

Gifts from the Sea: Seascape Painting in the New England Tradition Presented by Meg Black, PhD

Thursday, June 24, 7:00-8:00 PM.

Zoom lecture, sponsored by the Massachusetts
Cultural Council



Introduction:



Rockwell Kent, *Toilers of the Sea* (1907). Oil on Canvas, 38 x 44.
New Britain Museum of American Art, CT.

- ❖ Like many New Englanders, I long for the summer months when mindlessly strolling along the ocean shore, intent on finding treasures of sea glass, clam shells, and other primordial objects demands my full attention.
- ❖ Seascape painting, in our long-held tradition, seeks to capture this longing, or does it? While we currently might think of seascape painting in the same vein as sun and fun, historically this was not always the case.
- ❖ During this lecture, I will share this story of seascape painting in the New England tradition including my own painting on exhibition in the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade.

When you think of Seascape painting, what comes to mind?

- Sunshine
- Warm sun
- Breeze
- The smell of sunscreen
- Sand
- Salt-water
- Fish . . . And chips!
- Sailing ships
- Freedom

Sun burn
Nor'easter
Gail Winds
Sweat
Sand
Thirst
Sharks
War ships
Slave trade

The early years before the sea became a source for pleasure

- New England has long represented a place of timeless values in an everchanging and ambiguous culture, a constant in a sea of endless change.
- The turbulent waters of the northern Atlantic crashing against the steadfast rocks of the New England coast provided a visual metaphor for this provocative image.
- Nowhere does this metaphor work better than in 19th century abolitionist inspired seascapes.

John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark* (1778). oil on canvas, 71 x 90 inches. MFA, Boston.



- ❖ Painted after Copley moved to London in the history painting tradition.
- ❖ Demonstrates a series of emotions, important to painting at the time.
- ❖ Religious significance: harpooner (St. George and the dragon; shark represents the devil in hell, church steeples align with ship masts; boat of fishermen.

Brook Watson, who eventually became Lord Mayor of London, was born in 1735 in Plymouth, England. He was sent to Boston after the death of his parents to live with a merchant who was actively engaged in trade in the West Indies. In 1749, 14-year-old Watson decided to take a swim while the ship was at anchor in Havana's harbor. Having discarded his sailor's woolen garments Watson entered the warm water. Shortly thereafter he was attacked by a shark. Watson's own account, written in the third person in April of 1778 stated that the shark struck three times. "In the first attack, all the flesh was stripped off the bone from the calf downwards; in the second, the foot was divided from the leg by the ancle." Watson further stated, "at the very instant he was about to be seized the third time, the shark was struck with the boat hook and driven from his prey."

Dr. Bryan Zygmunt, "John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark*," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://smarthistory.org/copley-watson-and-the-shark/>.

John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark* (1778). oil on canvas, 71 x 90 inches. MFA Boston.



- ❖ The painting was commissioned by Lord Mayor Watson, who donated it to a hospital for wanton youth.
- ❖ The African man is at the apex of the triangle, adds to his dignity and heroism—he holds the rope that will rescue Watson.
- ❖ The issue of slavery is topical as the colonies gain freedom from British rule. Britain abolished slavery in 1833. This is a rare depiction of an African in a heroic pose. 19th century images of Africans will be more stereotypical. The original sketch included only white men.
- ❖ Just as Copley reworked *Watson and Shark* (a scene set in Cuban waters) to include a black sailor and consequently opened the interpretative possibilities, Lin-Manuel Miranda consciously cast performers of color to play white historical figures in his work of art. <https://www.mfa.org/entry/2017/watson-and-the-shark>
- ❖ Copley, as in Copley Square, was a Boston based artist whose father-in-law owned the tea company the colonists threw into Boston Harbor.
- ❖ He eventually sided with the British in the Revolutionary War and moved to London in 1786 to further his career as a history painter.



Guido Reni, *St. Michael Slaying the Devil*, c. 1636 (Santa Maria della Concezione, Rome)

J.M.W. Turner, (1840). *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. Oil on Canvas, 35 x 48 inches. MFA, Boston.



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) was a Romantic artist (emotional, colorful subjects, beyond the realm of recorded nature) who lived and worked at the peak of the industrial revolution when steam replaced sail, machine power replaced human-power, and wars, political unrest, and social reforms transformed society.

Turner's *Slave Ship* derives from an actual event when in 1783, the *Slave Ship Zong*, threw infected slaves overboard in order to collect insurance money.

J.M.W. Turner, (1840). *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*, details.



- ❖ The same storm that will reek havoc on the slave ship will also drown the slaves, nature is vengeful, something to be feared.
- ❖ The original owner of the painting was John Ruskin, a cultural philosopher of moral codes of behavior.
- ❖ The Slave Ship was purchased by Boston Abolitionist Alice Hooper and donated to the MFA in 1877.

Winslow Homer (1885). *The Fog Warning* (or *Halibut Fishing*). Oil on Canvas, 30-1/4 x 48-1/2 in. MFA, Boston.



Winslow Homer (1885). *The Fog Warning* (or *Halibut Fishing*). Oil on Canvas, 30-1/4 x 48-1/2 in. MFA, Boston. Details.



- ❖ We do not see the fisherman's face. We can't read his emotions, his thoughts. We need to interpret them.
- ❖ He could be us in this universal dread of nature. As the fog rolls in, will he make it safely to his ship?
- ❖ Was it worth it to try and catch so many large fish at what could be his ultimate peril?
- ❖ There is no horizon line.
- ❖ Homer's fisherman personifies the "pure" Yankee fisherman who was always a mythical creature" (Robinson, 1999, p. 144).

Compare Homer's *The Fog Warning* to Silva's *Calm at Sunset*



Francis Augustus Silva (1873). *Calm at Sunset*.
Oil on Canvas. Private Collection. American Waters Exhibit, PEM Museum.



William Homer (1885). *The Fog Warning* (or *Fog Warning*).

Winslow Homer (1894). *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 38 inches. Smithsonian Museum, Washington, DC.



- ❖ As in the *Fog Warning*, Winslow Homer was known for his robust depictions of nature. In *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*, the ocean wages a mighty and relentless assault on a rocky cliff at Prout's Neck, one of the artist's favorite spots on the coast.
- ❖ Note the three small figures at the top right, no match for the mighty winds of the north Atlantic coast.
- ❖ The eternal struggle of survival against the harsh New England landscape is the subject of this simple composition.
- ❖ Freedom from capitalism, war, societal restraints populate Homer's seascapes.

Winslow Homer (1894). *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 38 inches. Smithsonian Museum, Washington, DC.



- ❖ Homer depicts our endless effort to control nature, only to be controlled by nature. The scale of the three figures compared to that of the sea illustrates his point: we are no match for the whims of the northern Atlantic ocean.
- ❖ Homer himself was “not an openly religious person,” but his letters reveal a “hybrid of Protestant faith and secular rationalism shared in this era by New Englanders of his class and education,” [Foster](#)



Three Hebrew Children. Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, circa 300 C.E.

Homer's immediate successor was Rockwell Kent.



- ❖ Painted on Monhegan Island, off the coast of Maine.
- ❖ Hard lines, hard colors, hard weather.
- ❖ The fishermen struggle against the elements much like Homer's fisherman struggles against the fog.
- ❖ More colorful as the new century sees Fauvism and cubism emerge.



Rockwell Kent, *Toilers of the Sea* (1907). Oil on Canvas, 38 x 44.
New Brittan Museum of American Art, CT.

Art critic Henry McBride (1919) Kent goes the end of the world not to except finality, but to see what lays beyond. I crave snow topped mountains it is at the end of the world where something else begins. Kent is a communist, who believes capitalism will end in chaos.

Compare Rockwell Kent *Toilers* to Winslow Homer's *Fog Warning*



Rockwell Kent, *Toilers of the Sea* (1882-1971). Oil on Canvas, 38 x 44.
New Brittan Museum of American Art, CT.



Winslow Homer (1885). *The Fog Warning* (or *Halibut Fishing*). Oil on Canvas. 30-1/4 x 48-1/2 in. MFA, Boston.

Childe Hassam (1890). *Celia Thaxter's Garden, Isles of Shoals, Maine*. Oil on Canvas, 18 x 21 inches. Metropolitan Museum, N.Y.



- ❖ This painting was painted on Appledore Island, one of the Isles of Shoals, which lie ten miles east of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This series portrays the sumptuous wildflower garden cultivated by his friend, poet Celia Thaxter, a garden that provided a marvelous contrast to the rugged terrain of the island itself.
- ❖ It was completed upon Hassam's return to America from France where he studied Impressionist art. After Celia died in 1894, his attention would turn to the wild terrain of the island and away from the cultivated summer scene for which it was briefly famous.

Amy Sherald (2019). *Precious Jewels by the Sea*. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 108 inches.
Hauser +Worth Gallery, N. Y. On view at the PEM, American Waters exhibit.



- ❖ Painted Michelle Obama's official portrait.
- ❖ "I look at America's heart — people, landscapes, and cityscapes — and I see it as an opportunity to add to an American art narrative... I paint because I am looking for versions of myself in art history and in the world."—Amy Sherald
- ❖ She approaches people on the street and asks them to pose for her. She describes her work as non-resistance, a place for black people to just be themselves, minus the connection to resistance.
- ❖ For instance, compare this painting with the many family photos on the beach we see of white families. Those portraits might strike us as "normal" unlike the photos of black families at the beach.



Amy Sherald's narrative has a long history in American art.



J.M.W. Turner, (1840). *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. Oil on Canvas, 35 x 48 inches. MFA, Boston.



James Van der Zee *Society Ladies* (1927). 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.; Gelatin silver print. Cleveland Museum of Art.



Amy Sherald (2019). *Precious Jewels by the Sea*. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 108 inches. Hauser +Worth Gallery, N. Y. On view at the PEM, American Waters exhibit.

Childe Hassam's Appledore Island

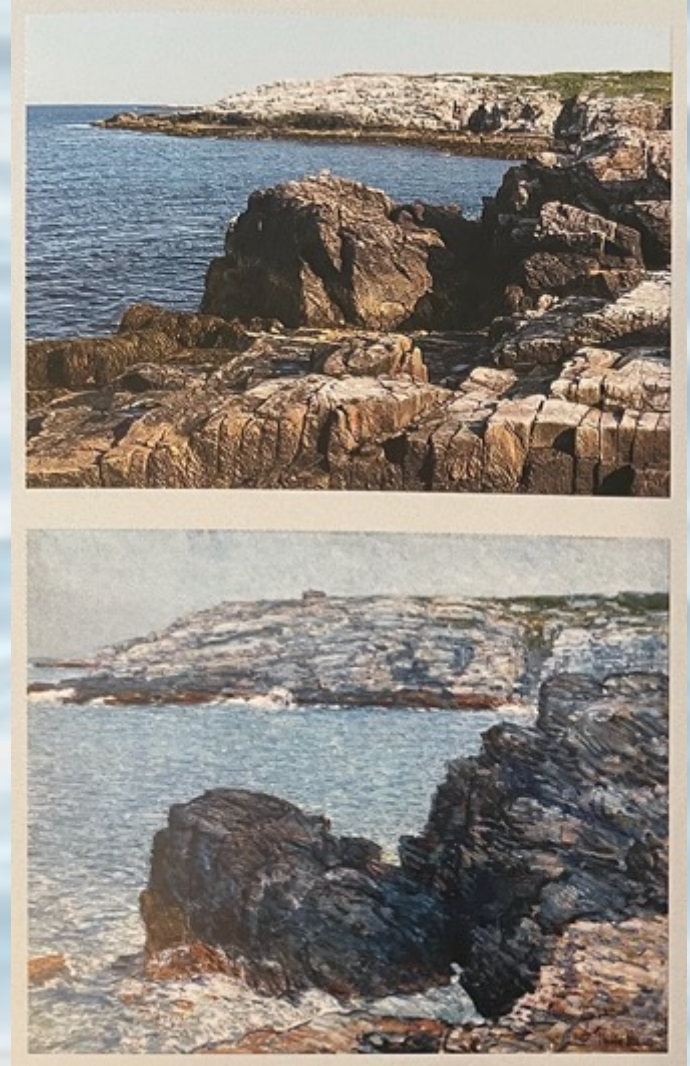


Childe Hassam (1908). *Headlands*. Oil on Canvas, 25 x 29 inches.
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA.



- ❖ Hassam visited Appledore Island every summer between 1882-1916. The island is 9.5 acres, ½ mile long.
- ❖ After Celia Thaxter died in 1894, he turned his attention to the rough landscape of the island.
- ❖ He stayed in the island hotel and painted on the front porch garnering much attention from other guests. The hotel burned down in 1914, ending the summer tourism the island had become famous for.
- ❖ The island has since returned to its raw terrain and is no longer a tourist destination.
- ❖ Despite the many tourists on the island at the time, Hassam rarely includes them in his paintings, preferring to focus on the land and seascapes.
- ❖ Conditions to paint in were harsh-wind, salt, lack of fresh water, insects, and heat/hot sun were a constant problem.
- ❖ His paintings include land, sea, atmosphere in keeping with the current interest in geology.
- ❖ One of the forces was the nor'easter, which chipped away at the traprock in the dikes. This can be seen in the Fogg painting.
- ❖ American Impressionism is much later than in France (1890's compared to 1860's. Hassam's work is closer to the palette and subject of James McNeil Whistler-who was born in Lowell but lived in London-than to Monet by this time.

It is easy to locate the source for Hassam's paintings.



Appledore island Norwegian Cove looking across to Broad Cove-the location where Hassam painted *Headlands*.

Compare Childe Hassam's *Headlands* to Winslow Homer's *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*.



Childe Hassam (1908). *Headlands*. Oil on Canvas, 25 x 29 inches.
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA.



Winslow Homer (1894). *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 38 inches.
Smithsonian Museum, Washington, DC.

Theresa Bernstein (1923). *The Immigrants*. Oil on Canvas, collection of Thomas and Karen Buckley, currently on view at the PEM, *American Waters* exhibit.

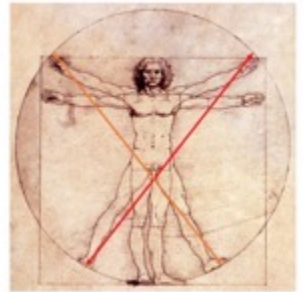
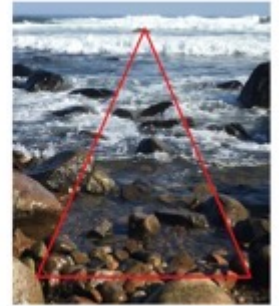


- ❖ This painting captures the experience of traveling to America in steerage class in one of the many large ocean liners that arrived in the port of New York in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- ❖ Bernstein herself immigrated to America on a similar ship.
- ❖ She lived to be 116, painted until she was 112, and was a prolific member of the Jewish Women's artists league of America.
- ❖ Signed her work T. Bernstein to avoid gender bias. One critic admired her for "painting like a man," because "painting like a woman" would be considered a bad thing.
- ❖ Member of the Ash Can school of painting which depicted the poor and underserved in N.Y. and other major cities.
- ❖ Similar to the Slave Ship, The journeys of both immigrants and enslaved people were often overshadowed by images of iconic and triumphant naval engagements and commercial ventures.

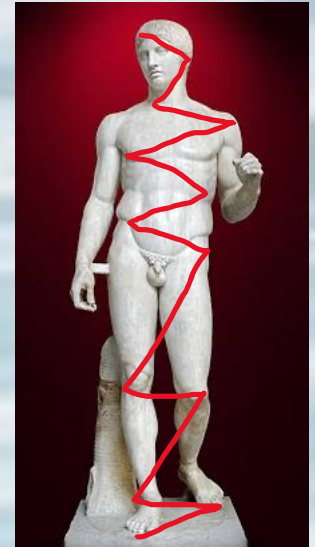
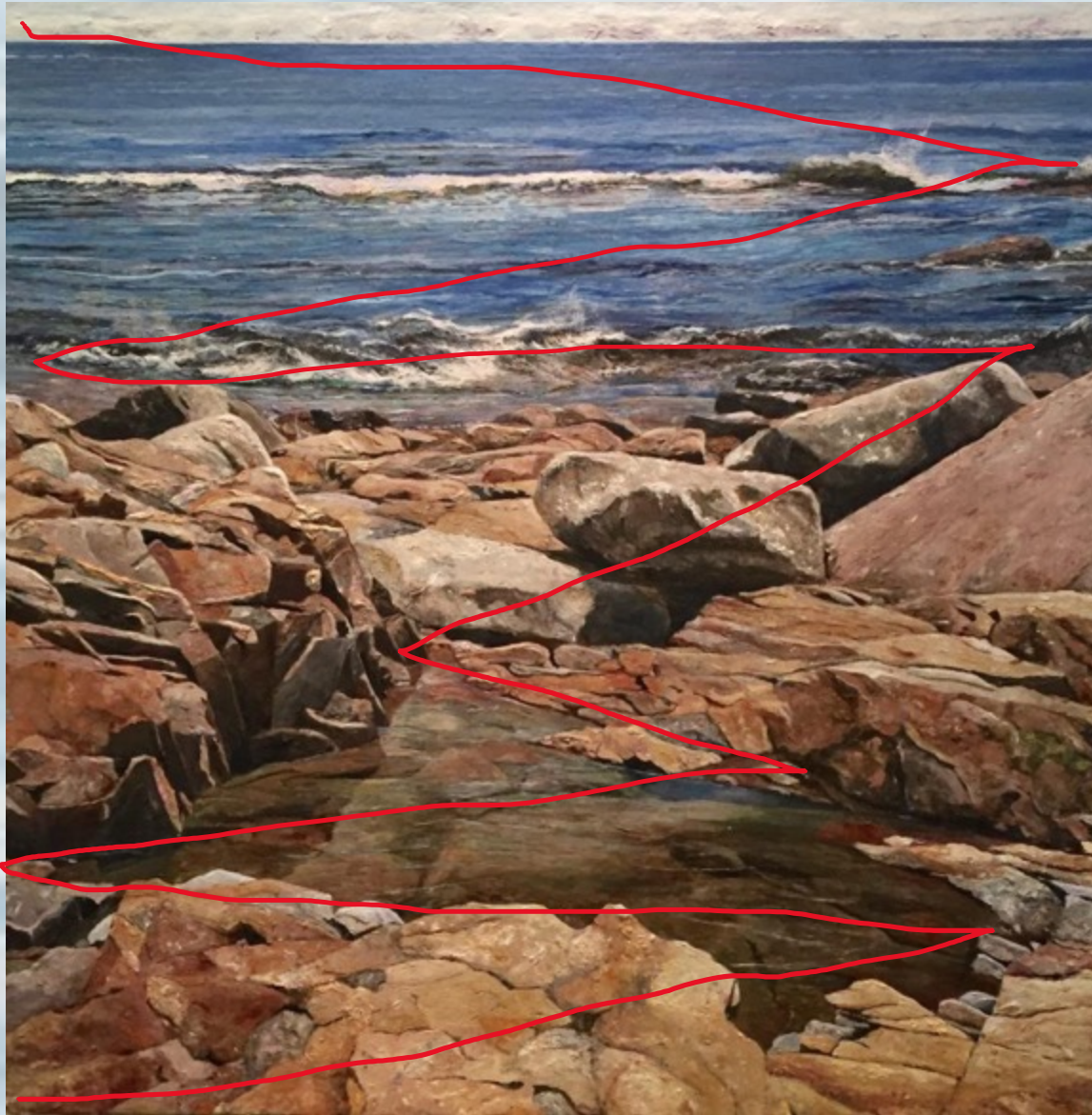
Fitz Henry Lane, *Southern Cross in Boston Harbor*, 1851.
Oil on Canvas, PEM Museum. American Waters Exhibit.



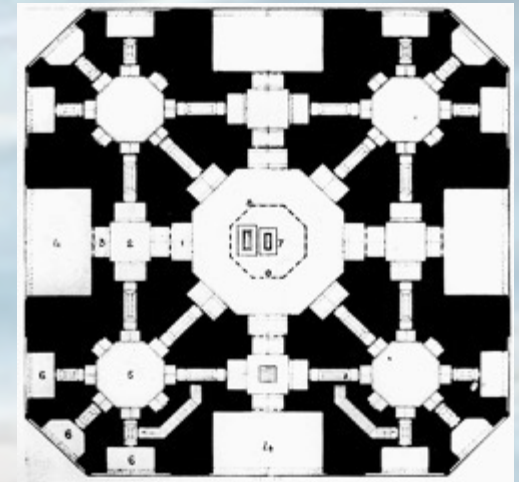
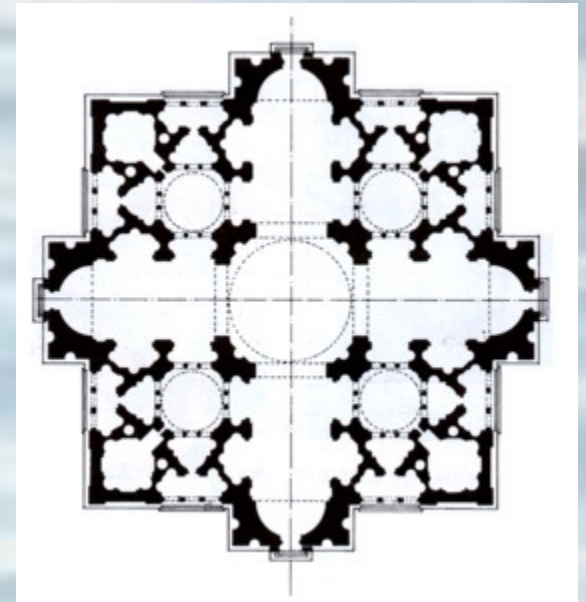
Meg Black (2020). *Resilience*, 40 x 40 x 4 inches. Mixed media. Private collection.



Meg Black, *Rocks and Water as Metaphor for Life's Journey* (2017). 40 x 40 x 4 inches. Mixed media painting.



Meg Black (2020). *Cape Ann Shoreline*, 40 x 40 x 4 inches. Mixed media. U.S. Embassy, Belgrade.



Please join my mailing list

I am working on 6 new seascape paintings 12 x 12 and 16 x 16 inches each. These paintings will be available on my website in late July. Because you're on my email list, you will have access to them before they are made public.

The link to the webpage for this collection is private and only available through this email list.



Meg Black: Artist statement

I am drawn to the north Atlantic shoreline with its harsh terrain, ice cold water, and thunderous crashing waves. Here, rocks are thrown to the shore by an unrelenting tide. This for me is the metaphor for life: we long for smoothness of the water but we are shaped by the steeliness of the rocks. Using an array of textures and colors, I attempt to depict this emotional pull of the sea, and to tell my story using my palette much like a poet uses words.



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The Sea as backdrop for pleasure



- ❖ Probably painted in Lippincott's Nantucket studio.
- ❖ The two women symbolize summer residents out for a stroll while the receding figures are full time residents returning home from their labor.

William Henry Lippincott (1915). *The Marginal Way*. Oil on Canvas. 21.7 x 29.5 in. Vance Jordan Fine Art, N.Y.

Compare Amy Sherald's *Precious Jewels* to Lippincott's *The Marginal Way*.



Amy Sherald (2019). *Precious Jewels by the Sea*. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 108 inches. Hauser +Worth Gallery, N. Y. On view at the PEM, American Waters exhibit.



William Henry Lippincott (1915). *The Marginal Way*. Oil on Canvas. 21.7 x 29.5 in. Vance Jordan Fine Art, N.Y.