

**THE DYNAMIC LANDSCAPE OF MONHEGAN ISLAND,
A STORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE AND ARTISTIC INSPIRATION,
EXPLORED IN NEW EXHIBITION OPENING DECEMBER 2024**

“Art, Ecology, and the Resilience of a Maine Island: The Monhegan Wildlands” is a collaboration between the Bowdoin College Museum of Art and the Monhegan Museum of Art & History

Brunswick, ME—June 25, 2024—In December, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA), in collaboration with the Monhegan Museum of Art & History, will present an exhibition that looks anew at the history of Monhegan Island, Maine. Titled *Art, Ecology, and the Resilience of a Maine Island: The Monhegan Wildlands*, the exhibition will illuminate the Island’s extraordinary journey of environmental transformation and resilience from the close of the most recent ice age to the contemporary period, as seen through the eyes of the artists who depict the terrain and the scientists who study Monhegan’s dynamic ecology.

The exhibition will feature a wide range artworks—from paintings by modernist artists such as Rockwell Kent and Edward Hopper, to contemporary pieces by Lynne Drexler and Barbara Putnam—alongside historical artifacts such as bone harpoon points and other objects created by Indigenous inhabitants, documents from the Island’s history, and scientific research on elements such as the human introduction, and subsequent removal, of first sheep and then deer. *Art, Ecology, and the Resilience of a Maine Island: The Monhegan Wildlands* will open at BCMA on December 12, 2024, through June 1, 2025, followed by a presentation at the Monhegan Museum of Art & History that will begin July 1, 2025.

As part of the collaboration, BCMA has commissioned a new series of photographs of Monhegan Island from photographer Accra Shepp, which serve as a throughline across the exhibition. Known for his exploratory and documentary-style photography that focuses on social and environmental narratives, Shepp employed his 4x5 view camera to create a new series of panoramic photographs that capture the Island’s ecology and its people. Shepp has also contributed an afterword about his experiences on Monhegan Island to the exhibition catalogue.

“New York artist Rockwell Kent first visited Monhegan Island in 1905, just as more than a half century of intensive sheep farming was coming to an end, so the landscape he saw and depicted was in the earliest stages of recovery from its greatest ecological disturbance in recorded history,” said Barry Logan, the Samuel S. Butcher Professor in the Natural Sciences at Bowdoin College and a co-curator of the exhibition. “Although he was not the first, Kent helped to inspire a renowned on-island artistic tradition that continues to thrive more than a century later—and that also supported steps taken by the Islanders and others to preserve and protect Monhegan’s unique landscape.”

Added Jennifer Pye, Director, Monhegan Museum of Art & History and a co-curator of the exhibition, “Although visible from the mainland on clear days, Monhegan Island’s geographical isolation fosters a unique ecology, as well as self-reliance among its residents. This distinct blend of accessibility and remoteness, coupled with a strong spirit of community, continues to draw visitors and artists alike, captivated by its rugged beauty and the sense of being part of something truly apart from the wider world.

We are excited about this innovative collaboration between art historians and scientists at Bowdoin, and historians of the Island itself, to bring this unique story to the public. The Monhegan Museum’s presentation in 2025 will emphasize different aspects of these narratives, sharing both some similar—and a few different—stories for those also seeing the exhibition at the BCMA.”

Located 10 miles off the coast of Maine—lying north of Portland but south of Rockland—Monhegan Island is just less than a square mile in size, with a year-round population of around 60 residents. Yet Monhegan’s small scale (a fraction of the size of other well-known New England islands like Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard) has enabled the kind of close study—by artists and scientists alike—that reveals in intimate detail the changes in the ecology of the forested landscape. Monhegan forests have been permitted to follow their own trajectory free from development thanks to the exceptional conservation-mindedness of the community. Fully three quarters of Monhegan Island—the Wildlands—is conserved in a land trust where the prevailing stewardship ethos is to let nature take its course.

The Monhegan Wildlands will explore these changes through several different thematic and time-based entry points:

- **Maps: Geography, History & Ecology:** The exhibition will first acquaint, or reacquaint, museumgoers with the Island, its coastal location, and the experience of visiting. Maps will highlight its prominent place in North America’s history of exploration, colonization, and displacement. Among the objects addressing this period is a 1637 map including an engraved portrait of “Captayne” John Smith, who spent most of a summer on Monhegan and offered an early description of its forests. An 1873 US Coast and Geodetic Survey map reveals the historical extent of forest and pasture, thereby grounding understanding of presentday ecology in past disturbance.
- **Deep History and Early Habitation:** The exhibition will examine 12,000 years of dynamic forest history through pollen records that reach back to the Island’s—and the region’s—revegetation as glaciers retreated at the end of the most recent ice age. Monhegan’s importance to the ancestors of the Wabanaki as a place from which to fish, for millenia, is reflected in fishing implements retrieved from Monhegan’s shoreline.
- **The Cathedral Woods:** The ancient, enduring, old-growth red spruce and fir forest of the Island interior has long attracted artists for its solemnity and its stark contrast with the crashing surf of the coast. Work of Robert Henri and early photographers is included in this section.
- **The Era of Sheep and its Aftermath:** Monhegan’s abrupt abandonment of sheep farming at the end of 19th century typifies that of the greater region. The new generation of modern artists arrived in the first decades of the 20th century to depict this transformed landscape. Forest recovery is represented in their work and coincided with the establishment of Monhegan’s reputation as a destination and home for artists. Highlight objects from this period include paintings of the iconic headlands by Rockwell Kent and Edward Hopper. Also included are a series of photographs and watercolors by Samuel Peter Rolt Triscott, an English painter who settled on Monhegan Island during the final days of sheep farming, and a contemporary painting by Jamie Wyeth.
- **Forest Decline:** The forest that grew on abandoned pastureland then suffered decline through the middle and late 20th century, largely as a result of twin threats: the growth of native, parasitic mistletoe, unleashed by human disturbance, and also the devastating browsing pressures brought

on by the introduction of deer. In addition, with the deer came ticks and the threat of contracting Lyme disease, ultimately prompting the removal of the herd. Artworks trace both the return and the decline of forest, including works by Andrew Winter, James Fitzgerald, George Bellows, and others. The role Monhegan played as a natural laboratory for the study of Lyme disease ecology is depicted through illustrations and archival photographs—as is the remarkable conservation effort led by Ted Edison (son of inventor Thomas Edison) that gave rise to the Monhegan Associates and their focus on the preservation of the Wildlands.

- ***Forest Resilience and Stewardship***: The removal of deer set in motion further, dramatic succession for the secondary forests of the Wildlands. In the 21st century, no longer suppressed by deer browsing, broad-leafed trees—aspens, birch, and maples among them—take their place in the canopy. Native understory shrubs displace the thorny, human-introduced plants that were once advantaged by the presence of deer. Monhegan’s Wildlands are contextualized in the broader land conservation movement of the New England. Works by Lynne Drexler and others illuminate artists’ relationship to the dynamic Wildlands, while the complexities of light-handed stewardship are illustrated, as are the challenges and satisfactions of contemporary life on this unbridged, out-to-sea Island—supported by Accra Shepp’s portraits of Islanders and Island life.

“While Monhegan has long been a canvas for artists, it has been an equally enriching landscape for scientists, a unique opportunity to observe the mechanisms of forest succession and resilience on a small scale,” said Frank Goodyear, Co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art and a co-curator of the exhibition. “As an art historian, it has been an engaging experience to work on developing an exhibition that integrates the narratives of artists, ecologists, and the community, and that so effectively relates these unique and instructive histories to the arc of environmental stewardship on Monhegan Island. Building on this experience, our exhibition concludes with invitations for visitors to reflect upon and express their own relationship to the Monhegan Wildlands and wildlands elsewhere.”

Art, Ecology, and the Resilience of a Maine Island: The Monhegan Wildlands will be accompanied by a catalogue written by Goodyear, Logan, and Pye, with new photography and an afterword from Accra Shepp of the School of Visual Arts, New York. David Foster, Director emeritus of Harvard Forest and a noted expert on conservation, land-use history, and ecology in New England, authored the foreword. The catalogue also includes sidebar essays by:

- William Livingston, Director of the School of Forest Resources, University of Maine at Orono
- John Bear Mitchell (Penobscot), Lecturer of Wabanaki Studies and Multicultural Studies, University of Maine at Orono
- Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Maine State Historian
- Matthew Klinge, Associate Professor of History and Environmental Studies, Bowdoin College
- Robert Smith, Vector-Borne Disease Lab, Maine Medical Center Research Institute
- Tish Miller, long-time Monhegan summer resident
- Doug Boynton, year-round Monhegan resident.

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The Bowdoin College Museum of Art is the cornerstone of the arts and culture at Bowdoin. One of the earliest collegiate art collections in the nation, it came into being through the 1811 bequest of James Bowdoin III of 70 European paintings and a portfolio of 141 old master drawings. The collection has been

expanded through the generosity of the Bowdoin family, alumni and friends, and now numbers more than 20,000 objects, including paintings, sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts and artifacts from prehistory to the present from civilizations around the world. www.bowdoin.edu

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For more information, please contact:

Sascha Freudenheim

PAVE Communications & Consulting

917-544-6057

sascha@paveconsult.com