

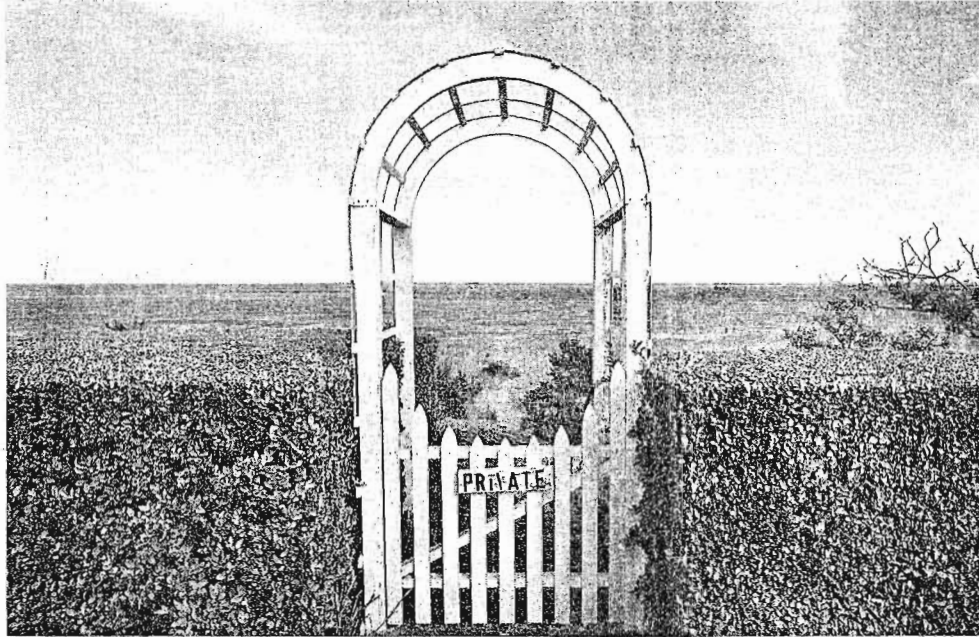
Sketching class finds Sconset has a glow all its own

By Clare Innes
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SIASCONSET — All I should be able to hear above the whisper of my pencil is a stiff wind stirring the ocean into whitecaps. But I hear nothing. Instead, my world has shrunk to one square yard where a tangle of grasses and flowers spills over a short fence of river stone.

Anne Baldwin Butler, the artist who hatched Sketching Tours of Nantucket, moves among the small group of us scattered up and down a quiet, one-lane track. Her red hair tosses wildly in the wind, and broken seashells crunch under her feet as she wanders among us, dispensing inspiration in her wake. "Some people tell me they can't even draw a straight line," she says by way of reassurance in the face of our group's complete lack of drawing experience. "I say, 'Good!' Straight lines are never as fresh. Take a look around — you'll find it very hard to find a straight line around here."

We're here in "Sconset," Nantucket islanders' shorthand for the town of Siasconset, about 8 miles across the island from Nantucket town, to learn a meditative way of seeing the subtleties of light, shadow, and texture in the scene before us, and then to try to translate it to paper. Sconset offers fertile ground for our class. Weathered cottages sag slightly in their tidy plots, many soldiering under a riot of roses. From some perspectives, the fretting sea provides a dramatic backdrop, and nautical antiques intertwine with decades of plant growth.



GLOBE FILE PHOTO

The Siasconset section of Nantucket seems made of scenes to capture an artist's imagination.

Some of these cottages are more than 200 years old and have been artfully restored. In the 1700s, cod and halibut fishermen and shore whalers lived in many of these same faded-to-gray-shingled cottages, while the wealthy captains lived in the fine mansions in Nantucket town. In the 1800s, when Nantucket was known as the most prosperous whaling port in the world, residents of Nantucket town would come to Sconset to escape the heavy fumes of the downtown whale-oil refineries. Later tourists included writers and artists who were drawn to the stark beauty of Sconset.

The town is quiet on this moody, wind-whipped day, and the cloud-filtered light saturates everything with a kind of liquid crystal sheen I have no hope of capturing with my pencil, but which I drink in anyway.

After we arrive, Butler begins by handing us each a collapsible chair, an 11-by-14-inch drawing tablet filled with creamy pages, and a small bag containing a gum eraser, a woodless graphite pencil, a sharpener, and a clothespin to keep our pages from taking flight in the wind.

"The real art of drawing is looking," she begins as we set our

chairs in a semicircle in front of her. "That's why I like to start people out with just a woodless graphite pencil. If you're looking in your pencil box for the right color, you're using the left side of your brain. We want to be on the right side of the brain."

We explore what the pencil can do if we hold it different ways and play with pressure, or look away from the pad and draw our open hand without watching our own progress or lifting the pencil from the paper. We pretend the pencil point is a fly in a tiny cage and trace its tangled, scribbly flight to loosen our hands and our minds.

"Now, let go of every word," Butler says. "When you look at something and you name it, you draw a preexisting image of what you know it to be. What it actually is can escape you."

She pauses for several minutes as we sketch the leaves of a nearby rhododendron. It's amazingly difficult to shut down our inner narrators, but after a while, it's just breath and pencil, following the contours of what lies before us. "It's almost like doing meditation," Butler says quietly. "You can get pretty spaced out, but you release expectations. Keep that mindset. It'll make all the difference today. Warming up is about getting to that wordless place in us that is quiet and still and present."

I look around with fresh eyes. I am itching to sketch the untidy coil of a garden hose beside me, to follow my pencil and explore the play of light and shadow and form. It's just an old garden hose, but take away its name and it presents an intriguing challenge to replicate.

"Don't draw the slats of a window," she continues as we walk down the lane, stopping one by one to set up our chairs before our chosen scenes. "Draw what's reflected or revealed in the panes. What makes light? Something dark around it. Draw the fence without actually drawing the fence."

I am staring at the scene before me, struggling to persuade my fingers to convince the pencil to replicate it.

"How are you doing over here?" Butler asks as she comes

If you go...

Sketching Tours of Nantucket
508-228-1478

www.sketchingtours.com

Classes begin June 14 and run daily, 9:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., through September. All levels of experience welcome. Sketching stools provided; other supplies available for purchase. Reservations required. Classes are \$85 for outdoor group instruction followed by individual sessions with Anne Baldwin Butler; discounts available for future classes in the same season.

my way.

"OK, but it all just seems like a big, chaotic scribble," I reply, squinting from drawing to scene.

Butler takes my pad and walks halfway across the lane, and shows me my drawing from about 10 feet away, and suddenly it works: A stone emerges without my having drawn a single line of it. Instead, a play of shadow and a frame of grasses suggest it, and it comes into being. "Once in a while, I look at my drawings from a distance," she says. "Sometimes that's when it starts to come together."

By the end of the 3½-hour session, my perceptions have sharpened. The scrubby, coastal vegetation reveals textures, hues, and contours that I had completely overlooked. Until now.

Clare Innes is a freelance writer who lives in Belmont.