

As the Nation's Birthday Approaches, Museums Lead the Way

Institutions around the country are preparing for the nation's 250th anniversary, even in the face of political crosswinds.



Listen · 10:27 min

By Alina Tugend

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This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how creativity can inspire in challenging times.

A life-size cow made out of butter. Quilts created by incarcerated men. Many, many versions of the Declaration of Independence.

With the nation's 250th birthday upcoming in July, museums and historical societies are opening exhibitions this fall commemorating the event with shows as diverse as the country itself.

Viewers will have their choice of exhibitions highlighting state fairs, prison art projects and the international impact of the country's founding documents — just a few of the many events, some of which have started rolling out.

The anniversary comes at a time when the Trump administration is mandating that cultural institutions and educational organizations re-examine how they view, present and teach topics like citizenship, free speech and even slavery. In August,

the Trump administration published a list of Smithsonian exhibits and programming it objected to, including those it said promoted homosexuality and “woke” activism.

The administration and Smithsonian executives are still in talks about how to handle some of these issues, but most museums, which are private, are unaffected by the White House demands.

“We are the guardians of authentic materials, documents, objects and art, and it’s really our job to tell these stories,” said Louise Mirrer, president and chief executive of the New York Historical, which is offering two commemorative exhibitions and an online project this fall. “I am hoping that people will take away from the whole range of exhibitions that we’re doing that democracy was achieved as a result of a struggle and that it was hard fought and hard won.” And she added, “that it is something that needs to be safeguarded.”

“On Our 250th,” created by the New York Historical in collaboration with 26 other historical societies and museums nationwide, allows people to post on a website their birthday wishes for America and hopes for the future of its democracy.

Scattered like Post-it notes across the web page and signed only with first names and states, the wishes tend to focus on living together more harmoniously; for example, Myair of Michigan writes succinctly, “No racism.”

About 10,000 notes have been posted so far, both online and on physical walls set up in participating museums, said Ken Weine, senior vice president and chief content officer for the museum. The notes are monitored for hate speech and highly partisan content before they are posted, he said.

An exhibition, “Stirring the Melting Pot: Photographs from The New York Historical Collection,” running from Nov. 28 to March 29, highlights a fundamental part of the nation’s history and the so-called American experience. It includes about 100 photos of immigrants throughout the last century, from well-known images of tenement life in the early 20th century to less-familiar scenes

surrounding the General Slocum disaster of 1904, when a ship carrying more than 1,300 passengers for a day trip up the East River in New York caught fire. The final death toll was 1,021, the largest in the United States until it was surpassed on 9/11.



A 1994 photo, “Side by Side” by Jack Margolin, is from “Stirring the Melting Pot: Photographs from The New York Historical Collection.” Jack Margolin/Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, via The New York Historical



Also in the melting pot exhibition is a photo from around 1908-1913, “Two Women and Two Children in a Tenement Kitchen.” Underwood Archive, via The New York Historical

The photos show how the countries from which immigrants hailed shifted over the decades — as did the landscape of New York City itself — as new arrivals’ places of worship, schools and restaurants replaced those of the previous influx.

“The style and variety has changed,” said Valerie Paley, director of the museum’s library. “The built environment has changed. But the vitality hasn’t changed.”

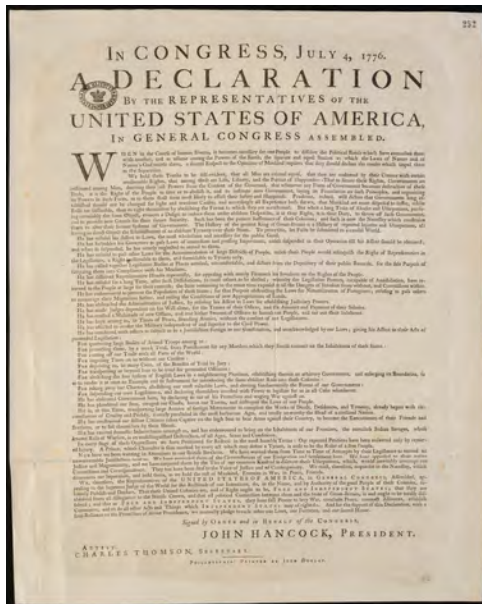
A second exhibition at the New York Historical, “Declaring the Revolution: America’s Printed Path to Independence,” focuses on 67 pieces of printed material on loan from the David M. Rubenstein Americana Collection, such as official documents, as well as pamphlets, broadsides and journals. It runs from Nov. 14 to April 12.

The Declaration of Independence makes two appearances in the exhibition: its first newspaper printing, in the Pennsylvania Evening Post in July 1776, and a rare copy from 1823. The original is in the National Archives.

One of the more unusual items is a 1773 slave petition for freedom written by literate enslaved men from Boston and addressed to Massachusetts elected officials.

“Increasingly, Americans were using the metaphor and symbolism of slavery to describe their relationship with the British crown,” said Mazy Boroujerdi, the exhibition’s curator. That didn’t go unnoticed by actual enslaved people; the petition noted that “we expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them.”

The four men were petitioning to be allowed a day a week to earn their own wages to buy their freedom. The petition was met, Boroujerdi said, “with something close to silence.”



Among the items to be shown at “The Declaration’s Journey” at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia are, left to right, a broadside of the Declaration of Independence printed by John Dunlap; it will be the first time the copy has returned to Philadelphia since it was intercepted at sea in July 1776 when Jonas Phillips, a Philadelphia merchant, tried to send it to a contact in Amsterdam; and a swivel chair designed by Thomas Jefferson, where he sat while working on the Declaration. Museum of the American Revolution, Philadelphia

The ongoing impact of the Declaration of Independence — nationally and internationally — is the subject of “The Declaration’s Journey,” running through Jan. 3, 2027, at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia.

Demonstrating the complicated history of the Declaration’s meaning, the exhibition opens with a juxtaposition of the Windsor chair that Thomas Jefferson is believed to have used when drafting the Declaration of Independence in the summer of 1776 and the prison bench from Martin Luther King Jr.’s cell in Birmingham, Ala. While in jail, King wrote his famous 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which he quotes the Declaration.

The exhibition showcases about 120 documents and artifacts connected to different independence movements and representing around 20 nations. It includes one of the first original printings — a broadside — of the Declaration of Independence, once owned by a Philadelphia merchant, Jonas Phillips, who tried to send it in late July 1776 across the Atlantic to one of his contacts in Amsterdam.

It was intercepted at sea by the British, said Matthew Skic, the museum’s director of collections and exhibitions, and ended up in the British national archives. It will arrive shortly after the exhibition opens, Skic said, returning to Philadelphia for the first time in two and half centuries.

An exhibition at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., looks at the country’s history through a completely different lens: state fairs. The Renwick is part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Smithsonian is offering a variety of programing leading up to the birthday, including the reopening of a historic carousel on the National Mall and a sweeping exhibition about the nation’s founding at the National Museum of American History. Both are scheduled to open in March.

“State Fairs: Growing American Craft,” which will run until Sept. 7, brings together two floors of more than 240 artworks from state fairs in 40 different states and four tribal nations.

Mary Savig, curator in charge at the Renwick, said when she started thinking about creating the show five years ago, “we thought it would really align well with the 250th.” The first state fair took place in Syracuse, N.Y., in 1841 and many others “started when migration was happening from the east to the west. It was a way of establishing the culture of the state through these craft competitions.”



Some 800 pounds of butter were brought in from Minnesota; the artist processed the butter in one room and then, bucket by bucket, moved it into a refrigerator to carve it. The finished cow is exhibited in a custom-built, life-size refrigerated case. Albert Ting, via Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Which brings up the butter cow. Competitive butter sculpting is a staple of some fairs (see “Butter,” a 2011 movie about such a competition at the Iowa State Fair). The full-sized Jersey cow was carved by Iowa State Fair’s official butter sculptor Sarah Pratt over one week in July and is exhibited in a custom-built, life-size refrigerated case, Savig said.

Some 800 pounds of butter were brought in from Minnesota; the artist processed the butter in one room and then, bucket by bucket, moved it into the refrigerator to carve it. “That was a challenging logistic,” Savig said. She added that the exhibition had not been reviewed by the Trump administration.



The Renwick's state fair exhibition includes “crop art,” like this portrait of Dolly Parton, made using straw for her hair. Linda Paulsen and John Colton, via Smithsonian American Art Museum

Other items include quilts, painted porcelain and crop art, which is a popular competition at the Minnesota State Fair; it's art made from seeds native to the state. On view is a replica of Dolly Parton, with straw as her hair.

The exhibition is a way to portray the country's history through fair craft, but it's not simply looking backward. Savig said many state fairs have seen an increase in the number of visitors every year.

"I think there might be a predisposition to think that the work is going to feel nostalgic or nationalistic, but I think the works feel very much reflective of the current moment," she said.

Perhaps not surprisingly, quilts, which have a long and significant history in the United States from antebellum times, appear in a few of the exhibitions commemorating the country's 250th.



Quilts appear in a few of the exhibitions commemorating the country's 250th, including this one at the Fairfield University Art Museum, "Red, White and Baldwin." Some of the squares include images of the writer and activist James Baldwin. Maureen Kelleher, via Fairfield University Art Museum

Besides the Renwick show, the Fairfield University Art Museum in Connecticut exhibition "Stitching Time," which runs until Dec. 13, highlights 12 quilts created by men incarcerated in Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola prison. It is one of three exhibitions tied to the 250th anniversary offered by the museum.

The quilts are part of the Social Justice Collaboration Quilts Project, which coordinates the quilting initiative within and outside the prison.

One quilt in the exhibition, “Red, White and Baldwin,” appears at first glance like a traditional quilt with multicolored squares; a closer look shows some of those squares are portraits of James Baldwin, the writer and Civil Rights activist. Another is covered with the name of Eric Garner, who was killed by New York police in 2014, and his last words, “I can’t breathe.”



Another quilt on display at the Fairfield University museum in Connecticut is a tribute to Eric Garner, who was killed by New York police in 2014. It includes his last words, “I can’t breathe.” Maureen Kelleher, via Fairfield University Art Museum

“These are artworks,” said Carey Mack Weber, the museum’s executive director. “They are truly pouring their souls into these and expressing their feelings on their political views, on their collective history.”

As to how these connect to the 250th anniversary, she said, “When you look at the beautiful artwork, you’re also forced to grapple with the realities of incarceration,” she said, adding, “this is an area where we can think about trying to create a better future.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section F, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: Happy Birthday, U.S.A.

Recalling When Lower Manhattan Was New Amsterdam

An exhibition at the New York Historical focuses on the city's 17th-century roots as a Dutch settlement.



Listen · 12:01 min

By Megan McCrea

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This article is part of our Museums special section about how institutions are commemorating the past as they move into the future.

To the untrained eye, the gleaming black skyscraper at the corner of Whitehall and Pearl Street is unremarkable.

To Russell Shorto, a historian who has written two books on Manhattan's Dutch roots, it's a landmark.

Peter Stuyvesant “built his house on this corner,” Shorto said on a recent walk through Lower Manhattan. He noted that, given the location, Stuyvesant — the peg-legged leader of New Netherland, the Dutch colony centered on New Amsterdam — could monitor ships coming and going, “so he had an idea of what was going on.”



A portrait of Peter Stuyvesant, the gruff, peg-legged leader of New Netherland. via The New York Historical

And a lot was going on.

Continuing down the block, Shorto explained that 400 years ago, the Dutch settlers arriving here built the first houses in the settlement of New Amsterdam along this street, Pearl — so named because back then, it ran along the water, and oysters could be found offshore.

“Broad Street, here, this was the canal,” said Shorto, crossing a curved street now lined with a row of Citi Bikes. “This canal goes right up through the center of New Amsterdam, and we’re at the edge of New Amsterdam looking out on the water.”

Walk with Shorto long enough, and each corner takes its 17th-century form. A gray brick outline on a plaza becomes the City Tavern, where the Dutch colonists gathered to drink and exchange news. A helicopter pad on the East River becomes Coenties Slip, where ships arrived and departed, bearing beaver pelts and tobacco and settlers and enslaved people. Wall Street becomes a long wooden defensive perimeter the Dutch built to keep the English out: the wall that gave the street its name.



Shorto at the Wall Street Hotel, the site of New York's early stock exchange. Shuran Huang for The New York Times



A marker memorializing a long wooden defensive wall that was built by the Dutch to keep the English out, giving Wall Street its name. Shuran Huang for The New York Times

One particularly pivotal spot? Wall and Broad, with the New York Stock Exchange on one corner, Federal Hall on another.

Gesturing at all of it, Shorto said, “think about all of these things — what a spark New Amsterdam was and how much flowed from it. The center of American capitalism in the 1600s, which in the 1700s becomes Wall Street. The center of American democracy.” He waved toward Federal Hall. “This was where George Washington was inaugurated.”

“This was the epicenter of all that, and there’s still something of that vibe here, you know?”

In that moment, New Amsterdam feels very real. So real you can picture it, and see the Dutch inheritances in New York — and America — of today.

In May, the New York Historical aims to bring that vivid sense of New Amsterdam to life in an exhibition, “Old Masters, New Amsterdam” (through Aug. 30). Curated by Shorto, who is the director of the New Amsterdam Project at the museum, and

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., a former curator at the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition uses 17th-century Dutch paintings, along with maps and documents, to give a sense of life in New Amsterdam — and to draw connections between past and present, the Netherlands and America.

Though none of the old master paintings in the show were made in New Amsterdam, or depict specific locations there, the works are being used to convey what Dutch people at the time valued, and how they behaved.

In short, Wheelock explained, the idea in displaying these works was to convey what New Amsterdam might have been like in the 17th century, by showing what the people who populated it were like.

“We can’t walk the streets with them in the way we’d like to, but we want to feel like we are,” he added.



“Head of a Girl” by Rembrandt, circa 1645, is one of the paintings in the exhibition. via The Leiden Collection, New York



“Young Man Smoking and a Woman Pouring Beer,” ca. 1656-58, by Gabriel Metsu. The owner, Thomas Kaplan, explained that, in collecting art, he has taken a keen interest “not just in high life, but in regular people doing regular things.” via The Leiden Collection, New York

The show was long in the making. For years, Louise Mirrer, president and chief executive of the New York Historical, and her staff had been contemplating ways to mark two big occasions this year: the 400th anniversary of New Amsterdam’s founding and the 250th birthday of the United States.

She and Shorto knew about the Leiden Collection, a trove of Dutch old master paintings and drawings owned by the American billionaire Thomas Kaplan and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan. Mirrer said that, when she and Shorto had an idea

for a show highlighting the ties between the Old World and the New, they approached Kaplan to ask whether they could use some paintings from the collection.

In a video interview, Kaplan recalled the conversation. “With me, it was, you want to promote history and the 400th anniversary, et cetera et cetera? You had me at hello.”

Mirrerr remembered Kaplan’s enthusiasm. “He was like, ‘Russell, here’s the cookie jar. Just put your hand inside, and take whatever you want.’”

That cookie jar contained some 220 works by Rembrandt, Jan Lievens, Gerrit Dou and their contemporaries, all focused on what Wheelock, who serves as senior adviser to the Leiden Collection, calls “the human element.”

Kaplan explained that, in collecting, he has taken a keen interest “not just in high life, but also in regular people doing regular things.”

“We have paintings by Gabriel Metsu of women who had clearly been war widows and men changing diapers, and herring sellers and fishmongers, and just these very, very prosaic scenes.”

Wheelock and Shorto pored over the collection. To find paintings that would evoke New Amsterdam, they looked for pieces featuring all kinds of people — soldiers, sailors, doctors, traders, the rich and the poor.

Some pieces they selected were tronies, paintings that depict a person who would not have paid to have their portrait done.

“It’s a guy that Rembrandt would have seen on the street, for example,” Wheelock said, adding that these tronies “are often very roughly painted and expressive, and they give you a feeling of the people — you can almost hear them talk.”

The pair chose 45 paintings from the Leiden Collection, adding works from various museums, archives and private collections — as well as items from the New York Historical’s own collection — to create the universe of the show.

A big, boisterous scene will welcome museum goers to that universe, in Jan Steen's "Peasants Merrymaking Outside an Inn" (ca. 1676).



Visitors to the exhibit will be welcomed by Jan Steen's "Peasants Merrymaking Outside an Inn," ca. 1676. "People are drinking and playing the fiddle and all these different little vignettes are going on," Shorto said, adding, it "really kind of gives you this sense of New Amsterdam." via the Leiden Collection, New York

In that scene, "people are drinking and playing the fiddle and all these different little vignettes are going on," Shorto said, adding, it "really kind of gives you this sense of New Amsterdam."

Before continuing through the art, visitors will encounter objects tied to the real people who lived in New Amsterdam — documents bearing their handwriting, portraits showing their faces — in a prologue.

These will include the proposed coat of arms for New Amsterdam (complete with two large beavers), portraits of Stuyvesant and Cornelius Steenwyck (another prominent city leader) and the Flushing Remonstrance, a document that, the wall text notes, "is considered by many to be the first statement of religious freedom in America."

The idea, Shorto explained, is for visitors to “get steeped” in the history, then “carry that into the main show.”

The main show will unfold across six sections: “At Home,” “At Work,” “At Play,” “Food and Drink,” “The Individual Self” and “The Wider World.”

In many paintings, the activities look strikingly familiar. In one domestic scene, a young man lights a candle; in another, a woman plays with a dog. In the work section, “A Bookkeeper at His Desk” (ca. 1627) — surrounded by books, a faraway expression on his weary face — is relatable to any exhausted corporate cubicle dweller. In “At Play,” merrymakers skate on an expanse of ice.

“Winter came,” Wheelock said. “We know that. Snowcrete.” New Amsterdammers 400 years ago: They’re just like us.

“The Wider World” section opens the show’s aperture to consider New Amsterdammers’ connections with the world beyond a handful of streets at the tip of Manhattan — examining why the colonists left the Netherlands, how they traveled across the ocean and how they were connected to the world at large.

“The Departure of the Pilgrim Fathers from Delfshaven” (1620) reminds visitors of one primary emigration driver: religious persecution. The Dutch policy of religious tolerance worked in the favor of many who came to New Amsterdam, from French-speaking Protestants to Jews fleeing Dutch Brazil.

In the paintings here, details speak volumes. A man’s pipe nods to the Virginia tobacco fields; a young woman’s parrot points to trade with the Caribbean.

That trade was built on one of the darkest aspects of the Dutch colonies: trade in enslaved people. New Amsterdam’s history involved slavery, and the subjugation of Indigenous people, as a contextual section makes clear, by showcasing Wenceslaus Hollar’s etchings of Black people and Native people alongside etchings of white women in furs: the products of that subjugation and exploitation.

Beneath it all runs a common undercurrent: trade. One sign notes that the paintings themselves could not have been created without it. The pigments used by the Dutch old masters to make their paints included materials from Mexico, Afghanistan and even the ocean. And the canvases, if they were not being painted on, could be made into sails.

As the years rolled on, people kept sailing across the ocean and, in 1776, the United States declared its independence, starting the Revolutionary War.

The exhibition's last section brings the story up to the 250th anniversary. As in the prologue, it grounds visitors in the history, with items showing the handwriting, and faces, of people in the nascent United States. And finally, there is a map of New York in 1776, marked with Dutch place names still with us today: Brooklyne (from the Dutch Breuckelen), Haerlem (once Haarlem) and Staten Island (formerly Staaten Eylandt).

It is fitting, perhaps, to end with a beginning because, as Mirrer pointed out, “in many ways, this is an origin story.”

She noted that, to understand who we are as Americans, “we need to understand that we come from diverse people, and we come from people who set foot in this city, and in this nation, for the first time and found here an opportunity to make something of themselves that they couldn’t succeed in doing in Europe, or they simply wanted a new chance for themselves.

“And that’s what it means to be an American, really.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section F, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Recalling New Amsterdam

The New York Times



Critic's Notebook

By Holland Cotter | June 20, 2026

New York City's oldest museum, [the New York Historical](#) (formerly the New-York Historical Society) was formed in Lower Manhattan in 1804 by citizens intent of preserving some of the clamorous recent American times they'd lived through. Two dozen years after the British had been routed and the Declaration of Independence signed, both the city itself and the new nation were still raw and small as, of course, was the fledgling museum.

Over the next century both would expand, and the museum would change locations, gradually moving uptown, finally settling, in 1908, at 170 Central Park West. And now, long-anchored there, it continues to grow. This week, in sync with the country's 250th anniversary observances, the NYH will debut, in a "soft opening" mode, a major addition.

Named the Tang Wing for American Democracy, and stretching west on 76th Street, the four-story, 71,000-square-foot addition houses an open-air sculpture court, a roof

garden, classrooms, the museum's first on-site conservation lab and the future quarters, beginning in 2028, of the American L.G.B.T.Q.+ Museum.

Some of these spaces, designed by the architect [Robert A.M. Stern](#), who died last year, are still in the polishing stages (the roof garden, with its views of Upper West Side rooflines, church steeples and Central Park, doesn't have plantings yet). But others are ready for showtime.



Installation view of "Democracy Matters," in the new Tang Wing, including various works from the "We the People" and "Right to Vote" sections of the exhibition. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

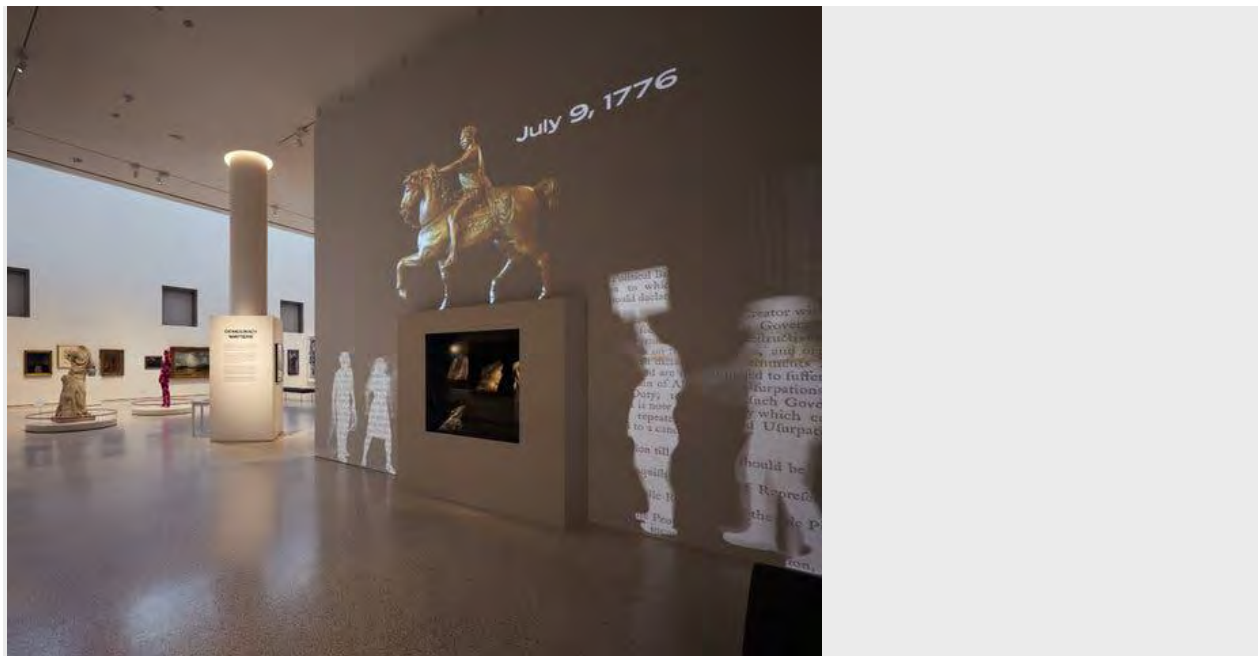
One is a permanent gallery devoted to the [Stuart and Jane Weitzman Shoe Museum](#), a charmer of an archival display of historic American female footwear dating from the 19th-century suffrage era to the present Age of Beyoncé. Another is a small corridor-like space packed tight with a show called "Queer Joy/Gay power," featuring photographs by Fred W. McDarrah (1926-2007), who was on the spot that night in 1969 when Stonewall Inn patrons went rogue.

And nearby is a tribute to Tyler Clementi, a New Jersey teenager and budding professional musician who, in 2010, committed suicide after being cyberbullied by a Rutgers University roommate. Clementi's violin and bow, given to the NYH by his family, are on display.

A third new space, the Tang Wing's primary, high-ceilinged, light-flooded special exhibition gallery, is home right now to a group show called "Democracy Matters."

It's the latest of three exhibitions the museum has organized in response to this year's United States Semiquincentennial, though the only one drawn entirely from its own collection of more than 1.6 million objects.

The other two shows, on view in the museum's older galleries, are conceived as nuanced historical narratives. One, "[Old Masters, New Amsterdam,](#)" is a portrait, through period art and artifacts, of the 17th-century Dutch culture that produced the original beta version of New York City we know. The other, "[Revolutionary Women,](#)" documents the female force, of both loyalist and revolutionary persuasion, behind the American War of Independence.



The entryway of the major exhibition in the expansive Tang Wing depicts patriot soldiers toppling a gilded cast-lead equestrian sculpture of the British King George III. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

"Democracy Matters" follows a different model. It's historically broad, thematically loose, unabashedly polemical, made up of equal then and now. It opens with a made-for-the-occasion work, a life-size video re-creation of a historic event. On a floor-to-ceiling screen we see a group of capering figures, depicted as featureless white silhouettes filled with text fragments from the Declaration of Independence, attacking an equestrian monument that explodes before their eyes.

It references a real event. In Lower Manhattan on the evening of July 9, 1776, after the first public reading of the new Declaration, patriot soldiers toppled a gilded cast-lead equestrian sculpture of the British King George III and chopped it up. Most of the fragments were melted down to make bullets; a few survived and a handful (including the tail of the royal horse) are in the NYH collection. Encased here in glass, they introduce the first of the show's five thematic sections.



Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, "Pulling Down the Statue of King George III," New York City, ca. 1852-1853. A view of a new nation in which women were technically second-class citizens, Native Americans had few civil rights, and a population of captive Africans had no rights at all. Credit...New York Historical Society

Titled "Right to Protest," its first entry is another image of the same event, this one hinting at complications built into the American-style version of democracy from the start. In a mid-19th-century painting by the German-American immigrant artist Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, the pulling-down is in progress, but the crowd here is large and visibly multicultural. It includes a Black man who looks in danger of being crushed in the melee; a Native American family half-lost in shadow, mute witnesses; a huddle of emoting women set apart from the fray.

A wall label describes Oertel's image as commentarial: a view of a revolution in which the vaunted idea of liberty was only "selectively applied," a view of a new nation in which, under slow-to-change laws, women were technically second-class citizens, Native Americans had few civil rights, and a population of captive Africans had no rights at all.

Letting history, as embodied in art and artifacts, speak critically — positively and negatively — is the basic strategy of the exhibition, organized by Wendy Nālani E. Ikemoto, NYH's vice president and chief curator.



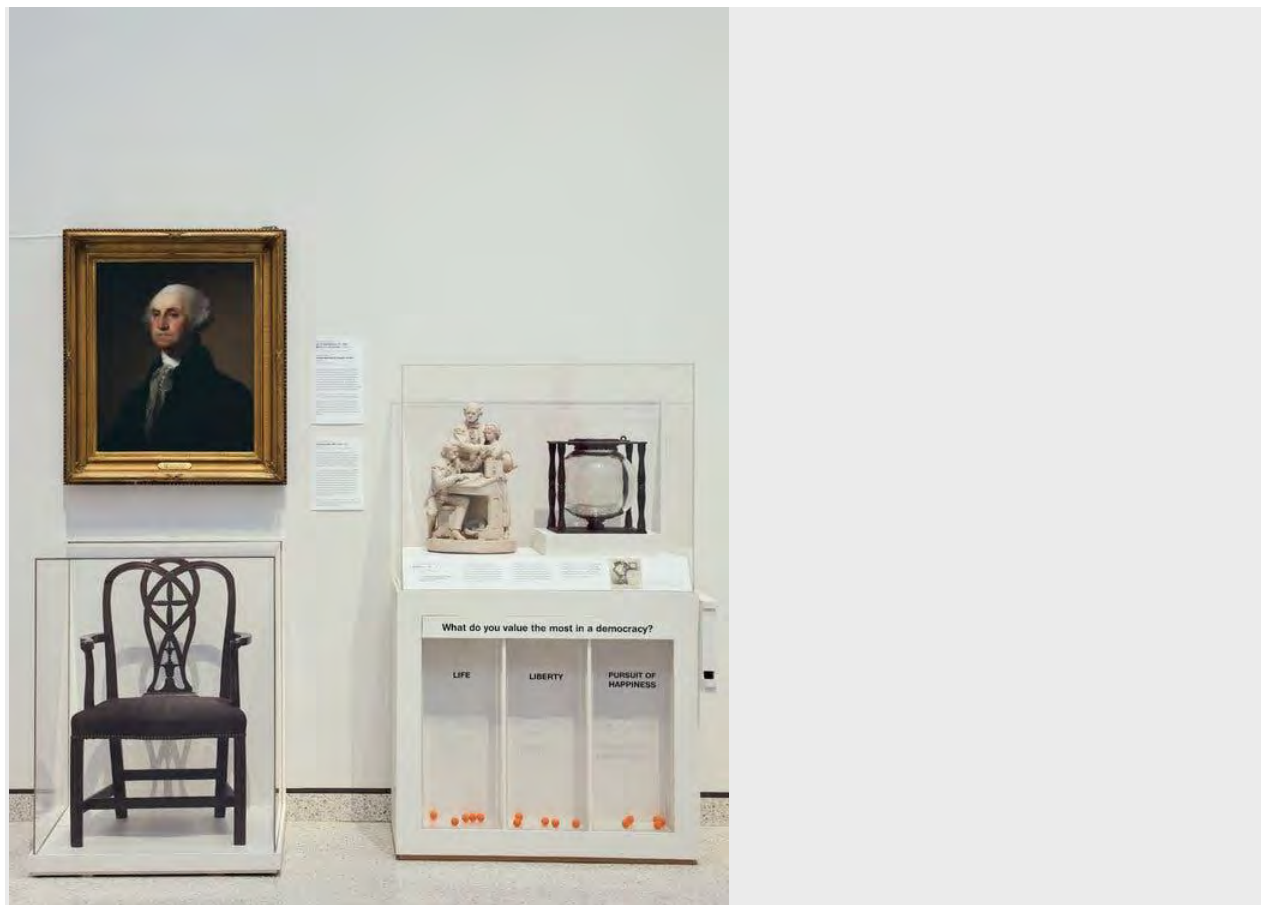
"Untitled (Youths at Stonewall Uprising), New York, June 28, 1969," by Fred W. McDarrah. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times



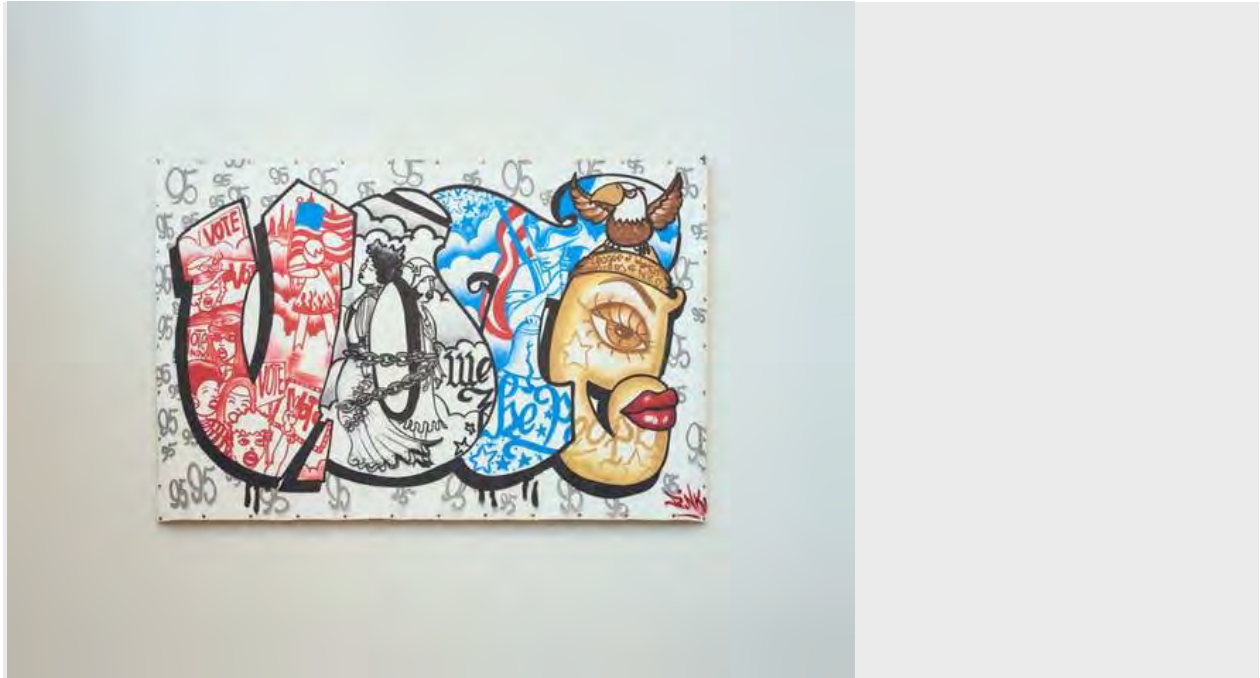
Betye Saar, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines," 2017. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

The opening section, “Right to Protest,” encompasses not only the 1776 sculptural relics, and Oertel’s editorializing picture, but also one of McDarrah’s classic Stonewall Uprising photos and a 2017 Betye Saar assemblage sculpture, “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines,” incorporating an Aunt Jemima figure armed with an assault rifle. (A solo show of Saar’s work, honoring her 100th birthday this year, is also on view in the museum.)

A section called “Right to Vote” has this cautionary, thumbs-up, thumbs-down mix. The presence of the plain-style mahogany armchair in which George Washington sat for his inauguration in 1789 — far from a throne — is a reminder of how radical, in the monarchic-dominated Western world of the time, the very idea of voting for a leader was.



Various works from the “Right to Vote” section of the exhibition including a plain-style mahogany armchair in which George Washington sat for his inauguration. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times



"Vote," 2014, by the graffiti artist Lady Pink (Sandra Fabara), who began making her mark in 1979 in a male-dominated scene. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

The placement nearby of a post-Civil War plaster sculpture titled "Challenging the Union Vote," in which an armed ex-Confederate poll worker guards a ballot box, suggests how easily voting can be manipulated.

A hand-lettered evening gown urging the passage of the long-stalled Equal Rights Amendment (E.R.A.), worn by the Democratic New York congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney to the 2021 Met Museum gala, is a reminder that women have equality to claim way beyond suffrage. Finally, a spectacular painting by the graffiti star Lady Pink (a.k.a Sandra Fabara) blows the word "Vote" up, bubble style, to mural size and fills it with figures and words: images of street demonstrations, the Liberty Bell, the Constitutional phrase "We the People."



“Gown worn by Representative Carolyn B. Maloney to the Met Gala,” 2021, by Ghassan Antonio.
Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

Who are “the People”? The show gives us a sampling of some. One, seen in a 19th century portrait, is a historical figure, Dred Scott. An enslaved Black man, in 1857 he sued for his freedom on the grounds that he was resident of a state (Illinois) where slavery was banned. The U.S. Supreme Court’s response? Not only was he not free, but no people of African descent could be considered American citizens.

And some of “the People” are fictional, as in the case of a Native American man shown wrapped in a stars-and-stripes flag in a print made for the 1976 Bicentennial by the artist Fritz Scholder (1937-2005). He could be taken for a patriot except that he wears the flag sacrilegiously upside-down.

There’s no way to know, short of reading the wall label, that a tiny wood-brooch in the form of a bright-colored songbird was made by a pair of artists, Yoneguma and Kiyoka Takahashi, husband and wife, who were, with their three children, among thousands of Japanese Americans labeled “enemy aliens” and confined to internment camps during World War II.



"Western Tanager bird pin," 1942-1945 by Yoneguma and Kiyoka Takahashi. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

Nor is it easy to know who or what we are seeing when we look at a 2024 sculpture by [Suchitra Mattai](#), an artist of South Asian descent born in Guyana and now based in Los Angeles. Titled "She Arose (from a Pool of Tears)," and acquired by the museum this year, the piece is a life-size female figure dressed in a pink body suit in a classical Indian dance pose — arms stretched high, legs extended — as if emerging from, or touching down on, a circular rippling pool formed from braided saris.

And she's surrounded and framed by one of the NYH's single greatest American art treasures, the five-part series of 1830s paintings by Thomas Cole titled "[The Course of Empire](#)." The series depicts the imagined rise and fall of a civilization, from its roots in a verdant wilderness, to its rise to urban extravagance (here resembling a Classical, gold-plated Trumpian Washington), to a descent into chaos and ruin.

But in the final painting the ruin is beginning — just — to sprout signs of fresh life. And maybe that's where Mattai's buoyant cross-cultural figure comes in. A versatile global dancer (references to Afro Beat, Bachata, Balanchine and Bharatanatyam can be read in her pose), dressed all in hot pink (a mix of red, white and blue), she's an alternative Lady Liberty, and an apt advocate for a new American democracy.



A new Lady Liberty: Suchitra Mattai's sculpture, "She Arose (from a Pool of Tears)," 2024, is shown alongside a cycle of paintings in "The Course of Empire" by Thomas Cole, who in the 1830s painted both the beauty and destruction of nature and civilization. Credit...Luis Corzo for The New York Times

Democracy Matters

Through Nov. 1, at the new Tang Wing for American Democracy, The New York Historical, 170 Central Park West, Manhattan, (212) 873-3400. Extended pay as you wish hours — 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday to Saturdays through July 4; nyhistory.org/on-our-250th.

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