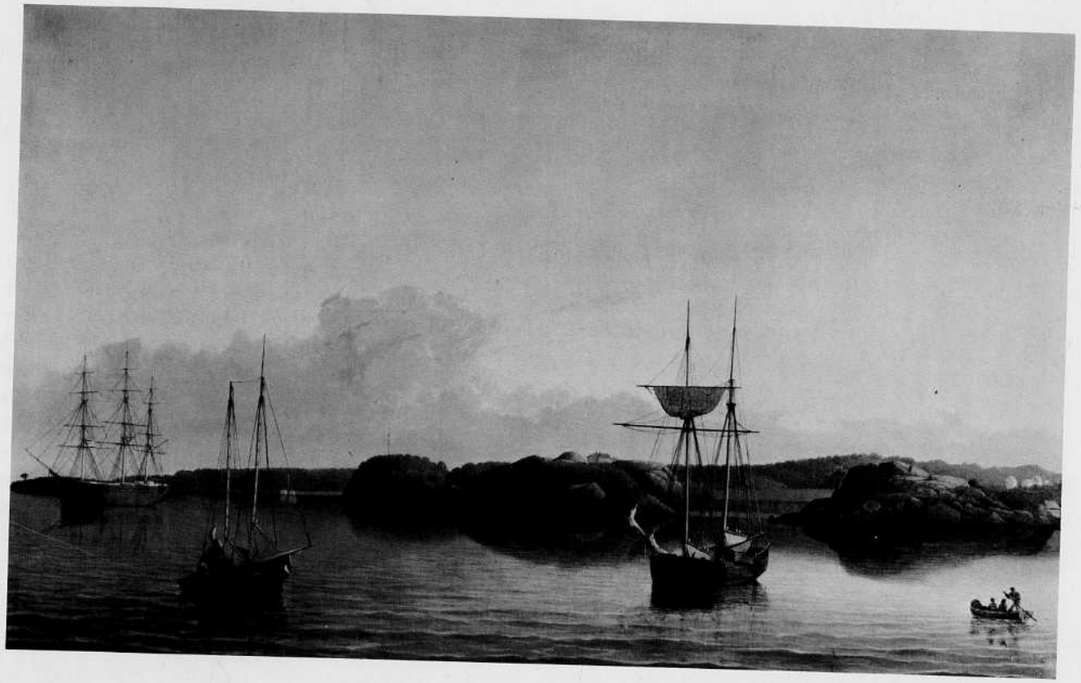
An exhibition held from July 25 through September 5, 1973, at the Cape Ann Historical Association, in celebration of the 350th anniversary of the first settling of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the 100th anniversary of its incorporation as a city.

PORTRAIT OF A PLACE

Some American Landscape Painters in

GLOUCESTER

A publication of the Gloucester 350th Anniversary Celebration, Inc.



Fitz Hugh Lane, *Stage Rocks and Western Shore of Gloucester Outer Harbor*, 1857, Private collection (not in exhibition).

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 profes-

sional, 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 artist; but in combination with a seemingly present quality of atmosphere they can inspire the artist to consider aesthetic problems he may never discover elsewhere. To the residents of Cape Ann the ocean and its weather are powerful and ever-present forces, and the geography of this coast has an attraction for the romantic mind, something further held in common by these artists. Soft, deep-curved beaches alternate with high cliffs and ledges, all rimmed with an endless variety of rocks and dramatically emphasized by extreme tidal changes. When the tide is out, great boulders, darkened by erosion and ocean life, stand out in their clarity. On higher ground the rocks of Dogtown's glacier-left moraine speak of a more ancient past. Constantly refining these physical presences, as well as conditioning the activities of America's oldest fishing port, is the weather, be it intense sunlight, ominous storm clouds, or misty rain. This vocabulary of place constitutes the ingredients in the language of art as Gloucester's artists gave it expression.

The special approach of Fitz Hugh Lane to his recording of the town and nearby coast was largely determined by the facts that, out of this whole group, he was the only one native to Gloucester, and that because of a childhood paralysis of the legs, he was throughout much of his life prevented from traveling far afield. His views of the harbor and shoreline are thorough and extensive, yet Lane is increasingly being recognized as more than a strict "photographer" of what he saw. While

painting in a realist, academic manner, he was never attached to any school of painting or group of artists. Being independent and in a familiar setting most of his life, Lane was able on his own to develop a highly personal and original style. He always gave an accurate sense of place, to the extent that his pictorial record of Gloucester in his lifetime is the most complete known; but in addition, he solved the purely aesthetic problems of color, lighting, and composition with superior assurance. Lane's stylistic development was remarkably consistent, and his art gained in quality as he proceeded. His total work might be called a curious mixture of the classical and romantic, combining lucidity of vision and stability of structure with mystery and inner movement.

At his most productive, during the 1850s, Lane showed a high degree of delicacy and subtlety, as the illustration of his *Stage Rocks and Western Shore*, dating from this decade, reveals. Two points about this work are to be noted directly: it views the shoreline from off shore, and depicts probably a late afternoon hour prior to sunset. Lane was always conscious about accurately rendering the time of day, and often chose the moments of sunrise and sunset both for their specific coloristic challenge and their heightened romantic expressiveness. As a partial cripple, he was also thought to have been rowed around off shore by his close friend J. L. Stevens, Jr. Lane was probably reluctant to move around in crowds and therefore sought the quiet independence that came only in the company of his friends. A major portion of his paintings indicate that they were painted from an isolated open field or from the middle of a harbor. So, here, Lane separates us both from the land and the ships by water.

The design is carefully structured on the zig-zag line that visually connects the four boats; in pairs their axes are at complementary right angles to each other. In echo the projecting rock masses along the shore behind seem to alternate rhythmically with small, recessed coves. Although most of the surface of the painting is divided

into several horizontal zones and punctuated by the vertical interruptions of the ships' masts, there is a total feeling of swelling and contracting lines of movement as the eye reads laterally across the composition. This is most clear in the rise and fall of the clouds, the outlines of the rocks at shore's edge, the reverse curves of their reflections in the water, and the placement of the four hulls across the canvas. Yet interest is always directed towards the center, and overall coherence maintained, by devices like the oar and arms of the sculling figure in the lower right pointing inward, by cutting off the view down the shoreline at the left with the broadside of the three-master, and by placing the largest elements such as brightened cloud and tall-masted schooner in the central area itself.

Still, cogency of design was not Lane's only achievement; his understanding and mastery of the uses of color to bring out effects of light contribute to the enlivenment of the whole painting. His breakdown of shadows into their color components and his application of small touches of pure paint to allow optical mixing of colors are in remarkable, because independent, anticipation of many Impressionist methods developed in the next decades in France. There is a wide range of differentiation in textures throughout the picture, from the clear glazes in sky and clouds to the softer effects of rocks, trees, or wooden hulls, to the partially rippled, partially calm water surface and its changing reflections. Analysis of the reds and blues alone in this work would reveal the rich but understated variety of Lane's coloristic touch. There is a remarkable range of reds, for example, in the bright-shirted figures in the boats at each foreground corner and their subtle counterparts reflected beneath, through the more diluted gradations in the clouds, hilltops, and rock reflections, to the lighter oranges at the right or the deeper purple grays at the left. A similar range of values exists in the transitions of blue through the sky and water, where greens emerge, and through the rocks or shadows, where grays and browns are mixed in. Though Lane's handling is tight and restrained, his full variety and sureness of touch

give to his work a sparkling freshness seldom seen in any of his contemporaries. He has achieved an unusual combination of accurate recording and a more lasting aesthetic interest.

The concern with capturing effects of light and atmosphere was also central to William Morris Hunt in his rendering of the Gloucester waterfront. But his eye for these qualities had been trained quite differently from Lane's some two decades earlier. Much of Hunt's life was spent in travel or study abroad; he was in frequent contact with other artists and familiar with current art developments in France; and he expressed himself articulately about art in lecture, conversation, and letter. He grew up in a Boston of literati: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow; a Boston conscious of clothes, entertainment, status, and name; a Boston that liked to consider only portraiture as art. Hunt was born into a proper New England family who was able soon to send him to Europe. Study in Rome and in the fashionable academy of Düsseldorf during the 1850s was followed by work under Couture in Paris.

Under the spell of Millet and the Barbizon School, Hunt returned to Boston in 1855, and proceeded to Newport, where during the late fifties John LaFarge came to join him. Here Hunt worked largely with landscape, although when the Civil War forced a move back to Boston, he turned increasingly to portraiture. His portraits, for which he is as much celebrated as for anything, and several charcoal sketches reveal Hunt's continuing interest in light and dark and in textures. A strong feeling for the living quality of people and things led to further landscape painting. In 1872 a fire in Hunt's Boston studio destroyed most of his work. This became a turning point after which he began to travel into the country to paint Newbury and Magnolia. A trip to Florida followed in 1874, and by 1877, two years before the end of his life, Hunt found himself spending the summer in Magnolia on Cape Ann. His palette had been lightening all the while; his brushwork was looser and more evocative.