

**ARTIST, AUTHOR, & INVENTOR RUFUS PORTER, FOUNDER OF *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN*,
IS THE FOCUS OF MAJOR EXHIBITION AT BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART**

*From portrait miniatures to patent models, Porter and his 19th century contemporaries
demonstrated relentless creativity*

Brunswick, Maine, October 3, 2019—On December 12, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) will open the exhibition *Rufus Porter's Curious World: Art and Invention in America, 1815-1860*. The founder of *Scientific American*, Rufus Porter distinguished himself as a creative visionary who pioneered initiatives in art, publishing, and science. This special exhibition includes more than 80 paintings, inventions, and publications by Porter and a number of his contemporaries, including Samuel F. B. Morse, Robert Fulton, Charles Bird King, and Winslow Homer, many of whom also successfully crossed disciplines between art making and scientific experimentation. Described posthumously as a “Yankee da Vinci” by *Time* magazine, Porter is underrecognized compared to these contemporaries. This exhibition and the accompanying catalogue demonstrate that he merits broader attention in both the history of American art and of American science. *Rufus Porter's Curious World* will be on view at the BCMA from December 12, 2019 through May 31, 2020.

The exhibition unites significant examples of Porter's artistic endeavors with his patent models, scientific newspapers, original letters, and publications, as well as paintings, drawings, and objects from two dozen other artists and creators. Unlike today's often siloed and specialized studies, the nineteenth century was an active period of cross-disciplinary exploration, leading to Fulton's steamboat and Morse's telegraph, as well as the works of Henry David Thoreau and Frederic Edwin Church. Curated by Laura F. Sprague, Senior Consulting Curator at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, and Justin Wolff, Professor of Art History at the University of Maine, the exhibition is grounded in original scholarly research that establishes a new context for understanding and appreciating Porter's critical work at the intersection of art, science, and technology.

“Like Benjamin Franklin before him, Porter promoted the ideals of the American Enlightenment and advocated for an educated populace rooted in practical knowledge of the arts and sciences,” said Laura F. Sprague, Senior Consulting Curator and the exhibition's co-curator. “Porter contributed to the modernization of American society in the antebellum age through his dogged efforts in diverse fields.” Justin Wolff, Professor of Art History at the University of Maine and exhibition co-curator, added: “Rufus Porter's trades— itinerant painter, inventor, publisher of scientific journals— seem disparate at first. But they are all mechanical arts beholden to his era's beloved ‘useful knowledge.’ Porter had a farseeing vision for a networked nation, a country literally connected by transportation systems and metaphorically connected by shared knowledge and vigorous optimism.”

As an artist, Porter is best known for his interior wall paintings, which inspired a school of New England murals in domestic settings. His spatial designs immersed residents in breathtaking panoramas of the New England landscape. He also pursued portrait miniatures as a commercial business, and the results show keen observation of the physical world and refined techniques, including the use of a camera obscura and chemical knowledge of pigment application.

Porter was also an avid inventor. He developed a revolving gun design purchased by Samuel Colt, successfully applied for more than 24 patents, and dedicated years of study to creating a “Travelling Balloon,” a never-realized mechanized aircraft powered by a steam engine, more than 50 years before the Wright brothers’ flights. Porter believed the dissemination of information was critical to the improvement of society and used publishing to pursue this goal. In 1845 he founded *Scientific American*, the oldest continuously published monthly magazine in the United States. He also wrote early practical art manuals in the United States.

Featured in the exhibition are works from the BCMA Collection and Bowdoin College Library’s Special Collections as well as significant loans from more than twenty institutions and private collections. Many are on view for the first time. Selected highlights include:

- Robert Fulton’s drawing for a submarine sighting mechanism, which sets the stage for Porter’s own inventions, especially his quest to realize mechanized flight with his travelling balloon or “aeropot;”
- Porter’s elegant design for the *Scientific American* masthead, which features a temple of learning with trains and steamships, elevating the importance of these technologies which connect people and places across America’s vast distances;
- Examples from the cycle of interior wall murals commissioned by Francis Howe of West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts, which is one of the finest examples of Porter’s mural technique and provides the foundation for understanding the quality of his panoramic designs; and
- A number of Porter’s miniature portraits of known sitters, including four members of the Timothy Flagg family of Andover, Massachusetts, circa 1830, which reveal the development of his style and the range of his patronage.

Anne Collins Goodyear, BCMA Co-director, noted: “Today, in an era in which attention to STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math—disciplines dominates education and public policy, Rufus Porter’s legacy demonstrates the critical importance of the artistic imagination in stimulating discoveries and achievements in all areas of human endeavor. Porter anticipates the practice of contemporary artists who actively explore and incorporate technology and science, such as in the realms of new media, experimentation with artificial intelligence, and bio-art. Porter’s work enables us to embrace the relationship between the arts and sciences and to consider not only how each might benefit the other, but also the many attributes they share.”

Frank Goodyear, BCMA Co-director, continued: “Porter’s name is not widely known today, though we believe it should be. We are proud to contribute to the rediscovery of this important historical figure and invite others to think anew about creativity and innovation. The exchange across disciplines evidenced by the life and work of Rufus Porter is a key benefit of a liberal arts education, making the Bowdoin College Museum of Art an ideal place to showcase his work and explore what it means to stimulate new ways of understanding the world.”

The accompanying catalogue to *Rufus Porter’s Curious World* is being published with Pennsylvania State University Press. It includes a new biographical study by Sprague, an analysis of Porter’s miniatures by art

historian Deborah M. Child, and an essay on Porter's itinerancy, spatial thinking, and network theories by Wolff.

Born in Massachusetts, Porter was raised in Maine, and the exhibition kicks off a year of BCMA programming tied to the bicentennial of Maine's statehood in 2020. Additional related programming will be announced in the coming months.

About the Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The collections of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art are among the most comprehensive of any college museum in the United States. Collecting commenced over 200 years ago with a major gift from the College's founder James Bowdoin III and his family that included Gilbert Stuart's magnificent portraits of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

The Museum is housed in the landmark Walker Art Building, designed in 1894 by Charles Follen McKim. Located on the historic quadrangle of Bowdoin College, the building is graced by murals by John La Farge, Kenyon Cox, Elihu Vedder, and Abbott Thayer. A \$20.8-million renovation and expansion in 2007 provided a stunning setting for objects as diverse as monumental Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud, Iraq; European Old Master paintings; and works by American modernists. The Museum is the centerpiece of Bowdoin's vibrant arts and culture community and offers a wealth of academic and educational programs.

Fully accessible, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is open to the public free of charge from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday through Saturday; 10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Thursday; and from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday.

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