

## Rivers, Sea and Shore

AN OVERVIEW

FROM THE TINY CARAVELS of Columbus to the giant cruise and container ships of today, America's history has been intimate with the oceans surrounding our continent. As exploration gave way to commerce, commerce to pleasure craft, the complexity of our nation's progress can be figured by the varieties of maritime experience. When settlement followed exploration, rivers became the main avenues of inland commerce, dictating the locations of our major cities. These natural waterways were eventually connected by canals, and were dotted by cargo rafts and sailing ships.

President Thomas Jefferson, whose purchase of the Louisiana Territory was dictated by his desire for control of navigation on the Mississippi, put great faith in intercontinental commerce as a force promoting world peace. But he was still President in 1812 when British depredation of U.S. shipping caused him to declare war on England. This was in effect a second "revolution," fought on the Great Lakes as well as on the Atlantic, and though it was essentially a draw, it did prove that the new American navy was a match for the British fleet. The U.S.S. *Constitution* (see figure 1) played a major role in that conflict, including its famous victory over the British ship, "*Guerrière*." This ship portrait was painted in 1828 by John Blunt to celebrate "Old Ironsides" shortly before it was put out of service. Blunt's retrospective tribute came at a time when American nationalism was on the rise, her security on the seas augmented by rapid expansion westward.

It was a time when American whalers set out from New England ports to bring back oil that lit the world's lamps, and trading schooners sailed around Cape Horn, bound for California long before gold was discovered there. By mid-century, great clipper ships—another American invention—were engaged in the China trade, bringing home the silks and spices that had inspired Columbus' voyage in 1492. His hope of finding a Northwest Passage was shared by Thomas Jefferson, who sponsored the expedition of Lewis and Clark, their return from Oregon in 1806 was closely followed in 1807 by Robert Fulton's successful trial of the "Clermont." Though first operating on the Hudson River, Fulton's invention was intended for use on western waters, and its prototype was soon navigating the Mississippi. Thereafter, riverine transport defined American commerce, steam power opening up the interior continent to trade, a vast improvement over rafts and keel-boats. We associate the westward movement with the prairie "schooner," but it was the paddlewheel steamboat that was the most important means of transportation.



1 U.S.S. Constitution, John S. Blunt, 1828



2 The Bark Columbia (Ships in New York Harbor), Antonio Jacobsen, 1915



3 James A. Stevens, Hudson River Steamboat, James Bard, 1873

During the first half of the nineteenth century factories were powered by water, utilizing the swift rivers of New England. But with the coming of steam power, American mills underwent great change. Freed from the need for rapidly falling water, they spread across the vast continent, sending up towering smokestacks that harmonized with the stacks of riverboats that were likewise servants of commerce. But it was those riverboats, often masterpieces of the woodcarver's craft, which became the aesthetic expression of America's technological accomplishments. Perhaps the greatest writer produced in America during the last half of the nineteenth century was Mark Twain, whose creative career is inseparable from the Mississippi River and the magnificent steamboats that raced along that great stream.

Antonio Jacobsen's *Bark Columbia* (fig. 2) is a late celebration of American merchant sea dominance, which also suggests the challenge to sailing vessels by steam power. Like the *Constitution*, "Columbia" can be seen as a code word for the United States, "the gem of the ocean." It proudly flies the stars and stripes, but notice the puny pilot boat approaching, its steam engine making it independent of wind power, a prophetic token of things to come. Steam is more clearly celebrated in James Bard's portrait of a Hudson riverboat, the *James A. Stevens* (fig. 3), capturing the grace and beauty of a technological triumph of mechanical power over nature's might. But the transcendence of steam on the Mississippi, more than the Hudson a symbol of America's greatness, is shown in Charles McIlhenney's *Steamboat at Night*, a pure example of the technological sublime. The smoke belching from the steamboat's stack parallels the night-time clouds as flaming torches rival the moonlight. Yet in Wheeler's *Great Lakes Marine Disaster* (fig. 4), we see that fire can suddenly turn against man's intentions.

By 1870, at the start of Mark Twain's writing career, the coming of the railroad brought an end to riverine dominance in transportation. But as Twain's account of riverboat piloting suggests, there was an element of sporting competition involved in river commerce, and the famous races between great steamboats were a significant aspect of Mississippi navigation. Where in 1812 it was the victory of the *Constitution* over the *Guerrière* that signaled American emergence as a sea power, in 1851 it was the famous race between the "America" and the entire British yachting fleet that was the significant contest, certifying the emergence of an American elite made possible by commerce. "Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt was the personification of the type: born poor, he rose to fame and fortune by means of steam powered shipping, and shortly after the victory of the *America*, he set out with family and friends on the 2500-ton "North Star," on a steam-powered trip to the cities of the old world. J. P. Morgan was another of the tycoon type, equally comfortable in a top hat or a yachting cap, so that wealth and



4 Great Lakes Marine Disaster, William R. Wheeler, ca. 1860



5 Summer Seas, Anton Otto Fischer, 1945



6 Ponte Alla Grazia, The Arno-Florence, William Merritt Chase, 1909

boating became virtually synonymous. In Anton Fischer's *Summer Seas* (fig. 5) we find an ocean filled not with commercial vessels but racing yachts, marking nearly a century of a wealthy man's sport that began in the wake of the victory of the *America*.

Many American towns that had prospered during the heyday of river and ocean commerce went into decline after the Civil War. This was especially true in New England, as the Great West became the center of manufacturing and transportation, but much as rivers and oceans became associated with sport, so New England became a tourist mecca, attracting wealthy and middle class people seeking relief from urban summer heat. Writers and artists followed, and the seacoast towns that provided harbors for yachts became subjects for art, celebrating a way of life that modern times had bypassed, resulting in an American arcadia. William Merritt Chase, one of the most influential of those American painters, was himself influenced by changing aesthetic directions in Europe, as shown by his *Ponte Alla Grazia* (fig. 6).

In several works in the exhibition we find how once prosperous Connecticut towns, like Mystic (*Mystic River* by G. A. Thompson, fig. 7), Noank, and Old Lyme (*Houses by the Water* by Gregory Smith, fig. 8), no longer busy centers of commerce, were portrayed by American impressionists as peaceful pastoral scenes. Charles Davis's *Looking Seaward* faces inland not seaward, a setting in which the Mystic River, once a busy harbor for a whaling fleet and a shipbuilding center, is obscured by a pastoral prospect of meadows. Likewise, *Gloucester View* by Jon Corbino (fig. 9) fills the scene with what seem to be pleasure craft, not the fishing fleet of a half century earlier.

New England's attractions included ocean vistas as well, for the sea had a transcendental dimension: once a setting for ships, it became a subject in itself, inspiring seascapes depicting translucent waves breaking on lonely shores as tiny triangles of far distant sails accentuated the changed emphasis. This romantic view of the ocean is found in *Reflections in the Surf* by William Trost Richards, who made a virtual profession of waves beating on ocean sands. A close counterpart is found in Alfred T. Bricher's *Narragansett Rock*, in which a single sail gives point to a scene similar to Richards' empty prospect. These paintings provided a vicarious equivalent to what the tourists sought: a tranquil vacancy soothing to the human spirit. Thus Percy Moran in *Children Playing on the Beach* depicts well-dressed children of the 1890s enjoying themselves in a setting in which a lone rowboat suggests a possible commercial presence.

But natural solitude became itself a commercial commodity: a few decades later A. Lassell Ripley painted a *Beach Scene* (fig. 10) that is crowded with bathers (most of whom are well out of the water), as a solitary fishing smack can be seen in the far distance. And Edmund Greacen provides a scene accurate as a graph of the crowds who by the 1920s can afford to spend a day



7 Mystic River, Connecticut, George Albert Thompson, ca. 1920



8 Houses by the Water, Edward Gregory Smith, ca. 1915



9 Gloucester View, Jon Corbino, 1934

*On the Beach.* Gone are the solitary children and the single row-boat. Likewise, the prevailing romantic mood of the late nineteenth century is replaced by a modernist desire to replicate the realities of commercial activity, and by the 1920s artists began to record the technological wonders of river towns, not graceful steamboats but towering architectonic structures, whether factories or bridges.

In such a work as Bruce Mitchell's *The Hudson at Newburgh*, we find the romantic natural element replaced by a realistic depiction of an industrial presence. And we have Reginald Marsh, best known for his satiric depictions of crowded urban vistas, providing a different scene in *Lift Bridge*, comparable to John Stull's *Industrial Port with Ship*, in which the growths of technology overshadow the natural prospect. Stull doesn't even identify the site, nor is Fayerweather Babcock specific in his *Industrial Waterfront* (fig. 11), a scene bustling with activity that leaves the lake itself virtually invisible. It is the towering crane, the grain elevators, and the streamlined locomotive that dominate the composition. In Frederick Butman's *Mount Hood* (fig. 12), painted only seventy years before these industrial meditations, we find the great Columbia River—once thought of by Thomas Jefferson as a possible Passage to India—overshadowed by a sublime aspect of the western scene, but aside from perspective we are viewing a far different world from that of Stull and Babcock.

—JOHN D. SEELYE

ARTHUR J. PHELAN, well known as a collector of paintings depicting life in the American West, has also had a long interest in the complex aspects of our maritime and riverine history. This exhibition, chosen from a wealth of paintings, provides a representative selection of subjects depicting the phases of that history. Since 1992 he has served as an officer or director of an ocean shipping company.

JOHN D. SEELYE, Graduate Research Professor of American Literature at the University of Florida in Gainesville, pioneered studies of Maritime Literature at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. He is well known for his books, *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*, and two works on the river in American literature: *Prophetic Waters: The River in Early American Life and Literature* and *Beautiful Machine: Rivers and the Republican Plan, 1755–1825*. Professor Seelye has received a Guggenheim and two NEH Fellowships for his ongoing work on the river in American culture.



10. Beach Scene, Aiden Lassell Ripley, ca. 1935



11. Industrial Waterfront—Great Lakes, Richard Fayerweather Babcock, ca. 1930



12. Mount Hood, Oregon, from the Columbia River, Frederick A. Butman,

## Artworks in the Exhibition

Richard Fayerweather Babcock  
*Industrial Waterfront—Great Lakes*, ca. 1930  
oil on canvas, 33 × 25 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

James Bard  
*James A. Stevens, Hudson River Steamboat*, 1873  
watercolor and gouache on paper, 19 × 41 inches

Charles Bauerle  
*Ohio River*, ca. 1855  
oil on canvas, 22 × 29 inches

Frank Weston Benson  
*Afternoon Docks*, 1926  
watercolor and gouache on paper, 14 × 20 inches

John S. Blunt  
*U.S.S. Constitution*, 1828  
oil on canvas, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 27 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Alfred Thompson Bricher  
*Narragansett Rock from Narragansett Bay*, 1871  
oil on canvas, 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 16 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Milton Burns  
*Wrecked Ice Yacht*, 1881  
oil on canvas, 11 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Frederick A. Butman  
*Mount Hood, Oregon, from the Columbia River*, 1865  
oil on wood panel, 17 × 21 inches

William Mettrick Chase  
*Ponte Alla Grazia, The Arno—Florence*, 1909  
oil on wood panel, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 9 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Eliot Candee Clark  
*View of Noank Harbor, Connecticut*, 1914  
oil on wood panel, 12 × 16 inches

Walter Clark  
*View of Mystic, Connecticut*, ca. 1895  
oil on canvas, 20 × 24 inches

Jon Corbino  
*Gloucester Views*, 1934  
oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 34 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Charles Harold Davis  
*Looking Seaward (Mystic River, Connecticut)*, ca. 1920  
oil on canvas, 17 × 21 inches

Julius M. Delbos  
*Chappaquiddick Ferry, Martha's Vineyard*, ca. 1935  
watercolor on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 20 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Preston Dickinson  
*Locomotive*, 1922  
watercolor on paper, 8 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 12 inches

Anton Otto Fischer  
*World War II Convoy*, 1944  
oil on canvas, 32 × 26 inches

Anton Otto Fischer  
*Summer Seas*, 1945  
oil on canvas, 26 × 32 inches

Will Howe Foote  
*White's Point from Millstone Point, Connecticut*, ca. 1924  
oil on canvas, 16 × 18 inches

Benjamin Foster  
*A View in the Swamp Land*, ca. 1900  
oil on canvas, 18 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 22 inches

Edmund W. Greacen  
*On the Beach*, 1925  
oil on canvas, 26 × 36 inches

George Harvey  
*Bluffs on the Mississippi near Burlington*, ca. 1860  
oil on artist's board, 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 15 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

Roswell Stone Hill  
*Noank, Connecticut Inlet*, ca. 1900  
oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 20 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Wilson Irvine  
*A Glimpse of the Connecticut*, ca. 1920  
oil on canvas, 25 × 30 inches

Antonio Jacobsen  
*The Bark Columbia (Ships in New York Harbor)*, 1915  
oil and gouache on paper on masonite, 20 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 36 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Julian Joseph  
*Across the Cove—Mystic*, 1925  
oil on artist's board, 14 × 14 inches

Paul Lauritz  
*California Mountains and Lake*, ca. 1920  
oil on canvas, 34 × 40 inches

Elmer Livingston MacRae  
*Mianus River, Cos Cob, Connecticut*, 1908  
oil on canvas, 24 × 32 inches

Reginald Marsh  
*Lift Bridge, Jersey Marshes*, 1936  
watercolor on paper, 20 × 14 inches

Charles M. McIlhenny  
*Steamboat at Night, Mississippi River*, ca. 1885  
oil on canvas, 24 × 20 inches

Arthur Meltzer  
*View of Noank*, 1922  
oil on canvas, 20 × 24 inches

Willard Metcalf  
*Old Lyme Shore, Connecticut*, 1906  
oil on canvas, 14 × 19 inches

Louis Rémy Mignot  
*Sunset*, 1859  
oil on canvas, 13 × 21 inches

Bruce Handside Mitchell  
*The Hudson at Newburgh, New York*, 1943  
watercolor and gouache on paper, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Edward Percy Moran  
*Children Playing on the Beach*, ca. 1890  
oil on canvas, 15 × 22 inches

Oliver Hazard Perry III  
*Stonington, Connecticut*, 1892  
oil on wood panel, 12 × 15 inches

Henry Ward Ranger  
*Noank Harbor*, 1911  
oil on wood panel, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 16 inches

William Trost Richards  
*Reflections in the Surf*, ca. 1895  
oil on artist's board, 8 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 16 inches

Theodore J. Richardson  
*Alaskan Glacier*, ca. 1900  
watercolor on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 25 inches

Aiden Lassell Ripley  
*Beach Scene*, ca. 1935  
oil on artist's board, 12 × 16 inches

Paul Sawyer  
*Serenity at Dusk, Kentucky River*, ca. 1900  
watercolor on paper, 7 × 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

John White Allen Scott  
*Eagle Point on the Mississippi River, Iowa*, 1871  
oil on canvas, 20 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Edward Gregory Smith  
*Houses by the Water*, ca. 1915  
oil on wood panel, 12 × 16 inches

John DeForest Stull  
*Industrial Port with Ship*, ca. 1937  
watercolor on paper, 17 × 23 inches

James Brade Sword  
*Duck Shooting, Chesapeake Bay*, 1883  
oil on canvas, 24 × 36 inches

George Albert Thompson  
*Mystic River, Connecticut*, ca. 1920  
oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

Robert Vonnoh  
*Cattle at the Brook—Early Morn—November*, ca. 1917  
oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 37 inches

Juan Buckingham Wandesforde  
*Lake Tahoe, Tahoe Mountain*, ca. 1870  
oil on canvas, 14 × 24 inches

Henry Warren  
*Ferry from Manchester, Ohio to Temperanceville, Kentucky*, 1853  
oil on canvas, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 15 inches

William R. Wheeler  
*Great Lakes Marine Disaster*, ca. 1860  
oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 47 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Guy Carleton Wiggins  
*The Blue Connecticut*, 1909  
oil on canvas, 25 × 30 inches

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Anton Otto Fischer, 1945

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