16: Martin Johnson Heade *Newbury Hayfield at Sunset* (1862)

Marjorie B. Searl

The world lies east: how ample, the marsh and the sea and the sky!
—Sidney Lanier: The Marshes of Glynn, 1878

Martin Johnson Heade's genius reveals itself in his meticulous studies of the natural world. Distinguishing himself from his nineteenth-century predecessors and peers whose canvases celebrated the enormous breadth of creation, he narrowed his focus, like a scientist pursuing microscopic truths. After experimenting and growing dissatisfied with the results of traditional landscape painting, Heade found himself drawn to subjects that were remarkable in their specificity and prototypical nature. In his floral paintings—like *Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth* reproduced on a United States postage stamp in July 2004—leaves and petals seduce our senses with their fragile perfection.

He described himself, for example, as a "monomaniac" about hummingbirds, and traveled to Brazil to study and paint them beginning in 1862. He even went so far as to dissect one to learn more about the bird that he included over and over again in his work, including the Memorial Art Gallery's painting *Hummingbird, Cattleya and Dendrobium Orchid,* circa 1890.[1]

Closer to home, Heade developed a passion for the salt marshes of the Atlantic Coast. In 1859 a Boston critic complimented Heade's "meadow scene in Newburyport, taken at sunset…[with a] stream that runs through the meadow," anticipating the Memorial Art Gallery's 1862 painting of the same subject, *Newbury Hayfield at Sunset.*[2] Decades before French impressionist painter Claude Monet began his haystack series, this rural subject first appeared in Heade's work, and recurred in nearly one-fifth of his oeuvre.[3] Sketches of haystacks from 1858 suggest that he spent time hiking through the marshes, stopping to observe, document, and record, and then used these images again and again as the starting points for paintings through the course of his life.[4]

(Facing page)
Martin Johnson Heade,
1819–1904
Newbury Hayfield at Sunset,
1862
Oil on canvas, 11¼ x 25³/₁₆ in.
Gift of Jacqueline Stemmler
Adams in memory of
Mr. and Mrs. Frederick
M. Stemmler, 75.21

Martin Johnson Heade,
1819–1904
Hummingbird with Cattleya
and Dendrobium Orchids, ca. 1890
Oil on canvas, 22¼ x 14⅜ in.
Harris K. Prior Memorial Fund,
76.3

Why would Heade paint marsh scenes for nearly forty years? To begin to answer this question, consider how the peripatetic Heade first encountered the coastal Atlantic landscape. He visited New England as early as 1855 *(Rocks in New England,* Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and by 1856 he was known to be living in Providence, Rhode Island. In 1861, when he was living in Boston, he painted his first dated marsh scene. From Boston, where he remained through 1863, it was a train ride of about forty miles to Newburyport, an active shipbuilding and mercantile center just inland from the coastal marshes.[5] Several of Heade's friends had Newburyport connections, and may have recommended a visit to see the picturesque countryside dotted with conical stacks of hay.[6]

To Heade, who spent his childhood in Lumberville, Pennsylvania, on the Delaware River, the ecology of the salt marshes must have had great appeal. While the marsh might appear to be a static subject in comparison to a swiftly flowing river, it is actually, to paraphrase Theodore Stebbins, an intermediate landscape that lies between wilderness and pastoral, churning ocean and domesticated fields. It both conceals and reveals continuous activity and, in short, is emblematic of nature's complexity.[7] While the exact location of many of Heade's marsh landscapes is uncertain, the date of the Memorial Art Gallery's painting and its similarity to other works of this period provide strong evidence that it was, in fact, inspired by the coastal landscape north of Boston, most likely between the Merrimack and the Parker Rivers.

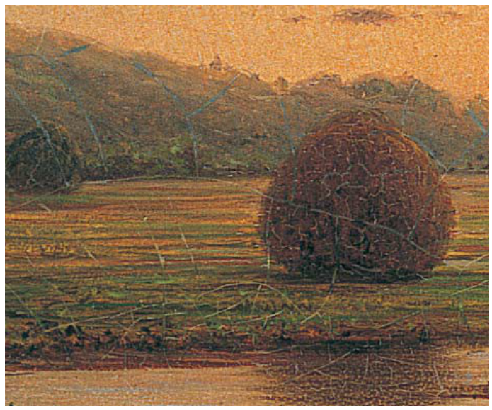
The Gallery's painting depicts a complex and dynamic environment whose transient qualities proved particularly compelling to the artist. Sunset's warm pink and yellow light ignites the entire scene in a single moment before the end of day, a fleeting effect of the earth's daily rhythm of rotation. Meanwhile, beneath this pageant, the ebb and flow of the tides nurtures the abundant growth of the marsh hay and the resulting haystacks. The apparent calm of the scene belies the drama percolating under the surface of the water and the grasses, as well as the tremendous human activity involved in "marshin'," or harvesting the salt grass. Over fifteen thousand acres of salt marsh make up the Massachusetts "Great Marsh," which extends from Rockport to Salisbury. Marsh hay, consisting of varieties of *Spartina*, grows in the spring and summer, and was traditionally harvested in August when the tide was low. At least one scholar has suggested that a tiny group of figures and a wagon can be seen just to the left of center in the painting, perhaps a farmer out checking his haystacks.[8] According to a Salisbury resident, whose family had harvested hay for centuries, the whole process took approximately two and a half months.[9] The cut hay was left to dry on the marsh before it was brought in, massed on wooden stakes, or staddles, that lifted it above the level of the water at high tide. In MAG's painting, a few broken staddles appear in the foreground on the left. When the ground hardened with the coming of cold weather, teams of horses or oxen pulling wagons and sleds retrieved the hay from the marshes; alternatively, a boat called a gundalow—a flat-bottomed barge that had been in use for centuries—pulled the hay in.

If you look down on the marsh from a bird's-eye view, the ground is penetrated by snake-like saltwater estuaries, whose winding tendrils lead the viewer's gaze through the receding haystacks. Heade composed these elements with precision. The painting is almost exactly bisected horizontally by an implied line extending from the *cumulis lenticularis*, or French bread cloud, at the left to its counterpart on the right. It is bisected vertically by a distant haystack reached by following the path of the tidal river. The river and the clouds move the viewer's gaze from one side of the canvas to another; the river also establishes, with the haystacks, the relationship between the foreground and background of the scene. And, by following the recession of space in the canvas from largest to smallest haystacks, the eye is repeating the curving meanders of the water—the manmade forms falling in step with the naturally created ones, integrated so seamlessly with the natural landscape that it implies Heade's valuing of the balance between man and nature—a balance that today's stewards of the marshes are valiantly attempting to reclaim.

While Heade's marsh paintings present a variation of a nineteenth-century farming landscape, some critics, including John Wilmerding, believe that his choice reflected not simply his interest in light and space but also his concerns about the impending national crisis of the Civil War: "Essentially flat expanses, they exemplified the luminist vision of spacious beauty. At the same time, their dual nature and constant flux also spoke to an America in the 1860s and 1870s of increasingly uncertain change and transformation."[10] Whether or not this interpretation is convincing—and some critics do resist it—we should also remember that the second quarter of the nineteenth century was a fertile time in American culture and philosophy. Heade could hardly have avoided the lectures and writings of New Englanders Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalists who emphasized the relationship—in fact, the unity—of the natural and the sacred. In the 1850s, living and working in Boston, Heade may well have read their words or heard Emerson lecture; his paintings parallel some of Emerson's writings, and suggest that, like the Sage of Concord, his choice of subject may have had more to do with finding personal meaning in the natural world.

Over two centuries before Emerson, Thoreau, and others speculated about the relationship between the natural and metaphysical realms, the Great Marsh region was said to be controlled by the Pawtucket sachem Masconomo, dubbed by Governor John Winthrop "the Sagamore of Agawam."[11] By the 1630s, English colonists were creating permanent settlements and pushing the Native Americans out of the way, dividing the property into common land and individually owned parcels. Historically, the marshland was significant enough to be mentioned specifically in wills and inventories. For example, in 1666, nearly two hundred years before Heade "claimed" the marshes

in his paintings, Thomas Smith of Newbury left to his two sons, in addition to pastureland, "that parsell of land that is called the lower pasture and a four acre lot at plumb Iland of salt marsh & two acres of salt marsh land at plumb Iland River below pine Iland..."[12] Settlers and their descendents used the salt marsh hay in a multitude of life-sustaining ways, including feed and bedding for livestock, insulation, and roofing. From earliest times, the region's clean water supported fishing, shellfishing, and farming, although this was generally taken for granted, and as the settlement expanded, the significant human impact on this miraculously self-sufficient natural resource set in motion a downward spiral of deterioration. Over the centuries, for example, marsh pests like mosquitoes were treated with poisonous chemicals as well as wholesale drainage of water. As the population increased large numbers of acres of marsh were filled in for development. Sewage was dumped into the marsh, making life impossible for many species within the region. Because of the delicate symbiotic relationship of the food chain, these alterations had broad-reaching effects that have only within the past several decades been addressed in meaningful ways through protective legislation. By the 1930s, the use of marsh hay for feed declined and, with changes in architectural technology, the hay was no longer used in construction. Currently, the hay is marketed as mulch.



Martin Johnson Heade,
1819–1904
Newbury Hayfield at Sunset (detail), 1862
Oil on canvas, 11¼ x 25³⁄₁₆ in.
Gift of Jacqueline Stemmler Adams in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick M. Stemmler, 75.21

In his book *Alongshore*, landscape historian John Stilgoe has observed that, with the deterioration of the marshes as well as the onset of photography, interest in them as a subject for the visual arts declined. What had been in Heade's time an activity that spoke of prosperity, productivity, and abundance, became, in a few decades, a problematical endeavor, possibly due to the adoption of poor land management practices.[13] In Stilgoe's estimation, not until the first quarter of the twentieth century, when wealthy individuals recognized the marshes' great potential for scenic views, did interest in the region grow. He quotes landscape architect Charles Downing Lay (1877–1956): "Nowhere...is there greater beauty of line than in their curving creeks and irregular pools."[14]

With increasing recognition of their aesthetic and ecological importance, Newbury marshes are now included in an area called Eight Towns and the Bay, which has been designated by the state of Massachusetts as an ACEC (Area of Critical Environmental Concern). Within this ecosystem, wildlife is remarkably diverse. Many types of fish and shellfish spend at least part of their life cycle in the salt marshes. Birds, including piping plovers and least terns, nest there during breeding and migration cycles, and the area is considered an Important Bird Area by international birding organizations. It is located along the Atlantic Flyway, a North American migratory route.[15]

Heade expressed early on the concerns of contemporary conservationists. Writing letters to *Forest and Stream* magazine with titles like "The Plume Bird Traffic," "Disappearing Ducks," and "Save the Woodcock," he indicated his sustained belief in man's responsibility for the natural world, a belief that began and was reinforced, perhaps, as he traversed the marshes.[16] Taking advantage of twenty-first-century transportation, we can easily to travel to Newbury and recreate his experience. The smells, sounds and sights are, in the main, the same ones that he knew almost 150 years ago. The captivating and thrilling views of earth, sea, and sky reveal more than words ever can why he revisited this subject over the course of his life. Its stark beauty as well as its peaceful isolation confirm to contemporary visitors that the marshes were an aesthetic as well as psychological touchstone for Heade.

Marjorie B. Searl is Chief Curator, Memorial Art Gallery.