

53: John Marin *Marin Island, Small Point, Maine* (1931)

Elizabeth Hutton Turner

In 1914 John Marin discovered Maine as a summer retreat and immediately resolved to own a piece of it.¹ Recently married, his wife pregnant, he used an annuity provided by his dealer and friend Alfred Stieglitz to purchase a small uninhabited island off the coast of Small Point, not far from Portland. The site lacked fresh water and was useful only for camping, fishing, and painting, but the artist proudly dubbed it “Marin Island.”

There's that-Island-that-Island of mine-beautiful little island-with all its trees the sense of being mine...I suppose there are now a thousand trees on it...The other day-me-with my brood-went over to the Island I carrying an ax and I chopped down trees-I who love trees-but when you cannot see trees for trees-something has to be done about it-...and even though I never build a house on it-I can still see a house on with-Groups of trees and vistas...and this is all right I guess it's all right-a trifle sentimental-but then I wonder-am I not a trifle sentimental-and then a bit.²

Between 1914 and 1919 Marin probably painted most of his seascapes from Small Point. In 1917, with his wife and his son, John IV, he spent the entire summer in a modest hotel there.³ In July he wrote Alfred Stieglitz, exclaiming, “Wonderful days, Wonderful sunset closings. Good to have eyes to see, ears to hear the roar of the water. Nostrils to take in the odors of the salt sea and the firs.”⁴ Nevertheless, although Marin Island was a regular stop on his annual drives north, Marin did not spend another summer there or nearby for the next fourteen years.

Born in Rutherford, New Jersey, on December 23, 1870, John Marin initially trained as an architect at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, and was recognized early on as a superb draftsman. He swiftly developed a fluency and range of technique in the graphic arts by balancing the movement of calligraphic line with luminosity of color wash. These elements were later liberated into abstraction through Marin's exposure to Cézanne and cubism at Stieglitz's Gallery 291. In 1912 Marin became the first to transpose the new sounds, rhythms, and heights of New York with his Brooklyn Bridge series. In the 1920s he became equally known for deciphering the conflicts among earth, sun, wind, and water in his landscapes. Marin was among the first of his generation honored with a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936.

Marin traveled seasonally if not extensively, making watercolors for most of his life. Between 1905 and 1910 he spent much of his time abroad. After 1920 he settled into the pattern of spending most winters in Cliffside, New Jersey, and most summers in northeastern rural locations. From 1914 until 1933 Marin summered in either Small Point or Deer Isle, Maine, before looking further up the coast.

During the summers of 1931 and 1932 Marin returned to Small Point. The familiar view with its adjacent island and inlet suitably exorcised the arid light and heat that had filled his renderings of Taos, New Mexico, the previous year. Returning to a setting where he knew every stone and tree and shoreline left Marin free to renew and interweave his powers of observation and improvisation.

Initially *Marin Island, Small Point, Maine* seems to make a predictable inventory of the setting. Marin's brushstrokes readily translate a record of “The solemn restful beautiful firs...the border of the sea” just as he first described them to Stieglitz in 1917. The modest description permits us to know the artist's position in the landscape. But landscape to Marin meant something more than mere description



or even transcription. Landscape was something to be performed *en plein air*. With a brush in each hand Marin moved rapid-fire as if conducting a symphony with the elements. The boldly fragmented diagonals launch a soaring trajectory out and over the inlet bordered by distant trees. Viewed through these angles the landscape presents itself kaleidoscopically, opening up in the center like the prow of a flying ship. The eye ricochets off high contrasts and strong effects of sharp light. Each break in contour, every shift in texture from graphite to color, every movement from saturated surface to empty paper lyrically connotes the sounds of



wave against rock acting in concert with sea breezes swaying the juniper. The disposition of light and line in the sky, so perfectly reflected upon the water, achieves a soothing harmony.

The images from the 1931–32 summers in Maine, among them that of the Memorial Art Gallery, are now considered to be among the best, most abstract, and compositionally inventive watercolors of his career, but critical reception at the time was also significant. Paul Rosenfeld wrote in *The Nation* that 1931 was “Marin’s year.” And in *Art News* Ralph Flint wrote:

*I no longer have any compunction about stating my findings about Marin....He is a master way beyond his time—possessing an almost scriptural solemnity and grandeur in his pictorial approach to the world about him.*⁵

In his later years Marin began re-exploring earlier styles but also experimented with new, expressionist forms. He died on October 2, 1953, at Cape Split, Maine (just north of Bar Harbor), his summer residence since 1933. As Lewis Mumford observed at the time, “Were I writing a history of American civilization and did I want a symbol of the utmost economy and organization we had achieved, I should select not a Ford factory but a Marin water color.”⁶

Elizabeth Hutton Turner, Senior Curator of The Phillips Collection, is a specialist in early twentieth-century modern art.

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

John Marin,
1870–1953

Three Master, 1923

Watercolor on paper,

22 x 26¼ in.

Gift of a friend of the Gallery,

25.32

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(Facing page)

John Marin,
1870–1953

Marin Island, Small Point, Maine,

1931

Watercolor with graphite

on paper, 17 x 21¼ in.

Marion Stratton Gould Fund,

51.10

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