



## IN AMERICAN WATERS: THE SEA IN AMERICAN PAINTING

Edited by Daniel Finamore and Austen Barron Bailly. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2021

**Reviewed by Michael R. Harrison**, Nantucket Historical Association

In a country linked by river and coastal networks, founded on fishing and ocean trade, and enlarged by both free and forced transoceanic migrations, it is no surprise that the sea has frequently preoccupied the national imagination. American artists' engagement with the sea—with its beauty, its symbolic potential, and its history as a place and means of human engagement and exploitation—forms the subject of *In American Waters: The Sea in American Painting*, the catalog for an exhibition of the same name organized by the Peabody Essex Museum and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in 2021.

Edited by curators Daniel Finamore from PEM and Austen Barron Bailly from Crystal Bridges, with essays by them, Mindy N. Besaw, Sarah N. Chasse, and George H. Schwartz, the book presents a synthesis of scholarship on American painters and pictures that have examined maritime activity and the water. It is illustrated with a heterogeneous and appealing range of works, many of them justly familiar. Bringing so many important paintings into the same room, as it were, was an outstanding achievement of the original exhibition, and the book represents a welcome surrogate for and legacy from that gallery experience.

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As Finamore and Bailly explain in their introduction, their project aimed to expose the many ways “the sea and marine motifs have pervaded American consciousness” (p. 29). Their painting selections and thematic organization

intended to elucidate how divergently American artists have been inspired to capture the beauty, violence, strength, and poetry of the sea relative to national identity. . . . We seek to illuminate the range and continuum of American histories and American artists’ interest in the sea as a subject, a symbol, and an emotional catalyst that can shape and transform identities, attitudes, and cultural values (p. 21).

As a result, in these pages readers find Georgia O’Keeffe engaging with the Atlantic Ocean from a New England shore in *Wave, Night* (1928), Fitz Henry Lane observing nature as the backdrop for American coastal commerce (*Halfway Rock*, 1850s), and Paul Cadmus commenting raucously and suggestively on wartime sailor/civilian encounters in *The Fleet’s In!* (1934). Thomas Hart Benton’s *Up Periscope* (ca. 1944), William Bradford’s *Icebound Ship* (ca. 1880), Theresa Bernstein’s *The Immigrants* (1923), and many other works bring us right into diverse maritime circumstances and ask us to consider the individual experiences, national narratives, and cultural assumptions that American painters have captured, interpreted, and even invented. Sailors, immigrants, stevedores, kidnapped Africans, cowboys, fishwives, Pilgrims, even teenage friends on a beach—these and other people touched and transformed by the water appear across the book’s pages and form the focus for two chapters, “A Motley Crew” and “Portraiture and the Marine.” In the chapter with the teenagers, we stand on the shore—“Beachcombing”—and consider through multiple artists’ perspectives those liminal littoral spaces where boundaries are in “constant flux.” Elsewhere, the authors examine the nature of “Voyages,” some real, some imagined, but all ripe with import and humanity. Maritime places and the meanings we assign to them provide the core of three essays, “The Horizon as a Region of Interest,” “Sea Metaphors and the Great Plains” (those cowboys you no doubt wondered about), and “Just Offshore and In Port.”

This summary might prompt the question, Where are the heroic naval engagements? the ship portraits? the pirates? the clippers and the racing yachts with their billows of white canvas? To be sure, these stock types from the canon of marine art are all present and accounted for. In fact, they are represented by some of the best examples from both museum and private collections, such as *Ship America on the Grand Banks* by Michele Cornè (ca. 1799), *Vigilant in last days Race against Valkyrie* by William Formby Halsall (1893), *Marooned* by Howard Pyle (1909), and *Portrait of Capt. James Josiah* by Charles Willson Peale (1787). Their appearance alongside works by O’Keeffe, Benton, Aaron Douglas, Felrath Himes, Norman Lewis, and others realizes a central goal of Finamore, Bailly, and their team: to define and promote an expansive and inclusive definition of marine painting, one that goes beyond just the tropes visitors might have seen in an old-fashioned American maritime museum of fifty years ago. As the introduction declares, *In American Waters* aims to “look anew at American marine painting,” and to challenge “the assumption that marine painting . . . is limited in focus to visual representations of the sea and ships in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism.” (p. 16) Only by pulling from a broad pool of works have the curator-authors been able to truly “reflect upon the ways Americans have perceived, utilized, and lived with the sea and its impact over time.” (p. 40) The result is a book deserving of being on the shelf of everyone interested in the sea and all it represents.