



Marcia Steele, Senior Conservator, and Joan Neubecker, Conservation Photographer, both of the Cleveland Museum of Arts, use an infrared camera to find out more about the work of Fitz Henry Lane.

Beneath the Surface

By Melissa Geisler Trafton

After several years of work, the first stage of the *Fitz Henry Lane Online* website will be released to the public this fall. The project is unprecedented among museums for the way that it will provide not only information on Lane's paintings, including conservation images, but also a wealth of related historic material. Collaborative relationships with the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and other institutions continue to be important to the success of the broad scope of the project.

In mid-April Senior Conservator, Marcia Steele, and Conservation Photographer, Joan Neubecker from the Cleveland Museum of Art spent a week in Gloucester conducting infrared analysis on the underdrawing in twenty of the Cape Ann Museum's Lane paintings. The two drove from Cleveland with their specialized equipment and recreated a photography studio in the Museum's darkened auditorium. Each of the twenty CAM paintings were removed from the gallery wall, brought to the auditorium and

unframed, then meticulously set up on an easel at a carefully-calculated distance from the camera.

Infrared reflectography operates by illuminating a painting with light that contains some infrared radiation. A camera that is sensitive to that radiation detects the underdrawings and compositional changes below the paint's surface. Black drawing material, such as that used by Lane, shows up particularly well using this technology.

It was an exciting process to witness, to stand in the darkened auditorium and see Lane's pencil marks and underpainting revealed for the first time beneath the paint. Discoveries included changes among the figures in the foreground of *On the Wharves* and the appearance of a lighthouse in *Somes Sound* that Lane drew and then omitted in the final painting. One of the most dramatic findings was the revelation that underneath the painting of the clipper ship *National Eagle* is a drawing of a bark (with unusual double topmast studding sails). Possibly Lane changed his mind, or perhaps he had already started the canvas when he received a commission for the *National Eagle*

and decided to paint over the ship already on the canvas.

Another interesting discovery can be seen in the infrared image of *Gloucester Harbor* (1852) (facing page, top). In Lane's original composition, a topsail schooner is placed prominently in the middle of the harbor, between the Pavilion Hotel and the Fort. In the final painting this vessel was not included—and a small yawl boat has been painted over it (as can be seen in the detail of the final painting, bottom image facing page). The openness of the center of the composition which resulted from this change allows the viewer's eye to scan the Gloucester cityscape, which Lane depicted in minute detail. Lane appears to have changed the vessels for compositional reasons, since even on the much smaller yawl boat, the sail is dropped so that it does not obscure the view of the town.

The conservation study also revealed much about Lane's working technique. One of the patterns that emerged from the study was the way in which Lane very carefully used a dark drawing material (such as pencil or black chalk) to plan buildings, figures, topography, foliage and rocks in great detail. He also used

underdrawing to plan the large vessels in a composition; in ship portraits the details of the ships, including rigging, are meticulously drawn in pencil. However, in compositions containing multiple vessels, he often painted in some of the minor vessels over the background as final additions to the painting. Those ships, for which Lane is so well-known, were often the product of a free hand—a final compositional or stylistic decision, which he executed without preliminary sketching.

Marcia Steele is an internationally respected paintings conservator who has had long experience working with Lane's paintings. Several years ago she published a study of his Boston Harbor pictures and presented her findings at a symposium on the work of Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen. We are incredibly grateful for her time and expertise, and the willingness of the Cleveland Museum to allow its staff to work with us on this project. The infrared images, along with an explanatory essay, will be available on *Fitz Henry Lane Online*.

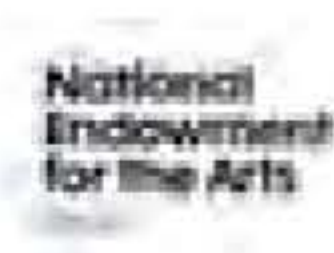
Summer visitors to the Museum have had the opportunity to explore the website using iPads in the Lane Gallery. Getting and implementing feedback from users is an important part of the process at this stage; if you are interested in helping to test the site before it is launched more widely later this fall, please email us at info@capeannmuseum.org or call (978) 283-0455 during regular business hours.

In addition to generous funding from the Danversbank Charitable Foundation, John H. and H. Naomi Tomfohrde Foundation, Wyeth Foundation for American Art and National Endowment for the Arts, the *Fitz Henry Lane Online* project was recently awarded \$46,680 from the highly-competitive Museums for America division of the Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS). Details on this award can be found on page 13.

Melissa Geisler Trafton is Senior Researcher for the Fitz Henry Lane Online project.

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Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865), *Gloucester Harbor* [detail], 1852. Oil on canvas. On deposit with the Cape Ann Museum from the City of Gloucester. This painting was given to the City of Gloucester by Mrs. Julian James in memory of her grandfather Sidney Mason (1799–1871); image above shows infrared analysis of this same painting.