



The Perfect Storm

IN FITZ HENRY LANE'S ART, MARGARETTA LOVELL STUDIES THE CONVERGENCE OF ART, CULTURE, COMMERCE, AND PATRONAGE

GLOUCESTER, MASS., SITS JUST A FEW MILES NORTH OF Boston, on Cape Ann, and has long been known for its thriving fishing industry. For generations it has drawn young men to lives at sea while also enticing artists and writers with its tales of peril and hardship. While today's readers and moviegoers know it best as the location of Sebastian Junger's bestseller *The Perfect Storm* (1997), 19th-century school children knew of it from the memorable lines of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (1842).

For art historian Margareta Lovell, Gloucester is the favorite setting for many paintings by Fitz Henry Lane, an artist appreciated in his day for his accurate renderings of maritime scenes but all but forgotten after his death in 1865. There was a revival of interest in Lane's works in the mid-1960s, when critics began celebrating those of his canvases that featured an interplay of light on moody skies and the calm, reflective water. In an interview with *Huntington Frontiers*, Lovell explains that critics appear to have been viewing Lane through a modern vantage point; rather than seeing Lane as a progenitor of abstract expressionism, Lovell argues that we should learn to appreciate his unique depictions of Gloucester's day-to-day economy in action.



Margareta Lovell, the Dana and David Dornsife Fellow for 2009–10 at The Huntington, is writing a book tentatively titled *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and Antebellum America*. She is the Jay D. McEvoy Professor of the History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley. She has had a long association with The Huntington, from curating the exhibition "Celebrating William Morris: The Artful Book and The Artful Object" in 1996–97 to contributing an award-winning essay to the exhibition catalog *A 'New and Native' Beauty: The Art and Craft of Greene & Greene* (2008). Her most recent book is *Art in a Season of Revolution: The Artist, the Artisan, and the Patron in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

Above: Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865), *Sailing Ships off the New England Coast, ca. 1855*, *The Huntington*.

Q&A

What do we see in Fitz Henry Lane's painting from The Huntington's collection, *Sailing Ships off the New England Coast*?

We see a ship, a schooner, and a brig carrying goods as fast and as profitably as possible, in multiple directions. These are all different classes of vessels that carry different kinds of products. The water is rough, meaning there is a good wind, and from the perspective of a merchant, the beautiful cumulus clouds indicate that this is a fine, windy day to move goods from one place to another.

How does this painting rank among the artist's works?

When Lane was active, a newspaper critic said, 'The further Lane gets out to sea, the better his work becomes.' In other words, his contemporaries preferred paintings like the one in The Huntington's collection. But for American audiences since 1965, when Lane was 'discovered,' the preference has been for the much quieter, emptier canvases, where the water is completely still and reflective of the sky. And so one of the things I'm doing is investigating the history of taste, which has changed so substantially in terms of this artist. In his time, he was valued for his incredibly accurate depictions of ships and weather conditions, and his depiction of water and action.

This year at The Huntington, you have been working on a book about Lane, tentatively titled *Painting the Inhabited Landscape*. Why that title?

Most artists at this time who were painting the American landscape were painting wilderness, what appears to the viewer as a virgin wilderness, one in which there are no fences or property lines or structures. Which is exactly how Lane *does not* paint. Lane paints an inhabited landscape. He's interested in describing the relationship between labor and land—or sea—in a way that the artists who have been most celebrated from this period did not. Artists like Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt wanted to present, for all sorts of reasons, America as an empty canvas on which a national destiny could be written.

What have you been reading in the Huntington Library this year?

I read diaries, memoirs, newspapers, logbooks of ships—I try to understand the economic history of the production of these paintings. Which means understanding the political economy of Gloucester in the 1840s, '50s, and '60s. And in order to do that I have to understand what is supporting the economy, not just what's supporting the artist. Because this artist is painting images of that political economy at work. He's interested in seeing the extraction industries

as they are occurring—whether in lumber or granite or fish—and his patrons are very involved in the lumber industry and fisheries as well as in the design of the fastest ships and that sort of thing. So I've been reading the diaries of his patrons as well.

Where would Lane have been without his patrons?

He couldn't have had a career. Many of his patrons were extremely wealthy, self-made men who lived lives of rip-roaring adventure while making a good deal of money doing it. Commissioning these paintings, I conjecture, was one way to root their experiences to specific moments in their lives, their hometowns, or the ships they built or sailed.

Have you come across any surprises in the manuscript and rare book collections?

Well, most of my sources are written by men—they did the logbooks, account books, and town histories. They are the mapmakers. A couple years ago I came across a small notice in a Gloucester newspaper from the 1850s about this woman named Mrs. Prince who was coming through town selling her memoirs. After I began my research fellowship at The Huntington, I thought I'd look for the memoir in the library collection, and sure enough you had it.

“Lane paints an inhabited landscape.”

And what did you find in her memoir?

What's interesting is that she was African American. Her husband worked as a mariner. Well, Gloucester had trading partners all over the world, and Mr. Prince ended up in Russia, where he caught the eye of the emperor, who hired a number of Africans, African Americans, and African Europeans to work in the palace.

So Mrs. Prince went to live in the palace, and in her memoir she gives these interesting accounts of seeing this incredibly different social system, including serfs and their relationship to the land and property. And so the memoir gave me another perspective, an unexpected perspective, which also showed the global reach of Gloucester.

I imagine sometimes you find items that are fascinating but might take you too far afield. Will Mrs. Prince's memoir make its way into your book?

Absolutely, because Lane and Gloucester are not just local stories. What we call globalism today is nothing compared to the world of what we might call 'highbound Yankees.'



LANE'S REPUTATION

"There was a deliberate privileging of a certain kind of Lane painting in the 1960s, and it's still very much reflected in the market. The taste was much more toward abstract expressionism and exercises in light and color. Critics were used to seeing the play of color, shapes, and geometry of the canvas. They also liked what you might call the uncluttered quality of some of Lane's paintings. So most people who have learned to admire Lane paintings in the recent past admire the still water of the quiet scenes, but still water doesn't move any goods." —Margaretta Lovell

Fitz Henry Lane, *Lumber Schooners at Evening on Penobscot Bay*, 1863. National Gallery of Art, 1980.29.1. Reproduced by permission.

They thought nothing of heading toward Turkey or India or China or Russia, and I'm not just talking about the big traders, but also the mariners on board every ship.

I'm trying to sort out how Lane saw the world. How did his patrons and the other people in this town of about 8,000 understand it? Gloucester was anything but a little local horizon.

What's another example of the global reach of Gloucester?

One of my chapters is called "Surinam," after one of Gloucester's major trading partners. It was a Dutch colony on the northern coast of South America, and Gloucester was the largest fishing port in the Atlantic at that time. That's where most of the Gloucester fish went—to feed the slaves. The tropical colonies didn't sustain their own fleet of independent fishermen, and the dried and preserved fish from Gloucester could be barreled and shipped as the primary source of protein for the hard-laboring slaves.

And so one of the questions going through my mind was, What are they thinking—what are they getting in exchange? Well, it turns out that molasses and sugar went back to New England and were distilled into rum.

Lane was really interested in temperance; he and many others—the local newspaper editor, for instance—were hostile to the rum trade. Which then as its corollary suggests hostility to the slave trade and to slavery. Those opinions about sugar and slavery and temperance, which you see enacted in this little town, had everything to do with this global reach of the economy and of these people as individuals.

So there is the armature of my book. Once I figured out how to tell the story, I tell it from the point of view of the materials—granite, lumber, fish—and places—Surinam, California, and Puerto Rico. I'm telling the story from the perspective of goods and the globe. Each of these chapters works as a piece of this larger story about Gloucester, Lane, his patrons, and the political economy of New England in the 1840s, '50s, and '60s.

How does California fit into this New England economy?

It completely upsets it. The idea that a breadwinner will labor hard and make a living and, if clever, make a profit is suddenly and completely undercut by a gamble—I mean California represented a gamble.

In the Gloucester newspaper, for 10 years after the Gold Rush began, every issue had something about California.

The newspaper articles make it clear that California was upsetting expectations—family expectations, father-son expectations. They don't quite know what to make of it.

How did this impact Lane's paintings?

Some of the ships that Lane painted were called *The California* and *The Golden State*. The names were sort of an acknowledgment of the power of California as a kind of magnet and a place of tremendous wealth. Some of his paintings were commissioned to go west with Gloucester families heading for Sacramento as mechanisms for helping them keep Gloucester affections and memories vivid.

The movement of young men to California created a sense of loss, disruption, and melancholy at home. I think when most art historians see Lane's canvases with a sunset sky, a still ocean, and maybe one ship in it—maybe even a *wrecked* ship—they usually say the sense of brooding and melancholy was coming from the Civil War. But in my

readings, including something called *The Fishermen's Memorial* in The Huntington's collection, I found that far more men were dying at sea than in the war. Yes, they were bleeding some men to the Civil War, and I know the names of who they are. But they were bleeding far more—twice as many—to shipwrecks and to hurricanes. And they were bleeding them to California.

You have a doctorate in American studies from Yale—how does that distinguish you from someone with a degree in art history?

For 30 years I've been training—if I can use that term—art historians. I'm teaching art historians to think like cultural historians. I understand formal analysis, and I understand its importance. I understand why it is important to be a connoisseur, to know this came before that, or this is technically done this way rather than that way.

It's just that the questions that really interest me are, How is the artwork a text about its culture? About its context? And that means not just its context at the moment that it is made. In Lane's case, there was a 100-year span in which nobody paid any attention at all—I mean his reputation tanked, totally. The paintings as far as I can see never changed hands, never were exhibited. We didn't even know his middle name.

You seem so varied in your career—from William Morris and Greene & Greene to your most recent book about 18th-century portraiture in colonial America.

I think there is real value in seeing a broad field, and I suppose the one constant is that I'm always interested in the relationship between art, culture, money, and patronage. And that's kind of a unifying thread, and even William Morris couldn't have done what he was doing if he didn't have John Ruskin there running in front of him and very well-heeled patrons beside him. He was a genius, but an artist is never just creating in a vacuum.

What's next for you?

Maybe someday I'll go back and do something longer on Greene & Greene, I don't know. Maybe I'll go back to the 18th century, but I don't think so. I think I'm going to stay in the antebellum period for a while. I know it's kind of various, in fact some people have met me and said, 'Are you the same Margaretta Lovell?'

I guess I'm just lucky, I think I have the best possible job, we get to decide our own agendas and then hopefully fulfill them. ∞

Interview conducted by Matt Stevens, editor of Huntington Frontiers.



LANE AND PATRONAGE

"Robert Bennett Forbes asked Lane to draw a lithograph for the frontispiece of the book he wrote about captaining *The Jamestown*, which was a U.S. frigate that he filled with relief supplies for Ireland in 1847. In one of the fastest Atlantic crossings ever—17 days—he delivered relief supplies and came right back to the United States, filled up four or five more ships, and took them back to the Irish starving in the Great Potato Famine.

"Another patron, Sidney Mason, had left Gloucester when he was 13, and went on to become a merchant in Puerto Rico and eventually the person who established the horsecar lines in New York. He hired Lane to paint his hometown—Gloucester—as well as scenes of the New York harbor and Puerto Rico. Like Forbes, he wanted to capture key moments and places in his autobiography."
—Margaretta Lovell

Frontispiece to *The Voyage of "The Jamestown" on Her Errand of Mercy, 1847*, by R. B. Forbes, *The Huntington*.