

## Sailing ships as artistic entities — exhibition tours Canada



Halifax Harbour, Sunset, C. 1853, on loan from the Halifax Board of Trade.

Canada's first professional marine artist, John O'Brien, is the subject of a major historical exhibition of paintings currently touring in Canada.

It is the first exhibition to study the production of the first Canadian to establish the ship portrait or marine subject as an artistic entity in Canadian art.

*John O'Brien (1831-1891): Marine Painter*, which was organized by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, opened on March 5, 1984 at Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. It has since been on view at Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick; Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario; Burnaby Art Gallery, British Columbia; and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. It will open at Yarmouth County Museum, Nova Scotia on March 25, 1985.

The exhibition was organized by Patrick Condon Laurette, assistant curator of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia who documented 54 John O'Brien paintings — 40 were shown in Halifax and 28 were exhibited on tour. Funding was received from the National Museums of Canada and the paintings were borrowed from public and private collections in Canada.

### Golden age of ships

John O'Brien's portraits of nineteenth-century barques, schooners and yachts, full-sailed or battered by menacing storms, reflect the glorious period of Nova Scotian shipping. The 28 paintings in the travelling exhibition

document Halifax's sailing ships and the golden era which ended with the steamship, photography, the railway, economic recession and landscape painting.

John O'Brien was the son of Irish immigrants who first settled in Saint John, New Brunswick. His father, a hairdresser and manufacturer of ornamental hair goods, relocated his business in Halifax, Nova Scotia, shortly before his son was born.

By the time he was 20, John O'Brien became well known locally for his natural ability as a painter of marine subjects and he was recognized as a professional ship

portraitist at age 21. His remarkable gift of portrayal motivated friends and civic officials to sponsor a nine-month tutorial in London, England in 1857, under John Wilson Carmichael, a popular shipping artist.

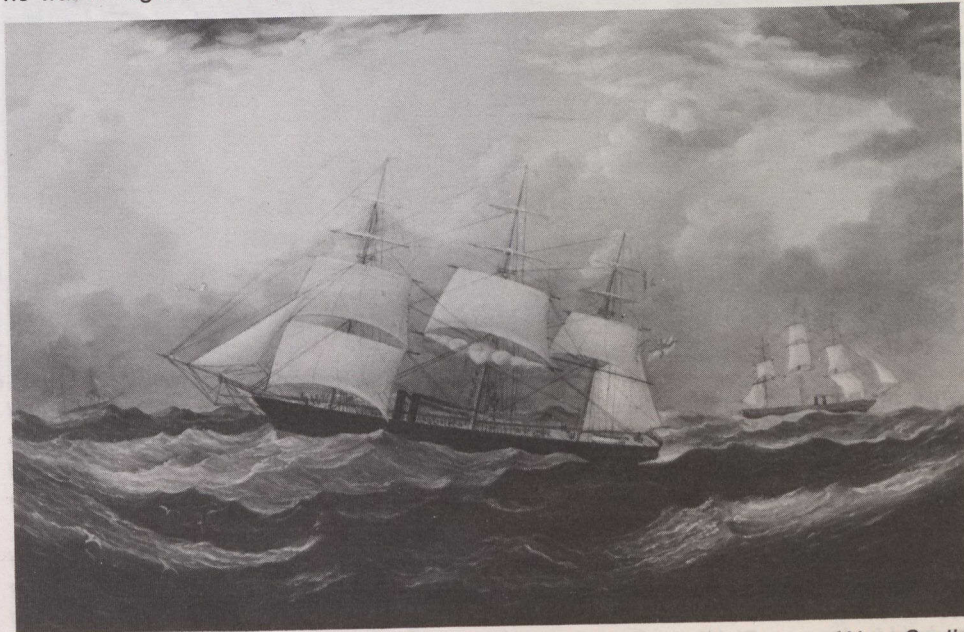
John O'Brien's situation in the 1860s and 1870s Halifax declined when marine art commissions did not follow. Photography and the colouring of such prints became the order of the day, followed by the increasingly national demand for landscape art that had developed out of railway travel facilities. As the respect for his subject, the sailing ship declined, so did John O'Brien's work as marine artist.

### Return to painting

By the 1880s, a decade of cultural vibrancy in Halifax, John O'Brien returned to painting subjects reflecting Nova Scotian shipping and naval history from the 1850s and 1860s. These paintings include Halifax Harbour scenes, standard vessel portraits and paintings of shipwrecks. They are much gloomier than the earlier works, which contain bright skies and sharp definition.

They also confirm John O'Brien as a master of his visual sources, perhaps drawing from the works of several artists to create an intimate yet panoramic painting. However, he apparently made his living as a house painter and died, unknown.

Patrick Laurette said John O'Brien was a "primitive" artist, "a person who comes out of nowhere and starts on his own and teaches himself". Because of the primitive's intensity, his works are small in scale and focus sharply on a ship as if it were a "precious object", Mr. Laurette said. "I think he had a natural affinity for his subject, as if he wanted to be part of it," he added.



Double Portrait, HMS Galatea at Sea, 1888, oil on canvas from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.