



February 2012



***The Grand Canyon of  
Yellowstone***

1872

**Thomas Moran**

Born: Bolton, England, 1837

Died: Santa Barbara, California,  
1926

Oil on canvas mounted on  
aluminum

84 x 144 1/4 in. (213.0 x 266.3  
cm.)

Smithsonian American Art  
Museum

Lent by the Department of the  
Interior Museum

L.1968.84.1

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*Researcher Ann began her investigations of this magnificent painting by studying it closely in person. She discovered that there were many important details, like the figures in the foreground, that didn't show up clearly in even the largest digital reproduction. Therefore she took photographs of these details, and returned often to consult the real painting. With suggestions from the museum's director, researcher Ann formulated the following questions:*

- **How did the English-born Thomas Moran get to Yellowstone in 1871?**
- **How does this painting relate to the creation of Yellowstone as the first national park in 1872?**

The first source I consulted was the National Gallery of Art's 1997 exhibition catalog on Thomas Moran. This includes essays on Moran's career and a detailed chronology of the artist's life. The book tells how the artist's family emigrated from Bolton, England, to Philadelphia in the 1840s when the artist to be was a child. The artist learned to draw and paint from his older brother Edward, who had learned from Philadelphia artists (Anderson, 1997).

The National Gallery catalog quotes many primary sources, including letters, journal entries, and art reviews. I wanted to see as many primary sources as possible myself to see what additional information might be there. I checked some of the primary sources in the Archives of American Art, which includes two large collections of much of this primary material on Thomas Moran. I did not have time to track down everything, but I noticed that one of the people who helped with the research for the National Gallery catalog was Merl M. Moore, Jr. The late Colonel Moore, a great American art researcher, gave his papers to the library of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. Sure enough, when I looked at his papers about Thomas Moran, I found a large file with most of the primary source articles on the 1872 painting cited in the National Gallery catalog.

Joni Louise Kinsey's *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* puts the artist in the context of the history of the great Western surveys of the nineteenth century. Kinsey tells how Moran first became interested in the mysterious Yellowstone region of Wyoming Territory. In the spring of 1871, the artist's friend Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *Scribner's Monthly*, asked him to clean up for publication in the magazine some sketches that had been made by explorers, not artists, on an expedition to Yellowstone. [Kinsey, 1992] Moran's translations from these sketches, the first published illustrations of the geysers, hot spring, and other features of Yellowstone, appeared in an article titled "[The Wonders of the Yellowstone.](#)" (Langford, 1871)

Moran's involvement with Yellowstone continued thanks to Ferdinand Hayden, a surgeon interested in geology and paleontology who conducted a series of surveys of western geological and geographical surveys for the Federal Government. The surveys included a draftsman, Henry Wood Elliott. In 1870, Hayden added photographer William Henry Jackson to his survey party. Hayden invited the prominent landscape painter Sanford Gifford as a guest artist in 1870. An example of the paintings Gifford made is [Valley of the Chug Water](#), an oil painting made by Gifford on the expedition in 1870, which depicts a landscape in southeastern Wyoming (Harvey, 1998). Gifford did not join Hayden's 1871 survey of the Yellowstone region. Hayden offered to take artist Albert Bierstadt along, but he did not accept the offer. Moran's friend A. B. Nettleton, office manager of the Northern Pacific Railroad, wrote to Hayden asking Hayden to allow Moran to join the 1871 expedition (Kinsey, 1992; Anderson, 1997). Hayden happily agreed. Moran caught a Union Pacific train from his home in Philadelphia to Utah, and then rode a stage coach to catch up with the expedition in Montana (Kinsey, 1992).

Moran's exciting days with the Hayden's survey of Yellowstone in 1871 come alive through an array of primary sources listed in secondary sources (Kinsey, 1992; Anderson, 1997). Most of Moran's surviving sketches and water colors of Yellowstone made on the 1871 expedition are in the collection of Yellowstone National Park (Morand, 1996). The Yellowstone web site reproduces [Moran's original drawings](#) on their web site, which also includes Moran's diary of the Yellowstone expedition. They have posted [a reproduction of it on their web site](#). Moran certainly concentrated more on his drawings than his very dry diary. His entries include nothing

more detailed than, “July 28. Sketching & photographing about the Falls.” A livelier narrative of the expedition’s progress emerges in the journals of Moran’s colleagues botanist George Nelson Allen and mineralogy Albert C. Peale (great-grand son of Charles Willson Peale the artist). Peale said “The falls . . . must be about 400 feet high. They are very pretty, indeed, and the sun shining on the spray formed a beautiful rainbow. . . .The Cañon is grand. It is cut through igneous rocks of various kinds and in places is stained of a red color from the iron of numerous springs. In others, it is bright yellow from infiltration of sulphur [which the editor notes is wrong] In others, it is green from vegetation and in still others pure white.” (Peale in Merrill, 1999.) These diaries, published in 1999, allowed me to correct the otherwise excellent chronology in the 1997 National Gallery catalog in that Moran actually joined the Hayden expedition on June 30<sup>th</sup> at Wilson’s Ranch in Montana rather than in July at Virginia City, Montana (Merrill, 1999).

Moran worked closely with photographer William Henry Jackson, whose photographs from the 1871 Yellowstone survey are available from many sources, including the [U.S. Geological Survey Photographic Library’s web site](#). Decades later, Jackson published his memories of the 1871 expedition in his autobiography (Jackson, 1940) and an article about his days with Moran. (Jackson, 1936). I am skeptical of details recalled so much later, but Jackson gives a charming description of his friend Moran “He was 34 years old, at this time, of slight and frail physique and did not seem to be of the kind to endure the strenuous life of the wilderness. But he was wiry and active in getting about and keenly enthusiastic about his participation in the work of the expedition.” (Jackson, 1936)

When Thomas Moran returned east from Yellowstone, he drew illustrations from his sketches and started his vast painting *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (Anderson, 1997). Moran’s illustrations appeared in several articles on Yellowstone, including “The Wonders of the West” in the February 1872 editions of *Scribner’s Monthly* (Hayden, 1872; Anderson, 1997). These illustrations and Moran’s watercolors were crucial to the founding of Yellowstone National Park. Hayden championed a bill to make Yellowstone the first national park and found the images from his expedition of great help to the cause. Hayden had some of the “curiosities” from his travels exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution. He also distributed copies of the *Scribner’s* article on Yellowstone illustrated by Moran (Kinsey, 1992). Jackson recalled that “the watercolors of Thomas Moran and the photographs of the geology survey were the most important exhibits brought before the Committee.” (Jackson, 1936)

It was not until after President Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill on March 2 to make Yellowstone the first national park that Moran wrote to Hayden, “The picture is now more than half finished & I feel confident that it will produce a most decided sensation in art circles.” (Moran to Hayden, March 11, 1872, National Archives) Moran declared his great canvas *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* completed on April 28 and invited people to his studio to see it the following day (*Newark Daily Advertiser*, 1872). This leads to more questions:

- **How did the American public respond to Moran's enormous painting of their new national park?**
- **Did Moran continue to paint great views of the American wilderness?**

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