The Nature of a Painter

With singular intensity, Walter Inglis Anderson devoted his art and his life to Mississippi’s Gulf coast

by Jack Rudloe

I first heard of the man a decade ago, when I was working on a book about shrimping. I was packing my suitcase, getting ready to go to Mississippi to catch opening day of the fishing season. All the shrimpers in Panacea, Florida, were heading west to be in Pascagoula when the season opened so they could partake of the rich harvest of brown shrimp. The television was on in the background, but I paid it no attention.

Then a film called The Islander came on. It was about Walter Anderson, an artist-recluse who had lived in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, and created thousands of watercolors and pen-and-ink drawings of every imaginable creature that swam the waters, flew the skies, and crawled upon the land. Packing forgotten, I watched with fascination the story of his life. Trained in New York, Philadelphia, and Paris, he nevertheless spent most of his adult life in Ocean Springs. He frequently rowed fourteen miles out to Horn Island, one of the narrow barrier islands within sight of his home on the Gulf coast, to live as a hermit and paint.

He was considered an eccentric. People laughed when they saw him high in the branches of an oak tree in downtown Ocean Springs, sketching blue jays in their nests. For Anderson the professional isolation of a small southern town and his inability to support his family by working as an artist were often more than he could handle. He had bouts with mental illness. After some Ocean Springs citizens circulated a petition to paint over his murals in the community center, he became increasingly reclusive. The seclusion of Horn Island was his salvation. He died in 1965 virtually unknown.

I knew I would have to see his work firsthand, for we both appreciated the complexities and beauty of the

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Paintings from the collection of the family of Walter I. Anderson.
Black drum
Paintings photographed by Anne Rudloe
STONE CRAB
Gulf of Mexico, were drawn to its life and its mysteries. I spent the next week at sea, sleeping by day, shrimping by night. It was hot, grueling, sweaty work. When we anchored off the Mississippi barrier islands, I thought about the hermit-artist Walter Anderson. He had lived as part of the environment of Horn Island, devoured by sand gnats, yellow flies, and bugs. He withstood the freezing north winds and the broiling heat and became part of the seasons of the sea. No doubt the yellow flies biting me were descendants of the ones that had tormented him.

After the boat docked in Pascagoula, I caught a ride to Ocean Springs and turned off onto a road paved with broken seashells to reach the Anderson complex. Time seemed to freeze; instantly the subdivisions and “carscapes” of an exploding sunbelt town were left behind, and the Old South returned. It was as wooded as my home in Panacea. Jutting out over the marsh from a shoreline covered with massive slash pines and live oaks draped with moss was his family’s dock. It was from this dock, with its old silver planking, that Walter Anderson had embarked in his small skiff, crossing the Mississippi Sound to Horn Island. My affinity for the man and the place grew.

After days at sea I suppose I looked a little wild, and it took some persistence before I convinced Sissy, Anderson’s widow, and her daughter Mary to let me see his work. Finally Mary led me to his little cottage beneath the moss-draped oaks of the coastal forest, not far from the dock. In the last years of his life, he allowed no one into his cottage. After he died, his family opened the doors and gazed with wonder and surprise at the vast multitude of watercolors, pen-and-ink drawings, block prints, wood carvings, and sculptures he had left. There were more than 30,000.

One room was totally empty of furnishings, but every inch of the walls was covered with murals. I stood reeling at the power of his artwork and vision—for there, from floor to ceiling, was a re-creation of life on earth. Anderson saw what visionaries see, and he tried to capture the flow of life as it spiraled its way into each and every living form. He was fascinated with the patterns of
COMMON OYSTER
nature, the repetitive forms of convergent evolution, the
symmetry of crabs, the motion of birds, and the spirals of
conch shells. Anderson was so enamored of energy that
he once lashed himself to a tree and rode out a terrifying
hurricane to better understand the energy of the swirling
forces of clouds, wind, and water.

Mary Anderson Pickard led me to an old building
where many of his watercolors and paintings were
stored. She let me go through the conservation boxes
filled with his drawings. Mary had spent years
cataloging and publicizing them on television, in books,
and in lectures so others could see them. There were
stacks of folders marked “insects” or “seashells” or
“turtles,” “frogs,” “snakes,” “birds,” “marsh grass,” or
“trees.” He left nothing out.

I looked through folders until I was dazed: 3,000
fragile drawings on flimsy, 8½-by-11-inch paper,
yellowing with age. Just when I thought I couldn’t take
more, something new would attract my attention. He
captured some of the amusing mannerisms of animals—
for example, how a praying mantis thrusts its butt into
the air as it walks about on spindly legs and stares at the
world through bulbulous eyes.

Anderson drew sea hares copulating, pelicans in
flight. I’m convinced that if he didn’t draw it, it was
because he never saw it. Stingrays, sharks, cowfish, and
batfish, they were all there. When he painted oak trees,
like the ones that surrounded his cottage, the boughs and
trunks twisted and reached up like living things, almost
as if their growth were filmed by time-lapse
photography. Bark fascinated him. He loved its
reptilian, scaly nature. He could feel the awesome
patterns of woods, their flowing lines paralleling the
waves rolling up on the beach.

The way he studied form was to draw an object again
and again and again, trying to get it “right” for the
twentieth time. There was a whole folder of works on an
octopus, a single specimen he had found on the shore,
each painting capturing a different aspect of its
movement or color, a new position, a better view of its
cold, brooding eyes or the sucker disks on its tentacles.
He drew the big swamp lubber grasshoppers from every
angle, turning them over and over, pulling out their legs
when dead, extending their wings, essentially dissecting
them visually in order to see what they were made of.
I was especially taken by Anderson’s drawings of
shrimp, since I had been handling thousands of them in
my week at sea. No one had ever captured their frenetic,
hysterical qualities before. His looked as if they were
about to jump off the paper. In some cases, his
incomplete drawings and studies say more about how he
saw life than the finished products do.
In addition to the paintings and artwork he left
behind, there were logbooks filled with thousands of
pages of observations about the beauty of the Mississippi
coast. He wrote about the river, its eternal trek to the sea,
and how it built the barrier islands. The poetry of the
ocean and the forms encountered there seemed to be
enough for him; but even so, he paid an enormous
personal price.