Tracking the History of Maritime Art and its Display

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Abstract:

Depictions of nautical vessels can be found as far back as the beginning of image making itself. Nautical art would begin to find its central themes and mediums in Medieval Europe through ship maps and illuminated manuscripts. However, it was not until the 17th century that the modern concept of maritime art would truly emerge. This genre of painting would be developed by Dutch painters at the time. This would then spread to the art of the rest of Europe and eventually to the United States. The popularity of maritime art was deeply connected to its original imperial use. Some of the first strictly maritime artists were exclusively commissioned to work on voyages of exploration, mercantile ship portraits, and naval war scenes.

This history was tracked extensively up until the late 20th century, though there has been little scholarly attention given to maritime art since the 1990’s. In order to understand the way maritime art may exist in the modern world, it is crucial to look at the way that modern museums display maritime paintings. In looking at maritime art from its imperial origins to the present day, one can also see the ways in which contemporary artists are using the genre to comment on modern, post-colonial issues.

Keywords:

Visual Arts, Art History, Maritime Art, Museum Studies, Maritime Museums
All lands and time periods are connected by our oceans. Therefore, the history of maritime art is immense. Its cultural context and purpose has shifted greatly over the last five centuries, displaying a plethora of different perspectives. Though depictions of seafaring vessels have been found from as far back as 10,000 years ago, the formal theme of maritime painting is relatively new as compared to some of its counterparts which have been in practice for millenia. Maritime paintings have their roots in the growth of the world’s leading empires. As a result, they have been viewed historically in a predominantly colonial context. However, there has been a shift away from such pro-colonial implications by contemporary marine painters. This has given voice to people who have been suppressed by colonial powers and draws attention to major issues humans face in regards to climate pollutants. These shifts in purpose and meaning have changed the context of these paintings, and thus have changed their means of display. In order to understand the way maritime paintings are displayed in a post-colonial world, one must first go through the history of marine painting. The sources that are particularly helpful to look to in understanding maritime art are the books written in the late 20th century which revisited and summarized the history of maritime painting. The two scholars focused on here are David Cordingly, who wrote *Ships and Seascapes: an Introduction to Maritime Prints, Drawings, and Watercolours*, and George Keyes, who wrote *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of Seventeenth Century*. Both scholars write of maritime art in Europe, though Keyes goes further in his exploration of Dutch artists. However, there are very few scholarly sources which reference nautical art in the 21st century.

Nautical travel is a crucial part to the development of many global cultures. Therefore, the depiction of vessels for water travel extends back nearly as far as image making itself. The original depictions of ships would be seen in carvings on rock faces or in caves. Recent
discoveries show that the earliest depiction of a ship may be from roughly 10,000 to 11,000 years ago. This 14 foot carving found in Norway may be depicting a vessel similar to the umiak boats used by the Inuit (Gershon). These boats are long and wooden, made specifically to move through the icy northern waters. The engraving would have been done by one of the nomadic tribes in the area of Northern Norway. This was clearly not a trend specific to the tribes of Northern Europe, as carvings and wall paintings similarly can be found in Egyptian tombs. These are in burial contexts on the walls of tombs mostly found to be from around 1500 BC (Cordingly 19). The depictions in the tombs may be carvings, but they can also be found in tempera. Tempera is the process of mixing pigment with egg whites. Depictions of ships can also be viewed on Greek pottery, the most famous example being Exekias’s black-figure cup depicting Dionysus reclined in ship from around 575-525 BCE (Exekias). This tracks to the middle ages where small images of vessels were seen in the borders of illuminated manuscripts. These images were done in watercolors on parchment.

Watercolor would go on to be used in 12th century sea charts, also called portulans. These charts began to be made with the introduction of the magnetic compass to the Western world (Cordingly 19). Portulans held a specific function of displaying accurate coastlines, however they were also used to depict both stylized and naturalistic nautical imagery. The original charts would be made by hand with watercolor on parchment, but they would spread vastly with the introduction of printmaking. Woodcut prints began to be used in Europe in the 15th century to illustrate printed books (Cordingly 32). Woodcut printing would be joined by the process of engraving. These processes of printing would be used to reproduce maps, charts, and atlases from voyages of exploration. The most famous of these explorers being Captain Cook, Christopher Colombus, Ferdinand Magellan, and Francis Drake (Cordingly 33). Printing would
be the major media of nautical imagery well into the 19th century. This allowed imagery to be produced and distributed in large quantities for books. Many people would see marine paintings as prints well after artists began to do full oil paintings of seascapes, harbor scenes, and ship portraits. Most of these maritime prints would understandably sell for only a fraction of the price of an oil painting (Cordingly 31). Thus the prints were more accessible to the wider public than the commissioned paintings for the elite. Also meaning that most people would only see nautical imagery by way of printing.

Watercolors or pen and ink drawings would be the preferred media for many of the artists traveling on naval voyages. This was due to the portability of these practices, specifically before the invention of the portable paint tube. Watercolor paintings would also dry swiftly after they were finished and could then be carried home with less risk of damage, as opposed to oil paint sketches which would remain tacky for a number of days after completion (Cordingly 27). These watercolor sketches would later go on to be further developed as detailed watercolor paintings.

However, watercolor paintings were not given nearly the same amount of respect as oil paintings of the time. In the late 18th century, the Royal Academy of London held the belief that watercolors were inferior to oil paintings and therefore should not be taken too seriously, despite having a number of watercolor paintings within their annual exhibitions (Cordingly 24). This led to London watercolor artists of the time to found the Society of Painters in Water-Colour in 1804 (Cordingly 24). This move separated watercolor paintings into their own context, without having to be compared to the more elaborate oil paintings of their contemporaries. As watercolor paintings began to be viewed on their own, they were treated more seriously by the artists themselves. Before this shift, watercolor sketches and pen drawings were most often kept within the artist’s studio for personal use on larger developed oil paintings. These watercolors would go
on to become larger and more finished, also being displayed in elaborate, gilded frames (Cordingly 24). The change in display highlighted the public shift towards accepting watercolor as a valid medium in its own right.

Imperialism plays a crucial part in the construction of marine paintings as we know of them today. This is further exemplified by the fact that the most prolific maritime painters in history are from the world’s major imperial countries. The earliest maritime paintings have a direct tie to imperial commissions, voyages of exploration, and the development of mercantilism. Seascapes and ship portraits of merchant ships would reach wide popularity as European nations began to set up East India Companies to trade with Eastern nations. These countries were specifically the colonial powers of France, Britain, and Holland. Britain’s Honorable East India Company was set up by a group of merchants in 1600 and the Dutch equivalent was developed two years later in 1602 (Cordingly 55). This focus on trade within this time period can be seen in the many busy harbor scenes being painted or in the rise in commissions of ship portraits by successful merchants. Artists were not only employed within Europe, but also found work on board the ships of traveling European explorers.

When going on a voyage of exploration, the Captain would appoint an artist, or even many artists, in order to record events or scientific information. These artists would then create pen and ink or watercolor paintings over the course of the journey, sometimes returning with hundreds of these sketches. This is where the portability of watercolor paints was extremely beneficial to traveling artists. The official artist for Captain Cook was the painter William Hodges (1744-1797), who would be brought on all three of Cook’s voyages. The images brought back from these voyages would give individuals at home in Britain some of the first views of the South Pacific (Cordingly 93). The sketches made by Hodges on his voyages show that while a
painting may seem to depict a simple scene of a harbor or a ship in motion, the smaller details and the painting’s title can allow the viewer to understand the deeper political implications. This is visible in Figure 1, which depicts Captain Cook’s ships on their search for the Southern Continent, Cook’s second voyage of exploration. The boat is shown pulling ice from the South Pacific to use for drinking water. The image calls for an aesthetic viewing, where you may note the dark atmosphere or the detail with which the ships are depicted. However this ignores the

Figure 1:
William Hodges, *Captain Cook’s ships Resolution and Adventure taking in ice for water, latitude 61 South, 4th January 1773*

imperial implications of such a journey and such an image being returned to England. These images would also be used to emphasize the “otherness” of indigenous peoples. Distinctly setting them apart from the English viewers of these images. While the print in Figure 2 was made by Theodore de Bry (1528-1598) roughly a century after Christopher Colombus’s journey, it is still an image that accurately displays the narrative created by these maritime images back in Europe. The inaccuracies in the clothes of both colonsers and the native people, is used to highlight the difference between the colonizers and the natives. Columbus is also standing heroically as the natives hand him gifts, depicting a very altered and inaccurate narrative to the masses that worldview these images.
While river and ocean scenes were painted before the 17th century, it was artists in the Netherlands during this time that would first make maritime paintings their full preoccupation. This tradition developed after the Eighty Years War (1568-1648), a revolt of the Netherlands against Spanish rule (Keyes 3-4). These 17th century marine paintings can be split into three groups: historical events; ship portraits; and biblical, mythical, or moralizing subjects (Keyes 4). The marine scenes in relation to myth depicted nautical scenes taken from Greco-Roman epics and the biblical scenes drew on imagery from both the Old and New Testament. In 1562 the artist who would go on to be the founding father of Dutch Marine painting was born, Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom (1562-1640) (Cordingly 67). Vroom was highly influential in creating a market for seascape paintings, even being commissioned by Cardinal Ferdinand de Medici as a painter of harbors and ships (Cordingly 68). Vroom was employed as a painter for the Dutch East India Company, as well as many powerful European leaders and members of the elite. He would initially be known for depicting historical events in large scale tapestries, also commissioned by
Figure 3: Vroom’s study for John Pine's *The Tapestry hangings of the House of Lords*, (1739).

An engagement on 29th July 1588 with the Spanish Armada off Calais (Clement).

These tapestries were meant to be imposing displays to the guests of these elite patrons. Figure 3 gives a glimpse at the monumentality and detail put into Vroom’s tapestry work. While the scene is shown in a flat perspective there is an immaculate attention to detail. This likely would have been appealing to patrons who would favor the clarity of the scene depicted over attempts at naturalism. The patronage is also made clear in the placement of portraits within the tapestry’s border. Vroom’s detail would also expand past tapestries into modestly scaled paintings, drawings, and etchings, though few drawings survive.

The next phase of Dutch marine painting would be less focused on mercantile or imperial affairs and more focused on the activities of local fishermen, as well as the depiction of natural forces. This movement was pioneered by the artist Jan Porcellis (1583-1632) (Cordingly 69). Jan Porcellis, born in Flanders in 1584, is believed to have been a pupil of Vroom’s in Holland (Keyes 14). Due to their less imperial, more domestic context, these paintings would be viewed in a different setting than the monumental war tapestries of Vroom. Despite having little financial success in his life, the work of Porcellis would be highly influential to later Dutch artists.
including Rubens, Rembrandt, and Jan van de Cappelle (Cordingly 70). Porcellis was highly focused on the effects of weather on water and on the boats themselves. Figure 4 depicts the way Porcellis dramatically depicted the effects of wind on a boat. The boat itself is a domestic and localized vessel rather than the large imperial vessels depicted by Vroom. This is only an etching of one of Porcellis’s paintings, but there is still a legible moodiness in the artist’s use of tone. Most of his paintings would have been seen through prints, twelve of which were engraved by the artist Claes Jansz Visscher (1587-1652) and published in Amsterdam in the year 1627 (Cordingly 70). Figure 4 is one of the prints released in this group. Visscher himself was prolific in making etchings based on the paintings of maritime artists, covering works from the most popular artists to those that may have been overlooked.

The third phase of Dutch art was specifically spearheaded by Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-1693) and his son, Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707) (Cordingly 72). The younger son of Willem van de Velde the Elder, Adriaen van de Velde (1636-1672), would also go on to be a landscape painter, though he would not focus particularly on maritime scenes. The Van de Velde family would spark a return to the historical nautical scene, rather than the
domestic. Thus leading into another phase of specifically imperial or historical maritime paintings. The pair worked closely together, with Willem the Elder making detailed pen drawings and Willem the Younger utilizing them to make full oil paintings (Keyes 22). Willem van de Velde the Elder made highly accurate pen and ink drawings of ships, being widely praised for his detail. While his drawings are clear in what they are depicting, Willem the Elder still uses a strong atmospheric perspective. Like his father, Willem van de Velde the Younger became known for painting large-scale historical pieces, specifically naval battles, the boats of dignitaries, and bustling harbors (Keyes 23). Looking between Figure 5 and Figure 6, one can see clear similarities between their
styles. Both Van de Veldes show a proficiency in depicting even the smallest details of ships, this was particularly helpful in their paintings of ship portraits and naval battle where clarity is required. However, Willem the Younger was specifically interested in the power of color to display perspective. Willem the Younger is able to use vibrant color and dramatic lighting that cannot be achieved in the pen and ink drawings of his father.

The Van de Veldes emigrated to England in the winter of 1672 or 1673, fleeing the turmoil of the Netherlands at the time, and were immediately welcomed by both King Charles and the British elite (Cordingly 77-78). The Van de Velde’s developed a market for marine painting within England, also being highly influential to the next generation of marine painters (Cordingly 78). Before the Van de Welde’s arrived, the presence of nautical art in England was much the same as it was in the Netherlands before the 17th century. Artists had painted marine images and views of the Thames, however this was not artists’ main preoccupation. This influence would continue to be prevalent up until the English artist, Samuel Scott (1702-1772), broke away from the Dutch traditions of the van de Velde and began to develop a style of his own (Cordingly 81). His drawings do not go as far in refinement as the sketches of the Van de Veldes and their followers. Scott instead goes for a looser, stylized approach for his sketches of

Figure 7:
Samuel Scott,
*A ship near the shore with yachts alongside*
(Cordingly 83)
the Thames, in order to depict an accurate image of 18th century London life (Cordingly 82). As shown in Figure 7, Scott’s pen drawings highlight the movement of the scene rather than the detailed clarity in the Van de Veldes’ works. Scott uses loose, gestural lines to imply detail rather than fully rendering it. This allows for the ships, people, and clouds to feel as though they are in motion even as he is drawing them. Scott, like Porcellis in the Netherlands, would focus on everyday harbor scenes rather than imperial ship portraits and battle scenes. Therefore, the works of Scott would be seen in a less formal, more domestic or accessible context than the imperial commissions of the Van de Veldes.

One of the most successful English maritime painters of this period was Dominic Serres (1722-1793). Serres was one of the founding members of the Royal Academy in London and was the official marine painter for King George III (Cordingly 84). Serres was born in France, but would spend almost his entire career in England. He was born into an aristocratic family and raised to be a priest, however he would run away and work to become a captain of a merchant vessel (Cordingly 84). This aristocratic background and experience on the sea was what led to Serres’s great success as a court marine painter. His style was influenced by the less recognized English maritime artist, Charles Brooking (1723-1759). Serres, as a painter of the court, specifically painted naval battles and imperial ship portraits. He also painted many images of harbors and merchant ships, drawing on his own experience as a merchant captain. One of these trading scenes can be seen in Figure 8. Serres depicts a similar attention to detail previously seen in the work of the Van de Veldes, with the addition of an attempt to display movement as in the work of Scott. However, Serres did not have the same ability to be so loose with his lines as he
Figure 8:
Dominic Serres,
*Shipping in the Mediterranean* (1780)
(Cordingly 84)

was still a painter of the nobility, a group who tended to favor clarity in the depiction of ships. Both of Dominic Serres’s sons would go on to be painters as well, however it was John Thomas Serres who would gain the most success, eventually succeeding his father as the official marine painter of the English Court (Cordingly 85).

America in its early years as a British colony was heavily developed through water-based communication and energy. Even before the arrival of sea-faring colonists, native populations relied heavily upon marine life (Neill 9). Through the colony, thriving ports would grow due to the new trade connections. Specifically productive industries in New England were whaling and shipbuilding. This nautical lifestyle which was so crucial in the founding of the American colony would go on to affect the forming of the American identity. The historical scenes of English war vessels became American ships escaping from imperial rule. American marine painters would bounce between painting historical scenes of military vessels and domestic fisherman images throughout the 19th century. The most famous maritime painter of the time in America, Winslow
Homer (1836-1910) would go on to use the more domestic imagery of fishermen and bustling shores to comment on the relationship between man and nature. This imagery would be highly influential in the development of American naturalism. Homer’s work pulls marine painting away from imperial and mercantile ships, towards the image of the rugged American fisherman up against the imposing force of nature. This exemplifies the American identity building that was happening at the time. Figure 9 shows a clear example of Homer using naturalism and calling on the idea of the sublime, nature as a divine force. This is shown in the display of the lone fisherman looking towards an impending storm. Homer’s paintings sought to focus on the effects of weather on the water and subjects of his paintings than the British court painters of the past. Homer’s work is specifically viewed in an artistic setting, though it also holds historical value in its depiction of 19th century maritime life in America.

The ways that marine paintings are displayed currently vary greatly between institutions. Some maritime paintings are viewed in a strictly art historical context as seen in major institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Louvre in Paris. This tends to occur specifically within these institutions, as the maritime paintings are displayed in a very similar way to the other non-maritime art within the museum. This is a very aestheticizing
artistic display of ability above historical or scientific context. Figure 10 shows an exhibition of Winslow Homer’s art, displayed in 1996 at the Metropolitan Museum of art. The paintings are displayed in the way that any other style of painting would be shown, in gilded frames on solid colored walls in an empty room. This is as to be expected in the context of an art museum. The display does not acknowledge a connection to the nautical origins of the work beyond what is shown within the actual paintings.

The displays in art historical institutions look very different from the display practices of other museums, specifically maritime museum displays of maritime paintings. These institutions also embrace the artistic skill displayed in the art, but the focus is instead placed on the scientific, anthropological value in maritime art. That becomes visible in the display as the paintings are placed amongst other nautical items beyond paintings. These paintings are shown besides scientific equipment, as well as nautical tools and gear. This highlights the practical usage of marine paintings as sources for knowledge on the history of nautical travel. Maritime art can be displayed beside ethnographic materials, trade artifacts, ocean liner memorabilia, logbooks, and maritime journals (Neill 10). This is the method of display at the National Maritime Museum in England, which displays maritime paintings alongside collections of boats, mainly from the after
the 19th century or later, as well as, a collection of navigational and astronomical instruments (Lewis).

The National Maritime Museum is the largest maritime museum in the world, holding enough works to occupy three large buildings. With one of the largest collections of marine art in the world. Many of the works of the most famous European marine artists can be found within this museum, split between the Queen’s House Museum and the National Maritime Museum (Lewis). This only highlights the reach of England during the height of its imperial spread. The Queen’s House building depicts some of the most impressive marine art in the collection as it would be seen in its context as imperial commissions. Therefore, the art is displayed in ornate frames within staged royal rooms with expensive furnishings. This is likely an accurate depiction of the context in which the works of the Van de Veldes and Serres, successful court painters, would be shown. The National Maritime Museum building puts marine art into a different context which highlights its historical and scientific value. The historical focus is an important aspect to the museum’s display as the works are mostly shown chronologically (Lewis), alongside equipment fitting to their respective time periods. The display of this equipment highlights the practical purpose of nautical paintings and the long history of exploratory navigation in European history.

The Norwegian Maritime Museum, Norsk Maritimt Museum, takes on a similar approach to the National Maritime Museum of England in its display. The museum seeks to present Norwegian maritime history, including art, shipbuilding, and underwater technology (Norwegian). This historically centered display stems from the country’s deeply marine based culture, highlighting the developments of the Northmen in the 8th and 9th centuries, as well as the travels of 19th century Norwegian explorers. The same can be said for the National Maritime
Museum of the Netherlands, which boasts one of the largest maritime collections in the world, including paintings, models of ships, navigation instruments and maps (National). Much like the National Maritime Museum of Norway, the Netherlands seeks to highlight the country’s history of marine exploration as opposed to displaying paintings as merely artistic in value. This tends to be the trend of maritime museums in Scandinavia, including museums in Sweden and Iceland. This is likely due to the Scandinavian history of scientific exploration that spans even into the present day.

While American art museums tend to favor an aestheticised approach to their treatment of marine art, maritime focused museums follow a similar trend to European museums. There are thirty-four museums within the Council of American Maritime Museums, however there are hundreds of institutions throughout the country that also hold important maritime paintings (Neill 9). Museums in different regions of America take some distinctly different approaches to their displays. Museums in the North-East, specifically those in New England highlight the area’s history of harbor based lifestyles and the colony’s initial reliance on whaling (Neill 11). The western maritime museums tend to put their focus on river centered travel and culture as opposed to ocean based. This is due to the western museums lacking the same link to a coastline as found in the North-East. An example of one of these western museums is the Manitowoc Maritime Museum in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. This relatively new museum seeks to focus on the history of the Great Lakes region, specifically with a focus on shipping and transportation (Neill 11). While the museums of America may display their own regional narratives, they all tend to share the same trait in that they wish to educate individuals on America’s maritime traditions. Maritime culture in America has nearly disappeared, or at least has greatly decreased from its previous
heights (Neill 15). However, many maritime institutions are seeking to revive maritime traditions within new generations.

There has not been much exploration of maritime art within contemporary art, not to the extent that it has reached historically. Though there are artists that have explored the use of marine art to fit a contemporary context. Modern maritime painters have been using marine art in order to draw attention to dangers facing our environment. Many artists have taken to using art in order to draw attention to the damage of pollution on our oceans. One of these individuals is California artist Scott Greene. Greene purposefully adopts classical imagery in order to comment on the connections between politics, nature and culture (Scott). Scott’s works are reminiscent of historical ship portraits, though he builds upon this image with satirical displays of modern pollution, technology, and excess. This is visible in Figure 11 which shows a freighter filled high with indiscernible garbage. In referencing historical imagery, Scott makes a connection between the beginnings of imperial mercantilism and the current state of the environment. This art is exclusively seen in an art based context, rather than scientific or historical. However, Scott’s work is displayed throughout different venues in America with the purpose of drawing attention to environmental issues.
Artists are not only making reference to historical maritime painting from the lens of environmental activism. There have been groups of contemporary artists specifically using maritime art to draw attention to colonial history from a postcolonial perspective. One artist that has done this within the last five years is American artist Kehinde Wiley. Wiley is not a strictly marine artist, his confrontation of past colonial themes have also been done through portraits. In his marine paintings, Wiley references famous marine painters of history through his compositions and color choices. Figure 12 shows the artist’s direct reference to Homer’s *The Fog Warning*, which can be viewed in Figure 9. Wiley’s painting is nearly a direct copy of Homer’s famous piece, however he switches the white fisherman for a modernly dressed black man. Another change is that the figure looks outward, past the viewer, as opposed to looking back towards the impending fog. Wiley’s pieces are also often monumental in size. In Wiley’s own words, his paintings are meant to “inhabit a surreal and ecstatic alter-reality, a trans-historical narrative that reclaims the tragic and traumatic narrative of colonialism,”(Bucknell). These paintings show a clear example of how maritime painting, a theme deeply connected to the West’s colonial past, may exist in a postcolonial context. In this postcolonial environment, marine painting has been used by painters around the world to act as a voice for those previously
suppressed by colonial voices. What is interesting about Wiley’s marine paintings is that they are mostly viewed in a strictly artistic context, however one painting, *Ship of Fools*, has recently been acquired by the Queen’s House in England (House). Thus, this specifically postcolonial work now inhabits an environment once only used to house highly imperial works of marine art.

The history of marine art is immense, an unavoidable fact due to the human connection to the ocean throughout our entire history. The rise of marine painting as a distinct style holds its roots in 17th century Dutch landscape painting and would explode in popularity with the spread of imperial power and the development of mercantile trade. However, the context of these paintings have changed with the socio-political shifts of the time. While maritime paintings may have originally been used in an imperial context, this has changed into a historical, educational context, and now into a point of activism in a postcolonial world. These shifts have greatly affected where and how these paintings are displayed whether that be in art museums, scientific institutions, or royal palaces. These many continued changes point to a continued use of maritime painting in the future as a reflection of the culture it is created within.
Work Cited


Exekias. Black Figure Cup, Interior; Dionysus Reclining in Ship with Vine with Grapes, Dolphins.


Willem van de Velde the Younger, 1633-1707, Dutch, active in Britain (from 1672). Sea Battle of the Anglo-Dutch Wars, The Battle of Lowestoft. ca. 1700. Artstor, library.artstor.org/asset/AYCBAIG_10313604031