

Harvard Art Museums

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Press Release

Harvard's Philosophy Chamber Collection—Rediscovered and Reunited after Almost Two Centuries

New exhibition opening May 19, 2017, at the Harvard Art Museums showcases iconic examples of 18th- and 19th-century art and technology, illuminating an important chapter in early American history



Left to right: Prepared by Charles Willson Peale, *Long-Eared Owl* (*Asio otus*), 1786–1827. Photo: Jeremiah Trimble; Courtesy of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. John Singleton Copley, *Nicholas Boylston*, 1773. Photo: Harvard Art Museums. Unknown artist, Native Hawaiian, *'Ahu'uula* (*Feathered Cape*), 18th century. Photo: Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, PM#11-65-70/84100 (digital file 99170065). All images © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Cambridge, MA
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This spring, the Harvard Art Museums will present *The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard's Teaching Cabinet, 1766–1820*, a special exhibition that brings together many long-forgotten icons of American culture. It will present new findings on this unique space—equal parts laboratory, picture gallery, and lecture hall—that stood at the center of artistic and intellectual life at Harvard and in New England for more than 50 years.

Celebrated at the time as one of the grandest spaces in America, the original Philosophy Chamber and its adjacent rooms housed an extraordinary collection of paintings, portraits, and prints; mineral, plant, and animal specimens; scientific instruments; indigenous American artifacts; and relics from the ancient world—all of which was used regularly for lectures, discussions, and demonstrations. Highlights include: full-length portraits by John Singleton Copley, Native Hawaiian feather work, carving by indigenous artists of the Northwest Coast, Stephen Sewall's 1768 mural-sized copy of the Wampanoag inscription on the famous Dighton Rock in southeastern Massachusetts, and the elaborately ornamented grand orrery (a model of the solar system) created by Joseph Pope between 1776 and 1787. Many of the objects in the exhibition have not been shown publicly since the collection was dispersed almost 200 years ago.

The reassembled Philosophy Chamber invites visitors to examine the role that images and objects play in building, organizing, and transmitting knowledge; and as a historical study, it deepens our understanding not only of Harvard's past, but also the history of early American art and culture.

The exhibition presents close to 70 objects from the earliest days of Harvard's collecting, shown together with a small group of 18th- and 19th-century objects that closely match the description of original pieces in the collection that have been lost or destroyed, or that survive but are too fragile for display. In addition, the show includes period representations of other teaching cabinets to contextualize the material on display. The exhibition's accompanying [catalogue](#) expands on the research into the chamber's collection, history, and uses, presenting information on the approximately 200 objects that have been tracked thus far—just one-fifth of the original collection once housed in Harvard Hall.

The exhibition and catalogue provide a 360-degree view of early American history through the examination of the artwork displayed in the Philosophy Chamber, the instruments and specimens handled by the students and faculty who met there, and the cultural artifacts dispatched to the college by foreign envoys and the nation's first merchant explorers. The project considers what the convergence of these objects in a New World college can tell us about the transfer of knowledge, burgeoning trade, the role of collections, and America's emerging identity in the mid-18th to early 19th century.

The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard's Teaching Cabinet, 1766–1820 is on display May 19 through December 31, 2017 in the Special Exhibitions Gallery at the Harvard Art Museums.

The exhibition then travels to The Hunterian at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, where it will be on view March 23 through June 24, 2018.

“Rooted in deep research and fresh curatorial insight, this exhibition invites audiences—both American and international—to explore a cultural landmark of the 18th-century Atlantic World,” said Martha Tedeschi, the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museums. “Our efforts to unearth this largely forgotten landmark of early American art and culture led us to map collections, library archives, herbaria, and other museums across campus, in addition to public and private institutions throughout the Northeast and abroad. Thanks to this exceptional cross-institutional collaboration, we can present an immersive interdisciplinary experience that brings an important period of history to life for all visitors.”

“Weaving together art and science, this exhibition considers one of the most vibrant spaces in early America and presents a veritable cross-section of the period’s art and material culture,” said Ethan W. Lasser, curator of the exhibition, and the Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. Curator of American Art and head of the Division of European and American Art at the Harvard Art Museums. “The Philosophy Chamber opens a window into a forgotten piece of American history; the story of this room intersects with some of the most admirable—and the most challenging—aspects of Harvard’s past.”

History of the Philosophy Chamber

Between 1766 and 1820, Harvard College assembled an extraordinary collection of specially commissioned scientific instruments and benefactor portraits, as well as donations from supporters around the globe. These objects were displayed in a set of three rooms adjacent to the college library in Harvard Hall, a large brick building that still stands at the center of campus today. The largest of these spaces, the Philosophy Chamber, was an ornately decorated room named for the discipline of natural philosophy, a field of study that wove together the sciences that sought to explain the natural world.

The collection and the chamber, which came into existence when Harvard Hall was rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1764, played a vital role in teaching and research at Harvard, while also serving as the center of artistic and intellectual life in the greater New England region for over 50 years. Artists, scientists, students, and advocates of American Independence—including George Washington—came to the Philosophy Chamber to discover, discuss, and disseminate new knowledge. Students attended lectures and demonstrations there, and visitors from around the globe flocked to the space to see works by some of the Atlantic World’s greatest artists and artisans, including John Singleton Copley and John Trumbull.

The only repository of its kind in New England when it was established, the Philosophy Chamber was closely linked to the 18th-century Enlightenment, and connected to a network of teaching cabinets in Europe, the United States, and South America, such as the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, the Académie des Sciences in Paris, the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, and the University of Córdoba in Argentina. These teaching cabinets were offspring of the 17th-century *Wunderkammer*, or privately held cabinets of curiosities, and ultimately foreshadowed the beginnings of the modern museum.

While the chamber's collection survived the Revolutionary War thanks to a temporary relocation (along with all of Harvard College) to Concord, Massachusetts, in 1775, an expansion of the college library in 1820 ultimately led to the dispersal of the collection to various university departments and local museums.

Research

The exhibition has its origins in curator Ethan Lasser's early days at the Harvard Art Museums. While researching the Fogg Museum's holdings of early American art, Lasser repeatedly came across references to the Philosophy Chamber. Intrigued, he initiated a campaign to locate the artifacts with a team of researchers at the museums. Lasser then expanded on the research by co-teaching a graduate seminar with Harvard professor Jennifer Roberts in Fall 2014. They enlisted their students to research the history of the chamber, the objects that were accessioned, and the people who visited. To date, the growing team of researchers—including curators, professors, conservators, scientists, and students from across the university—has tracked approximately 200 objects, or roughly one-fifth of the collection once housed in Harvard Hall. The whereabouts of the remaining four-fifths of the collection are unknown. Over the past 200 years, many objects have no doubt been lost, stolen, or destroyed, while some may be stored undetected in various campus and regional collections.

The Installation/Works on View

The Philosophy Chamber features more than 100 works displayed within four thematic sections.

The first section addresses how the collection was used in teaching and research, and includes tools and specimens that were regularly deployed for teaching in the 18th century. Included is the large-scale orrery, a dazzling astronomical model created by Joseph Pope. Labored over by Pope for 12 years, it was only the third orrery made in America, and was among the most celebrated objects to enter the chamber. Also included: one of two portable electrical machines for conducting demonstrations related to electricity (Benjamin Franklin advised on its purchase) and a group of six recently discovered

drawings of skulls from around 1810 used to support instruction in the unsettling pseudo-discipline of racial science. A projector installed in this gallery will show large-scale digitized images of solar microscope specimens and magic lantern slides.

A second gallery explores how the non-commissioned objects in the chamber's collection arrived at Harvard, and reflects on the collecting practices of wealthy alumni, entrepreneurial merchants, and scholars who sent objects from abroad. At the time, there was no curator of the collection, and very few objects were specifically solicited, resulting in a rather haphazard and idiosyncratic collection. This gallery features gifts sent to Harvard by five different donors or donor groups. In the late 18th century, as American ships began circumnavigating the globe, new courses were charted, and trade routes were established. An early 19th-century French map in this gallery shows the routes around North and South America that Captain James Cook and other explorers used. Shipmates on these missions brought back the exceptional examples of Native Hawaiian feather work on a colorful cape and a crested helmet seen in this space, as well as examples of carving by indigenous artists of the Northwest Coast. A touchscreen monitor in this gallery presents an animated map with points of origin of some of the objects in the collection, as well as demonstrations of two objects from Harvard's Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments.

A third section addresses the entangled histories of the objects gathered in the chamber and the origin story of the United States after the Revolutionary War. Works here show how artists and scholars were actively writing American history. Included are engravings after paintings by John Trumbull, who gave a portrait of Cardinal Guido Bentivoglio to the college, which also hangs in this space. The gallery includes another celebrated object in the chamber's history: Stephen Sewall's mural-sized copy of the Native Americans' inscriptions on the landmark known as Dighton Rock, an 11-foot boulder formerly located in the Taunton River, and now housed in a museum. Sewall was a professor at Harvard and his 1768 drawing is the only life-size representation of the monument known to exist. The rock was puzzled over by scholars from Harvard and around the world, and a variety of theories about the origin of the inscriptions were posited. Today, scholars attribute the inscriptions on the rock to the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the Eastern Woodlands, and more specifically to the Wampanoag who lived in the rock's vicinity. By contrast, in the period when Sewall made his drawing, European interpreters actively disavowed the possibility of Native American authorship.

The final room is a loose reconstruction of the Philosophy Chamber itself, an experiential space complete with a re-created version of the red wallpaper that John Hancock had donated to the original room. Three early full-length portraits of Harvard benefactors by John Singleton Copley are included, as

is a series of six mezzotints after Copley paintings that were given to Harvard by the artist's heirs. Harvard was Copley's first major patron, and plans to turn the Philosophy Chamber into a space dedicated to the artist's life were never realized; the gift of mezzotints has never been shown until now. A bust of William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham, given by Benjamin Franklin in 1769, was the first gift of sculpture the college received after the Great Fire consumed Harvard Hall in 1764. This gallery will be complemented by a [digital tool](#), accessible on the museums' website, that allows visitors to access recordings of present-day Harvard students reading from period sources, offering a sense of the kinds of conversations and debates that took place in the original chamber. The tool will also include deeper information about the objects displayed in the gallery.

Conservation

The research and rediscovery of objects once belonging to the Philosophy Chamber collection has led to exciting research by conservators and conservation scientists in the museums' [Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies](#). Several members of the Straus Center staff contributed essays to the exhibition catalogue on the following topics:

--Conservators were able to examine two of the full-length portraits by John Singleton Copley. Use of X-radiography and infrared digital photography helped them determine earlier iterations of a portrait of Thomas Hancock, painted between 1764 and 1766, showing Copley had reworked the painting twice to arrive at the formal, dignified pose seen in the final portrait. By contrast, a painting of college benefactor Thomas Hollis III was shown to have very few changes.

--Joseph Wilton's bust of William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham—given to Harvard by Benjamin Franklin—underwent scientific, technical, and art historical research, allowing staff to assess how the ceramic sculpture was made and to document its alteration over the centuries at Harvard. Guided by this research, the conservation treatment included removal of later overpaint layers and cleaning to uncover the original white painted surface.

--A close examination of Stephen Sewall's [drawing of the inscription](#) on Dighton Rock sheds light on his chosen materials and processes. Conservators believe Sewall directly traced the markings rather than using a rubbing or chalking method.

Publication

A [catalogue](#), edited by Ethan W. Lasser, with essays by a mix of curators, professors, conservators, conservation scientists, and doctoral candidates, will be published in conjunction with the exhibition.

The publication will advance new understandings of early American art history, and will serve as a rich resource for any reader interested in the art and culture of the Atlantic World. The catalogue is published by the Harvard Art Museums and distributed by Yale University Press.

Contributors include Aleksandr Bierig, Anne Driesse, Katherine Eremin, Andrew Gelfand, Claire Grech, Teri Hensick, Jane Kamensky, Ethan W. Lasser, Georgina Rayner, Jennifer L. Roberts, Whitney Barlow Robles, María Dolores Sánchez-Jáuregui, Anthony Sigel, Kate Smith, Lucie Steinberg, and Oliver Wunsch.

Online Resources

Once the exhibition opens, supplementary digital content will be accessible via the [exhibition page](#) on the museums' website. The [digital tool](#) complementing the room within the exhibition that loosely reconstructs the Philosophy Chamber will include "Voices of the Philosophy Chamber," a group of audio recordings by present-day Harvard students reading from period sources. The recordings will give a sense of the conversation and debate that once filled the Philosophy Chamber. The tool will also provide additional information about the works on view.

The website will also include a series of audio recordings of gallery talks planned for the run of the exhibition. The robust series of talks by the students, staff, faculty, and scholars involved with the Philosophy Chamber research will explore the range of objects and themes in the exhibition as well as the history of the chamber. New recordings will be added on a regular basis.

Programming

A wide range of events, including lectures, a symposium, gallery talks, Materials Lab Workshops on Wampum jewelry making, and special member events, will be offered throughout the duration of the exhibition. Harvard professor Jane Kamensky will give a free public lecture, [The Hungry Eye: Art and Ambition in Copley's Boston](#), on Tuesday, May 23, at 3pm. Kamensky is the author of the recent biography *A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley*, and also contributed to the Philosophy Chamber catalogue. During the fall semester, programming includes major lectures by artist Simon Starling and James Delbourgo (Rutgers University); The Room Where It Happens: On the Agency of Interior Spaces, a two-day public symposium featuring a keynote lecture by Louis Nelson (University of Virginia) and a full day of panel discussions; and a special late-night event for Harvard students. Detailed information about programs is forthcoming at harvardartmuseums.org/visit/calendar.

Press Preview

A preview of *The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard's Teaching Cabinet, 1766–1820* will be held for members of the press on Monday, May 15, at 8:30am. RSVP required by Wednesday, May 10, to jennifer_aubin@harvard.edu or 617-496-5331. Parking may be available, by permit, at the nearby Broadway Garage, 7 Felton Street. To reserve a permit, please indicate the need for parking in your email.

Credits

The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard's Teaching Cabinet, 1766–1820 is organized by the Harvard Art Museums. Curated by Ethan W. Lasser, the Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. Curator of American Art and Head of the Division of European and American Art at the Harvard Art Museums.

The exhibition is supported in part by major grants from the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Henry Luce Foundation.

The exhibition and catalogue also received support from the following endowed funds: the Bolton Fund for American Art, Gift of the Payne Fund; the Henry Luce Foundation Fund for the American Art Department; the William Amory Fund; and the Andrew W. Mellon Publication Funds, including the Henry P. McIlhenny Fund.

Lenders at Harvard University include: the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments; the Harvard Map Collection, Pusey Library; the Harvard University Archives; Houghton Library; the Mineralogical and Geological Museum; the Museum of Comparative Zoology; the Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology; and the Warren Anatomical Museum, Countway Library of Medicine.

Other lenders from private, academic, and public collections in the United States and the United Kingdom include: the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, MA; the Richard Balzer Collection, Brookline, MA; Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park, Warwickshire, U.K.; The Library Company of Philadelphia; the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA; and a private collection in Boston.

About the Terra Foundation

The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. Recognizing

the importance of experiencing original works of art, the foundation provides opportunities for interaction and study, beginning with the presentation and growth of its own art collection in Chicago. To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Implicit in such activities is the belief that art has the potential both to distinguish cultures and to unite them. terraamericanart.org

About the Henry Luce Foundation

The Henry Luce Foundation was established in 1936 by Henry R. Luce, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Time Inc., to honor his parents who were missionary educators in China. The Foundation seeks to bring important ideas to the center of American life, strengthen international understanding, and foster innovation and leadership in academic, policy, religious, and art communities. The Foundation's American Art Program was established in 1982 to support museums and arts organizations throughout the United States in their efforts to advance the knowledge, understanding, and experience of American art through research, exhibitions, publications, and collection projects. The American Art Program has distributed over \$173 million to some 425 museums, universities, and organizations in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and internationally. hluce.org

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums house one of the largest and most renowned art collections in the United States, and are comprised of three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler Museums) and four research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum, unique among North American museums, is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries; and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on Asian art, Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern art, and Islamic and later Indian art. Together, the collections include approximately 250,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States. The Harvard Art Museums have a rich tradition of considering the history of objects as an integral part of the teaching and study of art history, focusing on conservation and preservation concerns as well as technical studies.

The Harvard Art Museums' 2014 renovation and expansion carried on the legacies of the three museums and united their remarkable collections under one roof for the first time. Renzo Piano Building Workshop preserved the Fogg Museum's landmark 1927 facility, while transforming the space to accommodate 21st-century needs. The museums now feature 40 percent more gallery space, an expanded Art Study Center, conservation labs, and classrooms, and a striking glass roof that bridges the facility's historic and contemporary architecture. The three constituent museums retain their distinct identities in the museums' facility, yet their close proximity provides exciting opportunities to experience works of art in a broader context. harvardartmuseums.org

Hours and Admission

Daily, 10am–5pm. Closed major holidays. Admission: \$15 adults, \$13 seniors (65+), \$10 non-Harvard students (18+). Free for members; youth under 18; Cambridge residents (proof of residency required); and Harvard students, faculty, and staff (plus one guest). On Saturdays, from 10am–noon, Massachusetts residents receive free admission (proof of residency required). For further information about visiting, see harvardartmuseums.org/plan-your-visit.

Exhibitions, Events, and News

Our Special Exhibitions Gallery presents important new research on artists and artistic practice, and our University Galleries are programmed in consultation with Harvard faculty to support coursework. Visit the [Exhibitions](#) page for information on current and upcoming installations. Visit the museums' [Calendar](#) to learn more about lectures, workshops, films, performances, special events, and other programs that are held throughout the year. Check out [Index](#), our multimedia magazine, to keep up with what's happening at the Harvard Art Museums.

The Harvard Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

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