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Exhibition Dedicated to Innovation in 19th-Century America Opens at the Smithsonian American Art Museum July 15

The exhibition “The Great American Hall of Wonders” examines the 19th-century American belief that the people of the United States shared a special genius for innovation. It explores this belief through works of art, mechanical inventions and scientific discoveries, and captures the excitement of citizens who defined their nation as a “Great Experiment” sustained by the inventive energies of Americans in every walk of life.

“The Great American Hall of Wonders” will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from July 15 through Jan. 8, 2012. The museum is the only venue for the exhibition, which is organized by Claire Perry, an independent curator who specializes in 19th-century American cultural history. Until 2008, Perry was curator of American art at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

“The Great American Hall of Wonders” investigates questions that are still critical today. The exhibition reveals both the successful experiments of the past, as well as the ones that went awry, and invites today’s citizens to explore a valuable legacy left by the founding fathers: a belief in the transformative power of American inventiveness.

““The Great American Hall of Wonders’ examines the belief in American ingenuity that energized all aspects of 19th-century society, from the planning of scientific expeditions and the development of new mechanical devices to the painting of landscapes and scenes of everyday life,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “The museum now occupies the noble historic building that was the Patent Office’s home during the Industrial Revolution, so it is a fitting place to display this exhibition about the innovative character of Americans.”

The exhibition features 161 objects, including paintings and drawings by pre-eminent artists, including John James Audubon, Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin, Frederic Edwin Church, Winslow

Homer, Thomas Eakins, Thomas Moran, Samuel F.B. Morse and Charles Willson Peale, as well as sculptures, prints, survey photographs, zoological and botanical illustrations, patent models and engineering diagrams. The exhibition explores six subjects that helped shape America during the period—the buffalo, giant sequoia and Niagara Falls represent American beliefs about abundant natural resources for fueling the nation’s progress, while inventions such as the clock, the gun and the railroad linked improvements in technology with the purposeful use of time.

Peale’s iconic self-portrait “The Artist in His Museum” (1822), which will greet visitors at the entrance to the exhibition, embodies the ideas set forth in the exhibition. Peale—museum founder, artist, scientist and inventor—depicts himself at the threshold of his museum, a democratic reinterpretation of an Old World “wunderkammer” or cabinet of curiosities. Its galleries were filled with portraits of the founding fathers, natural history specimens, mechanical inventions and a massive mastodon skeleton. At a time when many Americans feared that the country would not survive the passing of the founders’ generation, Peale insisted that it was not the revolutionary generation, but rather invention itself that lay at the heart of the national project. The next generation began to define what their democratic nation would be in their scientific and artistic descriptions of America’s bounteous nature and in mechanical inventions aimed at improving their lives.

“The United States began with an act of imagination,” said Perry. “The topic of the exhibition is not science, art or mechanical innovation per se, but rather what Americans of the 19th century believed about those endeavors and how they deployed them to direct their lives and the nation. They considered ingenuity to be their most important asset. Over the course of the century the United States as we know it came into being, and from all indications the process was a seat-of-the-pants business. As we confront the complexities of our 21st-century stewardship, knowing where we have come from may show us where we are headed.”

On July 4, 1836, President Andrew Jackson authorized the construction of a patent office where the museum’s National Historic Landmark building is located. Construction began later that year. The building was designed to celebrate American invention, technical ingenuity and the scientific advancements that the patent process represents. The museum’s building was always intended for public display of patent models that were submitted by inventors. By the 1850s, more than 100,000 people each year visited the building, which became known as the “temple of invention,” to see the designs that filled display cabinets in the exhibition galleries. In addition to patent models, the government’s historical, scientific and art collections were housed on the third floor. The Patent Office occupied parts of the building from 1840 to 1932.

Publication

An illustrated companion book, *The Great American Hall of Wonders: Art, Science, and Invention in the Nineteenth Century*, accompanies the exhibition. It is written by Perry and co-published by the museum and London-based publisher D Giles Limited. It is available in the museum store and online (hardcover, \$65; softcover, \$45).

Free Public Programs

Through a collaboration with the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the museum will present a robust series of public programs and educational outreach about today's inventors and inventions as a contemporary complement to the exhibition. Perry will present a lecture titled "The Great American Experiment" Thursday, July 14, at 6 p.m. Additional programs include webcast public lectures, an inventors' symposium and hands-on activities for children and families, as well as college seminars and professional development workshops for educators. Details are available in a separate press release or on the museum's website.

Online Features

A podcast featuring commentary by Perry is available on the museum's website and through iTunes. A slideshow of selected artworks included in the exhibition with interpretive text also is available on the museum's website.

Credit

"The Great American Hall of Wonders" is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in collaboration with the United States Patent and Trademark Office. Battelle has provided important leadership support for the exhibition. Generous contributions also have been provided by Sheila Duignan and Mike Wilkins, the Raymond J. and Margaret Horowitz Endowment, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Thelma and Melvin Lenkin, Betty and Whitney MacMillan, Jean Mahoney and Robin Martin.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Follow the museum on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, ArtBabble, iTunes and YouTube. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Website: americanart.si.edu.

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