“1812: A Nation Emerges” Tells a Sweeping Story of a Forgotten War

National Portrait Gallery Exhibition Opens 200 Years after the Declaration of War

The War of 1812 is regarded as a relatively small war that barely registers in the minds of today’s Americans or in British history books. However, for the United States, this small war had great consequences. When it began, the young nation was still defining itself; by the end—a military draw—a new sense of nationalism pervaded the country. The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery presents “1812: A Nation Emerges,” the first major museum exhibition to comprehensively tell this story with objects from Canada, Great Britain and the United States. It will open at the museum June 15 and continue through Jan. 27, 2013.

“1812: A Nation Emerges” offers persuasive evidence that this war merits attention in our own time because of the enduring changes it wrought in our nation,” said Martin E. Sullivan, director of the National Portrait Gallery. “This exhibition will open almost 200 years to the day from the moment when a new, fragile republic chose to declare war against the mighty British Empire.”

In January 1815 the news radiated across the country: Andrew Jackson had decisively defeated the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Along with American naval victories Jackson’s triumph established the myth in American history that the United States won the War of 1812, when really it was an impasse. When Americans read and heard about Jackson’s victory, they reacted with euphoria, celebrating with parades and banquets. To President James Madison and his contemporaries, the War of 1812 was a completion of what had begun in 1776. The nation now viewed itself as truly independent of foreign powers and began a commercial and westward expansion.
“1812: A Nation Emerges” uses more than 100 objects to highlight people who influenced these events, such as President Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison, Gen. Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun and the powerful Indian leader Tecumseh. These and others are depicted by master portrait artists such as Gilbert Stuart, Rembrandt Peale and Sir Thomas Lawrence. The exhibition considers the war in its international context and includes portraits of the major British generals who fought. In addition, it follows the stories of slaves, pirates, sailors, architects, Native Americans and women during this time.

Two of America’s most enduring national symbols, Uncle Sam and the Star-Spangled Banner, date from this conflict. The first reference to Uncle Sam in print appeared in a broadside that is included in the exhibition. The Star-Spangled Banner—the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write what is now the national anthem during the defense of Baltimore in 1814—is on permanent view several blocks away at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

Another interesting object included in the exhibition is Dolley Madison’s red velvet dress. One of the First Lady’s most well-known feats was rescuing items from the White House only moments before it was burned: the silver, a Gilbert Stuart painting of George Washington and red velvet curtains. Documentation that the red velvet curtains from the Oval Drawing Room were saved from the flames led to the belief that this dress, which Madison kept until the end of her life, may have been made from the material.

The show concludes with the stories of rebuilding Washington, D.C., western expansion, the increase in American manufacturing and trade, a construction boom in roads and canals and changes in the American lexicon.

An original short film, one of 10 produced and donated to the exhibition by HISTORY®, explores the unprecedented surge in national feeling and economic prosperity following the war.

The exhibition curator is Sidney Hart, senior historian at the National Portrait Gallery, with Rachael L. Penman as assistant guest curator. An accompanying 284-page catalog published by Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press will be available in the museum bookstore.

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The National Portrait Gallery is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Website: npg.si.edu. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000.

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