Press Release

Harvard Art Museums Present the Graphic Arts of the Enlightenment in Fall 2022 Exhibition, Dare to Know

Cambridge, MA
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This fall, the Harvard Art Museums will present a first-of-its-kind exhibition and accompanying publication devoted to the graphic arts of the Enlightenment era. *Dare to Know: Prints and Drawings in the Age of Enlightenment* offers provocative insights into both the achievements and the failures of a period whose complicated legacies reverberate still today. Bringing together 150 prints, drawings, books, and other related objects from Harvard as well as collections in the United States and abroad, the large-scale exhibition asks new and sometimes uncomfortable questions of the so-called age of reason, inviting visitors to embrace the Enlightenment's same spirit of inquiry—to investigate, to persuade, and to imagine. The catalogue fills a gap in scholarship about the period by focusing on prints and drawings from across Europe, with a wealth of new ideas and analysis.
Co-curated by Elizabeth M. Rudy, the Carl A. Weyerhaeuser Curator of Prints at the Harvard Art Museums, and Kristel Smentek, Associate Professor of Art History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Dare to Know: Prints and Drawings in the Age of Enlightenment is on display September 16, 2022 through January 15, 2023 in the Harvard Art Museums’ special exhibitions gallery on Level 3.

The exhibition’s title borrows from German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s published response in 1784 to a journal article asking, “What Is Enlightenment?” Kant argued that the Enlightenment’s main impulse was to “dare to know!”: to pursue knowledge for oneself, without relying on others to interpret facts and experiences. But is this ever truly possible?

The 18th century saw dramatic growth in the circulation of works on paper, ushering in an era of information sharing that rivals our own digital age. New concepts in every realm of intellectual inquiry were communicated not only through text and speech, but in prints and drawings that gave ideas concrete form. The graphic arts made new things visible and familiar things visible in powerful new ways, wielding the potential to articulate, reinforce, or contradict well-known concepts. The graphic arts were also pivotal during moments of political instability, especially amid the three revolutions—American, French, and Haitian—that rocked the world at the end of the century.

“The Enlightenment era has often been described as awash in paper. The profusion of printed matter was essential for the exchange of ideas across physical distances, and the role of imagery was paramount,” said Rudy. “This exhibition and its catalogue focus on the power wielded by drawings and prints to shape opinions, argue for social change, and inspire new realities.”

Smentek added: “Our exhibition aims to show how prints and drawings were agents of Enlightenment rather than passive documents of it. Works on paper traveled easily, and they allowed for more experimentation in content and format than other modes of visual art. More immediate in their effects than textual sources, works on paper gave visual form to both the era’s ideals and its ambitions—in all their complexity.”

Dare to Know features a range of drawings, prints, and books from roughly 1720 to 1800 that shaped and communicated the debates of the moment, ranging from the realms of the natural sciences, technology, justice, religion, economics, and sexual health, among others. The exhibition’s introductory section lays out some of the foundational ideas and questions of the Enlightenment, followed by three sections that broadly prompt visitors to Investigate, Persuade, and Imagine.

Highlights on display include:

Étienne-Louis Boullée’s 1784 drawing Cénotaphe de Newton (Cenotaph to Newton), which details a fantastical monument honoring Sir Isaac Newton, a scientist who loomed large over the 18th century (loan from the Bibliotheque nationale de France);

Jacques-Fabien Gautier d’Agoty’s 1746 color mezzotint Muscles of the Back, a striking anatomical illustration in which the artist successfully blended scientific observation with pure imagination (loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art);

A Branch of Gooseberries with a Dragonfly, an Orange-Tip Butterfly, and a Caterpillar (1725–83), a realistic gouache over graphite drawing by Barbara Regina Dietzsch, a trained specialist in botany and drawing who came from a noted family of botanical illustrators in Nuremberg, Germany (loan from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.);
Diomède assailli par les Troyens, son écuyer tué à côté de lui (Diomedes Assaulted by the Trojans, His Horseman Killed at His Side), a 1756 drawing by sculptor Augustin Pajou exhibited at the Paris Salon, pointing to the era’s new appreciation for drawings as autonomous works of art (loan from the Musée du Louvre);

A large oval-shaped, custom-made display case of ephemera from the era, including invitations, tickets, pamphlets, and currency;

The Money Devil, an elaborate undated drawing by Roger Lorrain that could be a satirical critique of France’s economic situation in the 1780s, on the eve of the French Revolution (loan from Harvard Business School’s Baker Library; first museum exhibition and publication of this work);

Two copperplate engravings with silk borders by Manchu artist Ilantai from the volume Changchun yuan shuifa tu (Pictures of the European Palaces and Waterworks), created for the Qianlong emperor depicting the emperor’s private residence in Yuanming Yuan, in northwest Beijing (loan from Houghton Library, Harvard University);

Louis Carrogis de Carmontelle’s spectacular 12-foot-long watercolor Figures Walking in a Parkland (1783–1800), an idealized countryside scene painted on conjoined sheets of translucent paper and wound around rollers inserted into a backlit box to create a moving image and now presented with a custom lightbox (loan from the J. Paul Getty Museum).

Developed over several years and involving research consultation and collaboration between Harvard University and MIT, Dare to Know includes loans from 31 international and U.S. lenders. Multidisciplinary in its approach, the exhibition puts the works on view in new contexts, as seen through new lenses. Research from disparate fields, particularly history, comparative religion, gender studies, and history of science, was brought to bear in the analysis of works in the exhibition, offering new ways to interpret their impact during the 18th century.

The curators extend their special thanks to Heather Linton, Curatorial Assistant for Special Exhibitions and Publications in the museums’ Division of European and American Art, and Christina Taylor, Associate Paper Conservator, Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies. Research contributions were made by Austėja Mackelaitė, Stanley H. Durwood Foundation Curatorial Fellow (2016–18) and by these Ph.D. candidates in Harvard’s Department of History of Art and Architecture and former graduate interns in the Division of European and American Art: J. Cabelle Ahn, Thea Goldring, and Sarah Lund.

Publication

A generously illustrated catalogue with 26 thematic essays—an A to Z exploration of the Enlightenment quest for understanding and change—accompanies the exhibition. With a multidisciplinary approach, the book probes developments in the natural sciences, technology, economics, and more—all through the lens of the graphic arts. The essays, along with 11 object-specific spotlights, consider the disparate and often incongruous aspects of the period, with a particular focus on scientific investigation, religious belief, empathy, colonialism, the study of ancient civilizations worldwide, and political revolution. Edited by Edouard Kopp (John R. Eckel, Jr., Foundation Chief Curator at the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston), Elizabeth Rudy, and Kristel Smentek, with contributions by a range of leading scholars representing a variety of expertise and diversity of opinion. Published by the Harvard Art Museums and distributed by Yale University Press. Softcover, $50.
Press Preview

Members of the press are invited to attend an in-person preview of the exhibition on Monday, September 12, 2022, at 3pm. RSVP required; please contact Jennifer Aubin (jennifer_aubin@harvard.edu or 617-496-5331) to register.

Public Programming

A robust lineup of public programs will bring Dare to Know to life, including an introductory lecture by the co-curators and other scholars on September 15 at 5:30pm, hourlong tours by curator Elizabeth Rudy on Sundays, and 30-minute gallery talks by diverse scholars about a range of topics presented in the exhibition. All events, unless noted, are held in-person at the Harvard Art Museums, 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. For updates and full details, please see our calendar: harvardartmuseums.org/calendar.

Website

Learn more about the exhibition at harvardartmuseums.org/daretoknow

Credits

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About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums house one of the largest and most renowned art collections in the United States, comprising 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 art from Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Together, the collections include over 255,000 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. harvardartmuseums.org

The Harvard Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.
Hours and Admission
Open Tuesday–Sunday, 10am–5pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission: $20 adults, $18 seniors (65+). Free to all visitors on Sundays (all day) and the last Thursday of every month (5–9pm); on other days, free to: members, all students (with valid ID), youth under 18, Cambridge residents (proof of residency required), Harvard ID holders (plus one guest), active-duty military personnel (NEA Blue Star Museums), and individuals with SNAP benefits or an EBT card. On Saturdays, 10am–noon, Massachusetts residents receive free admission (proof of residency required). For further information about visiting, including important COVID-19 policies, see harvardartmuseums.org/visit.

For more information, please contact
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