

Observation, Imagination and Technique in Fitz Henry Lane's *Dream Painting*, 1862



Fitz Henry Lane, *Beached Hull*, pencil on paper, 1862, 14 x 15 in. Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts

artist's memory of the dream, then turns to describe the picture that eventually resulted and to which he appended the letter as well as to the drawing, titled *Beached Hull*, 1862, in the collection of Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts. Lane presumably made this drawing in preparation for the oil on canvas, now in the Terra Foundation Collection.

Lane's letter names John S. Webber, Esq. of Gloucester, Massachusetts as the owner of the painting,¹ describes the



The letter reads: "This picture, the property of John S. Webber, Esq., Colector (sic) of the Port and District of Gloucester, was suggested to the artist by a dream. Sometime last fall while lying in bed asleep a richly furnished room was presented to my imagination upon the wall, my attention was attracted to a picture which I have here endeavoured to reproduce. The dream was very vivid and on awaking I retained it in memory for a long time. The effect was so beautiful in the dream that I determined to attempt its reproduction, and this picture is the result. The drawing is very correct, but the effect falls far short of what I saw, and it would be impossible to convey to canvas such gorgeous and brilliant colouring as was presented to me. This picture however will give to the beholder some faint idea of ideal (sic)"

(Signed) Fitz H. Lane

Research is currently underway to ascertain how Lane combined accurate observation with imaginative elements in his painted works. Relationships between Lane's preparatory drawings and his oil paintings, which shifted considerably over the course of his career as he increasingly created images that combined topographical aspects of harbors and details from ships with elements drawn from his imagination, represent one avenue for this exploration. The following account of the painting excerpts portions of a report prepared in 2008 for the Terra Foundation by Travers Newton, in collaboration with Marcia Steele, Chief Conservator, The Cleveland Museum of Art.

BACKGROUND

Fitz Henry Lane's background as a lithographer trained him to document what he saw with the precision of a surveyor. His outline drawings of the harbor profiles of Boston and Gloucester were accurate enough to be used as navigational devices. However, as his career as an artist evolved from that of a topographical lithographer to a luminist painter, his memory and imagination began to assume an important role in the creation of his studio paintings. For instance, unlike his contemporary Frederic Edwin Church, no drawings of clouds by Lane survive, so it would appear that he painted them from memory.² This kind of invention is at play in Lane's graphite drawing of a *Beached Hull* made presumably in preparation for the oil that came to be called *Dream Painting*. It is the only known example of an image he drew from memory, and is the only work by the artist that he identified as being inspired by a dream.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE DRAWING TO THE PAINTING

In translating his sketch from paper to canvas, Lane enlarged the drawing, *Beached Hull*, to the painted version by nearly doubling the scale, although all indications are that he transferred the image free-hand. The drawing

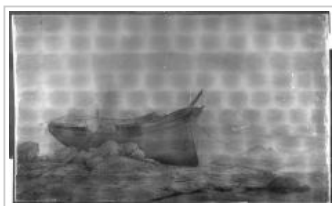
shows Lane's familiarity with a ship's hull form, the bow being rendered accurately.³ Lane added a considerable amount of detail in the painted version that is not in the drawing, such as fragments of rigging, anchor cables, and the stumps of her three lower masts. He added deck details including a boat, a skylight, rail fragments and a steering wheel, as well as breaking surf and dramatic sky. The sum effect is to increase the scale and monumentality of the ship. Indeed, it is difficult to judge the size of the ship in the *Dream Painting*. If one uses the steering wheel as a scale, then the ship is quite massive. In further research, we plan to overlay the drawing onto the painting, to compare how close the outlines match.

UNDER-DRAWING



Photomicrograph, Fitz Henry Lane, *Dream Painting*, 1862

Lane appears to have begun the composition on canvas by tracing the outlines of the ship with a dark grey material, possibly graphite, directly onto the white ground. A photomicrograph shows traces of this outline at the base of the ship's bow. The under-drawing is comprised of single, confident lines, almost as though Lane were tracing the outline, although there is no evidence of this.



Infrared photograph, Fitz Henry Lane, *Dream Painting*, 1862

An infra-red image (IRR) of the painting shows Lane's fluid and confident under-drawing, with almost no compositional changes. He appears to have first drawn the outline of the foreground rocks upon which the ship rests, and then the shape of the listing ship. He probably used graphite to delineate details such as the ropes. He drew-in a few additional features on the deck after outlining it, such as the three broken masts, the skylight over the after cabin, and the

black catheads on either side of the bow.



Infrared photograph (detail), Fitz Henry Lane, *Dream Painting*, 1862

He then drew the shoreline at a diagonal, leading up to the right of the ship. He drew the horizon lines up to the right and left edges of the ship with slightly undulating lines, suggesting turbulence. As was his usual practice, he painted the clouds in the sky without using any under-drawing.

There are traces of an incised line, possibly in the ground layer, along the horizon line to the right of the ship. Sometimes, Lane would under-draw the horizon freehand in a painting, such as the Terra Foundation's *Brace's Rock, Brace's Cove*. In other cases, he would use graphite and a straight edge, such as in the two versions of *Brace's Rock* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C., and the Cape Ann Historical Museum, Gloucester. But with *Dream Painting*, he first set the horizon with a finely incised line using a straight edge, and then drew over it (probably using graphite) a slightly wavy line, suggesting choppy water. Once the background sky had dried, but was still soft, Lane added a finely incised line which traced the outline of the dark, rectangular shape towards the bow of the ship. In addition, there are two diagonally scored lines on the right above the horizon (one is over 15 cm long), although it is unclear if these are part of a former compositional device, or are related to the application of the ground.

PAINT SEQUENCE

After making the under-drawing, Lane appears to have used a resinous, thin, transparent brown imprimatura wash to delineate the forms of the foreground, as well as the ship. Using a finely pointed brush dipped in a dark, dilute paint, he added details such as the crevices in the rocks, and finely delineated seams in the ship's hull. Once the ship and the dark foreground were dry, he added the sky, which he built-up starting with thin, transparent blue washes in the upper portions of the painting. There is no impasto in this region. He created forms such as the grey cloud in the top right, working wet-on-wet into the blue, working rapidly with two small



Photomicrograph, Fitz Henry Lane, *Dream Painting*, 1862

brushes (.5 mm and 1 mm filberts) dipped in very dilute pigment. He built-up the orange-pink transition to the horizon with additions of what we assume is white lead, and a slight amount of impasto using a larger brush (1 cm). The water was applied quickly, with elevated peaks of white impasto added at the end with a small brush.

Once the background sky had dried, but was still malleable, Lane added outline details on the ship in silhouette, such as the masts, rigging, and dark cathead towards the bow of the ship.

He also added bright accents, such as a purple

(photomicrograph above) along the rigging, and traces of a transparent red in areas of the ship's hull.

An X-radiograph indicates that Lane aligned the horizon to the left of the ship exactly parallel with a canvas thread, suggesting that he followed (or "caught") a thread with a straight edge. There is a "reserve" around the shape of the ship, showing that he painted up to the shape with lead white mixtures. He used lead white est. to create clouds in the upper right with active wet-on-wet brushwork, using a 1 cm wide brush. He created the crashing wave in the lower right with stiff lead white est. with a ca. 4 mm wide brush. He delineated geometric features on the ship deck with careful applications of paint mixed with dense white pigment, possibly with the use of a straight edge.

CONCLUSION

To create the *Dream Painting*, Lane followed his traditional practice of starting with a graphite sketch of a *Beached Hull*, which he enlarged, with just a few compositional changes, into a studio painting. As in other paintings, he invented the sky and the water while working on the painted version. In keeping with a new theme that he began to introduce in 1862, there is no human presence in the composition.

However, in the *Dream Painting* there are both thematic and technical innovations. In terms of composition, it is highly unusual for Lane to depict a scene without providing a background of a distinct, recognizable geographic location. The lack of any setting increases the "other worldly" quality of the composition. His use of a transparent imprimatura layer to create the foreground and the ship may reflect an innovation in his painting technique, in an effort to paint both more loosely and quickly. Also, his light sources are well thought-out, even in complex paintings which include back-lit sails such as his painting of *Boston Harbor* (1850s, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). In his *Dream Painting*, however, there appear to be several sources of light: the ship is back-lit by the colorful sky; in addition, light shines from the position of the viewer, illuminating the ship's hull in a mysterious fashion.

As all of this begins to suggest, by the early 1860s, Lane had turned his attention away from the mathematically rendered, topographical studies of harbors and shorelines that established his fame as a painter to pursue more imaginary subjects, exemplified here by Lane's inventive imagery, light and color effects, as well as by *Dream Painting's* evocative title and subject matter. The Terra Collection's *Brace's Rock*, *Brace's Cove* may be another of Lane's works drawn from the imagination that combines topographical elements with largely symbolic motifs to achieve its poetic effect. The relationship between the drawing and the finished work that came to be known as *Dream Painting* suggest the looseness with which Lane, in this instance, transferred his sketches from paper to canvas, and the adjustments he made to what had been his standard practice to achieve the overall effect he sought in capturing this fleeting image of an evanescent dream.

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¹This leaves the question of the painting's provenance unresolved, as records in the Terra Collection list John

Webber as the painting's original owner, an attribution presumably based on the contents of Lane's undated letter. If, in fact, Lane gave the drawing, *Beached Hull*, to Mrs. Sarah M. Davidson and subsequently sold the painting to her husband for \$50, as James A. Craig claims, questions regarding how and when the painting passed from Dr. Herman Davidson to Webber, and exactly when Lane penned the note he appended to the back of the painting, remain unresolved. See James A. Craig, *Fitz Henry Lane: An Artist's Voyage through Nineteenth-Century America* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2006), 158. See also Sarah Dunlap and Stephanie Buck, *Fitz Henry Lane: Family and Friends* (Gloucester, MA: Church & Mason Publishing, 2007), 66, note 242.

²In addition to there being no drawings of clouds on paper by Lane, we have found only one example of any under-drawing of clouds in infra-red in his paintings, and that was his *The Yacht "Northern Light" in Boston Harbor* (1845, Shelburne Museum), on the back of which he noted was based on a drawing by his instructor, Robert Salmon. For drawn cloud studies by Church, see *Sunset, Mount Desert Island* (1854, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Smithsonian Institution) and other in Gerald Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Catalogue Raisonné of Works of Art at Olana State Historic Site*. Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 216.

³Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr., "Imagery and Types of Vessels," in *Paintings by Fitz Hugh Lane*, ed. John Wilmerding (Washington, D. C., The National Gallery of Art, 1988), 100.