

Basic Detail Report



Title: Wreck of the Roma

Date: 1846

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e6fc

Medium: Oil on canvas [appears lined]

Description: The shipwreck motif was especially in vogue during the Romantic period, when violent storms at sea symbolized the awesome power of natural forces against human will. Views of coastal shipwrecks corresponded to a real and ever-present threat, which even the mapping of the coastline failed to prevent. Like other marine painters of the era, such as the French artist Michele Felix Corné and the Americans Thomas Birch, Thomas Cole, and Martin Johnson Heade, Lane painted variations on the shipwreck theme. Lane's earliest shipwreck picture, "The Burning of the Packet Ship" "Boston," was based on eyewitness sketches. Hit by lightning at sea, the "Boston" is shown ablaze, the huge flames illuminating the night sky and flat sea and the dark smoke billowing from its stern. The horror of the scene is, however, slightly mitigated by the figures of the crew escaping in four rowboats. A slightly later picture of a ship disaster, "Alcohol Rocks" (1842), is closer to the New Britain scene and may have been the model. This lithographed sheet-music cover is an allegorical scene of a vessel foundering on huge rocky cliffs. Its upside-down flag, emblazoned with the word Intemperance, signals distress. At the far left, safely clear of the rocks, a vessel identified as "Temperance" launches rescue boats. A

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sense of activity pervades the scene, as a large fully manned rowboat shoves off from shore and numerous figures scurry around the rocks and the beach to unload cargo and to aid sailors from the sinking ship. Painted four years after "Alcohol Rocks", "The Wreck of the "Roma"" is similar in subject and composition, but the rescue boat at left has been replaced by a large headland of rocks extending into the sea. Several rescue boats have just launched from the beach at left and are rowing out to the "Roma", while men on shore are retrieving pieces of floating cargo washing up with the waves. "The Wreck of the "Roma"" shows a more expansive scene, with fewer men and boats engaged in saving the vessel, but a sense of urgency is present nonetheless. Dark clouds looming in the sky suggest an upcoming storm that will increase the difficulties of the rescuers and threaten the ship to break up on the rocks and large waves batter the rowboats attempting the rescue. Lane was known for his accuracy in painting the details of various sailing vessels. His realistic effects were enhanced by the addition of figures on the shoreline or in rowboats at the foreground, which produces a sense of narrative and spatial depth. In his shipwreck scenes, Lane almost always focuses on the view from shore--the rescue attempts of the rowboats, the bystanders and survivors on the beach, the men retrieving floating cargo. The danger, drama, loss of life, and the power of nature typical in most Romantic shipwrecks are downplayed in favor of the hustle-bustle of the event. Because of the realism of the New Britain scene, the precedent set by the painting of the "Boston, the Wreck of the "Roma"" and the visibility of the ship's name on its stern could be the depiction of an actual shipwreck. However, searches through records of ships' registers have produced no evidence of a ship by this name.⁽¹⁾ In the 1850s Lane's style underwent a change, and his shipwreck scenes begin to focus as much on the effects of weather, atmosphere, light, and specific times of day as they do on human activity on the shore. These late works are often categorized as Luminist, and Lane is seen, along with Martin Johnson Heade, as one of the major proponents of this style of nineteenth-century landscape painting. MAS Notes: 1. Neither the National Archives nor the Massachusetts Archives could find any information relating to a ship "Roma". One explanation for this lack of documentation is an 1876 fire in the Boston customs house, which destroyed many records. It is also possible that Lane changed the name of the ship or that he was not portraying an actual event.

Dimensions: Frame: 23 x 32 1/4 in. (58.4 x 81.9 cm) Image: 23 x 32 1/4 in. (58.4 x 81.9 cm)