



Somes Harbor, 1850s. Oil on canvas. Private collection

## Fitz Hugh Lane's Paintings Down East

By John Wilmerding

WITH the undertaking of the first major exhibition of Fitz Hugh Lane's work, two New England museums will be recognizing the full measure of this important 19th-century painter. The exhibition will be shown first at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts from March 20th to April 17th. Colby College Art Museum will present the exhibition from April 28th to June 6th. It is fitting that the institutions are in the two states which Lane loved and painted most of his life. Lane has only recently begun to receive the popularity and critical appreciation that he has long deserved.

Lane's life has unusual dimensions, for he was confined for most of it to the environs of Gloucester.

John Wilmerding is assistant professor of art at Dartmouth College and the author of *Fitz Hugh Lane, 1804-1865, American Marine Painter*, published in 1964 by the Essex Institute of Salem, Massachusetts.

Born in 1804, he was crippled in his legs as a child. While this inevitably hampered his movement thereafter, he early in his youth turned to pencil sketching along the Cape Ann shore. Encouraged by local printmakers he secured an apprenticeship at Pendleton's lithography firm in Boston, at that time one of the most important shops in the country. During the decade of the 1830s his artistic interests grew under the only formal training he was to have. He also profited from association with other young aspiring artists. In his *Sixty Years' Memories of Art and Artists* the painter Benjamin Champney recorded that at one point he and Lane and a number of others had studios in Tremont Temple, not far from Pendleton's shop. While still at Pendleton's, Lane probably first met Robert Salmon, the outstanding marine artist of the day, recently arrived from England. Salmon's topographical style, inherited from the great period of English marine painting in the 18th century, was

to provide a major source of inspiration for the young Gloucester painter. Further stimulation doubtless came from the exhibitions of European, and particularly Dutch, painting held regularly at the Boston Athenaeum.

Another promising apprentice, John W. A. Scott, and Lane were soon led by common interests and abilities to establish in the early 1840s their own lithographic firm. From that association came many of Lane's best prints; more, his training as a draughtsman would prove valuable to him in the development of a clear and economic style of painting. Although Lane left Scott to return to his native Gloucester in order to devote himself more fully to oil painting, he continued to work in graphics to the end of his life. One of his most accomplished and eloquent lithographs is the 1855 *View of Castine*, made from a pencil sketch that he had done on a summer cruise.

Lane's first painting depicted primarily the coves and beaches of Gloucester harbor. His manner of painting showed a tightness that may have derived from his consciousness of Salmon's work. His compositions were often overly cluttered with ships jammed into the lower quarter of the canvas and the sky filled with dramatic cloud effects, features which he probably drew from paintings by the Dutch masters.

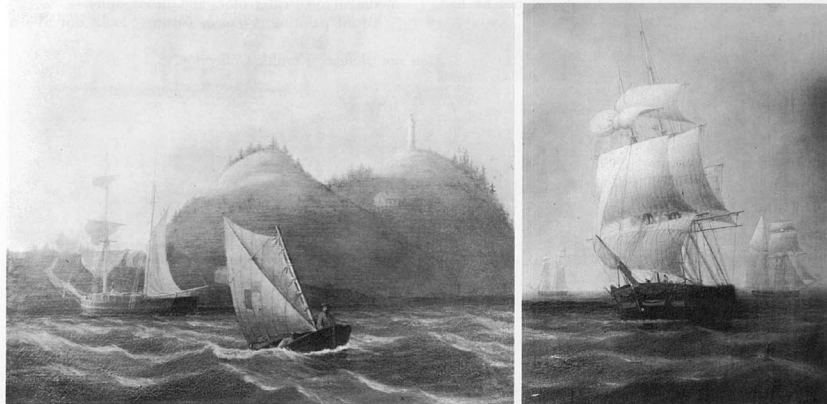
By the end of the 1840s Lane had come to maturity and he had achieved a vigorous personal style. He understood naval architecture and knew how to paint ships with confidence and clarity. He had also mastered the difficult talent of depicting water convincingly. In search of new subject matter, he planned what were to become annual summer cruises

down the Maine coast with his close friend, Joseph L. Stevens, Jr.

This friendship was to be instrumental in opening a new phase in Lane's artistic life. Stevens' father was a doctor in Castine, although the family had long been in Gloucester. Lane and young Stevens probably first went to Maine to stay at the Stevens homestead in 1848. The first trip that is documented by dated drawings took place in 1850, the last in 1855. From these few years come almost all of Lane's paintings of Maine scenes. Yet the impact of those visits would affect his work until his death in 1865.

Lane was fascinated with the rugged, irregular coast and possessed by the special character of light and air. Of particular interest to him were the unmistakable contours of Owl's Head, the Camden Hills, Blue Hill, and Somes Sound and Bear Island at Mount Desert. A number of artists were discovering Mount Desert at this time: Benjamin Champney, Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty, Frederick Church and John Kensett. The frequent brilliance of the Maine light, the alternating clarity of air and powerful stony grayness attracted them all.

A new purity enters Lane's work at this time. Eager to capture the transitional hours of the day, such as sunrise and sunset, Lane began to apply his paint in thinner glazes, using, in general, lighter colors. He composed now with greater assurance, no longer feeling the necessity to fill his canvas with objects. The effect was of stillness and lucidity. The transformation may be clearly seen in two works approximately ten years apart: *Off Owl's Head, Maine* and *Three Master*, ca. 1852, and *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine*, 1862. (Continued)



Off Owl's Head, Maine, c. 1852. Oil on canvas, originally one painting, now being rejoined. Cape Ann Sc., Lit. and Hist. Ass'n, Gloucester, Mass.



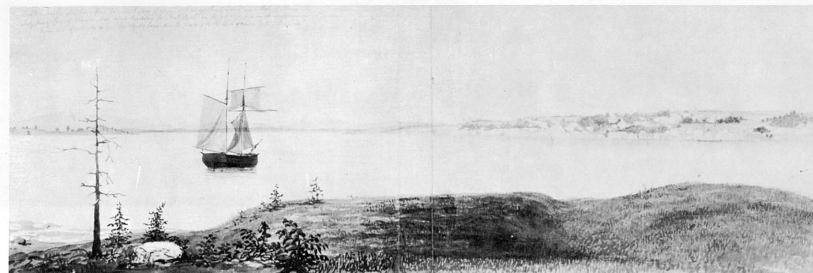
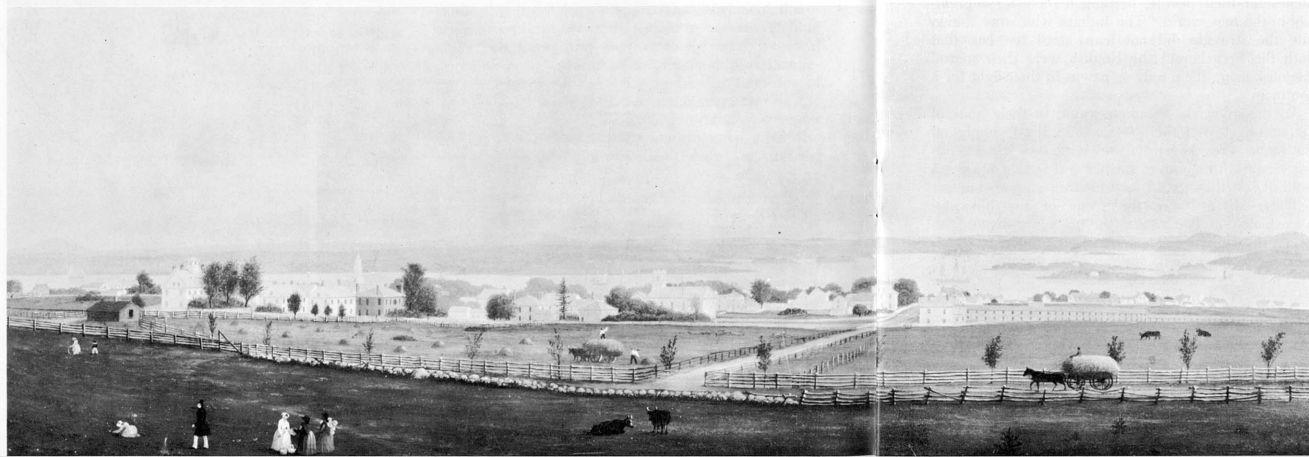
Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine, 1862. Oil on canvas. M. & M. Karolik Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In the later painting of Owl's Head — one of the few Maine subjects he painted in the 1860s — a bold spaciousness and economy has emerged. This is Lane at his height, and only three years before his death. The 1862 date may possibly indicate a later trip to Maine than those now known, but more likely this was done from a number of pencil sketches he had made in the 1850s.

At the head of Penobscot Bay lies Castine, a place which held both Lane's interest and obvious affection. He made many pencil sketches and several unusual paintings of the area. Three are of particular note because they show not only different points of view but also how Lane handled the different media of oil, watercolor, and lithography.

An oil painting, *View of Castine*, looks out to sea

View of Castine, c. 1850. Oil. Upper half of sky section not shown. Karolik Collection.



Above — Castine Harbor and Town, 1861. Pencil and watercolor. Karolik Collection.

Below — Castine from Hospital Island, 1855. Lithograph. The Mariners Museum, Newport News, Va.



from inland, a point of view that Lane seldom painted. The Farnsworth Art Museum at Rockland, Maine has recently acquired the fine preparatory drawing for this, and its title indicates that Lane took the view from near Fort George, just north of town.

A watercolor entitled *Castine Harbor and Town* tellingly reveals Lane's method of working. Attaching two sheets of his notebook together end to end, he drew with delicate pencil strokes the outline of his broad view. Over this he filled in certain large areas with watercolor, such as the foreground and distant shore, and completed a few critical details carefully, such as the pine trunk and anchored ship. Within the faint rectangles of houses on the far shore he has noted "r" or "b" or "y" according to the color he will want to fill in later on canvas.

The lithograph, *Castine from Hospital Island*, was done after a trip four summers later in 1855. It takes not too different an off-shore view of the town from the watercolor, though the composition is more care-

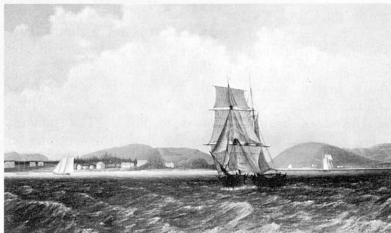
fully ordered. With but the single mast of the little sailboat in the foreground he pulls two areas together. One also notes the familiar delight in leaving more than half the space to the bright, thin cloud formations above. As a lithograph it is an accomplishment as high in its medium as Lane's best canvases were in oil.

Still another of Lane's favorite areas of Maine was Mount Desert further to the east. Here he executed some of his finest oils, supreme in their quality of light, poignant in their stillness and poetry. Bear Island in the Western Way off Mount Desert inspired a few canvases, but he gave most of his attention to painting Somes Sound. Seen from just off Southwest Harbor, the shapes of the mountains framing the

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## FITZ HUGH LANE'S PAINTINGS DOWN EAST

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Off Mount Desert Island, Maine, 1850s. Oil on canvas. Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.

entrance to Somes Sound are memorable. Lane painted this view from a beach near the entrance to Southwest Harbor: the water was still, the sky a flat, deep blue, and the light glaring. He painted it again sailing off-shore in his own boat, as in *Off Mount Desert Island*, with the tide and wind kicking up a choppy sea and a high overcast above.

Of a different mood is the peaceful *Somes Harbor*, in which Lane brings the viewer closer than usual to his subject. Lane did several paintings around the head of the sound, and it is conceivable that this view depicts one of the very anchorages Lane, Stevens and their friends put into. In fact, the small schooner beached at the right may be theirs, with someone's bright red woolies drying on the forestay! Since Stevens habitually rowed Lane around Gloucester and the Maine harbors so the latter could get a good view for his sketching, the two of them may well be those shown in the center foreground here. Altogether, Lane has balanced narration, landscape and personal mood in a subtle understatement. It is just such aesthetic restraint that imbues his work with lasting significance.

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