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## For Immediate Release

# Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to Commemorate Nation's 250th Anniversary with New Installations in Art of the Americas Galleries

**"America at 250" Opening Weekend in June 2026 Offers Free Admission and Special Programs**



From left: Fritz Scholder, *Bicentennial Indian*, (1976). The Peterson Family Collection; John Singleton Copley, *Paul Revere* (1768); Dave (later recorded as David Drake), storage jar (1857).

BOSTON (April 2, 2025)—The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), has announced a major reinstallation of its 18th-century Art of the Americas galleries, which will open on June 19, 2026—just ahead of the 250th anniversary of American independence on July 4. The reimagined displays will consider the role that artists played in shaping this pivotal time period, showcasing both beloved and long unseen works from the MFA's collection—one of the most comprehensive holdings of American art in the world. Highlights range from the monumental to the miniature, in all media. The galleries will be unveiled at the MFA's annual Juneteenth open house, kicking off a two-day "America at 250" celebration that offers free admission to Massachusetts residents and special programs exploring themes embedded in the nation's founding—resistance, liberty, and revolution.

"As we approach the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States, we wanted to take a moment to pause and revisit some of our most beloved galleries," said Matthew Teitelbaum, Ann and Graham Gund Director. "Thinking collaboratively and working with a spirit of curiosity, we set about to create a space for many voices to share their experience and understanding of the origin story of our country's founding."

This project marks the first reinstallation of the first level of the Art of the Americas Wing since its public opening in 2010. Over the past 15 years, these galleries have become among the most visited in the Museum. As frameworks for thinking about American art have evolved and the MFA's collection has grown to include a broader range of works from across North, Central, and South America—including Indigenous and island nations—the nation's 250th anniversary provides a timely opportunity to reinvent the Museum's presentation of this material.

"The new galleries will bring together works from across the Americas, integrating our extraordinary collections of Native and non-Native, North, South, Central America and the Caribbean for the first time. The displays will offer visitors a range of stories and experiences, and explore the role of 18th-century artists in shaping ideas about nationhood and identity that are still central today," said Ethan Lasser, John Moors Cabot Chair, Art of the Americas.

To celebrate the various American Revolution event anniversaries in 2025 prior to the reinstallation—from the firing of the first shots at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 to the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775—the Museum is partnering with the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism on their "Museums 250" program. The initiative is designed to bring the state's revolutionary story to life by highlighting objects in the Museum's collection that are from the period or speak to the spirit of American independence. The works will be highlighted with special "MA250" stickers on their labels, beginning in May 2025 through January 2026, when the galleries will close for reinstallation.

The new galleries will be accompanied by a new multimedia tour, offered for free on the MFA Mobile on Bloomberg Connects app; a new family guide centered around the themes and artworks of the reinstallation; a forthcoming publication; a new blog series on the Museum's website; and newly developed teacher resources.

In addition to the opening weekend, which includes the MFA's annual Juneteenth open house on June 19 followed by a free community celebration on June 20, the Museum is developing a full slate of public programs to engage visitors with the new galleries. These will include a lecture series, a multi-session course, and City Talks, the MFA's series of free public forums with local thought leaders. Additional details will be announced at a later date.

## Gallery Overview

The introductory space will welcome visitors with one of the most iconic and beloved works in the MFA's collection: *Watson and the Shark* (1778) by John Singleton Copley. As a view of Havana painted in London by a Boston artist, this dramatic painting speaks to the interconnectedness of the Americas, and suggests some of the broader themes that the installation will explore. Eight galleries follow, each creating a unique dialogue about our nation's history, institutions, and people. Themes include:

- **History and Myth:** Anchored by Thomas Sully's monumental *The Passage of Delaware* (1819), this gallery examines the role of art and artists in shaping our sense of national identity and collective history. Drawing from artistic traditions and iconographies of heroism, Sully transformed verbal descriptions of Washington's 1776 crossing of the Delaware River into a dramatic image of bravery. The cult of Washington in art and visual culture is explored through works including Jean-Antoine Houdon's life-mask of the general to a recently acquired work by Alan Michelson (born 1953, Mohawk member of Six Nations of the Grand River), which offers a contemporary critique of the man known to the Mohawk Nation as "Town Destroyer."

Additionally, the gallery includes a display of paintings, furniture, and needlework centered around the political provocateur and writer Mercy Otis Warren, exploring how powerful women often chose to maintain visual conventions of femininity. An area devoted to the 1876 and 1976 commemorations of the nation's founding illustrates how national myths have been reinforced and recast throughout the centuries.

- **Boston's World:** Telling both a local and transatlantic story, this gallery brings together works that reflect Boston's deep ties to London, the Caribbean and Native nations. Objects on view include portraits by London-trained emigrant artists such as Joseph Blackburn, Robert Feke, and John Smibert, as well as silver and furniture that were made in Boston by artisans who closely copied British designs. The connections between Boston and the Caribbean are highlighted through pieces of furniture crafted of imported materials like Caribbean mahogany, which was shipped thousands of miles despite the ample supply of wood in New England, as well as Copley's portraits of the Royalls, one of the many Boston families enriched through their investment in Caribbean sugar plantations operated by enslaved Africans. Newly commissioned works by local Native American artists will speak to the deep histories and vibrant present of Indigenous New England.
- **Home and Families:** A deeply personal installation by contemporary artist Hartman Deetz (born 1976, Mashpee Wampanoag), which is inspired by his home altar, invites visitors into this space. Placing works from the MFA's collection in conversation with regalia for dances and prayer, keepsakes from Deetz's ancestors, and materials related to his practices with wood and wampum, the project emphasizes the long history of the land on which the Museum stands. Following this introductory display, the gallery is divided into three main themes that examine domestic life in the 18th century. The first focuses on the home as a site for learning and working, introducing visitors to historical women artists in particular. Painted furniture, needlework samplers, and miniature paintings exemplify the range of works that girls and women created for both their own education and the art market. The second theme focuses on life stages, featuring objects that represent birth, childhood, marriage, parenting, elderhood, and death—from a Penobscot cradle made of woven ash to mourning jewelry inscribed with the names of lost loved ones. The third theme highlights homes of the Americas through a display of Latin American furniture and castas, or "caste" paintings, which represent Black, Indigenous, and mixed-race families from the period.
- **John Singleton Copley:** A gallery dedicated to Copley, the most important portrait painter in colonial North America, presents approximately 20 of his greatest works from the MFA's collection, including his likenesses of Joseph Warren, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams. These works not only document Copley's technical skills, but also reveal the performative nature of these compositions, which are soaked in the cultural and social aspirations of both the artist and his sitters. The display offers an overview of Copley's accomplishments as he rose from his origins as a self-taught limner and tradesman on Boston's wharves to the heights of the British artistic establishment at the Royal Academy in London.
- **Communities of Makers:** This gallery centers the stories of makers, emphasizing the enduring power of their knowledge and craftsmanship while also illuminating the collaborative nature of artistic creation in the 18th century. Many hands often contributed to the production of a single object—for example, pieces of silver marked by Myer Myers of New York and Jacob Hurd of Boston illustrate the concept that a mark or signature represents the work of many individuals, from the apprentice to the named maker. The gallery also explores the legacy of furniture makers such as John Welch in Boston and the Indigenous Tlaxcalan makers of Villa Alta de San Ildefonso in Mexico. A focused display considers mahogany and silver, and the labor and expertise necessary to transform these raw materials into finished works.
- **Asian Influences in the Americas:** Blue and white ceramics, floral patterned garments, and other luxury goods from China, Japan, and other parts of Asia became wildly popular in the 18th-century Americas—these objects conveyed the status and worldly knowledge that colonists so fiercely wanted to prove. This gallery explores the economic and cultural connections embodied by objects made in Asia for export—such as tea sets from Jingdezhen—as well as works created in the Americas to imitate Asian materials including porcelain, lacquer, and silk. The centerpiece is a newly acquired *biombo*, or Japanese-inspired folding screen that

was created in Mexico around 1750, which demonstrates how Asian influences extended beyond the colonial U.S. into Latin America.

- **Power and Resistance:** Works of art expressed power in the 18th century and at the same time served as tools of protest and resistance against authority. In colonial Latin America, paintings and silver were used to broadcast the wealth and authority of the Catholic Church. The church's power is evident in one of the highlights of this gallery—a full-length portrait of *Archbishop Manuel José Rubio y Salinas* (1754) by Miguel Cabrera, a mestizo artist trained in Mexico City in a high European style. The painting is juxtaposed with John Singleton Copley's likeness of merchant *Nathaniel Sparhawk* (1764), in which the artist draws on the same stylistic vocabulary to suggest power of a different order—the stature that comes with personal wealth and prestige.

Two inscribed objects in the center of this gallery form a powerful and poignant pair that demonstrates how art can be used to resist authority. Paul Revere's *Liberty Bowl* (1768), an early piece of American protest art, honors the Massachusetts rebels who fought for freedom and self-government, paving the way for the American Revolution. Nearby, a ceramic jar (1857) by the enslaved potter and poet David Drake demonstrates how literacy was an act of resistance in the decades before the Civil War.

- **Tea, Coffee, Chocolate, and Maté:** Taking the Boston Tea Party as its entry point, this gallery uses Copley's iconic portrait of patriot and silversmith Paul Revere along with the MFA's remarkable collection of tea wares to explore the outsized role of tea in 18th-century British North American culture—as a luxury commodity, a symbol of refinement, and a political hot button. Vessels and accessories related to coffee, chocolate, and mate examine the commercial and social impact of each beverage, extending the story across the Americas. Additionally, a grouping of silver sugar bowls made in Boston highlights the unseen and forced labor—in the mining of silver and the harvesting and manufacture of sugar—that underlies the consumption of all of these beverages.

Throughout the process of shaping the new galleries, the MFA's curators and staff are collaborating with community leaders and members as well as institutional partners. Scholars, artists, teachers, and fellow museum professionals were engaged as part of partnerships with the Lunder Institute of American Art at Colby College, supported by the Terra Foundation, and the Autry Museum of the American West, through the Luce Foundation's program Museum Partnerships for Social Justice. Additionally, the Museum is convening an advisory group of local artists, storytellers, teachers, and community engagement professionals to advise on the reinstallation through its Table of Voices initiative.

## Sponsors

"America at 250" is generously supported by the Henry Luce Foundation, the Americana Foundation and the Terra Foundation for American Art. Media partner is WGBH.

## About the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The MFA brings many worlds together through art. Showcasing masterpieces from ancient to contemporary, our renowned collection of more than half a million works tells a multifaceted story of the human experience—a story that holds unique meaning for everyone. From Boston locals to international travelers, visitors from all over come to experience the MFA—where they reveal connections, explore differences and create a community where all belong.

Open six days a week, the MFA's hours are Saturday through Monday, 10 am–5 pm; Wednesday, 10 am–5 pm; and Thursday–Friday, 10 am–10 pm. Plan your visit at [mfa.org](https://mfa.org).