



Alan Magee
on *The Maine Idea*

When I was in elementary school, memorizing the states and their capitols on a multi-colored, pull-down map of the US, I felt an inexplicable attraction to the state at the upper right (yellow, as I remember it) sitting at the northeastern corner of the country and bordering the blue Atlantic. I imagined that one day I would live there. Although I would have had no words for it, its place on the map seemed to suggest a way of life, independent yet still attached to the rest of the nation. Nearly two decades later, a chance conversation with Gordon Bok, the Maine-based singer and poet, reignited my long-dormant fascination with this region. In 1976 my wife, Monika, and I moved to Camden, Maine.

That first summer, a young friend took us to the stone beach at Pemaquid Point—an auspicious encounter with a place and a turning point in my life and work. Those stones and the paintings I made of them became a bridge from my life as a New York illustrator to a new beginning as a painter. The stones at Pemaquid are not only profoundly beautiful, but also suggestive of our place as humans in the vastness of time and space. Painting them gave me the time to consider and absorb their message.

Later, other destinations joined Pemaquid in a constellation of private pilgrimage sites. The salvage yard at a nearby cement factory is the source of *Chain*, and *Foro Romano*. A heap of abandoned books slowly returning to pulp in a neighboring town provided the subject for *An Extraordinary Novel*. And the Liberty Tool Company—a vast cabinet of curiosities housing thousands of old but still useful tools—is where I found the four plumbers' wrenches in the painting *Natural History*.

Matinicus Island, twenty miles from the mainland, is dense with intriguing, abandoned objects lying along the shore. Spikes from a long-collapsed wharf (as in *This Half-Century: Matinicus*), archaic machine parts, and the rusted remnants of antique cars embedded in a pebble beach on the island's southeastern side—all of these things are rich in metaphorical possibilities, and marvels for the eye. The intense colors of rust on Matinicus—from yellow-orange and vermilion to deep violet—seem to me more vivid than rust anywhere else.

But travel to distant parts of the world is woven into the fabric of Maine. *Departing and Returning* are its history and its essence. The grand houses of ship captains and shipbuilders along every seaport Main Street, the still-operational 19th-Century fishing schooners, the boatworks at nearly every harbor, and the adopted names of the great cities of Europe: Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Vienna, Lisbon, Belfast, testify to a past that was worldly and sophisticated. When travelers return home, the nature of home is changed.

Departing and returning—the cycle of time *away* and *home*, of discovery and contemplation—this time-honored rhythm characterizes my relationship to Maine. In my studio beside a tidal cove I can consider and respond to the experiences and lessons of travel. Several trips to the Neolithic sites in the British Isles, for example, brought a new sensibility and compositional structure to my paintings of stones. The painting *Voyage* makes reference to the longbarrows and stone alignments in Southwest England and to a reverence toward stones stretching back to prehistory.

Travel shapes my interpretation and treatment of nearly all of my subjects. A row of cement-covered bolts found a few miles from my home recalls the fragments of columns and pediments strewn through the ruins of the Roman Forum. An arrangement of driftwood pieces suggests a phrase from Renaissance choral music and a single, paint-encrusted brush serves as an emblem for the art of painting and for countless lives dedicated to its practice.

