Silhouettes in the Sky

The Art of the Weathervane

BY JEAN M. BURKS

Weathervanes and weathercocks are objects of admiration, affection, and awe. Used in America as rooftop decorations and wind direction indicators for hundreds of years, they have their roots in both religious and secular traditions.

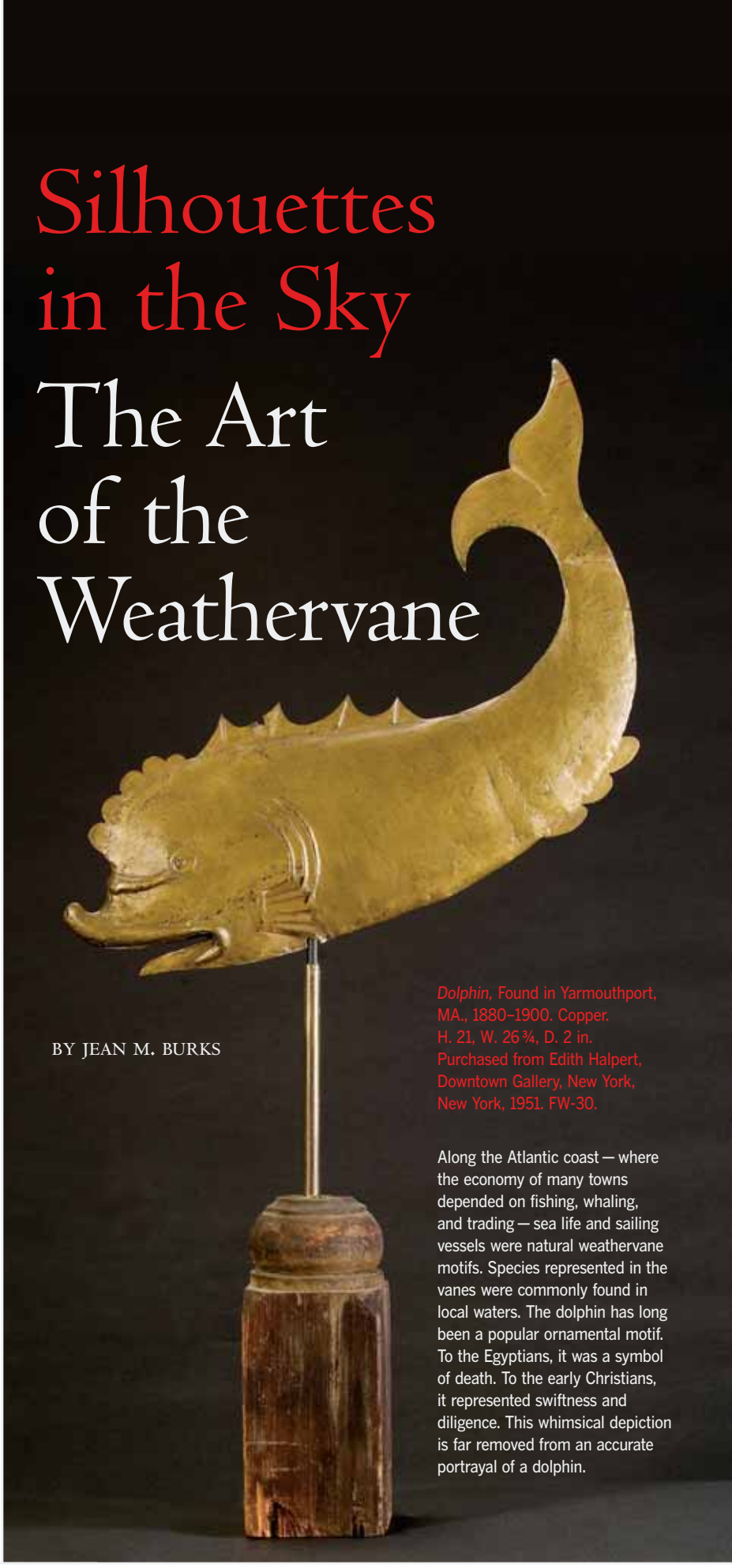
Early in its history, the Christian church adopted the cock as a symbol of vigilance, light, and intellectual and spiritual awakening. A ninth-century papal edict decreed that steeples should be capped by a metal or wooden rooster to remind the faithful of Saint Peter (who denied Christ three times before the cock crowed) and to inspire sinners to come to church. Thus, the weathercock, as it was called, became primarily a religious representation.

The weathervane, on the other hand, had secular associations. In the Middle Ages, English kings granted knights the right to fly *fanes* — an ancient word meaning both flag and weathervane. These cloth pennants bearing the family crest or coat of arms were carried into battle or fixed to castle turrets to proclaim rank and ownership. These heraldic flags also indicated to archers the course of the wind, allowing them to adjust their aim accordingly. Since fabric flags had to be repaired frequently they were replaced with more durable metal ensigns, generally square or rectangular in shape. Because a broadside breeze could bring down a fixed metal banner, the fane was fitted with a swivel that allowed it to sway freely in the wind.

By the seventeenth century, the king's permission to fly a vane was no longer required and vanes, as they were now called, crowned the most important buildings in Britain. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, Christopher Wren and other architects involved in rebuilding the city also designed weathervanes to complement the new architecture of the period. One of these was the metal bannerette, which had an arrow at one end and a shape that resembled the tail of a barn swallow at the other (a form that became widely copied in both Europe and America).

In the eighteenth century, freed from sacred or secular restrictions, weathervane makers abandoned the old geometric shapes in favor of more natural forms, which marked the beginning of the modern vane. In the New World, weathervanes became symbols of newfound social and political equality because any family could raise an elaborate metal banner as a make-believe coat of arms over its home or farm.

As one of the first meteorological instruments devised to predict the changes in weather based on the direction of the wind, weathervanes were vitally important to the agricultural and seafaring colonists. Before the development of the barometer, planting, growing, and harvesting sched-



Dolphin, Found in Yarmouthport, MA., 1880–1900. Copper. H. 21, W. 26¾, D. 2 in. Purchased from Edith Halpert, Downtown Gallery, New York, New York, 1951. FW-30.

Along the Atlantic coast — where the economy of many towns depended on fishing, whaling, and trading — sea life and sailing vessels were natural weathervane motifs. Species represented in the vanes were commonly found in local waters. The dolphin has long been a popular ornamental motif. To the Egyptians, it was a symbol of death. To the early Christians, it represented swiftness and diligence. This whimsical depiction is far removed from an accurate portrayal of a dolphin.

ules relied on such simple observations as recorded in the 1851 *Old Farmer's Almanac:* "Wind from the east — bad for man and for beast;/Wind from the south is too hot for them both;/Wind from the north is of very little worth;/Wind from the west is the softest and the best." Sailors and fishermen also depended on weathervanes for signs of favorable winds before setting out to sea, as expressed in a partial citation of the 1848 rhyme by J.O. Halliwell: "When the wind is in the east/Then the fishes bite the least;/When the wind is in the west,/Then the fishes bite the best,…"

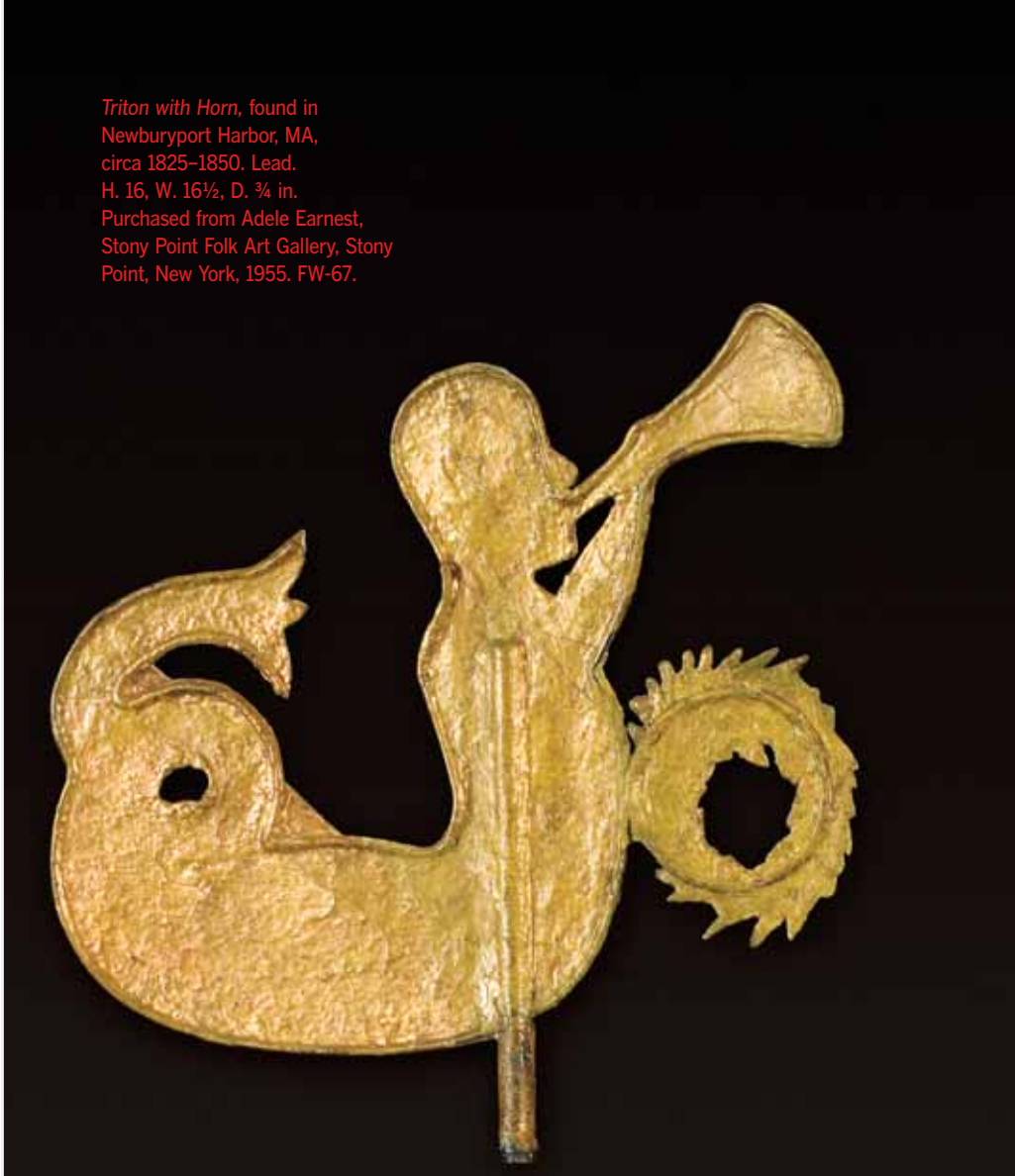
To accurately read the wind's direction, two-thirds of the vane's surface area must be positioned behind the vertical swivel rod (spindle) attached to the roof. When this broad section is struck by a gust of air, the vane spins and points towards the wind's source. Weathervanes were traditionally perched on cupolas — rooftop structures with louvered sides allowing air through to ventilate the structure below — and were sometimes fitted with quadrants indicating the compass points north, south, east and west.

Construction techniques were as varied as weathervane subjects. Before 1850, local craftsmen carved or sawed from wood or hammered or cut from sheet metal one-of-a-kind examples. The finished flat silhouette was painted for protection against the weather.

When manufacturing techniques and marketing methods matured during the second half of the nineteenth century, most weathervanes were produced commercially on a relatively large scale and advertised in catalogues. In producing these later vanes, a wooden pattern was first made and then one of two shaping techniques was employed: either the sheet copper was hammered around the form directly, or a two-part iron mold was cast from a wooden pattern. In the latter case, the copper was beaten into the hollow halves of the mold to create both sides of the vane, which were soldered together and finished with paint or gold leaf. This method allowed commercial factories to inexpensively mass-produce vanes of popular subjects.

No longer needed to tell the weather, today, people still retain a special fondness for weathervanes because of their aesthetically pleasing forms and connection with the past, providing insight into the evolution of American culture. Shelburne Museum has 130 outstanding examples of both handcrafted and manufactured pieces. Fifty-five of these weathervanes are on exhibit in the museum's Round Barn and Stagecoach Inn through October 31, 2006, with an accompanying color catalog available for $10. For information call the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont, 802.985.3348, or visit www.shelburnemuseum.org.

Triton with Horn, found in Newburyport Harbor, MA, circa 1825–1850. Lead. H. 16, W. 16½, D. ¾ in. Purchased from Adele Earnest, Stony Point Folk Art Gallery, Stony Point, New York, 1955. FW-67.



The human-horse centaur, the mermaid, and the human-fish Triton originated in ancient times on the shores of the Mediterranean. Triton was a sea god, the son of Poseidon who stilled the ocean's waves with his conch-shell trumpet. This Massachusetts example carries the classical crown, a laurel wreath.

The choice of Triton as a weathervane has a long history that reaches back to Andronicus of Cyrrhus who may have invented the weathervane when he made a Triton for Athens' Horologium (tower of the winds) about 100 B.C. He fashioned the octagonal tower as a meteorological instrument topped by a bronze figure of Triton, whose handheld rod turned in the wind, pointing to the direction from which it blew.

Old Gabriel, by Henry Forster (n.d.), Crown Point, NY, 1822. Iron. W. 72, D. 36 in. On loan from the White Church Association, Crown Point, New York.

Gabriel, one of seven archangels in the Old Testament, was sent to earth as a herald of comfort and good tidings. He appeared to the prophet Daniel and was sent to the Virgin Mary to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Consequently, Gabriel blowing his trumpet was the popular subject of many New England church weathervanes. This Gabriel is distinguished by his size and three-dimensional construction.

Fire Pumper. J.W. Fiske Company (working about 1873–93), NY, late 19th century. Found in Manchester, NH. Copper and other metals (brass, zinc, and iron). H. 37, W. 88, D. 15 in. Purchased from Edith Halpert, Downtown Gallery, New York, 1950. FW-35.

Horse-drawn fire equipment and steam driven vehicles represented technical achievements immortalized in weathervanes. Late nineteenth-century designers ambitiously produced impressive images for firehouse roofs, and this massive weathervane is the largest in the Shelburne Museum's collection. Fashioned of copper, the horse, pumper, and firefighters were conceived realistically and executed with knowledge and craftsmanship. The steamer depicted was an Amoskeag engine dating from 1840–1880.

Because of their focus on livestock, farmers typically chose depictions of fowl, sheep, pigs, and cows for their barn and henhouse weathervanes. James Lombard was a farmer and amateur furniture and weathervane maker who specialized in hens and roosters. Surviving examples on barns sixty-six miles from his hometown suggest that he had an itinerant career in his youth carving weathervanes as he traveled the Maine highways. The silhouettes of his weathervanes are extremely stylized, and the intricate cutout areas indicating tail feathers enhanced the visibility of the design from a distance. While some weathervanes can be recognized as the work of particular craftsmen, most local weathervane artists will never be identified.

Crowing Rooster, Bridgton, ME, circa 1880–1900. James Lombard (b. 1865), Baldwin, ME. Carved and painted wood. H. 16, W. 20¼, D: ¾ in. Purchased from Adele Earnest, Stony Point Antique Shop, Stony Point, New York, 1958. FW-82.

Weathervanes of farm horses, recreational trotters with buggies, and portraits of famous racing steeds with jockeys were inspired by popular lithographs printed by Currier & Ives and others. For this weathervane of Hindoo, the most famous racehorse of his day, L.W. Cushing & Sons commissioned a carved wooden pattern in 1881. A hollow iron mold was formed from the pattern, and sheets of copper were hammered inside to create two sides that were soldered together. In 1955, collector and folk art dealer Edith Halpert acquired the original wooden templates and patterns required to produce a complete unit. She commissioned this copper weathervane of Hindoo and presented it to Shelburne Museum. Mrs. Halpert was a friend of museum founder Electra Havemeyer Webb and served on the museum's early board of trustees.

Hindoo, cast from the original molds in 1955. L.W. Cushing & Sons (working 1872–1933), Waltham, MA. Copper. H. 19, W. 32, D. 2 1/2 in. Gift of Edith, Halpert, Downtown Gallery, New York, New York, 1957. FW-79.

Merino Sheep, L.W. Cushing & Sons (working 1872–1933), Waltham, MA, circa 1872–1890. Found on a farm in Addison County, Vermont. Copper. H. 20½, W. 28, D. 7 in. Purchased from Harry E. Knapp, Rutland, Vermont, 1954. FW-61.

When David Humphreys (1752–1818), the U.S. minister to Spain was recalled in 1802 by President Jefferson, he brought back a flock of Merino sheep (which produce a heavy fleece of exceptional quality) and became one of America's first successful wool processors. The mill he built on the Naugatuck River in Connecticut in 1806 spawned seventy-five more mills in New England by 1815. Improved machinery further stimulated the industry in the 1830s and 40s and the Civil War brought an even greater demand for woolen uniforms. A variety of sheep and rams were depicted on weathervanes throughout New England although the treatment of the wool is handled in a variety of ways. Some examples have wool punched in a random pattern while others exhibit great detail in the repoussée process.

***Jean M. Burks** is senior curator, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.*

1 Myrna Kaye, *Yankee Weathervanes,* Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, Limited, 1975, 1–3.

2 Robert Bishop and Patricia Coblentz, *A Gallery of American Weathervanes and Whirligigs,* New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981, 11.

3 Myrna Kaye, *Yankee Weathervanes,* Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, Limited, 1975, 1–3.