

# Report on Scholars' Gathering

in Association with the Exhibition

## FITZ HENRY LANE & MARY BLOOD MELLEN *Old Mysteries and New Discoveries*

Funded by the  
Terra Foundation for American Art



### Organizer's Name

Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, Massachusetts

### Project Name

Scholars' Convening, associated with the exhibition *Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries*, organized by the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, Massachusetts, in partnership with Spanierman Gallery, and curated by Professor John Wilmerding.

### Date of Event

November 15, 2007

### Location

Spanierman Gallery, LLC  
45 East 58th Street  
New York, New York

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# Participants

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## Summary of Event

### *Purpose of the Gathering*

In association with the exhibition *Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries*, a group of leading scholars and experts on Lane and Mellen (his student, follower, and sometime collaborator) was convened, including professors, curators, independent scholars, conservators, collectors, and art dealers. The purpose of the gathering was to study the works in the show and consider previously unresolved concerns in the artistic relationship of the two artists, including questions of attribution and collaboration and ultimately opening the door to new inquiries.

### *Overview of the Issues*

In the first part of the event John Wilmerding walked through the exhibition with participants and identified some of the features differentiating the two artists' works (see Notes for Benchmark of the Two Artists' Styles, p. 5). He addressed issues with the group in the following categories:

#### QUESTIONS OF COLLABORATION:

The existence of the small tondo painting signed by both artists (Cape Ann Museum; hereafter CAM) reveals evidence that the two artists collaborated. Some of the questions regarding collaboration include: to what degree did they collaborate?; did she help him with some of his works?; there is no evidence that she created original compositions, but did he add certain details to some of the works she copied from him?; could some of the orders indicated on Lane's drawings by his friend and executor Joseph L. Stevens, Jr have been for paintings that she may have helped him to create?; few paintings by Lane are signed, but does a signature prove that a work is completely by Lane?; were there certain parts of pictures that Lane tended to do and certain parts he let Mellen do? could some paintings be seen to have a little bit of Lane in them, or of Mellen, and how much would effect an attribution or the labeling or identification of the work?; could there have been a business arrangement between Lane and Mellen in which she assisted him in filling orders for certain subjects?

#### QUESTIONS OF ATTRIBUTION:

Some of the attribution questions raised include: could some of the works attributed to Mellen be perhaps just lesser Lanes?; William Gerdtz observed that often when artists duplicate their own works, the quality is reduced in their subsequent versions, and therefore could some of the works deemed Mellens be simply works by Lane in which he was copying his own art?; have condition issues on some works interfered with determinations of attribution, including such problems as changes in pigments over time and over-cleaning?; how can works be attributed when there are unanswered attribution questions?; is there a way to qualify an attribution, perhaps by indicating that another artist may have played a role, and/or how can it be indicated as what that role might be? Clearly the two artists' styles changed over the years—how do these changes effect determinations of attribution? D. Jerome Elwell touched up Lane's *Ten Pound Island at Sunset* (CAM). Could he have worked on other Lanes?; if so, which ones, and how can his contributions be identified? The painting of

Gloucester Outer Harbor by an unidentified artist named F. L. Palmer raises further the question of other collaborators. There are also qualities in some of the works that do not seem readily linkable with the hand of Mellen or Lane. This suggests the existence of other collaborators, or that Lane mentored other artists. There is no documentary evidence that Lane hired other artists or ran any sort of workshop, but can there be a category of attribution called School of Lane or Circle of Lane?

#### QUESTIONS OF PROCESS:

Some of the questions regarding process include: given that there are often several Mellens of a subject, did Mellen copy her own works?; Lane's light was invented, as he worked from his drawings—can differences in the two artists' works be due to her desire simply to study the light in scenes at different moments from Lane?; did Mellen work from Lane's drawings or just from his paintings?; what was her access to his work, especially in the years after he died?; what is suggested by the discovery that Mellen also copied at least one work by Severin Roesen and one by Alfred Thompson Bricher (as noted by Stephanie Buck, a Mellen after Bricher was in a recent auction sale)?; could she have had a business copying works by other artists—if so, there are no records of sales or references to such a business; could she simply have produced copies as a part of her training?; what can we learn by finding and studying examples of Mellen's works other than those after Lane?; can the contrasts in Lane's and Mellen's palettes be due to their use of different pigments (if she was working in his studio, presumably she would have used the same pigments as he did, but if she was working outside his studio, she might have used a different palette)?

#### NOTES FOR BENCHMARK OF THE TWO ARTISTS' STYLES:

##### *Vessels*

Lane's attention to the volumes and massing of boats and hulls, his adept foreshortening of vessels, and the way his boats seem to sit in the water can be noted. By contrast, Mellen's boats seem to sit on the water. She often lacks an ability at foreshortening in her vessels, as noted in the broken hull in her Dollivers's Neck painting (Cat. 13), which has a kind of warping not present in Lane's version. Her vessels are curved, but lack the perspective of Lane's. Lane has a clear understanding of nautical rigging. By contrast, Mellen's rigging does not have the tensile strength or sense of clarity that his does. Her sails tend to look flat by contrast with the movement in his.

##### *Rocks*

Lane's rocks have structural solidity, and his landscape has legibility and variety. By contrast, Mellen's rocks look softer and more doughy.

##### *Foliage*

His foliage is crisp and fully legible, whereas hers tends to have a painterly, less sharp quality.

##### *Water*

Lane's water has more variety than Mellen's; her reflections in ripples are not as subtle or nuanced as his. Her waves usually have a mechanical and repetitive quality. Her waves have a kind of repeated rhythm with curving edges that all look the same. She can't quite make the water seem to break over the rocks.

##### *Buildings*

Lane's buildings have a cubic box quality and a clear articulation of architectural features. Lane's painting of windows is in the volume of the cubic block, for example, in his version of the Blood Family homestead (Cat. 19). In her painting, the door seems perfunctory (Cat. 20).

### *Skies and atmosphere*

Mellen preferred a greater use of yellows and pinks in her sunsets than did Lane.

Empty space for Mellen looks empty, whereas Lane could make it look poetic and suggestive. For him light was not just an optical detail but an emotionally charged expressive element.

### *Palette*

Lane's color is more restrained and subtle; Mellen preferred a greater use of pinks and yellows in pale tones in her sunsets than did Lane; Lane used softer blues with subtler gradations.

## ***Updates on Conservation Studies***

Both of the reports are from projects that are in-progress, from which further findings will emerge in years to come.

KAREN QUINN, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, reported that scientific studies of Mellen's works are in the very basic stages at the museum. Work on the Lane paintings in the museum's collection was begun with the aid of a Kress grant, received in 2000. Members of the conservation and curatorial departments examined the twelve Lanes in the museum's collection with an infrared camera, studying under-drawing. They honed in on one painting in the collection. They discovered that this work, then entitled *Ipswich Bay*, was inscribed on the back "*View of Coffin's Beach.*" They set out to verify the location, which concurred with the inscription as they determined in the course of their research. They were struck by the quality of the line in the under-drawing, and after discussing the possibility that Lane may have done some work freehand and some mechanically, they focused on a camera lucida as the most likely device that Lane could have used. Borrowing a nineteenth-century camera lucida of the sort that would have been available to Lane, they traveled to Coffin's Beach in Gloucester, where they used the camera lucida to draw the scene. The result was remarkably close to the under-drawing in Lane's painting, suggesting strongly that Lane made use of this device for this painting and probably for others as well.

They further determined that Lane may have used the camera lucida to move from his drawings to his paintings. Such a supposition is relevant to a consideration of the artistic relationship of Lane and Mellen, as it may be possible that Mellen used a camera lucida in the transferring of Lane's imagery to her canvases. While the museum's team was able to photograph many of the works in the Lane-Mellen exhibition while it was on view in Gloucester, such a possibility will need much further study before any conclusions can be drawn. For example, it is not yet clear how the under-drawing found in works such as Mellen's *Owl's Head* relates to Lane's *Owl's Head*. Several questions ensued regarding the usage of the camera lucida in the adjusting of scale motifs in works and how the evidence of camera lucida use suggests that Lane may have had a workshop aspect to his studio.

MARCIA STEELE, Cleveland Museum of Art, conservator, reported next. She has been working with fellow conservator H. Travers Newton, and others at the museum, examining Lane's paintings of Boston Harbor with an infrared camera to consider the relationship between his drawings, under-drawings, and paintings. The conservation team determined that, while in some cases, such as the painting in the White House, the under-drawing and the work match, in others Lane eliminated motifs in his under-drawings, including figures and boats, for his final works, presumably so as to eliminate clutter. The group has observed that Lane laid in the sky with long strokes, and blended colors together so that there is no transition, with darker under-layers giving luminosity to brighter, more sunlit areas. They

studied the exactness of Lane's rigging, noting that he followed lightly incised lines, as pin pricks can be seen, for example, in looking, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, painting of the harbor. They suggest that he drew freehand, rather than using a ruler or other drawing instrument. They note that there are no known intricate drawings by Lane of ships, and they guess that he may have worked from models or drawings that have been lost, or simply from studying the ships themselves. They have considered that in some works Lane enlarged elements from his drawings in transferring them to his paintings. They note that few of Lane's drawings reveal an indication of his use of perspective. Only one small painting of Boston wharf on panel has a vanishing point and perspective indicated in its under-drawing. They have studied the way in which Lane at times combined various drawings of a scene, attaching them horizontally to complete a view of a site.

## Conclusion

### *Recommendations*

The participants recognized that much work on Lane and Mellen is yet to be done, but that the gathering was a good start toward a more complete examination process.

Karen Quinn has noted in a follow up to the meeting: "As far as the next steps in the Lane/Mellen research are concerned, we have a fantastic opportunity to capitalize on the momentum generated by the Scholar's Gathering and the exhibition. If everyone agreed, it would be useful if we could keep each other updated on the various on-going research projects. Perhaps we need someone who could take on the role of coordinator. In several conversations during the scholar's day, the subject of a catalogue raisonné that also addressed the Lane/Mellen issues came up. If this is feasible, it could serve as an umbrella for all of the work underway, plus additional research, and we could apply for funding to keep the work on track."

No definite re-attributions were made as a result of the gathering. However, the result of the discussion and study of the works was that there are several paintings in the exhibition that need further study, from stylistic and scientific perspectives.

These include:

Lane, *Salt Island*, CAM (Cat. 14)

Lane, *Ten Pound Island at Sunset*, CAM (Cat. 21)

Mellen, *Ship in Calm Sea*, private collection (Cat. 30)

Mellen, *Two Master at Sea*, private collection (Cat. 31)

Mellen, *Two Ships in Rough Water*, CAM (Cat. 32)

Lane, *Island with Beacon*, CAM (Cat. 33)

Mellen, *Moonlight, Gloucester Harbor*, Shelburne Museum, Vermont (Cat. 34)

Mellen, *Entrance of Somes Sound from Southwest Harbor*, Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine (Cat. 44)

Lane, *Coming Ashore near Brace's Rock, Gloucester, Massachusetts*, Burrichter-Kierlin Collection (Cat. 46)

Lane, *Brace's Rock, Brace's Cove*, Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago (Cat. 50)

## *Attribution Categories*

From the discussions, it was felt that some new categories could be established for further attribution studies.

1. Works that can be attributed fully to Lane.
2. Mellen copies after Lane (the Lane sources for some Mellens are unknown leaving the possibility that she may have created some largely original compositions). Within Mellen's work, it may be possible (based on scientific studies) to determine whether she copied an image directly, used a Lane drawing as the basis for a painting, used a camera lucida in the transference of Lane's image to her canvas, or copied one of her own compositions after Lane.
3. Lane-Mellen collaborations (some of these may be mostly by Lane, with Mellen contributions; others may be mostly by Mellen, with some Lane help; some may be more fully jointly rendered works). The ways in which these works can be attributed and identified is unclear at this time.
4. Works in which a third hand is present. These may include Lanes that were worked on by other artists (collaborations) or copies fully in another hand. These works will probably remain in limbo until further information becomes available.
5. Original works in the manner of Lane by a third hand.
6. Works that may be a result of the context of a workshop or studio under the direction of Lane (although this possibility is not supported by any evidence in contemporary materials on Lane).

## *Overall Summation*

The event was an extraordinary opportunity for experts from many aspects of the field to have an open and thoughtful discussion. The gathering raised questions not only with regard to the attribution of certain of Lane's paintings, but also about the process through which such attributions, or changes in attributions, are made. Another result of the gathering was renewed attention to Mary Mellen, including consideration of works she may have created after other artists. Those who attended were especially interested in seeing the results of further systematic conservation and scientific studies of the artist's processes and works and feel that such examination can play an essential role in untangling some of the issues of attribution and the possible role of mechanical devices, such as the camera lucida. Nancy Mowll Mathews, president of the Catalogue Raisonné Society, also suggests that the review of questionable works should involve a panel of experts, working according to standard practices as is done in the compilation of catalogues raisonné.