Beauty is Born of the Rain: Walter Inglis Anderson's Art and Isolation

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Beauty is Born of the Rain:

Walter Inglis Anderson’s Art and Isolation

By Chloe Evelyn Huff
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Chapter One: An Introduction

Walter “Bob” Inglis Anderson: naturist, painter, and ceramicist. Some say he was mad, while others were inclined to say that he was merely passionate regarding nature and
his watercolors. However, he is highly regarded as one of the most talented artists east of the Mississippi. In the following pages, his life, art, and battles with a mental illness will be spread out and investigated closely with the primary goal of observing whether his bouts of illness affected his art. To investigate this relationship, it is necessary to examine Walter Anderson’s early life and art, along with his progression into mental illness and changes in his later art.

Leif Anderson, one of Walter’s daughters, recalls Bob writing the phrase “beauty is born of the rain” as he reflected on his life’s toils while making a profound statement about some of nature’s greatest masterpieces. After all, the vast Grand Canyon was caused by water erosion, the brilliantly colored poppy flower must have hydration, and the lush, mystic greenery found on the Washington state coast requires twelve feet of water per year. In a similar way, the metaphorical rain that they experience, the hardships, turmoil, and storms of life define people. In this memoir of Anderson’s life and art, the reoccurring theme is that of the hardship that births unique creativity—linocuts, woodwork, ceramics, murals, charcoals, watercolors, oils, journals, and poetry in only a way that Bob can express.

Unfortunately, in the eyes of some, Bob’s personal hardships with mental illness outweighed his artistic genius, resulting in his being looked down upon or shunned. Due to the comments and gossiping whispers, the naturally introverted Bob completely withdrew from society. Even his family had to rely on seeing him in his skiff in the Mississippi Sound as the only way of knowing that he was okay.

Mid-twentieth century Ocean Springs, Mississippi, was an artist’s paradise sprawling with untouched nature. The beaches of the Mississippi coast and winding bayous
edged with tall grass with fingering outlets creep miles inland. Trees drip with dreamy
Spanish moss that canopy the roads with a picturesque look into the past, before industry
and the impudence of humanity. Pelicans, Shearwaters, Gopher tortoises, and Horseshoe
crabs call the salty bay water their home while alligators rule the fresh water bayous. There
is a wild beauty there; unique to itself that is subtle to a quick glance but apparent to
intentional observers. Bob was the latter and hid himself in the wild beauty, developing a
relationship with the land and sea that freed him from social ties.

Yet, Bob was not always isolated. Though his family and childhood may have been a
little different from the norm, he was a charming, social creature whose life story is one
that needs to be told. Therefore, the beginning of his life, with a sketch of his family
background is the best place to start. Bob Anderson’s art began humbly enough with pencil,
charcoal, or pen sketches comprised mostly of animals with the exception of a few oil
portraits. He also enjoyed a little bit of woodcarving, making simplified figurines or little
trinket boxes.

Chapter Two: All in the Family

Walter “Bob” Anderson was not the first person in his family to be diagnosed with a
psychological disorder similar to what is now known as schizophrenia. In fact, mental
illness can be traced back several generations on both his father and mother’s sides. In a
survey conducted by Debby Tsuang from the University of Washington, records that a person with no schizophrenia in his or her family have a 1-2 percent chance of having the illness. Yet, if one parent has a family background with schizophrenia, the likelihood of a child's developing the illness rises to 10 percent. If both parents' lineages have a history of the illness, then chances of a child experiencing it go up to 35 percent. The likelihood of Bob’s inheriting a form of mental instability could be considered expected.

Bob’s mother, Annette McConnell, was born into a small, wealthy family from New Orleans who were regulars of high society during her childhood. She had an older sister, Delphine or “Dellie”, who at the age of twenty-six was heartbroken when her father, Judge McConnell, disapproved of her courtship with a gentleman he considered to be unfit for her. After this event, she began to act strangely and complain of hearing voices. She had several violent episodes, one involving her throwing silver napkin rings and other possessions given to her by her father in the fire. After visiting a specialist, she was diagnosed with Dementia Praecox, or what is today known as schizophrenia.

Dellie was not the only relation of Annette’s to be considered unstable; on the contrary, she was the one of the few members of her immediate family that was considered to be of sound mind. Her mother, sister, brother, and a cousin on her mother’s side had all been considered mentally unstable and had spent some time in an asylum. Annette, though deemed mentally sound, was highly dramatic and considered

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1 Dementia Praecox was the widely used, standard diagnosis for any person showing signs of mental abnormality up until 1911. Then in 1925, the terms dementia praecox and schizophrenia began to be used interchangeably until Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler narrowed the term to its more modern use; having positive and negative symptoms, not necessarily causing dementia (mental deterioration), and can occur early or later in life.
hyper-religious to the point that she felt God was punishing or refining her by fire through the ills of her family. In addition to her beliefs, she became very controlling and critical of anything and anyone around her, perhaps as a way of coping with her unstable family.

Walter Anderson’s father, George Walter Anderson, emigrated from England to New Orleans when he was a child with his father Peter Anderson, who was a grain merchant. He eventually moved back to the British Isles for his schooling, but he came back to the United States after school and worked with his father at his grain firm. After his father’s death, he inherited the firm. The stress of running the business became too much for George Anderson and he sometimes slipped into serious bouts of hypochondria and depression. This unstable behavior was quite alarming to Annette’s family but it did not stop the marriage of George and Annette in 1900.

The background information is now set for Walter Anderson to enter life’s stage. Unfortunately for Bob and his brothers, they are genetically predisposed to a dark mental illness that will certainly affect them all, whether by personal affliction or having to experience a family member fight it.

**Chapter Three: The Early Years**

Walter “Bob” Anderson was born in 1903 in New Orleans, the middle child between his brothers Peter (1901) and James “Mac” McConnell (1907). From the beginning, Bob was considered very special. He was wild, playing rough-
tumble with his brothers and receiving little to no discipline for acting out. Yet, he was, as described in his mother’s journal, obsessed with gallantry. Noble acts, knighthood, and the myths, legends, or tales surrounding the two were the only things that seemed to interest him. He loved to pretend that he was a knight, on a grave quest. He had a quick and ferocious temper, but after an episode he would immediately apologize, striving to make amends in order to retain his noble standing with his own conscience. Bob also had a keen interest in animals, and living on the lush Louisiana bayous of the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico, there was plenty of wildlife to keep Bob’s interest piqued. Annette and George did not correct their children much or give them instruction. Annette’s only demand was that the boys journal and draw an hour or two every day, in hopes that the practice would cause an artist to bloom in one of them at least. This demand from her children most likely stems from her lifelong dream of becoming an artist herself and her wanting to live vicariously through each of her children.

In 1914, Peter and Bob were sent to the military school St. Johns at Manlius, near Syracuse, New York. Bob hated the rigidity there and when there were small bits of free time, he would escape to the woods to sketch and be away from people. The same year, Annette’s father died, leaving her a large inheritance and the task of looking after Dellie’s wellbeing at the mental institution. In 1918, George Anderson fell into a severe depression that was considered the result of stresses at his work at the grain firm. The same year, Annette decided that George needed to get away from the city life of New Orleans and began looking to move. She settled upon the idea of going to Ocean Springs, Mississippi, a small, quiet coastal town. In June, they settled into a 24-acre lot that was right on the Biloxi bay. The property was wooded and consisted of the “Front House” (large, white house), the
“Barn” (2-story carriage house), and a small coastal cottage. Peter and Bob came back from New York that summer and started school that fall in Ocean Springs. Neither Peter nor Bob were very good students but Peter did graduate while Bob dropped out after he failed chemistry and French.

The young Walter Anderson enjoyed solitude and often went on adventures in the woods or out into the Mississippi Sound on his little skiff. During the summer months, it was not unusual for him to leave the house early in the morning and return late that night. One of his most exciting adventures during this time happened one summer afternoon when he took his little catboat out into the bay. He often did so in order to have some solitude so that he could either read or draw in peace. However, an unexpected storm blew in. After the storm the boat was still upright in the bay but Bob could not be found. There was no sign of him and people began to think him dead. However, on the second day, he turned up at the house, nearly collapsing from exhaustion and dehydration. Bob recalled that during the storm the tiller had disconnected from the boat and so he went in after it. His boat drifted away from him and he was forced to swim two miles to a channel beacon. He was stranded there for twenty-eight hours before being picked up by fishermen.

Although Bob was shaken by the incident, the experience did not keep him from venturing out on his own again. With a sketchpad and drawing materials, lunch, and water in hand, he would go away from the hustle and bustle of the town to a place of silence. There, wherever he landed, was the perfect sanctuary for him to take in nature and sketch freely.
Chapter Four: Art School and Influences

Annette was delighted to see Bob’s interest in art and had him sent to the E. Ambrose Webster’s Summer School of Art in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Upon seeing his talent, the New Orleans Art Association awarded him a scholarship to attend Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. However, his admissions application was misplaced and when he did not hear back from them, he went to the New York School of Fine and Applied Art (which later became Parsons School of Design) instead in the summer of 1922. He did not make many friends at the school, for he considered his cohorts to be in art for the money that it could bring. Bob wanted to be a true artist, someone whose art needed neither to have an agenda nor to bring in money. While at the academy in New York, he explored not only the school but also museums and galleries, finding numerous treasures. Several of these treasures became inspirations that influenced his style of painting as well as his subject matter. Spanish Impressionist Joaquin Sorolla, German Expressionist Ernst Barlach, Eric Hudson’s marine life paintings, Winslow Homer’s watercolors, and Native American totem poles were Bob’s fondest works. Ernst Barlach’s block linocuts share distinct heavy-handed lines and stylized subjects that influenced Bob in his prints from his book Robinson: The Pleasant History of an Unusual Cat. Eric Hudson and Winslow Homer’s compositions of nature most likely comforted his love for documenting nature. Though Homer and Hudson often had
people in their paintings, the landscapes are stunning and rather steal the focus of the piece. Sorolla’s landscape scenes are phenomenal. In several of them his use of bright colors and apparent brushstrokes are similar to paintings that Bob created later on. He developed an immense interest in watercolor and honed his skills in the art of using the fluid paint to create light, simplified scenes of people in nature. His interest in totem poles was evident as well, as he created many of them, not only in Native American styles but also of non-traditional totem pole themes as well, like the story of The Princess and the Frog.

As he did in his childhood, he enjoyed going off alone to sketch wildlife. Though being away from people in New York City is nearly impossible, he liked to go to Central Park, Riverside Drive, and the Bronx Zoo alone to capture animals with his pen or pencil.

By spring of 1923, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts finally found his application and scholarship, and admitted him. He frequently visited the zoo in Philadelphia as well, preferring the company of animals to humans. He even won several art competitions for his works of animals at the zoo. In 1925, after receiving a
monetary prize for winning second place, he used the money to travel. He went west across Pennsylvania and then to Ohio. There, on the banks of the Mississippi River, he found an old abandoned canoe with a hole in the bow. However, this hole did not deter him from paddling and bailing all the way down to New Orleans. He then traveled to Ocean Springs where he spent a few weeks with his family before going back to school.
Chapter Five: Early Art and the Shearwater Era

In January of 1928, the Anderson family opened a business in Ocean Springs. Shearwater Pottery employed everyone in the family: George handled the books and advertised, Annette decorated, Peter created, Mac designed and decorated, and Bob created and decorated ceramics and woodcarvings. The Andersons’ little store and studio was nestled into the lush woods near East Beach in Ocean Springs, just a few miles away from the busy new US Highway 90 that stretched from San Diego, California, to St. Augustine, Florida. Tourism in the little town was booming too, which made the unique business attract many customers. All of Bob and his brothers’ time went toward creating mostly decorative dishware. Bob’s interests in water coloring were put aside, which he disliked. However, his personal style did show through in his ceramic designs.

The Grinstead family visited Ocean Springs one summer while on vacation, stopped in to admire the little pottery studio, and the two families became good friends. Peter eventually fell for and married Patricia, the older daughter, and Bob married Agnes.
“Sissy,” the younger daughter. Both the Grinstead sisters had been educated in France, Philadelphia, and then at Radcliffe College in Massachusetts. William Grinstead, a successful lawyer, had some qualms about how these Anderson artists would provide for his daughters, but luck soon came to the potters. In order to increase sales, the little studio began making humorous collectable figurines of African-American stereotypes. There were dancers, musicians, cotton pickers, maids, and many others. In 1931, some of the figurines were selected to be on display in an exhibition of contemporary American ceramics at the W. & J. department store on 5th Avenue in New York City. The little family business soon became extraordinarily busy with orders for these little figurines (or widgets) from all over the United States. Shearwater had to employ six other people to help with the workload, which produced nearly one hundred figurines each week, though the demand was for nearly one thousand per week. Though the money that the figurines brought in was great, Bob hated doing the same thing over and over again and complained so much to his brothers that Peter began to get very irritated at Bob, which led to tension in the studio annex.

When the demand for the “widgets” went down, Bob revisited painting. There are only a few examples of his painting style during the time of the widget craze. The works are mostly oil either on wood or canvas. Each picture exhibits Bob’s distinct use of bright and bold colors of simplified figures. The subjects are two-dimensional against the background but are deliberately done so, designed ever so precisely. Though the most of the paintings convey action with long,
visible brush strokes, they are placed to look as if they were applied swiftly but were thought through thoroughly.

Soon after Bob and Sissy’s marriage, William Grinstead began to behave strangely, talking of and attempting suicide and complaining of hearing voices in his head. After he refused treatment locally, Peter and Mr. Grinstead’s doctor took him to the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Baltimore where he was then diagnosed with “psychosis with cerebral arteriosclerosis.” While William was in the hospital, Mrs. Grinstead died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of fifty-one. Now there was no one left for Patricia and Sissy but the Anderson family.
Chapter Six: A New Development

Sissy’s dependency on Bob after the births of their first two children was stressful and when his father died, the pressure to provide for his wife while grieving began to crush him. He became very paranoid, lethargic, and unpredictable in his behavior. He was easily angered and sometimes acted out violently, much as Dellie had. He grew to believe that everyone was a spy of some kind and was out to get him. Sissy and the Andersons were nervous about his new behavior and took him to a psychiatrist. Annette Anderson’s worst fear had come true: Bob was diagnosed with dementia praecox, the same psychosis that her sister Dellie had. The family was distraught upon getting news of the diagnosis and was advised to admit him into a hospital that could handle his increasingly violent behavior.

The family doctor arranged for Bob to be taken in at the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic. Upon arriving at the clinic in Baltimore, Bob was calm but after a few days became volatile. He constantly attempted self-harm by throwing his head and hands into walls, windows, and floors. He had to have numerous nurses hold him down while feeding or giving him his medication, and he often tried to drown himself when given baths. These fits of psychotic romping were nearly impossible to calm. His dementia praecox, now known as schizophrenia, consumed him.

While he was in the different clinics, he did draw a little; and though only a few of those productions are still in existence, they nonetheless give some insight into Bob’s mind. The drawings were done in a peculiarly loose manner that was different from Bob’s earlier style. The
sketches can be separated into two groups: the incoherent and the depressed. The incoherent were jumbled and were filled with objects that a person would not place together normally: faces, motifs, squiggle lines, and other doodles. It seems that Bob did not have a purpose in doing such drawings, or if he did they did not make sense to anyone else. The drawings placed in the depressed group show great tension and turmoil, conveying men trying to escape or vanish from others. Several of the sketches that stand out in this category are of simplified subjects with hands over their ears. They seem to convey great struggle to attempt to block out the outside, the voices; those of other people around him or those that were heard only in his head. One sketch in particular shows a man holding his hands over his ears while running away from a large female figure while a crowd of men laugh in the background. Could this drawing be Bob’s way of expressing his mother's overbearing presence while people in the background scoff at his anti-social behavior?

In January of 1938, the doctors at the clinic began putting Bob through convulsion therapy with Metrazol. The treatment was experimental, causing epileptic convulsions in schizophrenics in hopes of possibly shocking patients out of the illness. Through January and February, Bob was given twenty-five injections that produced eighteen convulsions in all. The convulsive therapy seemed to do Bob some good and his erratic bursts became

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2 Metrazol or the scientifically correct term, Pentylenetetrazol, was an experimental medication used as a respiratory and circulatory stimulant. In 1934, American-Hungarian neurologist and psychiatrist Ladislas Meduna found that large doses caused convulsions and was thus used as a convulsion therapy to relieve patients with mental illnesses. However, Metrazol never proved to be an effective treatment and caused patients to have seizures. In 1982, the FDA revoked its earlier approval to use Metrazol.
fewer and farther between. He became docile, enjoying interaction with other patients and he picked up drawing again. After eighteen months at Phipps, he was considered well enough to go back to Ocean Springs.

![Alligator Linoleum block print](image)

After Bob was taken out of the hospitals in early 1940 and placed in the little house in Ocean Springs, he began to draw subjects in his earlier style. Birds, cows, and other animals again danced upon the paper of Bob's sketches. It was during this time, as well, that he started working on linoleum block prints. His linoleum block prints are what he is best known for. He did numerous prints of wildlife, a few Mother Goose rhymes, an alphabet book, and even his own picture book called *Robinson: The Pleasant History of an Unusual Cat*. *Robinson* is a delightful tale of an alley cat that learns to play the piano, then conducts an orchestra, and eventually opens conservatories for dogs, cats, and animals at the zoo. Aside from his print books, he used his talent to show the coastal wildlife unique to the Mississippi Sound. Alligators, turtles, crabs, pelicans, seagulls, and fish were common subjects. His prints were better received than his other artwork because they were brightly colored pieces of local art that were inexpensive and were simple images of nearby wildlife.
Robinson

The pleasant
history of
an unusual

cat

Robinson found that
he could play duets
quite easily.

Robinson explains to the
animals.
Chapter Seven: And Back Again

Unfortunately, only five months after being out of Phipps Clinic, Bob’s mental health began to degenerate again. Annette, Sissy, Sissy’s sister Pat, and the family doctor took him to the Mississippi State Hospital in Whitfield. He was diagnosed with a “depressive type of psychosis” which, though a bit easier to control, was difficult to handle. Evidently, the hospital in Whitfield was not as well staffed as the Phipps Clinic because Bob was able to escape from the facilities. He left his mark on the building before fleeing by drawing large birds on one of the outside walls with a bar of soap. He showed up two weeks later at Ocean Springs, a one hundred and eighty mile journey. Next, he was to be taken by two attendants to the Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina. However, on the train ride there, he was able to escape again, only to be picked up by the police when he was found walking southbound down the highway. He was eventually taken to the hospital in Asheville where he stayed for several months, until he escaped for a third time. He was not seen or heard from again until early October, when he showed up in the little cottage house Sissy and the children lived in. He lived out of doors, like an animal, until he was caught and taken back to the Mississippi State Hospital in Whitfield. Within a few days, he escaped but was caught within only a few minutes. About a month later, he escaped again and was missing for several days until police picked him up on the side of the road, and took him back to Whitfield. By late December, Annette was done with Bob being kept at different hospitals and thus settled him into a private cottage in Ocean Springs with a twenty-four hour attendant.
Out of the dim and dismal hospitals and living nearly on his own seemed to be what Bob needed. However, it was not until he and his family (Sissy and their children Mary, Billy, John, and Leif) moved together to Oldfields, Sissy’s father’s estate in nearby Gautier, Mississippi, in 1941, that he began to paint again. It was the first time that the family had lived together in the same house since Bob had gone to the Phipps clinic in 1937. His mind became a bit clearer and he was once again applying himself diligently to his art.

Two Kittens Pouncing, c. 1955
Trees at Horn Island

Fish Stranded on Beach, c. 1960
Frogs, Bugs, and Flowers, c. 1945

Pier, Tree, and Fence
Chapter Eight: Art after Diagnosis

He began drawing and painting with great vigor: rising before dawn and coming back to the house from his studio after dark. He did not care for the presence of his family, including Sissy and their two infants. All he wanted to do was to create art, which could only be interrupted by solo trips to Horn Island, his favorite place on earth. The island was just a bit away from the bay and was not inhabited by people, though it was buzzing with a variety of wildlife. His paintings were different than they had been some four years ago. They were all done in watercolor with fluid lines that did not completely fill in the subject of the painting. He left the pencil sketches visible and generous parts of the surface of his artwork untouched by paint. His style, which had been once characterized by bold, distinct, lines that conveyed much action and painstaking effort, had now evolved into loose, quick, and easy watered-down colors. This hastier version of his previous work seems to mirror perhaps an anxiety of being taken away to another mental institution. The style conveys a need to be finished rather urgently, almost though at any moment he could be interrupted by humanity by being taken to some closed space. However, what did not change were his subjects. Nature still beckoned him and he painted her constantly in all her forms.

Beginning in 1941, when the Anderson family moved to Oldfields together, his love for painting in watercolor was evident as he was painting steadily one picture a day.

In 1947, the Anderson family moved back to Ocean Springs, back to the property they had lived on before. However, Sissy and the children moved into “The Barn,” a carriage house that was repurposed into a house while Bob lived alone in the cottage house that doubled as his studio. He drew more and more into himself and away from the social world. He drew or painted one picture a day but was hesitant to let anyone see his work, or let the
outsiders into his hermit-like existence. Once again he was in the routine of creating art from sun up to sun down. Often he would go off to Horn Island for days at a time so as to be alone, with only nature as his companion. Horn Island was just twelve miles off the Mississippi Coast, and he went there often in his little catboat. He stayed days to weeks on the uninhabited island sketching and painting. During the interim time between the family moving back from Oldfields and 1950, Bob took several trips abroad. He journeyed to China, which he greatly enjoyed, though he had his passport and wallet stolen, resulting in Annette and Sissy having to pay for his return home. He also went to Costa Rica for a time. The only way Sissy and the Anderson family knew he was gone was that he would leave a little note on the screen door of the little cottage.

No one saw much of Bob until 1950 when he accepted the invitation to adorn the new Ocean Springs Community Center’s ninety-foot high walls. The city gave him a contract, but Bob wanted to do the mural as a gift so the city paid him one dollar for the
mural, but it was a check that Bob never cashed. His previous artwork usually was of simplified subjects but to call the mural at the community center simple would be wrong. For a year, he worked on the mural constantly, painting a complex, intertwining, abstract scene of French and French-Canadian explorers, Native Americans, and wildlife done in a style entirely his own. Though he used oil and tempera on the stucco walls, he was still able to convey a whimsical motion that is characteristic of watercolor. Once he was finished, however, many people critiqued his mural, saying that it was strange or that the subjects should have been more patriotic. Hearing the harsh words, Bob shrunk back to his safe and solitary studio, becoming once again a ghost.
Chapter Nine: Horn Island

Not much was heard from Bob for the rest of his years, and that was how he wished it. Bob was driven away from the mainland by people’s whispers and nervous glances to the solemn silence of Horn Island. The island was named after its shape and is a desert island, with sparse clusters of pine trees and bushes right on the water. The phantom artist went from his house to Horn Island and back again without talking to anyone. The family and the town knew him to be alive merely by seeing a distant figure in a small boat voyaging to and from the little island. His love for the sea, the shore, and the wildlife throughout was carefully noted in his logs of his experiences on the island from April 1944 to June 1965. He also wrote poetry during his stays at Horn Island, another vein from which his creativity could flow. Pieces of his poetry have survived and are treasures from his times in Horn Island. Though he had very little human contact during this time, Bob was happy. Bob kept the voices in his head at bay by being away from social frenzy, away from other people, and close to nature. He lived day-to-day, no longer crumbling under the pressure of the social norms that bombarded his fragile world.

He would start his journey to Horn Island by putting his art necessities and some food into his small skiff and then rowing twelve miles (which would take several hours) to

“I left the shore and turned in towards the trees and found, or heard, the most incredible reward. A symphony of birds…”

-The Horn Island Logs, 1950
his sanctuary in the Mississippi Sound. Upon arrival, he would often set up camp by making a lean-to out of his skiff. Next, Bob roved his kingdom, exploring the nooks until he found the inspiration to sketch or paint a masterpiece. Seasons came and went but Bob could not keep away from the allure of his precious sanctuary. Though as he grew older, his work became a little more abstract, the lines between the colored strokes wider, Bob’s colorful, whimsical, peaceful painting aura never stopped seeping from the watercolors.

In the 1960's, Walter’s body began to age and weaken. Years of smoking had taken its toll on his lungs, resulting in lung cancer. However, Bob did not let his illness stop him from going out to his island. In September 1965, it was projected that Hurricane Betsy was going to hit the Mississippi Sound. Undeterred, Bob went out in his skiff to Horn Island. He tied himself to tree at the highest place on the island and readied himself for the storm. Amazingly, Bob survived the storm strapped to the tree and when asked why he had done such a thing, he merely said he wanted to see the eye.
Horn Island

Walter Rowing His Boat, c. 1955
Two Blue Crabs, 1960

Horn Island
Chapter Ten: Death and Legacy

Two months later, November 1965, Walter Anderson died from complications after an operation for his lung cancer. The phantom artist, “the homegrown Van Gogh,” was gone. Upon his death, the Anderson family had to clear out his things and thus entered the little cottage that had once been off limits to anyone. It was littered with sketches, crumpled up papers, journals from his years of going to Horn Island, and colorful paintings, as was expected, but what they found next was not. In one of the small rooms in the cottage were murals. Every nook and cranny of the “Little Room” was covered with bright oil paintings. On the walls and the ceiling poured color, depicting birds, cats, deer, flowers, clouds, and motifs unique to Walter. It was his masterpiece for only him to see.

Walter Inglis Anderson’s love of nature is shown in his paintings. The hardship of battling schizophrenia can be seen in his works during his times in the clinics and hospitals, but he endured through the
darkest times of his illness. He did not let it take over his joy of painting but instead used his love of art to keep the voices in his head under control. He used art as therapy, to allow him to experience living in nature again. Yes, Walter could be considered mad—mad as in crazed by mental illness during his times in clinics. Yet he was also mad in a passionate way. He was mad for art, for nature, and for trying to convey the majesty of the first through the use of the latter. He was an artistic savant who showed viewers what he saw when he looked at nature. The tragedy was that he lived in isolation and was not noticed until after his death. However, isolation from humanity was also necessary for the creation of his art. Without his eye focused solely on nature, viewers would not be able to see the beauty that he saw from his immersion in wildlife.

Sissy and Mary Anderson Pickard (Bob and Sissy’s oldest daughter) were determined to show Bob’s world to all. Mary took on the business of being the curator of his work and was able to invite others into the mind of Ocean Springs’ gem. Leif Anderson (Bob and Sissy’s youngest daughter) is now a celebrity in Ocean Springs in her own right as a ballet dancer, writer, and artist. Both Mary

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3 The word ‘isolated’ is derived from the Latin word ‘insulatus,’ which means, ironically, ‘turned into an island.’
and Leif have written about growing up as Walter Anderson’s children and his impact on their lives. Mary’s son, Christopher Inglis Stebly, has become an artist in his own right, too, paying homage to his grandfather in a number of his linocuts. In 1991, the Anderson family and fans of Walter celebrated the opening of the Walter Anderson Museum of Art in downtown Ocean Springs. The museum features many of Walter’s works, rotating collections on display in order to show the variety of his art. A permanent fixture of the museum’s showcase is Walter’s Little Room, which was relocated to the museum to allow visitors literally to step into his work.

The town of Ocean Springs stayed much the same as at had been in Bob’s day: a quaint coastal town nestled between the bayous, woods, and Mississippi Sound. However, in August 2005, the Mississippi coast bore the brunt of Hurricane Katrina, striking the peaceful beach towns, wiping away most of them. The Biloxi Bay Bridge, a part of US Highway 90 connecting Biloxi to Ocean Springs, completely buckled under the ferocity of Katrina. Houses, buildings, landmarks, nearly all were completely shredded, leaving no
evidence that there was ever a foundation. Fortunately, most of the town was revived eventually and has since been able to fall back into the normality of living in a peaceful, little beach town. Thus, Bob’s legacy lives on; many admire his enthralling art, and his life of isolation with only nature as his companion is rightfully respected.
References


Artworks
(In order of appearance)


*Princess and the Frog*, c. 1950. Photographed from an exhibit at The Brooks Art Museum in Memphis, TN.

*Lions*, c. 1924. Photocopied from *The art of Walter Anderson.*

*Dancing Man* vase, c. 1931. Photocopied from *The art of Walter Anderson.*

Stevedore cast sculpture from Shearwater Pottery collection. Photo retrieved from:
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*Man on Horse*, 1934. Photocopied from *The art of Walter Anderson.*


Alligator Linoleum block print, date unknown. Retrieved from:
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Three Linoleum block prints from *Robinson: The Pleasant History of an Unusual Cat.*


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