PLATE III.14

Yacht America *from Three Views*

Fitz Hugh Lane (1804–1865)
Ca. 1851
Oil on canvas
18½" x 27½"
Unsigned

FROM THE DATE OF HER launching (May 3, 1851) to the date of her departure for England (June 21, 1851), the schooner yacht *America* was afloat in American waters for only seven weeks.[1] Lane would have been aware of her building, but it is unlikely that he would have taken time to travel to New York to sketch an unproven vessel, particularly if he was preparing another visit to Maine that summer. Under such circumstances, graphic sources for a painting would have been limited and not very accurate. Buttersworth portrayed *America* quite accurately in his painting of her race with the sloop *Maria* (Plate I.1), but its date of completion is uncertain and its derivative lithograph (Plate I.2) wasn't published until 1852.

Lane's painting of this schooner is one of his most unusual ship portraits and one of his most puzzling. While the hull profile and sail plan are unmistakably those of *America,* many details do not agree or are simply absent, raising questions about his sources and when he painted the picture.

The most striking differences are in the deck arrangement, which is devoid of two skylights, a round hatch, a capstan, and a small anchor windlass on the bowsprit heel bitts. The cockpit is long and oval, instead of round, and extends too far forward. In addition, there appears to be a break in the deck forward of the foremast instead of at the main. The most conspicuous error in the rigging is that the shrouds are single instead of double. Also, the forestay sets up to the stem, parallel to the bobstay, and there was an iron rod and turnbuckle connecting the forestay to the fore-masthead. Other minor points are arguable, but not crucial.

The time frame in which Lane painted this picture is quite a narrow one. It has to be before the Dutton lithograph (from the Brierly sketch) arrived in America;[2] otherwise, Lane would have been able to correct many mistakes. That would put the latest date around early November. This leaves May to early November 1851, minus August when Lane was in Maine, as the likeliest period when this painting was done.

Of this picture's many charms and strengths, the artist's attention to the sails is the most attractive, aesthetically and technically. The yacht designer L. Francis Herreshoff, who owned this painting for many years, wrote that Lane had given the sails the shape of perfect airfoils, but one does not need to understand aerodynamics to appreciate the beauty of their forms.[3] Lane became better at depicting sails than any of his contemporaries, including Salmon, giving them not only correct form, but going further in detailing their construction and in exploring the play of light and shadow on canvas in all types of weather conditions. Sadly, his applications of paint in fine lines and thin glazes are so delicate that heavy-handed restorations have obliterated these delicate tones and details in some paintings—a reminder that the conservation of paintings is a heavy responsibility. On a happier note, this painting has received much better treatment than most.

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