



The Art of Mary Blood Mellen

(1819-1886)

January – April 2023

CAPE ANN Museum

In 2004, the eminent art historian John Wilmerding challenged Fitz Henry Lane scholars to dig deeper into Lane's life, including into his relationship with his best-known student, Mary Blood Mellen. Three years later, drawing on research done by former Cape Ann Museum librarian and archivist Stephanie Buck and local historian Sarah Dunlap, Wilmerding organized an exhibition exploring the work of Lane and Mellen. When the exhibition closed and a scholarly roundtable was held to review what had been learned, it was agreed that although much had been discovered about the two artists, much remained a mystery. Today, 15 years after the Cape Ann Museum presented the exhibit *Fitz Henry Lane & Mary Blood Mellen: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries*, many aspects of Mary Blood Mellen's life and her ties to Lane remain unknown. It has become apparent, however, as examples of Mellen's work have come to light, that she was a talented and accomplished artist who commands a place in the history of art on Cape Ann.

The basic details regarding Mary (Taylor) Blood Mellen's life have been well documented. Born in 1819—15 years after Lane—Mellen was a daughter of Reuben Blood, Jr. and Sally Taylor Blood. By 1830, the Bloods were living in the central Massachusetts town of Sterling where they raised and educated their children. In 1840, Mary and Rev. Charles W. Mellen, a Universalist





Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *The Annisquam River Looking Towards Ipswich Bay*, undated, oil on canvas, collection of Anne and William Kneisel.

minister, were married. Fifteen years later, Charles Mellen's brother, William Roland Grenville Mellen, who was also a Universalist minister, was called to serve at Gloucester's First Universalist Church. It was probably because of that posting that Mary Blood Mellen visited Gloucester and established a friendship with Fitz Henry Lane. Information gleaned from a variety of sources tells us that Mellen quickly became Lane's student and collaborator; indeed, Lane gave her access to his preliminary drawings and allowed her to assist him on at least one of his canvases, *Coast of Maine (tondo)*. Stylistic examination of numerous Lane paintings in the Cape Ann Museum's collection suggests that she may have had a hand in many of them. A strong and mutually respectful friendship developed between the two artists, so much so that when Lane made out his will early in 1865, he included bequests of money and artwork to Mellen in it. Mellen would, in turn, mention Lane in her own will 17 years later, entrusting paintings that he had done to loved ones.

The most comprehensive information about Mary Blood Mellen as an artist comes from Phebe Hanaford's book *Women of the Century*, first published in 1877. Born in 1829, the author was a teacher, a suffragette, and one of New England's first women to be ordained a minister in the Universalist Church. *Women of the Century* is a Who's Who of accomplished women



Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Untitled (Gloucester Harbor)*, undated, oil on canvas, collection of Anne and William Kneisel.



Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Norman's Woe*, c. 1860, oil on canvas, private collection, Museum committee member.



Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Half Moon Beach in Gloucester*, undated, oil on canvas, collection of J.J. and Jackie Bell, Museum Trustee.

who happened to be educators, ministers, writers, inventors, business-women, historians, agriculturalists, librarians, and artists. Hanaford notes that Mellen “can hardly remember when she began using the brush,” informing us that she had the benefit of speaking with Mary Blood Mellen and asking her directly about her career. “She was taught to use watercolors,” Hanaford wrote, “in her native place, at a boarding school conducted by a Miss Thayer. She attended afterward the Fryville Seminary in Bolton, Mass., which was then under the auspices of the Quakers. Her parents, fearing that her love of art would bar her progress in other directions as a student if indulged, designed to have her paint-box remain at home. She was not informed of their wishes; consequently, it was the first thing packed; for to her it was of the highest importance.”

Of Mary Blood Mellen’s work with Fitz Henry Lane, Hanaford wrote, “She was instructed by the late Fitz-Henry Lane of Gloucester, Mass.; and, as he was unquestionably one of the best marine painters in the country, it is no wonder that in after years the pupil received a large meed of praise for her originals and copies. Her copy of Lane’s “On the Lee Shore” has elicited the warm encomiums of the press. One editor remarked, ‘An old sea dog, in looking at it yesterday, exclaimed, ‘Them anchors yer only hope!’ and added, ‘Mrs. Mellen is so faithful in the copies of her master, that even

an expert might take them for originals. Indeed, an anecdote is related of her, which will exemplify her power in this direction. She had just completed a copy of one of Mr. Lane's pictures when he called at her residence to see it. The copy and the original were brought down from the studio together, and the master, much to the amusement of those present, was unable to tell which was his own, and which was his pupil's."

While it is possible that Lane feigned his inability to tell his own painting from Mellen's, scholars today point to subtle and important differences that distinguish each artist's work. They include Lane's eye for detail and his genius at capturing it with crisp and precise lines; his skill at painting vessels so that they appear to be floating in the water, rather than bobbing on top of it is also often called out. Mellen's work, on the other hand, displays a preference for a more vivid color palette than Lane's and a tendency towards softer brushwork, a preference that often makes her work feel more painterly. Theories have been put forward that Lane may have worked on parts of a composition, while Mellen focused on other parts of the same work. Infrared examination of canvases attributed to her would determine if she transferred Lane's drawings to her canvases before applying paint, a finding that would not be all that



10

Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Moonlit Cove*, undated, oil on canvas, collection of Anne and William Kneisel.



Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Norman's Woe*, c. 1860, oil on canvas, private collection.



12

Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Gloucester Harbor and Dolliver's Neck*, 1870, oil on canvas, private collection.



Mary Blood Mellen (1819-1886), *Field Beach, Stage Fort Park*, c. 1850s, oil on canvas, gift of Mrs. Preston Dise, 1964, collection of the Cape Ann Museum.

surprising, particularly as Lane's health failed leading up to his death in August of 1865 and his popularity as an artist remained strong. It is possible that we will never know the details of their relationship and their artistic collaboration.

Mary Blood Mellen's husband died the year after Lane and, by 1870, Mellen had moved to Hartford, Connecticut, to live with her sister-in-law and her family. It is assumed that it was during these years that Phebe Hanaford spoke with Mellen in connection with her book *Women of the Century*. Few if any of Mellen's works are dated so it is not clear if they were done before Lane and her husband died, or after. Similarly, there is no information as to whether she returned to Gloucester or not. We do know, however, that Mellen continued to paint: in 1870 her profession was recorded as "artist" by a census taker. Save for one small oil landscape that sold at auction in 2007 bearing a note on the back indicating that Mellen had done it after a work by Alfred Thompson Bricher, we do not know the extent to which Mellen collaborated with other artists.

Martha Oaks

Chief Curator, Cape Ann Museum

The Cape Ann Museum thanks the following individuals for sharing their works by Mary Blood Mellen for a special exhibition held in the Museum's Fitz Henry Lane Gallery from January through April 2023: Jackie and J.J. Bell; Mac Bell; Glenys and Kermit Birchfield; Deborah and Richard Carlson; Anne and William Kneisel.

Cape Ann Museum

For close to 150 years, the mission of the Cape Ann Museum (CAM) has been to share the power of stories.

CAM's narrative has been curated to thrill; to teach; to inspire; to forge connections with others, past and present; to celebrate and share the inexhaustible human spirit that has animated and enriched this corner of the earth for centuries.

Founded in 1875, the Museum today is a vibrant cultural center that spans two distinct Gloucester locations featuring four historic structures including a sea captain's house, the original Gloucester town green, modern galleries for permanent and special exhibitions, art studio spaces, children's spaces, and an extensive library and archives.