



Pennsylvania Academy
of the Fine Arts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 24, 2024

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Opens *Layers of Liberty: Philadelphia and the Appalachian Environment*

Exhibition explores Philadelphia's relationship to the Appalachian region through the museum's permanent collection

Exhibition opens June 27 and is on view through November 7, 2024

PHILADELPHIA—June 24, 2024 - The **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA)** opens ***Layers of Liberty: Philadelphia and the Appalachian Environment***, on view **June 27** through **November 7, 2024**, in the Samuel M. V. Hamilton Building at 128 North Broad Street. Curated by **Ali Printz, PAFA's Terra Foundation Curatorial Fellow**, the exhibition explores Philadelphia's relationship to the Appalachian region. Through paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture drawn from PAFA's permanent collection, 56 works by 41 artists trace Philadelphia's connections to the extraction of natural resources in Appalachia, from a historical to contemporary perspective.

"As someone from the Appalachian region," says **Printz**, a West Virginia native, "it is a unique honor to tell the story of Appalachia through PAFA's extraordinary permanent collection, both the history of natural resource depletion as well as the beauty that continues to attract creative representation. I'm grateful for this opportunity to share my scholarship in an exhibition that brings new light to the impact that Appalachia has had on American art-making and culture."

"In addition to Ali's innovative scholarship that examines American art through an eco-critical lens, *Layers of Liberty* acts as a test case for our approach to the reinstallation of the permanent collection in 2026," says **PAFA Chief of Curatorial Affairs Anna Marley**. "Each exhibition we have mounted in recent years, and those upcoming, has given us an opportunity to examine the collection with the aim of telling stories from exciting and diverse perspectives, to be more representative of the history, present, and future of American art. Ali has brought a dynamic vision to her curation of the exhibition, and we are thrilled to welcome visitors and hear their feedback."

About *Layers of Liberty: Philadelphia and the Appalachian Environment*

The Appalachian region is vast, encompassing 13 states, with nearly 70% of the state of Pennsylvania included within the Appalachian territory. Motivated by both a lack of representation of Appalachian art in museum collections and recent trends in ecocritical scholarship, *Layers of Liberty: Philadelphia and the Appalachian Environment* examines themes that relate directly to Philadelphia and rural Appalachian Pennsylvania, referencing the ecology of early America, the establishment of networks of transportation like the railroad and the commodification of natural resources, and the pastoral relationship to the environment that inspired Philadelphia (and PAFA) artists.

The Machine in the Garden

Since the colonization of America, the Appalachian region has been used and abused for its rich natural resources. As the oldest mountain range in the world and the birthplace of many major waterways on the east coast, the Appalachian Mountains are a center for biodiversity, rich in flora, fauna, and precious minerals, yet rugged in their geography. For nearly a century after colonial America was established, the mountains represented a boundary that was something to be conquered, the “first American frontier” before westward expansion. By the late 18th century, much of Appalachian Pennsylvania in proximity to Philadelphia was deforested, and anthracite coal had been recently discovered in the Pottsville area as a source of fuel for the masses. With the help of financial tycoon Stephen Girard (1750-1831) and the funding provided for expansion of the Schuylkill River canals and his investment in coal, Philadelphia gained tremendous wealth in the “coal rush” in the first half of the 19th century, establishing waterway networks and railroad lines that connected much of the state to resource extraction.

Extraction and Exchange

As the Industrial Revolution took hold in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coal extraction was booming in Pennsylvania, producing over 11,000,000 tons of anthracite coal in the Northeast in 1865 due to the American Civil War. Similar amounts of bituminous coal were also produced in the Northwest near Pittsburgh, traveling by railroad into large East Coast cities like Philadelphia. Industrial workers, many recent immigrants to America, flooded the Appalachian Region looking for a new life and steady employment in coal, iron, and steel. Coalminers toiled long hours underground in an occupation filled with the danger of mine collapse, explosions, and respiratory infections like black lung complicated by the feudal system of employment most coal company towns enabled. As carbon emissions skyrocketed, signs of environmental decay were visible on the landscape and began to be frequently documented by artists as the pollutive effects of extraction were hard to ignore.

More Than Land or Sky

This section of the exhibition references a novel written in 1875 about the Appalachian region, *The Land of the Sky; or Adventures in Mountain Byways* by North Carolina author Christian Reid (1846-1920), expressing the beauty of the Appalachian Mountains during a time when they were actively being threatened by the Industrial Revolution. The only national exhibition of Appalachian art held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1981, *More Than Land or Sky: Art from Appalachia*, appropriated the phrase to reflect the contemporary artwork represented in the show. “More Than Land or Sky,” in the context of Layers of Liberty represents the influence of the Appalachian landscape and its flora and fauna on Philadelphia and PAFA artists, from both inside and outside the region. Each artist exemplified either a pastoral rendition of the region or an extractive one, expressing the history of natural resource depletion and the beauty that continues to attract attention and creative representation.

PAFA is open Thursday and Friday 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM, and Saturday and Sunday 11:00 AM to 5:00 PM. [Reserve tickets and access further information about visiting.](#)

Bloomberg Connects!

Enhance your visit to PAFA with [its digital guide on Bloomberg Connects](#), a free arts and culture app created by Bloomberg Philanthropies. Experience PAFA offsite or onsite as a visual guide with multimedia and audio features and an interactive map. The Bloomberg Connects app is available for free via Google Play or the App Store. [For more information about Bloomberg Connects.](#)

#

MEDIA CONTACT:

Katherine E. Blodgett

Communications Consultant

katherineblodgett@gmail.com

215.431.1230