

## *The Boston Harbor Pictures*

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FITZ HUGH LANE'S MOVE IN 1850 TO A NEWLY CONSTRUCTED stone house in his native Gloucester, Massachusetts, signified both a personal and artistic consolidation for him. His new economic and professional security allowed his art of the following decade to reflect a sense of confidence and maturity, culminating in works of major significance in which the aesthetics of luminism were refined to their highest level.

Several of these masterpieces, devoted to sunset views of Boston Harbor and nearby Gloucester, are remarkable for their elevated formal aesthetics and sheer beauty. With these paintings luminism achieved a place in the American naturalist tradition that was characterized by an intimate and measured experience of nature, in contrast to the romantic nationalism of the Hudson River School.

In the 1840s, particularly after he visited Maine, Lane had applied his sensitivity to conditions of light and his union of luminous hues with brilliant colors to new subject matter. His paintings of the 1850s articulate a stylistic and conceptual sophistication that crisply delineates the elements of luminism and explores the full potential of silence and light. These paintings are poetic in a transcendental sense, as well as contemplative; they are not influenced by the literary romanticism that inspired Thomas Cole and an earlier generation of American landscape painters. The imperatives of classic luminism are distilled, revealing a sense for ordered, mathematically conceived composition encapsulated in an atmosphere of tinted, crystalline light. The penumbral colors of the luminist palette were made more visually emphatic by the cadmium hues introduced in the 1840s, and Lane exercised precise and masterful control

in the structured symphonies of light that irradiated his paintings of this period.

The work Lane produced during the 1850s reveals an accomplished master who had assimilated the influences of his predecessor Robert Salmon. Lane had also studied European engravings and incorporated their styles into his own pictorial methodology. He melded the tightly controlled style of Canaletto with the Dutch marine tradition as represented in the work of Jan van Goyen (1596–1656) and Willem van de Velde (1611–1693). But the influence of Salmon and the European masters was mitigated by the development of a personal style and vision.

The pictures depict Boston Harbor in the historic decade before the Civil War, when the maritime supremacy of Massachusetts was at its height. Indeed, as Samuel Eliot Morison has noted, "Throughout the clipper-ship era, nearly all the traditional lines of maritime commerce continued to expand and new ones were created . . . the commercial prosperity of Boston, in 1857, reached its high-water mark for the ante-bellum period."<sup>1</sup> The Boston paintings thus consolidate the aesthetics of luminism with the high moment that celebrates the ascendancy of the New England maritime tradition, the final chapter of the age of sail, in an exquisite and provocative confluence of history and style. These evocative images, so eloquent in their prophetic silence, depict a moment in time as if frozen, and evoke a mood of transcendental silence that is an important reflection of the attitude of the American imagination at mid-century.

The Boston paintings do not necessarily represent a singular chapter in Lane's work; as is discussed elsewhere in this book,

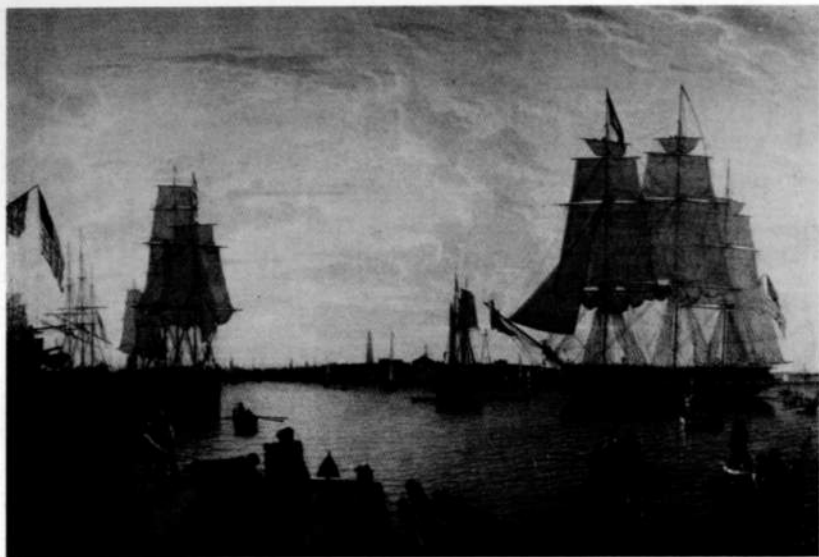


fig. 1. Robert Salmon, *Boston Harbor from Constitution Wharf*, c. 1842, oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 41 in. [United States Naval Academy Museum, Annapolis, Maryland]

the experience of Maine and its remarkable, evanescent light was central to Lane's mature stylistic evolution. The two paintings that best represent Lane's consolidation of the aesthetics of luminism both depict *Boston Harbor at Sunset*, 1850–1855 (cats. 24 and 25). The two paintings are complementary examples of luminism at its poetic and formal height and underscore Lane's emergence as a master of color and light. The paintings of Boston Harbor are far more than mere views, although they have roots in Lane's early experience as a lithographer. They are also indebted specifically to the work of Robert Salmon, as John Wilmerding has remarked.<sup>2</sup> Lane obviously knew and closely studied Salmon's painting *Boston Harbor from Constitution Wharf* (fig. 1), c. 1842, also published as a lithograph.

Salmon's view, however, is taken from the wharf and is filled with anecdotal vignettes that show the preparation of a saluting cannon to signal sunset, and color and light are much more incidental to the subject than in Lane's Boston pictures. Lane emptied the foreground of distractions and placed the ships in geometrically conceived relationships that reinforce a static, reverential quiet. Color, light, and silence are the subject of Lane's pictures. His indebtedness to Salmon was also formally

acknowledged in the *Yacht "Northern Light" in Boston Harbor*, 1845 (cat. 26), on the reverse of which Lane noted, "From a sketch by Robert Salmon."<sup>3</sup> The bustle and activity of this yachting painting, however, are also remote from Lane's cool and structured later compositions. Lane's Boston pictures are more poetically conceived and spatially complex than Salmon's straightforward views.

Neither painting of Boston Harbor is dated, but the delicacy and refinement of the surfaces and their tranquility share much with Lane's work in the middle part of the decade and relate closely to the other important works as, for instance *Salem Harbor*, 1853 (cat. 27). In this harbor scene several sailing vessels are disposed along converging orthogonal lines that form a geometric matrix. The sails hang limp, reflected in a glasslike calm in which all action is frozen. The same stylistic manifestations are apparent in Lane's very beautiful *Entrance of Somes Sound from Southwest Harbor*, 1852 (cat. 57) one of his greatest formal essays on quiet and light.

An interesting comparison can also be made between a painting entitled *Ships in Ice off Ten Pound Island*, 1850s (cat. 3) and his classically luminist scenes of Boston Harbor. The ships in this Gloucester scene are quite literally trapped in planes of harbor ice that reflect the clear white light from the winter sky. The juxtaposition of the frozen winter scene, reminiscent of Dutch paintings, with the spring or summer harbor pictures emphasizes Lane's interest in literally freezing time. The almost-undisturbed, mirrorlike surfaces of Boston Harbor in the Karolik and Ganz paintings, which articulate a canon of luminism's formal doctrine of color, light, and silence, confirm this recurring theme in his art.

Lane had begun to paint sunsets in Maine during the previous decade and his Boston Harbor pictures reveal his continuing interest in this theme. Each of Lane's paintings in this group open out to the west with Bulfinch's state capitol in the center of the composition. The sunset in American mid-century painting was a theme interpreted often by the major landscape artists beginning with Thomas Cole and including Lane's contemporaries Martin Johnson Heade, John Frederick Kensett, Sanford Robinson Gifford, and culminating in perhaps the most spectacularly incandescent work of the period, Frederic Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860 (fig. 2). This interest in the sunset transcends an empirical concern for pyrotechnical



fig. 2. Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860, oil on canvas, 40 x 64 in. [Cleveland Museum of Art, Mr. & Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund]

effects of light in nature and elevates these pictures to a profound level of interpretation consistent with the nineteenth-century understanding that fused God with nature. These paintings are poems of light, but together they represent a commentary on the tentative and ephemeral condition of a changing civilization.

Lane's paintings are not static formulas, but employ varieties of expression, which have sources in the European traditions that he subsumed in his art. His 1852 painting of *Boston Harbor* (fig. 3) is clearly indebted to Van de Velde and the Dutch marine tradition. The dark storm clouds in the distance and the alternating dark and light chiaroscuro effects in the turbulent water, with ships under full sail, effect a high drama similar to that in Robert Salmon's paintings. Salmon also painted a work that Lane may have known, entitled *Boston Harbor from Castle Island*, 1839 (fig. 4). The light in the 1852 picture comes from the far left, creating elongated bands of shadow across the picture plane, a pictorial device often used effectively in Robert Salmon's pictures. Of all Lane's Boston pictures this is the least luminist in its formal attributes. It can be compared to the 1853 painting *Boston Harbor at Sunset* (cat. 28). In this scene Lane interrupted the direct view of the sunset by placing the ship on the right, with the result that a shadow is cast toward the front

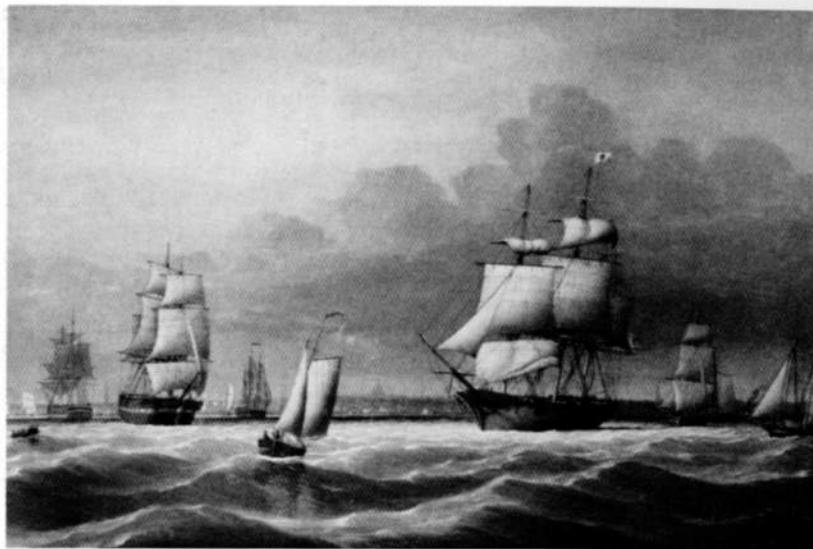
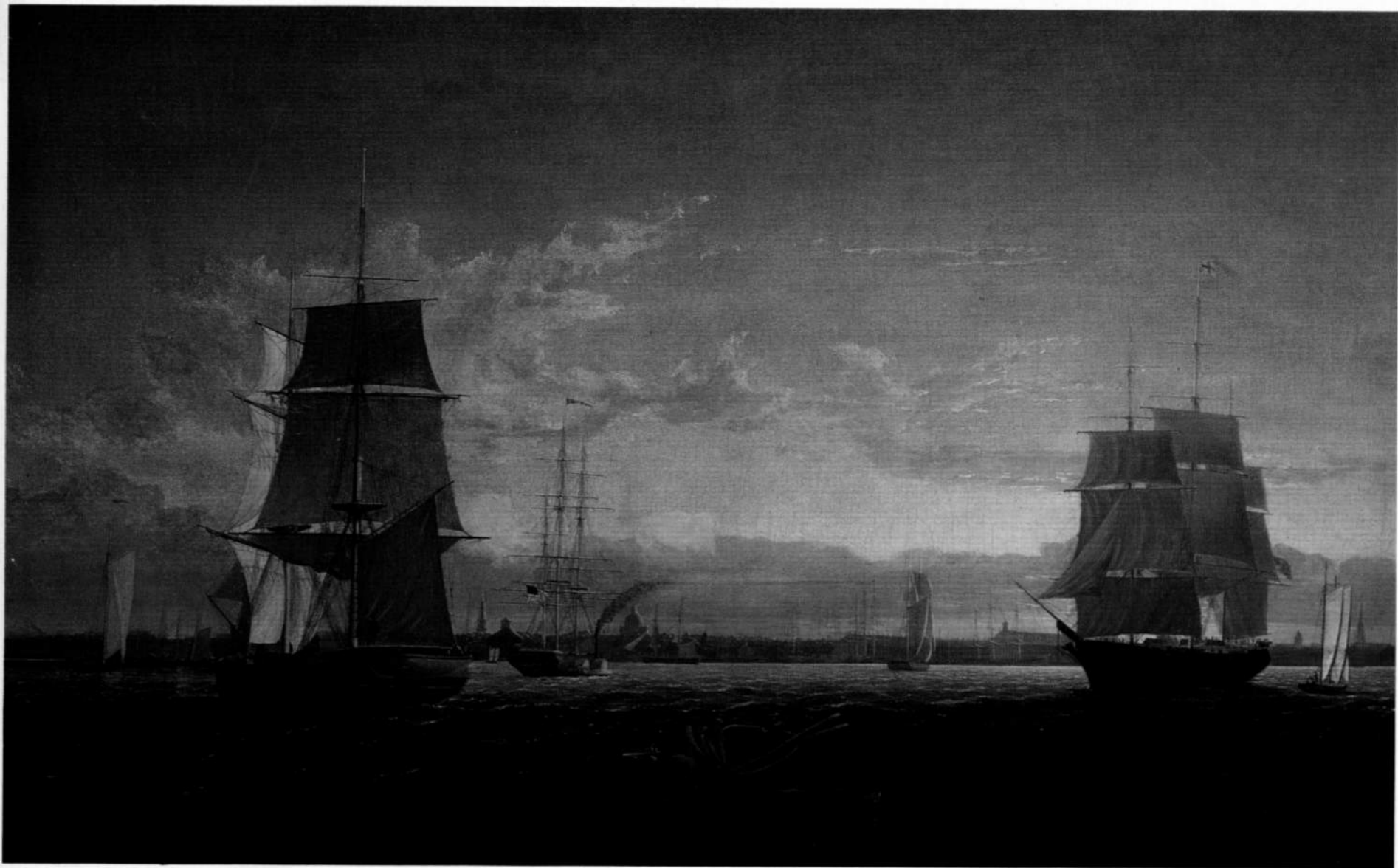


fig. 3. Fitz Hugh Lane, *Boston Harbor*, 1852, oil on canvas, 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 34<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. [The State Department]



fig. 4. Robert Salmon, *Boston Harbor from Castle Island*, 1839, oil on canvas 40 x 60 in. [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond]



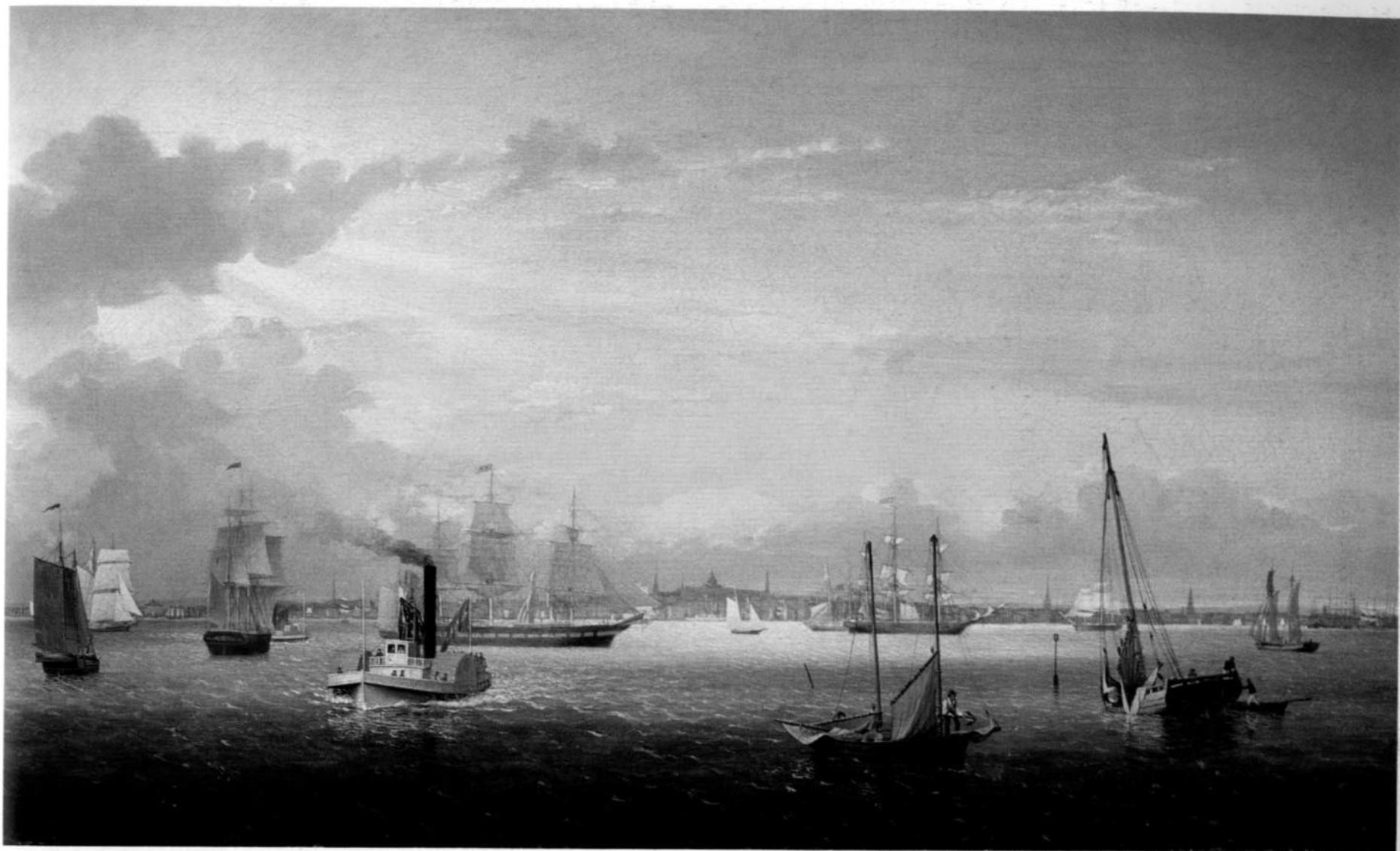


cat. 28. *Boston Harbor at Sunset*, 1853, oil on canvas, 24 x 39 in.  
[private collection]

of the picture plane. In contrast to the 1852 picture, the subject of the painting is light itself: the pink and orange tinted reflections on the underside of the cloud formations. The surface of the water, broken by a strong breeze, somewhat mitigates the saturated, reflected colors of the sunset, however. The contrast

between the 1853 *Boston Harbor at Sunset* picture and the 1852 painting is provocative, and points out how diverse Lane's approach to a subject could be.

Two other studies of Boston Harbor, one dating from 1854 (cat. 29), the other from 1856 (fig. 5), make an interesting com-



cat. 29. *Boston Harbor*, 1854, oil on canvas, 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 39<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. [White House Collection]

parison. In each the focus is on a small steamship moving toward the front central part of the composition. The organization of the vessels in the 1854 picture seems to refer back to Lane's earlier, Salmon-inspired views of Gloucester. The scale of the vessels is not emphasized, and they are primarily horizon-

tally disposed, while the 1856 painting has more in common with the darker tonalities of the earlier painting.

The emphatic introduction of the steamship into the calm waters of a harbor filled with sailing vessels creates a paradox. American landscape artists of the nineteenth century, begin-



fig. 5. Fitz Hugh Lane, *Boston Harbor*, 1859, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in. [Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas]

ning with Thomas Cole, expressed an escalating frustration at the rapid advance of urbanization to the detriment of the pastoral ideal represented in the American landscape. Cole, Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and a host of artists and writers saw the encroachment of civilization as tantamount to a loss of American virtue and morality, as nature gave way before a rapidly expanding western frontier. The railroad, whose piercing whistle jarred the contemplative atmosphere of nature, symbolized this new industrialized age. In the context of Lane's painting the presence of the steamship has much the same effect of a railroad engine shrieking in the landscape.<sup>4</sup>

The steamships in the two paintings of Boston Harbor are metaphors for the same attitude. Surrounded by sailing vessels, either becalmed or awaiting the tide, this new symbol of the industrial revolution, white against the darker hulls of the sailing ships, moves outward toward the viewer. The two paintings herald a transitional moment in America's history—the coming of the age of steam. In the two paintings of *Boston Harbor at Sunset* from 1850–1855 (cats. 24 and 25), though, the steamship is rel-

egated to an insignificant spot in the background.

These pictures hold a central position in the group of Boston Harbor paintings. They are remarkable explorations of the measured, contemplative, and poetically colored qualities that characterize luminism. The two works can be imagined as companion paintings with their complementary palettes: pink and orange in the one, and blue and yellow in the other. Likewise, the sun sets in the same position on the horizon and in each the ships are disposed in similar precisely geometrical configurations. Unlike Lane's earlier horizontally banded compositions, these two paintings have a spatial organization that moves along perspective orthogonals formed by the position of the ships, which move toward the center of the composition. The bottom of the picture is left open to extend toward and encompass the viewer's space. Nevertheless the paintings differ in size; cat. 25 is slightly smaller, and however similar they are in mood and spirit, it is unlikely that they were meant to hang together.

These pictures represent the sense of assured mastery that

Lane achieved in the decade of the 1850s, and he rarely surpassed the exquisite sense of touch and articulation of light and color. The light in both pictures halates almost imperceptibly in extended gradations from the setting sun, creating a penumbral effect as it is dispersed toward the darker, upper atmosphere. The harbor appears transfixed. It is a fascinating, pivotal moment as the ships wait for the tide to change and the wind to fill their sails and move them on to distant points. Lane has depicted a moment when the mind and spirit are at one with nature and the universe. The moment is emphasized through the utter stillness and quiet in these sensitively rendered poems of light. The metaphor of silence, so often applied to luminist paintings, is certainly central in the two works, which are so different in their style and symbolism from the more literary visual rhetoric of an earlier generation of artists. In their quiet and timelessness, they are clearly representative of the mood of mid-nineteenth century American painting. They summarize the conclusion of an era characterized by Jacksonian optimism and expansion, and look forward tentatively to a new decade in which the nation would be shattered by the Civil War. This fact endows these paintings with a unique poignancy, and compels the viewer even today to speculate on the fascinating dichotomy represented in the luminist pictures of Fitz Hugh Lane.

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783-1860* (Boston, 1961), 366.
2. John Wilmerding, *Fitz Hugh Lane* (New York, 1971), 34-35.
3. Wilmerding, *Lane*, 34.
4. See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964) for a complete discussion of this subject.