Spreading Canvas Navigates Uniquely British Genre of Marine Paintings at the Yale Center for British Art

SPREADING CANVAS: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH MARINE PAINTING  
September 15–December 4, 2016

NEW HAVEN (September 13, 2016) — Spreading Canvas is the first major exhibition to survey the tradition of marine painting that was inextricably linked to Britain’s rise to prominence as a maritime and imperial power and to position the genre at the heart of the burgeoning eighteenth-century British art world.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Britain vied with its main rivals—Holland, Spain, and France—for dominion over the seas. From thundering naval engagements to tranquil coastal scenes; from stormy shipwrecks to detailed views of working life in dockyards and on rivers; and from native shores to the farthest reaches of the globe, marine painting helped to tell the stories of the nation’s successes and disasters. Dominic Serres’s Capture of Chandernagore (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London) depicts a decisive episode in the establishment of British control in India, the capture of the French administrative outpost in Bengal in 1757. British naval ships are shown bombarding the town, one of them flying a red flag, the signal to engage.

By examining marine paintings alongside other media, including preparatory sketches, letters, and spectacular models such as the Coronation, Spreading Canvas illuminates the artistry involved in their making and recovers the meanings they conveyed to eighteenth-century viewers.

The exhibition is arranged in thematic sections within a broadly chronological framework. It begins with the arrival in England of the Willem van de Veldes (father and son), the Dutch painters who were given a studio at the Queen’s House in Greenwich and paid to depict “sea fights.” Willem van de Velde the Elder made studies of British naval vessels and maneuvers. He also made panoramic drawings of events such as the firework display on the Thames that celebrated the coronation of James II, in 1685, when according to one contemporary observer, “London seemed to have disembogued and emptied its Inhabitants into the Boats and onto the Shoars of the Thames.” The sheets that make up one of those views, long separated in the collections of the Yale Center for British Art and the National Maritime Museum, are reunited in this exhibition.
In the early eighteenth century, the prolific oeuvre of the Van de Velde studio—their hundreds of drawings, in particular, but also prints after their paintings—were collected and used as models by British artists. Marine painters such as Peter Monamy, Charles Brooking, and Samuel Scott were central to the art world that included William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, and Richard Wilson; their works were shown together at the first public displays of art in London in the 1740s and at the first public exhibitions in the 1760s. In Spreading Canvas, Scott’s fascinatingly detailed The Thames and the Tower of London (1771) is shown alongside selections from a series of his large sketches made along the river. His connection with Hogarth is demonstrated in an illustration from The Five Days’ Peregrination, which recounts a rowdy outing taken by the two artists and their friends. The illustration shows Scott sketching ships at anchor in the river while his companions converse.

Naval officers commissioned artists to paint the battles in which they had fought, and sometimes made their fortune. The exhibition includes annotated sketches and letters that reveal the ways in which officers often worked with artists to ensure that the details of events—the number of ships involved, the direction of the wind, the damage sustained to masts, spars, rigging, and sails at a given point in the action—were accurately depicted in the finished paintings. These were the conditions under which the British navy achieved its victories, and the paintings would represent these victories for posterity.

Samuel Scott’s Vice Admiral Sir George Anson’s Victory off Cape Finisterre (1749), still in its original trophy frame, is one of a suite of paintings by the artist that depict events in the illustrious career of Admiral George Anson. It includes a wealth of visual detail that convinces the viewer of its accuracy but also compresses the events of the action such that a narrative unfolding over several hours appears in a single, unified painting. The painting is featured in a section of the exhibition inspired by a letter written by Anson’s wife, Lady Elizabeth Yorke Anson, to her sister-in-law. It describes the arrangement at Shugborough, the house belonging to Anson’s elder brother, of objects relating to Anson’s exploits; “[T]he whole will be a kind of history,” writes Lady Anson. The exhibition evokes the arrangement at Shugborough through a display of objects listed in her letter: Scott’s paintings of Anson’s naval victories; the model of the Centurion, the ship in which Anson sailed around the world in 1740–44; and a set of prints published in 1748 that illustrate the account of Anson’s voyage.

Through unique groupings of objects like these, the exhibition reconstructs the full array of representational modes—pictorial, planimetric, narrative, and plastic—that were deployed throughout the century to represent the maritime exploits of the nation. Moreover, Shugborough not only provides a rare example of the ways in which marine paintings were displayed in domestic settings but also highlights the frequent role played by naval wives, specifically in the commissioning and display of marine paintings and in the promotion of their husbands’ reputations.
However, their insistence on accuracy and the convincing level of detail have caused these paintings to be treated more as reportage than as works of art. By including examples of the sketches, plans, and textual accounts that underlay the finished works, *Spreading Canvas* reveals the processes through which marine painters constructed depictions of highly complex events that had taken place over great distances and lengths of time. The exhibition includes the materials gathered by the marine painter Nicholas Pocock as preparation for the Battle of the Glorious First of June in 1794, the first naval battle of the French Revolutionary War. The resulting, extraordinarily grim, portrayal of one of the bloodiest engagements of the battle, eloquently evokes the heroic demise of the commander of the *Brunswick*, his bodily sacrifice translated into a struggle to the death between two ships.

*Spreading Canvas* also examines the interest of artists and the then print-buying and exhibition-going public in views of British coastlines, the first line of defense for an island nation, and of colonial and imperial forts and settlements. Charles Brooking’s *Shipping in the English Channel* (ca. 1755) is both a celebration of British sea power and trade in a location of geopolitical significance and a lyrical evocation of early morning light and atmosphere.

The exhibition concludes with marine painters’ responses to the artistic revolutions of the 1790s in which early modern ways of depicting and knowing became eclipsed by new modes of representation and exhibition. These included the panorama and other forms of large-scale, popular scenic entertainment; public exhibitions devoted to single works of art; and the arrival on the scene of J. M. W. Turner, who in responding to his British contemporaries as well as his Dutch predecessors, explored new ways of engaging artistically with the sea.

Drawn primarily from the collections of the Yale Center for British Art and augmented by unparalleled loans from public and private collections, *Spreading Canvas* demonstrates that marine painting was both ubiquitous and fundamental to eighteenth-century British culture.

**CREDITS AND PUBLICATION**

*Spreading Canvas: Eighteenth-Century British Marine Painting* has been organized by the Yale Center for British Art in partnership with the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, and curated by Eleanor Hughes, Deputy Director for Art & Program at the Walters Art Museum. The organizing curator at the Center is Matthew Hargraves, Chief Curator of Art Collections and Head of Collections Information and Access.
The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated book, edited by Eleanor Hughes and containing essays by Hughes, Richard Johns, Christine Riding, Catherine Roach, and Geoff Quilley, and contributions by Sophie Lynford, John McAleer, and Pieter van der Merwe. The volume has been published by the Center in association with Yale University Press.

OPENING LECTURE, September 14, 5:30 pm
Brave Tars and Glorious Commanders: Painting and Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Eleanor Hughes, Deputy Director for Art & Program at the Walters Art Museum.

EXHIBITION-RELATED PROGRAMS

FILMS (LECTURE HALL)
September 17, 2 pm
The Bounty (1984)
Directed by Roger Donaldson (rated PG; 132 minutes)
This historical drama tells the story of the most famous mutiny in the history of the sea, with Captain Bligh’s cruelty leading to chaos on his ship. When he is forced into a tiny lifeboat with his loyalists, he begins another epic voyage.

September 24, 2 pm
Mr. Turner (2014)
Directed by Mike Leigh (rated R; 150 minutes)
This critically acclaimed film examines the last twenty-five years of the life of the great British landscape painter J. M. W. Turner, who is considered one of the most important figures in the history of British art.

October 1, 2 pm
Directed by Peter Weir (rated PG-13; 138 minutes)
A British frigate and French warship stalk each other off the coast of South America during the Napoleonic Wars.
About the Yale Center for British Art

The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929), the collection reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center's collections include more than 2,000 paintings and 250 sculptures, 20,000 drawings and watercolors, 40,000 prints and 35,000 rare books and manuscripts. More than 40,000 volumes supporting research in British art and related fields are available in the Center's library.

Visit the institution online at britishart.yale.edu.

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Images: Charles Brooking, *Shipping in the English Channel* (detail), ca. 1755, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Unknown maker, *model of the Coronation*, 1677, boxwood, gold leaf, japanning, mica, brass, and varnish, The Kriegerstein Collection; Willem van de Velde the Younger, *Sea Battle of the Anglo-Dutch Wars* (detail), ca. 1700, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Samuel Scott, *The Thames and the Tower of London Supposedly on the King's Birthday* (detail), 1771, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Pierre-Charles Canot, *print made after Thomas Milton, after John Cleveley the Younger, Geometrical Plan of his Majesty's Dockyard, near Plymouth* (detail), 1756, line engraving on paper, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Dominic Serres, *The Capture of Chandernagore, March 1757* (detail), oil on canvas, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, Greenwich Hospital Collection; Nicholas Pocock, *The Brunswick and the Vengeur du Peuple at the Battle of the First of June, 1794* (detail), oil on canvas, 1795, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, Caird Collection; Charles Brooking, *A Lugger and a Smack in Light Airs* (detail), undated, oil on copper, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Samuel Atkins, *Men-of-War and other Shipping on the Thames (most probably at Deptford)* (detail), undated, watercolor and pen and black ink and graphite on paper, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; J. M. W. Turner, *The Victory Returning from Trafalgar, in Three Positions* (detail), ca. 1806, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; John Cleveley the Younger, *A Calm Day in the Anchorage* (detail), undated, watercolor, graphite, and pen and gray ink on paper, Yale Center for British Art, The U Collection, in appreciation of Choh Shiu and Man Foo U, loving parents, and Dorothea and Frank Cockett, dear friends; Peter Monamy, *An English Royal Yacht Standing Offshore in a Calm* (detail), ca. 1730, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, The U Collection, in appreciation of Choh Shiu and Man Foo U, loving parents, and Dorothea and Frank Cockett, dear friends; Nicholas Pocock, *The Ranger, Private Ship of War, with her Prizes* (detail), 1786, pen and black ink over graphite with gray wash on paper, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Yale Center for British Art, exterior view (fall), photograph by Richard Caspole.