

PORTS OF CALL

Harbors, Docks, and Artistic Traditions

Paintings of America's eastern ports, harbors, and coastlines participate in a robust tradition of representing the Atlantic Ocean and its communities. Many of the stylistic and thematic origins of these works emerged in 17th-century Holland. There, artists specialized in both *maritime* painting, which emphasizes the shore and sea as a site for human activity, and *marine* painting (or seascape), which places the coastal environment at center stage. By the late 17th century, this Dutch style, notable for its broad vistas, interest in atmospheric effects, and attention to precise topographic details, was well established in England—and soon came to the American colonies by way of British painters.

Though maritime and marine painting are distinct genres, the boundaries between them were often permeable in 18th- and 19th-century American art. Indeed, many artists sought to document the commercial and social activities of the docks while also creating convincing representations of coastal waters and environmental effects. This combination of marine and maritime approaches reveals the multifaceted ways in which the sea and seafaring enterprises informed early American life.

BATTLESHIPS!

Naval Conflict and Nostalgia

After the Revolutionary War, the newly independent United States established a permanent national navy to protect its coasts and shipping. The naval fleet gained significant recognition during the War of 1812, the so-called Second War of American Independence. Vessels such as the USS *United States* and USS *Constitution* helped ensure the nation's victory, and the ships' commanders became American heroes. Many artists from both sides of the Atlantic were quick to depict these naval scenes, working in a variety of aesthetic styles to render the famous men, ships, and battles. Some artists created precisely detailed pictures designed as visual documents, while others chose more energetic, even Romanticized approaches, intended to stir the viewer's emotions.

In the last decades of the 19th century, a spirit of nostalgia—inspired in part by the centennial celebrations of the nation's birth (1876) and of the commissioning of the USS *Constitution* (1897)—reinvigorated interest in the glories of maritime military history. Vibrant paintings of America's celebrated sea battles reminded audiences of the Navy's role in the struggles to establish and maintain an independent and unified nation. The proliferation and popularity of these works underscore the continuing centrality of the nation's maritime might to its early-20th-century cultural identity.

SEASIDE PLEASURE

Light, Landscape, and Leisure

America's Atlantic coast and inland waterways were central to 19th-century notions of pleasure, both as sites of aesthetic enjoyment and as venues for leisure activity. With the mid-19th-century rise of the Hudson River School of landscape painting, artists and their audiences embraced images of American scenery not only as symbols of the nation's bounty and growth, but also for the visual pleasure they offered. Working in that tradition, many painters treated coastal subjects with a luminous palette and an attention to the fleeting effects of weather and time of day. In these picturesque landscapes, artists often intended to provoke an emotional response, prioritizing Romantic sensibilities about the beauty of nature, the personal experience of viewing, and the pleasure of contemplating the natural environment.

In the 19th century, the coast was also a destination for a different kind of pleasure—that of sightseeing and relaxation. Artists depicted new tourist destinations and sporting activities in works that signaled the prosperity of modern America. Contemporaries believed that this type of seaside leisure was healthy, and that engaging with the natural world was an antidote to the advancing forces of industrial modernity that caused stress, pollution, and other social ills.

ADVENTURE & ENTERPRISE

The Romantic Seascape and the Mariner's Portrait

The prevalent dangers of maritime activities, which pitted humans against the often unpredictable and hostile forces of nature, provided ample inspiration for artists. Devastating shipwrecks and ocean storms offered powerful subjects for Romantic paintings rich in emotion and drama. Images of vessels tossed by angry seas were sublime—at once threatening and thrilling—to 19th-century viewers. These pictures served both as reminders of the potential perils of the sea and as broader allegories of life's trials.

While such powerful seascapes could manifest the danger of the ocean, they also amplify its place as a setting for adventure. Oceans were pathways for exploration and enterprise, and mariners as well as businessmen sought to harness the sea's force in the name of progress, profit, and discovery. Many of these men sat for portraits in which artists signaled their callings as merchants, ship captains, and explorers by including views of their boats and the instruments of their trades.