

# ESSEX INSTITUTE Historical Collections



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Salem, Massachusetts

The Swami left for Boston and then New York where the first formal Vedanta classes were organized, and where his work in America was brought to its climax with the foundation of Vedanta societies in various parts of the nation. Swami Vivekananda returned to India by way of Europe leaving devoted disciples in the New World of which he once said, "I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East."

The only criticism Essex County can level at her unusual visitor is his misunderstanding of some of her history. Often asked during the course of his lectures about missionary propaganda tales of the burning of widows with their husbands' bodies, and the attitudes toward women's rights in India, the Swami denied such rumors by saying that burnings were not the common course of events in India where women were honored, not burned as were the witches in our own colonial days. Having visited Salem, he should have known better than to accept this myth, but for the purposes of illustration the effect was indeed striking and not an intentional perversion of history.

The visit Swami Vivekananda paid to America was undertaken at the turning point of time and opinion. In a very real sense he brought a message from the ancient East and made Americans more aware of the civilization and heritage of India. Victorian attitudes were crumbling and as persons such as Mrs. Kate Tannett Woods helped liberate women, so the Swami helped liberate opinion and increase tolerance. It is interesting that along the North Shore of Massachusetts he met some of his most valuable and influential friends, but few disciples. Those "very rich ladies" who found their Oriental visitor fascinating, helped him to reach a wider audience from whom disciples arose, some to follow him back to India and take monastic vows. The dark Indian in his bright robes and turban may well have been a strange sight in America, but fitting enough in Essex County, which earlier had been among the first to carry the material wealth of India and the East aboard sailing vessels to the corners of the world.

## INTERPRETATIONS OF PLACE: Views of Gloucester, Mass. by American Artists

By JOHN WILMERDING

A CURIOUS but plain fact about the long-time fishing town of Gloucester on Cape Ann, Massachusetts is that she has almost since her colonization attracted good artists. Provincetown and other coastal art colonies in New England have at times been noted for their creativity or productivity, but they regrettably attract as many hack as serious artists. Surely the communities of Cape Ann, Rockport, Dogtown, and Gloucester, have had their share of dubious artists; still, they may boast among their visitors a succession of some of America's best painters. Each came to record his own pictorial interpretation of this special shoreline, and a brief history of these topographical portraitists is revealing.

Certain limitations must be imposed on their story. American landscape and marine painting had come into their own only by the first half of the nineteenth century. To be sure, the traditional lithographed view of city street and country estate was already popular, but it took the liberating enthusiasms of Jacksonian Democracy to stimulate America's taste for a personal and unrestrained landscape painting. In the century that preceded the modern turn towards abstractionism, six painters of Gloucester come to mind as representing the maturation in successive stages of an American style. They are Fitz Hugh Lane, William Morris Hunt, Winslow Homer, Maurice Prendergast, Childe Hassam, and Marsden Hartley. In spite of their great diversity of interest and method, all were in some degree, from part-time to professional, marine painters. They further shared the fact that their painting in Gloucester generally represented a critical recapitulative or transitional point in their work.

What was it about the Gloucester setting that so drew artists to paint her environs as they did? Two features especially stand out: the strong, large rock forms of the coastline itself and of the higher, inland elevations on the cape, and the almost equally tangible qualities of light and air which seem always to clarify, even press against the configurations of land and sea. The contours of a landscape, however memorable, do not alone insure their appeal to an

