

'Messing about in boats'

Master of the Maritime: James E. Buttersworth opens this summer at the Cahoon Museum of American Art

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by James D. Balestrieri

Clipper ships, schooners, racing yachts, cutters, steamers: the names alone evoke the golden age of sail and the romance of early steam. And of the various names of artists who made their fame in marine scenes, few are better known or more revered than James E. Buttersworth, whose life and work are celebrated

in the new exhibition, *Master of the Maritime: James E. Buttersworth*, at the Cahoon Museum of American Art in Cotuit, Massachusetts.

James Buttersworth was born in 1817, either in Middlesex County, Great Britain, or on the Isle of Wight. Though there is some speculation about his ancestry, Buttersworth's father and grandfather were painters who specialized



James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894), *America's Cup Race*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 8 x 12 in. Collection of Henry Blair.



James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894), *Yacht Racing off Sandy Hook*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 20 x 36 in. Collection of Alan Granby and Janice Hyland.



in seascapes and marine subjects. Little is known about his training, but stylistic similarities indicate that his father, Thomas, served as his son's principal instructor. The exhibition includes eight of Thomas' paintings to give viewers an opportunity to compare father with son.

Sometime around 1845, Buttersworth immigrated to the United States and settled in Hoboken, New Jersey, not far from the busy harbor of New York. His work, particularly of the massive clipper ships that were taming the Atlantic Ocean, caught the attention of printmakers Currier and Ives and they transformed some of his oils into fine lithographs that found a ready market.

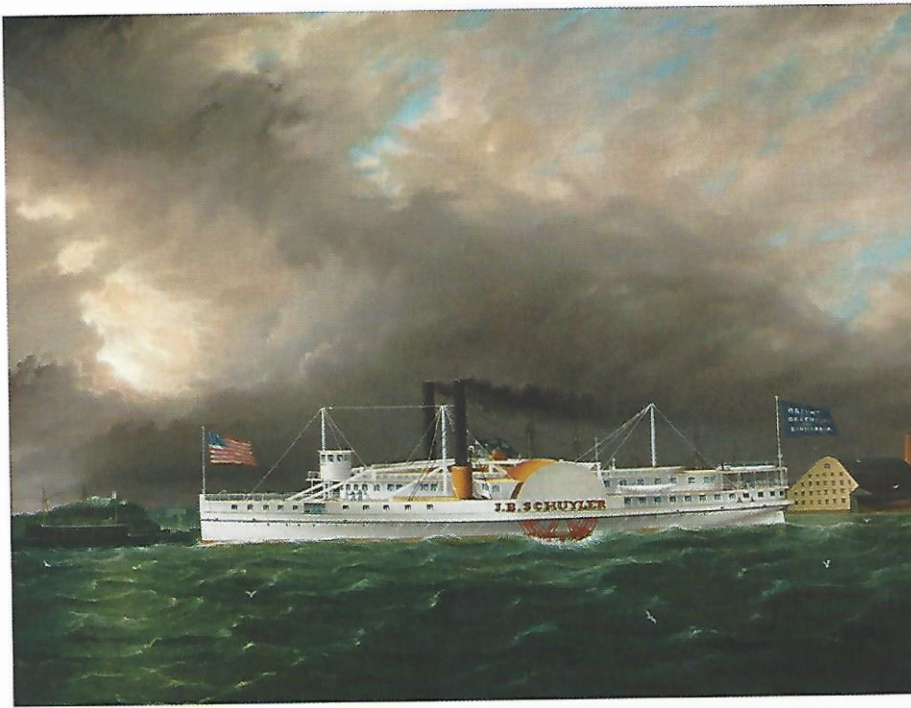
But the era of the clipper ships was already waning when Buttersworth arrived in America. Like small mammals scurrying around powerful dinosaurs, steam was about to challenge—and ultimately defeat—sail. At the same time, the America's Cup, arguably the greatest race in yachting history, began its storied run in 1851, opening an entirely new subgenre for marine painters, especially for Buttersworth, whose success via Currier and Ives and proximity to the New York Yacht Club put him in a strong position to commemorate the boats and men, the water and weather, that would characterize this classic contest pitting the Old World—

Europe—against the New, the United States, which held off 26 challenges from 1851 until 1983, when an Australian boat took the Cup.

The first race, around the Isle of Wight, might well have occasioned the ongoing speculation about Buttersworth's origins. Could he himself have spread the word that he was born on the island where it—it being the America's Cup—all began? Name an artist who will deny him or herself a little kismet, a little lore.

What sets Buttersworth's paintings apart from so many others isn't his biography but his approach to the subject. While conveying a rigorous understanding of the different ships and boats he paints—the shapes of their hulls, their rigging, pennants, and other details; an accuracy his clientele, as well as today's collectors of marine paintings, insist on—he also endeavors to express the sleek elongations of the boats, the fullness of the wind in their sails, the spray of the waves, the sunlight breaking through the clouds and lending its incandescence to the crests of the waves.

In Buttersworth, there is always a hint of pink in even the darkest sky. As scholar Richard Grassby puts it in his book, *Ship, Sea, and Sky*, "He quietly noted the contradictions of efforts to control the unpredictable forces of nature. But he



James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894),
Paddlewheel Steamboat J.B. Schuyler, 20 x 26 in.
Collection of Alan Granby and Janice Hyland.

was always optimistic and emphasized the positive side, the strength and resilience of ships and the courage and willpower of crews. Buttersworth predicated an orderly and stable environment as manifested by the greater regularity and predictability of maritime transport. Man is not cast adrift in a meaningless void or alienated from nature.”

What Buttersworth is after, especially in the racing pictures, is a sense of the moment when boat, captain and crew are all working together, harnessing and harmonizing with the powers of wind and water. Even in a perilous scene like the one depicted in *Ocean Scene, HENRIETTA Scudding*, Buttersworth



James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894), *Yachts Rounding the Mark*. Oil on canvas, 5 x 7 in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen S. Daniel.



James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894), *Ocean Scene, HENRIETTA Scudding*. Oil on board, 8½ x 10½ in. © Mystic Seaport, 2007.53.15.

suggests that the men aboard these ships are preternaturally calm, going about their tasks sure in the knowledge that they are doing their best, and that their best will almost certainly see them through. The seas are high, yes, obscuring the trailing ship—that we are observing this as if from the deck of another vessel not only places us in the action, but implies that we, too, are prevailing over it—and the storm is lowering, but we are riding in its sun-drenched eye (and it is eye-shaped), heaven blessed in true 19th-century Anglo-American fashion, mastering capital-N Nature with our superior technology, stoic faith and sheer grit. To the captains of industry who were also the owners and captains of these vessels, paintings of their boats overcoming Nature could not fail to be appealing.

Yet, even for those of us who are not captains of industry, or of racing yachts,

there are manifold pleasures to be had in Buttersworth's paintings. Consider *Yacht Racing Off Sandy Hook*, *Yachts Rounding the Mark*, or *America's Cup Race*. In them, there is, for this viewer anyway, a feeling of great joy in the apparent solidity of the graceful parabolas of the billowing sails, in the way those sails jut into the clouds and frame the clouds. In a way, the sails are abstracted, geometric clouds, products of human imagination and designs in imitation of nature, canvases that the wind paints on. And as the sails are clouds, the hulls of Buttersworth's crafts are streamlined creatures of the sea—dolphins and dorado, seals and whales. After all, when we look at the boat and the sail, we are looking at the products—aesthetic and practical in equal measure—of human observations of nature that date back millennia.

Marine painting is an unusual art form, with a clientele largely confined

to wealthy industrialists of Europe, the United States and the British Commonwealth, and, more recently the Far and Middle East. When I think about the breadth of their appeal as works of art to audiences far beyond collectors of the works, mind goes quickly back to Kenneth Grahame's eternal literary gem, *The Wind in the Willows*. Early on, the Water Rat introduces the Mole to his two-seat scull—just the sort of boat I have spent many spare hours fishing from. The Mole, who has never been in a boat, asks how nice boating is. This is the Water Rat's reply: "Nice? It's the *only* thing," said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leant forward for his stroke. 'Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing*—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.'"

I am certain—absolutely certain—James Buttersworth felt the same way. ■