



ELIZABETH AND IRWIN WARREN FOLK ART SYMPOSIUM

Points of Interest: New Approaches to American Weathervanes

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2021, 1:00-5:00 p.m. ET

Online; free with registration

ABSTRACTS

George Washington's Dove of Peace: An Iconic Vane from a Moment of Change

Susan P. Schoelwer, Ph.D., Executive Director, Historic Preservation and Collections and Robert H. Smith Senior Curator, George Washington's Mount Vernon

Unlike most American weathervanes, George Washington's Dove of Peace can be traced to a precise moment in time. It was created in Philadelphia during the hot summer of 1787, as its owner presided over the fractious Convention engaged in drafting a new constitution for the United States of America. What was he thinking as he ordered this "finishing part" to his house, giving specific directions for a bird with spread wings "with an olive branch in its mouth," the beak to be painted black and the branch, green, and the spire "not to appear above the bird"? What was Mount Vernon like in this moment of national crisis and uncertainty? What role did this iconic vane play in the landscape of the plantation and the lives of its inhabitants, free and enslaved?

The Ecological Spectacle of Madison Square Garden's *Diana*

Katherine Fein, Ph.D. Candidate in Art History, Columbia University

Just after 5:00 p.m. on November 1, 1891, thousands of electric lights switched on for the first time to illuminate *Diana*, an eighteen-foot-tall sculptural weathervane poised atop New York City's Madison Square Garden. The gilded, naked goddess balanced on one foot and pointed a bow and arrow into the wind, three hundred feet above street level. Existing scholarship about this well-known artwork focuses on the achievement of its creator, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, situating *Diana* in the context of Beaux Arts sculpture. In contrast, by placing it in dialogue with other weathervanes, this talk

demonstrates how *Diana* drew upon longstanding Euro-American iconographies of Indigeneity and classicism to stage a spectacular confrontation between a human body and the nonhuman natural world. Looking anew at *Diana* through this lens reveals it to be rife with contradiction: *Diana* was at once the product of academic art training and a contribution to the American folk art tradition, it perpetuated the fraught conflation of modern Indigenous people and ancient mythological figures, it both invited and threatened voyeuristic viewers, and it seemed simultaneously in control of and subject to the forces of the sky. Marshaling the evidence of historical photographs, newspapers, and correspondence as well as recent technical analysis, this talk uncovers a narrative of ecological spectacle—of confrontation and contradiction—rather than artistic triumph.

Weathered Wood: The Materiality of Early American Weathervanes

Laura Turner Igoe, Ph.D., Chief Curator, James A. Michener Art Museum

Primarily made of copper and sheet metal in the nineteenth century, many early American weathervanes were carved from wood. Few of these wooden vanes survive today, due to deterioration from continued exposure to natural elements, but those that do, tell a material story of wind, rain, fire, decay, and the necessary human maintenance and repair that have attempted to preserve them over time. These sculptures were profoundly shaped by the weather that they were meant to signal or predict. One of the oldest, surviving wooden weathervanes, the Portland Rooster (1788), stood as a city landmark for nearly 200 years, gracing the top of courthouses, a soap factory, and the First National Bank in Portland, Maine. Through a close examination of this historic vane, this paper considers the environmental and material contexts of aerial, wooden sculptures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Winds of Change in the 1930s: Weathervanes, the Index of American Design, and Questioning Artistic Canon Formation

Elizabeth McGoey, Ph.D., Ann S. and Samuel M. Mencoff Associate Curator, Arts of the Americas, The Art Institute of Chicago

In the 1930s, as the United States struggled through the Great Depression, economic instability inspired calls for national unity that found expression in the art world. Artists, curators, collectors, and government administrators attempted to define a distinctly American visual identity. They located in the fields of American vernacular arts—which they called folk art—a national culture they considered egalitarian, unpretentious, and self-made. At the center of this new canon formation were weathervanes, lauded in a landmark 1931 exhibition as having in common “a feeling of freedom” and “vitality”—ideas that continue to shape their interpretation today.

The notion that weathervanes were quintessential artistic expressions of the American spirit was reinforced through their inclusion in the landmark Index of American Design, a government art project active from 1935 until 1942. The Index sought to define the collective spirit of the United States through the handcrafts of its past, employing hundreds of artists to illustrate American decorative arts and crafts, particularly those having “special character which distinctly marks them as of American origin.” These attempts to define the United States broadly through its visual and material culture, however, marginalized many makers. The Index also

notably excluded works made by Native Americans, even as stereotypical representations made it into the Index in the form of weathervanes.

Winds of Change in the 1930s will investigate weathervanes at this critical moment in history, and explore the lasting impact of these period developments on their interpretation, value, and contemporary position in American culture.

Isamu Noguchi's Weathervanes: An Artist Animates the Wind

Olivia Armandroff, Ph.D. student in Art History, University of Southern California

Weathervanes are commonly associated with American tradition, but studies on artists including Elie Nadelman and tastemakers such as Edith Halpert demonstrate that American modernism did not mean an abandonment of the past. These two figures, and their circle, collected and dealt folk art, including weathervanes. The sculptor Isamu Noguchi was a part of their network, and also took inspiration from the weathervane when he began to experiment with the form in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During this time, Noguchi worked in tandem on other projects that explored American heritage, including monuments to the plow and Benjamin Franklin. For Noguchi, the weathervane was also a means of addressing nature, something he did throughout his work, and in his garden design, in particular. His experiences living throughout the world, including in Asia, directly informed his weathervane designs, which were inspired in part by the flocks of pigeons he encountered in Peking, now Beijing, China. These weathervanes had what Noguchi referred to as a musical component: their surface was perforated with louvers which would make a rushing noise as the wind moved through them that was meant to resemble the sound of these birds. Weathervanes were also Noguchi's first foray into his later investment in light sculptures, known as *Akari*. These weathervanes contained electrical components, including a space for an Edison bulb, so that they would glow at night like the moon. By incorporating sound and light in his modernist weathervane designs, Noguchi sought to animate nature and the wind like other vane makers had done throughout American history.

Weathervanes and Double Consciousness: History, Provenance, & the Folk Art Canon

William D. Moore, Ph.D., Director, American & New England Studies Program and Associate Professor of American Material Culture, History of Art & Architecture, Boston University

This twenty-minute illustrated talk will argue that understanding weathervanes requires recognizing that the genre has multiple periods of significance. Standard scholarship on the form has documented the makers and commissioners of these meteorological devices. Double consciousness allows us to appreciate the artistry of the works within their original contexts while simultaneously analyzing our own aesthetic responses and recognizing the changing interpretations that previous generations have attributed to them. By placing the activities of twentieth-century artists, designers, collectors, dealers, and institutions within their shifting historical and cultural contexts, we can appreciate how American weathervanes have served to communicate ideas about filial piety, modern design, nationalist identity, and Cold War American exceptionalism.

Image: CHURCH BANNER WEATHERVANE; artist unidentified; Orono, Maine; c. 1840; sheet iron, lead, copper, and blown glass with remnants of an early gilded surface; 61 x 74 1/4 in.; private collection. Photograph by Ellen McDermott, courtesy Olde Hope Antiques, Inc.