current president of ASMA and a watercolor artist with a painting of the Navy destroyer USS *Sautley* selected for the exhibition. ASMA also sponsors regional exhibitions as well, and visiting these or local galleries and museums is the best way to see what's out there and develop an eye for maritime art.

One of the Society's missions is to get first class venues for its shows, particularly more museums. When the national exhibition has appeared at

museums in the past, Moore said museum officials were surprised to find they were a big draw with the public, most likely because boats, the ocean and beach have a beauty nearly everyone can relate to.

The market for maritime art has been growing, say organizers, and even the current economic climate has not discouraged high-ticket sales of original paintings and sculpture. Mizerek, whose paintings are shown in seven galleries around the U.S., sold a painting recently for \$7,900. Some artists, he said, are so popular, collectors are waiting "in line" for works they've commissioned to actually be completed.

"People are still buying major pieces in the range of \$10,000, which to me is a substantial amount for the average person," Mizerek said. Other artists such as

Christopher Blossom and Donald Demers can command up to \$30,000 for a painting, however many top-notch works are available for as little as \$2,000-\$3,000.

Value for contemporary art is a fluid



Maritime art is no longer just about ships. A clamdigger (*Quahog Joe*, by Del-Bourree Bach), a hurricane-wrecked shrimp boat (*Hugo's Wrath*, by Al Stine) and an old-style "wasp-waist" buoy (*The Bell Buoy*, by Jim Gray) are some of the diverse subjects inspiring contemporary artists.

stilted thing of the past." Boaters who wonder what to "look for" in a good painting, need only follow their own instincts,

for the public to relate to as there are more fine paintings of ordinary people who live and work on the water. *Quahog Joe* by Del-Bourree Bach is a good example: a brilliant painting of a clam digger on Cape Cod, ankle deep on a transparent tidal flat, in a starkly realistic style after Andrew Wyeth, with wide open space and fine details.

Beauty amidst wreckage is also a frequent maritime theme as renderings of abandoned sailboats, beached and busted dinghies, and even a wreck left aground by Hurricane Hugo graced the 2001 show.

There are, of course, quite a few artists who specialize in painting historical scenes. Their special challenge is in making the historically accurate as

possible. Moore said he has spent countless hours researching ships for his watercolors at the National Archives in the nation's capital or at the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, VA. "We're almost as crazy as the model makers," he laughed. "But not quite."

One such painting in the national show was an unusual aerial view of the docks of Buffalo, NY, in 1900. The artist, Robert Averill, built a scale model of the city to be sure and get the scale, the shadows and the details right.

In addition to exhibits, ASMA also holds informal regional get-togethers for those interested in maritime art. Maritime museums in the U.S., such as the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the Mystic Seaport Museum in CT, Mariner's Museum in Newport News, VA, South Street Seaport Museum in New York City, and the San Francisco Maritime Museum, are just a few with maritime art collections worth visiting.

ASMA has a Web site at www.marineartists.org, with a sampling of members' works on the site, as do many of the artists themselves. The 2001 exhibition catalog with 82 color images can be mail ordered at the Web site. *

matter, like the oceanographic subject matter it portrays. What determines price is the artist's reputation, what museums and exhibitions his or her work is in, and what their last work sold for. Being selected by ASMA to appear in their national show is certainly a boost, Mizerek added.

Galleries specializing in maritime art are found in most cities and several hundred ASMA members are gallery owners. The J. Russell Jinishian Gallery in Fairfield, CT, for example, has a quarterly newsletter *Maritime Art* that circulates to 7,000 and the owner, former director of the Mystic Museum, is currently writing a book on the subject. The Internet has also opened up the art world to the boater's world with sites such as www.art.net and www.marineart.com.

Why the growing popularity of this genre? "I think because so many more people are on the water," Mizerek said. "People are spending more time outdoors and the number of boaters on the water now is amazing. Plus, marine art is not that

said Moore. Judge a work by whether or not the artist's love for the subject matter comes through, as well as whether the work captures your own interest and imagination. Is it pleasing to your eye? Can you look at it a number of times and still see new aspects to the work?

Maritime art includes sculptures as well, although one might wonder how the sea could be "sculpted." The Wilmington show included some gorgeous bronzes of delicate sea rays that appeared to be floating in mid-air, and a stainless steel leaping tarpon, textured right down to its scales. Scrimshaw pieces were shown as well.

Surprisingly, Mizerek said most of the artists in the field today are not formally trained, but were either born with their talent or learned "by the seat of their pants." When not painting his specialty - which is waterfront scenes of Brittany, France - Mizerek runs a graphics arts business in New York City.

The departure from ship portraits has also made modern subjects much easier

- By Elaine Dickinson