

Catching the Wind

Lawrence Packard's visions of sailing ships reflect his seafaring ancestry



Artist Lawrence Packard aboard the *Joseph Conrad*, in Mystic, Connecticut.

"I am the 12th great grandson of Stephen Hopkins, who was shipwrecked on Bermuda on his way to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1609. From the salvaged remains of the wreck, he and other survivors built two smaller boats in which they eventually reached their destination. He later returned to England and bought passage for himself and his family on the Mayflower. Maybe the visions of ships that I have in my head can be explained."

— Lawrence Packard

by Ann Marie O'Phelan

In 1968, Lawrence Packard was a radio operator on a forward air control team operating in Vietnam from the South China Sea west to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Along the coast there were villages with many types of fishing boats, and Packard wanted to capture the flow of the boats in the wind and water. But without a camera, he could only sketch.

"I sketched my first boat while in a marshy tidal area near the town of Vung Tau, sitting in my jeep using a ballpoint pen in the margins of an aeronautical chart. It wasn't long after that I drew a full sail square-rigged ship—something I'd never seen," says Packard, who has been drawing now for forty years.

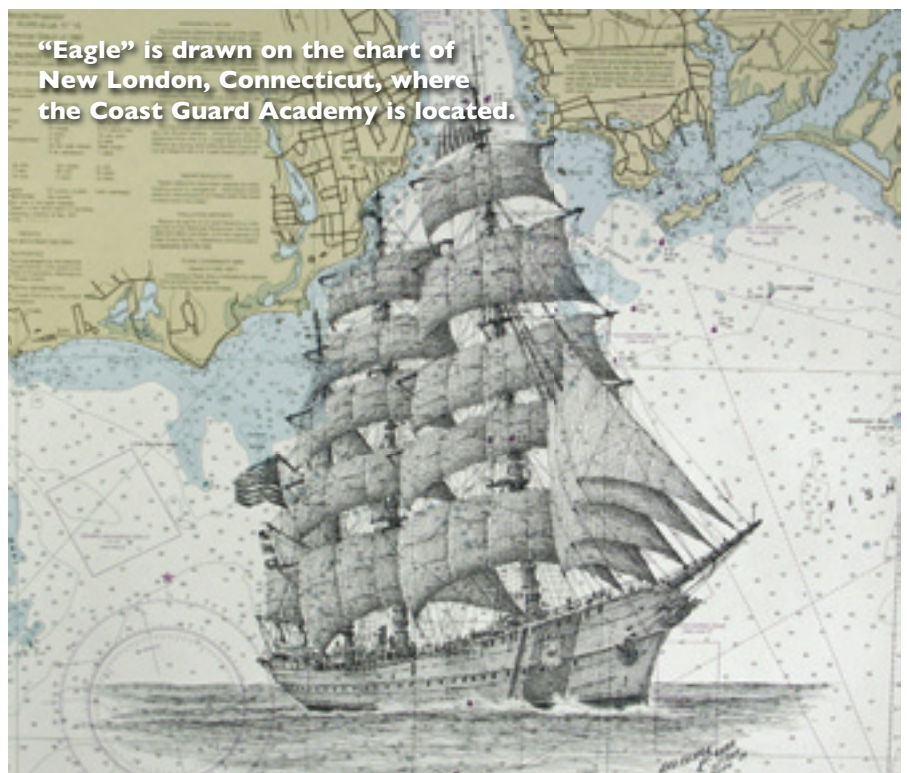
While most soldiers sent home letters, Packard sent his drawings to his mother in New Orleans, who, in turn, sold them in her newly opened Packard Gallery located just two blocks from Jackson Square and across from the old French Quarter. A self-taught artist herself, Marcella Stevens Packard created oil paintings of plantations, French Quarter scenes, and what would become her most well-known subjects—steamboats. "Before the Gallery was open, my mother painted and sold her work from 'the fence' at Jackson Square in the French Quarter," says Packard. "Notable people who bought her steam-

boat paintings included Walt Disney, Vincent Price, and Helen Hayes."

The Gallery also displayed work from other artistic family members. Packard's father, Francis, who served in World War II and Korea and later worked for NASA in New Orleans, displayed his miniature oils of wildlife, clowns, and landscapes, along with

photos of the local scenes in the French Quarter. (He was trained as a photographer in the Air Force.)

Packard's grandfather, Paul Hopkins Stevens, who lived in Rockport, Massachusetts, displayed his seascape oil paintings. And Packard's uncle, Jack Stevens, displayed work in many mediums, even though he had his own stu-



"Eagle" is drawn on the chart of New London, Connecticut, where the Coast Guard Academy is located.

dio and gallery in Key West. The Packard Gallery remained open until 1991, but Packard's mother continued to paint until 1997.

COMING HOME

Packard left Vietnam in 1969 and returned home to his wife, Janabelle (Jan), his high school sweetheart, whom he had married in 1966 and with whom he had two children. His last duty assignment was in Homestead, Florida, where he was inspired to continue his artwork and where he discovered that drawing pictures of sailing ships on old nautical charts "just worked for me."

"While at Homestead, I found a couple of used 1930s books on Pen & Ink, some photos of ships, and I bought my first RapidoGraph pen," says Packard. His early nautical charts came from scrapyards where WWII ships were being dismantled. "If I was there at the right time I could go on board and take the charts right out of the chart room. I was paying twenty-five cents for those and thirty-five cents for the new ones," says Packard. Today charts found at marinas and in boat stores go for about twenty dollars each.


Besides creating marine art, Packard worked at South Central Bell Telephone Company and retired after thirty-two years of service. However, he never stopped drawing ships. Now that he's retired, his job is to create award-winning (and commissioned) art and show it at about twenty art shows a year—from the Florida Keys to Cape Cod and

Packard's attempts to capture the motion and flow of boats in Vietnam later led him to create pen and ink drawings of square-rigged sailing ships such as this one titled "Hurricane Pass."




ARTWORK COURTESY OF LAWRENCE PACKARD

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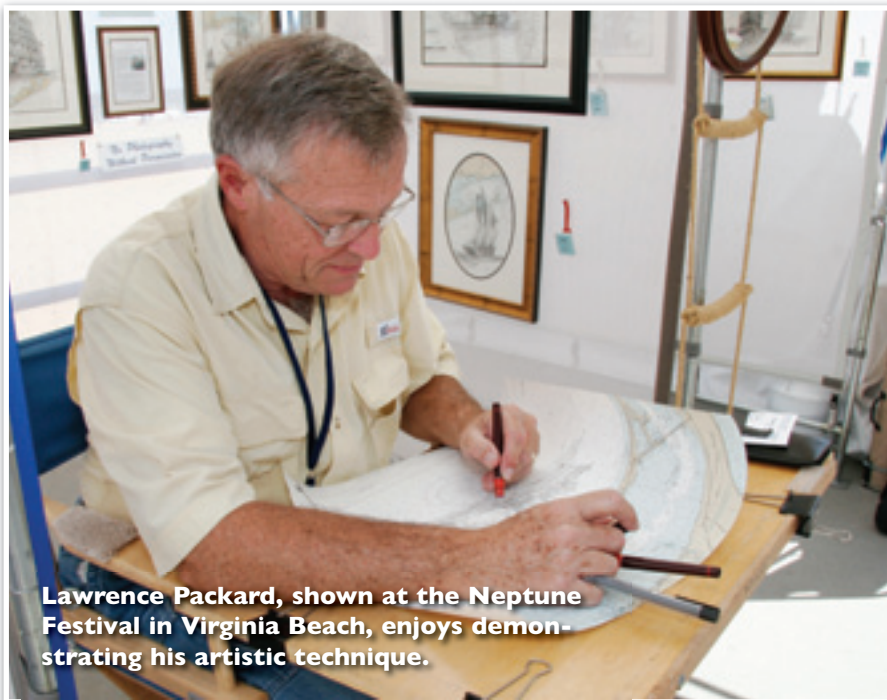
“Constitution” is drawn on the chart of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

along the Gulf coast—that he attends with his wife, Jan. “I couldn’t do it without her,” Packard adds, mentioning that they travel extensively in their motor home, yet still call Louisiana home.

Packard’s drawing style leaves no room for errors. In fact, about one in five drawings ends up in the trash because mistakes cannot be covered up. “I have a freehand style which com-

bines cross-hatching with something my left hand does. I actually rotate the paper 360 degrees while drawing, keeping my hand straight while changing the angle of the lines as the paper turns. I’m often working on the drawing upside-down. I don’t draw any out in pencil first; each drawing is done just once—in ink,” says Packard, whose inspiration comes from the sea, ships, and history and who also brings a portable drawing table to his art shows to demonstrate his style.

Like other New Orleans residents, Hurricane Katrina changed the Packards’ world suddenly. “We lived in extreme southeast Louisiana, south of New Orleans. The storm surge topped the levees surrounding us and put thirteen feet of water, mud, marsh grass, and whatever over our home and my studio. Everyone in our family lost everything,” says Packard, who now lives full-time in his motor home. “We lost a lot of the art we had collected over forty years. However, we did recover several of my mother’s original oils that we had, and we have been able to get them



Lawrence Packard, shown at the Neptune Festival in Virginia Beach, enjoys demonstrating his artistic technique.

PHOTO AND ARTWORK COURTESY OF LAWRENCE PACKARD

professionally restored,” says Packard, who was able to save only one of his original Vietnam drawings, drawn in 1968 on a sheet of plain writing paper.

“Things always work out like they’re supposed to,” says Packard optimistically. “Katrina gave my wife and me the opportunity to do more art shows and travel more, while we’re still young enough to do it.”

Ann Marie O’Phelan is a freelance writer who resides in Southwest Florida.

If You Go

UPCOMING 2008 AREA ART SHOWS INCLUDE*:

Pinecrest Gardens Art Festival, Pinecrest, Jan. 12–13, 305-669-6942, www.pinecrest-fl.gov/gardens.htm

ArtFest Fort Myers, Feb. 2–3, 239-768-3602, www.artfestfortmyers.com

IMAGES: A Festival of the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Feb. 12–13, 386-423-4733, www.imagesartfestival.org

Sanibel Island Arts & Crafts Fair, Feb. 16–17, 239-395-5853, www.sanibelrotary.org

Naples National Art Festival, Feb. 23–24 (at Cambier Park), www.naplesartcenter.org

Bonita Springs National Art Festival, Jan. 12–13 & Mar. 1–2 (Packard will be at the March show only), 239-992-1213, artinusa.com/bonita

Peace River National Arts Festival, Punta Gorda, Mar. 17–18, 941-743-1900, www.charlotteharbortravel.com

St. Augustine Spring Art & Craft Festival, Mar. 29–30, 904-824-0716, www.jaminmark.com/eventinfo/events

*Schedule subject to change.

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