Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts

## The Art and Science of the Philosophy Chamber at Harvard

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy President and Fellows of Harvard College

## The Philosophy Chamber was at the center of Harvard's and of New England's intellectual life for more than half a century.

667 This exhibition is about a room, a single room," curator Ethan W. Lasser told a group of press people a few days before the May 19 opening of The Philosophy Chamber at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Part lecture hall, part science lab, part picture gallery, part public assembly hall, part cabinet of curiosities, the Philosophy Chamber was at the center of Harvard's and of New England's intellectual life for more than half a century, from 1766 through 1820. Over the next seven years, while Harvard dismantled the space to make way for an addition to its main library, items from the Philosophy Chamber's collection were dispersed to other locations at the university or to local museums, or were lost or destroyed.

Not only a collection was jettisoned by the room's closure. The dispersal signaled the end of an academic era. The Philosophy Chamber had been the place where Harvard students had learned the basic principles of electricity, astronomy, mechanics, hydrostatics, and optics. More important perhaps, it had been a primary gathering spot for leading scientists, artists, and other innovative thinkers of the day. Benjamin Franklin advised on the purchase of one of the room's most celebrated objects, an unusually large, cylindrical electrical machine (used for making static electricity for experiments). John Winthrop, a Harvard professor and great-great-grandson of the founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, viewed the transit of Venus using astronomical instruments from the Philosophy Chamber in 1769. John Hancock donated the room's red wallpaper that served as the backdrop for three life-size portraits of Harvard benefactors commissioned from John Singleton Copley. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences held its first meeting in the Philosophy Chamber in 1780. George Washington visited it on his first presidential tour in 1789. At its termination, there was no argument that the Philosophy Chamber was hallowed ground, but the ways and means of knowledge-seeking had moved on, and so had Harvard.

Then about five years ago, Lasser, who is head of the Harvard Art Museums' division of European and American art and its Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. Curator of American Art, began thinking about putting the pieces of the Philosophy Chamber back together. Given how much the process of seeking knowledge has changed yet again, a look back at these origins seemed in order. He and a team tracked approximately 200 of its more than 1000 original objects. The exhibit displays some 70, along with about three dozen others that closely match the descriptions of pieces that are gone or that survive but are too fragile to put on display.

Of special note, besides the electrical machine and the Copley portraits, there is now on view a grand orrery (clockwork model of the solar system) made for the room by Boston clockmaker Joseph Pope. Its £450 price was paid for by the public in what one could call an early example of successful "crowdsourcing." But the less grand objects are equally fascinating. Displayed on the wall in frames are painted glass lantern slides, as exquisite as miniature portraits, showing astronomical phenomena. They used to be projected on the Philosophy Chamber's wall by a magic lantern in a simulation of an early "cinematic" experience. The exhibit shows a contemporary version of the same. There is an astounding 18th-century Hawaiian cape made of what is estimated to be 500,000 to one million feathers. There are a bald eagle and a long-eared owl prepared in magnificent taxidermy by Charles Willson Peale. There is a mahogany cabinet of many drawers attributed to another Bostonian, Isaac Vose, that houses ancient coins, including an Italian one encased in lava from a volcano eruption. There are also a giant curl of an eastern diamondback rattlesnake skin, an

18th-century lightning rod model, fossil fish, Qing dynasty shoes for Cantonese ladies' bound feet, an 18th-century solar microscope and slides, and a pipe tomahawk of iron, silver, and wood.

What Lasser and the others have produced isn't a simple, celebratory re-creation of a historical place, however. The exhibition, subtitled *Art and Science in Harvard's Teaching Cabinet*, isn't even confined to a single room, as its namesake was. In fact, it spans several galleries, the better to see individual objects, to think about how they relate to each other, and to understand what the actual Philosophy Chamber was all about. As a result, this show traces the rise and fall of a single, special space and also follows the fate of the broad, scholarly endeavor known as "natural philosophy." The multidisciplinary field, from which the room got its name, developed around the study of the natural world and the physical universe before the invention of modern science.

Natural philosophers also studied the human family, and their biases are examined here. "It's almost the best and the worst of Harvard, and the best and worst of eighteenth-century enlightenment," Lasser said of this reconsideration of American intellectual life during the crucial period just before and immediately after independence. One object that embodies the dichotomy is Harvard professor Stephen Sewall's 1768 mural

drawing of the inscriptions on Dighton Rock, a giant (11' x 5') boulder formerly located in the Taunton River in Berkley, Massachusetts, and now in a local museum. Professor Sewall's inked, life-size copy of the markings on the boulder was on view in the Philosophy Chamber for decades. Today scholars attribute the marks to the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the eastern woodlands, and more specifically to the Wampanoag, who lived in the boulder's vicinity. But Europeans refused to entertain the possibility of Native American authorship, leading them to theories that strike us as bizarre today. British and French authors, for instance, used Sewall's drawing to argue that they were Egyptian hieroglyphics and Phoenician characters.

The Philosophy Chamber was situated on the second floor of Harvard Hall, a Georgian building still standing at the center of the campus. Its collection was not cohesive. It

never had a curator and its growth was haphazard, mostly the result of the randomness of gifts. That's because the Philosophy Chamber literally rose from ashes. In 1764, a fire destroyed the original Harvard Hall, the college's oldest structure, made of wood. Also lost in that fire, besides books and manuscripts, were its collections of scientific instruments, specimens of minerals, plants, and animals, and what the *Massachusetts-Gazette* described at the time as "a variety of curiosities natural and artificial, both of American and foreign produce."

When the new brick Harvard Hall was completed in 1766 and the Philosophy Chamber was designated, friends, alumni, and supporters of the university from across New England began to replace what had been lost. Gifts came from around the globe, too. Foreign entities considered it a privilege to contribute something to the collection. In addition, recent graduates and other travelers on the Grand Tour brought back art, artifacts, and souvenirs, including treasures excavated from the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the ancient Roman cities destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Vesuvius Erupting at Night, a 1767 painting by Pierre-Jacques Volaire (French 1729-1799), is on display in the gallery that has been designed to most closely represent the actual Philosophy Chamber. A benefactor donated a similar painting to the room in 1772. A detail of the Volaire painting was selected as the cover art for the show's substantial catalog. It's the perfect choice. Fire, smoke, explosions, ashes, gases, the violent beauty of our physical world-all these elements resonate with the themes of this captivating exhibit.



*The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard's Teaching Cabinet, 1766-1820*, edited by Ethan W. Lasser, with contributions by 15 others, hardbound, 312 pages, \$55. Published by Harvard Art Museums, distributed by Yale University Press. To place an order, call (617) 495-7066 or go to (http://yalebooks.yale.edu).



A Westerly View of the Colledges [sic] in Cambridge New England by Paul Revere (1735-1818), after Joseph Chadwick (c. 1721-1783). The 11¼" x 17½" engraving, lent by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, shows the second Harvard Hall. Completed in 1766, two years after the first one burned down, it is the building with the cupola. The Philosophy Chamber was on its second floor. Photo credit: Kathy Tarantola.



On display at Harvard through December 31, 2017, The

Cabinet for displaying small collectibles, attributed to Isaac Vose (1767-1823) and Isaac Vose Jr. (1794-1872), mahogany, mahogany veneer, yellow poplar, and eastern white pine, 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>". In 1811 a similar cabinet, for coins, was donated to the Philosophy Chamber. The one pictured, on loan from a private collection, dates from 1819 to 1823.

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*Philosophy Chamber* will travel to the Hunterian at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, where it will be on view from March 23 through June 24, 2018. For more information, see the website (www.harvardartmuseums.org).

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## - FEATURE -



Ethan Lasser with two of the room's three commissioned oil on canvas portraits by John Singleton Copley (1738-1815): on the left, Thomas Hancock, who left a portion of his fortune to the college; on the right, Thomas Hollis III, a prosperous London merchant and the college's most generous early patron. The Hancock likeness, dated 1764-66, is 95<sup>1</sup>/16" x 59<sup>7</sup>/16". The portrait of Hollis, 1765-66, is 93<sup>3</sup>/4" x 58". The wallpaper is similar to that of the original wall covering donated by John Hancock, Thomas's nephew. Schinto photo.



Cylinder electrical machine by Benjamin Martin (1704-1782), mahogany, cloth, brass, rope cord, and glass, 70%" x 72<sup>13</sup>/16" x 32%". Martin of London made it circa 1766; it was repaired by an American, John Prince, in 1789. Designed to spark an electrical charge, this machine and another one like it were central to some of the liveliest experiments undertaken in the Philosophy Chamber. Harvard's collection of historical scientific instruments. Schinto photo.



This tiny so-called Cartesian diver was manufactured of colored blown glass, circa 1765, by Britain's Benjamin Martin (1704-1782). Measuring just 1" x <sup>7</sup>/16" x <sup>3</sup>/16", it was used for experiments. When placed inside a glass tube of water, the figure would rise and fall in response to changes in hydrostatic pressure. Harvard's collection of historical scientific

This is Joseph Pope's grand orrery, a clockwork model of the solar system, which the curator called "the highest order of technology of the period." Pope (1748-1826) spent 12 years constructing it, which included the duration of the entire War of American Independence, completing it in 1786. Turning the orrery's hand crank got the planets moving in their orbits and their satellites around them. Each planetary system also revolved around our central sun at relative speed. At the time, only six planets-Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturnwere known. Pope's was just the third orrery made in America. The other two were by David Rittenhouse (1732-1796), the astronomer, inventor, clockmaker, mathematician, surveyor, and scientific instruments maker who constructed one for the College of Philadelphia in 1770 and the other for the College of New Jersev in 1771. Always fussy, Pope's orrery needed repairs after two years. Many were called in to work on it after Pope gave up. According to lore, Simon Willard got it working for a while, but eventually it ceased to be a scientific instrument, becoming more of a sculpture to admire. The case alone was worthy of it. Perhaps carved by Simeon Skillin (1756-1806), it is made of mahogany, brass, bronze,



reverse-painted glass, and ivory. The statuettes that adorn it are likenesses of Benjamin Franklin and James Bowdoin II, the governor of Massachusetts from 1785 to 1787. A bust of Isaac Newton is part of the repeating pattern. Though it is not certain who carved and cast these figures, scholars have long attributed them to Skillin and to Paul Revere. Its glass dome may be a 19th-century addition. The orrery is now in Harvard's collection of historical scientific instruments. Schinto photo.

*Mahiole* (crested feathered helmet), native Hawaiian, 18th century, 17<sup>5</sup>/16" x 21<sup>1</sup>/4" x 6<sup>1</sup>/2". As the catalog states, garments such as the *mahiole* and the '*ahu'ula* (feathered cape) were sacred and symbolic objects, providing the wearer with divine protection. As a result, island chieftains often wore *mahiole* and '*ahu'ula* in battle and on ceremonial occasions. They also presented pieces of featherwork to visiting sailors, who in turn donated several to the Philosophy Chamber. Formerly in the Peale Museum, Philadelphia, this example is now part of the collections of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

An unknown native Hawaiian artist made this 18th-century 'ahu'ula (feathered cape). It measures 32<sup>5</sup>/16" x 42<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" and consists of hundreds of thousands of 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) and 'o 'o (Moho nobilis) feathers and olonā (Touchardia latifolia) and 'ie'ie (Freycinetia arborea) fibers, as well as silk and cotton thread. According to the catalog, it likely belonged to Hawaiian ruler Kamehameha I. The family of Captain Henry Dorr of Boston says Kamehameha I presented the cape to their progenitor in the early 19th century. Harvard received a feathered cape in 1792, but its location is now unknown. As the catalog notes: "In the aftermath of the Philosophy Chamber's dispersal, the college carefully tracked the whereabouts of its scientific instruments and works of art; its non-Western holdings, on the other hand, were largely ignored. An 1827 memo called for 'the Indian dresses, bows &c be deposited or given to museum of the Boston Athenaeum,' but there is no record this transfer ever took place." As Ethan Lasser observed, during the dispersal of the collection, there were "different attitudes toward different things," and these subjective judgments affected the objects' fates. Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.



Stephen Sewall's 1768 drawing of the inscriptions on Dighton Rock in ink on paper is a 36%" x 121" copy of Native American writing, at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.





instruments.



A late 18th-century lantern slide of the moon, British, painted glass and wood, 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>1</sub>6" x <sup>3</sup>/<sub>1</sub>6". Harvard's collection of historical scientific instruments. 18-D Maine Antique Digest, July 2017 Bust of William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham, by Joseph Wilton (1722-1803), 1766-69. The 26¾" x 16½" x 7½" composite ceramic sculpture was given to the Philosophy Chamber by Benjamin Franklin in 1769. It is now in the Harvard University portrait collection. Long-eared owl, taxidermy by Charles Willson Peale, 13<sup>3</sup>⁄4" x 5<sup>1</sup>⁄2" x 4<sup>3</sup>⁄4". Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ornithology Department. Photo credit: Jeremiah Trimble.

