

More six cup
I could have chosen indeed
and placed the cups on the sides

Sound and vision:

Poetry and American art

By Alyce Perry Englund





Since its inception in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum has been a gathering place for the literary and visual arts. From the beginning, the institution not only harbored a progressive art exhibition program but also encouraged the growth of the city's literary scene, establishing the repositories that eventually became the Hartford Public Library and the Watkinson Library at Trinity College. Following in this tradition, the Wadsworth has organized *Sound and Sense: Poetic Musings in American Art*, an exhibition (on view through April 17) that pairs selected American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts dating from 1700 to 1960 with poetry. Here we examine several such pairs by authors who had direct relationships with the artists or expressed widespread sentiments of their era. Like poetry, the visual and decorative arts open windows into personal narratives as well as reflect broader cultural currents.

Many readers will recognize the energetic meter bubbling with patriotism in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's lines:

*So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm, ...
And a word that shall echo for evermore!*¹

Longfellow's epic chronicled the valiant ride of Boston silversmith Paul Revere on April 18, 1775, alerting the locals to the invasion of British troops. The silver tankard by Revere paired with the poem reminds viewers of the political ferment in American taverns in the early Revolutionary era (Fig. 1). As a tavern keeper, Longfellow's narrator would not only have served beer and ale in such tankards but he would also have been the source of news in colonial American communities.



Fig. 1. Tankard by Paul Revere II (1734–1818), c. 1760–1774. Silver; height 9 ¼ inches. The objects illustrated are in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut. Gift of Harold C. Lovell Jr. and Lulu K. Lovell.

Fig. 2. Sperm whale tooth with whaling scene, American, c. 1840. Length 6 ¾ inches. Gift of Mrs. Charles A. Goodwin.

Fig. 3. Sperm whale tooth with whaling scene, American, c. 1840. Length 8 ¼ inches. Gift of Mrs. Robert W. Anthony.

Reading Longfellow's verse aloud, you are meant to hear the hoof beats of Revere's horse in the anapestic (three-syllable) and iambic (two-syllable) meter in such lines as:

*The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed,
in his flight,
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.*

One might also make comparisons between the rhythms of the verse and the tapping of the silversmith's hammer as he raised sheets of silver to form tankards, teapots, or other hollowware.

Longfellow was only one of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American poets who adopted the classical epic form, replacing the Greek and Roman heroes with Revolutionary figures and maritime adventurers. The danger and valor imagined in these works served as historical record, propaganda, or travelogue, but always allowed the reader to experience exotic and sometimes perilous milieus as if a direct observer.

Longfellow's poem first appeared in the December 18, 1860, issue of the *Boston Transcript*, and then in the *Atlantic Monthly* of January 1861—on the eve of the Civil War, when stories of colonial fortitude were used to promote unity. Indeed, had it not been for the popularity of Longfellow's poem, one wonders if the fame of Paul Revere and his silver would have been so widespread during the colonial revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to Revolutionary heroes, Americans also celebrated early seafaring adventurers in poetry and art, especially whaling men. Despite its lucrative returns, hunting whales was a deadly business, and sailors preserved memories of battles between man and beast in folktales, lyric verse, and improvised art, such as the carved whale's teeth in Figures 2 and 3. In chapter nine of *Moby Dick, or, The Whale* (1851) Herman Melville speaks in haunted verse through the character of Father Mapple, a former whaler, and likens

Mapple's voice to the grim tone of bells in the fog as he rhymes:

*I saw the opening maw of hell,
With endless pains and sorrows there;
Which none but they that feel can tell...²*

Melville's verse forms a link between the material culture of the maritime community and the extended legacy of his book in the arts of the twentieth century. In 1926 William A. Kittredge, director of design for R. R. Donnelley and Sons-Lakeside Press, invited Rockwell Kent to illustrate reprints of classic American books that would "stand for all time as the finest edition of the particular text which it preserves."³ From a list of American classics suggested by Kittredge, Kent elected *Moby Dick* and produced a print series conjuring the violence of the whale hunts (see Fig. 4). His modern imagining of man's fight against the sea and its creatures recalls the epics of Virgil and Homer.

In the nineteenth century American writers and artists began to challenge the principles of patriotic unity by considering gender expectations, high mortality rates, ethnic migrations, racial tensions, industrial expansion, and environmental decay. The artistic and literary movements that emerged between 1825 and 1890—notably the romantics and transcendentalists—were, among other things, vehicles of social activism and cultural criticism that both fused and polarized communities.

Popularly known as the Sweet Singer of Hartford, Lydia Sigourney was widely popular for her sentimental poetry. She befriended Elizabeth Colt (1826–1905), the wealthy Hartford art patroness and wife of firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt (1814–1862), by whom she was commissioned to commemorate family members in verse. In addition, lines from her poem "The Charter Oak" are inscribed on the base of a cradle made from fragments of Hartford's famed Charter Oak tree for the Colts' first-born son, Samuel Jarvis Colt,⁴



Fig. 4. Chapter CXXXV, *Whaleboat and Crew Tossed into the Sea* from *Series of Illustrations for Moby Dick* by Rockwell Kent (1882–1971), 1929. Pen and brush work in ink over pencil drawing on ivory paper, 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Gift of E. Weybe © 1930 R. R. Donnelly and Sons, Inc. and the Plattsburgh State College Foundation, Inc.

Figs. 5, 5a. Colt family cradle designed by Isaac W. Stuart (1809–1861) and made by John H. Most (active 1855–1876), 1857. White oak, fabric, and rhinestones; height 40, width 56 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Stanzas from "The Charter Oak" by Lydia Howard Sigourney (1791–1865) are inscribed on the underside of the burl attached to the base. *Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt Collection.*

Fig. 6. *Toward the Setting Sun* by Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), 1862. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 14 inches. Gift of Mr. J. Harold Williams in memory of Edith Russell Woolley.

with the hope that he would grow strong like the ancestral tree:

*That brave old Oak
Stood forth, a friend indeed,
And spread its Ægis o'er our sires
In their extremest need,
And in its sacred breast,
Their germ of Freedom bore,
And hid their life-blood in its veins
Until the blast was o'er.*

The celebratory occasion of Sigourney's poem would soon be darkened by the infant's death only ten months later.

Sigourney also expressed nineteenth-century views on America's rapidly changing culture in her poems. "Indian Names" mourns the disappearance of indigenous peoples as a result of racial expulsion, industrialization, and growing European American communities:

*Ye call these red-browed brethren
The insects of an hour,
Crushed like the noteless worm amid
The regions of their power;
Ye drive them from their father's lands,
Ye break of faith the seal...⁵*

Albert Bierstadt echoes the poem's sentiments in his *Toward the Setting Sun*, in which Native Americans face the eclipsing light of sundown (Fig. 6). Together, these works illuminate their creators' efforts to draw attention to the societal and environmental wrongs being done to Native American culture.

Like Sigourney, transcendentalist poets—among them Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, and the sui generis Walt Whitman—marked the country's cultural ascension and decline. The snowy landscapes and radiant hearthside painted on the folding screen in Figure 8 are drawn from Whittier's popular poem *Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl* (1866). Within the poetic narrative Whittier reminisces about his New England farming family's fortitude amid a bitter winter storm—digging paths through deep snow to feed their livestock and telling folktales by

the hearthside. In it, too, he memorializes deceased family members, his personal grief shadowing a larger mourning for the country, as rapid industrialization and the Civil War cut deeply into American culture.

The rhythms of art and poetry come together in Thomas Dewing's *The Days* (Fig. 7), where Emerson's poem "Days" is attached to the frame. The five cloaked women represent Emerson's allegorical figures, "The Daughters of Time":

*To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdoms, stars, or sky that holds
them all.⁶*

With Emerson's verse embedded in the frame, Dewing directed his viewers to consider imagery and locution while reading his visual narrative. He had clearly gathered creative nourishment from his awareness of contemporary literature.

Not all artists made reference to the poetry of their time. But considering poetry together with works of art in the Wadsworth Atheneum's collections helps us to see how artistic concerns across disciplines reveal a national culture.

¹ A full transcription of the poem can be found in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Poems and Other Writings* (Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 2000), pp. 362-365. ² A full transcription of the poem can be found in the modern reprint of Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or, The Whale* (Library of America, New York, 2010), p. 67. ³ *Alphabetical Files: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1926-1945, 1953-1954, 1954*, Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, available at aaa.si.edu. ⁴ For generations the historic oak stood as a symbol of American independence until it fell in a violent storm in 1856. Connecticut residents felt deeply connected to the Charter Oak and eulogized it in memoirs, poems, and artwork, sometimes incorporating relics of it into their compositions. Sigourney's poem can be found in William Henry Dodd and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, *The Charter Oak: Its History—Its Fall, August 21, 1856* (Hartford, 1856), p. 35. ⁵ A full transcription of the poem can be found in *She Wields a Pen: American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Janet Gray (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1997), pp. 15-17. ⁶ A full transcription of the poem can be found in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Brooks Atkinson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Modern Library, New York, 2000), p. 735.

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Fig. 7. *The Days* by Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851–1938), 1884–1886. Oil on canvas, 43 1/4 by 72 inches. Attached to the bottom center of the frame, designed by Stanford White for the painting, is Emerson's poem "Days." Gift of the estates of Louise Cheney and Anne W. Cheney.



Fig. 8. Folding screen, American, possibly Providence, Rhode Island, 1881–1882. Painted maple; height 57 1/4, width (of each panel) 18 3/8 inches. The screen is painted with verses from John Greenleaf Whittier's *Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl* and vignettes that narrate his family history. Gift of Anna C. Faxon Butler, by exchange.