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NEWS THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

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Press Preview: Tuesday, December 6 at 10 am

Picturing the Banjo
at the Corcoran Gallery of Art
December 10, 2005 through March 5, 2006

Washington, D.C. — The banjo is one of the most frequently encountered icons in American art. Historians and curators have amply documented the evolution of the instrument itself, yet its recurring imagery in paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture and decorative arts, has escaped prolonged scholarly engagement. *Picturing the Banjo* will be the first exhibition to underscore the banjo's symbolism in American art from the eighteenth century through the present day. Organized by the Palmer Museum of Art at The Pennsylvania State University, *Picturing the Banjo* will debut at the Corcoran where it will be on view from December 10, 2005 through March 5, 2006.

“For more than two centuries, the banjo has played an integral role in American history and culture and has inspired an eclectic array of artists,” said Sarah Cash, the Corcoran’s Bechhoefer Curator of American Art. “A highlight of the Corcoran’s own collection is Richard Norris Brooke’s best-known work, *A Pastoral Visit*, which exemplifies the frequent presence of the banjo in visual representations of the African American community. The banjo bridges the aural and visual histories of America from its use by African Americans on antebellum plantations to its enjoyment by Anglo-Americans in their Gilded Age parlors.”



Richard Norris Brooke (American, 1847–1920), *A Pastoral Visit*, 1881, oil on canvas, 47-3/4 x 65-3/4 in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund

From the stringed gourd instrument brought to this country by West African slaves in the eighteenth century, to its presence in the nineteenth-century minstrel show and the Gilded Age parlor, to its depiction in twentieth-century African American self-portraiture, the evolution of the banjo illuminates several national sagas and histories, including racial typing, minstrelsy and the rise and fall of vaudeville and other popular entertainments. Artists have seen the banjo as a Janus-faced cultural monument, capable of denoting such themes as simplicity, ridicule

nostalgia and authenticity.

Picturing the Banjo features 72 works on loan from 41 collections and examines the visual representation of the banjo, probing the icon's aesthetic and cultural usage in American paintings, drawings, photographs and other artifacts. Included are banjo images by such artists as Thomas Hart Benton, Mary Cassatt, Charles Demuth, Thomas Eakins, Eastman Johnson, William H. Johnson, William Sidney Mount, Norman Rockwell and Betye Saar. Also on display are equally important works by some lesser-known practitioners, including Helen Corson, Frances Benjamin Johnston, Clare Rojas, Thomas Hope, D. Morrill and William Henry Snyder. The exhibition also includes a handful of musical instruments, including several "presentation banjos," which were meant to be seen but not played. Other decorative art objects – including a banjo "chair" and accompanying tambourine stool – round out the exhibition.

The exhibition is divided into seven thematic categories. **Early Artistic Prototypes** explores the origin of the banjo's depiction in British and American art and its appearance in works dating from the early eighteenth century, including Hans Sloane's *A Voyage to the islands Madera, Barbados, Neves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* (1707-1725).

Performing Race and Type showcases a wide variety of images in which the banjo appears as a racially and ethnically charged symbol. From antebellum sheet-music covers, to Reconstruction-era Currier & Ives prints, to paintings by Eastman Johnson and Thomas Hovenden, the image of the banjo is used to classify and enforce racial and regional differences.

The works in the section entitled **Self-Performance** challenge the often denigrating typecasting exemplified by the previous grouping. Works by artists as disparate as nineteenth-century genre painter, William Sidney Mount, and twentieth-century illustrator, Miguel Covarrubias, portray the banjo player as a master of the instrument's manual and mental complexities. The subjects of these works evoke the themes of pedagogy, spirituality and intellectual engagement.

The objects grouped in the fourth section, **Ambivalent Banjos**, show how artists incorporated images of the banjo into works designed to neutralize – and romanticize – relations among people of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. The images in this category, such as William Ludlow Sheppard's wood engraving *An Artist Selecting an Instrument* (1874) and Norman Rockwell's painting *The Banjo Player* (1926), enlist the instrument to at once pay homage to and belittle its players.

Parlor Games and Objets d'Art explores the banjo's integral role in the Gilded Age domestic interior and in still-life paintings. Several presentation-grade instruments on display were in fact made for display rather than performance. Alongside paintings, prints and watercolors will be a number of rare historic instruments, including a six-bracket, scalloped-rim Boucher banjo (1845). Some of the other instruments on display feature elaborate carvings of gargoyles and idealized nudes, and fingerboards inlaid with photographs, Masonic devices and bejeweled designs.

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, many artists began to employ banjo iconography in works that posed deliberate challenges to the stereotypical images of the previous 200 years.

Artists represented in **Banjo-Wielding Women and Instruments of Activism** mobilize banjo imagery in an effort to transcend and confront racial barriers. Among the highlights of this section are Mary Cassatt's drypoint *The Banjo Lesson* (c. 1893), Robert Gwathmey's *Non-Fiction* (1943) and Betye Saar's incisive mixed media work *Let Me Entertain You* (1972).

From the Badlands paintings of Thomas Eakins to the hybrid instruments of William T. Wiley, artists have long explored the expressive potential of vernacular banjo symbolism. A final category, **Picturing the Vernacular**, examines the manner in which these and other artists understood the instrument as an emblem of folk authenticity and identity.



William Wegman (American, b. 1943),
Blue Period with Banjo, 1980,
Polaroid ER print, 24 x 20 in.
Collection of Emily Leland Todd.

“Using the banjo as a means to explore American history from the pre-Civil War area to today creates a unique narrative never before assembled in an exhibition,” said Leo G. Mazow, Curator of American Art at the Palmer Museum of Art and Affiliate Professor of Art History at The Pennsylvania State University. “Given the Corcoran’s significant American art collection, as well as the museum’s location near the heart of bluegrass country, it is an ideal location in which to premiere this exhibition.”

Complementing the exhibition, a 200-page book with seven essays and color illustrations has been published by Penn State Press in association with the Palmer Museum of Art. The publication will contain critical essays on the topic, written by Leo Mazow; Sarah Burns, Ruth N. Halls Professor of Fine Arts, Indiana University – Bloomington; John Davis, Alice Pratt Brown Professor and Chair of the Art Department, Smith College; Michael D. Harris, Professor of Art History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Joyce Henri Robinson, curator, Palmer Museum of Art; and Cecelia Tichi, William R. Kenan Professor of English, Vanderbilt University. The catalogue also contains several 350-word sidebars by social historians, musicologists, folklorists, and musicians, as well as a checklist, bibliography and index.

EXHIBITION SPONSORSHIP

Picturing the Banjo is organized by the Palmer Museum of Art of The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, with support from the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art.

The Corcoran’s presentation is supported by the Steve Martin Charitable Foundation, Catherine Dail, an anonymous donor and The President’s Exhibition Fund.

CURATORS

Leo G. Mazow, Curator of American Art at the Palmer Museum of Art and Affiliate Professor of Art History at The Pennsylvania State University, is curator of the exhibition. Coordinating curator at the Corcoran Gallery of Art is Sarah Cash, Bechhoefer Curator of American Art, with the collaboration of Emily Shapiro, Assistant Curator of American Art.

PRESS PREVIEW

A press preview of the exhibition is scheduled for Tuesday, December 6, 2005 at 10 a.m. For more information or to RSVP, please call Liz Bradley at (202) 639-1867 or email PR@corcoran.org.

PRESS IMAGES

High-resolution digital images are available to the press via the Corcoran's FTP site www.corcoran.org/press. To register for image use, please visit the press section of the Corcoran's Web site and click on "Press Image Login." After providing contact information, an automated e-mail will be sent back with user name, password information and download instructions. For questions or problems, please contact the Corcoran Communications Office at PR@corcoran.org or (202) 639-1867.

EXHIBITION ITINERARY

After closing at the Corcoran, the exhibition will be on display at the Palmer Museum from March 30 through June 25, 2006 and the Boston Athenaeum from July 26 through October 21, 2006.

ABOUT THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

The Corcoran Gallery of Art was founded in 1869 as Washington's first museum of art. It is a privately funded institution incorporating both a museum and college of art and design. As one of America's oldest art institutions, the Corcoran is known internationally for its distinguished collection of historical and modern American art, as well as European painting, sculpture, photography and decorative arts.

Founded in 1890, the Corcoran College of Art + Design is Washington's only 4-year college of art and design. The college currently offers four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree programs; two-year Associate of Fine Arts (AFA) degree programs; Master of Arts (MA) degree programs in Interior Design, the History of Decorative Arts and Teaching; and a Continuing Education program encompassing more than 250 courses and 14 certificate programs for part-time adult students; as well as year-round classes designed especially for children and teens.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art is located at New York Avenue and 17th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. and is open Wednesdays – Sundays from 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. and until 9 p.m. on Thursdays. The museum is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, but open on holiday Mondays. Admission to the Corcoran is: \$8.00 for adults; \$6.00 for senior citizens and U.S. military personnel; \$4 for students with current ID and \$3 for Member guests. Admission is always free for Members and children under 12. Admission is "pay as you wish" on Thursdays after 5 p.m. For information about the museum, call (202) 639-1700 or visit www.corcoran.org. For information about the college, call (202) 639-1800 or visit www.corcoran.edu.

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