The Object of History: Colonial Treasures from the Massachusetts

June 4th, 2012

Historical Society by Jeanne Schinto

by Jeanne Schinto

Concord, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Massachusetts

Historical Society This exhibit is small, just 70

objects, arranged in two joined

rooms. Surveying the situation from just inside the threshold, I'll admit I initially felt disappointed. Is that all there is? But as I began to move from one perfectly chosen object to the next, I had to hold onto my hat, so to speak. Quite simply, this show is a thrill. That these items came from

Boston's Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) to the

Concord Museum is a result of

"pillow talk," in the words of Peggy Burke, the museum's executive director. Burke said she and her husband, MHS president Dennis A. Fiori, got to chatting about how a collaboration between their respective institutions might work for their mutual benefit. What they birthed is the opportunity for this suburban venue to play host to a dazzling group of items—fine arts, decorative arts, historical documents, and artifacts owned by Boston's MHS but rarely if ever exhibited. "For those of you who don't know the historical society, it's the oldest in the world, founded

in 1791," Fiori told a group of museum supporters at a preview of the show. "There were no historical societies until we came along." These remarkable statements are very nearly true. MHS is considered to be the oldest historical society in the world devoted to collecting manuscripts, and it was definitely the first historical society in America. At its founding, its intent was to preserve the history of the whole country, not just that of Massachusetts, as its name would imply. That's why it is, for example, the repository for the personal papers of three U.S. presidents—John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, including the largest collection of Jefferson's architectural drawings anywhere. Some words that John Adams wrote to Abigail Adams inspired the show's organizing principle. In 1780, while on a

"Mathematicks and Philosophy," enabling their children to study "Painting, Poetry, Musick and Architecture." The arrangement of the MHS's objects in Concord reflects the same progression. It is the one that our country, when young, necessarily followed too. That means first you're examining pistols, a cutlass, a musket, a powder horn, a sword and scabbard; then maps, watches, a scale, a ruler, a pocket sundial, drafting tools, a surveying

compass; and finally oil

portraits, silver, jewelry, and an

elegantly cased Simon Willard

diplomatic mission to France,

he sent her letters from Paris,

musing in one of them that he

must study "Politicks and War"

so that his sons might study

tall clock. The two people responsible for curating the show are Concord's curator, David F. Wood, and MHS's librarian, Peter Drummey. Each is that rare scholar with the knack for communicating to the masses without dumbing anything down. Besides its literal meaning, the show's title "The Object of History" plays on the idea of the "purpose" of history, leading to questions: Why do we study the past, and why do we

everybody knows the answers from birth. exhibition is part of our reaching out." Those statements would imply a basic something-for-everyone show: guns for the guys, textiles for the ladies. But this exhibit somehow manages to avoid patronizing anybody. For example, perhaps because of my gender, I don't usually go in for

of 1812. So Revere had his hand in that war too. Who knew? The textile examples in this exhibit are among its signature objects, used

foundry and flatting mill in Canton, Massachusetts, where metal was

initials and those of his son Joseph Warren Revere as well as a partial

of the U.S.S. Constitution, launched in 1797. Nicknamed "Old

poured into molds or rolled into sheets. Cased in brass, it bears Revere's

impress of the "Revere" mark he used on silver. There is also an invoice

from Revere for several tons of metal fittings made for the construction

Ironsides," the frigate was involved in a series of engagements in the War

Independence was read publicly for the first time in Boston. Here too the news of the end of the war for independence was delivered, having been carried home from France on the ship Astreaafter the 1783 peace talks in Paris. The painting, which I'd seen reproduced but had never examined in its original glory, isn't merely an architectural piece. It's a cityscape full of vignettes that pique the historical imagination—two men with a wheelbarrow, one, an African-American pushing it from behind, the other, white, pulling it from the front; two well-to-do women in

feathered hats with parasols promenading down the sidewalk; a man in a

long coat, breeches, and white stockings selecting produce from the

published in Boston in 1698. One of the earliest books printed in North America, this edition was the first to include music to accompany the texts and the first instance of music printed in the British colonies of North America. It's too early a date for placement in the category of "Painting, Poetry, Musick and Architecture," meant for the grandsons of the Adamses. So it's nice to know there were some inklings of the fine arts for their forebears. Not everything in the show is American-made. One of the pocket watches is a circa 1720 example made by Joseph Williamson (d. 1725) of

London. A "repeater," meaning that it strikes the hour on a bell inside

the case whenever its wearer presses a button, it belonged to Robert Treat

Paine (1731-1814), a signer of the Declaration of Independence. A label

states that it was in his pocket when he put his pen to the document. It

also adds the homier detail that his grandson and namesake (1803-1885)

recalled his grandfather showing him the watch and causing it to strike. Someone at the preview wore a name tag that read "Tom Paine." I didn't get a chance to ask him if he descends from the same family. The exhibit isn't up long, only until June 17. You must hurry if you want to see it. The lighting in the rooms isn't great. This is an anti-slick production, but it works. It reminded me of a woman who doesn't wear makeup or use hair dye, yet is beautiful by every definition of the term. She has the confidence to forgo cosmetics, because she knows she has the

the chair is thought to have been Byles's grandfather, the Puritan minister Increase Mather (1639-1723). Schinto

his little of one from Graynes, the formal and my friends he at it the hear what a Lope in oh has I reguliting but he brought from muster dans, grant of a the het have and I woulful to find I were had not seed my little from horsel and formula - it may to day that I must not to early, In has little from his forming that I have by a Portugal the 29 6 9.6 Had be had jud in a little from him belief the sel Jun 12 - from this I weetenly you had mine I have this day a Letter from the May lang of he had altered of the Which in the attenue a ghat will the Things was don't and other ... And often all I from the will got a wormy Olas 30 16 mg openting land get . Oney with me by every Tofall to Holland and Spain I find they are the helogante you want imagine have fet was plead with the William of his Brief & I have view him a healthed nais, which show him would the practe hand the an Muse . It has day the dut wit me I will t

Web site (www.concordmuseum.org).

This is the first map known to have been published in the

This late 17th-century great chair, made

of maple and ash, is probably a Boston

product. It was owned by Mather Byles

Loyalist who refused to leave Boston in

1776 after the evacuation of Boston. He

was dismissed from his church and put

under house arrest. A previous owner of

The 1780 letter written by

John Adams to Abigail Adams

from Paris that inspired the

organization of the exhibit.

(1706-1788), a Boston minister and

England" was originally published in William

Foster, "A Map of New-

English colonies of North

America, and probably the first

map published in the Western

Hemisphere. Attributed to John



2012 Maine Antique Digest

This ad space now available.

Call 1-877-237-6623 for details.

comments powered by Disqus

This 1655-75 Wampanoag bowl, made of elm burl, was bought for the MHS in 1804.

The exhibition label states it was attributed to the Pakanoket of southeastern Massachusetts, and "has a tradition of ownership by

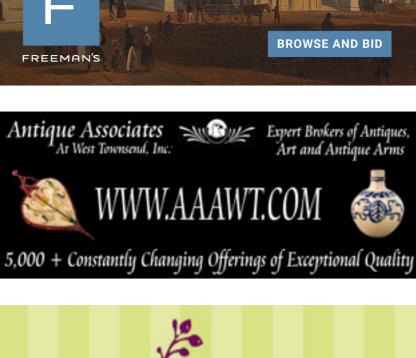
Metacomet," i.e., King Philip, as he was known by the English.

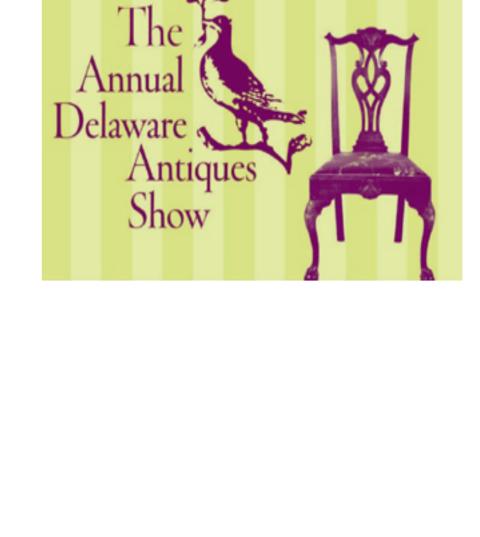
Ruby Lane .com

American Furni<u>ture, Folk</u>

Join









Schinto photo.



painter. Quincy's great-grandson

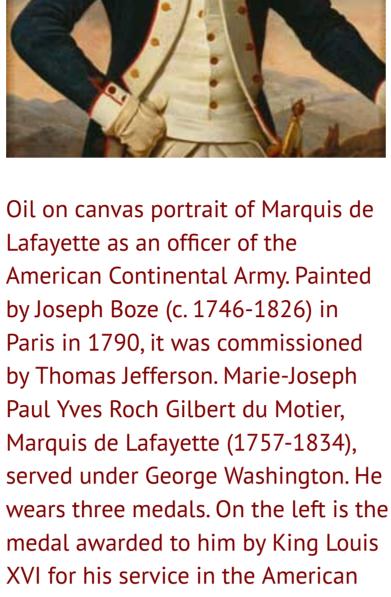
Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote a poem

about her, "Dorothy Q: A Family Portrait," which in part tells the story of how the painting was deliberately damaged by a British soldier's sword: "On her hand a parrot green/ Sits unmoving and broods serene./ Hold up the canvas full in view,-/ Look! there's a rent the light shines through,/ Dark with a century's fringe of dust,-/ That was a Red-Coat's rapier-thrust!"

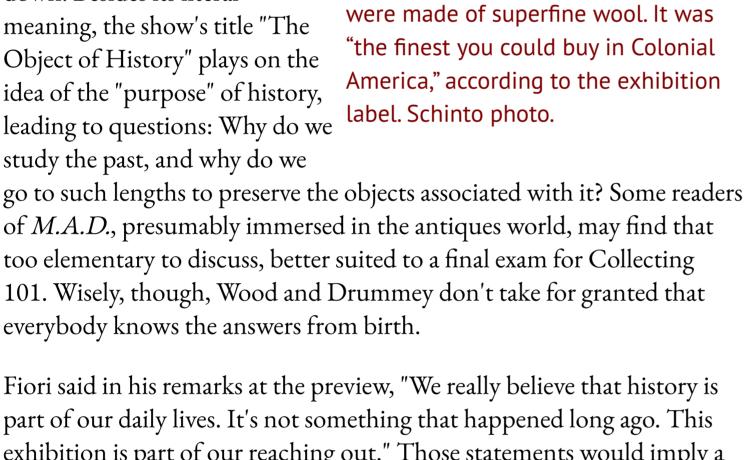


State Street, oil on canvas, by James B.

Marston (1775-1817).



war; in the center is the medal he received as one of the Vainqueurs de la Bastille; on the right is the medal of the Society of the Cincinnati, formed by Washington's officers. These 18th-century scarlet cloaks



firearms, but one of the pistols in this exhibit belonged to Paul Revere; another was presented to John Paul Jones. (It follows that MHS, being a world-class historical society, is a world-class name-dropper too.) The associations reeled me right in. There is, in fact, an embarrassment of Revere riches here. They include a lodestone (natural magnet) that he probably used in connection with his

prominently in the promotional materials because they have such eye appeal. But they aren't dresses. They are—ingenious choice—two men's cloaks, made of superfine wool in scarlet. The dye used to make the color, a museum label tells us, came from the dried bodies of an insect that lives on oak trees growing near the Mediterranean. It's a brilliant color, reminiscent of a gash or a geranium. One of the cloaks, another label tells us, was made circa 1765 and belonged to Peter Oliver (1713-1791), a Loyalist. A chief justice of the

Massachusetts Supreme Court, he was one of the judges for the trial of

the soldiers accused of murder following the Boston Massacre of 1770.

Bromfield (1727-1820), who grew famous as he aged, described by those

who knew him as "the ancientest man in Boston" and as the last man in

Boston to wear "small clothes," i.e., breeches that went only to the knee.

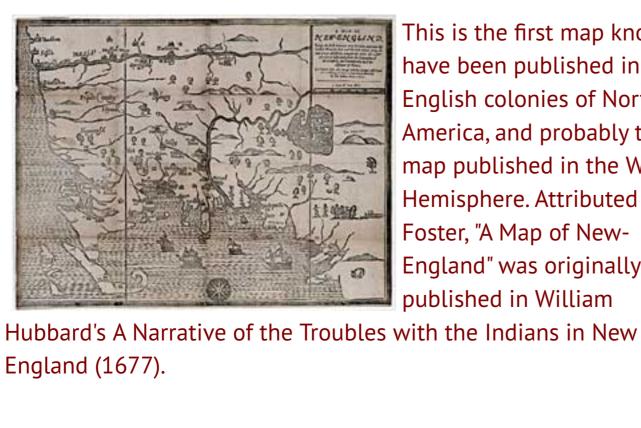
The second cloak, circa 1790, belonged to ordinary citizen Henry

Both Oliver and Bromfield must have crossed many times the square depicted in one of the oil paintings, State Street (formerly called Old State House), painted in 1801 by James B. Marston. The Boston Massacre took place in this square. In the same spot the Declaration of

woven baskets of a peddler woman. Among other treasures here is a ninth edition of the Bay Psalm Book,

goods. For more information, contact the museum at (978) 369-9763 or see the

photo.



Paul Revere's pistol, probably London, 1740-60. Schinto photo.

Originally published in the June 2012 issue of Maine Antique Digest. ©

Advertising | Subscriptions | Billing | Editor

1 (800) 752-8521 • PO Box 1429