

## Frederick Waugh

### *America's Most Popular Marine Painter*

By George R. Havens  
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*"The Setting Sun" Oil on board 46" x 60"*

"THE SEA, to my way of thinking should look like the sea." So Frederick Waugh expressed his opinion about marine painting. The remark seems obvious enough, yet not all artists have held this view, nor have all of them had the skill, even if they wished, to catch this elusive, rapidly-changing element and reproduce it convincingly on canvas.

Even with Waugh his ultimate mastery did not come, as we can readily understand, without a long and severe struggle. "Remember, Cleveland," he said encouragingly to a younger artist friend, Cleveland Woodward, "it was very difficult for me once."

It was while on the tiny island of Sark in the English Channel that Waugh first set himself to studying the sea intensively. He was nearing his thirty-second birthday when he went there with his wife in 1893. Originally they had planned nothing more than a short vacation, but, enchanted with this strange, remote, feudal island, they established themselves in delightful

“Rose Cottage” and remained there for more than two years. Already Waugh had behind him an excellent training as an artist under brusque old Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia. He had worked also with several of the skilled French painters at the popular Academic Julian in Paris. Moreover, his father, Samuel Bell Waugh, was an able artist, known particularly for his portraits of Lincoln and of General Grant. His mother was a miniature painter. Thus Waugh has a remarkable artistic heritage.



*"Rocky Seascape after the Storm" Oil on board, Size: 30" x 40"*

Later Frederick Waugh confided to his friend Erwin S. Barrie, Director of the Grand Central Art Galleries, that: “the first year he spent on Sark was devoted entirely to study of the sea. He watched and made notes carefully of the action of the waves against the rocks and the color of the rocks when they were dry and when they were wet; the effect of the water on wet sand as opposed to sand when it was dry; and he very definitely studied the action of the waves as they broke against the rocks and recoiled, and also the effect of sunlight on the water and showing through the waves just before they broke.”

Clambering warily by the high cliffs or crouched low behind the jagged rocks on the narrow beach, Waugh, for hour after hours, fixed his attention closely on the complex movement of waves and foam. Gradually he learned how to concentrate his gaze, how to master one single detail at a time –the sudden cut of a wave, the flash of air-filled water where the light shines through the rushing, variegated patterns of white spume near shore, the angry mass of surf flung

high above the black rocks. When he had accomplished this, he would put the whole together into a single scene of movement. He took notes on what he saw, he made quick sketches of smallest possible size, he further disciplined his already trained memory to do his bidding faithfully at home in the studio later. All of this mental activity filled day after day with intense observation in a place where, as Waugh wrote afterwards, "one has every northern condition... the effects characteristic of the Polar region and the tropics," he added, "Shark is a model of most conditions a sea painter cares to study."

Many years later, Waugh sent to Mrs. Sibyl Hathaway, Dame and ruler of feudal Sark, a little booklet filled with black and white reproductions of some of his most famous paintings, a brochure published by his friend Barrie in 1936, four years before Waugh's death. Mrs. Hathaway and "to the memory of Sark where," as he further stated, "I learned to paint the sea."

When at the end of 1895 Waugh, his wife, and infant daughter Gwentyth (a son Coulton was to be born the following March) moved to St. Ives in Cornwall, the artist found there in southwest England the same rugged rocks and foaming surf to paint. There was also the advantage of a studio within sight of the sea. "By this time," he wrote, "I began to concentrate my studies on wave forms, and it was at this time that my greatest ambition to paint the sea took possession of me." So Cornwall offered a happy continuation of Sark. Waugh's life vocation had been formed.

In November of 1910, three years after his definitive return home to America from his long sojourn of fifteen years in Europe, twelve of them in England, Waugh published an article on marine painting in a short-lived monthly magazine, *Palette and Bench*. With characteristic modesty, he entitled his article simply: "Some Words on Sea Painting."



“No doubt,” he writes at the beginning, “the sea is a difficult subject. To paint it convincingly means long, careful observation of its many phases and its anatomy, for the sea *has* anatomy.”

*"Great Manan coast" Oil on canvas Size: 25" x 30"*

Coming out of the long-established traditions of the studios and the emphasis in their teaching on human anatomy as the foundation of the painter's art. Waugh had discovered for himself, after long observation, that the sea in movement is not the confused mass which even some great artists, like Courbet for example, have imagined. Rather it has rhythm, form, and pattern. It has, as Waugh and others have said, an “anatomy” all its own.

“When a green comber turns over and breaks into white foam upon its base,” Waugh observes, “you at once may be sure that such a wave is breaking in shallow water. But when it turns over and breaks near its summit and the foam slides down behind it and the great monster swell comes at you unbroken again, you know there is deep sea underneath. Here is an example of the anatomy of the sea.

“The wave does these things and other things over and over again, pretty much as it did before. It cannot help doing them. It is a pliable element and the wind and rocks and sands heave it up and twist it and turn it, pretty much the same way every time, until the observer learns to

know the repeated forms he sees, and becomes at last so familiar with them that they can be painted from memory. That is my case exactly. I spend part of each summer studying the sea from nature and what I learn from it then, lasts me until next time.”

Always, it should be noted, sea painting is of necessity memory painting to a considerable degree, even when the artist with his canvas is directly facing the ocean. If the water is in movement, the painter can capture it only by fixing his mind just what it has done and is likely to be doing again at a particular instant. The waves will not wait for him. They must be caught and held by the eye before being transmitted to the brush. Waugh, at his inland home at Kent in western Connecticut, once demonstrated to his artist friend, Robert Nisbet, how he could, from memory alone, depict wave action at any successive moment in its rapidly changing course.

“Of course to paint it [the sea] on the spot is good—very good—but it is at best confusing,” continued Waugh. “At first one is inclined to paint every sort of wave that comes, dropping the one which has been laid in for another one soon, however, the attention becomes riveted upon one particularly attractive phase and you look for repetitions of it until by degrees you have worked it out sufficiently to know that you have been through a severe struggle. But it pays in the end.

“So, when I paint waves from nature, I make up my mind what composition in drawing I will undertake, and stick to that one rigidly until the end, no matter what other composition comes forward to claim my attention. This continual waiting for repetitions in the anatomy of the sea is no end of a help to the student.

“To avoid the quick changes in the lighting of nature,” adds Waugh after an interval, “I have acquired the habit of quick precise painting and seek to make each brushful of paint tell its own story.

“It is a good plan,” advises Waugh further, “to begin by looking at the general tone of the sea as compared with the sky and striving, without painting the details, to paint a single mass of plain sea water against the sky in its right relation, both in value and color. This applies also to painting the sea against rocks or sand. When you feel pretty certain that you have arrived at some sort of truth, try to paint a plain wave rising out of the mass of water. Then a bit of white cap, and so on, as your desire draws you; but don’t try too many things at once. Later your mind will be more elastic, and like the juggler, you will presently be able to do several things at once, each a separate thing, but all connected in a harmonious whole.”

Waugh follows, after certain further suggestions, with other more detailed comments. “I have found,” he says, “that to keep my work from looking insipid and thin, I have to paint out full values and colors, never restricting myself to the depth of a shadow, right down to the deepest black which I can make with dark blue and lake, up to the highest light which can be made with a good solid dab of pure white or white and some other color, or with the pure pigment as may be the case. And I have also found that my best results are attained by impasto, thick painting, shadows and all, having all my picture of an even, rugged, ragged thickness all over, building up and dragging and so on until the surface is very painty. All this paint is put on as unmixed as possible, the long, flexible, round brushes I use dragged through several tints

loosely and fully, and left upon the canvas (which I have previously prepared with a rough coat of paint of a dark color) as nearly unmixed as the correct tint desired allows. I even add small touches of lighter or darker color through a tint to break it up and make it *vibrate*. There is no other way to reach a positive vibration, but to vibrate your color *actually*. A flat mixed tint *never vibrates*, but it may be a beautiful note in a picture when used thoughtfully.”

In these years, shortly after his long-delayed return in full middle life to America, Waugh painted thick with long, sable brushes, as he indicated in the passage above. From about 1930 on, he used cobalt dryer for quick drying and painted thin, and commonly on board rather than canvas. Some observers prefer his earlier manner, in this respect; others the later.

“I do not pay particular attention to details now, “ writes Waugh, “but I am glad that I used to do so because the knowing them intimately aids me to paint broadly with more certainty than if I had never studied them.” Only such a mastery of details, we may add, makes it possible, not only to decide what to put in, but—sometimes even more important—what to leave out.

“Finally, “Waugh says, “it is better to err upon the side of loose, ragged painting than upon the side of tight, close, hard, finished painting.”

Many years later, under urging, Waugh wrote an extensive manuscript on sea painting which was never published. He put it in the form of a dialogue and counsel between himself and a young student friend. Without repeating what has gone before, we may here, in brief space, add a few more of Waugh’s suggestions.

He advises painting rocks as “more or less dark silhouettes with several well arranged forms of foam cascading off in your pattern. Never paint this effect as you actually see it,” he warns. “In all probability it would not be arranged, in nature, according to rhythm or counterpoint. The arrangement you deliberately invent in your studio is what counts in art, and will have a different appearance from reality. Yet, if your mind is soaked with the realities observed in nature, you can draw upon them with more advantage than if they were purely imaginary forms. These last might very well lead away from just the touch of reality needed to convince the beholder that your painted seas is not merely a diagram of broken geometrical designs, but sea water.” In other words, without constituting a mere photographic reproduction of an actual scene, the painting should be in harmony with what could happen. It must seem real, but in a more pleasing artistic composition than is likely to occur in nature.



*"Prevailing westerly" Oil on board Size: 48" x 60"*

In another passage, Waugh gives an interesting hint on procedure. He advises his young student to make an observation trip with a notebook, but without doing any actual painting. "I am bent on your acquisition of eye-memory, which has been of such value to me all these years," he writes. "When soaked full of impressions, you will be better off than when loaded with questionably good sketches. I have no objection to making pencil notes of forms plus descriptions. This is my own method of sketching. No bothersome material to lug about. One's eye constantly on nature, not on the canvas. Do you realize how much time this saves for observation?"

Of course, this is no method for beginners, as Waugh is careful to explain. They need much actual sketching in order to learn effective use of their tools. Waugh himself often made tiny sketches with Lilliputian painting set which he himself devised for convenient carrying in his pocket. But, assuming that the artist is well past the elementary stage, such as artist, in Waugh's opinion, can save much time by working chiefly for "an exhaustive eye-memory with notes. You can even dispense with these last," he adds, "when your mind retains sufficiently vivid impressions." This was evidently a practice Waugh himself adopted late in life after long experience.

"I find that my most striking pictures of the sea," Waugh observes, "are those strong in contrasts, the shadows as dark as I can get them and everything in between of the proper value up to the highest light I select to use."

“I have always believed in establishing the sky tone, in general, as soon as possible,” Waugh states. “In sea painting, the rest depends upon it because of the element of reflection. If you have a dark sky, with light breaking through, part of your water is bound to be light.

“The result of direct painting, in skillful hands, is automatically the best ever,” in Waugh’s opinion. “It goes far ahead of labored work, painting after painting, day after day, with perhaps one’s mental attitude on the change...Do everything in one whack. Even if it remains incomplete in places, no matter. The frame will often take care of this. Put a roughly executed picture into a highly finished frame for the best results. The very fact that there is an edge binder all around your canvas will, if the roughness is not too pronounced, finish up what you have done. The celebrated Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington is a fine example: There was no need of a complete background. Washington himself was enough.

“A sense of mystery is often conveyed by certain passages which lack obviousness because left unfinished,” Waugh continues. “Such things call attention to other passages which are of more import. Make these last your climaxes. The usefulness of the surroundings will consist of their right relationship to the whole. Right tone, right value, the drawing negligible in this instance... And, as I said before, simplicity, always simplicity.”

The passage is a final brief summation of Waugh’s long and fruitful experience.