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Open Air Art

Local artists offer outdoor classes

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I&M Staff Writer

A veteran outdoor painter, William Welch paints landscapes in the Loire Valley, Normandy and Provence every year and believes Nantucket is the only place in the world where the light and atmosphere are similar to those legendary regions of France that have inspired painters for centuries.

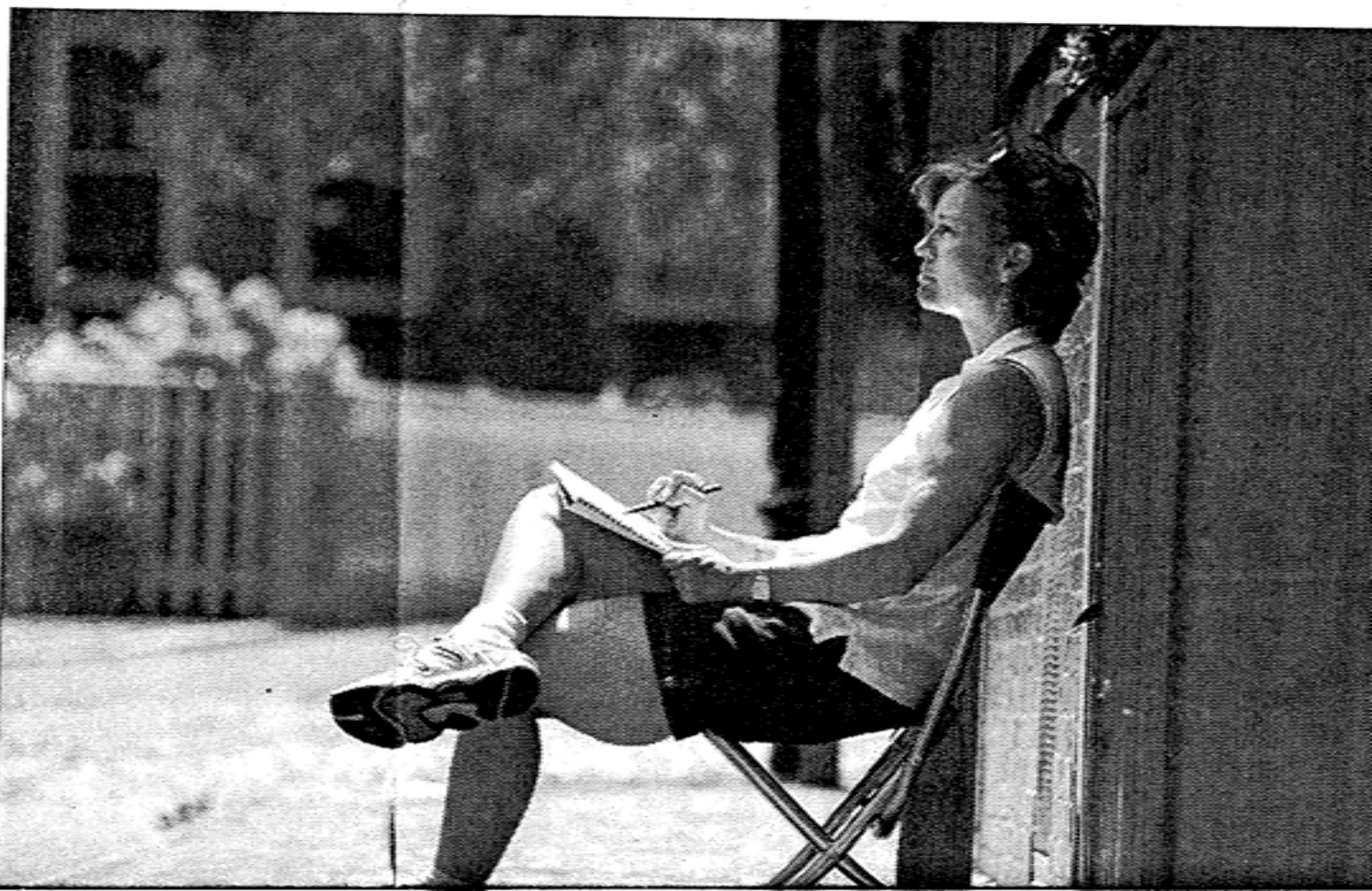
"It's an atmospheric phenomenon of humidity, light and angle of light," said Welch, who spends most of the year on Nan-

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— Kathleen Duncombe
Gallery owner

an inspirational place. Responding to that artistic urge are a growing number of drawing and painting teachers who are taking students outside.

"A lot of people ask



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are more people coming here expressly for the purpose of learning to paint."

Welch conducts a French-style *En Plein Air* painting workshop for the Artists' Association every year. Over fruit and wine and cheese, students - from beginners to advanced - gather in places such as Sconset, Brant Point and Old North Wharf early and late in the day, when the light is best.

"I try to impress on people a method of seeing the light," said Welch.

According to many artists, it's not just the light but the landscape - full of flowers, quaint cottages, stately homes and picturesque seascapes - that compels them to work outside.

"I think it's a different way of viewing the world and it's a totally different way of viewing Nantucket," said Kathleen Duncombe, who through her Shredder's Studio is offering a watercolor class by local artist M.J. Dickson that's going to be taught partially outdoors. The class starts Friday, with an additional session scheduled for August.

Because these days people spend less time outside than they'd like to, Duncombe said her outdoor classes are very popular.

"Next summer I'll be offering more if I can find people to teach them," she said.

Anne Butler, a new member of the AAN, is one of the few artists who teaches exclusively outside. In front of the Visitor Services building on Federal Street one morning last week, Butler, owner of Sketching Tours of Nantucket, set out with two students, Diane Battaglia and Hans Plukas. Butler conducts sketching tours five days a week, starting with a brief historical tour of Centre Street and a discussion of different drawing techniques before continuing up Main Street and ending in a private garden on Howard Court.

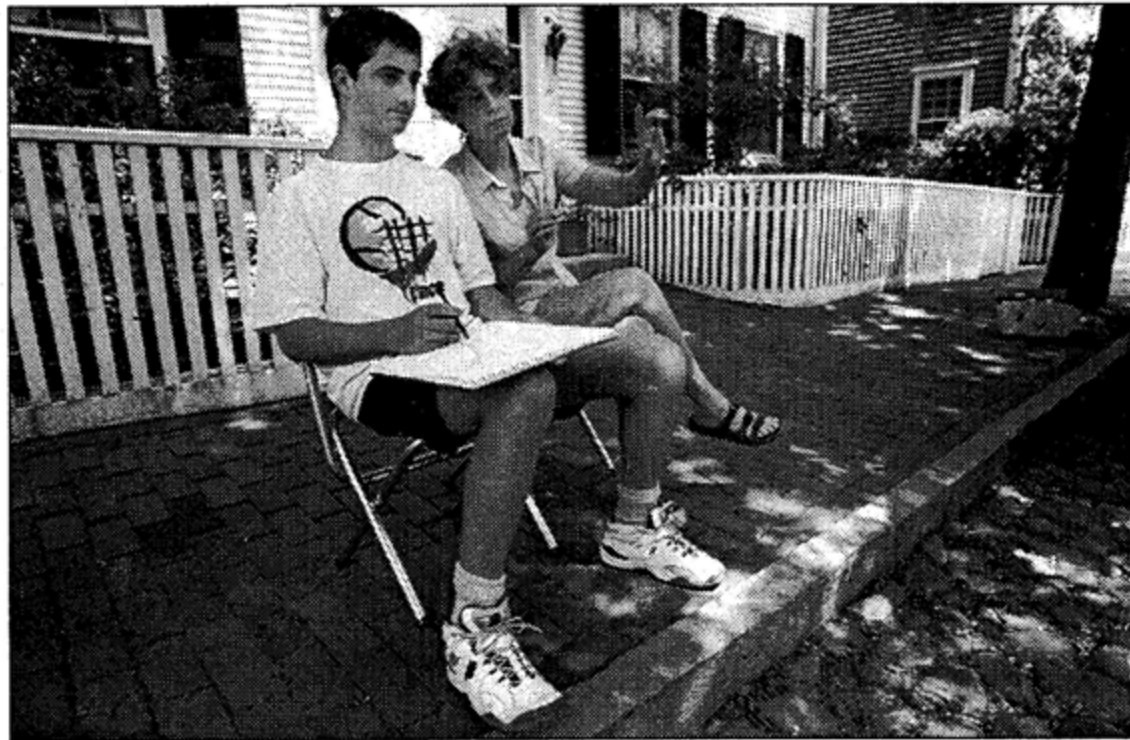


Photo by Jim Powers

Teacher Anne Butler works with Hans Plukas on Main Street last week.

On the way up Main Street, she asks students to look for something they connect with: a doorway, a flower box, a shady porch or something more subjectively appealing.

"I had a woman draw a cigarette butt on the cobblestones," said Butler, laughing.

Most of the people Butler teaches are beginners, many of them professional "linear types," as Butler calls people whose thinking is dominated by the left side of their brains, which is responsible for mathematical and scientific skills. With references to the book "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" by Betty Edwards, Butler teaches students to use their more artistic and imaginative side.

"Some people say, 'I can't draw,' and I say (the right side) of their brain hasn't been developed yet," said Butler. "When people say to me, 'I can't draw a straight line,' I say good."

With sketchbooks and lightweight camp chairs tucked under their arms, Battaglia and Plukas listened to Butler's instruction, learning, for instance, how

to concentrate on their subjects and draw without looking at their paper too much and how to draw negative space, which is the space around an object.

"Often, artists don't draw the positive, they draw the negative," said Butler. "Look at the shape of the shadows around your subject and draw those."

Helen Sharpe Potter, who teaches outdoor painting classes all summer, said painting outside can be overwhelming because, especially on Nantucket, the scenery everywhere is so striking.

"Usually when you go out looking for a place to paint you spend half your time driving around," she said. She teaches people to succumb to the instinct that causes them to brake their car or slow their bike. "The thing to do is stop. You slowed for a reason, so stay."

Once her class is settled, she has them cut a small rectangular frame out of piece of cardboard and move it around in front of them like a viewfinder in a camera until they find a "picture" they like.

"You see too much to

begin with but once you learn to do that, you can focus," she said. "The first time you go out painting it's almost a disaster but it's a big challenge because there's so much out there to choose from."

Most of the people Potter teaches have some experience, but she recognizes that beginners want to paint outside, too.

"I'd like to set up a class for beginners," she said.

Potter's favorite places to paint outside include Wauwinet, the end of the Washington Street Extension and certain downtown streets, though she usually waits until the fall to set up her easel on the sidewalk because, inevitably, someone always parks their car in front of her. Regardless of the obstacles to painting outside - bugs, wind, heat and humidity - Potter said it's rewarding.

"It's just being out there and seeing the light the way it changes," she said. "It's a wonderful life."