



The Phantom of Boston

One of the joys of museum going is the inherent mystery behind every object and painting from the past. Who made it and why? What were they trying to communicate, who was their audience? The Museum has recently been given a painting that contains several mysteries, *Phantom of Boston*, donated by Joan Klimann in memory of her husband Gustav D. Klimann. This moody, mysterious image of the early morning sun breaking through the mist reveals a stranded vessel, and a captain and crew with their supplies spread upon the beach being approached by five men in a rowboat. The palette is sophisticated and dramatic and the technique at a consistently high level. The painting is not signed or dated but has many intriguing characteristics of Fitz Henry Lane's work.

The painting was acquired by Gustav Klimann in the late 1950s from a dealer in Essex, Massachusetts. Klimann, who died in 1982, was a well known art conservator in Boston who did work for the Vose and Childs galleries, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and numerous collectors and institutions across New England. He was also a friend of Maxim Karolik, the pre-eminent collector of Lane and other 19th century American artists. Mr. Klimann was a knowledgeable collector in his own right and from

the very first moment thought this painting was by Lane.

The Museum's new painting tells a mysterious and still unknown story. The vessel is a private yacht that has run aground. The contents of the boat have been unloaded onto the beach; a collection of blankets, suitcases, a fish basket (identical to one in the CAM collection), a frying pan, jugs, pots, a kettle, a coil of rope, a hatchet and several rifles. The vessel's sail is half hoisted to dry with the boom ingeniously supported by the boathook stuck into the sand. The smart red cushions lie on the deck to dry. The captain and presumed owner with his jaunty cap and tailored jacket is anxiously looking towards a boat with five men rowing towards him. The mate on the beach is looking down at a rifle in his hands as if to load it, another rifle is nearby. The sun is rising through a swirling mist.

Several scenarios have been suggested for this narrative. One is that the boat has gone aground and the approaching men in the boat are salvagers. In the 1800s any shipwrecked boat that had been abandoned was fair game to whoever could float it free and claim it. Perhaps the man on the beach is loading his rifle to keep the salvagers at bay while they wait for the tide to float the boat free? Note the ominous cross made by the

hatchet crossing a plank of wood in the lower left, a device Lane used in several paintings, including one in the Brace's Rock series.

A second interpretation is based on marine historian Erik Ronnberg's identification of the vessel's design as British, and its similarity to boats used for duck hunting in the English salt marshes. While the transom clearly shows *Phantom* as her name and Boston as her home port, it was not uncommon to transport smaller boats to America from England or to have one built here to specifications. In this interpretation, the captain and crew have been caught overnight in a storm and run aground on a sand bar near the salt marshes. Their belongings have been unloaded to dry and the rest of their hunting party is rowing in to help them off the bar come high tide and proceed. Perhaps the boat owner commissioned the painting to memorialize the event.

Whatever the interpretation, it's a scene full of anecdote and detail typical of so many Lane paintings. The rigging on the vessel is impeccably and accurately painted and the vessel's hull shows all its form and weight lying on its side. The man seated in the foreground sits amidst a remarkable tonal study of disparate objects. The sun breaking through the mist casts bands of shadow and light on the beach. And the black triangle of the hull is perfectly balanced against the corresponding white shape of the drying sails. Regardless of ultimate authorship, it is an extraordinary painting.

The painting is 15" x 20" on a panel of magnolia wood, a very unusual support. The *Fitz Henry Lane Online* project committee and associated experts are currently researching the subject matter, provenance, technique, under-drawing and paint layers, via infrared photography, in an effort to provide a definitive attribution and further unravel the mystery. We will update our findings on this intriguing painting in subsequent newsletters. The Museum is very grateful to Mrs. Klimann for her generous gift.

—Sam Holdsworth

Sam Holdsworth is a longtime member of the Museum's Board and serves as Director of the *Fitz Henry Lane Online* project. The *Phantom of Boston* is currently on display in the Museum's Fitz Henry Lane Gallery.