

Wet Paint: Herman Melville, Elihu Vedder, and Artists Undersea

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Wet Paint

Herman Melville, Elihu Vedder, and Artists Undersea

Charles C. Eldredge

In 1891, the year of his death, Herman Melville published *Timoleon*, a collection of forty-two poems which he dedicated “To my countryman Elihu Vedder,” the American artist seventeen years his junior. Despite the implication of the dedication, the two men were not friends; indeed, it appears they had never met. In expressing his gratitude to Melville’s widow, Vedder wrote: “I may not have been very successful in a worldly way—but the knowledge that my art has gained me so many friends—even if unknown to me—makes ample amends.”¹

Although they never met face to face, Vedder and Melville were certainly not unknown to each other. The reputation of *Moby-Dick*’s author could hardly have escaped Vedder’s notice at mid-century in New York City, where he delighted in the company of Melvilleans and other literary and artistic enthusiasts who set the ambience of Pfaff’s café.² Melville took similar pleasure in the painter’s work. Vedder’s portrait of the aged freedwoman Jane Jackson, exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1865, moved Melville to compose the poem “Formerly a Slave,” which he published the following year. Two decades later, the international acclaim that greeted Vedder’s illustrated edition of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in 1886 attracted the attention

of the bookman Melville, who acquired a copy for his library.

But the ties between the two men went beyond chance inspiration or mutual admiration. They both shared a love of travel, which shaped their art indelibly. For Vedder, it finally meant an expatriate life on Capri, where, like the eponymous *Timoleon*, “He, the Isle’s loved guest, reposed, / And never for Corinth left the adopted shore.”³ Melville too journeyed far from home, most famously to the Pacific, but also, in 1855–56, to Mediterranean Europe and the Levant. The ancient cultures of that region, which Melville recalled years later in eighteen *Timoleon* poems grouped under the rubric *Fruit of Travel Long Ago*, also provided Vedder with the inspiration for some of his most memorable images.

The two shared other interests and traits as well. Two-thirds of Melville’s *Timoleon* poems deal in one way or another with art, the realm of its dedicatee; likewise, Vedder often displayed a fascination with subjects from the maritime world, the setting for Melville’s most familiar works. The men’s working methods were also complementary, their art apparently linked by an inverse parallelism. Whereas the writer’s prose and verse were frequently pictorial in nature, as Christopher Sten has pointed

Edmund Dulac, *Full Fathom Five* (detail), 1908. Watercolor, gouache, and pen and brown ink on paper, 43.5 x 28.9 cm (17 1/8 x 11 3/8 in.). Location unknown



out, the painter's images were often narrative or mythic in content. The literary Melville's preoccupation with intellectual themes often yielded vivid mental pictures. By contrast, the visual Vedder proclaimed the primacy of subject matter over form or design and denigrated the vogue for Whistlerian

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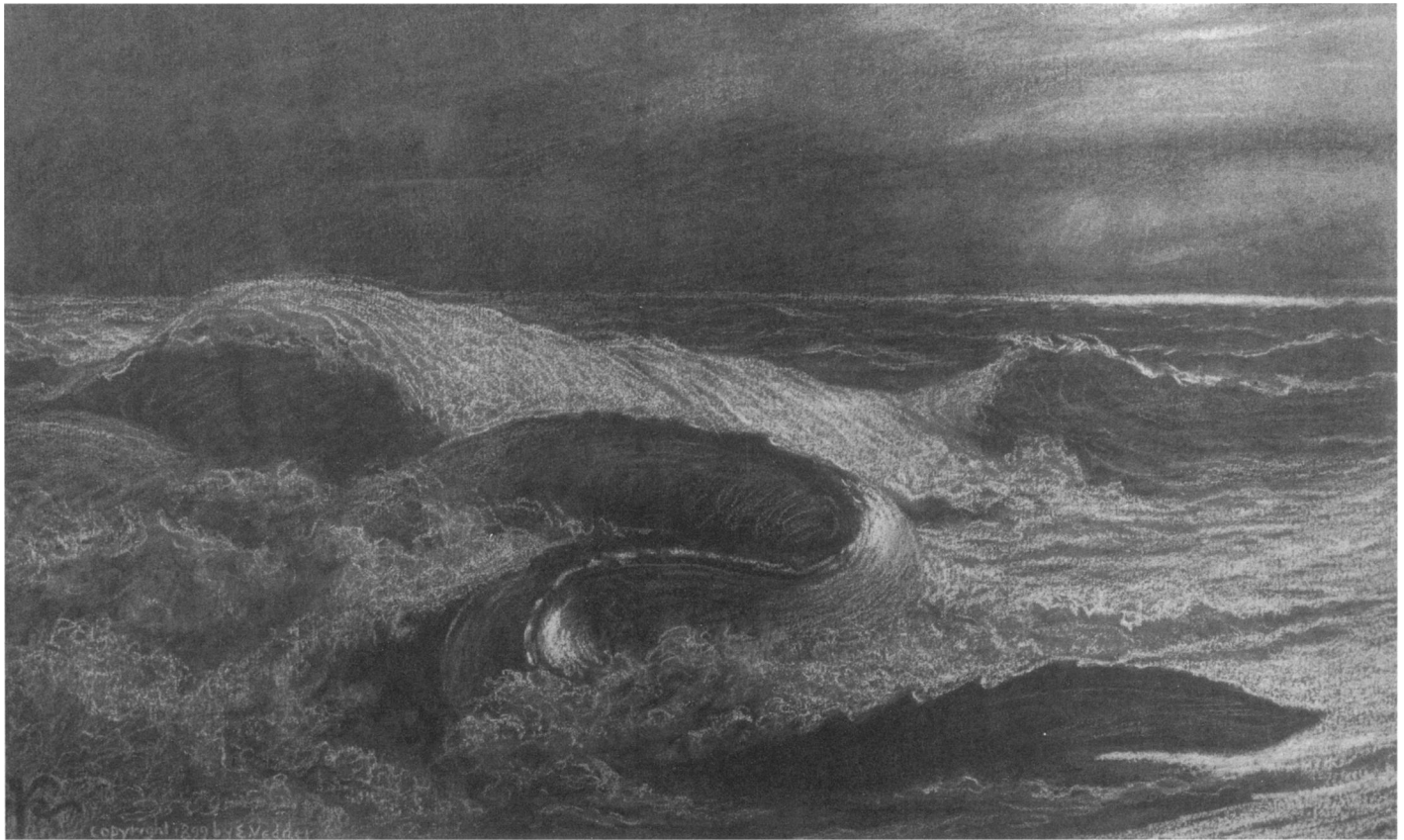
formalism: "For my part I must always admire a good arrangement of ideas as much as a good symphony in pale green and yellow."⁴

Instances of this curious parallelism abound. In a familiar passage from *Moby-Dick*, Melville likened the lookout in his perch aloft to Saint Simeon Stylites, "a dauntless stander-of-mast-heads, who was not to be driven from his place." The reference to the obscure Christian hermit of Syria is exceptional in American art and letters, yet it is curiously echoed in a painting by Vedder, *Saint Simeon Stylites*, now lost, of the same ascetic saint seated atop a massive column. In another memorable passage from *Moby-Dick*, Ahab contemplates the severed head of the whale, suspended alongside the *Pequod's* deck: "'Speak, thou vast and venerable head,' muttered Ahab, 'Speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee.'" Ahab's confrontation with the mute head occurs in the chapter tellingly titled "The Sphynx," a phrase and an image that prefigure perhaps the most famous of Vedder's many compositions, *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Like Vedder's haunting image, Melville's

sphinxian head also retains its mysteries. As the writer later noted in *John Marr*: "Unmoved by all the claims our times avow, / The ancient Sphinx still keeps the porch of shade."⁵ So too could this be said of Ahab's whale and Vedder's monument.

The interest in mystery and the obscure—whether of shadowed sphinxes or other subjects of terra firma—was matched by Melville's concern for the "sweet mystery" of the "secret seas"—for that which lay below their "inscrutable tides." Vedder also responded to what Melville called "the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored," with its "unimaginable, talking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures." On, or beside, or beneath the sea the painter often sited his memorable scenes (fig. 1), many of them fantasies that seemingly bore out Melville's claim that "in maritime life, far more than in that of terra firma, wild rumors abound." Writer and painter alike heard "the thousand mermaids sing to them—'Come hither. . . . Here are wonders supernatural. . . . Come hither!'"⁶ And each responded. Though they never met, Herman Melville and Elihu Vedder were kindred spirits, true compatriots in the realm of the imagination.

Some skeptics have doubted that Americans possessed an imagination, disbelieving that there is here a capacity for wonder, for delight in "wild rumors" and the supernatural. "Some people think that there are not fairies," wrote the English cleric Charles Kingsley in his popular aquatic tale, *Water Babies*. "Well, perhaps there are none—in Boston. . . . There are only a clumsy lot of spirits there, who can't make people hear without thumping on the table." But away from the practical concerns of American terra firma and the Spiritualists of the Back Bay—"Alone, in such remotest waters"—Melville knew "the whaleman is wrapped by influences all



1 Elihu Vedder, *Sea Serpent*, ca. 1899. Chalk on paper. Location unknown. Photo from Vedder Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty birth.” Or, as the Reverend Kingsley put it, “out of the sea the silly things come.”⁷

One intrepid modern-day explorer explained the allure of the undersea by alluding to another magical descent: “To dive—to pass through the filmy curtain between air and water—is a true adventure that surpasses Alice’s step through the looking glass,” wrote Jacques Cousteau. Jules Verne, whose phenomenally popular *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* fueled his readers’ fancy when the book was published in 1869, marveled at his story’s adventure but fretted over the challenges it posed for the literary artist: “How can I retrace the impression left upon me by that walk under the waters? Words are impotent to relate such wonders! When the painter himself is incapable of reproducing the precise qualities of the liquid

element, how can one hope to achieve it with the pen?”⁸

Melville had testified that “the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last.”⁹ Verne similarly worried that the whale’s undersea realm might remain unwritten to the last. Unpainted, unwritten? Perhaps. But undepicted? Scarcely.

Fascination with the Deep

By some accounts, terrestrial life emerged from ancient waters to ascend an evolutionary ladder, eventually producing *Homo sapiens*, a progression that has been interpreted variously by artists and scientists. *Mr. Limpet*, Theodore Pratt’s popular novel of 1945, tells of a timid bookkeeper of molluscan surname who worries about mankind’s advance up the evolutionary ladder. Despite his progress



from marine life, still “man wasn’t much more than a talking fish.” In the aftermath of world war, anticipating the time “after human beings went the way of the dodo,” Mr. Limpet determined to return to the sea to get a head start on the next evolutionary cycle and “start up human beings once more.”¹⁰ Mr. Limpet was not the first nor the only one to imagine the merger of human and fish life; various cultures have venerated hybrid gods, part man, part beast. But Mr. Limpet remains one of the most distinctive fish-men, especially after Pratt’s book was made into a movie in the early sixties starring Don Knotts in the title role (fig. 2). While the film may not claim a prominent place in cinematic history, its premiere surely did: guests at the affair, held at Weeki Wachsee, Florida, watched *Mr. Limpet* projected onto a specially engineered, submerged screen in a glass-enclosed room twenty feet below the surface.

Such a setting would have been envied by Saint Clement or Alexander the Great. Medieval painters depicted the saint performing healing miracles beneath a submarine ciborium.¹¹ The Greek hero also worked underwater, allegedly using some sort of diving bell or glass barrel to witness submarine assaults by his troops on the defenses of the island of Tyre. Alexander’s descent was related in historical accounts and fancifully illustrated by medieval illuminators on several occasions. The Alexandrine fascination with being underwater preceded by several centuries the first modern use of a diving bell to recover Roman galleys from Lake Nemi in 1531.

Melville’s poem “In a Church of Padua” from *Timoleon* also employs the image of the diving bell, although toward rather different ends than Alexander’s military purposes. The author likened the descent into the sea to one into the soul,



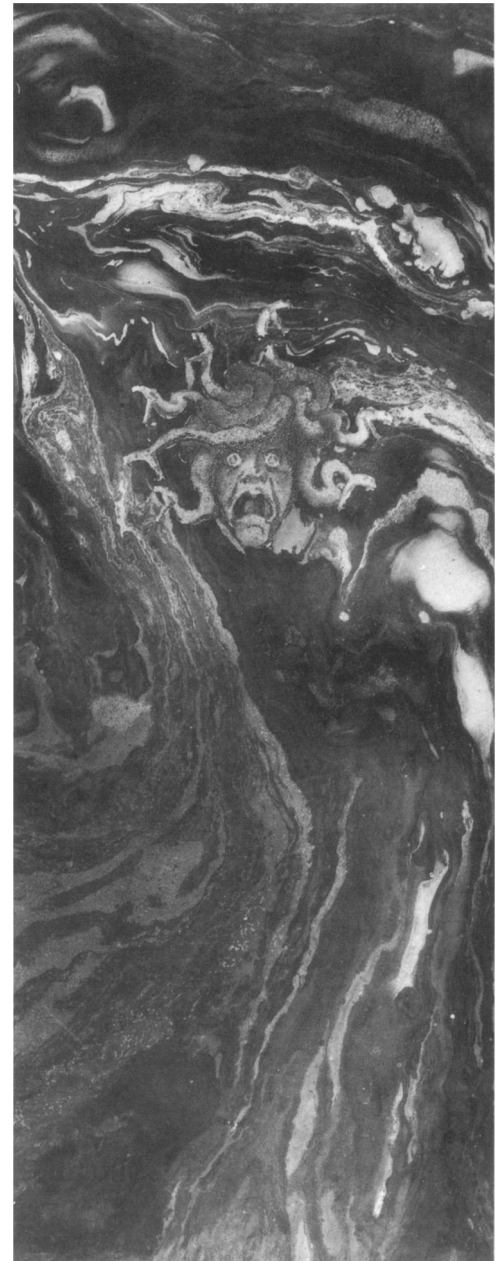
3 Rockwell Kent, *Ahab's Reflection*. From Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Random House, 1930)

4 Victor Prouvé, *Chimera in a Wave*, ca. 1900. Watercolor heightened with gold paint, 48.6 x 19.1 cm (19 ¼ x 7 ½ in.). Location unknown

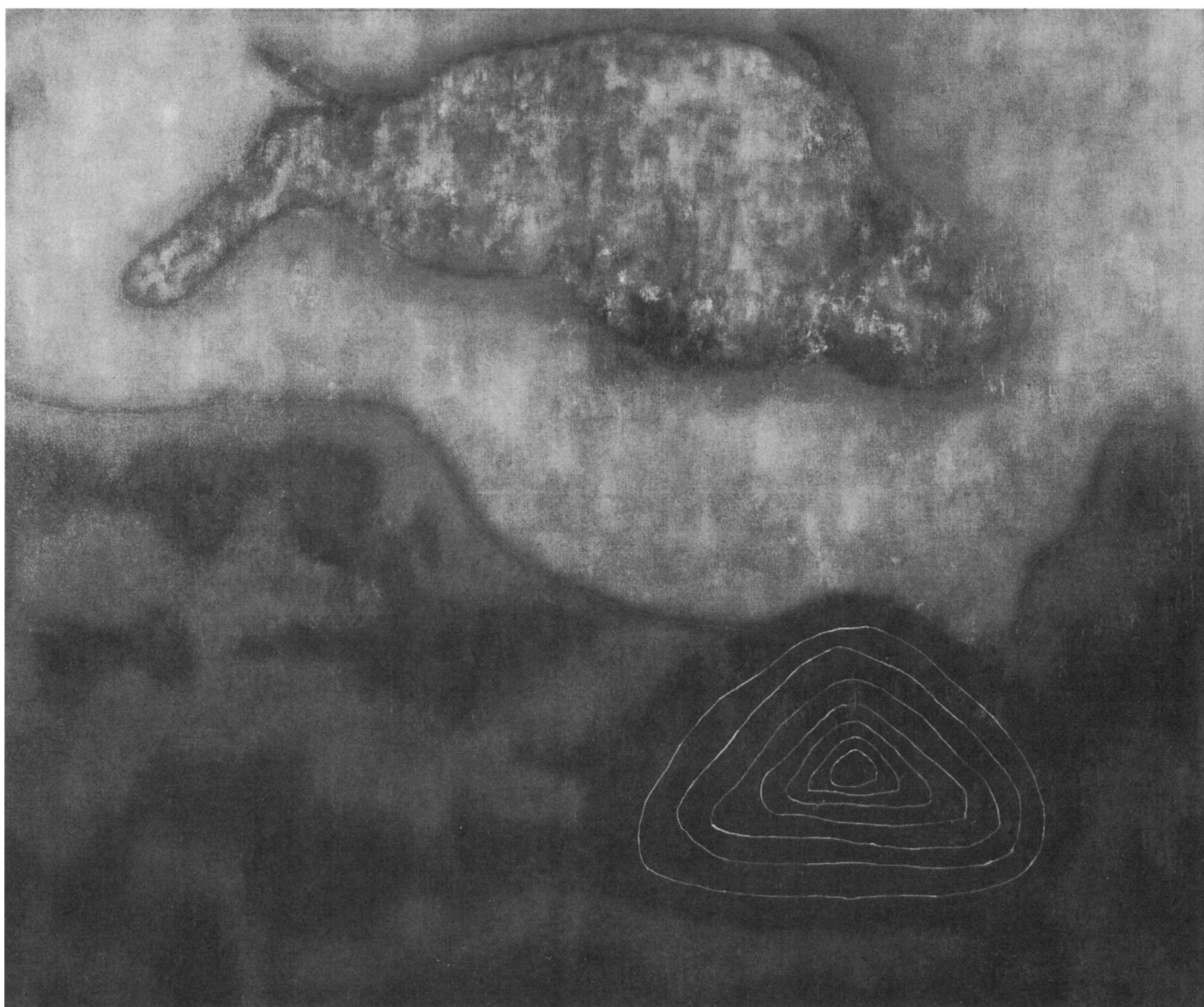
analogizing the church's confessional booth to a diver's bell and the act of self-knowledge to one of deep descent:

*Dread diving-bell! In thee inurned
What hollows the priest must sound,
Descending into consciences
Where more is hid than found.*¹²

In the deep, some mariners might make similar spiritual discoveries; for others, however, the ocean depths were more obscure. Melville described Ahab as he “leaned over the side, and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and more that he strove to pierce the profundity.” Reflected on the stirred surface, the captain’s gaze revealed not the ocean’s depths but something of Ahab’s. As interpreted by Rockwell Kent for Random House’s 1930 edition of



Moby Dick (fig. 3), the reflection looked eerily like horrific marine visions conjured by earlier artists (fig. 4). Ahab’s blindness to the submarine wonders, his inability “to pierce the profundity,” was shared by many of his contemporaries. Charles Kingsley noted this prevalent failure when he described the experience of one chimney sweep-turned-waterbaby, who, from beneath the surface, “watched the sailors upon deck, and the ladies, with their



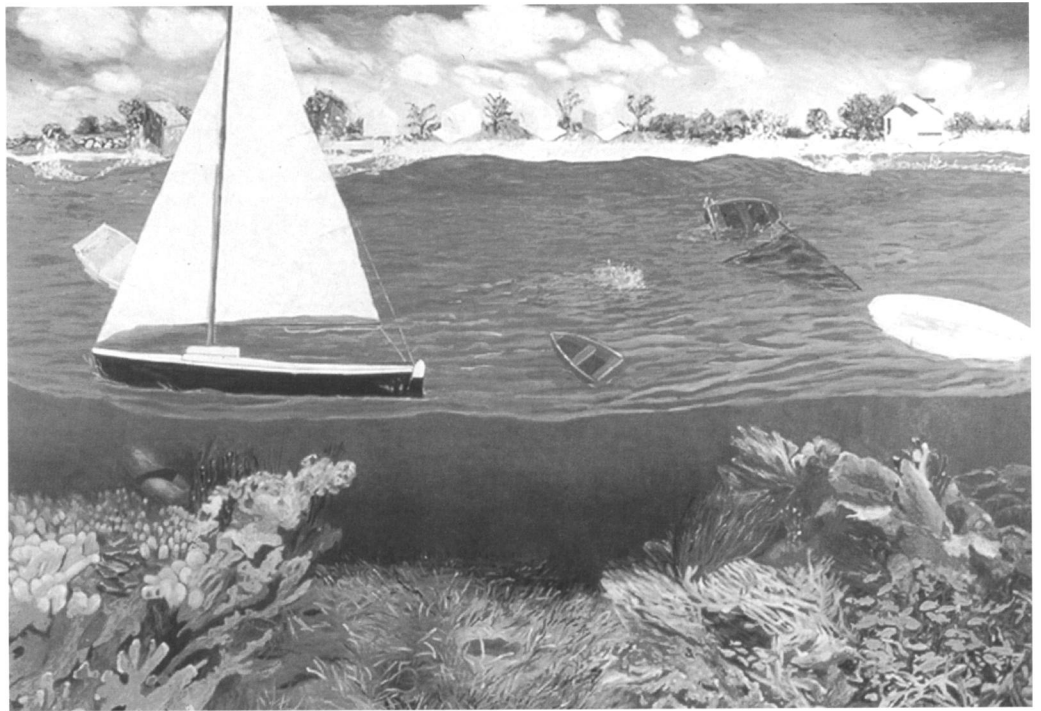
5 William Baziotes, *Moby-Dick*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm (60 x 72 in.). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M. Burden, New York

bonnets and parasols; but none of them could see him, because their eyes were not opened,—as, indeed, most people’s eyes are not.”¹³

What Ahab did finally spy in the deep was his fabled quarry: “As he peered down and into its depths, he profoundly saw a white living spot no bigger than a white weasel, with wonderful celerity uprising, and magnifying as it rose, . . . floating up from the undiscoverable bottom.” This haunting ascent was reimagined in paint by William Baziotes in 1954, during an

era rich in undersea imagery (fig. 5). But for the title’s allusion to Melville’s classic tale, Baziotes’ pale swimmer might as well have been inspired by contemporary cinema, which prospered on submarine adventures in the 1950s. *Underwater!* (1955), for instance, was a \$3-million, Technicolor extravaganza about sunken treasure, financed by Howard Hughes. Like *Mr. Limpet* several years later, its premiere was held underwater at Florida’s Silver Springs, with viewers outfitted with scuba tanks. Today this vehicle for Jane

- 6 Jennifer Bartlett, *The Island*, 1984. Oil on canvas, 274.3 x 398.7 cm (108 x 157 in.). Private collection



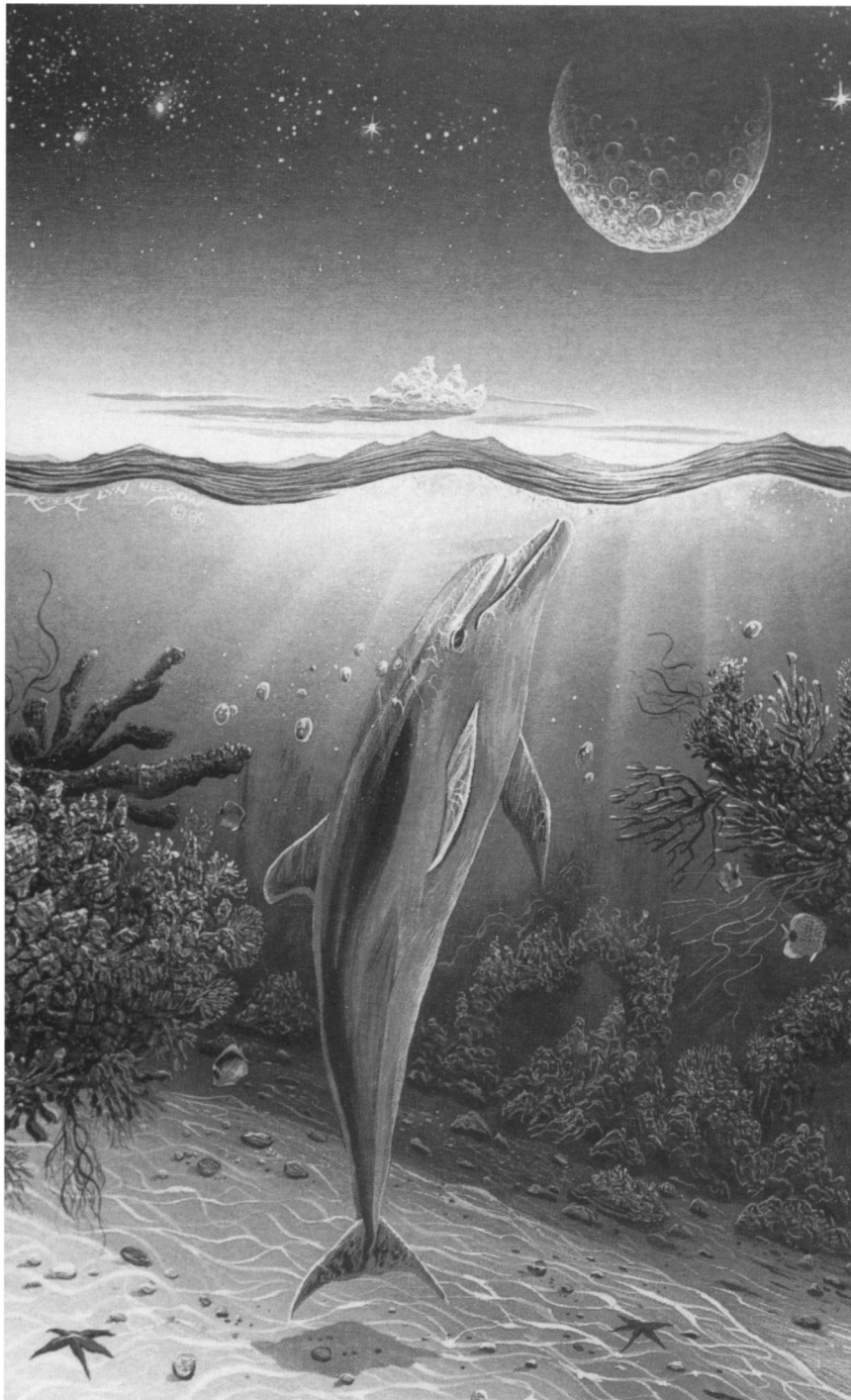
Russell is remembered as an “absurd and outlandish picture which is actually better known for the excessive hype which surrounded it than for the film itself.”¹⁴

Whatever its cinematic shortcomings, *Underwater!*, like the Baziotes painting, testified to the continuing fascination with the deep. Artists’ interest in the watery realm did not, of course, have to await Miss Russell or the aqualung. In the 1880s, F. H. Taylor used a split focus in his watercolor paintings to depict events above and below the water’s surface, the product of the Caribbean’s clear seas and the artist’s clear vision. While gazing at an Adirondacks pool, Winslow Homer also grasped the charming optics of subjects simultaneously viewed above and below water, and in *The Mink Pond* (1891, Harvard University Art Museums) he brilliantly used watercolor to capture the water’s sparkling effect. In recent years, some critics have felt that the underwater image, after more than a century of use, has become “one of the most banal clichés of modernist photography”—or,

presumably, of painting as well—“by now the oldest saw in the snapshotter’s toolbox.”¹⁵ Yet, the subject still challenges artists, as suggested by the tableaux of Jennifer Bartlett (fig. 6), Lorraine Shemish’s recent *Painted Pools* series, or Laurie Simmons’s photographs of immersed figures. Robert Nelson’s *Moon Watch*—which decorates a greeting card sold, appropriately, at New Bedford’s Whaling Museum (fig. 7)—also plays on the motif, but now with a contemporary spin. By selecting and sending this card (which is printed on recycled paper), the buyer shows consideration for saving seas and trees, as well as dolphins and perhaps even the moon. The linking of Flipper and Luna suggests an ecological unity of the entire cosmos, not unlike that of earlier visionaries.

Parallel Worlds

The tie between the upper and lower worlds recalls a favorite occult equation “As above, so below,” a formulation in



7 Greeting card with *Moon Watch* design by Robert Lyn Nelson

which many had faith during the nineteenth century. Scientists, for instance, wrote of “the harmony existing between the Ocean and the air,” concluding that “such as the maritime Ocean is, so is the

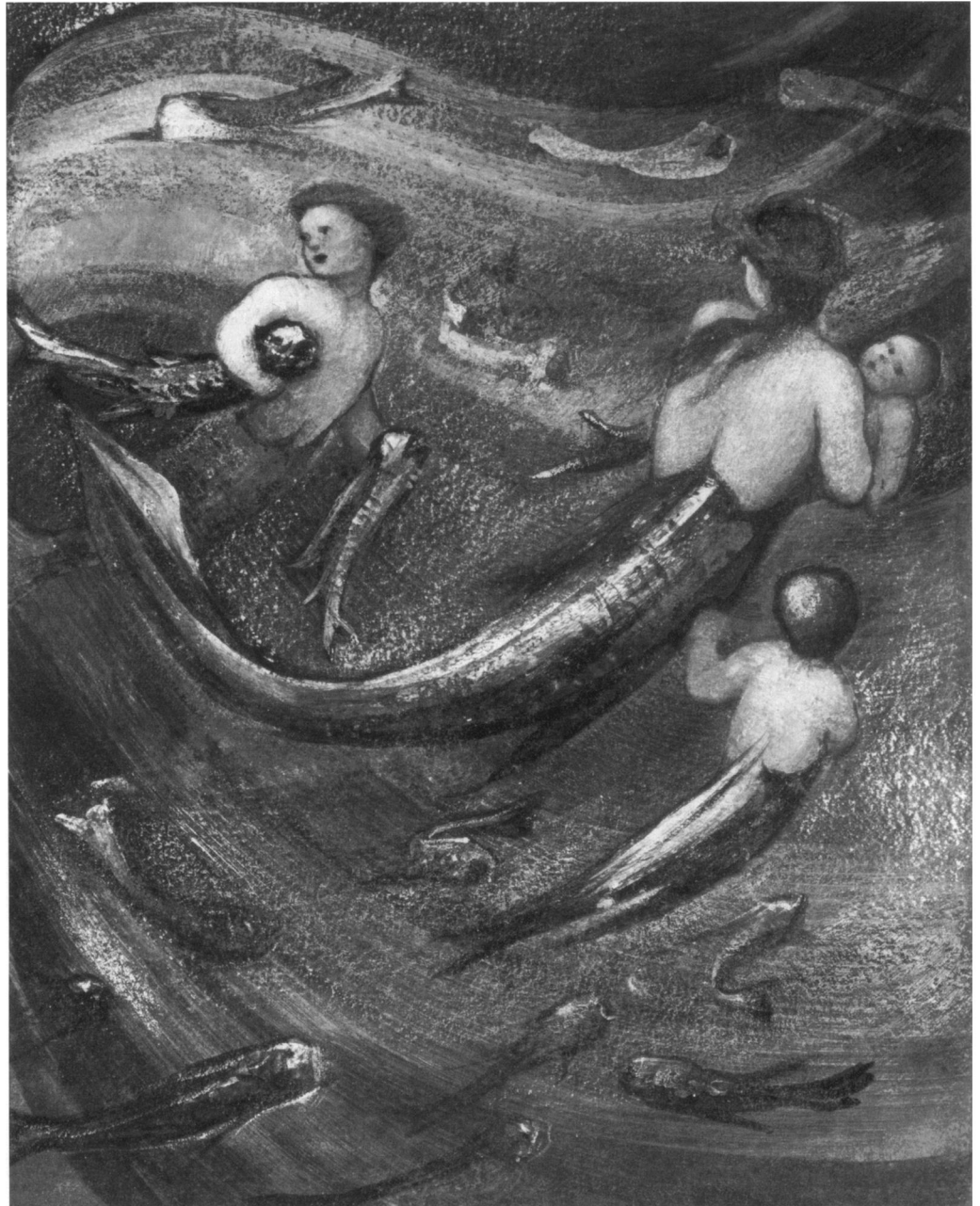
aerial.” Of a similar persuasion, Charles Kingsley rebutted his skeptics:

No water-babies, indeed? Why, wise men of old said that everything on earth had its double in the water; and you may see that that is, if not quite true, still quite as true as most other theories which you are likely to hear for many a day. There are land-babies—then why not water-babies?

In our century, mystically minded artists like Emil Bistram, Agnes Pelton, and Lawren Harris, leading neo-Transcendentalists of the 1930s, exploited the Emersonian duality in their paintings. These artists reveled not only in the parallels between the aerial world and the aquatic, but also in the mystical link between the cosmic plane and the terrestrial that so intrigued Melville. His whalers were enchanted when “some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond.” In the depths, Ishmael narrated, “far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes. . . . In those watery vaults, floated forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers.” The transparent waters permitted discovery of “the young of these whales . . . looking up towards us” and “the mothers [who] also seemed quietly eyeing us.”¹⁶

Human values and the human condition—like maternity, so prized by the Victorians—had elsewhere been projected onto other species, as in Arthur F. Tait’s popular designs for Currier and Ives, which conflated human and animal behaviors. But the submersion of those values into the watery realm was less common, though not altogether unique. For example, in England during the 1880s, Edmund Burne-Jones imagined protective maternal mermaids (fig. 8).

- 8 Edward Coley Burne-Jones,
Mermaids in the Deep, 1882.
Colored chalks and gouache on paper,
29.2 x 22.9 cm (11 ½ x 9 in.).
Location unknown



Drawn to this fantasy world on several occasions, Burne-Jones boasted that he “designed many scenes of life under the sea . . . tragedies, comedies, and melodramas in plenty.”¹⁷ In Miami, Florida, early in this century, human sentiments in submarine guise similarly occupied sculptor Alexander Stirling Calder. His decorative scheme for Vizcaya, the villa of

James Deering, included good sea mothers whose tender caresses paralleled the poses and practices of the upper world.

Denizens of the deep inspired experiments with composition as well as with content. Such subjects flourished in the late nineteenth century, despite the admonition of painter-teacher William H. Beard, who instructed: “It is impossible to



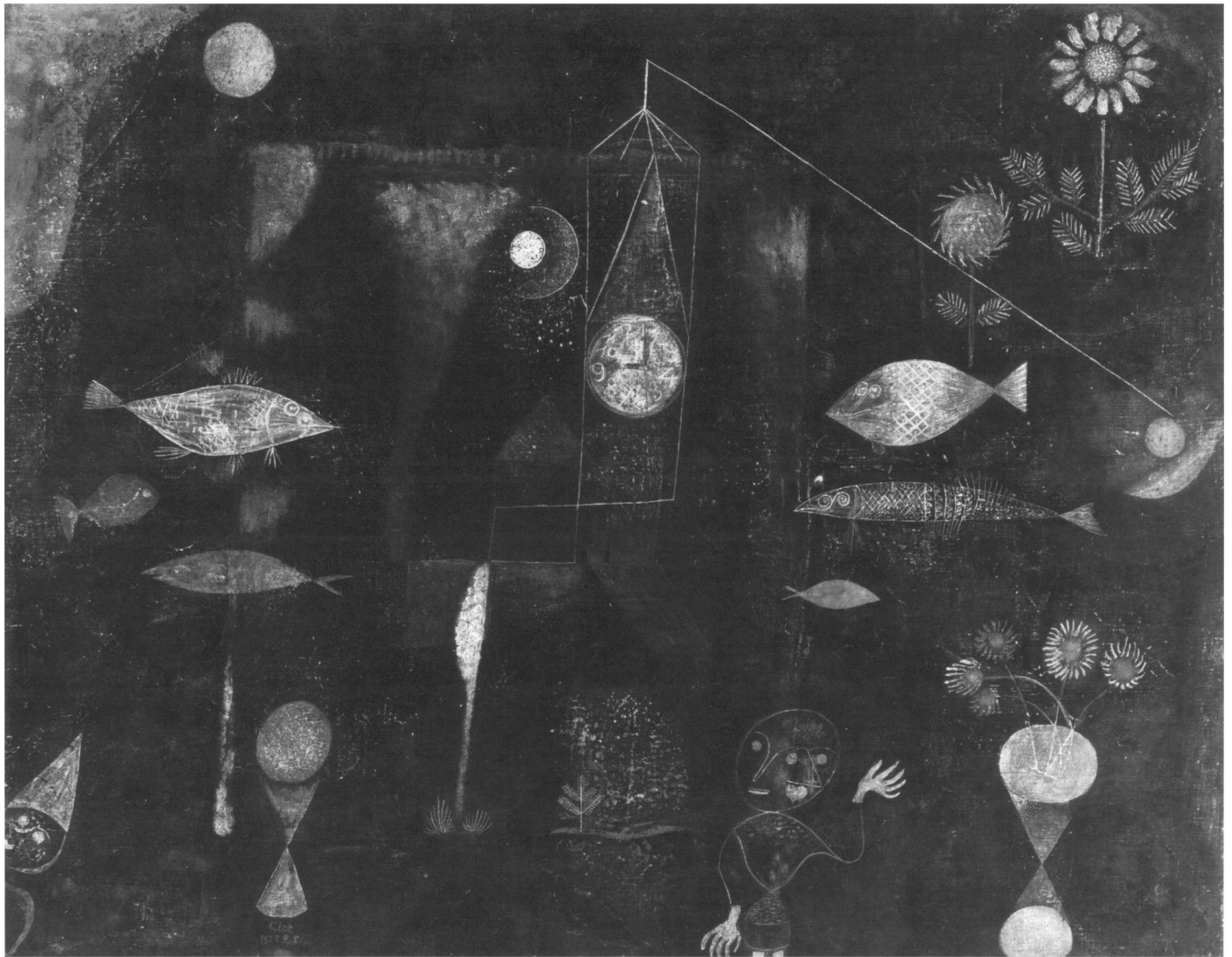
9 Frederick S. Church, *Naples Aquarium*, n.d. Ink on paper. F. S. Church Scrapbook, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

give a satisfactory rendering of the movement of things in the water. . . . Therefore it seems futile for an artist to attempt the natural expression of things so *out of his element*." Another arbiter on matters pictorial and piscatorial decreed that "all pictures of fish under water should be hung below the level of the eye," a presentation which, he acknowledged, "makes them uninteresting

to most people."¹⁸ Such cautions notwithstanding, the vogue for fishy subjects captured many.

Enthusiasm for all that was aquatic inspired interior decorators as well, who during the mid-nineteenth century introduced countless aquariums into Victorian homes. In addition to decoration and entertainment, aquariums provided instruction in natural history, "attract[ing] and rivet[ing] the attention not only of scientific men, but of those who, until lately, have looked upon the votaries of science as forming a useless class."¹⁹ The taste for these domestic marine exhibits led to the creation of larger public aquariums, like the one that opened in Regents Park, London, in 1853 and many others that followed. Such facilities soon became popular tourist sites, offering inspiration for more than ichthyologists alone.

The aquarium in Naples, Italy, for example, attracted a visit from the American painter Frederick Stuart Church (fig. 9). Although Church reacted in the customary fashion to the frightful Neapolitan octopus, another visitor to that site came away with a very different lesson. The Swiss modernist Paul Klee, on a visit to the South during his youth, discovered at Naples what one biographer called "perhaps the most celebrated episode of his Italian journey." Instead of the disgust—mock or otherwise—conveyed in Church's sketch, Klee thought the aquarium "very stimulating" and responded with delight to specimens unfamiliar in his alpine homeland—sea-urchin, jelly-fish, polyp, exotic fish. He found correspondences of their forms and behaviors to those of humans: common polyps, for instance, evoked memories of art dealers! Klee's encounter with the rare sea creatures led him ultimately to admire "the prodigality of divine fantasy" that had created such amusements. Though he wondered "for



10 Paul Klee, *Fish Magic*, 1925. Oil on canvas, mounted on board, 77.2 x 97.8 cm (30 3/8 x 38 1/2 in.). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection

what purpose these forms and colors, if no human being comes along?" he finally "had to laugh at the sight of almost every creature." In the fantastic and playful imagery that followed his aquarium visit, Klee opened himself to the discovery of other unknown submarine forms, all part of what he called "Fish Magic" (fig. 10).²⁰

At the popular New York Aquarium in Battery Park, Charles Demuth also made artistic discoveries, resulting in a series of watercolors in 1916 and 1917 (fig. 11). "In none of Demuth's works," wrote one critic, "does one come more face to face

with the artist's inherent simplicity, his lack of pose. . . . It is the disarming quality of this simplicity which makes [the *Fish* series] among the most charming of his works."²¹ Beyond charm, these explorations of submarine color and kinetics are astonishing early inventions. Remarkable for their colored washes independent of underdrawing, surprising in their puddles and bleeds of heavy liquid, the *Fish* series shows the artist's mastery of his medium and of sophisticated, nearly abstract design. Like Klee at Naples, Demuth was moved to new



aesthetic experiments by his underwater experience at the Battery.

While aquariums introduced many artists to the world underseas, others preferred to seek their aquatic subjects in the wild. Frederic E. Church, whose brush had captured the drama of Andean peaks, Arctic icebergs, and ancient Near Eastern cities, also devoted loving attention to a small fishpond on his Hudson Valley estate (fig. 12). His intimate submarine glimpse differed strikingly from the underwater seascapes of other nineteenth-century painters, who tended to emphasize the drama and mystery of the deep. In 1862, Edward Moran, elder brother of the acclaimed western landscapist Thomas Moran, digressed from his customary historical tableaux of American naval battles to depict the Atlantic floor as he imagined it off Britain's southern coast. *The Valley in the Sea* (fig. 13) was



11 Charles Demuth, *Fish Series No. 5*, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 20 x 32.9 cm (7 7/8 x 12 7/8 in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection

12 Frederic E. Church, *Goldfish in a Pond*, ca. 1870. Oil on paper, 31.4 x 36.5 cm (12 3/8 x 14 3/8 in.). Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Bureau of Historic Sites, Taconic Region

13 Edward Moran, *The Valley in the Sea*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 102.9 x 162.6 cm (40 1/2 x 64 in.). Indianapolis Museum of Art, Martha Delzell Memorial Fund

probably inspired, at least in part, by the deep-sea surveys during the 1850s in preparation for the transatlantic cable that eventually joined Newfoundland and Ireland. The simplistic method of taking soundings that was initially used resulted in surveys showing a seabed much smoother and flatter than in reality. Among some oceanographers, the belief long persisted that “the ocean floor probably resembles nothing so much as that of the great prairie lands of the western continents.” Moran’s dramatic vista of submarine cliffs and ravines, however, belies the prairie analogy and conforms instead to the more current soundings of scientist-explorers like the American Matthew F. Maury, who published his theory describing the North Atlantic’s rugged, cavernous ocean floor in 1855. A century later, Moran’s dramatic topography was repeated by the

illustrator Chesley Bonestell in his designs to accompany a scientific survey in which he imagined an ocean half-drained to expose its rugged sea floor (fig. 14). Moran’s imaginative vision was finally corroborated by modern scientists in deep-diving vessels who explored the trenches of the Atlantic. Using an analogy that would have been understood by Moran’s brother Thomas, one of these modern visitors to the deep reported that “looking at the Mid-Ocean Ridge from *Alvin* is like looking at the Rockies in a heavy fog.”²²

Empiricism Versus Mysticism

In the decades following publication of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories in 1859, fascination with cataloguing and systematics grew, and with it came a

- 14 Chesley Bonestell, *Seascape of a Half-Desiccated Earth*. From Hans Pettersson, *The Ocean Floor* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1954)



period of intense marine study. Public interest in the undersea was further increased by the advent of submarine photography in 1893, when Louis Boutan, working in the Mediterranean off the French coast at Banyuls, succeeded in making the first documented underwater images. A few years later, Simon Lake became the first American to duplicate the feat, working from his submerged

Argonaut.²³ Their pioneering images were widely publicized in the popular as well as scientific press, exposing the realities of submarine life to a vastly broader public than ever before. Such empirical studies, abetted by advances in photographic and diving technology, led to significant developments in marine exploration, oceanography, and ultimately new fields such as underwater archaeology.

15 Theodoros Stamos, *Sea Images*,
1947. Oil on fiberboard, 152.4 x
91.4 cm (60 x 36 in.). National
Museum of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution



The scientist's empirical approach was, however, of scant concern to many modern artists who were drawn to submarine motifs not because of new knowledge, but because of old mysteries. André Masson, for instance, used sand, shells, and seaweed to evoke in a collage the unfamiliar precinct beneath the

Melville was stirred by his imaginative descent "amid this world's foundations."

sea.²⁴ Masson and his fellow surrealists, who delighted in free association, spontaneity, dreams, and mystery, found these in abundance in the underwater world.

In the years around World War II, artists of the New York school were captivated by the techniques and the images of the émigré surrealists in their midst. Not surprisingly, the early compositions of Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos (fig. 15), William Baziotis, and others were often indebted to the methods and aquatic subjects of Masson and cohorts. Baziotis, like Demuth before him, frequented the Battery Aquarium. Interest in the undersea reached its high-water mark among the New York school at mid-century, in a vogue that extended to sculptors too, among them, Louise Nevelson and Richard Stankiewicz.²⁵

Doubtless the most famous of the abstract expressionists' marine themes is Jackson Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* (fig. 16). Though titled after Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Pollock's goal certainly transcended the simple illustrations of Ariel's song that earlier artists had drawn (fig. 17). Conflating marine and literary

allusions, Pollock's canvas is ultimately independent of any single source, its unplumbed depths of charged pigment assuming an aesthetic vitality of their own. Like the bones of Ferdinand's father that lie "full fathom five," so too do Pollock's pigments—in Shakespeare's words—"suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange."²⁶

Though less lofty than Pollock's objective, earlier illustrators' works inspired by Ariel's song nevertheless recall once more the perennial appeal of the ocean's deep and suggest another class of submarine imagery—the lost patrimony, literally Ferdinand's, but more generally that of a culture. A view like *Under the Sea* by the British painter Glyn Philpot, whose fashionable portraiture and equally fashionable fancy pictures earned accolades and entry to the Royal Academy, recalls, in the broken carving lying forgotten on some Aegean seabed, the lost splendor of Greece and Rome (fig. 18). Similarly, in the "gently awful stirrings" of the sea, Melville detected "some hidden soul beneath." In the depths he divined "millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries, all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming, still."²⁷ Just so does Philpot's kore lie inert, yet still the vessel of cultural memory.

Even more evocative was what Jules Verne called a "perfect Pompeii escaped beneath the waters"—Captain Nemo's view of the "picturesque ruins . . . vast heaps of stones, amongst which might be traced the vague and shadowy forms of castles and temples, clothed with a world of blossoming zoophytes." Submerged beneath the rising tides, these structures provided potent reminders of civilization's past glories and of the limitations of man, puny in the face of time and nature. Melville was stirred by his imaginative descent "amid this world's foundations" to the unfamiliar undersea, "where unrecorded names and navies rust, and

16 Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, 1947. Oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coin, cigarettes, matches, etc., 129.2 x 76.5 cm (50 7/8 x 30 1/8 in.). Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim



17 Edmund Dulac, *Full Fathom Five*, 1908. Watercolor, gouache, and pen and brown ink on paper, 43.5 x 28.9 cm (17 1/8 x 11 3/8 in.). Location unknown





Glyn Philpot, *Under the Sea*, begun 1914. Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm (60 x 60 in.). Private collection, England

untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land.” Verne’s Captain Nemo was likewise “petrified in mute ecstasy” by his descent

to sunken Atlantis. “Was he dreaming of those generations long since disappeared?” Verne asked. “Was he asking them the secret of human destiny?”²⁸ Or, did he and Melville find in the depths some prefiguration of our own future, as

- 19 Terry Schoonhoven, *Downtown Los Angeles Underwater*, 1979. Oil and acrylic on linen with scrim, 182.9 x 609.6 cm (72 x 240 in.). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Janet and Morley Benjamin Fund
- 20 Elihu Vedder, *Fisherman and Mermaid*, 1888–89. Oil on canvas, 41 x 59.4 cm (16 1/8 x 23 3/8 in.). Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of John Coolidge
- 21 Elihu Vedder, *The End of the Fisherman and Mermaid*, ca. 1878. Black chalk and white chalk on gray-brown paper, 17.1 x 35.6 cm (6 3/4 x 14 in.). Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters

imagined in the haunting cityscape of Terry Schoonhoven, depicting Los Angeles sunk beneath the Pacific (fig. 19)?

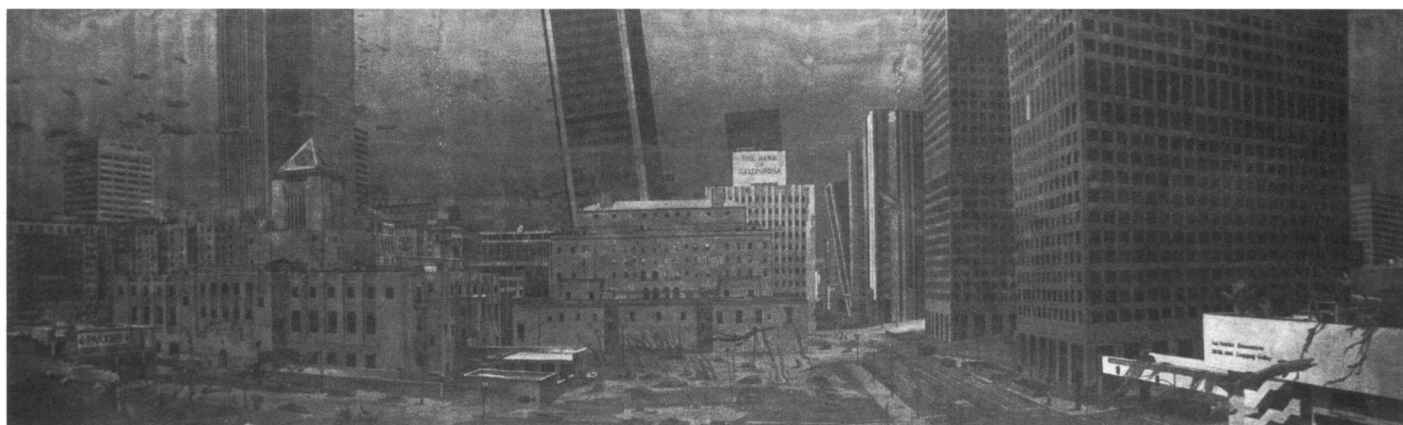
The Mermaid

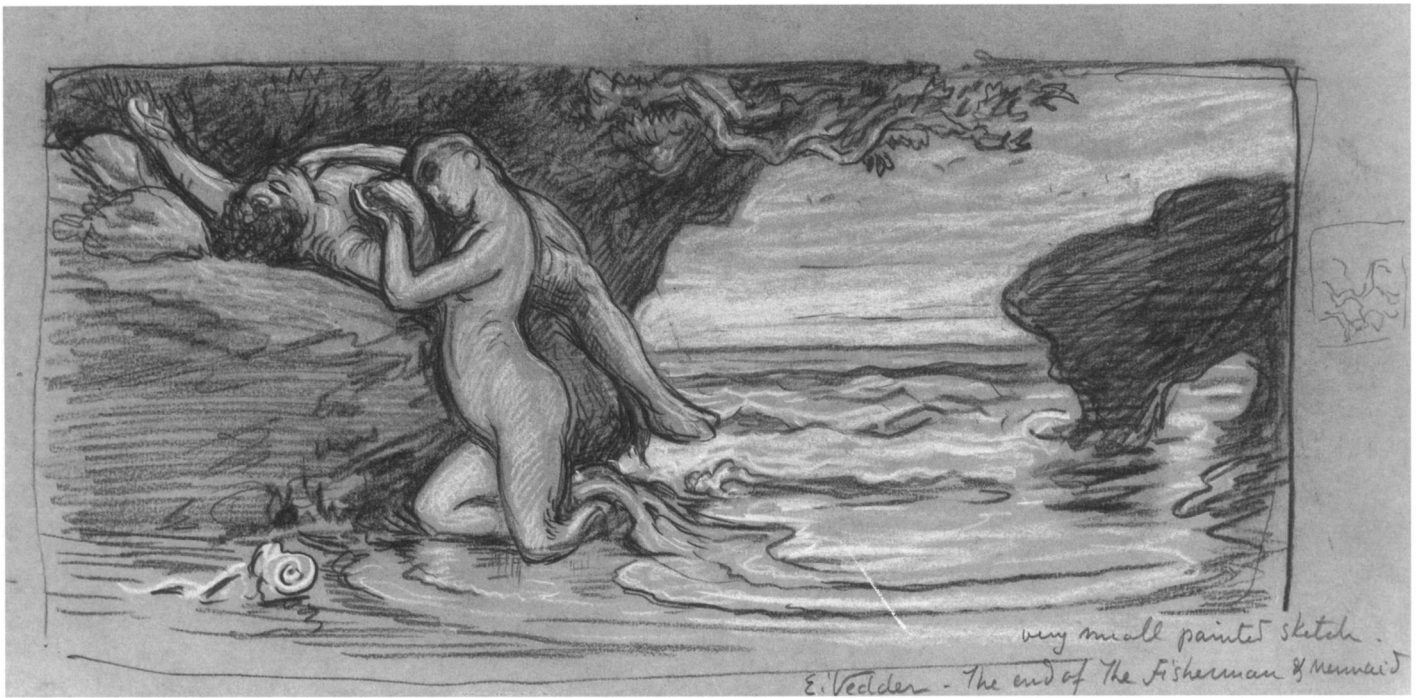
In the depths lurked not only dead cities, continents, and civilizations, but fantastic live beings as well. “Of all the creatures of mythology,” understated one nineteenth-century critic, “mermaids and mermen are far from being the least interesting.”²⁹ Indeed, among krakens, sea serpents, fearsome nautiluses, and other marine fantasies, none was more enduring nor alluring than the graceful mermaid, part human, part fish. Her appeal was ancient and very nearly universal, reaching even to cultures far from the sea.

In modern times, she has been adapted to various purposes. Salvador Dalí’s “Dream of Venus” pavilion was one of the most popular attractions at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Into this aquatic display, a surreal undersea fantasy decorated with incongruous objects and inhabited by mannequins and live female swimmers, visitors were beckoned by a buxom mermaid with a zebra-striped tail. Dalí called this submarine fantasy a “panorama of the unconscious”; he promised visitors that the “liquid ladies” and “sophisticated sirens” in his tableau

would “plunge into the depths and reveal the secrets of your dreams”—perhaps like the priest in Melville’s Paduan confessional. Fantasies of a similar sort were promised by Bette Midler, the “Divine Miss M,” performing as Dolores Del Lago in her bawdy revue *Clams on the Halfshell*. Amusingly, Midler’s mermaid was inspired by a picture of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale character. “I thought, a mermaid, how innocent, how vulnerable. Of course, by the time I got finished filling in the details,” Midler admitted, “the innocence had fallen by the wayside.”³⁰

That the playful, nubile mermaid permeated popular culture so thoroughly suggests a potent tie to some fundamental and universal human sentiment. She captivated many artists, including Vedder, who in the late 1870s designed a series of illustrations for his “Tale of the Fisherman and the Mermaid.” While numerous sketches and drawings survive, Vedder’s marine fantasy seems to have been abandoned prior to completion. However, in one image he suggests an outcome of the tale, as the fisherman hauls home from the sea his catch of the day (fig. 20). It was a haul whose erotic humor had a lasting appeal; decades later, Norman Rockwell decorated the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* with a similar design.³¹





22 Walter Püttner, *The Diver*, 1896.
From *Jugend* 40 (October 1897)



More commonly, however, it was the mermaid who caught her man. The sea maiden might rise to her prey (fig. 21); more often, she would draw him down to her. Beneath the surface, in the world of

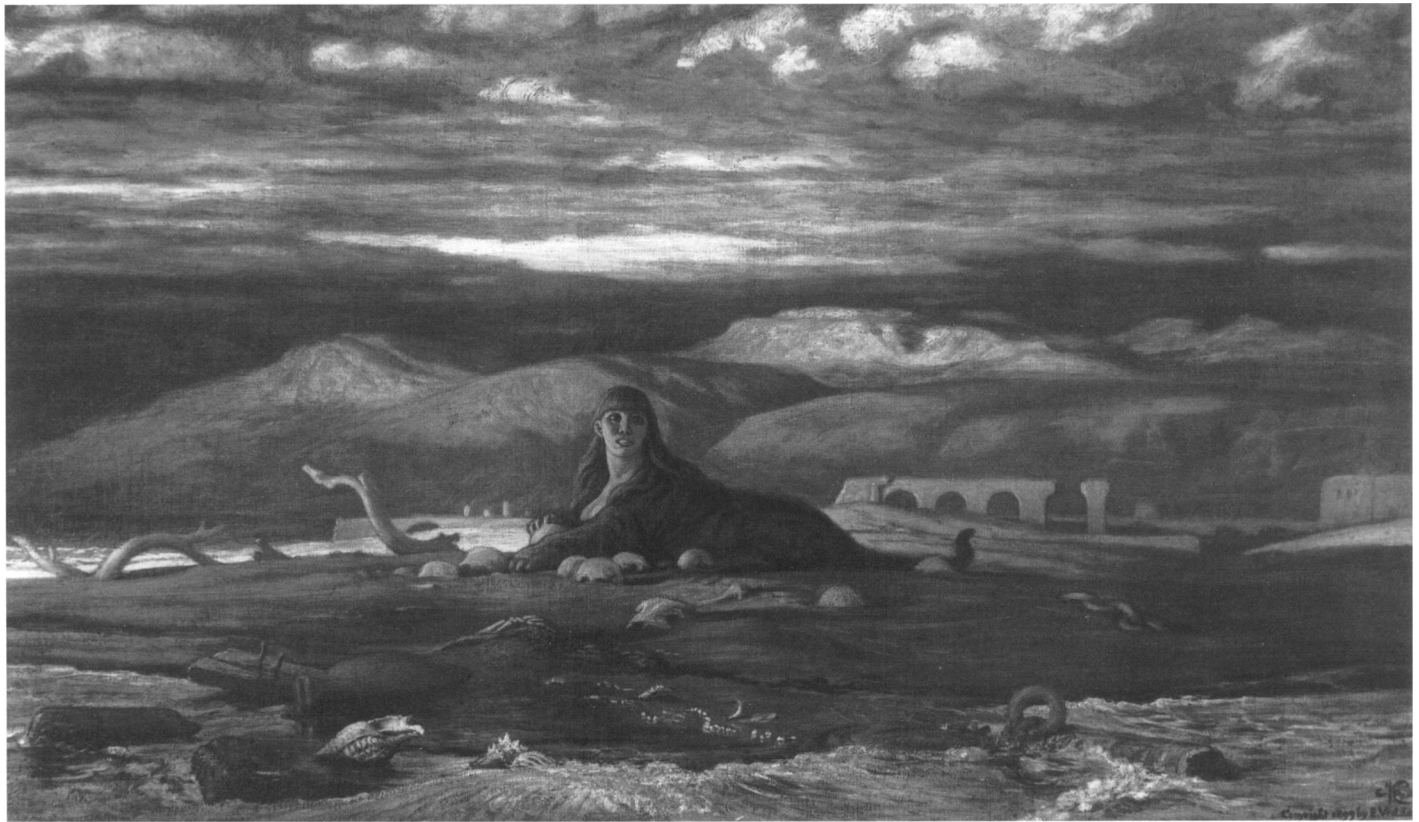
waving weeds, slithering fish, and wet flesh, the erotic potential of the mermaid motif flourished. Long before Freud expounded on the erotic significance of floating dreams—literally, wet dreams—



painters were depicting some of their most sensual and imaginative couplings in the water. Vedder's mermaid and fisherman embraced modestly, providing a mild example of this aquatic erotica, a motif enjoyed by many of his contemporaries as well. Walter Puttner, illustrator for the avant-garde German journal *Jugend*, played with the public's fascination with deep-sea diving in his design for a story entitled "But It's Fearful Down There," in which the dangers become overtly sexual (fig. 22). The American

Daniel Beard outfitted his figure with diver's gear and added a toothsome shark for an extra note of submarine danger (fig. 23). Beard's iconography curiously prefigures by many decades James Jones's 1967 novel *Go to the Widow-Maker*, which concludes in an underwater coral ring with the convergence of diver, spear, and shark in a submarine orgasm, suggesting the undersea's long hold on the creative imagination.³²

The sensual setting attracted the attention of a variety of artists. Many



24 Elihu Vedder, *The Sphinx of the Seashore*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 71.8 cm (16 ¼ x 28 ¼ in.). Fine Art Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3d

“heard the mermaids singing, each to each,” but, unlike Eliot’s Prufrock, most thought “they will sing to me.” Nineteenth-century artists often depicted women descending with their victims or luring them to Davey Jones’s proverbial locker in the depths. The mermaid who drew the hapless fisherman, sailor—Everyman—became a popular image in the last fin de siècle and was treated by many and diverse artists in Europe, including Max Klinger, Edmund Burne-Jones, and Auguste Rodin. Americans also responded to the theme with gusto. Vedder did so in verse as well as paint. His poem “Neptune’s Siesta” concludes with a vista of an “empty beach and bay / Where only deadly Sirens stay—and the sea moans, / While they sing and play, with dead men’s bones.” The haunting mood of Vedder’s poem is echoed in his *Sphinx of the Seashore* (fig. 24). The Vedderesque spirit also inspired such

contemporaries as William Holbrook Beard, whose *A Sailor’s Delight* (1891, location unknown) depicts a victim being lured by a school of mermaids, and Frederick S. Church, who often painted mermaids, sometimes showing them contemplating the skull of their (presumably) male quarry.³³

Escape beneath the Waves

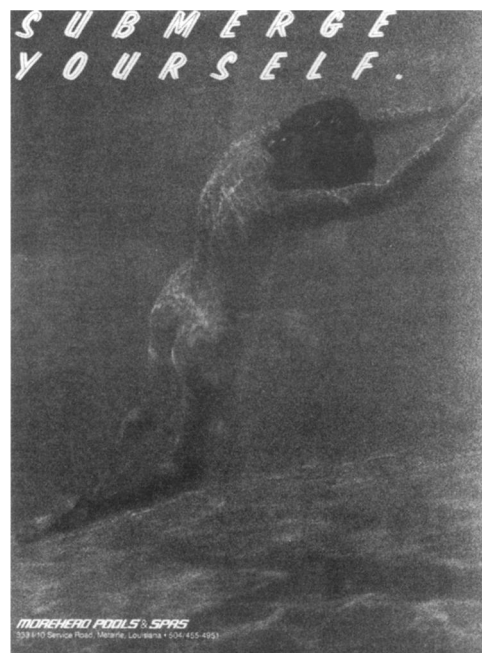
Other divers found not death but escape beneath the waves. In modern art and letters, immersion itself—to lose oneself in the waters, to escape from the pressing realities of terra firma’s here and now—is often the objective. That was certainly the goal of Jules Verne’s brave Nemo. His adventures beneath the sea offered not only a sci-fi adventure into the unknown, but also as a flight from the all-too-well-known political, social, and cultural

upheavals of his time. Published on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, in the midst of cataclysmic upheavals in Western

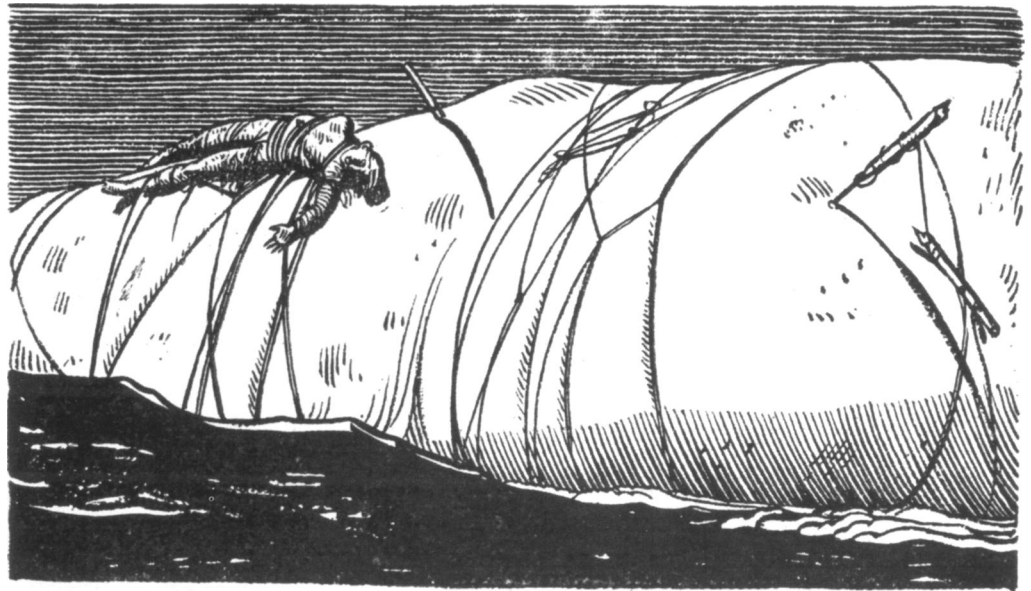
Among krakens, sea serpents, fearsome nautiluses, and other marine fantasies, none was more enduring nor alluring than the graceful mermaid, part human, part fish.

culture, Verne's imaginative voyage offered a refuge from reality, an escape to what Melville called the "wondrous depths . . . of the unwarped primal world." "Was it here," asked Verne, that "this strange man [Nemo] came to steep himself in historical recollections, and live again this ancient life,—he who wanted no modern one?"³⁴

Certainly, amid World War I's horrors, the American painter Harry Hoffman wanted no part of his modern world. His solo exhibition in New York in 1917 consisted almost entirely of Caribbean submarine fantasies, a purposeful avoidance of current military events on land. The phenomenal interest in scuba diving, which began around the time of World War II, might similarly be attributed to escapist impulses. While doubtless fueled in part by the exploits of Navy divers and by technical advances in equipment, the underwater also provided an escape from the turmoil of mid-century American life. The popular press was quick to take notice of the phenomenon, which even spawned its own publications, such as *Skin Diver* magazine. After Cousteau's marketing of the aqualung in 1952, many "webfooted Cyclopean apparitions could be found in almost any American spot that had interesting water."³⁵



With "interesting water" widespread, the enthusiasm grew, and Hollywood responded predictably with a glut of films featuring brave Navy divers, pneumatic bathing beauties, or horrible deep-sea monsters. With the dross came an occasional treasure, like Jacques Cousteau's classic film *Silent World*. Madison Avenue also took measure of this popular fascination, using it to pitch everything from fashion to cigarettes to (not surprisingly) swimming pools. In one such advertising layout, an androgynous nude following the command to "Submerge Yourself" (fig. 25) seems suspended in some amniotic sea, evoking a return to blue wombs and the "phantasies of intra-uterine life" that Freud discovered in many dreams.³⁶ This image of immersion, with its solitary, sensual pleasures, catches the eye just long enough for the mind to register the Morehead Pool and Spa's sponsorship. Yet it purposely leaves uncertain whether the figure is rising or sinking and to what end its submersion. The object of longing—other than a Morehead product—is unclear.



Newsweek interviewed one New York publisher-scuba diver who explained that her fascination with the undersea “arises perhaps from the discontent we all suffer, especially in this city. . . . We are looking for ways out. That’s why people read so much science fiction, so much about things verging on the Utopian. At the back of it is always the motive of somehow getting away from this world which we no longer control.” Her reaction is akin to that of James Jones’s protagonist, who pursued diving “as if in the diving he was relieving himself of some terribly intense, and yet at the same time terribly unknowable frustration.” Recalling the special pleasures of a vacation spent scuba diving, the *New Yorker* reflected:

*But it wasn’t only the beauty—it was more. For me it was a refuge. Today we have hardly any choice but to escape. That’s why I believe that, when people notice something radically wrong with our cities now, they take this snorkel and go under water. We have almost no choice left.*³⁷

Her vacation choice fulfills trend forecasters’ predictions that “plenty of

[Americans] will be interested in spending one or two days of their vacations simply swimming . . . underwater.” But it also suggests, as the marine historian Jean-Albert Foex once wrote, that in the underwater, “man will be spiritually transformed by his activity, that from his intercourse with the sea he will receive an unexpected gift: a certain wisdom, a different way of thinking, judging and making decisions.”³⁸

Perhaps with such a hope in mind, performance artist John Fleck situated his 1988 *opera buffa* underwater—hoping to receive an “unexpected gift.” Playing both male and female halves of the same character, Fleck explores issues of androgyny far from the quotidian concerns of the aerial world. “I Got the He-Be-She-Be’s” is a cathartic work,” he explained, “inspired by the AIDS crisis and the fear it has engendered.”³⁹ For his exploration of the plague’s emotional crisis, Fleck invented a setting fittingly immersed in fluids.

Fleck sought escape from the here-and-now in a mythic setting of his own creation. His invention, though, represents the universal appeal of the undersea,



27 Mark Rothko, *Aquatic Drama* (Rothko number 3049.46), 1946–47. Oil on canvas, 92.2 x 122.4 cm (36 3/8 x 48 1/4 in.). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation

the source of countless legends, of which Venus's birth in the brine is but one familiar example. Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*; the mythic Undine, goddess of immortality and of water; Wagner's Rhinemaidens; the Japanese Prince Fire-fade, who courted the daughter of the God of the Sea—these, plus a host of other legendary figures, populate the submarine imaginations of diverse generations and cultures.

Some legends of the undersea deal, like Fleck's, with issues of a more topical sort. Such was the tale of John Tabor, popular during the mid-nineteenth-century heyday of the whaling industry. Tabor

was taken by a mysterious, hunchbacked old man on a round-the-world trip atop a whale, "whizzing along as if all the whalers in the Pacific were after him . . . bounding from wave to wave like a streak of pigtail lightning," leaving John Tabor "hang[ing] on like grim Death."⁴⁰ Tabor's dream sequence was illustrated in J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846), often cited as a precedent for Melville's heroic tale. But Melville's great novel—and Rockwell Kent's equally impressive illustrations (fig. 26)—offer an achievement far grander than any Browne could have imagined. *Moby-Dick*, at once topical and timeless, is replete with figures

and struggles of epic scale, with imagery recalling heroes of other eras—like romantic Mazzepa tied to his steed—more ambitious and venerable than the comical John Tabor, with mysteries more enduring than most.

Pliny the Elder, convinced of the completeness of his catalogue of marine species, once boasted: “By Hercules! in the sea and in the ocean, vast as it is, there exists nothing that is unknown to us.” Modern man knows otherwise. “O sea,” lamented Charles Baudelaire, “none

knows the richness of your depths / Since you protect your secrets jealously!” Carl Sandburg concurred:

*The sea is large.
The sea must know more than any of us.*⁴¹

Melville knew this too. And, as he did with words, so too, with ink or paint, wood or metal, film or other materials have artists sounded the rich depths to explore the ocean’s mysteries, continuing to discover in “aquatic drama”—the title Rothko gave one such painting (fig. 27)—reflections of the human condition.

Notes

My research on this subject was conducted with the generous support of the Kansas University Endowment Association, the Smithsonian Institution, and the University of Auckland. I am also indebted to Sarah Burt, Michael Gaudio, and Karol Lawson for their able research assistance over the several years in which this project evolved, and to Michael Shaw for his early exploration of the Melville-Vedder subject. The essay was ultimately inspired by my friend and colleague, Elizabeth A. Schultz, to whom it is dedicated.

- 1 Elihu Vedder to Elizabeth Shaw Melville, New York, 19 April 1896, reprinted in *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle*, ed. Eleanor Melville Metcalf (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), p. 288.
- 2 Pfaff’s habitués included such celebrated Melvilleans as Charles Henry Webb, whose enthusiasm for *Moby-Dick* led him to ship out on a Martha’s Vineyard whaler. Webb also was fond of recalling his ultimately successful search for a member of the crew that had rescued Melville when the author was imprisoned in the valley of the Typees in the Marquesas. See Van Wyck Brooks, *The Times of Melville and Whitman* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1947), pp. 206–7.
- 3 Herman Melville, *Timoleon Etc.* (New York: Caxton Press, 1891), p. 15. Unlike Timoleon, Vedder did from time to time leave Capri for Rome, New York, and other destinations.
- 4 Christopher Sten, “Melville and the Visual Arts: An Overview,” in *Savage Eye: Melville and the Visual Arts*, ed. Christopher Sten (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), pp. 30–34; and Vedder to “Dear Madam,” declining invitation to speak at Brooklyn “Women’s Art School,” [March 1887], Elihu Vedder Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 5 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Charles Feidelson, Jr. (1851; reprint, Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1964), pp. 207, 405; Herman Melville, *John Marr and Other Poems* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1922), p. 204.
Vedder’s painting of Saint Simeon Stylites is illustrated in color in Elihu Vedder, *Digressions of V.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 321.
- 6 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 613, 366, 214, 617–18, 241, 617–18.
- 7 Rev. Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies* (1863; reprint, London: Macmillan, 1874), pp. 66, 122; Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 241.
- 8 Jacques-Yves Cousteau, “Introduction,” in Arthur C. Clarke, *The First Five Fathoms* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. ix; Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, annotated by Walter James Miller (1869; reprint, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), p. 104.
- 9 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 352.
- 10 Theodore Pratt, *Mr. Limpet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), pp. 8–9.
- 11 See, for instance, Guglielmo Matthiae, *Pittura Romana del Medioevo*, vol. 2 (Rome: Fratelli Palombi, 1965), fig. 11.
- 12 Melville, *Timoleon*, p. 51.
- 13 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 682; Kingsley, *Water Babies*, pp. 281–82.
- 14 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 691; Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross, *The Motion Picture Guide*, vol. 8 (Chicago: Cinebooks, 1986), p. 3626.
- 15 Brian Wallis, “Robert Flynt: Shallow Anatomies,” *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England* 9 (summer

- 1988): 17. For examples of F. H. Taylor's split focus, see Taylor's *Diving for Shellfish—Sponges in Bahama Waters* (1881) and *The Ocean Floor of the Crystal Clear Waters of Nassau* (1881), both watercolors illustrated in *The Old Print Shop Portfolio* (New York) 27 (March 1968).
- 16 Jules Michelet, *The Sea* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1875), p. 51; Kingsley, *Water Babies*, p. 83; Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 498, 497, 500.
- 17 Burne-Jones, quoted in Georgianna Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, vol. 2 (London: MacMillan, 1906), p. 124.
- 18 William H. Beard, *Action in Art* (New York: Cassell, 1893), pp. 275, 279–80; E. F. T. Bennett, "The Movements of Fish," *Art Journal* (London) 7 (1899): 291.
- 19 Arthur M. Edwards, *Life Beneath the Waters, or The Aquarium in America* (New York: H. Balliere, 1858), pp. 2, 14.
- 20 Paul Klee, Naples, 25 March 1902, quoted in Charles Werner Haxthausen, *Paul Klee: The Formative Years* (New York: Garland, 1981), p. 80, quotation on p. 79.
- 21 Emily Farnham, "Charles Demuth: His Life, Psychology and Works," vol. 1 (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1959), p. 298.
- 22 James Johnstone, *Life in the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), p. 7; Robert Ballard, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 1974, quoted in Robert F. Burgess, *Ships beneath the Sea: A History of Subs and Submersibles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 235. See also Matthew F. Maury, *Physical Geography of the Sea* (New York: 1855).
- 23 Robert F. Marx, *Into the Depths: The History of Man's Underwater Exploration* (New York: Von Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1978), p. 166. Lake reported his early adventures to a wide and enthusiastic audience in *McClure's Magazine*, January 1899.
- 24 See, for instance, Masson's *The Depths of the Sea* (1937, private collection), reproduced in William Rubin, *André Masson* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 40.
- 25 In addition to his *Moby-Dick* subjects, Baziotes painted other marine motifs, including *Sea Forms* (1951, Whitney Museum of American Art) and *Whirlpool* (1953, Wichita Art Museum). On submarine themes in sculpture, see, for example, Louise Nevelson, *Undermarine Scape* (1956, illustrated in Sotheby's New York catalogue *Sale of Contemporary Art, Part II*, 7 May 1992, lot 230); and Richard Stankiewicz, *Diving to the Bottom of the Ocean* (1958, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris).
- 26 Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act I, scene 2.
- 27 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 613.
- 28 Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, pp. 246–47, 249; Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 405.
- 29 Walter Montgomery, ed., *American Art and American Art Collections* (Boston: E. W. Walker & Co., 1889), p. 851.
- 30 Salvatore Dali, quoted in Robert Descharnes, *Salvador Dali: The Work, the Man*, trans. Eleanor R. Morse (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), p. 231; "Here It Is!" *Art Digest* 13 (May 1939): 12; Bette Midler, quoted in "News-makers," *Newsweek*, 2 July 1979, p. 37.
- 31 *Saturday Evening Post*, 30 August 1955.
- 32 James Jones, *Go to the Widow-Maker* (n.p.: Delacorte Press, 1967), pp. 583–86.
- 33 T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p. 401; Elihu Vedder, "Neptune's Siesta," poem in Vedder Papers, reel NAA-4, frame 644.
- 34 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 530; Verne, p. 249.
- 35 "Skin Diving: New Found Thrills in an Old Pursuit," *Newsweek*, 7 September 1953, p. 50.
- 36 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1954), p. 435.
- 37 *Newsweek*, quoted in Hans Hass, *Men beneath the Sea: Man's Conquest of the Underwater World* (1973; reprint, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 357; Jones, p. 584.
- 38 Hilbert Schenck Jr. and Henry Kendall, "Should We Ban Goggling?" *Field and Stream* 58 (July 1953): 99; Jean-Albert Foex, *Histoire sous-marine des hommes: Dix milles ans sous les mers* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1964), pp. 15–16.
- 39 John Fleck, quoted by Stephen Holden, "The Shock of the New: East Village World's Fair," *New York Times*, 17 June 1988, p. C27.
- 40 J. Ross Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1968), pp. 175–76, 179.
- 41 Pliny, quoted in F. D. Ommanney, "Exploring the Deep Sea I," *Geographical Magazine* (London) 19 (May 1946): 57; Charles Baudelaire, "Man and the Sea," *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 35; Carl Sandburg, "The Sea Hold," in *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).