

# Artists Paint the Sea



## A C T I V I T Y S H E E T

**Some artists live or vacation in places that are along the sea, so seascapes were a natural theme for them to work with.** In the Netherlands, Dutch painters who painted seascapes had the task of accurately depicting every feature so that not only the exact location of the seascape could be recorded, but also every minute detail of the ships included in the painting. Artists have always enjoyed taking holidays along the sea, as many of us do today. Many artists brought their canvases and sketchbooks with them to record what they saw and create seascapes. [Claude Monet](#) and [Vincent Van Gogh](#) loved the sea, and recreated many seascapes in France, capturing the quality of light in their impressionistic style. On a windy day, these artists often complained of getting sand in their paintings.

**Some artists have used seascapes to tell us about the sea.** You can see a calm sea in John Constable's (English, 1776-1837), [The Sea Near Brighton](#) painted in 1826. You can see icebergs in a northern sea in Frederic Edwin Church's (American, 1826-1900) [The Icebergs](#) painted in 1861. You can see a tornado at sea in Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet's (French, 1819 - 1877) [Marine: The Waterspout](#) painted in 1870. You can see a terrible gale in Ludolf Backhuysen's (Holland, 1631 - 1708) [Ships in a Stormy Sea Off a Coast](#) painted somewhere between 1695 and 1700 in the Netherlands.

**Some artists have used seascapes as a way to tell stories from current events.** Painter and lithographer Théodore Géricault lived in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. In his painting [The Raft of the 'Medusa'](#) he told the story of a government ship named *The Medusa*. This ship was lost off the coast of West Africa, and 150 people tried to escape on a raft. After thirteen days, only fifteen people were rescued alive. They had nothing to drink on the raft but a few drops of wine and nothing to eat but human flesh. The tragedy was blamed on official negligence and created a huge scandal. In the painting, Géricault chose to depict the moment when the survivors first saw the rescue ship. While creating this painting he worked much like a newspaper reporter would. He interviewed survivors and drew their portraits. He had a model of the raft built and he even studied corpses in the morgue.

**Some artists paint seascapes to tell stories about fishermen.** In the summer of 1883, American artist Winslow Homer moved to Prout's Neck, Maine. Here, he concentrated exclusively on painting the sea. He worked directly from nature. In his painting [The Fog Warning](#), he shows fishermen challenging the ocean's power with their own strength and cunning. In [Saved](#), fishermen defy the ocean's force in a scene of dramatic rescue. In [Eight Bells](#), Homer records the heroic everyday tasks of fishermen. In [The Herring Net](#), artist N.C. Wyeth stated, "Homer painted the sea for the first time in history as it really looked." In this painting he shows heroic men catching fish in a net despite the teeming rain and dense fog.

**Some artists paint seascapes to tell stories about sailors.** [Breezing Up \(A Fair Wind\)](#), also painted by Winslow Homer, shows young American sailors happily sailing across the ocean. There is a threatening storm cloud in the distance, and when you look at the painting you can't help but wonder if they notice it and are heading for home.

**Still other artists painted the sea to tell stories from history.** French painter Edouard Manet painted a famous battle scene in his [Battle of the Kearsarge and Alabama](#) in 1864. The USS *Kearsarge* was the only ship in the United States Navy named for Mount Kearsarge in New Hampshire. The boat was built in Kittery, Maine under the 1861 American Civil War emergency shipbuilding program. The boat was launched on September 11, 1861. Soon after, she was hunting for Confederate States of America raiders in European waters. Arriving at Cherbourg, France, on June 14, 1864, she found the *Alabama*. When both boats were safely out to sea, the *Alabama* opened fire first. The *Kearsarge* waited to return the fire until she was less than 1000 yards away from the *Alabama*. The ships circled each other as each commander tried to deliver deadly fire. The battle quickly turned against *Alabama* because she was an older ship in poor condition. One hour after she fired her first shot, *Alabama* had been reduced to a sinking wreck. The crew of the *Kearsarge* rescued the majority of *Alabama's* survivors, The battle between *Kearsarge* and *Alabama* is honored by the United States Navy by a battle star on the Civil War campaign streamer.

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