

In Concord, the art of celebrating an anniversary

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FULL TEXT

CONCORD —This year the Concord Free Public Library observes its 150th anniversary. The Concord Museum is celebrating its near neighbor with “A Perpetual Invitation: 150 Years of Art at the Concord Free Public Library.” The institutions are slightly less than a mile apart, on opposite sides of Concord center.

The show runs through Sept. 4.

Wait, you might think, shouldn't that be 150 years of “books” in the subtitle, not “art”? It *is* a library we're talking about. In fact, the CFPL having an art collection is among the things that make it a special place. If you go to the show, do visit the library, too, even if only for a few minutes, to savor the building's very handsome interior. That collection includes more than 200 items, nearly 50 of which are in “Perpetual Invitation.”

The show's curators are Reed Gochberg and David Wood, from the museum, and Anke Voss and Jessie Hopper, from the CFPL.

Most of the collection relates in some way to Concord, either because of subject, artist, or both. Both is the case with Stacey Tolman's “Concord River,” an oil so elegantly delicate it could almost pass for a watercolor. But by no means is all of the art Concord-centric. The collection includes plaster casts brought back from Europe by the library's founder, William Munroe. None of them are in the show, but it does include three tiles with copies of paintings by Titian, Gerrit Dou, and David Rijckaert. They're curios now, and rather attractive ones, but 150 years ago they were state-of-the-art reproductions. Google Arts & Culture wasn't exactly an option.

The show takes its title from a statement by Munroe: “A fine building, well adapted to the purpose, would be a perpetual invitation to possessors of Art treasures to consider the wisdom of bestowing them on the public.” The original library design included an annex to be devoted to artworks. It was never built. “Perpetual Invitation” includes an architectural rendering, and the design is quite pleasing.

Giving credit where credit is due, the show features a bust of Munroe. There are also busts of three eminent Concord authors: Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott. There's a portrait of the most eminent Concord author of all, Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as a painting (and several sketchbooks) by his son Edward Waldo Emerson. Another familial connection comes courtesy of Alcott's sister Abigail May Alcott Niereker, who has a watercolor in the show. She was the model for Amy March in “Little Women,” and her older sister paid for her to go to Europe to continue her art studies.

The show includes works by several familiar names: Washington Allston, N.C. Wyeth, and Thomas Cole (a portrait of George Washington that's “attributed” to Cole). But if the show has a star, it's Alicia M. Keyes (1855-1924). A student of Niereker's, she taught at Wellesley and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Her sumptuously restrained view of Mount Monadnock is a highlight. Even finer are several of her sketchbooks, displayed next to Emerson's.

The CFPL still exhibits art. Its skylit second-floor gallery is an attractive exhibition space. That, too, is worth a visit if you make it to the library. “Daniel Chester French: Art & Enterprise in Concord” closed March 31. It was a nicely varied look at the sculptor, who started his career in Concord and is best-known for the seated figure of Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial. Don't feel too bad about missing the show. An exhibition of Paul Scopa's macro photographs opened April 2. That's the beauty of perpetual invitations. They remain on offer.

A PERPETUAL INVITATION: 150 Years of Art at the Concord Free Public Library

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