Like Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt enjoyed great success in the years surrounding the Civil War, producing finely detailed vistas of nature’s splendor in majestic canvases that were similarly invested with significance beyond their surface appearance. The first technically advanced artist to portray the American West, Bierstadt offered to a rapidly transforming nation pictures whose spectacular size and fresh, dramatic subject matter supplied a visual correlative to notions of American exceptionalism, while also contributing to the developing concept of Manifest Destiny. Trained in the highly finished manner of the Düsseldorf Academy, Bierstadt’s precise style imbued his works with a reassuring sense of veracity despite their sublime subjects and occasional liberties with geographic reality. In Mount Adams, Washington, he characteristically combined an impressively scaled natural background with a foreground view of American Indian life, which serves to heighten the picture’s putative realism even as it enhances its exotic appeal. The implied movement of the clouds and the sunlit figures on horseback similarly off to the right seems to open up the depicted space for the viewer to inhabit, providing an apt pictorial metaphor for the actual occupation and exploitation of the West by the eastern interests that constituted the artist’s clientele.
- Handbook Entry, 2013

Bierstadt’s Mount Adams, Washington presents an awesome spectacle, yet the inviting foreground makes it more accessible than Church’s Cayambe, in keeping with the scene’s location in Washington Territory, then being actively promoted for settlement. Here the mountain is separated from the open meadow merely by the morning mist, whose implied movement to the right seems to draw the Indigenous figures with it, opening up the space for others to inhabit. Yet in continuing to portray the central glacial peak as majestically remote, Bierstadt like Church reinforced the notion that people and nature are not part of the same world. Seen in this way, the vacating Native Americans suggest the evacuation of all human presence from what is properly deemed “nature.”
- Special Exhibition, 2018-10-13, Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment
Made by Maria Montoya Martinez, San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1887–1980
Painted by Julian Martinez, San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1885–1943

Jar decorated with Awanyu (water serpent) 1919–20
Blackware ceramic
h. 23.0 cm., diam. 33.0 cm. (9 1/16 x 13 in.)
Museum purchase
y1940-431

In the late nineteenth century, artists of the American Southwest adapted many traditional art forms for a new audience: Anglo Americans who could now reach this territory by rail. In 1919, Maria Martinez developed a novel decorative technique for blackware pottery, which she made in collaboration with her husband, Julian. Her famous pottery was made using the traditional coiling method. Once the vessel was fairly dry, she added a coat of slip—clay suspended in water—and subsequently burnished the surface with a polished stone, producing a glossy effect. Next, Julian applied a second coat of slip with a yucca fiber brush around a design—in this case, the Tewa guardian of water, Awanyu, who appears as a horned serpent. Near the end of the firing process, the fire pit with its pottery was covered with ash, causing the vessels to turn black.

- Gallery Label, 2015-02, 2015 AAA Reinstallation WC7 Native North America
Childe Hassam, American, 1859–1935

*Rainy Day, Fifth Avenue*, 1916

Oil on canvas

46 x 39 cm. (18 1/8 x 15 3/8 in.)

frame: 63.5 × 56.2 × 5 cm (25 1/8 × 22 1/8 × 1 15/16 in.)

Gift of Albert E. McVitty, Class of 1898

y1942-62

Hassam’s images of New York were inspired by the urban life outside his studio on lower Fifth Avenue. That grand thoroughfare, the city’s cultural and commercial artery, was also the main parade route for the nation. Hassam had a window onto the country’s increasing involvement in World War I when he later moved his studio uptown to 57th Street, closer to the center of those colorful patriotic displays. He recalled, “There was that Preparedness Day, and I looked up the avenue and saw these wonderful flags waving, and I painted the series of flag pictures after that.” Here rain provides a pretext to dissolve the canvas into a harmony of red, white, and blue, while the innumerable American flags parallel the swarms of people below.

- **Gallery Label**, 2018-09-14, **MEB Rotation September 2018**

Childe Hassam’s images of New York gentry sauntering through Washington Square Park or navigating a snowy evening on Union Square were inspired by the urban life outside his studio on lower Fifth Avenue. That grand thoroughfare, the city’s cultural and commercial artery, was also the main parade route for the nation. Hassam had a window onto the country’s increasing involvement in World War I when his studio moved further uptown, closer to the center of those patriotic displays. He recalled, “There was that Preparedness Day, and I looked up the avenue and saw these wonderful flags waving, and I painted the series of flag pictures after that.” The flag-covered streets and Impressionist images of Bastille Day had captivated Hassam during his early days in Paris. An Impressionist concern with the effects of weather and light exhibited in the works he produced there and in his earlier New York canvases gave way to more formal explorations and symbolic undertones as his flag series progressed. Of the approximately thirty flag images the artist made between 1916 and 1919, *Rainy Day, Fifth Avenue* marks a pivotal turning point in this development. Rain provides a pretext to dissolve the canvas into a harmony of red, white, and blue, while the American flag becomes both a pattern and a parallel of the swarms of people below.

- **Handbook Entry**, 2013, **also used as gallery label for MEB July 2015 rotation**
John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815

Elkanah Watson, 1782

Oil on canvas

149 x 121 cm. (58 11/16 x 47 5/8 in.)

frame: 177 × 150 × 7.2 cm (69 11/16 × 59 1/16 × 2 13/16 in.)

Gift of the estate of Josephine Thomson Swann

y1964-181

Before politics compelled his departure for England in 1774, Copley produced colonial America’s most distinctive portraits. Once abroad, the crisp linearity of his American work gave way to the painterly, richly embellished manner current in London, of which Elkanah Watson is a superior example while retaining vestiges of the artist’s earlier realistic style. A successful American merchant, Watson later recalled the historic circumstances surrounding the portrait’s production: "The painting was finished in most admirable style, except the back-ground, which Copley and I designed to represent a ship, bearing to America the intelligence of the acknowledgment of independence, with a sun just rising upon the stripes of the Union, streaming from her gaff. . . . This was, I imagine, the first American flag hoisted in old England."

- Gallery Label, 2018-09, MEB rotation September 2018

Before political exigencies compelled his departure for England on the eve of the Revolution, John Singleton Copley produced colonial America’s most distinctive portraits, notable for their strikingly appealing realism. Once abroad, the hard-edged, linear planarity characterizing his more familiar American work gave way to the painterly, richly embellished manner current in London, of which Elkanah Watson is a superior example while retaining vestiges of the artist’s convincing early realistic style. Elkanah Watson (1758–1842) was an American who traveled extensively both as an agent for John Brown, merchant of the distinguished Rhode Island family, and on his own behalf, establishing a successful trading firm in Nantes, France. Twenty-four when Copley painted his portrait in London, Watson later recalled the historic circumstances surrounding its production: "Soon after my arrival in England, having won at the insurance office one hundred guineas . . . , and dining the same day with Copley, the distinguished painter . . . , I determined to devote the sum to a splendid portrait of myself. The painting was finished in most admirable style, except the back-ground, which Copley and I designed to represent a ship, bearing to America the intelligence of the acknowledgment of independence, with a sun just rising upon the stripes of the Union, streaming from her gaff. . . . This was, I imagine, the first American flag hoisted in old England."

- Handbook Entry, 2013
Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988

Moon and Two Suns, 1971

Paper, cloth and plastic
61 x 46 cm (24 x 18 1/8 in.)
frame: 74 × 59 × 6.5 cm. (29 1/8 × 23 1/4 × 2 9/16 in.)

Gift of The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Childe Hassam Fund y1972-1

Associated with the Harlem Renaissance as well as the Civil Rights Movement, Romare Bearden worked in a variety of disciplines, among them the visual arts, poetry, music, and set design. He began to experiment with collage in 1963, the same year he founded the Spiral Group, a collective of African American artists eager to expand their role as social activists. Based on the reclamation of found materials, Bearden's collages represent and affirm the lives of African American peoples. Most display a striking visual rhythm, the result of Bearden's immersion in jazz and blues, and some exhibit the influence of African art, a source of Black pride in the 1960s. Such is the case with Moon and Two Suns, which features a standing male figure whose accoutrements place him in Africa, as does his visage, which bears a striking resemblance to an African mask. Four quadrupeds flank the figure; one appears to be an alligator, but the identities of the other three are ambiguous. More fantastic than real, they might be understood as manifestations of an indigenous religion.

- Handbook Entry, 2013

Reclaiming newspaper clippings, textile scraps, and other found materials, Bearden's collages display a striking visual rhythm, a result of the artist's immersion in jazz and blues. Some exhibit the influence of African art. Such is the case with Moon and Two Suns, in which a male figure's visage incorporates a brass representation of the head of an oba (king) from the Kingdom of Benin. Four quadrupeds flank the figure; one may be an alligator drawn from Akan imagery (from Ghana and surrounding areas) associated with the fierceness of rulers.

- Special Exhibition, 2017-11, Hold: A Meditation on Black Aesthetics
Georgia O’Keeffe, American, 1887–1986

*Narcissa’s Last Orchid*, 1940

Pastel

54.5 x 69.1 cm (21 7/16 x 27 3/16 in.)

frame: 74.5 × 89.7 × 4.5 cm (29 5/16 × 35 5/16 × 1 3/4 in.)

Gift of David H. McAlpin, Class of 1920

x1982-357

Here, O’Keeffe exploits the directness and tactility of drawing in pastel, using her finger to massage the color into the paper to create painterly effects. She first used pastel at the New York Art Students League in 1907–8. The orchid pictured was a gift to O’Keeffe from her friend Narcissa Swift King, who, offended she was not thanked, declared, “That’s the last orchid you’ll ever get from me!” Nevertheless, the two women remained friendly. O’Keeffe had previously likened perceiving a flower to nurturing a friendship: “Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven’t time—and to see takes time like to have a friend takes time.”

- Gallery Label, 2019-07, PBL rotation July 2019

Georgia O’Keeffe first used pastel as a student of William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League in New York in 1907–8. Since pastel and charcoal are direct media, unlike oil painting, her early works on paper were the initial vehicles for the pursuit of a visual language. Although she employed charcoal only intermittently, O’Keeffe worked in pastel consistently throughout her long career. From Arthur Wesley Dow, she learned to draw by extending her entire arm while holding the implement upright. Employing the same technique in her pastels, O’Keeffe also adopted the habit of using her fingertips to massage the medium into the support, enabling her to exploit the matte surface to painterly effect, as in *Narcissa’s Last Orchid*. The splayed white blossom echoes the forms in the artist’s bone and antler paintings from the 1930s. Here she deposits a rim of white pigment dust along the edges of the petals, endowing them with a tactile quality and creating the illusion of three-dimensionality in places where the petals appear to fold back on themselves, casting shadows. The flower itself seems to merge with the landscape behind it, and strokes of pink and blue fleck its white fringe.

As the title suggests, this is a specific orchid. Narcissa Swift King, a friend of O’Keeffe’s in New York, sent her an orchid that became the basis for this pastel, which was first exhibited in 1941 at Alfred Seglitz’s gallery An American Place. Disappointed that she had not been thanked, Swift King is said to have declared, “That’s the last orchid you’ll ever get from me!” Hence O’Keeffe’s title. In spite of the incident, the two women remained friendly. In the notes she wrote to accompany an exhibition at An American Place a year earlier, O’Keeffe had in fact likened the activity of perceiving a flower to that of nurturing a friendship: “Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven’t me—and to see takes me like to have a friend takes me.”

- Handbook Entry, 2013
Winslow Homer, American, 1836–1910
At the Window, 1872
Oil on canvas
57 x 40 cm. (22 7/16 x 15 3/4 in.)
frame: 80.7 × 63 × 5.2 cm (31 3/4 × 24 13/16 × 2 1/16 in.)
Gift of Francis Bosak, Class of 1931, and Mrs. Bosak
y1985-38

In 1872, Homer produced a group of four related scenes remarkable for their interiority of setting and mood. Each work depicts the same, similarly attired young woman, pensively standing or seated in a darkened room before a window opening onto bright countryside. Homer evidently thought At the Window the best of these, as it was this picture he chose to exhibit the following year in New York. A reviewer conveyed some of the image’s mysterious appeal, describing a "young woman sitting in quiet shadow, while outside the world is gay with rollicking sunshine." The identification of the woman in another review as "a Salem girl," referring to the Massachusetts seaport, provides a plausible underlying narrative for all the paintings, as the sitter—whose distinctive black dress likely signifies mourning—becomes the bereaved companion of a sailor lost at sea.

- Gallery Label, 2018-09, MEB Rotation September 2018

Distinct among the images of sunlit rural life that constituted the bulk of Winslow Homer’s production in 1872 is a group of four closely related scenes remarkable for their interiority of setting and mood. Each work depicts the same similarly attired young woman, pensively standing or seated in a darkened room before an open window that reveals a glimpse of bright countryside. Homer evidently thought At the Window the most compelling of these, as it was this picture he chose to exhibit the following year at the Century Association in New York, where the Evening Post deemed it "strongly painted and admirably drawn." A subsequent review moved beyond concerns of facture to convey some of the image’s mysterious appeal, describing a "young woman sitting in quiet shadow, while outside the world is gay with rollicking sunshine." The identification of the woman in still another account as "a Salem girl," referring to the Massachusetts seaport, provides a plausible underlying narrative for all the paintings, as the sitter—whose distinctive black dress likely signifies mourning—becomes the bereaved companion of a sailor lost at sea. If this hypothesis is true, then these works anticipate by a decade Homer’s engagement with the theme of men and the sea, which was to become a crucial part of his overarching preoccupation with man’s struggle against nature.

- Handbook Entry, 2013
Henry Benbridge, American, 1743–1812

The Hartley Family, ca. 1787

Oil on canvas

194 x 151 cm. (76 3/8 x 59 7/16 in.)
frame: 221.9 x 178.4 x 9 cm (87 3/8 x 70 1/4 x 3 9/16 in.)

Gift of Maitland A. Edey, Class of 1932

After six years of artistic study in Rome and London, Philadelphia native Benbridge settled in Charleston, South Carolina, where between 1772 and at least 1790 he was the leading artist in that wealthy, style-conscious city. The Hartley Family, perhaps his most accomplished work, depicts four female generations of the same prominent family in the crisp, strongly modeled, Neoclassical style the artist employed throughout his career. Although the generic setting imparts a timelessness to the scene, the picture’s intergenerational aspect is underscored by the spatial arrangement and poses of the subjects, whose linked hands and arms collectively suggest a circle moving clockwise from eldest to youngest sitter, as if to subtly indicate the march of time across the family’s history.

- Gallery Label, 2019-01, MEB rotation January 2019

After six years of artistic study in Rome, Henry Benbridge, a Philadelphia native, returned to America by way of London (and, probably, Benjamin West’s studio), settling in Charleston, South Carolina, where between 1772 and at least 1790 he was the leading artist in that wealthy, style-conscious, Anglophilic city. The Hartley Family, perhaps his most ambitious work, and among the major compositions produced in America during the eighteenth century, depicts four female generations of the same prominent family — none of whom, curiously, was named Hartley when the painting was executed — in the crisp, strongly modeled, Neoclassical style Benbridge employed throughout his career. Although the sitters’ nondescript “portrait dress,” characteristic of period imagery, and the similarly generic setting in which they are placed impart a timelessness to the scene, its intergenerational aspect is underscored by the spatial arrangement and poses of the subjects, particularly their linked hands and arms, which collectively suggest a circle moving clockwise from eldest to youngest sitter, as if to subtly indicate the march of time across the family’s history. Such an impression is bolstered by the background’s complementary transition from dark to light, by the gradually increasing brightness of the progressively younger subjects’ clothing, and by the heightened legibility and display of their youthful bodies, pictorially signifying their greater vitality.

- Handbook Entry, 2013
Robert Walter Weir, American, 1803–1889

*The Greenwich Boat Club*, 1833

Oil on canvas

54 x 77.5 cm. (21 1/4 x 30 1/2 in.)

frame: 77 × 100.3 × 9.8 cm (30 5/16 × 39 1/2 × 3 7/8 in.)

Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund and the Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art; frame gift of Eli Wilner & Company

2009-1

A prolific artist, influential teacher, and progenitor of an important family of American painters, Robert Walter Weir was long a mainstay of the artistic community revolving around New York during the mid-nineteenth century. This masterpiece of his early career depicts a group of the artist’s friends seeking recreation and respite from a cholera outbreak in New York. Unusual among Weir’s generally more staid works for its engaging portrayal of leisure, despite the sober circumstances, the painting is a classic genre scene in its broad appeal and illustration of daily life, yet it also contains elements of the so-called conversation piece, a type of group portrait in which recognizable individuals are portrayed, full-length but small in scale, in informal surroundings. The survival of a related journal and other archival materials make it possible to reconstruct the particulars of the scene to a degree matching the picture’s unusual detail. In the summer of 1832, New York was alarmed by the arrival of a cholera epidemic from Europe and Asia, where it had claimed thousands of lives. Many New Yorkers fled to the clean, open areas just north of the crowded city. The Greenwich Boat Club, named after one such environ, recalls the me Weir spent during the epidemic sailing in the fresh air of the Hudson River in the borrowed boat of his student Walter Oddie, depicted at the painting’s far left. In the scene, the group has struck camp on the New Jersey shore, and the men are busy with the instruments that define them as artists, writers, and musicians, their particularization by profession providing a tableau of the period’s emergent bourgeois democratic culture. The painting’s appeal was noted from its appearance the year it was completed in the National Academy of Design’s annual exhibition, a review of which concludes: “[I]t [may be] hazardous to say this is Mr. Weir’s best picture, and yet we believe we must say it.”

- *Handbook Entry, 2013*

Despite its lighthearted appearance, this painting results from a sober event: New York City’s cholera epidemic of 1832. To avoid infection, many of the wealthier inhabitants fled the city. Here the artist (standing under the flagpole) depicted himself with a group of his friends—artists, writers, and musicians—who, having escaped Manhattan, the Greenwich (Village) of the work’s title, set up camp along the New Jersey shore of the Hudson River. A murky haze obscures the distant Manhattan coast, evoking period theories about airborne miasma as the disease’s cause. As if to protect the group, the boat’s sail has been transformed into a tentlike enclosure, offering a metaphorical shield against infection.

- *Special Exhibition, 2019-11-02, States of Health*

This painting commemorates an event surrounding New York City’s cholera epidemic of 1832. To avoid infection, a group of elite white men, including the artist (standing under the flagpole), escaped Manhattan—the Greenwich (Village) of the work’s title—for the New Jersey shore. A murky atmosphere obscures the distant Manhattan coast shrouded in haze, evoking period theories about environmental “miasma” as the disease’s cause. As if to protect the group from it, the boat’s sail has been transformed into a tentlike enclosure, offering a metaphorical shield against infection. Looking ecocritically at the painting, with a focus on the environmental conditions informing it, enhances our understanding of a work whose composition and very existence is owed to environmental factors.

- *Special Exhibition, 2018-10-13, Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*
Robert S. Duncanson, American, 1821–1872

Untitled (Landscape), late 1850s

Oil on canvas

61 x 91 cm. (24 x 36 in.)

frame: 92.3 x 120.5 x 7.5 cm. (36 5/16 x 47 7/16 x 2 15/16 in.)

Museum purchase, Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art and Mary Trumbull Adams Art Fund 2011-107

The grandson of a freed Virginia slave, Robert Seldon Duncanson was the first African American artist to achieve wide renown during his lifetime. Born in upstate New York, he moved to Cincinnati around 1840 and began producing portraits, but soon gravitated toward landscape painting, influenced by Hudson River School artists, especially Thomas Cole. In 1853, local civic leader and abolitionist Nicholas Longworth financed the artist’s study tour of Europe, the first for an African American. Upon his return, Duncanson worked in the studio of African American daguerreotypist James Presley Ball and participated in the production there of a panoramic painting (now lost) entitled Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States Comprising Views of the African Slave Trade, which toured the country showing “the horrors of slavery from capture in Africa through middle passage to bondage.” In his own work, Duncanson referred only obliquely to race, completing several portraits of abolitionists and sometimes incorporating small, ancillary figures of different racial types into his landscapes, for which he was increasingly acclaimed. In Untitled (Landscape), which dates from late 1850s, evidence of the artist’s study abroad is generally apparent in the idealized pastoral landscape, replete with background Classical architecture, which draws upon European landscape traditions. More subtly, close inspection of the three diminutive figures in the middle ground at water’s edge reveals that they have been rendered with discrete white, brown, and black skin tones, corresponding to different racial types. Though likely not intended to be widely recognized by viewers, their distinct coloration was nonetheless intentional. Their harmonious existence in the fictive Arcadian landscape perhaps represents the artist’s private, wishful rendition of the world as he hoped it might be.

- Handbook Entry, 2013

Duncanson’s art shows that environmental perception is influenced by social and cultural factors. His untitled painting is in the idyllic spirit of Durand’s contemporary work, presenting a dream of a landscape, with background templelike structures and a skiff with boatman on a placid lake, all bathed in raking, golden light. An African American regarded as among the country’s best landscapists, Duncanson comments on race as well, only subtly, almost privately, as close inspection of the painting’s three small figures reveals: each has been carefully rendered in a different skin tone—black, brown, and white. The group’s insertion by the artist, harmoniously interacting, conjures a world Duncanson perhaps hoped might be, even if their distant location and the gradually disappearing path leading toward them implies it is beyond reach.

- Special Exhibition, 2018-10-13, Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment
Marsden Hartley, American, 1877–1943
Blue Landscape, 1942
Oil on board
40.6 x 50.8 cm. (16 x 20 in.)
frame: 57.5 × 67.9 × 5.7 cm (22 5/8 × 26 3/4 × 2 1/4 in.)
Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund and Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art
2015-6679

In October 1939, late in his life, Marsden Hartley made the arduous trek to remote Mount Katahdin, Maine’s loftiest peak. The artist spent eight days in a hunter’s cabin on the south shore of Katahdin Lake, making sketches for what became a remarkable series of nearly twenty paintings executed over the next three years. Although Hartley’s trip was inspired by the desire to create salable images of a well-known landmark—and, for marketing purposes, to associate himself with the iconography of his native Maine—it proved a deeply personal encounter. The artist’s resulting identification with Katahdin was profound; shortly after his return, he wrote: “I now know my own beloved Maine as I have never known it before, and I shall immortalize that mountain, as no one else has or likely will, as it is my mountain, and I the ‘official’ portraitist of it.” Completed in 1942, Blue Landscape is among the last of the series and culminates a progression from Hartley’s more literal early portrayals toward an increasingly simplified and abstracted evocation of the peak’s mystical atmosphere, in which descriptive ridges, shadows, and other details have been suppressed in favor of elemental forms of pronounced power and effect.

- Gallery Label, 2015-02, Rotation July 2013, Rotation March 2018
Elizabeth Catlett, American, 1915–2012

*Friends*, 1944

Egg tempera and blue colored pencil on Masonite board

28.6 × 23.5 cm (11 1/4 × 9 1/4 in.)

frame: 46.4 × 41.3 × 4.1 cm (18 1/4 × 16 1/4 × 1 5/8 in.)

Museum purchase, Laura P. Hall Memorial Fund

2016-10

An intricately layered web of fluctuating linear patterns foregrounds the expressive faces of a man and a woman engaged in the quiet drama of their gaze-driven dialogue; these same interwoven lines create a tautly constructed play of folds and curves in the couple’s clothing, further showcasing the artist’s mastery of technique and composition. *Friends* belies its petite scale, projecting a monumental presence that is both graphic and sculptural, qualities present throughout the artist’s politically charged work. Catlett created this image when she and her first husband and fellow artist Charles White taught at the progressive George Washington Carver School in Harlem. Teaching in this environment, she explained, “gave me a basis for what I wanted to do in art”—namely, to address the lives of working-class African Americans.

- *Gallery Label, 2018-09, MEB Rotation September 2018*

Fusing social realism with a modernist approach to natural forms, this close-up view of a couple evokes the distinctive figurative style of the artist’s politically charged sculptures and prints. The inscribed date of 1944 situates *Friends* during the period when Catlett and her first husband, Charles White, taught at the progressive George Washington Carver School in Harlem. For Catlett, the experience opened her eyes to the limitations of her own middle-class background. Teaching in this environment, she explained, “gave me a basis for what I wanted to do in art”—namely to address the lives of working-class African Americans. Although small in scale, *Friends* projects a monumental presence that is both graphic and sculptural. Catlett foregrounds the expressive, angular faces of the man and woman, crafted with an intricately layered web of fluctuating linear patterns. Made early in Catlett’s career, the work showcases her mastery of technique and composition in the tautly constructed play of folds and curves in the couple’s clothes that accompanies the quiet drama of their gaze-driven dialogue.

- *Gallery Label, 2016-03*
Titus Kaphar, American, born 1976

*To Be Sold*, 2018

Oil on canvas with rusted nails

152.4 × 121.9 × 8.9 cm (60 × 48 × 3 1/2 in.)

with strands: 248.9 × 121.9 × 8.9 cm (98 × 48 × 3 1/2 in.)

Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund 2018-83

On July 31, 1766, the headline "To Be Sold" announced the sale of six African American slaves on the site of Princeton University’s Maclean House as part of the dispersal of the estate of Samuel Finley, president of the University from 1761 to 1766, whose portrait hangs nearby. Kaphar’s work responds to the archival records of this sale, affixing with nails the tattered strips of a painted canvas enlargement of that advertisement along the contour of a painted portrait bust of the president. The artist’s contemporary portrait merges two traditions: that of honorific oil-portrait busts and of *nkondi* figures, an example of which can be seen in the Museum’s African gallery downstairs. *To Be Sold* aims to invert the relationship between the entrenched heroic image of a founding father, the typical subject of historical memory, and the human slaves who remained unseen and unknown.

- Gallery Label, 2018-09, MEB Rotation September 2018
Charles Willson Peale, American, 1741–1827

*George Washington at the Battle of Princeton*, 1783–84 Oil on canvas

237 x 145 cm. (93 5/16 x 57 1/16 in.)

frame: 275 × 179 × 10 cm (108 1/4 × 70 1/2 × 3 15/16 in.)

Princeton University, commissioned by the Trustees.

PP222

An icon of American art, *George Washington at the Battle of Princeton* monumentalizes an event central to both the University’s and the nation’s history. On January 3, 1777, following a decisive win at Trenton, the Continental Army under General Washington consolidated its unaccustomed momentum with a second victory on and around the Princeton campus of the College of New Jersey, as the school was then known, helping turn the tide of the Revolution after a series of inauspicious defeats. Completed in 1784 on commission from the trustees of the College, and installed for more than two centuries at its center in Nassau Hall, Charles Willson Peale’s dramatic image was apparently paid for with funds bestowed by Washington himself as a testimony of his respect for the institution, regarding which he wrote, "No college has turned out better scholars or more estimable characters than Nassau."

In a richly symbolic circumstance, the painting was explicitly conceived to take the place — indeed, to occupy the very frame — of a portrait of George II, "the late king of Great-Britain, which," according to the minutes of the trustees, "was torn away by a ball from the American artillery in the battle of Princeton." This unusual situation may have influenced Peale to produce a picture whose composition is distinctly more formal — more in keeping with the state portrait it was intended to replace — than the artist’s other great image of the leader, *George Washington after the Battle of Princeton*, completed several years earlier and reproduced by Peale in at least a dozen replicas, one of which is also at the University. That painting depicts Washington at ease during the aftermath of the conflict, with victory assured, and, as such, is more an artifact of propaganda than history painting, which accounts for its extensive reproduction and international dissemination as a diplomatic tool to bolster the new nation’s legitimacy.

By contrast, *George Washington at the Battle of Princeton*, as its title implies, evokes the battle itself (one that Peale had experienced firsthand as an officer of the Philadelphia militia) and makes specific reference to events from it, notably the death of Washington’s friend General Hugh Mercer, shown expiring in the arms of surgeon Benjamin Rush, a blood-stained bayonet lying at the general’s feet indicating the cause of death. With sword poised in readiness, Washington gestures to the battle raging behind him, where Continental troops, pistols and muskets blazing, force the British soldiers away from their Nassau Hall stronghold — or, in the pictorial logic of the painting, literally out of existence, off the picture plane, in the direction that Washington’s raised weapon appears to impel them. Meanwhile, a diminutive horseman bearing a white flag, just visibly rendered approaching from Nassau Hall, makes apparent that Mercer’s ultimate sacrifice, and by implication that of others in the patriot cause, had not been in vain, as American forces would carry the day and thereby gain invaluable confidence in their larger campaign against a formidable adversary.

Perhaps on account of its greater specificity, this rendition of the battle, perfectly suited to its intended destination in Nassau Hall, was not repeated by Peale and, unlike the other version at Princeton, is unique. The work is also distinguished in being painted from life. In December 1783, Washington granted Peale the fifth of his unsurpassed seven sittings with the future president to produce this portrait, which the artist completed in time for the painting’s unveiling in Princeton the following September.

- *Handbook Entry, 2013*