

## THE SERIES PAINTINGS OF FITZ HENRY LANE: FROM FIELD SKETCH TO STUDIO PAINTING

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1. Fitz Henry Lane, *Boston Harbor*, ca. 1846, oil on canvas, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland (Ohio), 26 x 41 1/4"

### Background

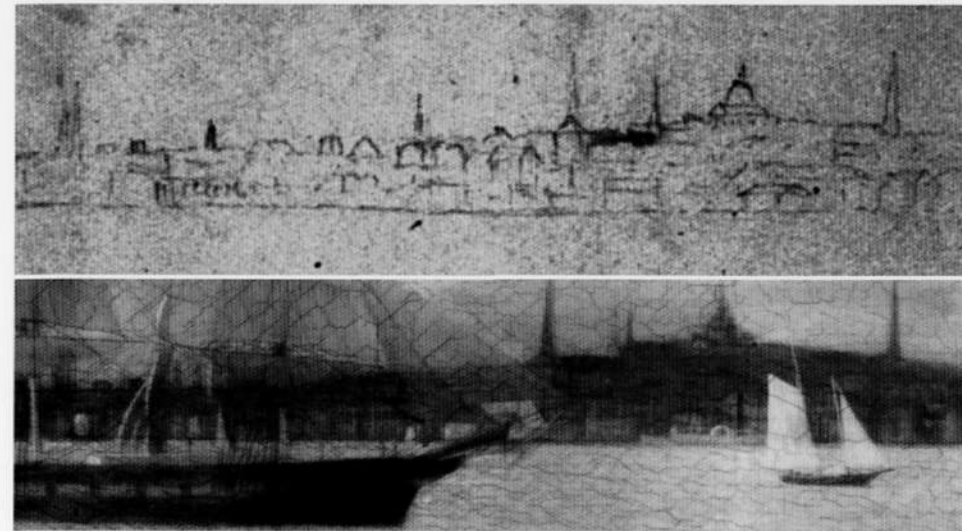
The Museo de Arte Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid is the only European institution that owns paintings by the esteemed American marine artist Fitz Henry Lane.<sup>1</sup> Lane's *Old Fort Gloucester* from the Thyssen collection along with other works by F.H. Lane can be seen as "series paintings" as they relate to locations portrayed by the artist. In Lane's case, "series paintings" can be defined as a pair or group of paintings in which the artist rendered nearly identical backdrops while changing foreground ships and marine activities, and altering the atmosphere. Until recently, the role that Lane's drawings play within his artistic production has been minimally explored. It is known that his drawings were extensively annotated by Lane's friend Joseph Stevens, who accompanied him on his sketching travels.<sup>2</sup> These annotations include references to date and location as well as sometimes noting the recipient/commissioner of a painting or paintings after the drawings. Through technical analysis of the paintings, it is clear that Lane's sketches and drawings were a vital component of his working method. Infrared reflectography (IRR) of his paintings reveals that he initially drew in contours of the landscape and buildings with outlines similar to those found in the field sketches done on site. With this analytical technique, light that contains some infrared radiation illuminates a painting while a camera or instrument sensitive to that radiation "sees" below the paint surface and can detect initial underdrawing by an artist.<sup>3</sup> In Lane's case, the background and ships are often extensively rendered in black drawing material. These hidden underdrawn compositions provide a new understanding of his working method. They also make comparisons between preliminary drawings on paper and the final painting much more informative. Microscopic examination of the paintings' surfaces and radiographic images of the pictures give further insights into Lane's exacting working methods.

Lane's ability as a draughtsman was refined in his lithographic training, which influenced his later career as a painter. In making a lithograph, the skill of the artist is crucial in that the drawing on stone should be done without erasing.<sup>4</sup> The importance of lithographic contour and line is reflected in Lane's drawings and his ability to work in wide tonal ranges is realized in his paintings. Undoubtedly, his experience as a lithographer familiarized him with the advantages of repeated imagery. The fact that he was crippled as a child also limited his ability to travel to a wide variety of

locales, and likely necessitated that he refer back to sketches done in the field for his paintings.

The only known portrait of Lane is a graphite drawing from 1835, made by his lithographer colleague Robert Cooke.<sup>5</sup> It captures the well-dressed 31 year old artist near the ocean, with a lighthouse in the distance, clutching a folder of loose papers that one can conjecture contains either field sketches or lithographic prints. Cooke aligned Lane's shoulders with the horizon of the ocean, anticipating what would become the main theme of his drawing and painting. Two of Lane's paintings portray an artist seated outdoors in the foreground, sketching. In his most recent publication, Lane scholar John Wilmerding makes a case that these are self-portraits. In several other paintings, he conjectures that small vessels containing two figures could represent Lane being rowed by Stevens.<sup>6</sup> Since some of Stevens' inscriptions on the drawings state that they are done from vessels, this conjecture is a distinct possibility.

Making field sketches based on direct observation from nature was an artistic innovation in America in the 1820's started by the first generation of Hudson River School landscape painters, which included Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Alvan Fisher and Thomas Doughty. Lane's familiarity with the work of these artists began at an early point in his artistic career. He moved from Gloucester to Boston in 1832, where these artists showed their work at the Atheneum as well as at local galleries and dealers. Lane trained at the lithography firm of William S. Pendleton. He may have met Doughty there, as Doughty lived nearby while the firm produced his lithographs.<sup>7</sup> At that time, lithographs were an extremely popular form of mass reproduction. The firm that Lane worked for started in 1825 and by this time was producing large numbers of prints of historical and geographical subjects as well as sheet music. One of Lane's first lithographs, of his hometown of Gloucester circa 1835, shows his ability to capture detail in a process which pre-dates photography. Sold by subscription, the lithograph captured the townscape from an elevated vantage point above the horizon. From this elevated view, Lane would visually swoop-down and document portions of Gloucester, Boston and Maine at eye level, often in groups of paintings that re-used similar backgrounds. Meticulous renderings of a place were a vital component of his imagery. Throughout his later career as a painter, he continued to depict familiar harbors and towns, where viewers could easily pinpoint a steeple or hillside. Influenced by mass production through his early training as a lithographer, Lane must have recognized the value literally and figuratively in repeating a common theme in his paintings. He might re-use a certain setting which appealed to local residents, and could concentrate on particular ships or atmosphere at the request of a patron. Rather than viewing his process as a form of mass production, it might be helpful to view the background of his paintings as a theatre set, while the foreground ships, sailors, water and light are the actors, exploring the different activities and moods of a particular place.



2. Comparison of details of the skylines of Lane's drawing of *Boston Harbor* and the infrared image of the painting in The White House Collection. Infrared image of the White House painting courtesy of Pam Betts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Since almost all of Lane's writings are lost, his methods and motives for creating repeated images or series paintings are not entirely known. Lane left us few clues as to his everyday comings and goings. Only a small number of personal correspondence has survived, as well as contemporary newspaper articles, and to our knowledge Lane never kept a journal or diary.<sup>8</sup> Historians have noted that both Lane and his mentor Robert Salmon were influenced by the compositions of Antonio Canaletto. Between 1827 and 1840, a dozen views of Venice attributed to Canaletto were exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum.<sup>9</sup> Canaletto was a prolific artist who skillfully reused historic background settings, while altering the arrangement of foreground ships and figures.

Lane's debt to Canaletto, as well as to the founder of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole, has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> In 1828, Cole exhibited two sets of series paintings at the National Academy of Design in New York, *The Garden of Eden* and *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. These two groups are "series paintings" in the more conventional sense as the subjects are interrelated and comprise a story. Cole's compositions were based on John Martin's mezzotint illustrations of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* published in 1827.<sup>11</sup> Cole's 1836 series of five paintings titled *The Course of Empire*, has also been cited as an influence on Lane.<sup>12</sup> It depicts man's transformation of a pristine natural setting into a metropolis, which eventually falls into ruin.

In 1840, Cole painted a series of four paintings titled *The Voyage of Life*. They were





3. Fitz Henry Lane, *Boston Harbor at Sunset*, 1850-55, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 26 1/2 x 42".

divided into *Childhood*, *Youth*, *Manhood*, and *Old Age*. Lane almost certainly saw these paintings, as they were featured in the 1843 exhibition at the Boston Art Association, held in Chester Harding's Gallery, 22 School Street.<sup>13</sup> Lane was a member of this association, and contributed a painting to the same exhibit (n. 52 *Lying to for a Pilot in Boston Bay*, present location unknown). Cole's series was featured in the exhibition catalogue with a two page interpretation of the paintings written by the artist.<sup>14</sup> This subject by Cole must have impressed Lane, as the following year he exhibited his own group of five paintings, also entitled *The Voyage*. They were divided into *The Departure*, *Fine Weather*, *Stiff Breeze*, *Storm and Wreck*, *Calm After the Storm*.<sup>15</sup> Since these paintings have not been identified, it is difficult to know how closely Lane was following Cole's series. Still, given the similarity of the title, theme, and number of paintings, the group was clearly a type of homage to Cole.<sup>16</sup>

Before seeing Cole's series in 1843, there was a series of seascapes by Thomas Doughty that Lane likely saw at the first exhibition at Chester Harding's Gallery in 1834. The show was organized by Doughty and Alvan Fisher, who sought an alternative venue to the annual exhibition at the Boston Athenaeum.<sup>17</sup> At the Harding Gallery exhibit, Doughty included three seascapes which were from a series of five views of Long Beach, Nahant, north of Boston.<sup>18</sup> Doughty began this series with a small oil field sketch. He then painted four larger versions of the same view, altering the foreground figures, the crashing wave, and the distant clouds. In two versions he added a coastal ship with a somewhat unusual lateen sail, which is in the process of



4. Fitz Henry Lane, *Boston Harbor at Sunset*, 1850-55, oil on canvas, Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, 29 x 39 1/4".

lightening (or floating) a cask ashore. In this respect, as Doughty re-used the same setting, Lane's "series paintings" follow a similar path. In addition, Doughty's depiction of the crashing wave in this series had a stylistic influence on Lane. The similarity of the breaking waves in his paintings *Ten Pound Island from Pavilion Beach*, and *Salt Island* has been recognized.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, Lane's familiarity with Canaletto, Cole and Doughty's series paintings had an influence on his own repetition of particular scenes. However, in Lane's case, like Doughty, he did not continue with a series that related in a linear fashion. Instead, he created several paintings from the same viewpoint with nearly identical backgrounds. These views were derived from sketches that were done at a specific place and time. The reasons for creating these series views and working methods will be explored in the following sections. Lane would enlarge and reuse the backgrounds of Boston Harbor, Gloucester Harbor and its environs, New York Harbor and the coast of Maine, for several subsequent views. Methods of enlargement or transferring a drawing to canvas used by artists during Lane's time include: copying free-hand, tracing, gridding the drawing and canvas with either threads or graphite lines, and using a pantograph.<sup>20</sup> The only optical device known to have been owned by Lane was a spyglass, mentioned in his will which he must have used for scrutinizing distant details of both landmarks and ships.<sup>21</sup>

From some of the paintings examined, Lane's use of various drafting tools and methods for enlarging were revealed and will be discussed in the following sections.

