

## ICONS

# The Philadelphia Museum of Art Reimagines the City's History

The museum's new early American galleries highlight the turbulence and vitality of the biggest city in colonial America

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For the Philadelphia Museum of Art, renovating its early American galleries meant rethinking the history of its hometown. The museum's collection of American art from 1650 to 1850 was last reorganized around the time of the Bicentennial in 1976, with the focus on famous artists and changing artistic styles. When the new galleries open on May 7, as part of the museum's "core project" renovation designed by Frank Gehry, they will highlight the turbulence and vitality of a city where immigrants, enslaved people and citizens, long-forgotten furniture makers and successful women painters, all played their parts. The galleries will have almost 50% more exhibition space and occupy a more prominent space on the museum's first floor,

The Philadelphia Museum traditionally left local Native American art and artifacts to other museums, like the one at the University of Pennsylvania. "This left us short-handed," says Kathleen A. Foster, senior curator of American art at the Philadelphia Museum, so "we've gone out and borrowed things." One item from the 1680s, a 26-inch wampum belt made of animal hide, glass and shell beads, is said to have been a gift to William Penn, the city's founder, from a chieftain of the local Lenape tribe. The belt depicts two figures holding hands, showing the amity between Penn and the Lenapes.



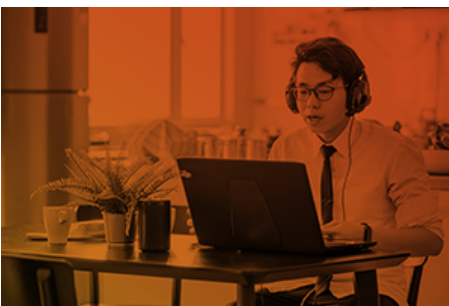
A wampum belt made by Lenape artisans in 1682 as a gift to William Penn.

PHOTO: TEMPORARY LOAN FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE ATWATER KENT MUSEUM (PHILADELPHIA HISTORY MUSEUM) HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA COLLECTION, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, AND THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

Two portraits of Lenape chieftains hanging above the wampum belt come from the 1730s, when William Penn was long dead and a questionable treaty had taken substantial land from the tribe. The Swedish-born painter Gustavus Hesselius (1682-1755), one of the leading American artists of the time, depicted the chieftains with Rembrandt-like gravity as sober men, their foreheads lined.

Two of Hesselius's most famous contemporaries are also represented in the collection: John Singleton Copley, a portraitist popular among wealthy colonists, and Gilbert Stuart, most famous for his portraits of George Washington. The curatorial team has devoted an entire room to the painter Charles Willson Peale, who fought in the Continental Army and made portraits of many revolutionary leaders, and his family. A highlight of the collection is Peale's newly restored trompe-l'oeil painting "Staircase Group" (1795), which features life-size depictions of two of the artist's sons climbing a staircase—with a real wooden step projecting from the bottom of the frame. The illusion is said to have taken in Washington himself.

Several of Peale's daughters and daughters-in-law thrived as artists, a rare achievement for women in the early days of the Republic. Sarah Miriam Peale's circa 1830 "Portrait of Cornelia Mandeville" depicts the teenage daughter of a Philadelphia merchant in an off-the-shoulder dress. The artist "later moved to St. Louis and still flourished," says Ms. Foster, showing that she didn't need to stay within her father's circle to succeed.



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## The Peale gallery includes one of his most talked-about works, the 1819 ‘Portrait of Yarrow Mamout,’ a formerly enslaved man who lived in Washington, D.C.

The Peale gallery also includes one of his most talked-about works, the 1819 “Portrait of Yarrow Mamout.” Peale became fascinated by this elderly Black man. Deported from Guinea as a teenager and freed from slavery at the age of about 60, Mamout owned a home in Washington, D.C.’s Georgetown district and is said to have openly practiced his Muslim faith.

Few of Philadelphia’s African-Americans were so lucky. Slavery continued in Pennsylvania until the early 19th century, and much of the iron used in colonial America came from the state’s foundries, which were often worked by enslaved people. There were free Black craftsmen in Philadelphia as well, but evidence of their work is hard to come by. A handsome mahogany double chest of drawers in the museum’s collection is a rarity: Thomas Gross, a Black cabinetmaker, left his signature on a drawer bottom.



A matching chest and dressing table made ca. 1765-75.

PHOTO: PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, 2021

In 1750, when Philadelphia was the largest city in the colonies, about a third of the population of Pennsylvania spoke German, and German and British styles of furniture-making were popular. A clothes press made in Lancaster County in 1779 stands almost 7 feet tall; its doors are decorated with delicate trceries of birds, crowns and stylized leaves, with a sulfur inlay. Nearby, a matching chest of drawers and dressing table from

1765-75 is 8 feet high. Built with four types of wood, it features a brass plate that illustrates the Aesop fable “The Fox and the Grapes,” in which a fox, unable to reach the desired fruit, declares it unripe.

The last gallery includes one of the 62 existing “Peaceable Kingdom” paintings by the Quaker minister Edward Hicks, depicting a biblical paradise where animal predators and prey lie down together. The museum’s version includes a background scene of Penn making a peace treaty with Native Americans. But when Hicks created his painting in 1826, Ms. Foster notes, the Lenape had moved west in the wake of their devastating loss of land, and few Native Americans still lived in the state.

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