

Digital Arts

The Cape Ann Museum moves 19th-century artist F. H. Lane online and into the 21st century.

BY NANCY E. BERRY

Gloucester's Cape Ann Museum offers a fresh perspective on how we view and study art with the launch of a comprehensive interactive online catalogue raisonné of the work Fitz Henry Lane (1804 to 1865). Lane was a native of Gloucester and is today considered one of America's most important marine painters and one of the most significant artists of the 19th century. His precise depiction of Gloucester's maritime landscapes offers a detailed glimpse into the past. Today, the Cape Ann Museum has the largest collection of his work in the country.

Lane, the son of a sailmaker, began his artistic career working at a lithography shop in Boston. With a talent for drawing, he excelled in the field, creating business cards, advertisements, and sheet music as well as drawing the entire working Gloucester Harbor. As he cultivated his drawing skills through the years, he eventually turned to oil painting. He painted scenes within the social, historical, and cultural context of the era and place. He portrayed the growth of international trade and the merchant class while holding nostalgia for a simpler time in his works.

His paintings of calm harbors and gentle landscapes are often called "luminist" for the quality of light in them. Judith McCulloch, former director of the Cape Ann Historical



Museum, told the *New York Times* after a Lane sold at a Skinner auction for \$3.5 million, "Whenever Lane does a sunset with two colors, you can't tell where one color ends and the other color begins." His works did not stop at these poetic vistas; Lane also painted ships for their captains, bustling ports, and sailing vessels navigating stormy seas.

The extensive online site includes a catalogue raisonné of Lane's paintings, drawings, and lithographs, a database of historical information, scholarly essays on Lane's work, and materials related to the subjects in Lane's pictures. To date, 319 works are currently on the site and include all known Lane pictures in public collections. (The

Above, Fitz Henry Lane. *Three Master in Rough Seas*, early 1850s. Oil on canvas, 10 1/2 x 15 3/4 in. Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester.

Below, Fitz Henry Lane. *Gloucester Harbor from Rocky Neck*, 1844. Oil on canvas, 34 x 45 1/2 in. Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester.

site will include art from private collections in the future.) The museum hopes the site will function as a central repository for information about Lane. “The site has lots of layers,” notes project director Sam Holdsworth. “The rich historical material is connected to the relevant painting through links.” Holdsworth explains that the site is for scholars of Lane, students, or those curious about Gloucester’s maritime paintings and past. “Melissa Geisler Trafton was adjunct curator on the project and she and the Cape Ann Museum staff worked tirelessly to bring this project to life,” adds Holdsworth.

“This catalogue raisonné is the most exciting development in Lane research since our studies of him began in the 1950s,” notes art historian and Lane scholar John Wilmerding, who was an adviser on the project. “This sets a new level for such catalogues ongoing in America and raises the bar by expanding into the cultural contexts of works.”

Now that phase one of the project is complete, the museum hopes to attract the attention of private collectors who may have a Lane hanging on their wall or tucked away in an



attic. In fact, “The Cape Ann Museum acquired many of its Lane paintings through numerous donations; in particular, a large collection came from the heirs of Joseph Stevens, who was a friend of Lane’s,” notes Holdsworth.

In the early 1940s, Alfred Mansfield Brooks, a professor of art history at Harvard, retired to his native Gloucester and persuaded the members of the “codfish aristocracy” (the socialites who made their fortunes from the codfish trade) to donate their Lane paintings to the Cape

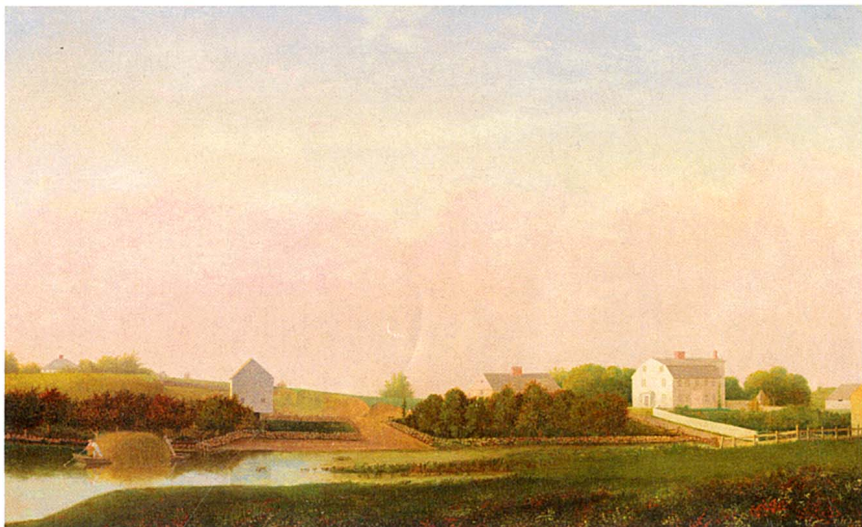
Ann Historical Museum—today, the Cape Ann Museum. Brooks was successful in his persuasion, and 39 paintings, 100 drawings, and several lithographs were acquired.

The project was funded by major supporters such as the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Institute of Museum Library Services. The Cleveland Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, provided curatorial and conservation assistance.

Marcia Steele, senior conservator, and Joan Neubecker, conservation photographer of the Cleveland Museum of Art visited the Cape Ann Museum to photograph some of Lane’s works with an infrared camera, which detects compositional changes below the paint. They discovered how the original drawing on the canvas might differ from the final work. These infrared photos can be seen in the online collection. The project was a five-year collaborative effort, and to celebrate its success, the Cape Ann Museum will be exhibiting all of Lane’s lithographs. The show will open in October 2017. njs

Above, Fitz Henry Lane. *Brace's Rock*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 10 x 15 in. Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester.

Below: Fitz Henry Lane. *Babson and Ellery Houses, Gloucester*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 22 x 36 in. Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester.




fitzhenrylaneonline.org