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"Sketched at Sea"--The Exhibit and the Market

by Jeanne Schinto



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I've been on a mission these last few weeks, trying to find dealers—or even a dealer—who could speak to me about the market for mariners' sketches. These are drawings, primarily of ships and shorelines, executed by sailors and other travelers at sea. They are included in illustrated journals, diaries, and logbooks of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as in sketchbooks by professional artists and others of the same period.

Naturally, their quality widely varies. Some images are merely workmanlike, executed by men and women (often captains' wives) without formal artistic training, while those by painters, like William Bradford (1823-1892) and George Savary Wasson (1855-1926), are as artful as anyone might expect. But it's not always the most painterly examples that are the most interesting or important. That's because much of their value derives from their associations with specific persons, vessels, ports, and moments in maritime history.

That would seem to make them likely quarry for marine artifact collectors, the same people who collect navigational instruments, scrimshaw, maps, and half-hulls. There's only one problem, according to Greg Gibson, owner of Ten Pound Island Book Company, Gloucester, Massachusetts, who sells "old, rare, and out-of-print books, manuscripts, and charts pertaining to the sea."

Except for British midshipmen's logbooks, there just aren't enough mariners' sketches in the marketplace. "Sailors with lots of time on their hands didn't sit around drawing," said Gibson. "They did the other various forms of sailor art—fabric art and carving." As a result, a core group of mariner's sketch collectors has not yet been established.

That collecting situation is shared by several other classes of books, manuscripts, and objects. "To a lesser degree, it is true of clipper ship sailing cards, in which I specialize and for which there's just a handful of knowledgeable collectors," said Gibson. "That means it takes a long time for scholarship to get done and for books to be published, which get other people interested and stimulate the market."

Andrew Jacobson, owner of Andrew Jacobson Marine Antiques, Ipswich, Massachusetts, agreed with Gibson, adding in an e-mail message, "The majority of non-whaling, illustrated journals are British and predominately naval in character, reflecting the huge size of the Royal Navy and its training system. It seems that many midshipmen were required to keep journals of their training voyages. They contain drawings of landfalls, vessels, and ports encountered, with the quality of work which ranged from static to artistic. Our navy was small, compared to that of the British, and the Annapolis classes were similarly sized."

Jacobson summed it up: "The Brits had a well developed system for training future officers that had a navigational component involving a variety of forms of illustration. We did not."

Both Gibson and Jacobson were aware of the Americana sale at Skinner in Boston on November 6, 2005, in which a group of 85 mariner's sketches were sold in 34 lots. They were executed in watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper by U.S. Navy Captain Henry Schreiner Stellwagen from the late 1820's to the early 1860's. Taken from a single scrapbook, the images were created during a series of Stellwagen's voyages around the globe, from the Caribbean to California, from Lima to Algeria.

"Instead of bringing his camera, he brought his paintbrush," said Skinner CEO Karen Keane as she auctioned them for a total of \$48,674. Their consignor was the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. "Tell me the next time another group like that comes up," said Gibson. "We'll both be in wheelchairs. And if they're as rare as I'm saying they are, the Stellwagens were a great buy."

I have no doubt he's correct, but nine months after the Skinner sale, on August 12, 2006, an exhibit of more than 30 mariners' sketchbooks and illustrated journals went on view at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts. Called *Sketched at Sea*, the exhibit was curated by Samuel Scott, associate curator of PEM's Russell W. Knight department of maritime art and history. It will remain on view until January 6, 2008. And if there ever is even a mini-surge in the mariners' sketch marketplace, I hope we'll all remember to note Scott's exquisite show as a turning point.

Last spring, Scott gave me a personal tour of the exhibit, whose subject is one that has "not been featured in a previous show anywhere else," as far as he knows. Because these sketches are invariably small, they are difficult to exhibit effectively. A large setting would overwhelm them. To present them at their best, a curator needs a tight, intimate space like the one Scott was given for his show, PEM's works-on-paper galleries. Sketches like these are also "demanding from a conservation point of view," said Scott. Hard to exhibit and fragile—these attributes are also reasons why private collectors would shy away from them, Scott acknowledged.

Scott's selections were made from a total of about 60 examples accrued by the museum over many decades. "Because we have been collecting for so long, we have a lot of them," he said. They were hiding in plain sight. Scott happened upon them while looking for an early navigation manual. The museum library's card catalog led the way. "Because of how we keep things in storage, all were collected in a single cabinet."

Some of the earliest examples in the PEM exhibit are Mediterranean views drawn in ink and oil on paper by Jacob Crowninshield (1796-1849), a member of a wealthy Salem seafaring dynasty, while he was aboard the U.S.S. *Washington* in 1816-18. Some of the earliest British examples, by Nicholas Pocock (1740-1821), are among the most artistically accomplished.

Pocock went to sea at age 14 out of Bristol; by 26, he had become a successful merchant captain involved in trade between the Mediterranean and the West Indies. Along the way, he brought the tradition of marine sketching to a new artistic level. He had an "artistic itch to scratch even though he was a sea captain," Scott said. By the 1780's, he had given up the sea to become a professional artist.

The technical term for drawings like these is perspective views. They were helpful as navigational aids. The concentration required to create them enabled a sailor to recall them when he needed to make landfall. By remembering the landmarks, he could establish his position relative to shore. Sailors also drew their own vessels as a way of learning and committing to memory the complicated arrangements of sails and rigging. Scott explained in "The Sailor's Eye," an article he wrote for *The Magazine Antiques* (September 2006, pp. 78-85), based on materials from the exhibit.

These mnemonic exercises weren't just academic; sometimes they literally saved lives. "A careful drawing of a dismasted vessel's makeshift sailing rig that allowed it to survive a storm," Scott wrote, "could help a mariner remember what was done should he ever find himself in similar circumstances."

In 1966 the museum purchased six naval sketchbooks created by a Frenchman, Gaston Liébert (active 1886-89), in pencil and colored pencil on voyages through the Mediterranean, to the West Indies, West Africa, through the Suez Canal, to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. "Although the format of the works echoes the perspective views tradition, Liébert's talent as an artist transformed them into compelling works of art," Scott's exhibit signage states.

Even when this exhibit comes down, visitors to PEM's permanent marine gallery will still be able to see remarkable examples by another Frenchman, Antoine Roux (1765-1835). The museum purchased a dozen of Roux's mariner's sketchbooks in the 1920's. Two may be seen in the gallery and also on a computer monitor. In one of the most wondrous marriages of old and new that I have seen, a click of the mouse turns the leaves of these sketchbooks, so one can view them page by page. The same amazing format is available on the museum's Web site (www.pem.org/roux).

PEM is lucky to own so many fine examples of entire sketchbooks, not just single pages. Unbroken ones are able to tell stories that weave themselves into a wider historical and cultural fabric. The Stellwagen scrapbook was already unbound when it got to Skinner, making it easier for the auction house to decide to sell its pages individually and in small groups. To disassemble such things is "almost the natural thing to do, because they naturally do break up," said Scott.

When I asked Jeremy Markowitz (formerly of Swann Galleries, now with Bloomsbury Auctions in New York City) if he could remember any mariners' sketches coming up for sale, he mentioned three pages, including a notable group of three 1835 drawings of St. Barts and Key West by a midshipman named W. Chandler aboard the U.S.S. *Constellation*. Estimated at \$400/600, they sold at Swann in one lot on October 10, 2002, for \$10,925.

Chandler made those drawings a decade before the Naval School at Annapolis, Maryland, was founded; five years after that, in 1850, it underwent its first major reorganization and was officially renamed the U.S. Naval Academy. I contacted James Cheevers, associate director and senior curator of the U.S. Naval Academy Museum, to ask him about mariners' sketches. He told me that midshipmen were required to keep journals, similar in format to ship's logbooks, as learning exercises, and that occasionally these journals contained topographical and other sketches.

"No one has ever surveyed all the journals here to see how many contain sketches," Cheevers said. "There were also some expeditions conducted by the U.S. Navy, which involved the employment of artists." He named the U.S. Exploring Expedition, led by Commander Charles Wilkes in 1838-42; the Japan expedition of Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1853; and various polar expeditions involving naval personnel.

"All had artists assigned to them to help record people, geographical features, flora and fauna, and other scientific evidence," Cheevers wrote in an e-mail. "The USNA Museum does not contain any sketches books from these endeavors, but it does have a few individual drawings, paintings, and publications showing the works of some of these artists."

During Annapolis's reorganization, a department of drawing was added, and Edward Seager (1809-1886) was named as its head. In 1986, the centennial of Seager's death, Cheevers developed an exhibition about the artist/teacher's life and work. Most of the 60 examples were loaned by Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York City.

According to Cheevers's exhibition program, the images had been passed down in the Seager family, then acquired by Baltimore antiques dealer Norton Asner from a nurse who cared for Seager's grandson in his last years. They included scenes such as Salem, Massachusetts, harbor, circa 1850; Panama (Pacific Entrance to the Canal), 1835; and Pillar Point, St. Lawrence River, 1854.

In preparing the exhibit, Cheevers said he was "disappointed in being unable to locate much work by his midshipmen students or to establish that any of his [USNA] students later became noted artists in their own right." (Before USNA's time at Annapolis, he taught sculptor John Rogers, best known for his "Rogers groups.") Cheevers added that he did find a few mechanical drawings by midshipmen, "because the emphasis in the department of drawing evolved from doing topographical work to understanding engineering concepts, as the navy converted from sail to steam-powered ships."

Apparently, the midshipmen were free to take their journals home, said Cheevers, although there are "at least several dozen" in the museum, "some more" in the special collections of the academy's Nimitz Library, and in other maritime museums. Surely, too, some families still have them in their attics?

Just recently, PEM made another purchase in the mariner's sketch category, some sketchbooks created in the 19th and 20th centuries by William Formby Halsall (1844-1919). According to Internet sources, Halsall was born in England, educated in Boston, then worked as a sailor from 1852 to 1859. During the Civil War, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He became an artist specializing in historical ships and sea landscapes.

For more information about *Sketched at Sea*, contact the museum at (978) 745-9500 or see its Web site (www.pem.org).

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