Term used to describe a variety of painted subjects ranging from the sketchiest of beach scenes to the carefully detailed ships’ portraits commissioned by naval officers and ship-owners. There is no clear division between marine painting and landscape painting, and many of the most vivid portrayals of the sea have been painted by artists with little or no first-hand experience of ships. In the 17th and 18th centuries marine paintings were variously described as ‘sea-pieces’, ‘seascapes’, ‘marines’ and ‘ship-paintings’. The most popular subjects were sea battles, harbours, shipwrecks and estuary scenes. During the 19th century other subjects were added to the repertory including pictures of the seaside, fishing boats, yachts and vistas of the open sea.

1. Early history.

Marine art can be traced back to the wall paintings of royal barges in Egyptian tombs dated 1360 BC. The voyages of Odysseus were illustrated on Greek vases of the 5th century BC. Glimpses of ships and ports appear in medieval manuscripts and in the frescoes and altarpieces of the early Renaissance in Italy. The story of Jonah and the Whale and the legend of St Nicholas of Myra, patron saint of sailors, provided opportunities to paint shipwrecks and storms. Among the finest of these early examples of marine painting is Vittore Carpaccio’s Legend of St Ursula (1495; Venice, Accad.). Maps and charts are another early source. The voyages of the great explorers in the 16th century resulted in the production of beautifully drawn maps, which are frequently decorated with pictures of ships and sea monsters. Closely linked with these maps are aerial views of towns, the most notable examples being those of Venice and Antwerp with numerous vessels moored along the waterfront.

The aerial view resulted in two pictures that occupy a key place in the development of marine painting: the so-called Portuguese Carracks (1520; London, N. Mar. Mus.), which was painted by a north European artist, probably Cornelis Anthonisz.; and Pieter Bruegel the elder’s View of Naples (Rome, Gal. Doria-Pamphili). These two pictures, together with the famous Storm at Sea (Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.), long associated with Bruegel but now generally
attributed to Josse de Momper II, were forerunners of the great age of marine painting that was centred on the Netherlands in the 17th century.

2. Subsequent development.

(i) The Netherlands.

The first of a long line of Dutch marine artists was Hendrick Cornelis Vroom. Much influenced in his early years by Paul Bril, he began with landscapes and townscapes but moved on to sea battles, storms and harbour scenes. He was followed by Adam Willaerts, who specialized in colourful embarkation scenes. Jan Porcellis introduced a very different mood with his sombre seascapes and his low-key renderings of fishing boats in humble settings. He led the way for a generation of talented artists including Jan van Goyen, Aelbert Cuyp and Simon de Vlieger. Van Goyen’s silvery palette and cloudy skies are a distinctive feature of his river scenes. Cuyp’s contribution was the acute observation of sunlight and reflections, the Passage Boat (London, Buckingham Pal. Royal Col.) being a spectacular example. De Vlieger painted cool, grey pictures of windswept beaches and rocky coasts. He was a friend of Willem van de Velde the elder and the teacher of Willem van de Velde the younger.

The van de Veldes were an impressive team, the elder making on-the-spot drawings of warships and naval actions, while his son used the information for his masterful paintings. The younger van de Velde painted storms and calms, as in Dutch Vessels Inshore, and Men Bathing (or Calm: A Wijdschip and a Kaag in an Inlet close to a Sea Wall, 1661; London, N.G.), with equal ability, and his work was admired and copied by generations of marine artists. The only two artists of his day who could challenge his supremacy were Jan van de Cappelle and Ludolf Bakhuizen. The former was a gifted amateur artist who painted estuary scenes shimmering with sails and watery reflections beneath billowing clouds. Bakhuizen was as skilful as van de Velde in the drawing of ships and produced seascapes of great power with dramatic use of light and shade. Other accomplished marine artists from this golden age were Abraham Storck, who specialized in harbour scenes, Hendrick Dubbells, Abraham van Beyeren and Reinier Nooms (also called Zeeman).

(ii) Britain.

The van de Veldes emigrated to England in 1672 and established a flourishing school of marine painting in London. Isaac Sailmaker and Peter Monamy were among their many followers. Samuel Scott depicted sea battles in the manner of the van de Veldes but also painted a number of finely observed views of the Thames, which
show the beginnings of an English style. This was taken a stage further in the mid-18th century by Charles Brooking, an artist who received scant recognition in a short life dominated by illness. His sparkling seascapes are notable for their exquisitely drawn ships and subtle portrayal of wind and weather. Brooking was followed by two generations of professional marine artists who recorded the sea battles and shipyards of the later 18th century. They were mostly ex-shipwrights or former seamen and included John Cleveley, Dominic Serres, Nicholas Pocock, Francis Holman (fl 1760–90) and Thomas Luny.

Many of the landscape artists associated with the Romantic movement in England turned to the sea as a source of inspiration. Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg, who settled in London in 1771, produced a number of shipwreck pictures in the style of Joseph Vernet; he also painted sea battles, the most impressive being his huge canvas of the Battle of the Glorious First of June (1794; London, N. Mar. Mus.). J. M. W. Turner devoted much of his long and successful life to the portrayal of the sea in all its moods (see fig.). The Shipwreck (1805; London, Tate) is an awesome vision of the destructive power of a storm. Turner’s similar mastery of the sunlit calm is demonstrated in one of the most beautiful of all marine paintings, Dordrecht: The Dort Packet-boat from Rotterdam Becalmed (1818; New Haven, CT, Yale Cent. Brit. A.).
An artist who emerged from Turner's shadow and became the leading marine painter of his day was Clarkson Stanfield. A former seaman and a theatrical scene-painter, he was particularly adept at painting the surface of the sea and the weather-beaten timbers of jetties. The pre-eminent figure after Stanfield's death was E. W. Cooke, who painted meticulously rendered pictures of Dutch fishing boats and English coastal scenes. Two artists who specialized in panoramic vistas of the open sea were John Brett and Henry Moore (1831–95), while W. L. Wyllie painted everything from battle-cruisers and ocean liners to tugboats and yachts.

It is sometimes assumed that marine painting in England suffered a sharp decline in the 20th century, but this is not the case. In Cornwall the artists of the Newlyn school, led by Stanhope Forbes, produced some brilliantly observed studies of the local fishing boats and harbours. The two world wars provided a huge variety of subjects for official war artists, some of whom—Charles Pears (1873–1958), Norman Wilkinson, Edward Wadsworth, Montague Dawson (1895–1973) and Richard Eurich (1903–92)—later turned their talents to the more peaceful subject-matter of yachts and coastal views.

(iii) USA.

Martin Johnson Heade: *Approaching Thunder Storm*, Oil on canvas, 28 x 44 in. (71.1 x 111.8 cm), 1859 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Erving Wolf Foundation and Mr. and Mrs. Erving Wolf, 1975, Accession ID:1975.160); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art
By the end of the 19th century American artists had produced a number of seascapes remarkable for their originality and freshness of vision. A forerunner was the British artist Robert Salmon, who settled in Boston in 1829, but the first American painter to specialize in marine subjects was Fitz Hugh Lane. His pictures of sailing craft in sheltered bays have an extraordinary stillness and clarity of light. *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay* (1862; Boston, MA, Mus. F.A.) is typical, showing a schooner becalmed beneath a pearly sky. The landscapes and seascapes of Martin Johnson Heade also have a static quality, but that of the calm before the storm. His *Thunderstorm over Narragansett Bay* (1868; Fort Worth, TX, Amon Carter Mus.) is an astonishing work in which fishermen and sailing boats are starkly illuminated against a black sea and threatening thunder clouds (see also Approaching Thunder Storm). Usually linked with the work of Lane and Heade is Frederick Edwin Church: he made his name with *Niagara* (1857; Washington, DC, Corcoran Gal. A.), a minutely observed study of the vast, curving expanse of water viewed from the very edge of the falls. Church also painted stormy coast scenes and ships among the icebergs of the Arctic.

The most gifted and versatile of the American landscape and seascape painters was Winslow Homer (see fig.). Equally adept in watercolours and oils, he painted a variety of subjects in a dashing style. *Breezing up* (1876; Washington, DC, N.G.) captures the excitement of sailing a small boat on a sparkling, summer day. His later works are more sombre. The *Fog Warning* (1885; Boston, MA, Mus. F.A.) is one of many paintings showing the local fishermen battling with the elements off Cape Cod. In dramatic contrast to Homer’s seascapes are the river scenes of Thomas Eakins. Fascinated by photography and perspective, Eakins constructed his pictures with elaborate care: his masterpiece, *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* (1871; New York, Met.), is a painting of astonishing brilliance and technical skill.

(iv) France.


In France many of the greatest seascapes were painted by landscape painters. The first of these was Claude Lorrain, with his imaginary harbours bathed in sunlight. Claude-Joseph Vernet, a specialist, earned a reputation as the most accomplished marine painter of the mid-18th century. He perfected a successful formula for dramatic
shipwrecks and picturesque seaports. In 1753 he received a royal commission to paint all the ports of France, and, of the 15 pictures he completed, 13 hang in the Musée de la Marine and 2 in the Musée du Louvre, Paris. Théodore Gericault and Gustave Courbet, though not marine specialists, cannot be ignored here. The Raft of the Medusa (1819; Paris, Louvre) is one of the most powerful of all images of the sea. Courbet was inspired by his first sight of the Mediterranean to paint the Artist on the Seashore at Palavas (1854; Montpellier, Mus. Fabre) and later painted Stormy Sea, or ‘The Wave’ (1869; Paris, Louvre) in which heavy seas break on a desolate beach (see also Marine: The Waterspout, 1870; New York, Met.). Less dramatic but full of poetry are the marines of Charles-François Daubigny. Etretat (Glasgow, Burrell Col.) is a deceptively simple picture of a bay with distant sails beneath a summer sky. Daubigny made several visits to England between 1866 and 1870 and painted some atmospheric views of the Thames.


One of the few French artists to concentrate exclusively on marine subjects was Eugène Boudin. Son of a ship’s captain, Boudin painted harbour scenes alive with light and movement, while his breezy depictions of fashionable crowds on the beaches of Deauville and Trouville brought him considerable success. Marine subjects
frequently appear in the work of some of the French Impressionists. Manet and Seurat painted harbours, Alfred Sisley was fond of river scenes, but it was Monet who made the most significant contribution. *Impression: Sunrise* (1874; ex-Mus. Marmottan, Paris), the picture that gave its name to the whole movement, was an oil-sketch of the harbour at Le Havre. Monet also painted numerous beach scenes at Fécamp and Etretat (see fig.), river scenes with boats at Argenteuil and a dazzling series of paintings of the Thames showing Waterloo Bridge and the Houses of Parliament in different lights (see fig.).

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