



## Coastal Scene and Transient Dream: Washington Allston Revealed

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### Abstract

*Washington Allston (1779-1843) is known as the father of the Romantic period in American Art. He is best known in art history for the struggles that defined his late career. In this paper, I introduce an unknown painting from the beginning of his career: Coast Scene on the Mediterranean (1810). Allston painted Coast Scene in Boston after his return from artistic study in Europe. The simple sunrise scene is rife with allusions to classical tales which, I argue, cryptically narrate Allston's frustrations with American reception of his art, and may communicate his intentions to leave America for good. These references show that the sun may have set on Allston's artistic dreams in America. Allston utilized metaphoric themes to narrate his personal story. To complete my research, I examined the painting in person, reviewed letters written in the time period from the artist, and drew on the knowledge of 50+ books or journal articles.*

In writing about Washington Allston's (1779-1843) *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean* (1810) in an 1839 *Salem Massachusetts Paper* article, Miss Elizabeth Peabody lavished praise on the artist (Figure 1):

I never saw such triumphs of individual genius as in the subduing of the magnificent Scene on the Mediterranean to the Allstonian tone... Looking the sun itself in the face, he commands him to veil his proud beams and acknowledge a master.<sup>1</sup>

*Coast Scene* is an early work of Allston's, and the artist's name is largely known among art historians for later works, including his *Belshazzar's Feast* (1817-1843) and his *Elijah in the Desert* (1818). His *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean* is largely overlooked. Allston was an ambitious artist who sought to become a master in the United States. He wanted to bring the rich, artistic styles of Europe back to America after his grand tour, and these goals fueled his career. Allston's *Coast Scene* is a product of his ambitions. This painting shows his use of an American-European style that drew on the works of other great artists he studied in his European travels, notably Claude Vernet (1714-1789), Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), and Henry Fuseli (1741-1825). Allston included references to classical stories in the painting, alluding to trials within his own life and foreshadowing his departure from America, which occurred shortly after completing *Coast Scene*. Allston's early ambitions were not accommodated by the American public, prompting his return to England. *Coast Scene* has not received previous detailed analysis; therefore, this article explores the work as a significant, early, and ambitious painting. The painting reflects the artist's response to this collision of ambition and rejection, through what I analyze as a carefully coded narrative within this painting, consisting of references to other artists and styles. This rich reading of a little studied painting from his early career raises the question of whether Allston's later works might include similar coded personal symbolisms.

Though scholarship on this painting is relatively slim, the work of Allston experts and enthusiasts such as David Bjelajac, Diana Strazdes, William Gerdts and Theodore Stebbins, and Noelle Rice have allowed me to build on conventional understandings of Allston's *oeuvre* in order to interpret a new and exciting meaning in the artist's work. Furthermore, I have used parts of Allston's biography from his nephew's 1892 book, *The Life and Letters of Washington Allston*, as well as primary source documents written by Allston to friends, such as his correspondence with John Vanderlyn (1776-1852), to piece together the context of this work within Allston's timeline. This scholarship has ultimately allowed me to develop new ideas and to uncover the light of Allston's *Coast Scene* in a way never before discussed.

*Coast Scene on The Mediterranean* features a sunrise in the early morning on the coast of what is presumably Tuscany.<sup>2</sup> A sunrise shines from the middle of the picture, with distinct rays emanating from the center of the light.<sup>3</sup> Fishermen are busy in the foreground selling their morning catch. A merchant holds up his fish from a pile, and a group of two huddled women with head cloths stare, unimpressed, at the man and fish. A shirtless man sits on a barrel to the left of these women, smoking a pipe. In the bottom right of the painting, a horse cart

passes. Standing with a red cap, a man gestures from within the cart to a woman who wears a red empress dress, and sorts fish from her basket. At right, another man guides a white horse, while counting on his fingers. The expanse of ocean is filled with fishing boats, each with fishermen inside. In the very back right of the painting, a war galley is shooting its cannon, with another cannon-laden ship following close behind.<sup>4</sup> The only figures who notice the maritime battle are the merchants on a docked ship, two of whom sport turbans with feathers; they point toward the action in the distance. The cannon fire is so minute in the overall composition of the painting that it can easily be missed. The sky is pierced with the sun's rays, shimmering in shades of purple, pink, and yellow. Majestic clouds fill the upper half of the painting, with dramatic use of light and shadow. The emphasis of light falls at center, lighting the fish upheld by the fish-seller, while the other figures are cloaked in silhouette.

The painting projects an optimistic air, achieved by the warm colors and play of light. The eye is first drawn to the spectacle of sunrise. Then, the eye moves to the upheld fish, draped in light. The fisherman who calls for our attention by holding up his fish remains in shadow. The composition produces a sense of calm. One can almost miss the painting's action altogether and, instead, get lost in the majesty of the sunrise. The figures possess great poise and stillness. None of them notice the "boom" of the cannon, and, instead, remain contented in their placidity.

The timeline of Allston's grand tour is important in understanding the context of this painting. In 1810, Allston had just completed a lengthy seven year European tour to develop his artistic techniques. After graduating from Harvard, he sold his family's Charleston, SC, estate in 1801 and financed a trip to England with this money.<sup>5</sup> There, he was admitted to the Royal Academy and studied art under Benjamin West (1738-1820) and Henry Fuseli (1741-1845).<sup>6</sup> From Fuseli, Allston learned about "poetic timelessness," a concept through which costume and décor did not restrict a work to any specific historical period. Equally important was the precise observation of nature.<sup>7</sup> Allston also got to study the paintings of J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), both of whom were members of the Royal Academy.<sup>8</sup> After his time in England, Allston went to continental Europe in 1803, studying mostly in Paris and Rome, accompanied by his friend, and fellow aspiring American painter, John Vanderlyn.<sup>9</sup> Allston was most interested in copying the works of great painters to learn their techniques, with particular interest in the Venetian masters such as Titian (1488-1576).<sup>10</sup> He also became familiar with painters such as Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), and Claude Vernet (1714-1789).<sup>11</sup>

Allston looked to a number of artists as inspiration for painting this particular coastal scene. He must have seen paintings by Vernet while in Paris or Rome.<sup>12</sup> Vernet was a French maritime painter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who painted mostly Italian themes, which were inspired by his own grand tour.<sup>13</sup> His paintings were typically horizontal, featuring a wide expanse of sky, dramatic plays of light, and a neoclassical flair.

A notable comparison to Allston's *Coast Scene* is Vernet's *View of a Mediterranean Harbor with Fishermen and a Vessel* (1773) (Figure 2). Both feature a sunrise off of the Mediterranean coast, with a shallow horizon line and fishermen hauling in their catch. The figures are dressed in idealized clothes, and there are even a few turban-clad men with smoking pipes. War ships float in the harbor and in the distance, and a hidden scene of calamity unfolds discreetly in the right of the frame, just as in Allston's. A ship fire rages, but the viewer might miss it within the calm scene. The sky is filled with clouds and warm yellow light, but the painting focuses more on the action of the harbor. The figures also appear still, draped in silhouette. Such similarities make one wonder if Allston explicitly tried to incorporate ideas he had gleaned from viewing Vernet's work into his *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean*. He would have seen works by Vernet in the Louvre or elsewhere. If this particular painting was not one that Allston specifically saw, it is characteristic of Vernet's work, and its influence is evident in *Coast Scene*.<sup>14</sup>

Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) almost certainly was another influence on Allston's painting.<sup>15</sup> Lorrain was known as a landscape painter and crafted imaginative scenes.<sup>16</sup> Lorrain painted a whole host of port scenes, most with a sunrise or sunset. Most of these paintings were exactly the same in compositional formula with very little variance. Lorrain's *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (1648) contains elements that may have inspired Allston (Figure 3). The sunrise is the obvious comparison, and war ships float in the distance. The theme of a journey is a focus of the painting, with the Queen and her entourage boarding the ship. Similarities in their depictions of the sky show the likely influence of Lorrain on Allston. Lorrain's paintings were in the Louvre, and it is likely that Allston saw them while he stayed there to copy paintings.

Allston was surely influenced by his contemporaries as he studied their artwork across Europe.<sup>17</sup> One of his contemporaries was the British artist J.M.W. Turner. Turner was also enrolled at the Royal Academy beginning in 1789, and he opened a gallery in 1804.<sup>18</sup> Turner became a full Academician in 1802.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that Turner helped to instruct Allston, since he taught there while Allston was a student. Both are considered to have studied under Henry Fuseli.<sup>20</sup> Fuseli's strong belief of "poetic timelessness" was diffused at the academy and seems to appear in both Turner's and Allston's paintings. Independently of Allston, Turner completed his *Sun Rising Through Vapor* in London in 1807 (Figure 4). In this painting, we also see a sunrise, fishing ships, peasants energetically animated, and a war ship passing in the distance. A second warship further away fires its cannon. There is also a woman sorting fish, and many men wearing red hats, as in Allston's *Coast Scene*. Though the figures are similar, the two paintings are most similar in their concept of "timelessness." It appears that both Turner and Allston omitted any flags or key indications of time or place. This could be the reason why the view from *Coast Scene* omits any landmarks of the port, even though Livorno was the only coastal area that Allston is known to have visited on his grand tour. These features of "poetic timelessness" can be seen in both paintings, creating an enduring scene that viewers are able to enjoy in any era.<sup>21</sup>

After studying many great artists in Europe on his grand tour, Allston was equipped with the artistic knowledge to pursue his career back in America. With his grand tour completed, Allston waited in the port of Livorno in Tuscany for his ship to Boston. In *Coast Scene*, he would later paint this same view as a poetic recollection, and here he would combine both elements of nature and references to other artists' work. Allston wrote the following words to his old artist friend, John Vanderlyn, on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1808, while he was in Livorno waiting to go back to Boston. He had a few weeks to wait on the ship, and it appears he was passing time by reflecting on the artistic knowledge he had gained up to this point:

Art will do a great deal; but nature has done more. The first may teach a man to draw a correct outline; I mean after a model: may teach him to put figures together, so that they appear neither awkward nor embarrassed; to dispose of light & shadow, so as to correspond with common reason: but to the last alone is reserved the province of feeling & expressing the beauty of form; of painting the soul, of giving life & motion to a group; & expression, & harmony, & magic to the mystery of the chiaro'scuro.<sup>22</sup>

When Allston writes "art will do a great deal," he makes reference to the importance of composition in constructing a painting. He believes that the study of art is important because it serves as a model for the figures and light. As these thoughts occurred to him, he likely considered existing art as models for his *Coast Scene*. This is why the compositional elements seen in Lorrain and Vernet, such as the horizontal harbor scenes and dramatic plays of light, are seen in compositional parallel to Allston's. He also writes that "nature has done more," noting that it has a more important role in artistic expression and emulation of beauty. According to Allston's own words, when conveying the feelings of mood on the coast of this shore, he probably noted them first-hand in nature. Though the figures may appear formulaic due to thoughtful artistic construction, the personal details are ones that he probably saw onsite, in nature. This may also be true with the lighting and shadow of the sunrise; though it follows formulaic representation learned from other artists, the feelings of mood were likely conveyed through Allston's direct observation of the scene in nature. Therefore, his painting is a fusion of artistic study of personal observation, and each served as inspiration to him. Reading Allston's words from the time of his painting *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean* allows us to see directly into the artist's mind. He believed the combination of both contained the secret of feeling, beauty, expression, magic, and mystery, showing the soul. These thoughts would have gone through his head as he gazed at the Livorno port, taking in the scenery and preparing for this journey back across the sea.

As Allston wrote that art served as a model to "teach him to put figures together," it is likely that his figures within *Coast Scene* were modeled after other preexisting artistic examples. Key foreground figures hold important clues for interpretation through the lens of a previous model. The figures are Italian

peasants rendered in the neoclassical style. Here Allston adds figure types he may have seen on the tour, but makes them idealized. The most dynamic figure appears in classical pose: the man with the fish (Figure 5). He stands in contrapposto, pointing to the catch with his right hand. His knee is popped and his shoulders slant. With his illuminated fish in his left hand, his head is turned to the pair of women.

This figural composition may make reference to the famous classical story “The Choice of Hercules.”<sup>23</sup> Hercules comes to a fork in the road. One path is direct yet unpleasant, and the second is meandering but beautiful. Hercules is synchronously confronted with two women: Vice and Virtue. Vice offers to bring Hercules through a life of joy and pleasure on the meandering road, while Virtue offers Hercules a life where all he labors for comes to fruition on the straight path. Hercules chooses Virtue and a life of fulfilling work.<sup>24</sup> This was a popular subject in European art, and Allston would have encountered it on his travels, as well as in his classical and artistic education. He likely would have known *Hercules Rejects Pleasure and Chooses Virtue* (1710), by Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, and its accompanying theoretical text. Published in 1713, the earl’s *A Notion of the Historical Draught of Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules* commented on the importance of a historically accurate and moral painting, and highlighted nature’s consequential role in projecting moral virtue.<sup>25</sup> Painters of Allston’s time continually looked to this text for instruction, as it enumerated the formula required for a perfect history painting. Since morality was of key importance to history painting at the time of Allston’s instruction, it is likely that he used both the figures and natural elements within the painting to project an emphasis on virtue. Shaftesbury’s *Choice of Hercules* influenced instruction in history painting, so it could have influenced Allston’s inclusions in *Coast Scene*.

Benjamin West painted his own *Choice of Hercules Between Virtue and Pleasure* in 1764 (Figure 6), responding to the model of the *Choice of Hercules* by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1655) painted in 1636 (Figure 7).<sup>26</sup> Poussin’s work was later purchased by English nobleman Henry Hoare II.<sup>27</sup> West and the Hoare family were associates, so West surely knew the original.<sup>28</sup> His version of the *Choice of Hercules* bears striking similarities to Poussin’s, such as the contrapposto stance of Hercules, the strip of wrapped brown cloth, and virtue’s upward gesture. The clothing is also similar, with Virtue’s white robe, headband, and Vice’s mustard robe. This version of the *Choice of Hercules* by West then stayed in West’s collection, and would have been there when Allston studied under him at the Royal Academy in 1824.<sup>29</sup> I believe that Allston saw West’s version. Given the relationship between the Hoare family, West, and the Royal Academy, it is also possible that Allston saw the original Poussin. Allston likely used West’s and/or Poussin’s version to guide his painting.

After seeing these paintings, it seems Allston was inspired to incorporate elements within his own painting. There are a few obvious similarities between Poussin’s Hercules and Allston’s fish man. The pose is similar, with the left-arm

extended and the right arm pulled up at the hip. Allston's fish-seller also holds a drape of brown cloth on his hip. Though there are similarities, it is not a perfect comparison. Allston's figure is clothed and lacks the classical grace of Hercules. In Allston's version, rather than Vice and Virtue who look on him judgmentally, Hercules chooses an illuminated fish, touting it to the sky in what appears to be a joke on the classical story. In French, the word for fish is "poisson." The figure standing in for Hercules is here holding up a "poisson," perhaps in reference to the artist "Poussin," notable for the connection to his famed *Choice of Hercules* painting.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the fish selection falls to the two women, and this further accentuates the joke by reversing gender roles.

Just in front of this group of figures, a man sits on a barrel, staring somberly off in thought while smoking a pipe. The figure is not looking at anyone specifically, yet broods intensely. It is striking to compare Allston's man-with-pipe to Vanderlyn's *Caius Marius Amid the Ruins of Carthage* (1807) (Figure 8).<sup>31</sup> Vanderlyn was a close friend of Allston on his grand tour. They were travel companions, and had neighboring studios in Rome.<sup>32</sup> They likely influenced each other's artistic styles. Vanderlyn's painting shows the general Caius Marius, who had saved Rome in the past, exiled to Africa. The people of Rome, whom he loved, had rejected him. He sits at the ruins of Carthage, representative of his individual ruin.<sup>33</sup> Vanderlyn completed this painting while in Europe, with Allston nearby. There are a few obvious similarities: Allston's figure raises his right hand to his mouth, while his right leg is crossed over the knee. This mimics Vanderlyn's Caius Marius, though Vanderlyn's figure crosses his leg at the ankle. A fold of white cloth on the figure's right mimics the tunic that Caius Marius wears. The strongest comparison is the intense brooding thought that both figures display. This inclusion of Caius Marius could have been a deliberate nod to Vanderlyn, or simply a shade of Allston's humor.<sup>34</sup>

Allston was deeply thoughtful and contemplated the composition of this painting extensively. A friend of Allston commented about his contemplative nature during his time abroad: "The pleasure he derives from his own thoughts is so great that he seems to forget there is anything to do but to think."<sup>35</sup> I believe that the painter-poet was more thoughtful and deliberate than just including these visual references in jest.

Allston had studied across Europe, gaining painting techniques that he believed would push the frontier of art in the United States. Upon his return to Boston, it soon became clear that there was no market for his more ambitious art. There was a market for portraits, and sometimes for religious scenes, but not much else. He was forced into portraiture and confronted with the reality that the appreciation for art was starkly different in America than in Europe. Allston despised painting portraits, and he wanted to be a history painter.<sup>36</sup> Such scenes of imagination may have isolated him from his Boston patrons and made his art unsellable.<sup>37</sup> Allston left Boston only three years after he arrived and went back to London with his wife in 1811. Mrs. Anna Lowell wrote of the artist's departure,

“As we have few or no purchasers for such pictures as his, he will soon go to England, where I hope the sunshine of patronage may await his labors.”<sup>38</sup> Allston knew that his art was underappreciated. This must have been deeply frustrating to him. He was one of the most qualified and trained artists in the United States, but his only employment was portraiture. Perhaps Allston saw himself as Caius Marius, sitting in exile in a place that had no appreciation for his talents. The man with the pipe in Allston’s *Coast Scene* looks reminiscent of Allston (Figure 9). The contemplative brooding figure of Caius Marius could be a fitting double of Allston, lost in reverie on his life’s career. Could Allston have intended this resemblance?

When he painted this work in 1810, he faced a difficult choice. It appears from his compositional choices in *Coast Scene* that Allston had already decided. This can be traced by turning again to the contemplative man. He is grouped together with the figures who replay *The Choice of Hercules*. In the composition, the *Choice of Hercules* plays out slightly behind the sitting man, as if he is pondering the decision. Allston must decide between vice and virtue. Which will lead his path in America?

Before beginning his grand tour, he wrote to his mother: “I am more attached to [painting] than ever; and am determined, if resolution and perseverance will affect it, to be the first painter, at least, from America.”<sup>39</sup> This quotation underlines that Allston’s ambitions far exceeded average portraiture. Dismissing the work of his American predecessors, he set out to be the first great artist from America, bringing the style of fine European art to the country. Vice meant that Allston could do what is easy and live a prosperous life by painting dull portraits for an eager market. Virtue meant that he could labor to forge a straight path of artistic excellence in the States, and toil to influence a cultural appreciation for his art. When faced with the choice of either of these dim options, Allston made a different choice altogether: He took the fish! He had no plan to stay in America. He went back across the ocean to England where his art would have merit. The fish is a creature of the ocean, and Allston anticipates the travel over the water with his sunrise. Like this fish, Allston will navigate toward a better horizon. If we allow fish “poisson” to stand in for the artist “Poussin,” Allston’s choice is metaphoric, and it could be that he chooses a career in history painting like that of the European master.

Having navigated back home to Boston after the grand tour, Allston finished *Coast Scene* while in Boston. Some viewers skipped across the deeper meanings of the figures altogether, and instead fixated on the painting’s sunrise. The inclusion of the strong sunrise feature may also contain meanings for the greater interpretation of the painting. Leonard Jarvis, a friend and former Harvard classmate to Allston, wrote to R.H. Dana, mentioning his personal surprise that Allston had painted a sunrise:



On my return from Europe, in 1810, I found him in Devonshire Street, about a stone's throw from State Street. He here painted a landscape of American scenery and a sunrise, of which your brother said to me, two or three years ago, in speaking of Allston's love for his bed in the morning, that he had often said that Allston must be a genius, since he could paint what he had never seen. I told Ned that this picture afforded proof positive that Allston had never seen the sun rise, for if he had he would never have painted the reflection of the sun in the water widening as it approached the foreground.<sup>40</sup>

The observation of Jarvis makes one question how important accuracy was to Allston's painting. Allston's brother, William, also lived in Boston. William came to see the painting and, in a teasing way, was surprised that Allston was able to paint a sunrise, since he always slept his mornings away.<sup>41</sup> These observations may hint at a deeper meaning to the sunrise than the surface-level questions of natural accuracy.

Some viewers questioned whether the painting was actually a sunrise or a sunset. In a letter written on July 25, 1826, sixteen years after Allston completed the work, Mr. H. Pickering gushes over the painting, "The sun is past sinking, or has part sunk below the horizon—I believe it has not quite disappeared. But with what grandeur he sinks! Under what a magnificent sky does he appear to be sinking to [sic] upon!"<sup>42</sup> The museum file on the painting also describes the view as a sunset over the Tyrrhenian (Tuscan) sea.<sup>43</sup>

Here it must be stated that Allston was only documented to have visited the Italian coast at the city of Livorno, shown in a letter written to Vanderlyn while Allston stayed for a number of weeks. Though he could have visited coastal areas elsewhere, his time in Livorno is his only known extended stay at an Italian coastal city. Allston's tour through Europe is documented as follows: Low Countries, Paris, Lucerne, Turin, Florence, Siena, Rome, Livorno. His travel between the Italian cities was probably done on roads inland, which was typical of the grand tour.<sup>44</sup> Allston painted a collection of Italian landscapes from his travels, and all the scenes include mountains: *Romantic Landscape* (1804), *Landscape with a Lake* (1804), *Diana on a Chase* (1805), *Italian Landscape* (1810), and *Alpine Landscape* (1810). In these examples, Allston likely painted mountain scenes because it was the scenery on his travels.<sup>45</sup> Allston probably stayed inland in the hills as he travelled, and he may never have seen the coast on an extended stay until the end of his trip. Having reached the end of his journey, Allston stayed in Livorno for around six weeks, and would have had ample time to view different angles from around the port as he waited on a ship.<sup>46</sup> He probably took sketches to prepare for a later painting, so that he could recreate this Italian coast as a model for works like *Coast Scene*. His coast scene does not include landmarks which identify the view as distinctly from Livorno. It appears this omission of identifying factors was a specific device used by Allston to create a sense of poetic timelessness within his painting. Specific identifiers to the port, such as a

lighthouse or the town wall, would have distracted from the timelessness Allston sought to convey.

Though period viewers were unsure if the scene was a sunrise or sunset, it is important to note that their confusion may be credible. This double meaning of sunrise versus sunset could be useful for the larger meaning Allston sought to craft. Allston sat at Livorno for a number of weeks awaiting passage back to Boston, and with his improved painting skills, he felt certain of a bright future. Inspired by the view, Allston likely made a sketch of the view or the different fishermen and boats while he waited there, though no sketches or studies are known. The fishermen are sorting and selling their fish, an activity that usually occurs in the morning instead of the evening. This would seem to indicate that the scene take place during sunrise. However, the port of Livorno faces west, so Allston was never able to see a sunrise here (Figure 10). A westward-facing sunrise is directionally impossible. This calls into question the meaning that Allston wishes to convey. Could Allston have intended this view to include a double meaning of sunrise and sunset? In the context of Allston's life, was the sun rising or setting?

As Allston waited in Livorno, it is likely that his journey back home weighed on him. It was not a simple thing to take a ship across the Atlantic in the 1800s. Nevertheless, Allston probably felt optimistic to return home to see his family and develop his career as an ambitious painter in the United States. An optimistic mood is conveyed through the sun rising across the Tuscan sea. Though the Tuscan coast is westward facing, it could be that the sun is shown rising across the sea- from the area of Boston. When Allston waited in Livorno, his prosperity and happiness seemed secured in America, since he aspired to become a successful professional painter along the lines of his Academician associates. The sun was rising on the next chapter of his life, much as in his painting. The sun is placed in the west, rising from America. Could Allston have intended such a meaning in his sunrise?

However, as previously mentioned, Allston felt that his fortunes were not in his favor once he had returned to Boston, and, importantly, *Coast Scene* was painted in Boston. His paintings were not selling, and his artistic style was underappreciated. He had failed in his mission of bringing the refinements of European art into the culture of America. He likely knew this by the time he created *Coast Scene* in 1810, because he left just a year later. The brooding nature of the man with the pipe, possibly metaphorical for Caius Marius, could convey that Allston is a ruined man. The coastal view from Livorno may represent the earlier time in Allston's life when he still dreamed to be a great American painter. Now an embittered man, the sun sets on Livorno, a representation of Allston's past dreams. His time in Boston has concluded. Could this be another possible reading of Allston's manipulated sunset?

It seems that the public in America had a greater appreciation for Allston after he left Boston for England the second time. Word had crossed the seas that

had been elected as an associate of the Royal Academy in 1818, and it was while he was abroad that the public began to truly praise his artistry. *The Port-Folio* gushed in 1814:

Mr. Allston's mind's eye is evidently nourished by invigorating, close, and intelligent study of the lively graces of the old masters and the antique. For the rich, ocular, and intellectual treat he has afforded us, we offer him as a small proof of our thankfulness and esteem, the testimony of our humble approbation.<sup>47</sup>

The residents of Charleston in 1829 were proud to claim Allston as one of "our own," naming him an artist with "the highest rank among the artists of the old world."<sup>48</sup> *The National Recorder* similarly praised Allston in 1819 after his election to the Royal Academy:

Mr. Allston, who is a native of America, was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy last year. He possesses the classical mind of a poet, with the skill of a painter and the manners of a gentleman, and is universally beloved by his brother artists, a proof that the eminent abilities of an artist, when accompanied by amenity and candor, are a recommendation to professional esteem in this country. This gentleman was not in England to canvass for himself: but his merits canvassed for him! What an honor to the electors and elected!<sup>49</sup>

The *London Magazine* in 1829 proclaimed him as "one of the best painters alive."<sup>50</sup> It was clear that the same techniques that Allston had used in his *Coast Scene* were making him famous in Europe. Allston was right: the Boston market did not appreciate his work in the same way that England did, and, at best, Boston was behind the popularity curve by a number of years. Maybe if the national appreciation of Allston had been as strong in 1811, he would have wanted to stay in America. Allston likely would not have known such fame if he had decided to stay in America to labor in a market that was not open to his artistic expertise. Allston aimed to be a successful professional painter, but his contemporaries only ascribed him this label long after his *Coast Scene*.

In *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean* we see the artist's methods at work: he fills his painting with references to classical stories, styles that he learned on his grand tour, and a pervasive mood in parallel with his life events. After thorough study of Allston's biography, his larger *oeuvre*, the details of his grand tour, relationships to other artists, and the extensive corpus of Allston scholarship, I have uncovered complex and layered meanings within the composition and implicit content of *Coast Scene*. I conclude that *Coast Scene* holds a trove of meaning when examined in the context of Allston's career and artistic environment, as complimented by details of his biography and his desire for virtuous message through poetic timelessness. The style of Allston's painting drew on the study of other great artists whose work Allston encountered on his grand tour, notably Vernet, Lorrain, and Fuseli. He incorporated compositional

elements from other artists within his work, writing that existing art serves as an important model for his own work. Moreover, his veneration of nature as inspiration for a painting's mood, coupled with his extended stay in Livorno, may show that he painted this moment in time from a point of personal observation. Having modeled his painting's figures after other works, such as Poussin's *The Choice of Hercules*, Allston includes personal reference to the struggles that he must overcome in deciding his career path, focusing on a moral lesson within the painting. Further reference to Vanderlyn's Caius Marius may show that he had reached a point of embitterment with his artistic career in the United States, and the fish-seller's selection of a "poisson" may show that Allston still chose a life of history painting instead of conforming to the American portrait market. It is possible that a dual nature of sunrise and sunset also exists within the scene, which may speak to his conflicted mood at the time of the painting: the sun may have set on his past dreams of an American career, but the sun rises on the next chapter of his determined mission.

Allston's careful insertions make one wonder which personal inclusions exist in his other paintings, and this merits a second glance at his other works with deliberate scholarly investigation. Though the bulk of scholarship focuses on Allston's later career, this painting sheds light on Allston's early ambitious goals as he returned from his grand tour. It may prove fruitful to understand Allston's *oeuvre* through the arc of his ambitions. His careful inclusions within *Coast Scene* should change the way that Allston's larger career is understood as a whole, having been influenced by this significant moment in his formative years. If we take a step back and reinterpret the witty inclusions of a contemplative Allston, deeper meaning may also exist in his other artistic works through his carefully coded symbolisms, just as in *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean*.

## The Figures



Figure 1. Coast Scene on the Mediterranean (1810), Washington Allston. Columbia Museum of Art.



Figure 2. View of a Mediterranean Harbor with Fishermen and a Vessel (1773), Claude-Joseph Vernet, Private Collection.



Figure 3. Embarcation of the Queen of Sheba (1648), Claude Lorrain, Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 4. Sun Rising Through Vapor (1807), J.M.W. Turner, Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 5. Group of figures with the fish-seller. Coast Scene on the Mediterranean (1810), Columbia Museum of Art.



Figure 6. *The Choice of Hercules Between Virtue and Pleasure* (1764), Benjamin West, Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 7. Choice of Hercules (1636), Nicolas Poussin, Wikimedia Commons.



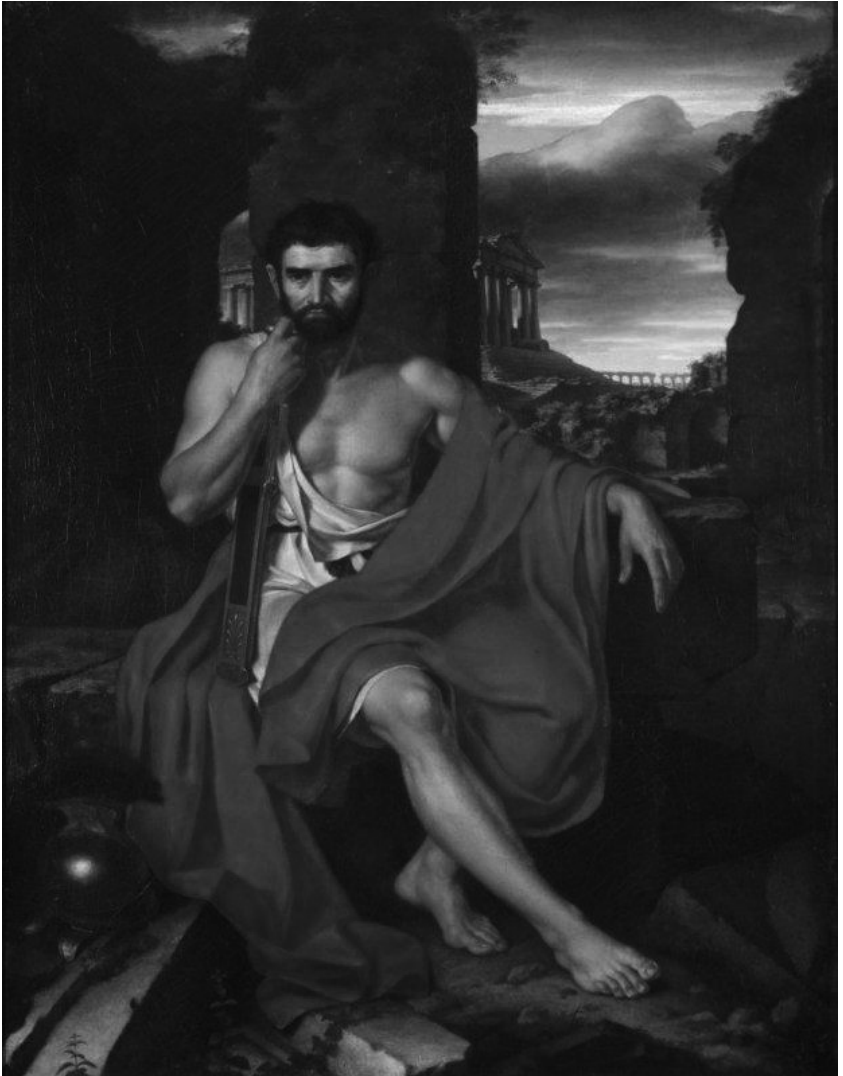


Figure 8. Caius Marius Amid the Ruins of Carthage (1807). John Vanderlyn. Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 9. Washington Allston Self Portrait (1805), Wikimedia Commons.

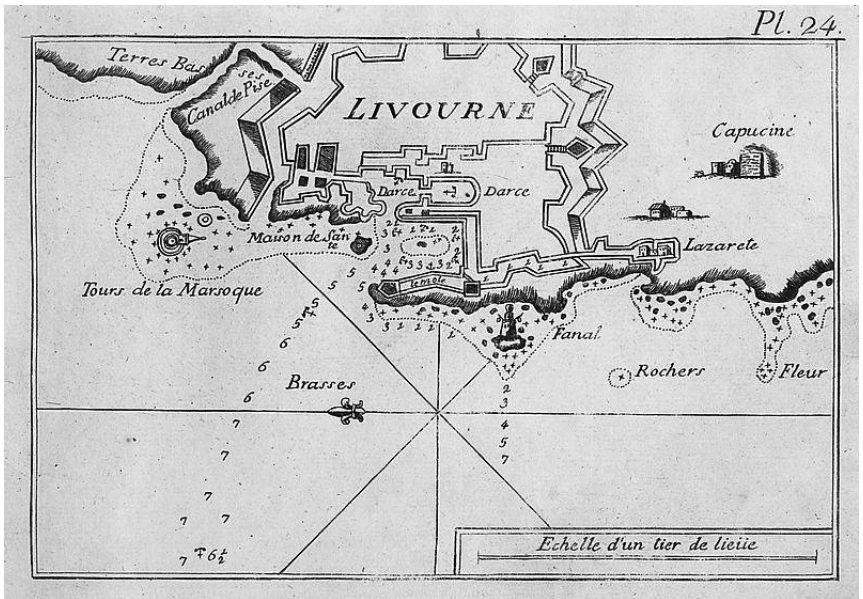


Figure 10. Port of Livorno in 1804. Wikimedia Commons.

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## Notes

- 1 Accession File. "Washington Allston Canvas Comes to Museum", *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean*. Columbia Museum of Art Archives.
- 2 The Accession File at the Columbia Museum of Art suggests that this painting was made in 1811, but the earliest mention of the painting is actually in an 1810 letter written by Leonard Jarvis, a friend and former Harvard classmate to Allston, writing to R.H. Dana. Allston came to Livorno in Tuscany where he waited for a few weeks to take a ship back home to Boston after his grand tour. Strazdes also suggests that the painting was painted before 1811, possibly in 1809 or 1808. She suggests that Allston painted the work while waiting for passage to America, but through the accounts of Jared Flagg, it seems that the painting was ultimately finished in Boston in 1810. Accession File. "Washington Allston Canvas Comes to Museum," *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean*. Columbia Museum of Art Archives; Diana J. Strazdes. *Washington Allston's Early Career, 1796-1811* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 180.
- 3 Upon visiting the painting in the archives of the Columbia Museum of Art, I noticed that it is considerably darker than most pictures online. After talking with the chief Museum Curator, Will South, it was explained that smoking used to be allowed in the museum for a few decades, and the associated tar and nicotine had the effect of greatly darkening the work while it was on display. The colors I saw in it are not the original colors the artist intended when he painted it. I will continue to describe the painting based on the public digital images which are brighter. It is very possible that Allston's asphaltum glazes also darkened the painting over the decades. Allston would paint glaze over dried paint with mixtures containing megilp, asphaltum, and other pigments. His asphaltum glazes began to destroy his canvasses, and he abandoned his glazing style later in life, likely doubting his techniques. Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, "Washington Allston: 'The Painter-Poet'," in *American Painters on Technique: The Colonial Period to 1860* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011), 62-68.
- 4 The galley was out of use for almost 100 years before Allston painted this picture, so he likely never saw a galley in action. This inclusion is peculiar. The second ship is a brig, which was mostly used for trade and transatlantic travel. Allston likely rode this type of ship back home to America. Joseph Wheatley, *Historic Sail: The Glory of the Sailing Ship from the 13th to the 19th Century*. (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), 16 and 79.
- 5 Evert Duyukinck, "Washington Allston," in *National Portrait Gallery of Eminent Americans: Orators, Statesmen, Naval and Military Heroes, Jurists, Authors, etc., etc.* (New York: Johnson, Fry & Company, 1862), 459.
- 6 Noelle Claire Rice, "The Career of Washington Allston" (master's thesis, University of South Carolina, 1996), 14.
- 7 Tate Gallery 1975, *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*. (London: Tate Gallery Publications Dept., 1975), 10-14.

8 Lowe Art Museum, *The Paintings of Washington Allston*. (Coral Gables: University of Miami, 1975), 9; Neff Weber, *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World*. (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2013), 2; and Ian Warrell, *J. M. W. Turner*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 25.

9 William H. Gerdts and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., “*A Man of Genius*” *The Art of Washington Allston (1779-1843)*. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1979), 31; and Mayer and Myers, “Washington Allston: ‘The Painter-Poet,’” 62.

10 Gerdts and Stebbins, Jr., “*A Man of Genius*,” 32. He even copied a self-portrait of Rubens while in Paris in 1804.

11 N. Y. E. Post. “Fine Arts” in *The Balance, State Journal; VI No. 37*. Albany: Sept. 10, 1811. This article confirms the validity of a pair of paintings by Salvator Rosa owned in the states, through Allston’s personal authentication: “Washington Allston, an artist of pre-eminent genius, whose name and talents are better known in Italy and England, than in this country, previous to his going to Europe resided at this place, and spent day after day examining and studying these paintings. After an absence of eight years during which he had seen and studied the best collections of Europe, he returned with an opinion, which he freely expressed, that there would be no doubt as to the antiquity and extraordinary value of the paintings; that his own ideas of their merit were greatly increased by the comparisons he had made, and that the only reason he had to doubt their being the work of Salvator Rosa, was, that he had seen no piece of his in Europe, equal to them.”; Rice, “The Career of Washington Allston,” 43-45.

12 Rice suggested that Allston may have looked to Vernet, but I uncovered his charming *Mediterranean Harbor* painting as a strong comparison. Rice, “The Career of Washington Allston,” 49.

13 Greater London Council, *Claude-Joseph Vernet 1714-1789*. (Kenwood: Greater London Council, 1976), 4.

14 It must be said that it does not appear Allston looked to Dutch examples when crafting his *Coast Scene*. Though Allston’s scene includes the stillness of classic Dutch scenes, the reflective nature of the water is not as prevalent as in examples of famous Dutch maritime scenes, such as in *The Maas at Dordrecht* (1660) by Aelbert Cuyp. The designs of the ships have different sails and masts. To create his *Coast Scene*, it appears that Allston preferred to follow the examples of Lorrain and Vernet, using the compositional style of the French tradition while infusing elements of his English training. I looked through two overviews on Dutch art and could find no useful comparisons in either volume: Jeroen Giltaij and Jan Kelch, *Praise of Ships and the Sea: The Dutch Marine Painters of the 17th Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), and David Cordingly, *Painters of the Sea: A Survey of Dutch and English Marine Paintings from British Collections* (London: Lund Humphries, 1979).

15 Gerdts and Stebbins suggest that there may have been influence of Lorrain in Allston’s work, but I found a very compelling comparison in Lorrain’s *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*. Gerdts and Stebbins, Jr., “*A Man of Genius*,”

58.

16 Marcel Röthlisberger, *Claude Lorrain The Paintings, Volume 1 and 2*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 3.

17 Gerdts and Stebbins also suggest that the painting may be “Turneresque,” but I explore this further with my own examples. Gerdts and Stebbins, Jr., “*A Man of Genius*”, 58.

18 Ian Warrell, *J. M. W. Turner*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 25.

19 “J.M.W. Turner RA (1775 - 1851).” Royal Academy of Arts. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/j-m-w-turner-ra>.

20 Fuseli was a full Academician in 1790, teaching while Turner was a student. “Henry Fuseli RA (1741 - 1825).” Royal Academy of Arts. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/henry-fuseli-ra>.

21 Fuseli’s work ended up being very dark, mostly featuring terrible scenes of death, tragedy, torture, or pain. One very important distinction to make is that Allston’s work never incorporated such morose elements, and his figures were never as dramatic. Turner’s is an exception. Nevertheless, the idea of “poetic timelessness” may have left their mark on both. Richardson suggests that though Allston was out of the influence of British art by the time of painting *Coast Scene*, the shared romanticism of the styles shows the similarities of approach. E. P. Richardson, *Washington Allston: A Study of the Romantic Artist in America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.), p.89.

22 Washington Allston to John Vanderlyn, April 23, 1808, *In The Correspondence of Washington Allston*, ed. Nathalia Wright (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), p. 54.

23 Dr. Tom Sienkewicz suggested that this configuration may represent the *Judgment of Paris*, a lead which may require future scholarly investigation.

24 James Baldwin, “The Choice of Hercules.” *What So Proudly We Hail*. April 26, 2013. <https://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/the-choice-of-hercules>.

25 Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, *A notion of the historical draught or tablature of the judgment of Hercules*. (London: 1713).

26 “The Choice of Hercules between Virtue and Pleasure | West, Benjamin.” 2017. Accessed February 23, 2019. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O132833/the-choice-of-hercules-between-oil-painting-west-benjamin/>.

27 The painting was purchased by Hoare in 1747 and stayed in the family’s collection until 1946. “Choice of Hercules.” National Trust Collections. Accessed February 23, 2019. <http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/732103>.

28 Benjamin West and the Hoare family had a connection, since Prince Hoare was the “Secretary for Foreign Correspondence to the Royal Academy” and attended West’s Funeral. John Galt, *The Life, Studies, and Works of Benjamin West, Esq.* March 22, 2013. Gutenberg EBook. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8857/8857-h/8857-h.htm>

29 It is likely that West saw the original Poussin painting and made a copy of his own while at the Stourhead estate. This version of the *Choice of Hercules* by West then stayed in West's collection, being passed down through Raphael West in 1824. So it would have been in West's collection while Allston studied under him at the Royal Academy. "The Choice of Hercules between Virtue and Pleasure | West, Benjamin."

30 I must thank my mentor Dr. Julia Sienkewicz for this brilliant realization.

31 "Caius Marius Amid the Ruins of Carthage - John Vanderlyn." Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. May 09, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://art.famsf.org/john-vanderlyn/caius-marius-amid-ruins-carthage-49835>.

32 Salvatore Mondello, "The Grand Tour" in *The Private Papers of John Vanderlyn (1775-1852) American Portrait Painter*. (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 1990), p. 28.

33 "Marius Amid the Ruins of Carthage." Albany Institute of History & Art. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.albanyinstitute.org/details/items/marius-amid-the-ruins-of-carthage.html>.

34 Vanderlyn came back to America in 1815, so it is unclear if Vanderlyn actually got to see the painting. Salvatore Mondello, "The Grand Tour" in *The Private Papers of John Vanderlyn (1775-1852) American Portrait Painter*. (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 1990), p. 29.

35 Jared B. Flagg, *The Life and Letters of Washington Allston*. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 67. Quote by Washington Irving, who befriended Allston in Rome.

36 *Ibid.*, 82.

37 This certainly happened to Allston with his *Elijah in the Desert* (1818), as Bjelajac points out. In this case, the audience of Boston resisted the Elijah painting due to the sublimity of the nature, since they felt it did not accurately represent God's presence. Having isolated his Bostonian audience in 1818, it is not surprising that Bostonians did not enthusiastically embrace his 1810 Coast Scene either. David Bjelajac, "The Boston Elite's Resistance to Washington Allston's *Elijah in the Desert*," in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 39-57; Angela L. Miller, Janet C. Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts, "Early Romanticism: Washington Allston" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), 167.

38 Anna Cabot Lowell. Anna Cabot Lowell to Mrs. Anne Grant, 1811, in *Washington Allston: A Study of the Romantic Artist in America* by E. P. Richardson, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 314. The "engagement of the heart" refers to his marriage to Miss Ann Channing, to whom he had been long engaged.

39 The letter was in 1800 in Newport. Gerdts and Stebbins, Jr., "*A Man of Genius*," 25.

40 Leonard Jarvis to R. H. Dana, Sr., undated, in *The Life and Letters of*

*Washington Allston*, 85.

41 Wright, *The Correspondence of Washington Allston*, 59.

42 Pickering, H. H. Pickering to Unknown. Dated July 25 1826.

43 Museum Accession File. *Coast Scene on the Mediterranean*. Columbia Museum of Art Archives.

44 Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 34.

45 Wright, *The Correspondence of Washington Allston*, 59.

46 Ibid. Here, Allston mentions that he has already been at the port for 6 weeks, waiting for passage home because he needs to go to his bride, and because he fears that the US will lose its neutrality in the Napoleonic wars. Washington Allston. Washington Allston to John Vanderlyn, April 23 1808.

47 “The Fine Arts: For the Port Folio” from *The Port-Folio (1801-1827)*; 4,1. July 1814; and Anna Wells Rutledge, “Artists in the Life of Charleston. Through Colony and State from Restoration to Reconstruction” in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society. Vol 39, No. 2*. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949), 136.

48 Rutledge, “Artists in the Life of Charleston,” 136. Original quote is in the Charleston Press from the *Courier* in 1829 and *The Philadelphia Register and National Recorder* (1819-1819); Philadelphia: Jan 30, 1819; 1,5., 92.

49 “Fine Arts.: Allston’s and Leslie’s New Pictures” in *The National Recorder (1819-1821)*; 2, 7. August 14, 1819.

50 London Mag. “American Painters” in *The New-York Mirror: a Weekly Gazette of Literature and the Fine Arts (1823-1842)*; New York: Aug 22, 1829; 7, 7.