American Light

THE LUMINIST MOVEMENT ❧ 1850-1875
PAINTINGS ❧ DRAWINGS ❧ PHOTOGRAPHS

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left, the western bank on the right, the mountains in the background, and no foreground at all. In his lecture, Hart explained that the artist "having found his subject, . . . is next to enquire how much of his picture or panorama, of which he is the centre, he can take in upon the canvas."[30] Kensett's decision was to select a portion of the panorama that countered Gilpin's definition of the picturesque: a scene that looked like a picture. Kensett's painting decidedly did *not* look like any picture from the tradition of landscape painting, unless it was a segment of one of those endless, moving panoramas that had stopped; it was a segment poised between views of the river and the land. The effect of such a composition was threefold. First, it makes the spectator think of a painting less as an art object and more as a fragment of nature related to a larger whole. Second, it demonstrates the possibilities of design in unorthodox relationships. And third, it reveals how endlessly fascinating is the portrayal of light: the subtle modulation of tone on the glassy surface of the water, the graduated veils of atmosphere enveloping the mountains, and the evanescent illumination in the sky. Again and again, the eye is drawn away from the contrast of color and form in the landscape to the water and air as a medium for the play of luminescence.

Because of the prominence given to the sky and so to the effects of light, the panoramic landscape became the preferred compositional format for the luminist artist, and the coast and marshlands replaced the mountains as the primary theme. The extended horizon presented an alternative to the irregular rhythms and enclosed compositions of picturesque beauty and the primary formal motif against which minor variations of verticals, diagonals, curves, irregular lines, and parallel horizontals were played. The importance of the horizon as a straight line, an element of geometry, meant that the other components of the composition must necessarily be placed with a consciousness of design which was almost architectonic. The location of each form in terms of its relationship to every other and the intervals between them became a matter of carefully measured ratios.

The incorporation of measure and design in panoramic compositions had a number of origins. Foremost was the importance given to depicting the specific and familiar in the earliest landscape paintings made in the New World: topographical views of gentlemen's seats and townscapes recording the likeness of a growing metropolis. Related to this concern with the representation of portraits of places were the portraits of ships. Both types of paintings served to document appearances for those who were closely associated with the subject in question. Accuracy was important, and the pictures were often prosaic. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the topographer's concern for recording facts was blended with the landscape painter's preoccupation with realizing the truth of nature, truth derived from a perceptual study of the facts filtered through the mind and endowed with a depth of feeling.

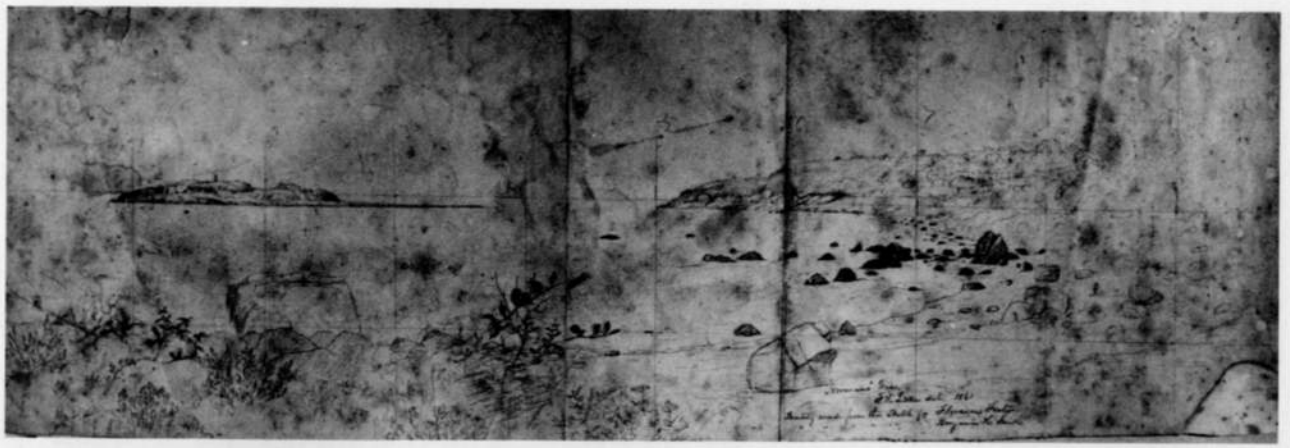
The transformation from topography to poetry and from fact to truth was enhanced by a portrayal of light and the application of principles of design. There were three sources for the adaptation of design in panoramic compositions. First were the practical techniques used in the making of pictures and the transferring of images from paper to canvas. Second were the examples from the tradition of art: the precepts outlined in the instruction books and adapted by other artists. Third was the artist's own sensibility that enabled him to realize the potential for design in a given subject. Naturally, the pragmatic, traditional, and intuitive origins of design were fused in the creation of the final image.

In the course of his career Fitz Hugh Lane developed from an uninspired topographer of town and harbor views and a painter of ships' portraits to the most sensitive of the luminist painters. It was in his early years that he acquired the tools of his trade: knowledge of perspective and ship's architecture. Undoubtedly it was then that he first relied on the mechanical aids which stood him in good stead later: a drawing machine to measure distances accurately and use of transfer lines to transpose the views from his sketchbook to his canvas.[31]

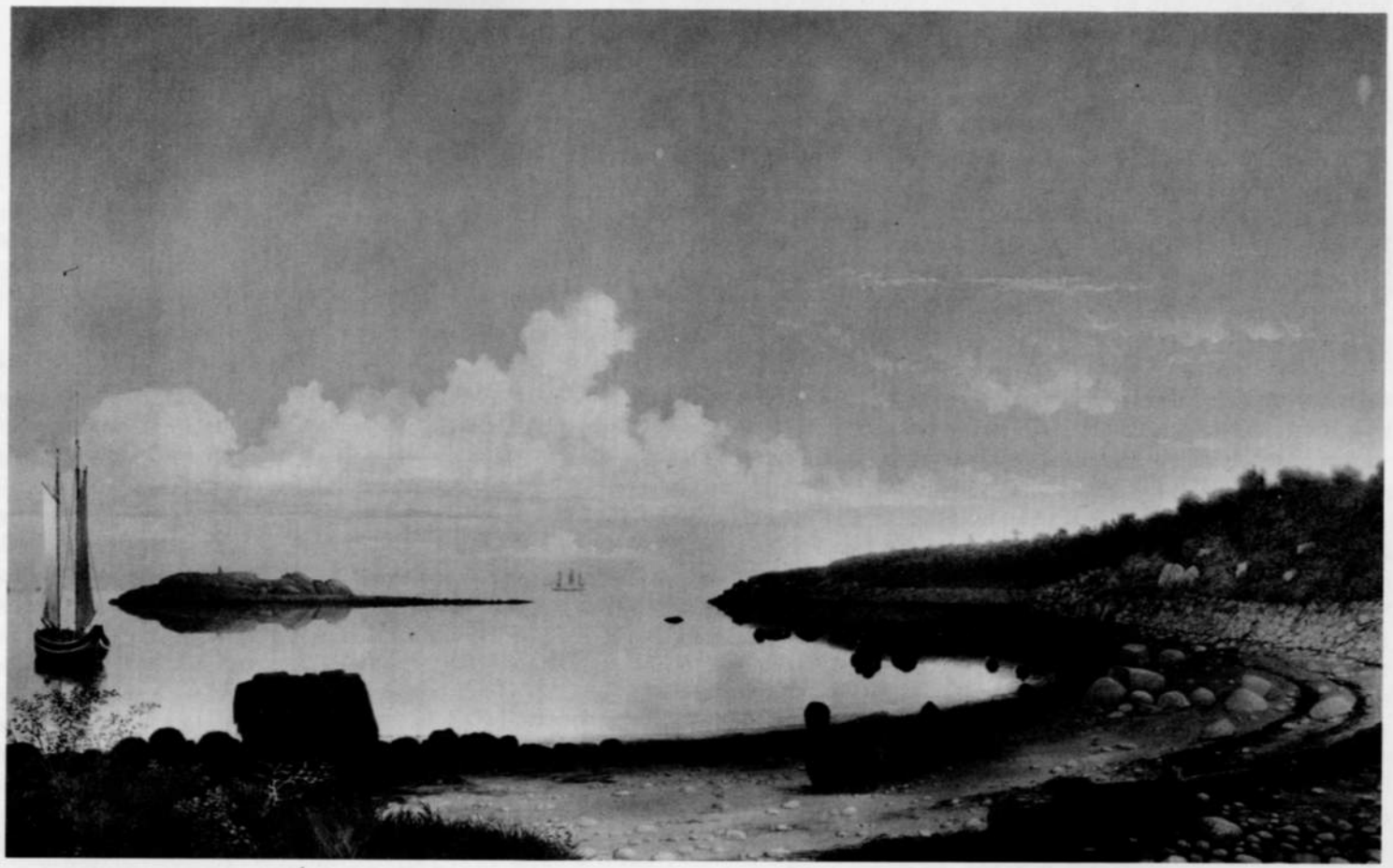
A comparison of Lane's paintings of Norman's Woe (*Norman's Woe, Gloucester,* 1862, fig. 61; and *Norman's Woe,* 1862, fig. 32) with the drawing on which they were based (1861; fig. 33) reveals that in his mature style he maintained the topographer's allegiance to the accuracy of the view but, through the principles of art, elevated the factual to the poetic. The selection of the scope of the panorama demonstrates that the process of design was already at work. Lane chose a point of sight with an eye for the balance of contrasts: the solid curve of the shore against the void of sea and sky, the reach of land anchored by the island, one rock in the foreground silhouetted against the water and another enclosed within the line of the shore. The forms are situated on the paper with a precision that marks off the recession of space and locks the coast and island into the plane of water. The smaller rocks act as units of measure charting the distance across the inlet. The commitment to the carefully measured view is documented by the ruled grid superimposed over the drawing to aid in the transfer of the scene to the canvas.

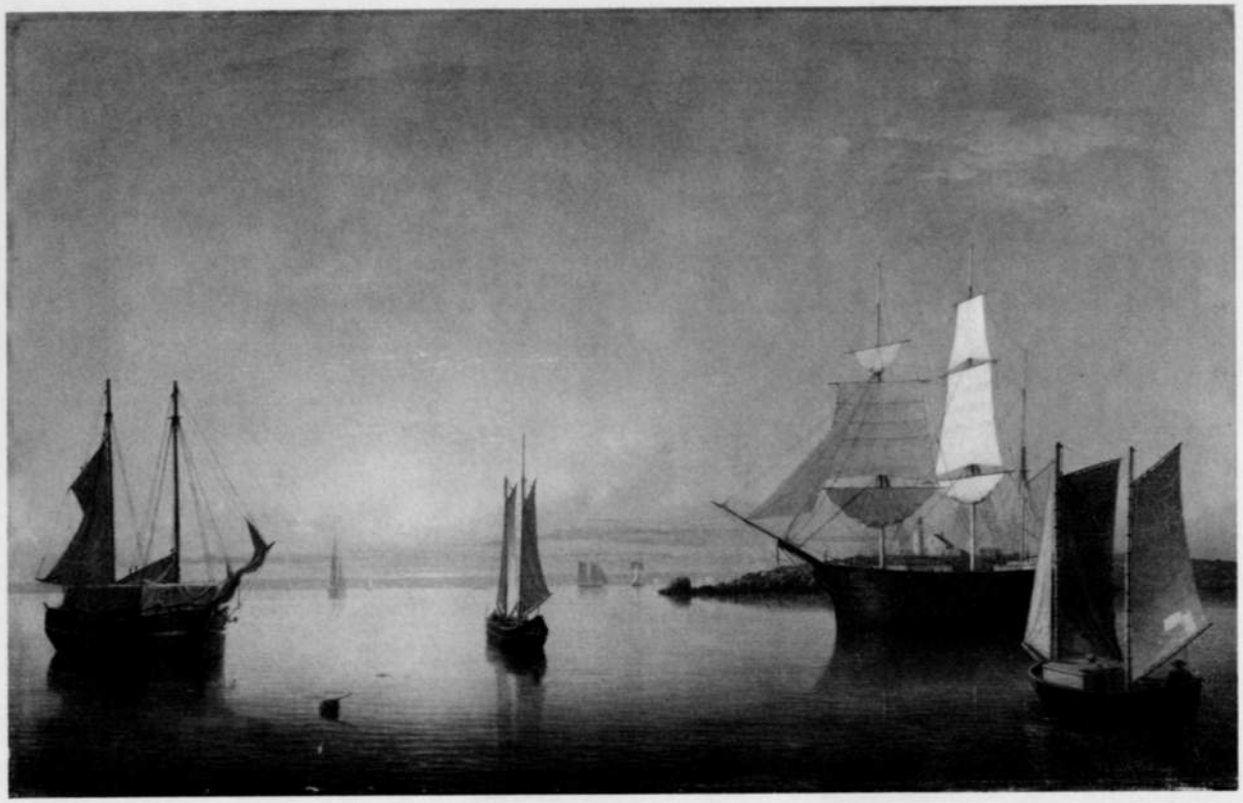
In the two paintings the dimensions and placement of the island and coastline have been scrupulously reproduced; but contours have been subtly adjusted, and the details introduced in the first painting to give interest have been modified or omitted from the second to emphasize the structure of the composition. The picturesque wrecked hull has been eliminated from the final version, and the plants in the foreground subordinated. The ripples in the first canvas are stilled in the second, the three parallel curves moved up the shore to become tide lines. In both paintings the outlines of the island and rocks have been regularized toward the geometric. One of the foremost lessons of the instruction books demonstrated the importance of recognizing geometric analogies to the forms being copied.[32] This was to help in the delineation of contours—unnecessary, of course, if the artist was using a drawing machine—and to create order and harmony. The manuals also taught the artist to discover alignments in nature to create order.[33] In the second painting Lane aligns the

33. Fitz Hugh Lane. *Norman's Woe*, 1861. Pencil on paper. 0.216 x 0.647 (8½ x 25½ in). Inscribed, l.c.: *F. H. Lane del., 1861.* Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts



32. Fitz Hugh Lane. *Norman's Woe,* 1862. Oil on canvas. 0.546 x 0.895 (21½ x 35¼ in). Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts





34. Fitz Hugh Lane. *Gloucester Harbor at Sunset,* late 1850s. Oil on canvas. 0.622 x 0.978 (24½ x 38½ in). Private collection. Photo: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

reflection of the headland with the rocks in the water. The result is to subordinate the minor elements of the rocks to the more significant pattern created by the shore and its mirror image. The reflections, not present in the drawing, are important in setting the mood of crystalline stillness but also in stating the philosophical relationship of land and sea. The dark form of the land and its reflection is intersected by the light form of the sea of the same dimensions. They complement and complete each other. Similarly the prominent horizon is opposed by the verticals of the schooner's masts. In the first painting the placement of the boat may have been suggested by the ruled line in the drawing that intersects the horizontal spit of the island. In the final version the schooner was placed to the left to create a subtler and more evocative relationship, countering the panoramic thrust of the painting, the sweeping curve of the shore and its offshoot, the island, and providing a link between the sea, the island, and the cloud above. The center of the inlet is now a void around which the tensions of curves, horizontals, and verticals are poised. Lane discovered abstract relationships only intimated by the site. The balances he achieved in his paintings were never stable, never resting on a firm foundation, but were suspended along the horizon like the transfer lines in his drawings and the riggings of the ships that were often an important part of the pictorial structure.

As a painter of ships' portraits Lane became thoroughly familiar with different kinds of vessels, the shapes of their sails, the lengths of their masts and spars, and the complex system of ropes, shrouds, and ratlines. In the early portraits the ships were situated parallel to the picture plane with their sails full. In his later paintings the ships provide a structure superimposed on the glowing sky and luminous sea. They pivot on their axes to define the plane extending from foreground to horizon. The vertical masts counter the prominent line of the horizon, and the hulls interrupt, then discreetly continue the lateral thrust through alignment with deck or portholes. Most remarkable is the fragile balance achieved through a subtle tension among forms. In both *Gloucester Harbor at Sunset* (late 1850s; fig. 34) and *Boston Harbor* (c.1850-1855; fig. 239) ships, barks, and schooners revolve around a smaller schooner near the

35. Fitz Hugh Lane. *Christmas Cove, Maine,* 1863. Oil on canvas. 0.394 x 0.610 (15½ x 24 in). Private collection. Photo: Childs Gallery

center of the picture, silhouetted against the evening light. The position of each vessel relative to the point of balance is determined by a reckoning of its size, the amount of foreshortening, and the disposition of the sails, furled or deployed, cast in shadow or in light. In *Boston Harbor*, for instance, the bark on the left with dark sails distended approximates in mass the ship on the right partially hidden by the smaller vessels, its topsails reefed. The schooner in shadow is countered by the smaller schooner placed against the light, masts intersecting the horizon and oars extended, a compendium of the poised balance of the picture as a whole.

In *Entrance of Somes Sound from Southwest Harbor* (1852; fig. 72), *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine* (1862; fig. 113), and *Christmas Cove, Maine* (1863; fig. 35), the verticals of the barks are juxtaposed to the low-lying land, their balance echoing the perpendicular and horizontal relationship established in the right foreground, the man and rowboat in the first two paintings and the rocks and trees in the third. In both harbor and coast views the vessels' role is crucial in establishing order and balance through right-angled geometry along the horizon and through the precise measurement of hulls by portholes, masts by masthoops and spars, and sails by reef bands and reef ropes. The verticals and horizontals subdivided by increments of mensuration provide lines of regulation against which to gauge the topography of the land and the spacious latitudes of the sea.

The solution to the problem of creating contrast and order in panoramic seascapes was provided in part by the very nature of the content: sailing vessels against the horizon; but there were also present in Lane's paintings artistic principles that he most likely gleaned from one of the manuals that taught the Anglo-Dutch tradition of landscape to the painter of watercolors. These instruction books were much more pragmatic than the theoretical writings of Durand and went further than Gilpin in particularizing the creation of order in a variety of landscapes. Although written for watercolorists the rules for composition and tone could be applied equally well by the painter of oils, and even the descriptions of techniques were relevant to the luminist artist who sought to conceal his brushstrokes by a careful blending of tones.

36. Robert Salmon. *Boston Harbor from Castle Island,* 1839. Oil on canvas. 1.016 x 1.524 (40 x 60 in). Signed, l.r.: *Painted by R. Salmon.* Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 1973

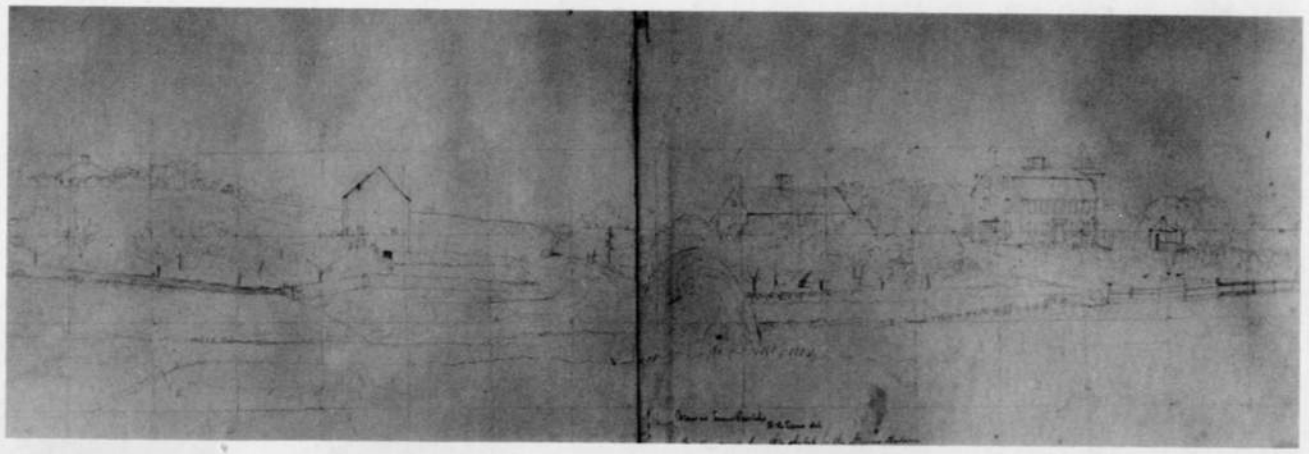
The most comprehensive of the instruction books on landscape painting published in the United States was Fielding Lucas' *Progressive Drawing Book* (1826-1827), which incorporated the writings of the English watercolorist John Varley.[34] Varley's intention was to give the representation of views variety and order by achieving a balance through the opposition of forms and tones. He described the creation of contrast by juxtaposing an irregular shape such as a rock or a tree with the smooth surface of a body of water in the middle distance as Gilpin had done, but he also discussed balance through opposition in panoramic seascapes, a topic which Gilpin had avoided. To relieve the lateral expanse of the horizon and the recession of planes parallel to the pictorial surface characteristic of marine paintings Varley stressed the value of foreshortened sailing vessels. He also described how sails adjusted to provide contrast of dark and light could offset the spacious breadth of sea and sky, and how reflections on water introduced shade without weight and a streak of light gives relief to vessels.[35] The alternation of dark and light tones was useful for leading the eye into the picture especially if a light object were placed against a dark ground and a dark object against a light ground, as Lane had done with the stones set on the shore and others silhouetted against the inlet in his paintings of Norman's Woe.[36] The principle of "partially intercepting one object by another, in order to subdue it, for the sake of elevating a third object" is illustrated in all Lane's paintings of harbors, and the advocation of a little red to alleviate the prevailing grays and greens of seascapes was met by Lane through the expediency of a sailor's shirt.[37]

Ideally, the thoughtful disposition of contrasts created a harmony that appeared completely natural, the result of "observation" rather than "contrivance." As Varley explained, "All the leading lines, ascending or descending, should so balance each other from the different sides of a picture, that a ball, rolling down one of them, should be impelled up on the other side, and so on in succession, til it settled near the centre of the picture."[38]

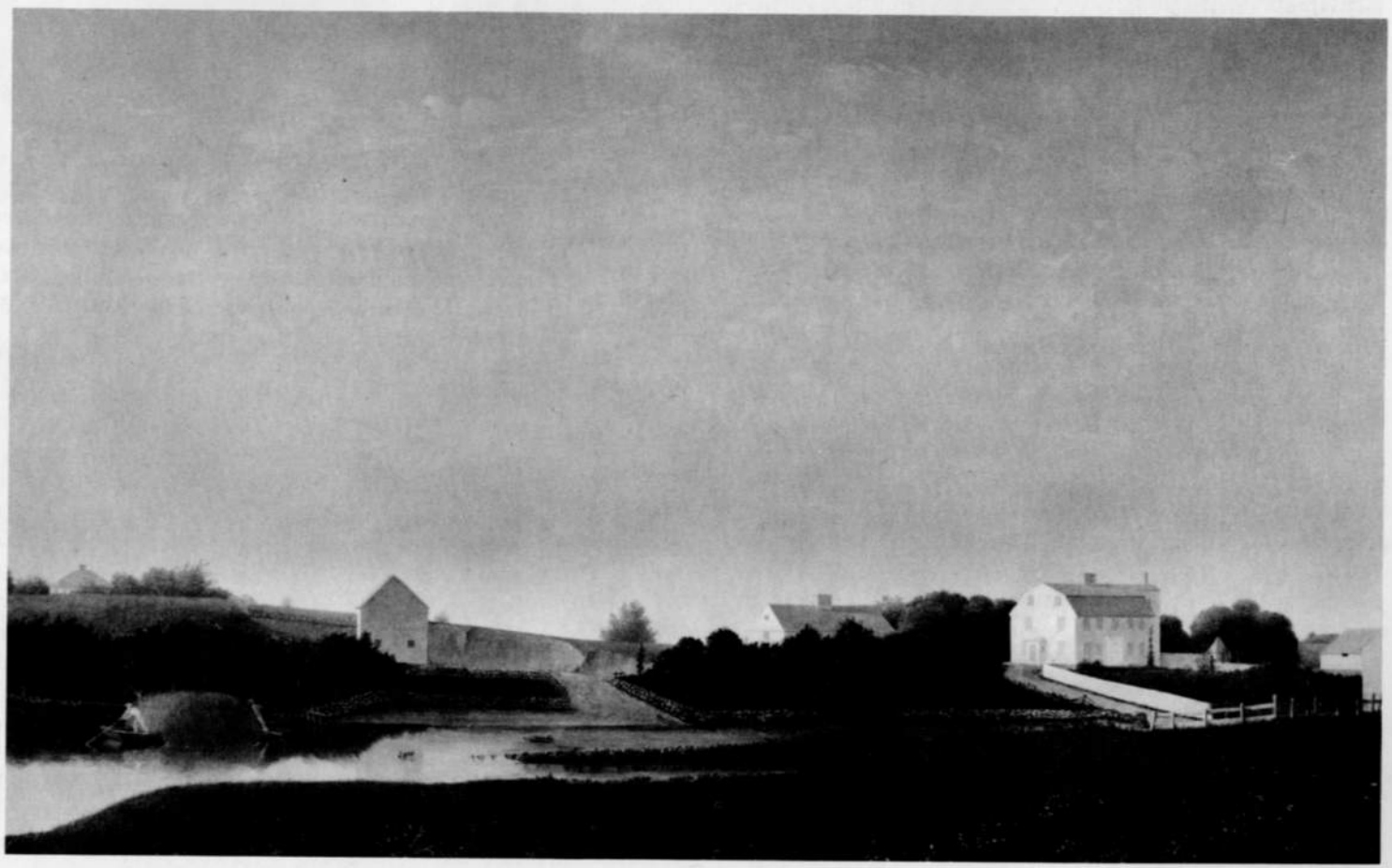
In some of Lane's paintings (*Gloucester Harbor at Sunset)* the balance of contrasts achieves a poised stillness that is totally assured. In others (*Norman's Woe*) there is a brittle tension as if with the slightest movement the image would crack. Lane was capable of a fluid handling of forms; but more and more he created compositions where the abstract relationships were not hidden but self-evident, and this is what distinguishes his paintings from those closer to the European tradition such as the work of the English-born Robert Salmon (fig. 36; also figs. 14, 104-105). Reality is selected and composed with an eye for geometric relationships that provided a structure for observations of the ever-changing effects of light.

The introduction of sailing vessels in Lane's paintings meant that the balance

38. Fitz Hugh Lane. *View in Town Parrish,* 1863. Pencil on paper. 0.248 x 0.737 (9¾ x 29 in). Inscribed, l.c.: *F. H. Lane del.* Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts



37. Fitz Hugh Lane. *Babson and Ellery Houses, Gloucester,* 1863. Oil on canvas. 0.540 x 0.896 (21¼ x 35¼ in). Inscribed, l.r.: *F.H. Lane,1863.* Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts



39. Sanford Robinson Gifford. *On the Nile,* 1872. Oil on canvas. 0.432 x 0.787 (17 x 31 in). Inscribed, l.r.: *S.R. Gifford, 1872.* Eugene B. Sydnor, Jr. Photo: Herbert P. Vose (see plate 22)

of forms was often intricate, hinging on the delicate weighing of tones on a sail's patch. Other artists who used the same principles could select views where the contrasts were far less subtle depending on the situation of a few well-chosen forms or lines to provide contrast with the panoramic horizon.

The types of composition for the organization of views of the sea, shoreline, or low-lying landscape were limited to the location of an isolated object against the horizon; the arrangement of forms parallel, diagonal, or curving into the picture plane; and the asymmetrical placement of rocks or a headland to interrupt the extension of the horizon.

The most prevalent luminist composition was based on the organization of the major forms parallel to the picture plane, to emphasize the panoramic expanse of the taut horizon. According to an article that appeared in the *Art-Union* (London) in 1844 the horizontal composition was the most

> easily managed, . . . and after that the horizontal and perpendicular. . . . They are . . . productive of more grandeur and solemnity than any others, from the natural associative character of the two orders of forms. A horizon of water is a fine thing in itself, and never fails, with the contemplative, of ordering up vast associations, and amongst them those of eternal duration, repose, latent power, and danger. . . .
>
> The [horizontal and perpendicular] possess all the elements of pictorial harmony, that is, relation on some points, and opposition on others, with subordination of one to the other: the horizontal is indicative of a universal law of nature, that of a general subsistence and repose of inanimate matter; and the perpendicular, that of power and action to preserve its position; added to which the horizontal is its own base, being a subsistence of all other lines in nature, while the perpendicular requires one.[39]

The horizontal and perpendicular composition, therefore, had a twofold advantage. It was a straightforward means of creating pictorial order through the balance of contrasts, and it had universal connotations.

Variety within the format of parallel horizontals could be achieved through the broken forms of shoals of rocks, the curves of islands, hills, and mountains, and the uneven contours of clouds and vegetation. Vertical accents were introduced by the masts of ships, trees, beacons, smokestacks, or even figures. (Compare, for instance, Lane's *Brace's Rock,* c.1864 [figs. 11, 74, 91, 116-117], and *Babson and Ellery Houses, Gloucester,* 1863 [fig. 37; see also fig. 38], Church's *Beacon Off Mt. Desert,* 1851 [fig. 88], Heade's *Thunderstorm, Narragansett Bay,* c.1870 [fig. 10] and *Becalmed, Long Island Sound,* 1876 [fig. 249], Gifford's *The Desert at Siout, Egypt*, 1874 [fig. 126] and *On the Nile,* 1872 [fig. 39], and Samuel Colman's *Storm King on the Hudson,* 1866 [fig. 148].) In each case the quality of luminism portrayed was determined not only by the representation of light and the panoramic composition but by the pervasive quietude and the rigor of the design.

Heade's paintings and drawings of marshes (figs. 40-42) are among the most disciplined of those created in the luminist style. In over one hundred pictures[40] he worked within a limited vocabulary experimenting with the abstract relationships presented in the instruction books as the basis for contrast and harmony. The major element to which all others are related is the panoramic horizon dividing the low, flat landscape from the sky. The pronounced horizontal proportions of paper and canvas emphasized the breadth of the topography, and oblong clouds and attenuated shadows cast by the rising or setting sun were frequently used as minor parallel accents. Contrast was furnished by the snaking curves or diagonals of the river, which defined the receding plane of the landscape extending from foreground to horizon. Vertical articulation followed the suggestions in the books for domed, angled, or vertical forms.[41] Occasionally, Heade introduced a small tree at one side of the canvas, but primarily he worked with the haystacks. Their domed shape provided two kinds of opposition: the contrast of curve to straight line and the contrast of a short object to the length of the horizon. The haystacks, like the river, emphasized the depth of the ground plane, marking off distances in measured ratios. In his charcoal drawings Heade interjected the angle of a sloop's sail to counter the extended horizon and the curve of haystacks. The vertical mast links the alternating dark and light tones of the marsh to the dark and light clouds, and the dotted diagonal of birds adds a lightness of touch to the predominantly heavy forms. In each of his pictures, Heade reordered the pictorial elements, setting line against curve and angle and dark against light to achieve the desired balance of contrasts. The marsh scenes are a compendium of the luminist purpose: the portrayal of the particular facts of a specific place arranged to reveal universal truths through a measured and balanced composition and tonal modulations of light.

Although luminism was foremost a style of landscape, the luminist atmo-