

Zarh H. Pritchard

A biography by Elizabeth N. Shor (©2010)

Walter Howlison ("Zarh H.") Mackenzie Pritchard created the art of portraying underwater scenes by sketching them from life. In the early 1900s he produced beautiful illustrations of tropical marine fishes and coral landscapes in the true pastel shades known well to divers. His paintings were praised and purchased by royalty and by natural-history museums, and were exhibited worldwide in art galleries.

"I am not an artist at all," declared Pritchard in 1926. "I am a naturalist who happens to be a painter." However, at an earlier time he had certainly wanted to be an artist.

Pritchard was born on 26 March 1866 in Madras, India, of Irish ancestry. At the age of ten he was sent to school in Scotland, where he enjoyed swimming in a shallow bay on the Firth of Forth — the Bay of Portobello, which had been visited by Jules Verne 17 years earlier. The boy was familiar with Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. He began a game with friends of seeing who could stay under water the longest, and when he opened his eyes, he became enchanted with the below-surface colors, what he called "the fairy scenes of the deeps of the sea." He made sketches of these scenes when he returned to shore. He soon created underwater goggles of cow horn and leather, based on a picture in a travel book. His were cut and shaped to fit the eyes and had a small air space between the eyes and the water.

At age 18, Pritchard took art classes in college in Edinburgh, and he spent his summers admiring and sketching underwater scenes, especially dramatic rocks. But when he tried to sell his underwater paintings in England in 1888, the art critics spurned them. Although discouraged and nearly penniless in 1890, Pritchard attended a performance of "Cleopatra," starring Sarah Bernhardt, who was noted for elaborate costumes and interested in their authenticity. In one scene her robe represented a sea-sorceress. On the next day, Pritchard visited the actress to tell her that the robe did not correctly represent life in the sea. Fortunately, he spoke French, her language. She viewed his paintings, bought two of them immediately, and commissioned him to re-design her gown. This led to work for Pritchard over the next 12 years of designing costumes, stage accessories, and interior decorations for stage personalities, all on undersea themes.

About 1902 Pritchard became ill with pneumonia. Doctors advised him to go to Egypt (!) to recover, but he instead chose to go to southern California. Many people there enjoyed swimming and skin-diving, and trips on glass-bottomed boats off Catalina Island were popular. A few people then had successfully taken photos underwater, even movie footage. Pritchard met Robert Cameron Rogers, a poet of Santa Barbara, who, he later said, "persisted in urging me, despite my conviction that his idea was not possible of achievement, to paint the sketches in full color below the surface of the sea, so as to render the scenes perfectly from the best point of view" (Nicholson, 1926). Rogers and others showed Pritchard their favorite swimming locations, and they told him about the beautiful underwater scenes in the oft-described paradise of Tahiti. Pritchard went to Tahiti in 1904 and there, under water, he held his breath while making many sketches, using crayons on paper that had been taped to glass and then oiled. He soon made the acquaintance of Narii Salmon, the brother of Queen Marau, who showed him beautiful reefs and who had "the only diving suit in all those wine-cheered islands" (Burgess, 1994, p. 118). There Pritchard did his first actual painting in the depths. These were "the first paintings ever painted under the sea" (Burgess, 1994, pp. 123-124), though one artist had previously painted while in a diving bell and another had sketched in "full diving dress."

For his underwater work Pritchard used lambskin soaked with oil and brushes thoroughly soaked in oil. Wearing a diver's helmet, serviced by a tank from a boat on the surface, he sank to the seafloor with a coral or stone weight, selected the view that he wanted, had his canvas and materials lowered to him from the boat above, and painted for about half an hour. On the sea floor he sat upon his weight rock, "surrounded by the wonderful tropical fishes" (Moulton, 1918, *Sunset*). Sometimes his Tahitian boatmen were careless in pumping his air supply, and he had to signal them frantically when water seeped into the exhaust line. He preferred the depth of about 30 feet, where he found the light clear and at its best. In calm waters off Tahiti he could actually leave his easel on the seafloor and go back the next day to finish his picture. Most of his underwater work was used as sketches for later completed pictures. Pritchard returned from Tahiti to California, carrying hundreds of sketches and paintings. Many of these were at his first American display in San Francisco, and thus about 50 of them were destroyed when the 1906 earthquake and fire struck that city. He recovered from the loss and

produced many new paintings from his unburned sketches, after settling in Pasadena. Some of the final ones were done on chamois or on untanned calfskin leather with dry paints, which he felt represented the subtle underwater lighting and shadows effectively.

In 1909 Pritchard changed his first name to Zarh, with the explanation (given in a later exhibit catalogue) that there were four other men called Walter H. Pritchard. The origin of the new name has not been explained.

From his Pasadena home and studio, Pritchard sailed often to nearby Catalina Island, where he went down in his own full diving suit. For some years he traveled widely and painted under water: again in Tahiti, then in the Philippines, Japan, Samoa, Brazil, California, Florida. Accounts of him do not say what his sources of funds were for these travels, but he obviously sold some paintings.

His explorations had dangers. For example, he was stung, "as if by a thousand needles, from thigh to instep," by a fish lying in the sand (*Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1906). A journalist reported, "Once he was attacked, before he could get away, by a gigantic fish, larger than a tarpon. As it flashed suddenly beside him in the sunlit sea, its back was a lovely golden green, but its short, thick snout was vicious. It ripped through the painter's canvas, knocked the painter down with its tail, and then fortunately, continued its course as if nothing unusual had happened" (*Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1928). To avoid sharks, Prichard never went under water where there was an absence of small fishes, for, he said, "That is a sure sign of danger" (Moulton, *Bellman*, June 22, 1918).

He held exhibits of his paintings in Tokyo (1919, 1920), Paris (1921, 1925), Rio de Janeiro (1922); London (1928); New York (1913); Honolulu, Pasadena, and several other cities in the United States. Critics and journalists praised his works as harmonious, dreamy, poetic, restful. As an artist, Pritchard was not a member of any of the art movements of the day — cubism, expressionism, impressionism. Outside the realm of the critics of his day, his works were often described as "pleasing" (Burgess, 1994, pp. 155-158). They sold fairly well, especially to the "nouveau riche." An art critic dubbed him "The Merman," a title that he enjoyed (Burgess, 1994, p. 138).

The tide turned after a few years when he began to be recognized as a naturalist painter. He was mentioned by *National Geographic* and featured in *Scientific American*. Then he gave lectures about his techniques and the underwater world itself at significant natural-history museums in the United States — the aquarium of the New York Zoological Society, the California Academy of Sciences, Scripps Institution for Biological Research. Scientists and donors responded enthusiastically, and praised his pictures for their accuracy. The American Museum of Natural History in New York obtained 9 of his paintings for their new Hall of Ocean Life in 1924. The Cleveland Museum of Natural History in Ohio also acquired 9 paintings. Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California received three of Pritchard's paintings from Ellen B. Scripps in 1917, following a talk by Pritchard in San Diego. (Prices penciled on the back of these range from \$200 to \$450.)

At a 1921 exhibit in Paris, Prince Albert I of Monaco "warmly thanked him for having revealed to the great public the glories of the undersea, which the Prince himself only knew from descriptions furnished by his divers during the forty years of their descents in different seas" (Nicholson, 1926, p. 4) The Prince then purchased 11 of Prichard's pictures for the Musée Océanographique. In 1925 Pritchard was awarded the Decoration of the Palmes académique while holding an exhibit in Paris. At that time three paintings were purchased for the Museum of the Luxembourg in Paris.

In his prime, Pritchard stood six feet tall. He had "steel-blue eyes" (Burgess, 1994, p. 135). He apparently never married. In 1912, he became a citizen of the United States.

Today many of Pritchard's paintings have simply disappeared from some of the museums, perhaps into storage closets. That may seem strange, but obviously the use of underwater photos has made his works seem obsolete. This is unfortunate, because these paintings illustrate something that underwater photos, taken with flashes, do not: the pastel colors and the dimmed perspective view that the swimmer actually sees at that depth. Divers who see Pritchard's paintings still acknowledge them as true works of art and science. They say, "That's the way it is down there."

Certainly, to Zarh Pritchard the undersea was special. He wrote: "It is a dream world in which everything is enveloped in soft sheen. On reaching bottom, it is as if one were temporarily resting on a dissolving fragment of some far planet. Nowhere does substance appear beyond the middle distance and material forms insensibly vanish into the veils of surrounding color" (Burgess, 1994, p. 158).

Pritchard's final years are not well known. He may have gone to England for a time shortly before World War II. If so, he returned to the U.S., because from San Diego County on 22 September 1945 he wrote to the Musée Océanographique in Monaco that he wanted to give to that museum in his will a number of his paintings (12 that Prince Albert I had admired in 1924). In December of that year he was trying to arrange to carry the paintings himself to Monaco — but that did not happen. An obituary in the Austin, Texas *Austin American* of 30 August 1956 has Pritchard's obituary: he had died on 29 August 1956, penniless after having moved to Austin in 1949, hoping to teach art at the University of Texas, but was turned down. He had \$14,000 in cash, lost it in real-estate ventures, and died nearly penniless, living on a small pension from the state of Texas.

A diver contemporary with Pritchard, Capt. A. D. Christie of San Pedro, California, wrote: "I have been under water 115 feet and I can say that Mr. Pritchard has the very correct idea of the way things look when down in a diving suit and I look forward to going down with him sometime and watch him work."

Author Jack London admired his work, as did naturalist John Burroughs.

Scientists thought well of his paintings:

C. H. Townsend, Director of the New York Aquarium, wrote on July 31, 1916: "You are painting a world that artists know nothing about, and I believe portraying it faithfully. I have done some diving about the reefs of Tahiti myself, and have been down in a diving suit on a coral bank, so my opinion ought to be worth something" (Burgess, 1994, p. 144).

David Starr Jordan, President of Stanford University and a renowned ichthyologist, wrote in September 1916: "It is delightful to see the under-water scenery as an intelligent and thoughtful fish must see it" (Nicholson, p. 25).

William Beebe of the New York Zoological Society praised his work, and, a helmeted diver himself, created the bathysphere a decade later (Burgess, 1994, p. 150-1).

Some of Pritchard's paintings have sold in recent years for as much as \$20,000.

References

- Burgess, Thomas. 1994. *Take Me Under the Sea: "The Man Who Painted Under the Sea"* (pages 93-160), The Ocean Archives, Salem, Oregon.
- Moulton, Robert H. 1918. "Painter Under the Sea," *The Bellman*, vol. 24, June 22, 1918, p. 685.
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- Nicholson: Grace Nicholson Galleries, "Exhibition of Undersea Paintings by Zarh Pritchard. Catalog of exhibit from February 26 to March 26, 1926; dedication by Zahr Pritchard.
- Vaughan, Malcolm. 1928. "Painting Beauty Under the Sea," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, July 8, 1928, pp. 16-17.

Note: this manuscript has never been published. It is a part of Scripps history. Betty Shor. 8 April 2011

Following are three Zarh H. Pritchard paintings, which Pritchard painted underwater in Tahiti, or sketched underwater and then painted in afterward above water, or reproduced from his underwater paintings. These paintings were gifted to Scripps Institution of Oceanography by Ellen B. Scripps, after Pritchard gave a talk in La Jolla in 1916. These paintings are currently hanging in the George H. Scripps Memorial Marine Biological Laboratory







Poou
 ATATI.
 Parrot fish & poracine in among
 coral in the lagoon of PAPARA
 TAHITI.
 Capt H. Pritchard.
 Bishop's College
 1916.

Writing on backside of wrasse (parrot fish) painting above