

**Maggi Hambling** remembers being inspired by the sea, 1949

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I was a very talkative child and liked to walk into the sea and speak to it, 10 to the dozen, as if it were an old friend. This photograph was taken when I was four, at Frinton, 15 miles or so from where I grew up in Hadleigh, Suffolk. We always went to Frinton because my mother was a snob. I would have preferred Clacton, about eight miles down the coast, where there were fairground rides and candyfloss, but she thought Frinton to be much more correct.

Those knitted, woolly costumes like the one I am wearing here were calculated to make you drown. They stayed wet and heavy for ages. It wasn't easy learning to swim wearing one of those and I never became a good swimmer.

At the age of four my ambition was to become an admiral in the Wrens. Other girls wanted to work with animals or be ballet dancers, but I was attracted to the uniform of the Wrens. It wasn't until I was in my teenage years that I thought I might become an artist.

When I was 14 my art exam was being invigilated by the biology mistress, with whom I was deeply in love. I had been trying to draw attention to myself by throwing paint at people, when suddenly I looked at the clock and it was 20 past three and I had to have a painting done by half past. I chose the subject of laziness. I produced a painting of a woman lying on a chaise longue with a book in her hand, but she was so lazy she wasn't reading it. When the results came out I was top of art.

I started looking into art and once stayed up very late trying to paint the night sky from my bedroom window. I took the paintings into school and laid them out for my art teacher, but when she came into the room I was on the point of tears. I told her I had been up until 2am doing these paintings and all the girls were laughing at them. She said, 'However anyone reacts to your work, take no notice, it has to be water off a duck's back. I think you are an artist.' That's how it all began.

The sea has been my muse since 2002. I began painting the sea when I witnessed a huge storm one morning near where I live, seven miles down the coast from Aldeburgh. I came back to my studio and I was working on a portrait, from memory, of a London beggar. I looked out of the window across the landscape and thought to myself, 'What the hell are you doing, painting this London beggar when there is the whole experience of that storm this morning inside you.' So I began painting that storm at sea on the same little canvas I had been painting the beggar.

I go to the sea early every morning about 5am and listen to it. I started off talking to it, but now I listen. **Interview by Georgia Dehn.**

*Maggi Hambling has produced a sound installation for the art show Snap at the Aldeburgh Festival, exhibited from June 9 to 24; she will be in conversation with Norman Rosenthal on June 11 (01728-687110; snapaldeburgh.co.uk)*