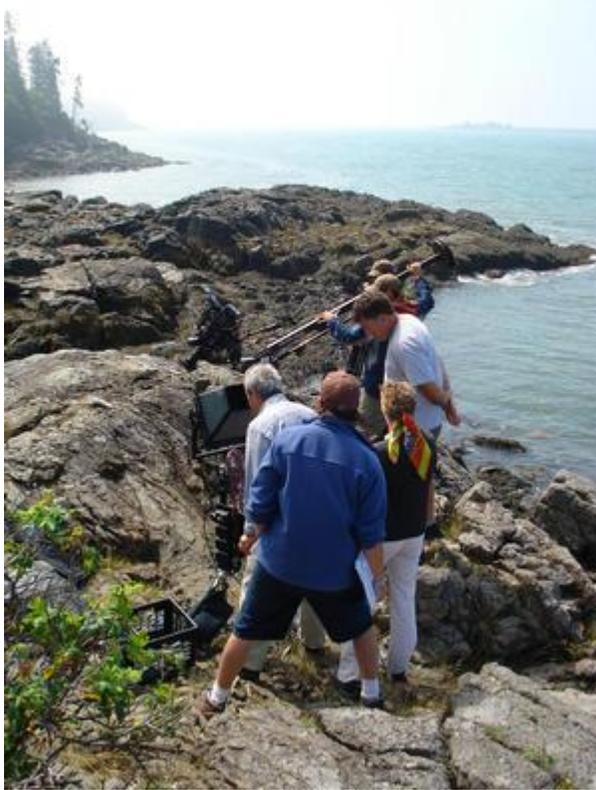


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Courtesy of 217 Films: Ramsey Tripp, Michael Maglaras, Terri Templeton and Phil Cormier review a shot on the rocks in front of John Marin's summer home on Cape Split in Addison.

The life and art of John Marin

A new documentary about the legendary painter tells the story of a remarkable artist who also was just a regular guy.

By BOB KEYES, Staff Writer August 30, 2009

ADDISON — It's easy to understand why the painter John Marin was so smitten with the Down East coast.

After spending many years renting homes and staying at boarding houses from Portland to Stonington, Marin finally settled on a lonely section of the coast, far beyond the bustle of the city or the quiet of Deer Isle.

Marin, who came to Maine nearly every summer from his New Jersey home with wife and child in tow, rented a home in the Cape Split section of Addison in the summer of 1933 and returned the following year. But this time, he stayed at a cottage overlooking Pleasant Bay that he had purchased.

It would become his professional and personal touchstone, and a source of joy, until he died in 1953 at age 82.

Just outside his windows, the sea washed in around the glacial remains. Beyond the rocks, a series of islands lay before him, providing a stunning visual backdrop.

Cape Split offered everything Marin wanted. It was remote and inspirational. It afforded endless opportunities to paint, and also to hunt, fish and get on the water in his boat. Nearby, the Tunk Mountains provided the painter with paths to hike and other scenes to consider.

The cottage – expanded and modernized over the years – is still standing, and on a recent afternoon, filmmaker Michael Maglaras planted himself in an armchair on the porch where Marin painted and sketched.

"Everything I have read about him, everyone I have spoken to who knew Marin, every letter of his that I have read, leave me with two lasting impressions: He was enormously sensitive and intelligent, but he also was a regular guy," Maglaras said.

"Marin was one of the most important painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But the thing that stands out about him is the fact that he had a life. He had a wife. He had a son. He would go to the ballgame, he would boat, he would hike, he would play the piano – and he would paint."

The Connecticut-based independent filmmaker is finishing work on a documentary that he and his wife, Terri Templeton, are making about Marin, his life and his art. Their company, 217 Films, will premiere the movie in December at the Portland Museum of Art, then send it around the independent film circuit before showing it at the end of 2010 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

"John Marin: Let the Paint be Paint!" will tell the personal and professional story of one of America's most influential painters, highlighting his struggles and successes while offering a window into his private world.

Maglaras and his Maine-based film crew shot the movie in June in Waterville at the Colby College Museum of Art, which owns many Marin paintings, and last week at Cape Split.



Photographer unknown. Used by permission of the estate of John Marin: Among the images in the documentary film "John Marin: Let the Paint be Paint!" is this photograph of Marin painting at his Cape Split retreat in Addison.

MAINE MADE AN IMPRESSION

Marin was an American-born modernist painter who formed many of his artistic sensibilities overseas in Europe. But he found his stride as a painter when he came to Maine in 1914 for the first time, spending his early Maine summers in Phippsburg before exploring the coast in later years.

Marin, who was a key member of Alfred Stieglitz's New York circle of painters, was a decent artist before he discovered Maine. But Maine gave him his identity. He formed his lasting artistic vision and legacy when he beheld the islands of Casco Bay for the first time.

Marin's work is known as lyrical abstraction. His images are based in the landscape and highly recognizable. But he challenged the viewer to see things his way, with loosely defined boundaries. He worked in both oil and watercolor and made significant paintings in each medium.

In the movie, Maglaras appears on screen as a narrator. The voice of Marin comes from local actor John Hickson.

This is the third film that Maglaras and Templeton have made about an American modernist with Maine roots. The first two explored the life and work of Marsden Hartley, a contemporary of Marin's.

"It seemed like a logical extension to move from Hartley to Marin," Maglaras said. "The two together are wonderful examples of Maine painters. Hartley was born here, and Marin adopted Maine.

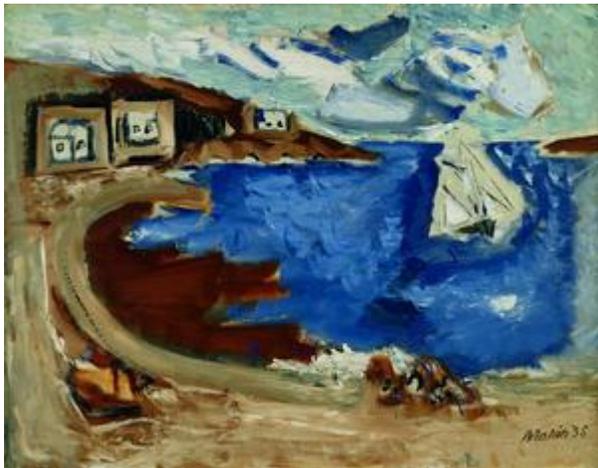
"They also had a profound respect for each other and knew each other well. They had an influence on each other. Together, they were two of the most important fathers of American modernism, and both were devoted to the landscape of Maine."

But the film might not have happened had it not been for Norma Marin, who married the painter's son, John Jr., and controls the Marin estate. A Maine resident, Norma Marin spends much of the year in Cape Split, and she also had a condo in Portland's West End and an apartment in New York.

A few years ago, she was in New York and happened to see Maglaras' first film about Hartley, "Cleophas and His Own," released in 2005. She said the movie moved her to tears "because it made Marsden Hartley become a person." She felt compelled to stay after everybody else had left the theater to introduce herself to Maglaras.

They became friendly, and she invited him to a party in New York late last year. "I guess I had a couple of glasses of wine, maybe more, and I said to him, 'How I wish someone would find the time to do a film about John Marin,' " Norma Marin said.

She got her wish. Maglaras had already begun the process. But having her blessing allowed Maglaras and his crew access to the Marin home, which is something previous documentarians have not enjoyed.



Courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art, gift of John Marin Jr. and Norma B. Marin: "From Seeing Cape Split" by John Marin, 1935, oil on canvas, 23 by 29.5 inches.

THE LONG HAUL TO CAPE SPLIT

Cape Split is one of those places not easily forgotten.

It is surrounded by water, with Pleasant Bay on one side, Wohoa Bay on the other and Cape Split Harbor providing a protected cove at the end of the road in between.

To get there, one passes through the flatlands and rolling hills of blueberry country before dipping down into the windswept wonder of a coastal peninsula bracketed by hills, low-lying brush, trees and marshland.

One can imagine Marin's reaction when he finally reached the place – with delight and relief very likely topping the list. Typically, he drove up from his New Jersey home – at least he did after 1922, when he bought his first car. He would take his time getting to Maine, bringing his family through upstate New York, and crossing through Vermont and New Hampshire before finally arriving. He would paint along the way.

So the journey to Maine would last weeks. But getting to Maine was only half the challenge. Once in the state, Marin would have to pick his way up the coast to Addison in Washington County, and then down the peninsula to tiny Cape Split.

Today, the drive takes four hours from Portland. As Maglaras says in the movie, "in 1933, (it) must've taken longer than forever."

The reward of the long drive is the view at the end, where land meets sea. There is one view, which will be featured in the movie, that likely cemented Marin's affection for the place.

Near the end of the Split Road, the roadway narrows and crosses over a tiny, curving causeway. Off to the right, in the bay, one can see a series of islands, including Sheep Island, that served as a natural model for many of Marin's paintings after 1933. On the left is Cape Split Harbor, which drains at low tide.

Beyond the other end of the causeway is a tiny cluster of homes, nestled among trees and largely out of view. They run right up against the rocks.

This is where Marin made his way in the world.



Courtesy of 217 Films: Gaffer Ramsey Tripp holds a reflector while Michael Maglaras and the 217 Films crew shoot a scene.



Courtesy of 217 Films: Stylist Lucretia Connolly applies makeup to Connecticut-based independent filmmaker Michael Maglaras before the shooting of a scene at Cape Split.

Last week, Maglaras, Templeton and their crew, headed by photography director Phil Cormier, spent several hours on the causeway. They filmed Maglaras as he talked about Marin's attraction to Cape Split.

In the morning, all they could see was fog. The islands that Maglaras referred to in his script vanished under a blanket of dense, gray fog.

Later in the day, after lunch, the challenge was the sun and the wind. The latter filled Maglaras' shirt with air like a balloon and messed with his hair. The sun, which popped in and out of the clouds, kept Cormier and his crew scrambling. During one take, they needed lights. During another, they had to set up scrims to block the sun.

Very likely, those ever-changing conditions are what challenged Marin as well. Although he painted in his studio, he preferred being out in the open air. Late in life and beset by poor health, Marin still scrambled around the rocks at Cape Split in search of a different perspective.

Maglaras' goal with this movie is simple. He wants people to understand why this place meant so much to Marin, both from the artistic perspective and also for personal reasons. And he wants people to understand the man, to get to know the artist on a humanistic level.

Marin lived in two centuries and saw a wave of technology evolve in his lifetime. We have audio recordings of him talking, movies of him painting and copies of the letters that he wrote.

We also have the vast collection of art that he left behind. Marin completed some 4,000 paintings, drawings, etchings and other works. His artistic output has been parsed and analyzed time and again.

But what we don't have, Maglaras said, is a great sense of the man. With his film, he hopes to connect this place, which meant everything to Marin, to the man.

Over time, the two became one, he said.

"Marin was someone who enjoyed his life," Maglaras said. "He had problems with illness, and certainly from time to time he was depressed.

"But this was a man who enjoyed life, and who enjoyed the act of painting."

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Marin at age 25, photographer unknown. Used by permission of the estate of John Marin.