

Activity: *What's In Dodd's Maritime Painting?*

Museum Exhibit Association: *What's In a Maritime Painting?*

Module: Language

Grade Level: 6-12

Standards Criteria: Use spoken, written, and visual language to (e.g. conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.



Title: *H.M.S. 'Southampton' Off Table Mountain, Capetown*

Date of Painting: 1780

Artist: Robert Dodd (circa 1748-1816)

Discuss Robert Dodd's painting in terms of Aesthetics, Technology and History using examples from the Blue World Web Museum's exhibit, *What's In a Maritime Painting?*, to compare and contrast.

Background Information The objective of this lesson is to let students explore through and sub-topics of the exhibit with a new painting not previously exhibited in the Blue World Web Museum.

Take time to tour the in the Blue World Web Museum exhibit, *What's In a Maritime Painting?* The exhibit explores how to look at maritime art through different avenues, specifically with an eye to aesthetics, technology and history. In particular, it takes the 1831 painting *The 'Sir David Scott' at the Straits of Sunda* by William Huggins and explores the work in-depth using other marine paintings to compare and contrast each of the main themes and the adjoining sub-topics.

Presented in this activity is a painting by Robert Dodd, *'Southampton' Off Table Mountain, Capetown*. Like Huggins' *Sir David Scott*, Dodd presents the *Southampton* in a large format with a grand view.

Painting Facts:

Title: *'Southampton' Off Table Mountain, Capetown*

Date of Painting: 1780

Artist: Robert Dodd (circa 1748-1816)

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Painting Dimensions: 33 inches (84 cm) by 56.75 inches (144 cm)

Provenance: Initially acquired by Sir Robert Preston (1740-1834), then by James Bruce upon whose death the painting passed to his elder brother, Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin (1766-1841), then by descent to the 11th Earl of Elgin, then to the present owner.

Ship Facts;

HMS Southampton

Built: Rotherhithe, England

Builder: Inwood

Architect: Thomas Slade

Launched: 1757

Fate: Wrecked 1812 (Bahamas)

Notes:

Research often presents conflicting possibilities. The present title of the painting refers to the arrival, in Cape Town, South Africa, of the second of six British warships christened **Southampton**. **HMS Southampton** was a 32-gun, 5th rate Royal Navy warship, not as large as a ship-of-the-line. This ship saw naval action at the battles of Bell Isle, the Glorious First of June and Cape St. Vincent. **HMS Southampton** was an early example of British naval frigates.

In Dodd's painting, the Southampton sits in the right foreground facing away from the viewer in a portside quarter view. Then to the right the ship is seen again in a second position bearing toward the viewer in a starboard side bow view. In both views the ship is flying the British Royal Ensign on the stern staff, and at the masthead, a Royal Navy commissioning pennant that prominently displays the Cross of St George.

There are five additional vessels at anchor in Table Harbor, Cape Town, South Africa. Two vessels fly British flags and two fly Dutch flags. The fifth vessel's flags are obscured. Rising above the bay in the background distinguishing the harbor are Devil's Peak, Table Mountain and Lion's Head.

An alternative, speculative possibility exists that this painting commemorates the concurrent presence at the Cape of Good Hope during April and May 1780, of the two *British East Indiamen* **Southampton**

(*the central vessel*) and *Nassau* (shown arriving on the right), and the British Frigate *Sybil* (shown on the left wearing the British white ensign), along with *Resolution* and *Discovery*, the two ships of Captain James Cook's third expedition which were returning to England after Cook's death. *Resolution* and *Discovery* would be the ships positioned just forward of *Southampton*, one partially obscured by *Southampton's* bow, the other closer to shore in the background.

This likelihood is supported by the fact that the painting's first owner was Sir Robert Preston who likely commissioned the painting. Preston was an officer of the British East India Company and could easily have had a financial interest in the East Indiaman *Southampton*, and/or its cargo.

The two Cook ships arrived at False Bay on the west side of the Cape of Good Hope on April 12, and the next day moved further into the bay and anchored at Simon's Bay to effect repairs to the ships. They saw the two East Indiamen anchored there. The repairs to the Cook ships were completed by May 1. The frigate *Sybil*, which had been sent to escort the two East Indiamen back to England, arrived at Table Bay on the West side of the Cape on April 21, and departed, carrying letters from members of the crew of Cook's ships, on May 4, in the company of the two East Indiamen. The Cook ships left the Cape area May 9th. The records do not confirm that all the ships were ever concurrently in Table Bay, on the West Side of the Cape, although since the repairs to the Cook ships were completed by May 1, and the *Sybil* did not leave until May 4, they *could* have all been in Table Bay for a few days in early May.



Dodd may have used artistic license in his design showing all the ships together in Table Bay. It is unlikely that he was present in the Cape area at the date of the event (April 12-May 9, 1780). He appears to have appropriated the painting's overall design from the 1730 painting; *Table Bay* by William Scott (seen at left). This is corroborated not only by the obvious similarity of the perspective of the scene and the placement of the subject vessels, but even more conclusively by the existence of what appears to be a low lying land at the viewer's right horizon in both paintings. This feature does not exist in reality. Even if the ambiguous feature were intended to represent a low lying cloud bank, its presence in the same location of both paintings is too unusual to be coincidental. Comparing the ships in the two paintings, it is obvious that Dodd updated the design of the ships to those of the later time period of his painting, and changed the flags to match the nationality of the ships he was depicting. He has also depicted more ships at anchor than in the Scott painting, possibly adding ones to represent the Cook ships.

The long commissioning pennant featuring the Cross of Saint George flying from the masthead of *Southampton*, which Dodd borrowed from the Scott painting, raises a question. This pennant is reserved for naval ships. Was this merely a design element appropriated by Dodd with no significance, or were the East Indiamen commissioned for the return trip, or disguised as naval vessels to make the flotilla appear more impressive; since they were sailing into waters they knew were populated by hostile French and American warships?.

Despite its ambiguities, Dodd has created a painting which was much admired, and passed through the ownership of Sir Robert Preston to Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin and then descended through his family.

Teacher's Notes: There are three main themes in the exhibit *What's In a Maritime Painting?*: Aesthetics, Technology, and History. Within each theme are six sub-topics: Aesthetics [Color, Light, Composition, Stylistic Detail, Medium, School], Technology [Hull, Rig, Weather & Sea, Point of Sail, Crew Activity, and Vessel Function], and History [Vessel Identity, Flag Information, Location, Historical Moment, and Connected People]. A painting of the stature of Dodd's *Southampton* covers most, if not all, of the main themes and their sub-topics. Therefore an essay on this painting could easily touch on every theme and sub-topic or focus on a specific theme and set of sub-topics. Use examples from the exhibit to help students compare and contrast.