

GALLERY GUIDE

BILL OF LADING

The Art & Poetry of Roger Martin

FEBRUARY 14 – JUNE 28, 2015



Roger A. Martin

The Cape Ann Museum is pleased and honored to present *Bill of Lading*, a special exhibition exploring the art and poetry of Roger Martin. A founder of Montserrat College of Art and a long-time member of its faculty, Roger Martin is Rockport's first poet laureate and author of three books celebrating the people and poetry of his hometown. Also a highly respected graphic designer, illustrator and painter, he has long been—and continues to be—one of Cape Ann's most distinguished and creative artists.

Born in Gloucester in 1925, Martin's roots run deep in the community. His mother came to

this country from Finland in the early 1900s and his father's ancestors from the Azores a generation before. Roger grew up in Rockport where his "childhood patch of home turf ranged along Main Street from Mill Lane to Five Corners ..."¹ His father was a tugboat captain and a master mariner, working early on for the Rockport Granite Company. One of Roger's fondest childhood memories is of hanging out a window of his family home, waving a bed sheet as a greeting to his father as he passed by the rugged shoreline in his tugboat.² After graduating from Rockport High School in 1942, Roger left Cape Ann to serve in



the Canine Corp of the Coast Guard during World War II. Following the war, and after a short stint on the west coast where he quickly came to realize he was "looking for a facsimile of Rockport and [that] there is no facsimile,"³ Roger returned to the East Coast.

In 1946, taking advantage of benefits offered through the G.I. Bill of Rights, Roger Martin enrolled in the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, focusing on book design and illustration during four years at the institution. After graduating with honors in 1950, he worked freelance in advertising design in Boston and New York City eventually illustrating seven books for the Boston firm of D.C. Heath. During this time, his illustrations began appearing in such publications as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1953, Roger returned home to Cape Ann, young, enthused and happy to be out of "the great rat race."⁴

Finding on Cape Ann an art community which, at times, he felt was

held back by its allegiance to conservatism⁵, Roger quickly fell in with artists who by exploring new subject matter and methods of expression were striving to distance themselves from traditional Cape Ann land and seascape painters. In 1954, just a year back in Rockport, his work was included in the annual Cape Ann Festival of the Arts. The Festival was organized in 1951 and over a ten year period staged broad ranging exhibitions featuring music, theatrical presentations and a cross section of the wide range of arts being created on Cape Ann. Exhibitors divided themselves into self-selected groups, joining other artists whose work they found compatible. In 1954, Roger's work was included in "Group K" whose chairman was Rocky Neck artist Tom O'Hara and whose members included Nell Blaine, Napoleon A. Setti and Fay Abrahams. In coming years, Roger would show his work in the Festival regularly, using it (as other did, too) as a platform for exploring new mediums and techniques.

As time went on, his work underwent a steady evolution as he moved away from drawing and illustration and focused more on painting. His palette became simpler and bolder, his edges harder and his compositions increasingly organic and abstract. He experimented with collage, used a palette knife, designed and cut woodblocks for printing, and worked in oil and oil stick on canvas. The inspiration behind his work, however, the landscape of Rockport and Cape Ann, remained constant, investing his output with a richness and authenticity that garnered wide appeal.

In 1970, after working for several years with organ maker Charles Fisk designing and carving pipe shades, and teaching design and drawing at the New England School of Art in Boston, Roger and eight other artists (most of whom had exhibited at one time or another in the Cape Ann Festival of the Arts) joined together to establish what today we know as Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Massachusetts. The group—Oliver Balf, George Gabin, Joe Jeswald, Paul Scott, John Head, Jim Sweeney, Ray Pisano, Vincent Varvaro and Roger Martin—were dedicated to the idea of establishing an art school which embraced all types of visual artwork and was defined by an open admissions policy: students only needed to have a face-to-face interview and present a portfolio of original work. During his 20 year career

at Montserrat, Roger taught a wide range of classes including spot drawing, painting, design, cartooning and visual systems. When he retired from Montserrat in 1991, having inspired an entire generation of new artists, Roger was honored by the institution as its first professor emeritus.

Like the early 20th century modernist Marsden Hartley whose work has inspired Roger for many years, the beauty and diversity of Cape Ann's landscape has moved Roger's pen as well as his brush. Over the decades, dozens of his essays and columns have been published in the *Gloucester Daily Times* and other newspapers, many of them inspired by the history of Rockport and his family's involvement in it. Poetry has been a passion as well as prose and in 1990, Roger was honored with the title of Rockport's first poet laureate, a distinction he retained through 1997. In 1989, he began assembling an anthology entitled *Poetry for Rockport* which was published in 1992. In 1991, he published *7 Woodcuts & Poems*, a limited edition portfolio of poems and woodblock prints produced with Bob Perrigo and printed on a hand-fed platen press in Perrigo's letterpress shop in Essex, Massachusetts. The portfolio includes Roger's introspective and lyrical poem *Bill of Lading* from which this exhibition takes its title.

Drawing on his love of history, in 1997 Roger Martin published *Rockport Remembered: An Oral History*, in 1998 a photographic collection called *A Rockport Album: Photographs of Bygone Days*, and in 2001, *Rockport Recollected: Real Stories from Real People*. Each book captures the voices and images of a generation of Rockport residents





and landscapes which Roger astutely realized was quickly passing away, of men and women who grew up in the town during the 1920s and '30s whose parents had worked in the quarries and built boats on Bearskin Neck. It is readily apparent and Roger happily acknowledges that these books, like his paintings are “gesture(s) of love” for a town which has nurtured and sustained him all his life.

Throughout his career, one of Roger’s main goals has been “to make a meaningful statement about Cape Ann,”⁶ and to that end he has been fully engaged in his hometown. In addition to his long and esteemed tenure at Montserrat, Roger taught in the Rockport public schools, served on Rockport’s volunteer fire department—as deputy forest warden and for many years as Captain of the Pigeon Cove Department, on the town’s planning board and board of appeals. In the course

of all these engagements, Roger stored up a wealth of visual images which are “powerfully transmitted” through each of his paintings and his poetry.

—Martha Oaks
Curator, Cape Ann Museum

NOTES

1. Roger Martin, *Rockport Remembered: An Oral History* (The Curious Traveler Press, Gloucester, MA, 1997), p. 143.
2. *John Ronan’s The Writer’s Block*, Interview #44 with Roger Martin (Adelphia Cable-tv, Gloucester, MA, 1994).
3. “A Native’s Return” by Roger Martin in *Artists of the Rockport Art Association, 35th Anniversary Edition* (Rockport Art Association, Rockport, MA, 1956), p. 13.
4. “Brief: Roger Martin,” undated (c.1955) artist statement in Cape Ann Museum Archives.
5. “A Native’s Return,” op.cit.
6. “Roger Martin stayed home” by Peter Anastas in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, December 19, 1979.



The Cape Ann Museum thanks the following individuals for their assistance in organizing this exhibition: Mari Martin, Roger Martin, Faith Oker, Al Mallette and David Hall.

RELATED PROGRAMMING

Saturday, March 7 at 2:00 p.m.

Poets in the Round with Colleen Michaels,
Writing Studio Director, Montserrat College of Art

Saturday, April 18 at 2:00 p.m.

A Gallery Conversation with Roger Martin and John Ronan,
producer and host of *The Writer's Block*

A list of additional related programs will be posted
on our website: www.capeannmuseum.org.

BILL OF LADING

My manifest shows passage
from Lascaux to Loblolly Cove,
from Finnish and Azorean shores
to the sands of Pebble Beach,

in steerage and on cross tree,
on reindeer sled and open boat,
along cliffs alive with legend,
capped with bracken soaked in blood.

My forbears have molded fertile figurines
in dark, forbidding caves,
been pierced by Northern winds
and heard the cries of wounded whales.

They've been a part of mutinies at sea,
heard shot tear the rigging overhead,
and fought a gale four days and nights
before driving ashore Down East.

I look back along those ancient tracks
vainly seeking evidence
of marks and footprints
I might somehow match with mine.

But here I sit, three score and ten
with no such drama in my log,
small triumphs reached in daily coping
my only contribution.

Robust spirits from the past
chant dirges with my demons,
accompanying my lifelong search
for a port to call my own.

—Roger Martin, 1995

MUSEUM INFORMATION

Hours: Tuesday–Saturday 10am–5pm;
Sunday 1pm–4pm; closed Mondays and major holidays.

Admission: \$10 adults; \$8 seniors, students and Cape Ann
residents; Museum members and youth 18 and under are free.

For more information call (978) 283-0455 x10 or visit capeannmuseum.org.

CAPE ANN MUSEUM

ART HISTORY CULTURE

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