

Massachusetts Historical Society

Founded 1791

The Object of History: 18th-Century Treasures from the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society

Exhibition Checklist

The exhibition takes its arrangement from a letter that John Adams wrote to Abigail from France in May 1780:

I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting Poetry Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine.

This letter is on display on the second-floor stairwell landing in the Society's Presidential Gallery as part of an exhibition of letters that John and Abigail Adams exchanged about the education of their children—and more generally about education.

The Object of History begins in the Hamilton Room, the round receiving room to the left at the top of the stairs. There, "Politics and War" tells the political and military history of 18th-century America through paintings, artifacts, and a map. The second and third sections of the exhibition, "Mathematicks and Philosophy" and "Painting Poetry ... and Porcelaine," continue through the doorway to the Oliver Room.

"Politicks and War"

Edward Truman. Thomas Hutchinson, 1741
Gift of Peter Wainwright, 1835

Harbottle Dorr. Annotated copy of The Boston Evening-Post, June 26, 1769
From the Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Jr.
Gift of Josiah Quincy, 1798, and by purchase, 1915 and 2011

William Brassier. A Survey of Lake Champlain ... 1762, London, 1776
From Atlas des Colonies Angloises en Amérique
Gift of Count Jules de Menou, 1859

Joseph Boze. Marie Jean Paul Roch Yves Gilbert Motier, marquis de Lafayette, Paris, 1790
Commissioned by Thomas Jefferson
Gift of Mrs. John W. Davis, 1835

Jacob Gay. Powder horn belonging to Ephraim Moors, Cambridge, 1775
Gift of Samuel Clarke, 1876
Cassaignard of Nantes. Brace of flintlock pistols, Nantes, France, ca. 1775-1780
Owned by Commodore Edward Preble
Gift of Penelope Levi (Lincoln) Canfield, 1891

Flintlock pistol, mid 18th century
Said to have been presented by Congress to John Paul Jones, on the day of his appointment to the rank of captain in the U.S. Navy, October 10, 1776
Gift of Theodore Chase, 1977

John Paul Jones. Letter to John Adams, Lorient, France, February 28, 1780
Gift of Catherine A. Hull, 2006

Augustin Dupré. John Paul Jones off the coast of Scotland, copper medal from the original dies, 55.6 mm, struck before 1842
Medal commissioned by Congress, 1779; designed in Paris, 1789
Gift of George William Erving, 1843

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John Montugu, the Earl of Sandwich. Letter to Captain Francis Reynolds, November 23, 1779
From the Miscellaneous Bound Collection
Gift of James Savage, 1864

Brass candlestick, France, ca. 1779
“Saved from the Ward Room of the Bon Homme Richard” by Lt. Henry Lunt
Gift of Henry Lunt, Jr., 1857

Sword and scabbard, ca. 1745
Worn by William Pepperrell at the Siege of Louis-
burg, 1745
Gift of Usher Parsons, 1862

“Mathematicks and Philosophy”

Edward Fisher after Mason Chamberlin. Benjamin Franklin, London, 1762-1763
Mezzotint inscribed by Mather Byles as the gift of Franklin
Gift of Anna W. Storer, 1845

Peter Pelham. Cottonus Matherus, Boston, 1728
The first mezzotint executed in America
Provenance unknown

Brass type matrices, France, ca. 1740
Bought by Benjamin Franklin in France and used by him in Philadelphia for casting type. The lead type on display was cast for the Society from the matrices in 1914.
Gift of William J. Duane through Isaac Davis, 1836

Gawen Brown. Gold consular pocket watch in a pair (inner and outer) case with an additional outer case of brass, Boston, 18th century
Gift of Robert Marion Pratt, 1912

Joseph Williamson. Repeating pocket watch in a silver double-bottom pair case, London, 1686-1725
Bought in London by Robert Treat Paine, signer of the Declaration of Independence
Gift of Robert Treat Paine (1803-1885) through Samuel C. Cobb, 1885

Benjamin Franklin. Letter to Samuel Mather, May 12, 1784
From the Manuscripts Bound Collection
Provenance unrecorded

Spectacles belonging to Samuel Dexter, [U.S.], ca. 1785
Gift of Mrs. Henry W. Perry, 1955

Étienne Lenoir. Official French Meter stick from the French Assembly, Paris, 1799?
Brass in original wooden case
The meter stick does not appear in the Society’s records, but the label on the original wooden case lists the “Government of France” as the donor.
Paul Revere. Magnetite lodestone, late 18th century
Trial engravings and punch mark by Paul Revere on brass covers
Provenance unrecorded

Portable scales, [Boston], early 18th century
Hand-held scales made of two brass balance pans suspended from cast-steel balance beam used to check the weights of coins
Box inscribed “Boston. 1722. November 10... Robert Wroth, Esqr.”
Gift of Samuel A. Green, 1912

Chinese dotchin or single-pan portable scale for weighing drugs, China, ca. 1790s
Ivory, brass, and silk threads in original bamboo case with steel brad decoration
Gift of Thomas Handasyd Perkins, 1794

Joseph Frederick Wallet Des Barres, publisher.
A Chart of Boston Bay, London, 18th century
One plate from a two-plate chart for the The Atlantic Neptune and a chart made from it
Gift of the British Admiralty, 1948

Thomas Jefferson. Manuscript plat of survey of Monticello, 1809
From the Coolidge Collection of Jefferson Architectural Drawings
Gift of Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, Jr., 1911

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Set of brass and steel drafting instruments, 18th century
Sharkskin case with silver fittings bearing the owner's initials, "BT", for Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford
Gift of George Edward Ellis, after 1883

Pair of Nuremburg magnifiers, Nuremburg, ca. 1700-1725
The magnifiers with hand-ground lenses, that belonged to a member of the Baur family.
Gift of Mary Baur (Jackson) Rathbone, 1921

North Ingham. Circumferentor, Boston, ca. 1725-1730
"An Ancient Compass Used by Jacob Thomson, Surveyor & Scrivener, in Middleboro and Bridgewater, about 1730"
Gift of Samuel T. Livermore, 1880

James Blake. Pocket compass and sundial, Dorchester, Mass., early 18th century
Bequest of William T. Carleton, 1890

"Painting Poetry... and Porcelaine"

Dress waistcoat, ca. 1755
Blue silk embroidered in gold thread, buckram lining with added silk gussets to enlarge
Joseph Blackburn depicted Andrew Oliver, Jr., wearing this elegant waistcoat in a portrait dated 1755.
Gift of the estate of Andrew Oliver (b. 1869), 1963

William Crafts. Chinoiserie bench, Boston, ca. 1772
Gift of the Proprietors of the Brattle Square Church, 1871

Scarlet superfine wool cloak, Boston, ca. 1765
Property of merchant and jurist Peter Oliver
Provenance unrecorded

Queen Anne-style church chair, [Boston?], ca. 1760
Gift of Miss Margaret Revere, 1988

Mahogany cellaret with interior fittings lined with lead, England, 18th century
Benjamin Faneuil's wine case
Gift of Caroline M. Jones (Mrs. Benjamin M. Jones), 1917

Abigail Adams. Letter to John Adams, Boston, July 21-22, 1776
Gift of the Adams Manuscript Trust, 1956

James B. Marston. State Street, 1801, Boston, 1801
The "Old State House"
Purchased by subscription, 1879

Polly Adams. Marking sampler, 1779
Silk thread on coarse weave natural linen
Gift of Constance N. Hixon, 1972

Unidentified artist. Edward Lyde, ca. 1795
Watercolor on ivory
On paper glued to hair chamber on reverse:
"Edward Lyde Son/ of Edward Lyde + Elizabeth/ (Oliver) Lyde. Born Oct. 25/ 1773/ Died Dec. 31. 1831"
Purchase from Grace Lyde Gordon Estate, 1920

Necklace of oval nacre bosses set in silver with paste brilliants, England, ca. 1760
"This necklace of mother of pearl & paste belonged to Lady Bernard, wife of Sir Francis Bernard last British Governor of the Masstts. Bay Colony—when she left America in 1768 she gave it to her friend Mrs. M. Nichols who gave it to Mrs. Thomas Lamb (Rosanna Duncan Lamb) my great grandmother."
Gift of Rosamond and Aimée Lamb, 1973

Cream ware baluster-form jug with transfer prints, Staffordshire, England, ca. 1790-1800
Decorated with motto "Success to the crooked but interesting Town of Boston"
Gift of Mary Scollay Parker, 1929

Stephen Twycross. Silver turban clasp with brilliants and blue and gold enamel, London, ca. 1800
Owned by Hannah (Dawes) Lucas

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Gift of Mrs. Arthur Holland in memory of her husband, great-grandson of William Dawes, the Patriot, 1929

Nicolaas van Swinderen, engraver; struck by Willem de Koning. Diplomatic Medal of the States-General of the Netherlands, third type, Amsterdam, 18th century

Medal presented by the States-General to John Adams in 1788 to commemorate his service as the first envoy from the United States to the Netherlands

Gift of the Adams Family, date unknown

John Quincy Adams. A ballad founded on fact, July 7, 1787

From his diary, July 1, 1786, to October 31, 1787
Gift of the Adams Manuscript Trust, 1956

Richard Rugg. Silver teapot, London, ca. 1754
Silver teapot that belonged to Thomas Hutchinson
Gift of the Estate of Mary Wheelwright, 1927

Paul Revere. "IMK" Silver sugar tongs, Boston, ca. 1785-1790

Spring-type sugar tongs with tapered arms ending in convex shell finials

Gift of Ellen M. Gifford, 1889

Andreas van Braam, designer; anonymous maker. "States" plate from Martha Washington's presidential china service, Jingdezhen [and Canton], 1795

Glazed porcelain luncheon plate, made in Jingdezhen, China, and decorated there or in Canton.
Bequest of Ebenezer Thayer, 1884

Mather Brown. George Lyde 1742-1804, Boston, 1781

Watercolor on ivory

Earliest known miniature by Mather Brown

Purchase from Grace Lyde Gordon Estate, 1920

Hannah Storer. Sampler, Boston, 1747

Silk thread on tightly woven natural linen

Gift of Samuel A. Green, 1908

Elizabeth Blanchard. Needlework hatchment, Boston, ca. 1765

Arms of the Blanchard and Hunt families in gold and silver gilt and multicolored silk thread on black silk

Gift of Clara Bowdoin Winthrop, 1924

Joseph Badger. John Joy, Jr., [Boston], ca. 1758

Gift of Benjamin Joy, 1953

Unidentified artist of the American school. Dorothy Quincy, [Boston], ca. 1720

Bequest of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1936

John Singleton Copley. John Hancock, [Boston], ca. 1770-1772

Bequest of Henry Lee Shattuck, 1971

Needlework Cobb family arms, mid-late 18th century
Gold and silver metallic and multicolored silk thread on black silk

Gift of Charles P. Fisher, 1991

Thomas Whiphham II and Charles Wright. Silver coffee pot, London, ca. 1761

Deposited by Bertha Ann McCready, 1938

Samuel Minott. Silver tankard, Boston, late 18th century

Tankard engraved with Moulton family arms and crest

Gift of Jean W. Bemis (Mrs. George F. Bemis), 1981

John Potwine. Silver pepper pot, Boston, mid 18th century

Simple baluster-shaped canister that belonged to John Hancock's mother

Gift of Thomas Wood, 2012

Silver pap boat, [London], 18th century

Descended to the donor through the Hancock family

Gift of Thomas Wood, 2012

Silver punch strainer, [London], 18th century

Early Georgian two-handled punch strainer with crest and engraved motto, "Manuforti"

Gift of Thomas Wood, 2012