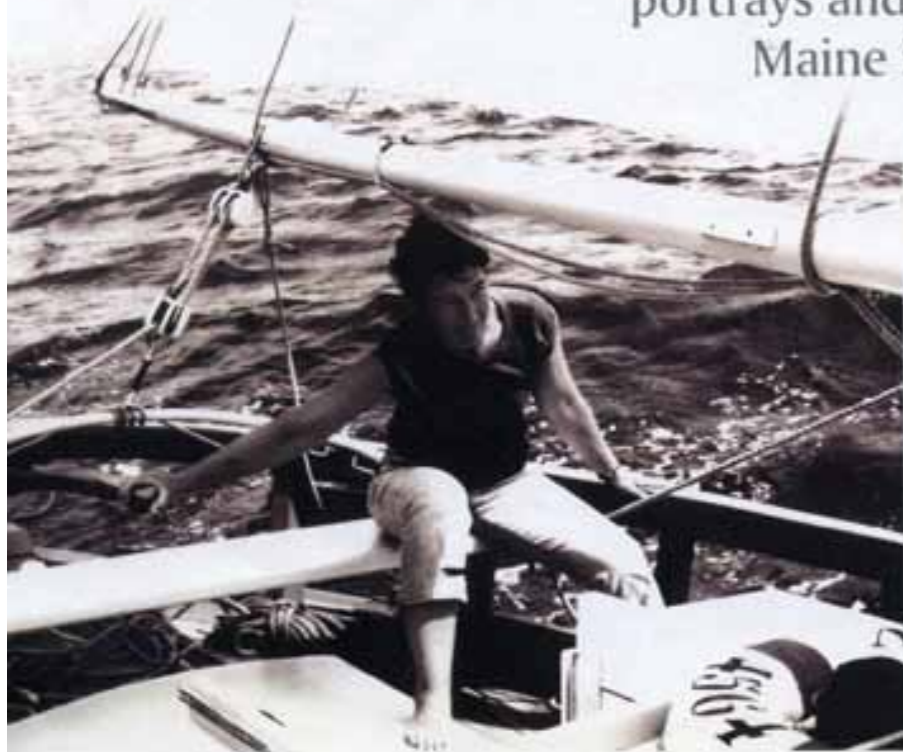


# Maritime Folk Art In the 21st Century

BY R. MICHAEL WALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN MAGRO



Anne-Emmanuelle Marpeau, a French artist, portrays and interprets the coast of Maine in her own unique way.



Artist portrait at left courtesy Anne-Emmanuelle Marpeau

**C**ONTEMPORARY MARINE artist Anne-Emmanuelle Marpeau is an expert in creating shadowbox models or perspective dioramas.

Born in Brittany, France, in 1962, she has joined a special realm of international masters of the genre that includes the likes of Joaquim Maristany (Spain), Kenneth Britten (England), and Erik Ronnberg Jr. and Sr. (United States of America), all of whom have their own approach to nautically themed folk art.

Marpeau, a professional artist for the past 23 years, lives in the coastal village of Audierne in Finistère, where she has a studio in an old shipyard along the Goyen River. That is where she gains inspiration for her projects and where she learned the techniques of her art.

# In the 21st Century



ADVANCE PROOF

For her American market, Marpeau's fanciful three-dimensional artistry has added a new scope and innovative presentation to this traditional nineteenth-century sailor's art form, known by the French as "ex-voto." Marpeau interprets the meaning of ex-voto in a spiritual way; these were offerings given by a sailor to his church as a plea to God for a safe voyage.

She first came to Maine in 1997, inspired by the state's enduring nineteenth-century maritime heritage and seaport towns, villages, and island communities. She has traveled the coast from Mount Desert Island to the eastern reaches of Boothbay in search of inspiration for her work.

Thus, her Maine island or coastal ex-voto pieces are convincing, from both a visual and historical perspective. They are, in most ways, insightful interpretations of the lives of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century seafarers and their families, those who were engaged in and survived the season-



Facing page above: 1906—Wednesdays at Whitehead Island's Life-Saving Station  
Facing page below: The artist at the helm  
This page, above: *The Lighthouse Keeper's Silent Conversation with the Sinking Ship*  
This page, left and below: *A New Lighthouse, Bass Harbor Head*





Above, right, and below:  
The Day They Took  
Our School Off  
(Greens Island, 1907)

al hardships, joys, and endless dramas along the coast of Maine. Many of her pieces are a celebration of rustic and lighthouse life on the small coastal islands that abound in this region. With the aid of ship's or lighthouse-keeper's logs, and other historical accounts, she develops these scenes with great care, understanding, and whimsy. Most viewers of her work are drawn in, compelled to explore all the details within each box.

In addition to large ex-voto models, Marpeau has developed a less complicated offering, a *Lettre* as she calls each one, carved from wood. These smaller format pieces, generally 4" x 7" or



6" x 7", are brightly painted, imaginative, and clever. They all include an official French postage stamp with a dated postmark from Finisterre and have an appropriate maritime message in the way of the address. Most include a small ex-voto window, sometimes screened, sometimes disguised behind a fabric flap or miniature door. The scene behind the window generally reflects the *Lettre's* text.

Marpeau begins actual work on an ex-voto only after her subject and concept have been visualized, and her research, based on historical photographs and documents, and her own on-site sketches, is complete. First she makes a wooden box: four sides and a bottom of proportions appropriate to the scene she will develop. Each box is enhanced with a somewhat wide picture frame simply painted with soft colors—light blues and greens to various shades of beige or gray. Often the frame includes hand-painted text, either identifying the scene location and date, or telling a story.

Creating the scene in the box generally begins with painting the background details—sky and water, with a delineated horizon. Next come vessels, buildings, figures, etc. Some of her ex-votos include secondary cameo boxes or openings that highlight particular aspects of the story she is telling; these are often enhanced with "sailor's



valentine"-style decorations made from tiny seashells.

All the elements within a scene are authentically and artistically painted in subtle tones.

Her sky often conveys an impression of the crisp, clean air of coastal northern New England; her waves as they meet the shore are lively in quiet scenes and convincingly turbulent in rough weather. Blustery weather is

indicated by billowing sails, stiff flying flags, heavy wind-swept seas, and soaring birds. All of this adds to the overall theatrical performance, movement, and fantasy of the narrative.

Over the past several years Marpeau has gained a steady following in Europe. Her first introduction to the American market was through the Gleason Fine Art Gallery in Boothbay Harbor in 1998.

R. Michael Wall is the director of the American Marine Model Gallery in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

FOR MORE INFORMATION  
An exhibition of Marpeau's work, "Inside the Box: The Marine Art of Anne-Emmanuelle Marpeau," is on display at the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport through September 10, 2010. For more information: [www.penobscotmarinemuseum.org](http://www.penobscotmarinemuseum.org).

Above: Baker Island 1858  
Left: Wreck Island 1914



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