The Art and Science of the Philosophy Chamber at Harvard

by Jeannie Schinto
Photos courtesy President and Fellows of Harvard College

Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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The Philosophy Chamber was at the center of Harvard’s and of New England’s intellectual life for more than half a century. Founded in 1764 by John Sewall, the chamber served as the backdrop for three life-size portraits of military leaders. The chamber was 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 reading science books, and other intellectual pursuits among innovative thinkers of the day. Benjamin Franklin advised on the purchase of one of the room’s most celebrated items, the unusually large, cylindrical electrical machine (used for making static electricity for experiments). John Winthrop, a Harvard professor and 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 contains the names 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 meanings of knowledge-seeking had moved on, and so had Harvard.

Then about five years ago, Lasser, who is head of the Harvard’s division of European and American art and its Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. Curator of American Art, began thinking about putting the pieces together. “After all, 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 send other curiosities 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 Herculanum, 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 resemble 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 theme of this captivating exhibit.

On display at Harvard through December 31, 2017, The Philosophy Chamber was at the center of Harvard’s and of New England’s intellectual life for more than half a century.
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 93/16” x 59/16”. The portrait of Hollis, 1766-68, is 93/16” x 58”. The wallpaper is similar to that of the original wall covering donated by John Hancock, Thomas’s nephew. Schinto photo.

This tiny so-called Cartesian diver was manufactured of colored blown glass, circa 1765, by Britain’s Benjamin Martin (1704-1782). Martin of London made it circa 1766; it was repaired by an American, John Prince, in 1789. Designed to spark an electrical charge, this cylinder mechanical machine by Benjamin Martin (1704-1782), mahogany, cloth, brass, rope cord, and glass, 79/16” x 72/16” x 32 1/2”. 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.

A late 18th-century lantern slide of the moon, British, painted glass and wood, 3/32” x 10/16” x 9/16”. Harvard’s collection of historical scientific instruments.

Mahiole (crested feathered helmet), native Hawaiian, 18th century, 175/16” x 21¼” x 6½”. As the catalog notes, 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 memoir 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.

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 (1748-1824) 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. Every planetary system also revolved around our central sun at relative speed. At the time, only six planets—Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—were known. Pope’s was just the third orrery made in America. The other two were by David Rittenhouse in 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 Jersey 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.

An unknown native Hawaiian artist made this 18th-century ‘ahu’ula (feathered cape). It measures 32 1/2” x 42 1/4” and consists of hundreds of thousands of ‘Vestiaria coccinea’ and ‘Vestiaria noctiflora’ feathers and Olsonia (Touchardia latifolia) and ‘ie’ie (Frezcinetia arbores) 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 memoir 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.

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Stephen Sewall’s 1768 drawing of the inscriptions on Dighton Rock in ink on paper is a 36 1/2” x 12 1/2” copy of Native American writing, at Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

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Bust of William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham, by Joseph Wilton (1722-1803), 1766-69. The 26 1/2” x 16” x 7 1/2” composite ceramic sculpture was given to the Philosophy Chamber by Benjamin Franklin in 1768. It is now in the Harvard University portrait collection.

Long-eared owl, taxidermy by Charles Willson Peale, 13 1/2” x 5 3/4” x 4 3/4”. Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ornithology Department. Photo credit: Jeremiah Trimble.

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