



# TURNING THE PAGE

*New Bedford artist excited about the next phase in an established career*

BY BETH PERDUE  
EXCLUSIVE TO HOME GALLERY MAGAZINE

*-Robert Duff-*

*There have been many decisions in Robert Duff's long career, but maybe none so risky as the one the New Bedford artist made this spring. After 20 years of operating their own business, Bob and his wife Debra sold their successful New Bedford art gallery so he could devote more time to studio painting.*

Although there are lots of emotions after ending a venture this big, right now, the artist is feeling is mostly gratitude for what the gallery has given him and excitement over what comes next. "I'm like a little kid. I'm running around, I don't know what I want to do first," he said grinning. In the world of art Robert Duff is a rare breed, combining talent and skill with a marketability that many could envy. What he paints, invariably sells; and many of his customers come back for more. "Art has been good to us," he suggested quietly. "I've got a loyal enthusiastic clientele."



"The Boom - Ernestina"

Over the years he's built a successful relationship with those clients that although based primarily on his work, was also due to the welcoming environment he and Debra created in their Centre Street gallery where customers would visit for hours before making a purchase or just taking a painting home on loan to see how it feels. His business partner as well as his spouse, Debra was an integral part of the gallery, managing all of its operations

from marketing to customer service and sales.

But though the gallery was important, now it's time for him to devote his full energies to painting, the 60-year-old artist said. And he added with a grin, he has a list of projects already in mind including spending more time painting outdoors, in the plein-air style. A fixture on the Southcoast art scene for 35 years or more, Bob's work is done mainly in oils, many of them large-scale realistic landscapes that use color and light to represent a scene while also conveying an emotional quality. Although he has always made sketches or taken photographs outdoors, now he anticipates spending more time painting small studies tracking the light and changes of one setting over a finite period of time. Done spontaneously, the studies would then be developed into large paintings in his studio.

The technique is one that was used by Hudson River School artists, a group of painters who worked in the 19th century creating beautiful, often romantic images of unsettled areas of America. These painters used special lighting techniques in their work in a way that conveyed tranquil emotions. It's a skill that Bob said he has been fascinated with since his beginnings in art. In fact, at the age of 10 he was so moved by a painting in the Hudson River School tradition that he began considering a life as an artist.

"I just couldn't believe someone did that with their own hand," he said, remembering the defining moment. Most of Bob's work for his paintings, including the entire composition process, takes place in his mind before he ever puts brush to canvas. "I have to have a complete picture in my mind of what the painting is going to be before I begin," he said. That's the challenge and also the exciting part of the process, he said, taking that initial inspiration plus any sketches or photographs and turning it over and over in his mind until he is satisfied with the composition. Some days, he said, he sits in front of a blank canvas for the entire day working it out. By day's end he may only have drawn the horizon line. Other times the impact of an image is immediate.

"I see it and in my mind's eye it already has a frame around it. It just hits you,"

he said. "The subject is secondary. The most important thing is the rendition," he explained, "It's got to evoke a feeling in people, some emotion." The emotions he hopes to convey are peace and tranquility, but any emotional reaction is okay with him.

"Someone else can take a totally different emotion away, that's okay, as long as it doesn't just sit there like a pretty painting on the wall," he said with a smile. It's this emotional quality in the Hudson River paintings that he really admires. In fact, he suggested, that particular style of landscape painting is enjoying a resurgence recently because people need those emotions more than ever in our modern chaotic world.

"They're about beauty, simplicity. Things people have a hunger for," he said. It's his passion for creating this style of landscape that ultimately led Bob to the conclusion that he needed to close the gallery. Ironically, the realization hit him after completing an exhibit he had originally tried to avoid because he was too busy with gallery work. Asked to do a series of paintings on Cuttyhunk, the outermost island in the Elizabeth chain off Cape Cod, Bob took on the role unaware it would become a life-changing experience. After painting on the theme for six months, he and Debra organized a three-day exhibit in an island church.

The 2004 summer show was a huge success. More importantly, the intimate setting they used created a social experience where both artist and art-lovers benefited from the personal interactions. "It was kind of a defining moment," Bob said, "It felt so good to make that contribution to the island and to have the islanders enjoy it so much." "I looked at Debra afterwards and said, you know, this is what I want to do," he added.

Speaking just weeks after the gallery closing, Bob already had plenty of plans for using his increased studio time limited only by the number of hours in a day. Still he wants his customers to know how much he and Debra have enjoyed their connections and support over the years.

The loss of the familiar Centre Street landmark after eight years of business in New Bedford's National Historic Park area shocked many of their longtime



“Ned’s Point Light”

customers who enjoyed the camaraderie of the artist and his wife as much as the paintings they perused.

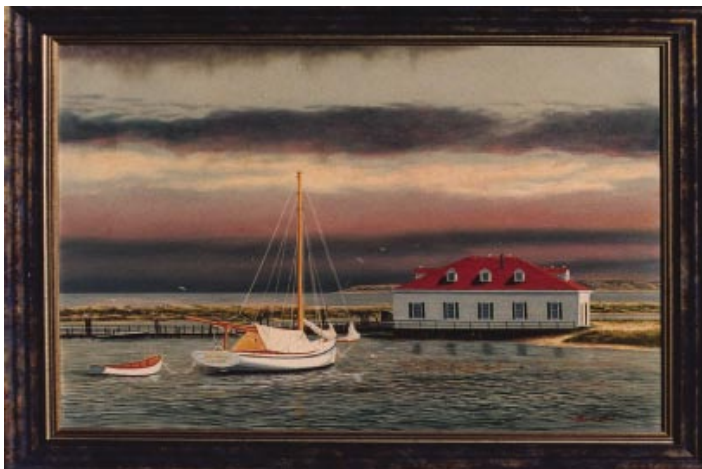
“To a lot of people it’s kind of confusing because they know we’re doing well,” Bob acknowledged, adding, “It was a little sad leaving it but we’re excited to turn the page and start a new chapter.” Despite its closing, the Duffs point out that fans will still have easy access to Bob’s paintings and prints through local galleries including Rogers Gallery in Mattapoisett. They chose Rogers Gallery as their representative for Bob’s original paintings, they said, because they had confidence in the gallery’s ability to maintain the same level of service their customers are used to.

Robert Duff’s prints are available at the following galleries: Norton Gallery - Padanaram, Riverside Art - Somerset, Golden Gazebo - Barnstable.

The Duffs are also maintaining their own website at [www.robertduff.com](http://www.robertduff.com) to promote Bob’s work. “We loved every minute of what we did for 20 years,” Bob noted. But now, he’s looking forward to the next 20 years.



“Fairhaven Waterfront”



“After the Rain, Cuttyhunk”



“Nantucket Apple Basket”