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Edward Moran 1886



*All the Sea Knows: Marine Art from the Museum of the City of New York
on display at the Florence Griswold Museum* by James D. Balestrieri

SAIL *to* STEAM

T H E N A N D N O W

Paintings of ships and boats scream summer. They decorate second homes, cabins and seaside and lakeside hotels. They make us happy. When we see a 19th-century sailing picture, or a painting of an early steamboat plying a river, a harbor or the ocean, the effect on us is instantly romantic. “Sailing,” in the immortal words of Christopher Cross, “takes me away,” and steamboats recall Mark Twain, Tom and Huck, and riverboat sharpies in stovepipe hats. The pace

in these paintings, running before the breeze or chug-chugging along, takes us back to what we think of as a slower time. And it is—to us. But in the world that gave rise to the beautiful paintings in *All the Sea Knows: Marine Art from the Museum of the City of New York*, on view at Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut, the scenes these canvases enact, of canvases furled and unfurled, of canvases billowing in the wind, of canvases displaced by smokestacks, depict work—hard work,

dangerous work, work that came with hardship and heartache.

Until the railroad was just coming into its own in the 1840s and '50s, the sailing ship and the steamboat were the fastest, surest ways to move people and goods on the planet and the only way to move them across seas and oceans. Ambitious plans to connect distant places via water (and, later, rail) dominate the 19th century. The Erie Canal, opened in 1825, ran from Albany to Buffalo, New York,

Thomas Thompson (1776-1861), *New York from Fulton Ferry, Brooklyn*, 1848. Oil on canvas, 18½ x 77½ in. Museum of the City of New York, Museum Purchase, 1956. 56.33.



John Tudgay (1836-1859), *"Palestine" Black X Line*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 27 x 39 in. Museum of the City of New York, Bequest of Edward Larocque Tinker, 1968. 68.103.2.



Michael John Boog, *Hell Gate*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 19 x 35 in. Museum of the City of New York, The J. Clarence Davies Collection, Gift of J. Clarence Davies, 1929. 29.100.1313.



James Bard (1815-1897), *"Mary Powell"*, ca. 1861. Oil on canvas, 30 x 50 in. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Miss Josephine C. Allison, 1932. 32.354.1.

and connected New York with the Great Lakes. It was one of the earliest successful undertakings of this sort. Ships and boats of all sorts, banners flying, fill Anthony Imbert's painting of the celebration in New York City. Sailors in dress uniforms line the decks and huzzah, perhaps after the moment when Gov. Clinton ceremoniously poured water from Lake Erie into the harbor. Everyone knows what this will mean for the city in terms of commerce; even the warehouses that huddle together on the bank appear to have great expectations.

Thomas Thompson's panoramic 1848 canvas, *New York from Fulton Ferry, Brooklyn*, shows how crowded New York Harbor became after the opening of the Erie Canal, and how quickly. From edge to edge in the painting, a forest of masts rises over the bay. Small steamers, like mammals among dinosaurs, chug in and around the tall ships. The weather is fine, and so is business.

What distinguishes *All the Sea Knows* from other exhibitions of maritime art are the letters, some 40 in all, dated between 1836 and 1876, from Florence Griswold's mother, Helen Powers Griswold, to her husband, Capt. Robert Griswold. Capt. Griswold was master of a ship that sailed between New York and London, bearing cargo and passengers. As the letters attest, he was away from his home, wife and family in Connecticut for nine months or more each year. Through their correspondence, Helen keeps her husband up to date, as far as possible, on the health and activities of their children and extended family, on management of their household, and on her feelings of loneliness and depression during their long periods of separation and in the silences between letters. For example, "I received your letter with the money by John Griswold, and wrote you a few lines for him to take down, but he was unable to see you in time, and has I believe sent it on by a Steamer. You say dear Robert that I must be cheerful and happy, my dear dear husband you can not expect me to be happy in your



Edward Moran (1829-1901), *Enlightening the World (The Unveiling of the Statue of Liberty)*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 49½ x 39 in. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of J. Clarence Davies, 1934. 34.100.260.

absence surely, cheerful I try to be, as both my dear Mothers wish it, but I find even that difficult—." At the outset, for his part, Robert tells Helen about the day-to-day grind of his voyages, about the vagaries of the weather and even the unexpected deaths of passengers. But Robert's later letters are filled with homesickness and a longing to be quit of the sea: "Oh how I dreaded this voyage and leaving you and all I leave behind how I hate this life of mine, tis misery I do think it is hardly possible for me to be more perfectly unhappy than I am away from home but you will not believe me Helen and yet how can you doubt it, for you have seen enough of it too???"

John Tudgay's "*Palestine*" *Black X Line*, painted in 1855, offers us a direct glimpse into Robert Griswold's life at sea. The Griswold Family owned the Black X Line of Transatlantic packet ships: Robert would have been captain of a ship much like this one.

The "*Palestine*," as Tudgay conceives it, is a sleek, beautiful craft, a three-masted schooner just clearing the headlands and lowering her sails before a following wind. You want to be there. But then, you look at the schooner out further, heeling over to a raking wind, heading into dark water beneath a darkening sky. What's coming might not be a jaunty punt on the Thames or Hudson. The captain, pointing from the



Anthony Imbert (1794 or 1795-1834), *Erie Canal Celebration, New York*, ca. 1825. Oil on canvas, 24 x 45 in.
Museum of the City of New York, Anonymous Gift, 1949. 49.415.1.

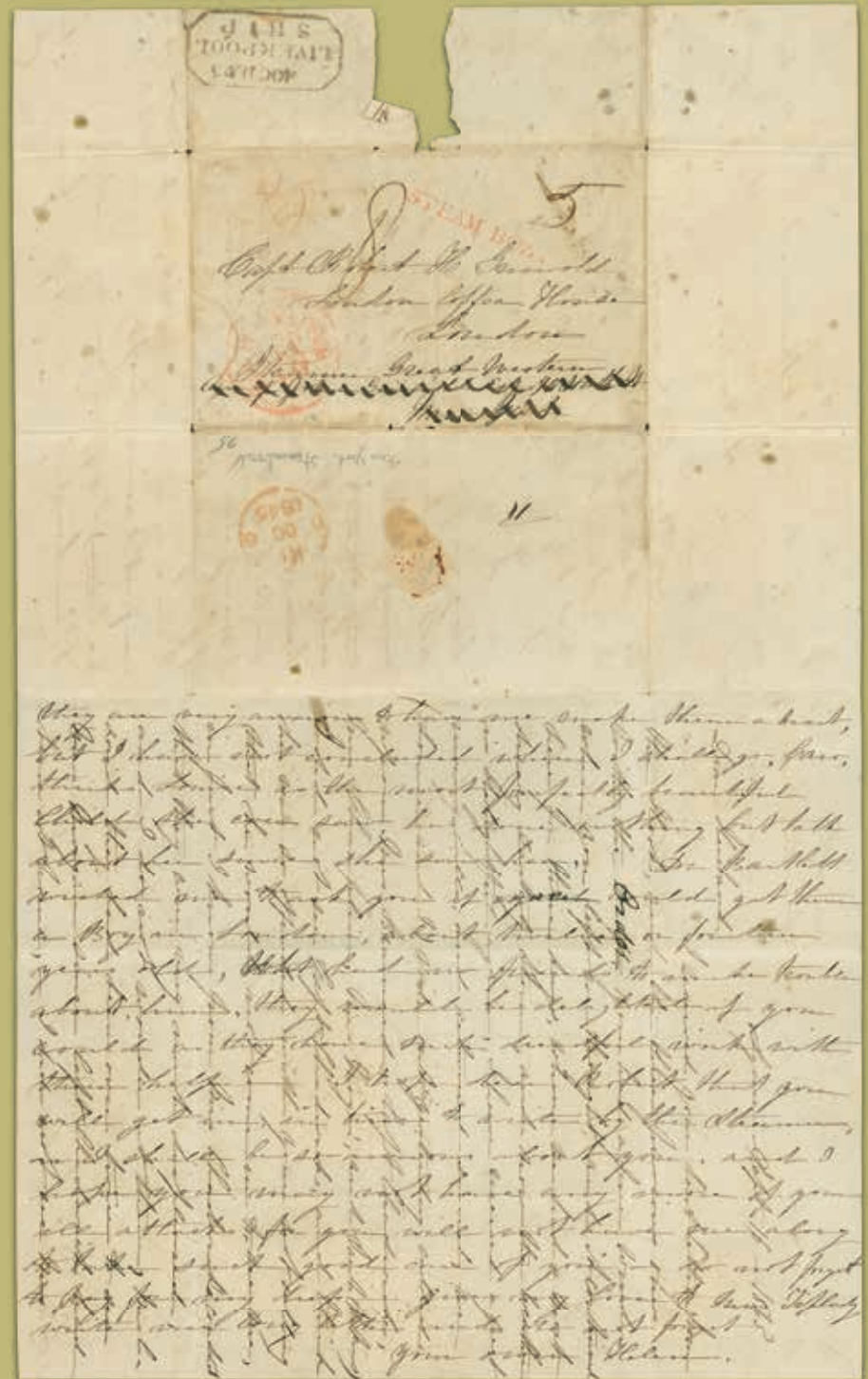


Thomas Birch (1779-1851), *View of New York Harbor from the Battery*, 1827. Oil on panel, 26¼ x 42½ in.
Museum of the City of New York, Gift of the Women's Committee of the Museum, 1951. 51.261.



bridge, might be giving the order to raise sails rather than lower them. In the distance, a steamboat chugs straight into the weather, unconcerned—unless the waves sweep over the deck and swamp the boiler.

It wasn't all hardship, of course, and James Bard's painting of the bright white sidewheel steamer, the family-friendly "Mary Powell," known as the "Queen of the Hudson," recalls pleasure excursions of yesteryear. For 55 years, under only two captains—a father and son—the "Mary Powell" left Kingston, New York, early each morning for New York City, making several stops along the way. Then, at half past 3, she would make the return trip. Bard makes this ideal day trip even more ideal, as well-dressed passengers take the air and take in the Hudson Highlands under



A letter from Helen Powers Griswold to her husband, Capt. Robert Harper Griswold, September 16, 1845. Lyme Historical Society Archives, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of David H. Littlefield.

cotton ball clouds in a pink sky.

In a similar fashion, James Buttersworth's *Yacht Race off Fort Wadsworth* makes sport of the work of sailing. In sport as in commerce, then as now, it's all about time: harnessing power, channeling it, getting there ahead of the pack. Here, in perfect congruence, one yacht attempts to overtake

another while, in the foreground, three fishermen ply their trade.

In a different kind of American harnessing, the 19th-century determination to master nature, Michael John Boog's 1888 painting, *Hell Gate*, shows the notoriously treacherous straits between New York's East River and Long Island Sound in



Victor Gifford Audubon (1809-1860), *View of the Hudson River*, ca. 1845. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Miss Alice Lawrence, 1938. 38.188.

an almost pastoral light. Farmers till the rich riparian soil, their cattle grazing in among the warehouses that line the shore. To the left, in the bay, are sloops and a small steamboat circle, perhaps waiting their turn to navigate the gate. The water in the strait is somewhat rough but doesn't seem especially dangerous; there is nothing at all of the

“boiling in whirlpools; brawling and fretting in breakers,” as Washington Irving wrote some 60 years before Boog's painting. Perhaps this is because the Army Corps of Engineers had blasted the largest rocks in 1885. Boog's *Hell Gate* is all but tamed, a crucial strait made safe for passage.

American maritime history is

not complete without the Statue of Liberty and a nod to immigration. Edward Moran's 1886 masterwork, *Enlightening the World (The Unveiling of the Statue of Liberty)*, commemorates the moment on October 28, 1886, when President Grover Cleveland received a 21-gun salute as he arrived on Bedloe's Island to dedicate Lady



Liberty. The civic religion of optimism and our alliance with the French Third Republic dominates Moran's canvas. In the manner of his brother Thomas' paintings of the ceremonial blessing of the fleet in Venice, Liberty here broadcasts her benedictions over the waters—and over the nation. To reinforce this, banners flying from the



James Edward Buttersworth (1817-1894), *Yacht Race off Fort Wadsworth*, ca. 1870. Oil on board, 9¼ x 12¼ in. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Mrs. Walter D. Fletcher, 1962. 62.140.2.

boats just beneath the statue bear the cross and the Lion of St. George. But the immigrants who came prior to 1886, and the great waves that came in the decades after the start of the 20th century, were no strangers to hardship and heartache, despite and because of their longings and aspirations.

Human history is, in part, a story of reducing distance and compressing time. In his book, *Steam Coffin*, author and historian John Laurence Busch offers an intriguing thesis about the advent of steam in the age of sail: that steamships, especially once they began to cross the oceans, constitute the first successful human challenge to time and space. Prior to this, transportation depended on nature—whimsical winds and beasts of burden. Busch argues that steamships that could ignore weather, that could depart and arrive at given times, allowed human beings to contemplate the mastery of time and space and that the moment of breaking this “psychological barrier” gives rise to the modern age: to the telegraph, the railroad, the jet, the computer, the cell phone: “In time, the dream would become reality, and the oceans of the earth would be traversed by machines so powerful as to have

once been considered chimerical in the extreme. Still other technologies would be developed, eventually allowing humans to artificially alter time and place in ways that would have seemed otherworldly to inhabitants of the early 19th century.” (Busch, *Steam Coffin*, pp. 595-96)

Paintings of ships and boats scream summer. They decorate second homes, cabins, seaside and lakeside hotels. They make us happy. We escape into them. But then we see that little steamer in the background, chug-chugging along, the world calls, and we think about checking our emails on our smartphones. Just a peek wouldn't spoil the holiday mood—would it? There might be something important. Just a quick peek? ■

Through September 20
All the Sea Knows: Marine
Art from the Museum of the
City of New York

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