

Gretchen Simpson's world — in small slices

● The paintings of architectural detail are instantly familiar; you might even say they're 'Absolut Simpson.'

By SELBY FRAME
Staff Writer

Twenty years of painting New Yorker covers have given Gretchen Dow Simpson undisputed celebrity.

Her realistic renditions of architectural detail — a porch cornice, a shadowed clapboard wall — are instantly familiar. They are the images of Long Island summer cottages and broad Maine barns, and they have helped to define the magazine's image as the choice of those monied, educated and leisurely enough to sit on the porch and pore over long, pictureless articles.

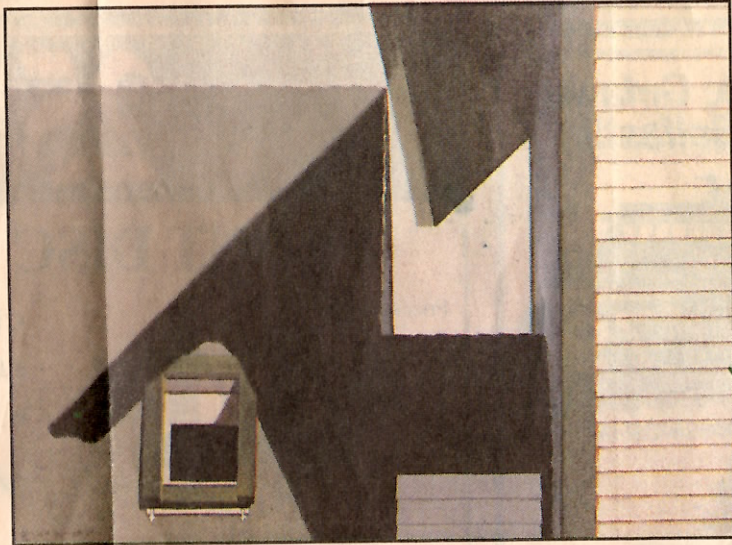
But the crowning recognition, says Simpson, 54, is a recent deal with Absolut Vodka. Last week, the

company purchased a painting for their popular advertising campaign, which uses works by prominent artists in their print ads. "It's really every artist's dream in the advertising world to be in that campaign," says Simpson. Her painting depicts the shadow of an Absolut bottle against a clapboard house. The slogan will read: "Absolut Simpson."

Mainers can view a mini-retrospective of Simpson's work at the Islesboro Historical Society, July 25-Aug. 7. The New York-based artist, who sometimes vacations on the island, will be there from 12:30-4:40 p.m. daily to talk about the 45 posters, prints and paintings on display.

The island's exhibition hall is precisely the kind of creaky, angular building that captures Simpson's aesthetic imagination. She always has been drawn to the abstraction of detail, she says, "the strong shapes and light and color."

"I want people to notice how beautiful the world is. But I need to focus in on sections. I don't have the ability to edit with my eye."



Gretchen Dow Simpson's Grindel Point Lighthouse, Islesboro.

That telephoto quality comes from her early years as a professional photographer. She still uses photography to frame images for her paintings.

After graduating from Rhode Island School of Design in 1961, Simpson began to paint in earnest. She badgered the *New Yorker* for nine years before they accepted her first painting. Once she got her foot in the door, she had a cover on average every three months.

"The magazine, being small, and my images being intimate — sections of rooms or buildings — people feel connected to them and connected to me," says Simpson of her commercial popularity. "They write and tell me that. Some are sentimental, they say the paintings remind them of their youth."

If the *New Yorker* covers have made her career, they've also limited it to some degree, she says.

"There's a *New Yorker* cover stigma. Most people remember my early covers, very simple architectural work with no light. Over the past five years, I've been doing other things ... landscapes ... trying to expand my career. The vertical format of the *New Yorker* is limiting."

There's also that matter of Tina Brown, the lioness of publishing who now makes her den at the *New Yorker*.

Since she took over the magazine last year, the visual look of the magazine has changed. Faces are now appearing on the cover, and sometimes, the cover art corresponds directly with magazine content — a first.

Since spring, Simpson has been working on a new series of paintings, inspired, she says by the prospect of her Islesboro show. "I've been doing lots of paintings of Maine," she says. "One of the things that challenged me was I read that Georgia O'Keeffe didn't like Maine because she said it was all blue and green.

"I thought, I wonder if that's true? If you learn to look, you can see more of what's there. I don't think she's right about that."