

TODAY'S
MASTERS

CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON'S PAINTERLY CONVERSATION WITH A CONNECTICUT LAKE

The first body of water Charles Raskob Robinson (b. 1940) came to know was a spring-fed farm pond in which he would swim and upon which passing geese would alight. Soon he went on to experience bigger, more turbulent bodies of water — sailing along the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the coast of Maine, where he spent boyhood summers. Waters even more challenging exerted a tidal pull on him during his teens.

“When I was 16, I rowed with friends 2,000 miles down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico,” says Robinson from his home and painting studio in Litchfield County, Connecticut. “What I forgot to account for, though, is that there were 53 dams along the Ohio, with

water flowing over the tops. Fortunately, we learned about those before we went over them.” By the ripe age of 17, Robinson had traversed, alone, some 4,500 miles of the Amazon River and its tributaries.

“I have no real idea what it is about water that appeals to me. I grew up on a gentleman’s farm in southeastern Pennsylvania, so maybe water was part of some previous life of mine. Perhaps the best way to put it is that, while there’s plenty to fear from water, I respect it.”

Much later, in 1997, Robinson and a crew of five others sailed a yawl across the Atlantic Ocean, during which Robinson executed an extensive series of paintings in which he detailed clouds and water. The resulting works, collectively referred to as *The Crossing*, used the same horizon line as their ref-

erence, though each painting was named for the time of day or “watch” it records. Also emerging from that voyage was a painting Robinson calls *Sunrise at Sea: A Symphony in Four Movements*, and from which he derived a new term, “en plein ear,” referencing its embrace of Antonín Dvořák’s New World Symphony of 1893. (When it was exhibited

(THIS PAGE) *Calm before the Second Round: The 15-Inch Snow Storm*, #19 of 35, painted 2 March 2009 ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE TOP): *Airs of Spring*, #21 of 35, painted 28 April 2009 ■ (MIDDLE) *Early Morning Oarsman*, #35 of 35, painted 15 July 2010 ■ (BOTTOM) *Hurricane Hanna*, #10 of 35, painted 6 September 2008







OPPOSITE PAGE: (TOP) *Ephemeral Summer*, #28 of 35, painted 20 September 2009 ■ (MIDDLE) *Autumn Crew*, #12 of 35, painted 1 October 2008 ■ (BELOW) *Full Wolf Moon of January*, #33 of 35, painted 13 February 2010

in eight museums around the U.S. in 2011–13, the “quadtych” was accompanied by headphones, allowing viewers to hear the four movements of the symphony.)

DEVELOPING A THIRST FOR A SUBJECT

But the most important body of water in Robinson’s life, the one that flows deepest in his imagination, is a tranquil, 656-acre glacier-formed lake in western Connecticut known as Lake Waramaug. Named for an 18th-century tribal chief, this 40-foot-deep freshwater lake, shaped like an irregular Z, straddles the townships of Washington, Warren, and Kent. These are picturesque hamlets popular among weekend New Yorkers, but they are also the year-round home of many townspeople, some of whom can trace their families’ residence here to the mid-18th century. For nearly 50 years, Robinson and his wife, Barbara Paul Robinson, have occupied a 1752 Colonial farmhouse in the area; its original footprint was a mere 15 by 30 feet, but subsequent additions have greatly enlarged it.

Located about seven miles from the house, Lake Waramaug has assumed a profound presence in Robinson’s life. Over a two-year period, from August 2008 to October 2010, he painted 35 depictions of the lake, all from the exact same spot, a sandy cove known as Holt Beach, on the grounds of the venerable Washington Club. From that vantage, a long view of the lake comes into focus. Each of Robinson’s 35 paintings is oil on canvas, mounted on panel, and measures 13 inches high by 32 inches wide. While the location and vista are identical, no two works are even remotely alike. Their very titles signal nuanced yet dramatic differences — for example, *Full Wolf Moon of January*, *Zephyrs under a Clear Summer Sky*, *Cold Blue Wind: Harbinger of Winter*, and *Sun Glare and Shadows*.

“After two years of observing and painting Lake Waramaug, it seems almost possible to communicate with it and listen to the stories it has to tell,” Robinson wrote in his 2016 book about the series, *Lake Waramaug Observed: Its Beauty in the Four Seasons, Its Amazing History and Its Promising Future*. “Doing a series like this makes you open your eyes an awful lot,” he adds now. “All of your senses become much keener. Amid that perfect silence, with just the wind and birds as voices, you think about your existence, à la Thoreau, Muir, or [John] Burroughs. I found myself addressing the lake mentally — I wasn’t talking out loud, but there was definitely a dialogue.”



Two views of the telephone-booth-sized portable “sketching capsule” that Robinson designed for himself. Top: Erected on the exact spot from which he painted all 35 scenes; Below: Packed up and ready to pull across the snow (it also has a set of wheels for pulling on dry land).

It seems, perhaps, that the lake was more emboldened to speak directly to Robinson, who remembers being cocooned in his custom-made, telephone-booth-sized portable “sketching capsule” when he heard the lake. It was a cold winter day, the surface was frozen over, and the only sounds were those of his own breath and the sweep of the brush over canvas. Suddenly, the landscape was filled, as Robinson describes it, with “loud booms followed by long moans, not unlike one hears in recordings of whales.” Lake Waramaug is no Loch Ness with a resident monster. Rather, the sounds were those of ice expanding and cracking under enormous pressure caused by the warmth of the sun. “This went on and on, as if the lake were trying to relate earlier, far less peaceful times in its existence,” Robinson writes, referring to its tumultuous glacial birth eons ago.

CAPTURING LIFE OUTDOORS

Robinson likens plein air painting to being in the path of a freight train roaring toward you: the elements — light, ever-changing weather conditions, and more — require the artist to work as quickly as possible to record what is happening all around. “It’s coming at you so fast, everything’s changing, so you have to deal with it, get it down on canvas. The studio process is exactly the opposite in that what is coming out of your head is going on to the canvas. In the studio, there’s no time limit. Outdoors, time is running fast. Each brushstroke has to count, for you have time for only so many.” Here Robinson implies his understanding that this process is an apt metaphor for life, too.

Like Monet’s expansive series depicting the façade of Rouen Cathedral, Robinson’s Lake Waramaug pictures remain fixed from that stretch of beach: the topographical variables do not vary — the undulating Litchfield hills, forested shorelines, and a monumental sky not often associated with the Northeast. Yet viewers never feel a sense of monotony while looking at all of the works. The differing light of each season illuminates the scene in dramatically distinctive ways. A single sailing boat, a lone cross-country skier, an oarsman rowing, all offer heightened moments of drama and visual poetry. Cloud formations speak of coming storms or the winter solstice, the atmosphere registers summer haze or the blinding sun’s glare and the long shadows it casts. As we look at each scene, nuances of the landscape emerge. On the right side of most of the canvases, for instance, is a distant grouping of four evergreens. After a while, for both painter and viewer, these become reliable “characters.”

But, Robinson recalls, “Suddenly, one day, while I was painting one scene, it dawned on me that where there had long been four trees, now there was only one. I don’t know what happened to the other three.” So invested in the series is the viewer that the sudden omission of three trees feels like a twist in the plot, an unresolved mystery at which we keep guessing. Nature is never static.

Nor is Robinson, as an artist. He continues to paint daily, in his home studio and at the lake where, last winter, he undertook the new subject of ice boaters, a hybrid between skating and sailing — sometimes described as “hard water sailing.” He maintains the same patience and discipline he adopted while immersed in the Lake Waramaug series.

Knowing that all 35 pictures would feature the same natural “architecture,” Robinson used a pencil to draw that landscape onto each canvas before setting out from his studio. “In this way, I would be ready to paint when I returned to the lake for the next painting,” he explains. “I could spend my precious and fleeting hours outdoors rendering what I observed as new or distinctive.”

Robinson embarked on the series for several reasons, some practical, others phil-

osophical. Aware that the Lake Waramaug Task Force, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving this body of water from foreign microorganisms and other hazards, was going to celebrate its 35th anniversary in the fall of 2010, he began making 35 works. The paintings were to be auctioned off, with the proceeds split between the Task Force and the Washington Art Association, of which Robinson is an active member. Although the works were marked at \$2,500 each, competition for certain canvases led to bidding as high as \$10,000.

So emotionally invested is Robinson in Lake Waramaug that he also devised a Power-Point presentation about its history that he delivers to regional organizations. As ambitious as his series of paintings is, so, too is his embrace of natural history. He often starts his talks by acknowledging the birth of our universe itself, 14 billion years ago, a decidedly ambitious start for any history lesson. Robinson then breezes through the eons, recounting the movement of tectonic plates, the rise of the Appalachian Mountains (of which the Litchfield Hills are distant descendants), and the sculptural effects of the Ice Age.

"In my talks, I pull up an image of a football field that represents the distance from the creation of life on earth 3.8 billion years ago to today," Robinson says. "I point to the fact that the existence of our species represents only three-sixteenths of an inch on the football field. That's how much we, now, represent. It's pretty sobering. All this debate about climate change is pathetic. It's happened before with the five Mass Extinctions of life on Earth. It's a real problem now."

LIFE ASHORE

In an odd linguistic confluence referencing his life as an artist, the Connecticut property that Robinson and his wife call home (in addition to their Manhattan apartment) is named Brush Hill. The house dates back to

the 1700s. "I suspect the name derives from the fact that there was a lot of brush on a hill with lousy, rocky soil. Then there are some people who think it refers to a pile of dead paint brushes I've amassed." Nonetheless, Barbara Robinson has managed to cultivate a series of gardens there that has made Brush Hill a kind of shrine site for devoted horticulturalists.

Before they acquired it, the house was once owned by the artist Eric Sloane (1905–1985), noted for his poetic renditions of farms and, later, New Mexico landscapes. "A lot is the same as when he occupied the house," says Robinson, pointing to the Franklin stove and cathedral ceiling pierced with a skylight in the studio. "Sloane had a great affinity for clouds and skies," adds Robinson, who might just as well be describing his own concern for such elements in the Lake Waramaug series.

From 1968 to 1986, Robinson served as a vice president at Bankers Trust in Manhattan. When he learned of a company program in which secretaries and bank clerks could take painting classes in the cafeteria after work for a nominal fee, he enrolled, too. "I was the only male and the only bank officer in the class; all of those women artists were much better than I was. A real live artist/teacher was brought in to teach folks how to paint."

Eventually, Robinson tried to encourage some of his fellow artists to join him at the Art Students League of New York, where he was taking other classes. Alas, he recounts, the female bank employees could not conceive of taking classes in which live, naked models of the opposite sex were posing. "This was an era where the glass ceiling was so amazingly rigid," he emphasizes. After years of after-work cafeteria study, and a daily routine of rising at 5 a.m. to paint before going into the office, Robinson eventually resigned from his prestigious position to paint full-time. Among his many ongoing affiliations is that of a Fellow in the American Society of

Marine Artists, for which he has contributed a column, "Notes from Brush Hill," to the quarterly newsletter for more than 20 years.

Looking back at the Lake Waramaug series, Robinson has favorites, one of which, *Crescent Moon in Cold January Dusk*, now hangs in his home. Of its origins, he recounts having gone to the lake late in the day on a frigid January afternoon. The sky was so evenly gray and featureless that he packed up his painting capsule after just a few minutes. "Just as I was leaving, though, it was as if the whole lower sky exploded in color, and I raced back, set up my tools and began my work." The resulting canvas is a haunting array of deep, soulful, luminous blues, infused with a sharp gradated orange-red sunset, and a crescent moon scarring the sky. "I had gone to the lake to paint its appearance late in the day, but I left with something about twilight." ●

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Information: Robinson's 130-page book about the Lake Waramaug series can be ordered via lakewaramaugobserved.com. To visit the gardens at Brush Hill, see brushhillgardens.com.

Crescent Moon in Cold January Dusk, #32 of 35, painted 14 January 2010

