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The Art Issue

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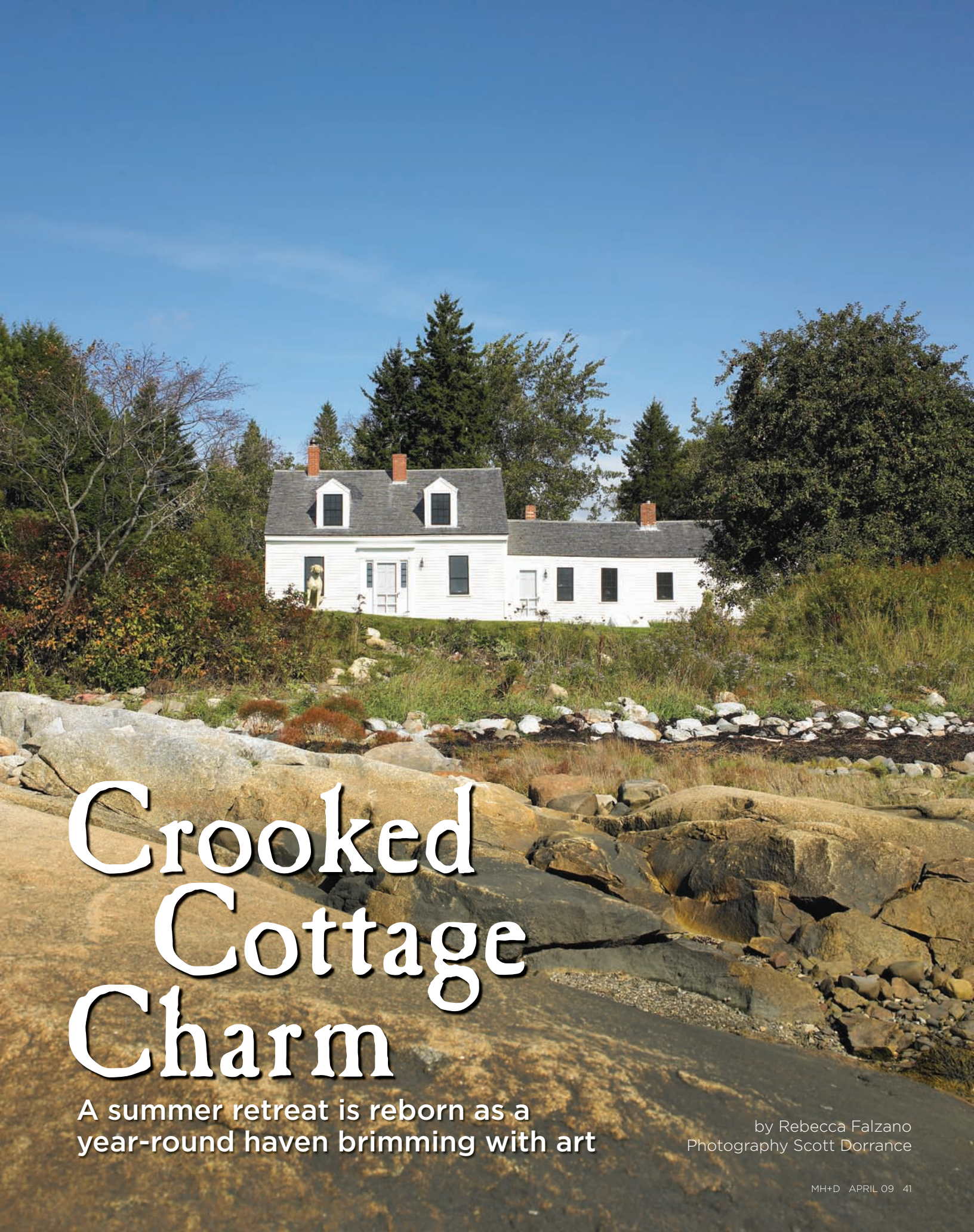
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Crooked Cottage Charm

A summer retreat is reborn as a
year-round haven brimming with art

by Rebecca Falzano
Photography Scott Dorrance



Robin McCoy's seaside cottage has been in her family for sixty years. The renovation was gut-wrenching at times, but Daggett Builders faithfully maintained the crooked lines of the windows and wainscoting that gave the house its charm (previous page).

Inside the light-filled kitchen (above), beauty and functionality combine in the custom cabinetry featuring walnut knobs and handles. For Robin, drawers and open shelves were two must-haves: "I love being able to look at food or china," she says. Energy-efficient appliances blend in seamlessly with maple butcher-block countertops, while the wood floors are painted with a blue and white diamond pattern. Moravian star accent lights like the ones pictured here have been in every house Robin has lived in since childhood.

At the end of a winding dirt road, on an expanse of land that runs along the rock-strewn shore, Robin McCoy's family had the kind of idyllic summers often found in dreams. While her parents, prolific artists John McCoy and Ann Wyeth McCoy, were spending their days painting, she and her siblings and cousins—Jamie Wyeth among them—were stirring up trouble.

Such childhood pursuits transpired in a flowing antique Cape built in the early 1800s, which Robin's parents bought in 1949. For the next few decades, the McCoy's spent their summers in this bucolic paradise, a source of continual inspiration for their work. Though the family's permanent home was in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the McCoy's were never regarded by locals as "summer people." "We knew everybody and everybody knew us," says Robin—who, in those days, could be found helping the local fishermen plug lobsters or camping out on the cliffs of Monhegan Island.

After her mother's death in 2005, Robin decided to make the summer cottage she inherited her year-round home. "I wanted to retire, and once my mother died, Chadds Ford wasn't the same," she explains. Before she could move in permanently, however, the uninsulated, 1,800-square-foot house—which often shuddered in the coastal winds—needed to be winterized.

Robin's relationship with Daggett Builders was a one-of-a-kind collaboration from the start, beginning with a storm and a sledgehammer. One day, with rain quickly approaching, she found herself alone in the house, unable to get the front door closed. On a recommendation, she called someone

who worked for Daggett at the time. "He came over, took the door off, fixed the bottom, rehung it...he practically vacuumed. I asked if I could call him if I got into trouble again, and he said absolutely. And that was it—I chose Daggett for the renovation," she says.

Originally, the project was modest in scope: new windows, clapboards, and insulation, as well as a remodeled kitchen and bathroom. But as soon as the team got to work, they discovered extensive rot beneath the siding on the wing of the house. And then they began to dig deeper. As Chris Robinson, co-owner of Daggett Builders explains, "It was sad. Doors were coming off the hinges, and you could push a wall and it would move. When we took our hammers to the wall in the dining room, it disintegrated into dust. The plaster and the clapboards were there, but there was nothing in between." Before long, the winterization became a gut renovation—a nerve-wracking prospect for Robin, who cherished

The dining room's views serve as a backdrop to gatherings around the table. A cupboard displaying a portion of Robin's china collection was a gift from her parents when she was 18. A portrait of Robin when she was 6 years old was painted by her aunt Henriette Wyeth. To make young Robin sit still, her aunt would tell fairy tales. "You can tell I'm listening intently in this portrait," she says.



the cottage with all of its quirks, including its crooked windows, doors, and trim. Each imperfection was a lasting reminder of her family's long history in the cottage. "The house was wonderful looking and charming before we did this, which is why this was so scary. But once we got into it, there was no stopping," she says. "I had to do it."

For Daggett, the major challenge became restoring the house's structural weaknesses while maintaining the charm that made it inimitably Robin's home. "We had to find ways of modernizing it without changing the character," says Chris. Because she was living in Pennsylvania at the time, the construction team communicated with Robin daily via email, telephone, photos, and videos. The builders took extensive photographs before demolishing anything so they could restore everything faithfully, down to every last crooked line. The end result was exactly as Robin had imagined it: Daggett angled the new windows slightly to match the crooked wainscoting on the interior; the new siding follows the original, flowing curves of the building; and the new custom trim on the interior doors matches the crooked lines of the old doors. "If you put the siding on level, it would've looked ridiculous," Chris says. Inside, the plaster walls and ceilings were gutted and replaced, as was most of the wood flooring. In addition to the windows, exterior doors were replaced and outfitted with custom hand-forged hardware. Despite Robin's physical distance, she had a hands-on role in the work, choosing all the paint colors and designing the kitchen and bathroom cabinetry from afar.

AN ART-FILLED LIFE

Perhaps the most striking feature of Robin's cottage by the sea is the art collection inside, which is enough to make even a gallery owner envious. Paintings by her parents, grandfather, aunt, uncle, and cousins gracefully line the walls of every room, which are painted white to bring out the rich colors of the canvases. "It's hard to hang paintings in a crooked house," Robin laughs as she gingerly adjusts a painting by her aunt Henriette Wyeth. Portraits of Robin both as a child and an adult hang near portraits of her mother, the resemblance striking.

Many of Robin's paintings were given to her as gifts, a common occurrence in a family of artists. A more recent gift from Jamie Wyeth hangs in her mudroom—a reminder of an inside joke from long ago. "Once, when we were kids, Jamie and I brought back a fake shrunken head from a fair. At night, he would hang it over my bedpost and turn it so it was staring at me. It looked so hideous and real—I wouldn't get any sleep!" she confesses with a laugh. Years later, Robin found the head in a drawer and gave it to Jamie as a birthday present. In return, he painted her a portrait of a shrunken head hanging from a bedpost. "It will watch over you always," he had written on it.

Raised by generations of artists, Robin was taught at an early age how to really see. "We grew up looking at how things look—noticing the way light comes through a window or how it rests on an object. Just like if you grow up in a lobstering family, you know what a good boat is and how the weather is going to be. No one sat down and said 'this



In the living room (above), Robin's father, who was over six feet tall, exposed the ceiling beams for his comfort. The work to the left of the fireplace is Robin's grandfather N.C. Wyeth's *Melissa at the Gate*, from John Fox's book *Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, which Wyeth illustrated. Robin's mother posed for this piece and later gave it to Robin since mother and daughter so closely resemble each other.

John McCoy's *The Bell Pull* hangs above an inherited antique Windsor back chair next to the stairwell (top right). On the wall perpendicular is Joan Hooker's *Quinces*, and at the top of the stairs, one of Robin's own pieces, *The Flag*.

A portrait of Robin in a red dress (right) was painted by father John McCoy when she was 21 and living in New York City. "I thought I was terribly chic at the time," she says. The wood box, candle box, and bayonet—which her father found in the garden—have been in that corner as long as she can remember.

The guestroom in the back of the cottage (opposite) is simply furnished with a cannonball bed and an antique green bureau that Robin inherited from her parents. Artwork from her mother and father flank the window: on the left, *Iris* by Ann Wyeth McCoy, and on the right, *Victor's Place* by John McCoy. The star quilt came from an antique shop in England. "I thought it was so American with the red and blue. I fell madly in love with it," says Robin.





is how you do it'; it was more like osmosis," she explains. Robin was taught to view everything—from a rock to a hamburger—as exciting and full of life.

This talent for seeing is evident in the way she has decorated her home. Aside from art, the rooms brim with antique pieces that do not outright match, but fit together perfectly, each piece characteristically Robin. "I buy a piece of furniture because I love the piece. Nothing is upholstered to match, I just happen to love the fabric. If you love it, it fits together," she says. Like many of her paintings, Robin inherited much of the furniture from her family. "In every house I've ever owned, I always knew where the furniture was going to go immediately. It's the first thing I think about," she says. Some of the items required little thought, however, because they have always been there: the living room table, the antique wood boxes and candle stands, the green bureau in the back bedroom, the bayonet her father found in the garden that now hangs in the dining room—nearly all of these remain in the same location they were in when Robin was a child.

An artist herself, Robin has been painting on and off for much of her life. She recently produced work for a show at Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland that celebrated the legacy of the McCoy family. At home, several paintings of her dogs decorate the walls, though she has yet to paint Gracie, the most recent addition to her canine family. "I don't know her well enough yet. I have to have a feeling about her personality and then I'll paint her. It's how I paint—it's how everyone in my family paints. It has to be something that strikes you, something you keep looking at and thinking about and dreaming about," she says.

For more information, see Resources on page 90.

EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

Months after her home "came back to her," as she says, Robin's relationship with Daggett Builders has surpassed the strictly professional and blossomed into a genuine friendship. For Chris, the project evolved into what he calls a "labor of love," and Robin can barely contain her gratitude and elation. "I gave the builders hugs every time I saw them," she says. "At first, they would get embarrassed, but after awhile they'd see me coming and open their arms. I never had a sense that they were interlopers; they became part of the fabric of this house." The project culminated in a big lobster picnic on Robin's lawn.

That's not to say the transformation came easily or without adjustment. "It was really emotional to see this house gutted. It was like losing a part of me," says Robin. "It was so important to maintain the intimacy, warmth, and the feeling of this place. It wouldn't have been mine otherwise." A pivotal moment for Robin occurred when she noticed during a visit that the steps below the front door—where she often sips coffee on summer mornings with her dogs—were askew from the construction process. "I was terribly upset and I don't know why! Somehow everything boiled down to that—the destruction of this place and the change." Even though it was not necessary until later in the construction, Daggett put them back immediately.

These days, Robin is happily settled in her new old home. From her myriad windows, she marvels at how fast the mammoth tankers go by. "Sometimes, if the light is just right, you'll see white under them so they look like they are floating," she says. "And other times, with the reflection, they look like they are upside down."

Inside Robin McCoy's head, the idea for a painting is born. **MH+D**