



Natural Bridge As An Idyll



THE DECORATIVE ARTS GALLERY of “Virginia Arcadia” (above) features two Rockbridge artifacts in front of historic reproductions of a wallpaper series titled “Views of North America.” Produced by Parisian firm Zuber et Cie in 1835, these panels highlight Niagara Falls and Natural Bridge as iconic American symbols. One of the Rockbridge artifacts in the exhibit is (at left) a glazed earthenware plate with view of Natural Bridge made by Enoch Wood & Sons, Staffordshire, England, 1830-1848, that is courtesy of the Reeves Museum of Ceramics at Washington and Lee University.

New Exhibit In Richmond Features Rockbridge Treasures

Editor’s note: Last month, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts opened a new exhibit, “Virginia Arcadia: The Natural Bridge in American Art,” which runs through Aug. 1.
Admission is free, but consult vmfa.museum for visitor policies, and health conditions in Richmond. This article is written by Rockbridge Historical Executive Director Eric Wilson. It spotlights several of the exhibit’s local artifacts, images, along with the insights of curators, archivists, and park rangers.

Finding Arcadia

For three millennia, now, finding Arcadia has required an imaginative journey. Since the ancient Greeks and Romans, a long line of writers and painters – including two centuries of neoclassical

American artists – have figured Arcadian habitats and habits as an idealized, even metaphorical place. Their idyllic poems and paintings have both mapped and shaped a state of mind. Their mythic landscapes and lyrics are invariably set in the past, and invitingly pastoral. Their vistas guide viewers and readers to travel back to some mythic, idealized vision of a time when human interactions with and within Nature enjoy both balance and bounty.

In the technological press of contemporary society (not to mention the cloistered-constraints of the COVID-scape), those images, those getaways seem to hold even more appeal.

Named in such spirit, Arcadia, Virginia – as it happens – lies immediately at hand: a dozen miles south of Natural Bridge, leaving the main road behind,

a turn east, and an easy skip across the James River.

But if you steer over the Blue Ridge yet further, you can now find “Virginia Arcadia” in Richmond. The title of a newly opened exhibit centered on “The Natural Bridge in American Art,” it brings Rockbridge to audiences well beyond, as artists and writers have done since the first European visitors and settlers here in the mid-18th century. In 1777, Rockbridge County was fittingly named for the geological marvel. Three years earlier, its first American owner, Thomas Jefferson, famously called others to see “the most sublime of Nature’s works.” And for generations since, it’s been marveled at and marketed as one of the “Seven Natural Wonders of the World.”

The exhibit depends, authentically, on Rockbridge art and artifacts, and on the artistic, historical and scientific expertise of local institutions. But familiar as the Bridge may seem here, the VMFA exhibit constellates new connections. Their choices and gallery design prompt new angles for viewing and understanding the Bridge’s visual appeal, as well as the social complexities that have shaped its visual renderings through time.

Exhibit curator Christopher Oliver emphasizes the show’s collaborative reach and rewards: “One of the pleasures of mounting an exhibition such as this is the ability to engage with other institutions’ existing knowledge about certain objects, with people who have thought deeply about the works of art that are brought together here in Richmond. It’s such an unusual show, because while

these are vastly different artists, working in different eras and locales, each of them had an inspirational starting point, the Natural Bridge.”

New Angles

Natural Bridge State Park ranger and RHS board member Matthew Jackson also affirms that diversity of experience, inside and out: “Given all the familiar pictures and promotions that people have seen, the Bridge seems so iconic, fixed in time and stone. But each visit to the Bridge is new, often in different company. The seasons change, as do the scientific and cultural programs the state park has to offer.”

A few years ago, the RHS Museum staged its own exhibit, “Images of the See **Natural Bridge** page B2

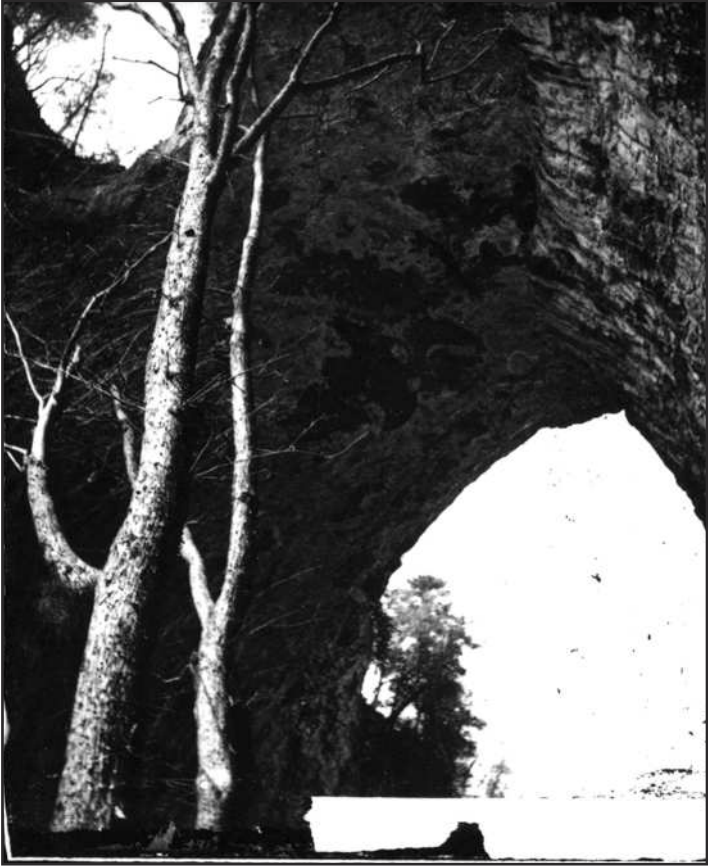


THIS HEADRAIL (above) of the Rockbridge Historical Society’s Natural Bridge Painted Fancy Chair, made in Baltimore ca.1820, was owned by Lexington author Margaret Junkin Preston. VMFA Conservation staff have stabilized, cleaned and clarified the chair’s original pigments, revealing more subtleties in the image of its local landscape. AT RIGHT, a Washington and Lee chemistry student uses noninvasive spectroscopic equipment to analyze paint composition and layering, bridging scientific, historical, and curatorial research.





AMONG THE ART-WORK featured in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts exhibit are (clock-wise, from above) “View from the Arch of the Bridge Looking down the Creek, Rockbridge County,” Joshua Shaw, 1820;. Joseph Drayton’s hand-colored aquatint and engraving, published in 1820 in *Analectic Magazine*; and the underside of Natural Bridge, as captured by Lexington photographer Michael Miley ca. 1875-1910 (W&L Special Collections). Unprinted by Miley, this abstract composition shows a more experimental approach than conventional views from Cedar Creek, or the eastern ridge near today’s Shafer Lane.



Natural Bridge

continued from page B1
Rock Bridge” to emphasize that visual variety, and local contexts (a digital version can now be seen at historicrockbridge.org). The VMFA’s collections and capacities now extend these encounters yet further through a wide array of media, international artists, rarely loaned paintings, and decorative arts.

One of the VMFA’s own holdings is a small 1820 oil painting by Jonathan Shaw, but it provides an utterly unique perspective on the Bridge. More accurately, it was painted on the Bridge, showing a sole figure crawling with curiosity towards the edge of its precipice, looking expansively out over Cedar Creek and toward mountain ridges. The most common viewpoints for artists – and photographers today – come from the smooth easy path below, often looking directly upward to try to capture the majesty, an almost dizzying awe of an arch that feels like a cathedral, but was slowly carved by water through a subterranean cavern whose collapse provides the physical and imaginative portal today.

Another unique image painted the same year by Joseph Drayton shows a covered wagon traveling over the Bridge. Suggesting both local settlement and pioneer expansion, it’s one of the only pictures that Oliver has found that shows a vehicle in transit, clearly figured on a ledge that is typically obscured by the angles from below.

The exhibit also includes several photographs by Lexington photographer Michael Miley; several show how he helped to anchor the dominant pictorial mode there today. But some, quite unconventional, are more artistically experimental. Most of those images

have been loaned by Washington and Lee’s Special Collections and Archives, whose head, Tom Camden, echoes the sense of novelty captured here: “As historians, we know much about the history of such a site and its surroundings. But sometimes, it takes an institution like the VMFA to give us a fresh new aesthetic perspective on a wonderful old friend. The W&L library is once again pleased to collaborate by including the work of another local and national icon, Michael Miley. That the beauty of such a sacred place is sustained over time is clearly evidenced by Miley’s timeless exposures.”

Looking directly upward, one of the Miley photos feels almost abstract, modernist, a study in dark and light and varied form, without a steady perspective point. Miley has arranged his camera so that the straight lines of the spare, wintry trees neatly bisect the two parabolas of empty sky, neatly mirroring one another at an angle. While he and others would more frequently shoot or sketch from further back the creek bed (or from the easterly ridge where Shafer Lane now runs, to be able to jointly capture the Bridge in full, in more panoramic scale), Miley’s experimental, unprinted plate shows one artist’s desire to see things from different angles, to stabilize as well as unsettle.

Touching the Bridge

Before and beyond their visits there, paintings and photographs have generally been the forms through which people have encountered the Bridge. New 19th century technologies like stereoscopic prints and viewers allowed images like Miley’s and others to be seen in 3-D. At the museum, visitors

can view such illusions themselves, in that fresh animating perspective.

But another of the exhibit’s inventive decisions is to highlight other ways in which the Bridge was made newly tangible, tactile. Here, too, two artifacts from Washington and Lee and the Rockbridge Historical Society figure prominently, to tell the tale.

In the early generations after American independence, Niagara Falls and Natural Bridge would become the joint avatars, nationally and internationally, through which to figure the young nation, signaling its rough but inviting frontiers, waiting to be populated through those dramatic gateways.

Parisian wallpaper was manufactured to feature both sites; and a wall-size swatch has been reproduced to simulate its domestic atmosphere, in a room featuring the exhibit’s decorative arts. Rather fancifully, its 1835 scene figures a historically unlikely blend of genteel African-American and Euro-American visitors enjoying a day out at the Bridge. Ferried there by stagecoach, down a smooth (and historically non-existent) road that runs beneath the span, they watch a group of Native American musicians and dancers perform in colorful attire. Again, their clothing and implements seem incongruous: blending or inventing the material culture or rituals of regional tribes that the neither artist – nor visitors – would have seen onsite. Together, all these figures project some imagined community of Jacksonian America, “domesticating” the wild.

For another domestic touch, W&L’s Reeves Center has loaned an elegant, glazed plate centering a view of Natural Bridge. Like the wallpaper produced by Zuber et Cie, this is a transatlantic product, manufactured by Enoch Wood &

Sons, in Staffordshire, England (1830s-1848) and the kind of object that could either be used or featured in artistic display.

Reeves Center curator Ron Fuchs echoes many of the exhibit’s common chords: “This plate was part of a series of pieces decorated with views of the natural and man-made wonders of the young United States, and I think reflects both the interest in one of the country’s most majestic natural monuments and also how the image of Natural Bridge was spread through objects as well as prints and paintings.”

Across the room, set in front of the wallpaper, stands another locally distinctive artifact, loaned by RHS: a Baltimore Painted Fancy Chair manufactured in the 1820s and owned by Lexington writer Margaret Junkin Preston. Thanks to new research – and generous restoration work provided by the VMFA Conservation staff to prepare for the exhibit – visitors can now more clearly see the original rich red hues and brilliant gilded that patterns its frame. On the headrail, a more subtly textured recess of mountains and horizon can now be seen through the striking, neatly framed ovular portal.

It may be that Preston sat in her chair while writing her diary entries about the arrival of the Civil War in Lexington, in June 1864; or her 1867 poetic lament, “Beechenbrook: A Rhyme of War,” as the county and state began their reconstruction.

But the idyllic scene again shows how a romantic, Arcadian lens on the Bridge also comparatively refracts the local, national, and inter-cultural dynamics of America’s changing natural and political landscapes.

As a last “imaging” of the Bridge, RHS and the W&L chemistry department partnered in a unique enterprise before the chair was sent to Richmond. Students of professor Erich Uffelman undertook a range of noninvasive spectroscopic analysis to see if the chair’s surface showed later stages of over-painting (none), underscoring to guide decorative lines or landscape forms (hard to tell), and assess types of pigment (its yellows contain real gold). Altogether, another example of how different modes of educational outreach, scientific and curatorial perspectives, and historical and environmental frameworks can jointly and newly illuminate familiar icons.

A final coupling of those approaches highlights what this exhibit newly offers in Richmond, while building on the deep environmental and institutional foundations in Rockbridge. Reflecting on their own partnership with the exhibit’s development, Natural Bridge State Park manager Jim Jones hits a broad key: “From the early days as a gateway to the west, and today as a gateway to the outdoors, travelers from all over the world still stand in awe of Virginia’s Natural Bridge. As our visitor management plan states, this magnificent arch is ‘folded, sculpted, and etched by time. Natural Bridge State Park is a sacred place echoing with the footsteps of the past where your journey leads you to discover you belong to the community of the people of the bridge.’”

And by affirming and extending the scope of that experience, the VMFA’s Oliver echoes once more: “I hope a visitor leaves ‘Virginia Arcadia’ appreciating the sheer power it held as national icon and conveyor of grandeur.”

Does your business need a PPP loan?



CornerStone Cares about helping businesses keep their workforce employed during the Coronavirus crisis with a Paycheck Protection Program loan. Whether you are seeking a First or Second PPP loan, are a customer or non-customer, CornerStone can assist your business in gaining access to these much-needed funds.

* NMLS ID 775782
** Institution ID 509209



To start the PPP loan process contact:

Greg Frederick*
Senior Vice President, Chief Lending Officer
CornerStone Bank**
(540) 462-6723
frederickg@cornerstonebankva.com