

CAPE ANN Museum

Library & Archives

1+ 978-283-0455 x19

library@capeannmuseum.org

FITZ HENRY LANE AND MARY BLOOD MELLEN: OLD MYSTERIES AND NEW DISCOVERIES LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

- Speaker:** John Wilmerding
- Date:** 7/6/2007
- Runtime:** 33:22
- Camera Operator:** Chris Williams
- Identification:** VL04; Video Lecture #04
- Citation:** Wilmerding, John. "Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries." CAM Video Lecture Series, 7/6/2007. VL04, Cape Ann Museum Library & Archives, Gloucester, MA.
- Copyright:** Requests for permission to publish material from this collection should be addressed to the Librarian/Archivist.
- Language:** English
- Finding Aid:** Description: Karla Kaneb, 4/14/2020.
Transcript: Trudi Olivetti, 4/30/2020.

Video Description

This lecture by American Art historian and collector John Wilmerding explores the stylistic differences between Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen as highlighted by the exhibit of the same name, which was featured at the Cape Ann Museum from July 7, 2007, until September 16, 2007. Mary Blood Mellen was a

27 Pleasant Street, Gloucester, Massachusetts 01930 USA

+1 978-283-0455

capeannmuseum.org

close friend and student of Lane's, but as is often the case within an artist's studio, the role she may have had in completing some of his works and creating her own is not always clear. This exhibition, which was curated by Wilmerding, displays paintings by Lane and Mellen side by side, many for the first time. While pointing out works that lack concrete documentation upon which to rely, Wilmerding's lecture focuses on the characteristics and capabilities of each artist so that viewers can draw their own conclusions about the nature of their collaboration.

Subject list

Fitz Henry Lane	John Wilmerding
Mary Blood Mellen	<i>Lane Lecture Series</i>
D. Jerome Elwell	

Transcript

John Cunningham 0:11

I'd like to welcome all of you to what promises to be a very special evening, celebrating the opening of the show that explores "Old Mysteries and New Discoveries." Good title. In the works of Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen. We're very pleased that so many Fitz Henry Lane Society members could be here this evening. We're very appreciative of your support for the museum and for this exhibition, and very grateful for all that you've done to keep this museum going.

John Cunningham 0:48

We're also very indebted to those who have lent their paintings to this show. And to the those who have provided very generous financial support to make it possible. Very grateful to the Spanierman gallery, Iris Spanierman, Lisa Peters, Ralph Sessions and all of the staff who have produced an exquisite catalog and also for agreeing to host this show at the Spanierman Gallery this fall in New York City. We also owe very special thanks to Judith McCulloch, who was worked with John from the very beginning to make this show a reality, as well as our present director Ronda Faloon, and our curator Martha Oaks and all the staff at the museum. John Wilmerding has a long association with Fitz Henry Lane's work and this museum. The Lane collection here, the largest in the nation, was the starting point for John's work on this artist when he was an undergraduate at Harvard. And now some 40 years later, this distinguished scholar, curator, collector and teacher is still asking questions about Lane and provoking thought. We thank him very much for inspiring this show, for being its curator, for the essay in

Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellon: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries – VL04 – page 3
the catalog, and especially for being here tonight to share his insights on the paintings, which we will soon see. John is going to talk for approximately a half an hour. And then we should all plan to go upstairs to the gallery to see the paintings themselves. And John will be there and willing to answer questions and discuss what we see. It's really a pleasure, John, to have you here tonight. Thank you very much.

John Wilmerding 3:07

Thank you all. It's, of course, a great pleasure for me to be back here once again. Some of you I think were here three years ago, was it three years ago?

Wilmerding 3:21

The two hundredth anniversary of Lane's birth when the ideas of this present exhibition, sort of were first proposed, and I won't try and repeat that material, because I've tried to summarize it and develop it in the exhibition catalog. But what I do want to go over as fast as possible, because it would be fun to get up before the large group comes in at seven, for you to have a chance to look at the exhibition, and what I consider, in a sense, the problem pictures in this fascinating relation between Mary Mellen and Fitz Henry Lane. And what I want do this evening is rather hope not repeat myself as much, but in a sense use this just to point out the pictures to look at and the issues involved. Because even now that the catalog is going to press, just taking a quick walk through this afternoon, I've begun to change my mind again on a couple of things.

Wilmerding 4:25

There may be litigation for dealers and collectors.

I start with this pairing, which isn't really relevant to Mary Mellen, per se, but this is the clipper *Sweepstakes* on the right hand side, hangs in the large ante room into the exhibition. And it is the only picture that survives today that we know with the full Fitz Henry Lane signature on it in the lower, the lower foreground, which is right about here; you can see it by yourself. It says Fitz Henry Lane, Gloucester, Mass. Lane didn't do that very often. I'd say, Fitz Henry Lane did rarely. There's one other case - the picture in the Met, which for conservation reasons, has been relined - it's signed on the back so you can't see it today. So this is it, as far as we know, till further others turn up. So have a good look at it. It, I think, was painted before Mellen came to Gloucester - we now believe in 1855 - it was clearly a commissioned portrait, a ship portrait. The Met picture is also a New York Harbor. It also was certainly a commissioned painting; that probably would have been the reason for the full signature and indicating Gloucester, Mass. This was an out of town artist, not well known in New York, certainly not as well-known or competitive with Church and Heade and Gifford and the other New York painters. So he identifies himself as part of the signature as the place he comes from. It's a very handsome ship portrait, as I say, just for that reason. Now in passing, I've also just comparing briefly

Wilmerding 6:18

with not the Karolik picture, but a version belonging to the Ganz's: Boston Harbor painted by Lane at about the same time, simply to make the interesting, to me, comparison at least of

Lane working in Boston and in New York. I don't want to over - in the sense- categorize, but it is interesting, of the some half dozen ship portrait and harbor paintings that Lane did in New York, they all are what I would call rough or turbulent seas. They have something to do with a sense, with the business-like enterprise of New York Harbor, whereas, seems to me, appropriate and significant, that working in Boston, working on the North Shore, we have a classic luminous composition. In a sense, Lane, the Boston painter is Lane the transcendentalist, is Lane in the world of Emerson and Thoreau. That's another whole avenue to explore, but it's a way of putting in context the different business enterprise of Lane going to New York City. Now, to begin, this little picture on the right is in the Cape Ann collection; we moved it up to the exhibition proper. The one in the National Gallery is a larger picture. We have, in a sense, the first challenge, and that is that Lane himself painted several, often several versions, in some instances, only two versions of the same subject. So the issue of the second version, which, in the case of Mellen, becomes, as it were, a copy or a work by a different hand, is a different problem than, say, the quality or the reasons for a second version by Lane himself. But both of these unmistakable Lane's hand and the draftsmanship of the rigging, the handling of the rocks and so forth on the slides are deceptive, of course, because the image on the right is a relatively small picture, approximately 20 inches wide, while the one on the left is a much larger painting, presumably it followed, and there's a drawing for both of them. The larger connections - obviously different time of day, and what we have here is Lane, not only reworking an image on a different scale, the one on the right is about 36 inches wide, has a very different commanding presence. And obviously he is much more interested in that kind of midday late afternoon light and the water is still. The one here on the right is a different kind of lighting. And, like Monet, he is simply exploring two different lighting conditions, two different scales. So those are not problems but, as I say, it's something to keep in the back of your mind. For example, hanging in the exhibition on the left there's the beautiful Norman's Woe,

Wilmerding 9:23

a picture of about I think 25 inches wide. I'm not showing you its companion, which is hanging on the second floor in the permanent collection, a much probably a later picture with a very intense cadmium red sunset. There again, I think, I'm saying, I think both of them are Lane - this one unquestionably, the later one may in fact, this is what I mean, you've got to go look with me now, you've got to go look ever more closely. The later one has some weak spots, and whether that's from conservation, or whether in fact Mellen had a hand in it, is still in my mind an open question. Likewise, we now know there are a number of Camden Hills pictures - we have one of the show - here is another one. The interesting thing is that in the year that Mellen came up to Gloucester, we now believe 1855, many of Lane's drawings from the later 50s not the early 50s, but the later 50s, 1855-1860, are the ones that Joseph Stevens has [marked?], well say, several paintings of the enlisting owners were made from this drawing. The problem is he has written those subscriptions in the past tense. He says paintings were made. He doesn't indicate whether Lane made them or Mary Mellen made them. And so this now with the collaboration that clearly was going on, the copying that was going on, and Mellen at her very best, I think now forces us to go back and look at the second and third and fourth versions of a subject made from the late 50s drawing and have to ask ourselves, could Mellen have done one

Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellon: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries – VL04 – page 5
or more of those? Or could they have in fact been a joint production - that is the issue with these pictures.

We do have in the show both of these paintings. The one on the right is included because it was the painting by tradition and all documentation was on Lane's easel in the stone house on his death. But in fact, it is signed by Mary Mellen, after Fitz Henry Lane. And the Lane that she was working from has disappeared, it's unlocated. It's a very fine painting, and it's worth looking at just to digest and [grant us?] the quality of her draftsmanship, her handling of waves and so forth. On the left is subject that he and she, and you'll see that there are half a dozen upstairs, did throughout the 1850s.

Wilmerding 12:15

There is, of course, Smart Blow or Ships in Rough Seas and so forth. We have side-by-side, upstairs, Lane's version and Mary Mellen's version. So one begins to see how she immersed herself under his tutelage. And the question, of course, is, until further documentation arises, we don't know exactly what was going on in that studio. Did he block out a picture, for example, and said, you work on it and then come back and touch it up? Or does she simply, under supervision, start out? So there are these various issues of the exact stylistic relationship.

Wilmerding 13:00

The great Norman's Woe, there on the left, Lane in the permanent collection here, and then you will see on the facing wall, I think two, if not three, versions by Mary Mellen. On the right hand side -

Wilmerding 13:18

this is embarrassing, for a Lane scholar, is this Norman's Woe or Salt Island – the one you're looking at. ...another Norman's Woe

This is by Mellen the right hand screen. Now, for all of the quality of her work, you begin to get some sense of the differences. Her rocks tend to be softer, more porous, more cognate. It's interesting that the black rocks in the foreground are really silhouettes, whereas Lane develops them in a three dimensional sense. They both have the formulas, as you can see, of the breaking waves across the foreground. But Mellen's waves tend to be a little bit more mechanical than Lane's; he varies them, he has a sense of three dimensionality.

Again, slides only drive us to looking at the original. And that, to me is the excitement of the great pleasure of this exhibition, because we can go on arguing for a long time. But in a sense, what's so, to me, exciting and different about this exhibition is, in a sense, it's not meant to be a scholar's exhibition. It's a classic connoisseur exhibition. It's a question of style and eye, and we don't have a lot of documentation. And aside from the fact, on another level, this is the first time, this is really a great monographic exhibition of Mary Mellen herself, for some kind of critical mass of her work. So, you can make these comparisons yourselves, upstairs.

Mary Mellen painted, just after his death, on the right hand screen, signed by her on the back, painted after Lane. We don't have the exact Lane. Although she has clearly been looking at the Western Shore, of various Western Shore pictures, by Lane, and then added her own beach

Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellon: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries – VL04 – page 6

again, that kind of almost mechanical, repetitive – the volumes of her boats, here a rowboat, are not quite the same as Lane. We have, this is Lane, and we have the Mellen copy upstairs. Here's one of the great problems. Unfortunately, one of the few loans we were denied, the great masterpiece in the Johnson collection of Lane's Entrance of Somes Sound, one of the first, was the second trip to Maine in 1855, there on the left hand screen. We've known it for years. Pierpont Johnson [and descendants?] was on the cover of my first major Lane book, one of the real early luminous classics. Now this is a problem picture on the right and it is in the exhibition - we've reproduced the one on the left. Sorry you can't look at them side by side, but there are enough Lanes and Mellens obviously upstairs, that I think we can deal with it. When I say it's a problem, it's a smaller picture. It matches closer to a drawing Lane did when he returned to Mount Desert in 1855, rather than 1851, so it could be Lane. This is one where I fully admit I've gone back and forth. When I first saw it, I thought it looks like a copy of the of the painting on the left,

Wilmerding 16:46

a copy by whom, Lane himself or Mary Mellen.

The problem is that here's a case where conservation, in this case, rather bad restoration, in probably the 30s or the 40s over-scrubbed the picture. And there are some details that are really very weak. For example, these little sailboats in the background, you know, don't look like Lane. And the brown mountains here, they're just not that brown. But that could be explained by poor conservation over time. This has had a rough life. It's been over cleaned, it's been stored and so forth. And so we downgraded it to Mary Mellen because, of course, the comparison in a sense, makes it look so clunky, almost primitive. On the other hand -- so in the catalog, in the exhibition, it says Mary Mellen. I'm now inclined, and, as I said, go look at it for yourselves. I mean, it's a much stronger little picture that I initially thought - the draftsmanship of the rigging, which is quintessentially Lane, is quite good. This kind of foreshortened perspective of the little cat boat here in the foreground. And then particularly, if you look at the background of Mellen's Owl's Head pictures [aware?], she does have houses in the background, rather flat, rather primitive. These have volume, they're very much like, like Lane. So I'd be, as I say, inclined now, to argue that this probably really is a Lane picture. It may have had some touching up or parts re-worked by Mellen or Mellen worked on some details. But this is what I mean - until we've had a chance, related study, study the works in this exhibition firsthand, here and in New York, we'll not know for sure.

Wilmerding 18:47

But do look. As I say, I'm inclined to think that it's got something of the strength of Lane's hand. Sorry about the slide on the right; this has, since, been cleaned. The classic Karolik picture of Owl's Head there on the left, which we have in the exhibition here. Alas it won't travel to New York. But side-by-side, I think there are two, if not three, versions by Mellen, one example here on the right. And these, I think, are fairly straightforward comparisons. Mellen is pretty good at copying Lane. In her version itself, the sky is cleaned up, the water itself. But nonetheless, this is not quite Lane. She's really in a copying mode. The handling of the water is a little bit more mechanical. The figure, for example, doesn't stand out with the clarity, the sense of space

behind the figure. The clouds are a little bit more obvious than the incredible [subtlety?] and the glazes that Lane used in his late work. You'll see upstairs. This is a very obvious comparison, so that isn't so much a problem, it helps, in a sense, us try in a way, get our hands, our eyes around what distinguishes the two, the two artists.

We don't have this pairing, but I just show it to you, another version of Owl's Head from the other side by Lane on the left in the Cape Ann collection, and the version that came to my attention, as I say, in its bad state here on the right. Just again, to show you Lane and Mellen side by side. Sorry about the vertical here. We don't have in the exhibition, but one of these twilight pictures believed to be there, on the left, at Yale, Camden, the Camden lighthouse, a classic Lane moonlight. These are fairly rare pictures in both their work, but I compare it with two versions which are in the show, so don't worry about the slide, but just to give you a hand here, I think I showed this three years ago. But in fact, the smaller version of Ten Pound Island is by Lane up here, a slightly larger version, and you can get a hint of it, by Mary Mellen here. Now in the slides, they're virtually indistinguishable. In the exhibition, I think we have three or four that you can compare. And, as I say, the telltale differences - Mellen tends to go towards the higher pinks, the yellows, the draftsmanship of the vessel, the solidity of the rocks, is a real telltale. And then there was the further complication, which we did[n't?] want to explore in the show, the further complication that in this version of Ten Pound Island in the exhibition, by Lane, was reworked in the 1870s. And here is the inscription on the panel from the back: "F.H. Lane to Joseph L. Stevens 1851, [and then] touched upon by D. Jerome Elwell, March [I think] 1873." [That?] D. Jerome Elwell was clearly a follower or some kind of student of Lane, in his lifetime. After his death, as taste changed, in a way, became more and more Victorian, looking for denser, richer, more exaggerated colors as opposed to the restraint of the luminous period, felt that Lane was too out of date and needed a heightening. And I remember that picture when I first saw it with Alfred Mansfield Brooks. I did. It was a lot redder, it was a lot overwrought. And when we turn it around, we both agreed that it needed to be cleaned and returned, as it were, to Lane. But I just mention that as part of this trio, to indicate the problem of Lane, Mellen and Jerome Elwell, in fact. The moonlight group, another group [...?] side by side.

Wilmerding 23:09

The classic painting in the Boston Museum, on the left there [Indian Bar?] Cove, near Castine is one of the rare, authentic, fully signed, Lane moonlight pictures. And one of the sort of characteristics, one of the formulas that Lane, of course, used, is the configuration of clouds surrounding and intersecting the moon, a tour de force of Lane, in the moonlight on the water, the ripples here of the three dimensional volume and rigging. All this is quintessentially Lane in moonlight. Here we have, on the right, one of, I think, three versions by Mary Mellen, and right away I think you could see the softer puffier, more cotton-like clouds. Her rocks imitate Lane, but again, you know, look like glazed donuts. The water surface is not bad, but compared to Lane isn't the same hand, and there's no mistaking. So then, as we start looking at other versions, and here's one that are not in the show, but one of the many I've seen over the years. This is one on the right, again, with that kind of awkward foreshortening of the beach, that schooner in the foreground. This almost certainly is a Mellen. On the other hand, the painting

that's come from the Shelburne Museum, originally a Karolik picture sold to Electra Webb for Shelburne, was sold to her as a Lane, and over the years, I thought it was, looking at that picture many times in a kind of isolation, I thought, you know, it's too hard, it's too exaggerated. There's something artificial about it. And so all these years, it's been downgraded to a Mary Mellen. Here again is a case where I think I'm now prepared to argue that in fact this needs to go back to Lane,

Wilmerding 25:13

that the quality of craftsmanship and, as I say, look at it and see - the telltale clouds and moon, the beautiful precision. The water has a subtlety, the draftsmanship of this, versus this, for example, [...?] an unfair comparison, but they, for example, the touch of light on the horizon. Those are those subtle details that I think is Lane's hand.

Wilmerding 25:45

And just to go back, with that picture in mind, couldn't be painted by the same hand as this. This is Mellen, then that is not Mellen. So we have to either argue that it is upgraded to Lane or a different hand altogether.

Here are two pictures in the show worth looking at. The one on the right is the only painting that, in fact, is jointly signed on the reverse, painted by F.H. Lane and Mary B. Mellen, in their respective signatures. So the challenge here, as I say to my students is who did what, you know, there's no diagram, there's no drawing indicating which part each painted. But this is what's the can of worms that was opened, because this is a collaboration, then it's possible, of course, to understand that a lot of the later pictures have both their hands in them. My guess is, for purposes of argument, that the central section, the thinness, the softness, the rather heightened yellow, is Mellen; that she wouldn't have tackled the rocks; his love of flowers, which often occur in the foreground. So I think he blocked out the outer edges. She did the intersection. That is pure speculation, but I'm trying to make a case here. How do we sort this out? This was a picture of Dana Beach that we had in my first Lane exhibition [recorded?] in 1965. And the minute we got it up in the show, we realized right away that it wasn't Lane. It's too pale, too yellow, that the mechanical

Wilmerding 27:34

waves on the shore, there, the draftsmanship of the rigging, the little stick figures. But all these years later, now that I'm aware of these joint works, I would argue to you that this foreground, including [...?] heads, this foreground is by Lane, the quality of the reeds, the rocks, the love of flowers – it's typical of the foreground of Brace's Rock – that's worth looking at. And I'd be prepared to argue attribution there, Mary Mellen with F.H. Lane. So you begin to see the problem.

And I'll end with this group, the famous Brace's Rock group. Lane's drawing and an inscription by Stephens. In the foreground, it says paintings were made for the following. And I think he lists either four or five names. The view that he looked at is the common one here, looking out to the open ocean, and he's captured and fairly topographically. The paintings that follow, this

Harold Bell's on the right, the Karolik picture now in Washington on the left. And I apologize for the slide on the right, it's not quite as crystalline, but you see them side-by-side. But my worry of course is that we have, I think we now have four or five Braces Rock pictures, you have to ask yourself, somewhere along the line, did Mellen have a hand or outright paint one of them. I'm now convinced that both of these, as you'll see side by side, are quintessential crystalline beautiful Lanes, and when I say that, the foreground of that earlier picture, see how close it is to the handling here of unmistakable Lane-like detail.

There is a third version not in the show, and I'm beginning to wonder whether that version isn't possibly more Mellen than Lane, but we again are no [secrets for?] to tell. We do have this one on the right in the exhibition, clearly Brace's Rock area and related Brace's Rock vocabulary sort of reworked. Here's a case where I would argue on stylistic grounds, that this is probably a collaboration. That is to say, these sort of simplified silhouette black rocks look like Mellen - the softness here of the Braces Rock clump, as opposed to that. This looks like Mellen, possibly this foreground. Whereas I would argue this, the rigging, of foreshortening, this figure, is quintessentially Lane. So there's a case, again, where I think we could at least make a stylistic argument of a collaborative hand.

And then finally, the Terra Museum picture which will be in New York, it's not here, alas, is the real problem, because this picture is, in fact, solid F.H. Lane, and I've no doubt that a good bit of it is Lane.

Wilmerding 30:48

But unlike Lane's other works, including the Brace's Rock scene from the standard side, Lane is so topographically accurate from his drawings with the finished picture. And it's my belief, particularly given his lameness, but he never was able to walk to this side of Brace's Rock; it's very rugged out there on the rocks on this

Wilmerding 31:09

on this side. Moreover, the configuration of Brace's Rock doesn't look the way it does seen from that side. So my feeling is that this is an imaginative re-doing from the drawing he made from the other side; it's as if he just flipped that drawing over and used it to block this out. Moreover, as you can see, there's nowhere in the foreground on this side of Brace's Rock where there's a little beach that you could bring in any vessel in any kind of calm water, ashore. This is totally imaginary. I find that very unlikely [*audio breaks up*], and moreover, I would be prepared to argue, again, that

Wilmerding 31:54

probably the background parts of this are Mary Mellen. I think the sky could well be Lane. I think possibly the water here. There is something a little bit awkward about the perspective of this boat; that could be her hand; I think that is his. The ultimate in the problem of the problem pictures.

So those are the issues, as I say, this is the first time, at least I've ever worked on an exhibition and said, in a sense, where you present your conclusions, that it just opens up a wonderful set

Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellon: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries – VL04 – page 10
of exciting challenges of two extremely interesting artists. And so who, who would have
thought, least of all myself, starting out 40 years ago,

Wilmerding 32:39

that I would continue to work on Lane, continue to find new things. Your archivist, Stephanie
Buck, and others, turned up all the information about his name; we still don't know why the
name and why that [moment?]. So the glorious thing is that there's still a lot to be discovered.
But let's go up and have a look for ourselves. Thanks very much.