

On the Town

Plein and simple

Open-air painter Joe Paquet has had success on both coasts, but his heart belongs to St. Paul

BY BILL STIEGER

Highland Park painter Joe Paquet sits at his desk beside a shaft of midmorning sunshine streaming through the window of his Prince Street studio in St. Paul's Lowertown. His landscapes hang from the studio's south wall and the sunlight seems to make them glow. A more studied observation, however, reveals that the light is emanating from the paintings themselves, not the window.

A taconite plant reveals the squalid beauty of industrial decay as seen on a winter afternoon. A colorful row of dilapidated houses is offset by the steely skyline of downtown New Orleans. The viridescent leaves of a maple tree frame the front of a brick house and garage in Lowertown.

These are among the images captured in oil by Paquet. A visitor may be reminded of the paintings of Hopper, Winslow or Corot. But though Paquet's subject matter, style and craft reveal those influences, his rendering of light is all his own.

"The light of each day should differ from the light on any other day," Paquet said. "A good landscape painter sees the light of each day as a gift."

Paquet enjoys a sterling reputation among landscape painters, gallery owners, collectors and former students. He has won numerous awards in exhibitions throughout the United States. Fans of his work speak of his craft and discipline, but most important, his ability to see.

"Joe has the vision," said Julie Bangert, a curator at the Trees Gallery in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. "Joe often chooses scenes that another artist might find unremarkable, but he makes the viewer see the beauty in it."

Paquet was born to a working-class family in Paterson, New Jersey. "My father was an artist," he said. "He painted and sculpted. He's really the one who gave me my start. My father never really had the financial means to pursue his creativity. He worked for the railroad. Both of my parents encouraged me

in my drawing and painting."

Paquet attended the School of Visual Arts in New York City. After graduation, he apprenticed with painter John Osborne, who had the ability to reproduce landscapes from memory. "I studied with John for four years," he said. "John was an incredible teacher. I wouldn't be where I am today without his guidance."

Paquet then moved back to New Jersey, into what he called a "railroad apartment," and did nothing but paint for an entire year. "I felt I had the tools to become an artist, but I knew I had a long road on the way to becoming one," he said. "That year I spent painting was one of the best and most productive times in my life."

After his year of painting, Paquet married and became a father. Like anyone with family responsibilities, he soon yielded to the necessities of earning a living. Paquet became an art director and illustrator in order to earn a regular paycheck.

"Despite all the work and long hours, I still painted," he said. "Painting was a passion I couldn't

neglect. I painted whenever I could, mostly during the evenings and on weekends."

In 1997 he accepted a position teaching landscape and studio painting at the Minnesota River School of Fine Art in Burnsville. The decision led to a watershed period of his life. His wife left him and Paquet's move to Minnesota wasn't at first a happy one. "I loved teaching at Minnesota River," he said, "but that period was also a very tough time for me."

Fortunately, Paquet's luck eventually began to change. He met his present wife, Natalie, who worked in the school's office. He soon opened a studio in downtown St. Paul with portrait painter Jeffrey Hurinenko. He began to teach painting classes on his own.

"Meeting and marrying Natalie was the greatest thing that's happened to me," he said. "She's the one who makes it possible for me to do my work. And she's always encouraging me. Whenever I feel insecure about my work,



Joe Paquet with his oil painting "Unaffected by Market Volatility" on the easel behind him and a detail from "Lake Superior Taconite" at left. PHOTOS BY BRAD STAUFFER

Natalie will say, "Just paint your picture, Joe." And paint his picture he does. Art collector Roy Rose, who lives on Catalina Island, began buying Paquet's paintings after seeing his work at the annual conference of the Society of Plein-Air Painters.

"Joe's work has more detail than that of an impressionist-style artist," Roy said. "He draws beautifully and has command of his craft. When Joe comes here to paint, he captures places on the island few artists would paint. Joe finds his beauty and his sense of color makes him a standout among American landscape painters."

Painting sales and gallery representation followed in the wake of Paquet's success on Catalina. He has returned to the island on numerous occasions to paint, exhibit and

teach workshops. He has exhibited and taught in California and Massachusetts. He has even led a workshop for landscape painters in Florence, Italy.

Paquet has now lived in Highland Park for over a decade and has an abiding passion for painting the environs of St. Paul. Wintry backyard scenes from the city's East Side. Piles of scrapped, rusted steel outside of the train yard near Newport. Barges lodged in the ice on the Mississippi River. Christmas lanterns hanging from branches over a backyard filled with rusted cars.

"It's kind of ironic to think that I make my living on the coasts by selling paintings of St. Paul," he said. "But I love living here. It's the perfect place to raise a family, and I don't see myself leaving anytime soon."

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