Ship Star Light in Boston Harbor
Fitz Hugh Lane (1804-1865)
Ca. 1854
Oil on canvas
23¾" x 25½"
Unsigned

LYING AT ANCHOR IN BOSTON HARBOR, the clipper ship *Star Light* dries her sails in the warm still air of a summer morning. Other vessels lie becalmed except for the ship in the right background being assisted by a "steam propeller" as tugboats were then known. In the left foreground, an open boat with a cargo of miscellaneous objects has given up on the wind and returned to shore under oars.

With *Star Light*'s jibs partially raised and her yards in lowered positions, the squaresails "hanging in the gear," Lane is demonstrating his knowledge of practical seamanship; *Star Light*'s master is taking care of the new ship's sails. Some of the cotton canvas is almost $\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick and all of the sails are hand-stitched, but they must be correctly treated or they will not draw properly. Any dampness in furled sails was an invitation to mildew, so it was necessary on calm, dry days to unfurl them to dry out.

Star Light was built for the Boston firm of Baker & Morrill and was launched from the South Boston shipyard of E. & H. O. Briggs on February II, 1854. Regarded as a medium (as opposed to extreme) clipper, she made several fast passages to San Francisco, returning via the Far East. Lane probably saw and sketched her after her launch and fitting-out, returning to his Gloucester studio to do the painting. He may well have had access to the sailmaker's plan to establish accurate proportions for the rigging and sails.

Lane's ship portraits are highly individualistic in terms of composition and narrative content, reflecting a style full of curiosity and little patience with the highly repetitive ship portraits ground out by other artists. The careful posing of the vessels, the pier head, and the drifting log in the foreground all lead the eye to the main subject which, unlike other ship portraits, remains gracefully confined to her setting instead of straining to sail out of it.

Equally important is the narrative which Lane worked into his compositions. His pictures tell stories which add meaning to the whole when the portrayed aspects of seamanship are understood. Each of his ship portraits shows its subject in a different situation which creates a different composition. The narrative content even extends to the surrounding elements (sea, weather, other vessels, wharves, etc.) that behave in ways consistent with the subject's activity. The only other artist equal to Lane in this aspect was Salmon, which is why the relationships between these two artists, their work habits, and their paintings deserve further study.

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