

**"American Schooner Under Sail, 1834"**

by Robert Salmon

1834, Oil on Wood Panel

Nelson Maritime Arts Foundation, 22.8



## Robert Salmon and the American Schooner

Robert Salmon was born in Whitehaven, a port situated on the northwest coast of England, in 1775. Although his artistic beginnings are unknown, his career can be divided into two periods. The first was largely influenced by such great marine artists as J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Whitcombe, and Thomas Luny. In many of his paintings, Salmon adopted the low horizon and clear, sparkling light effects typical of the Dutch seascapes of the 1700s. During the second period, he developed his luminous style and held great influence on the emerging style of American maritime art.

In 1828, Salmon immigrated to Boston from England. Although he was regarded as an eccentric, rude, and solitary man, he was highly thought of as an artist, and he soon became a leading maritime painter in the area, capturing the harbor from Nahant to Milton, carefully recording the new buildings and commercial activity underway. He was associated with the city's leading merchant families, many of whom were engaged in international trade and owned shipping lines operating out of Boston's busy wharves.



Detail shot from "American Schooner Under Sail, 1834."



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To get a better idea of Salmon's distinguished career, we can turn to historian and scholar Elizabeth Garrity Ellis. She writes, "Salmon first established his reputation in Boston with several panoramic canvases that a local newspaper praised as "indubitable tokens of great talent." Among these projects was a view of the city commissioned as a drop curtain by the Federal Street Theatre in 1828. Two years later Salmon exhibited a series of 15-foot panoramas of the naval battle at Algiers, at least one of which was semi-transparent and could have been illuminated with special lighting effects." This would eventually lead to American Luminism.



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As we've discussed many times, Salmon is widely considered to be the father of the artistic movement "American Luminism." An offshoot of classic Impressionism, Luminism is a landscape painting aesthetic, largely characterized by the effects of light in the atmosphere. Through the use of a wide aerial perspective, large, glowing color fields, and the concealment of visible brushstrokes, Luminist works emphasize tranquility, and often depict calm, reflective water and a soft, hazy sky. Salmon in particular used Luminist elements like shining waters, graceful waves, and clear, crisp skies.

This piece, "American Schooner Under Sail, 1834" is a dramatic ship portrait of a schooner. To put it literally, a schooner is a sailing ship with two or more masts, typically with the foremast smaller than the mainmast, and having gaff-rigged lower masts. Brian Lavery writes, "This type of vessel evolved in Dutch waters in the 17th century, but it later appeared in North America. Schooner rig was ideal for a medium-sized vessel that sailed close to the wind. It enabled sailing ships to compete with steamships, and it became common for trading ships in Europe and North America. Later the schooner was used as a basis for racing yachts, and the name caught the public imagination."

As this work makes evident, Robert Salmon was fully capable of expressing sentiment in the best sense, and of capturing the particular character of what he saw before him. His ships are painted with precision, while his sea has a crisp clarity. However, it is his exquisite use of light illuminating this scene that makes this particular composition an extraordinarily romantic and expressive evocation of a schooner at sea.



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