Explore the artworks and interpretive texts.

Click the arrows in this document to learn more about selected topics.
After discussion and research, the Mead’s curators and educators have decided to capitalize terms describing racial identities—Black, Brown, and White—to underscore in our writing that race is a social construct.

By capitalizing Black, we recognize the history and contributions of Black people in the United States and around the world. In recognition of individuals who identify as Brown, we also include this term to describe racial identity. Our decisions are informed by voices such as the National Association of Black Journalists and Nell Irvin Painter, Edwards Professor of American History, Emerita at Princeton University.

We decided to capitalize White to stress that it, too, is a historical, cultural concept. As sociologist of education and writer Dr. Eve L. Ewing argues, not capitalizing White “runs the risk of reinforcing the dangerous myth that White people in America do not have a racial identity.” The decision to capitalize White is not meant to detract from the reclaimed power associated with the capitalization of Black.

Conversations about these decisions are ongoing. We welcome your feedback on the capitalization of Black, Brown, and White in the Mead’s materials.
**Founding Narratives** presents portraits, landscapes, and related works from 1800 to today that reflect or explore the history of the United States. In addition to an iconic presidential portrait and views glorifying the geography of America, this exhibition includes artworks that challenge ideas and interpretations of national symbols such as the US flag. Drawn from the Mead Art Museum’s extensive collection of American art, the exhibition also evokes various “firsts”: a portrait of the republic’s first president; a painting by the first woman to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art; and a print that honors the oldest known African burial ground in what later became the United States—though at the time of its founding, the cemetery was in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, a settlement on Lenape land.
Grappling with ideas of “founding” in a settler-colonial society like the United States requires a reckoning with histories that predate colonization and have been excluded from the dominant narrative of colony and nation. Selected works in the exhibition offer opportunities to consider the role of art in creating, reinforcing, and challenging stories about national identity and a national art. The artworks were chosen with the intention of inviting questions about representation and the absence of representation in the context of national narratives and art, the significance of and problems with “firsts,” and the replication and rupture of dominant narratives within artworks, as well as the interpretive frameworks created about them in museums. These objects are fragments of histories that can be used to construct new and more nuanced narratives of the United States’ colonial past and to craft new visions for public engagement with “American” art.
For further reading on the region’s Indigenous histories, click here to open the Five College Native American & Indigenous Studies page on the Kwinitekw Valley.
Stuart turned a few live sessions with George Washington into an enterprise, producing more than one hundred portraits. He created three portrait types for an elite public that desired representation of the republic’s first president and revolutionary war hero. About sixty likenesses, including this one, are based on Stuart’s “Athenaeum” portrait type. The sitter’s costume and the background vary slightly in each.

Washington’s face became well known through copies of Stuart’s works. Reproduced in a range of media—from paintings and prints to the dollar bill and sculpted public monuments—the images made him a symbol of the republic’s founding.

In the context of this exhibition, which includes landscapes and portraits, consider exploring Washington’s estate, Mount Vernon, virtually.

Mount Vernon reveals Washington’s ownership of enslaved people to run his plantation. Furthermore, Washington’s collection of landscape paintings, portraits, and historical scenes reflects the understood significance of art in cementing ideas of national identity and conventions of display.
Cole’s Romantic painting portrays the popular frontiersman Daniel Boone (American, 1734–1820), imagined outside a rustic home within an invented landscape (likely inspired by Cole’s sketching trips in New York). The painting embodies the English-born artist’s conservationist beliefs and conflicting support of development through the picturing of wilderness as a key national resource. Cole represents Boone as an elderly pioneer, already mythologized for exploits that were buoyed by a belief in the divine right of White Americans to expand their control over the land and deny the histories and presence of Native Americans already living there. Cole created his earliest landscape paintings soon after he moved to New York in 1825, a time when cultural producers and industrialists in the region sought to define American identity and a national art.
Yasuo Kuniyoshi
American, born in Japan, 1889–1953

_She’s Going_, 1944
Oil on canvas
Gift of James and Dorothy Schramm
1972.115

Kuniyoshi frequently created portraits of a lone, introspective woman. In _She’s Going_, the subject is pictured before a barren landscape that may reflect the Japanese-born artist’s increasing despondency during World War II—a time of heightened anti-Japanese sentiment in the US, when the government persecuted citizens and noncitizens of Japanese descent.

Although Kuniyoshi was the first living artist to receive a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1948), critics sometimes challenged the validity of presenting his work as American. (Immigration law prevented Kuniyoshi from ever gaining citizenship.) In a 1940 speech at the Museum of Modern Art, the artist questioned what constituted “American” versus “un-American” art. Defying the nationalistic and regionalist thinking of the day, he said he believed that “the boundaries of nations are not the boundaries of Art.”

_The Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art created an online exhibition of documents such as photographs, letters, and postcards to complement the 2015 exhibition_ The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi. _These materials offer further insight into the artist and his work as educator and organizer._
A preeminent watercolorist, Yarde lived for many years in Northampton, Massachusetts. Both Yarde and Sojourner Truth recognized the power of photography and portraiture in representing Black Americans as an important part of US culture.

Truth (American, ca. 1797–1883) copyrighted her own image in cartes de visite (small albumen prints mounted on cards) that she widely circulated to promote and raise money for her causes, which included the abolition of slavery. One such portrait served as the basis for Yarde’s print. Inspired by his own history and identity as a Black man, Yarde often celebrated historical and contemporary African American icons like Truth.
The direct gaze of the subject of *Pensive* and the use of strong lines to delineate her face are reminiscent of many of Catlett’s sculpted works. Catlett is known for sculptures and prints depicting Black American and Mexican women and children, including Americans Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), Harriet Tubman (1822–1913), and Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), as well as anonymous individuals. She defied barriers throughout her career, becoming the first African American to earn a master’s of fine arts in sculpture from the University of Iowa (1940) and the first African American woman to teach sculpture at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (late 1950s). She moved to Mexico in the 1940s, where she later acquired citizenship, and exhibited there and in the United States.
Convictions VI is an abstract representation of the US flag that invites reflection on the traditional flag’s varying symbolism within Black America, historically and today. After investigating the Civil War and Reconstruction era, Edmonds expressed awe at some “formerly enslaved” peoples’ “complete ownership” of the flag and their “[commitment] to American ideals.” Her painting is composed of colors based on brown skin tones that call for a new, more inclusive reading of Americanness that breaks from the use of the American flag, in Edmonds’s words, as a “tool of violent exclusion” by White supremacists. Her flag’s vertical orientation suggests a portrait. The range of colors and bands of paint assert a plurality of identities that compose the United States.
Lee Norman Friedlander
American, born 1934

GWB [George Washington Bridge], 1973, 1973 (print, ca. 1978), Gelatin silver print (This page, below)

Mt. Rushmore, 1969, 1969. (print, ca. 1976), Gelatin silver print (Next page.)


Mount Rushmore National Memorial, built 1927–41, comprises sculpted portraits of Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. The monument was constructed on Lakota Sioux sacred land in violation of federal treaty. It remains highly contested today and indicative of the federal government’s history of violence against Native Americans. Friedlander used reflection as a device to embed the monument within a social environment that invites consideration of the role of tourism in perpetuating some national narratives.

Named for the first president, the George Washington Bridge spans the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey. Friedlander’s photograph captures a fragment of the bridge’s railing and cables rather than a complete view of the historic monument. The selective focus emphasizes the everydayness of the structure over its symbolic naming.
See recent reflections on the significance of Mount Rushmore National Memorial by the executive director of United Native Americans, Quanah Parker Brightman.
Sánchez often creates dense collages that feature portraits of global figures, activists, and family members, among other symbolic elements, many of which refer to his Puerto Rican heritage. The integration of a self-portrait in this artwork underscores the artist’s exploration of his origins and identity and highlights his activism. The photographs—multiples of the same image—show Sánchez as a young boy at a birthday party. The replication of the image mirrors the repetition of two photographs in the background—a fragmented grid. These photographs—of a woman and a man with the Puerto Rican flag draped over their heads—were modeled after a poster Sánchez created in 1979 supporting Puerto Rican independence and the release of political prisoners. The poster was adopted by the Black Liberation movement, among other organizations.
The fragmented grid of photographs is an element Sánchez first used in the 2011 video Unknown Boricua Streaming: A Nuyorican State of Mind. Unknown Boricua, like Self-Portrait, explores Sánchez’s ethnic, racial, and national identities.
Robert Seldon Duncanson
American, 1821–1872

*Maiden’s Rock, Lake Pepin* (detail), 1862
Oil on canvas

Gift of William Macbeth, Inc.
1950.8

Duncanson painted *Maiden’s Rock* during the US Civil War (1861–65) after taking a sketching tour up the Mississippi River. The site is known for a legend about a young Dakota woman. Duncanson represented Native Americans in several works, including paintings completed on the same trip. Unlike most landscapes of the era, *Maiden’s Rock* shows a Black man, who is seated in the boat, leisurely adrift in the lake.

For much of his career Duncanson was based in Cincinnati, Ohio, and by the 1850s he was recognized as one of the preeminent Midwestern landscape painters. He was influential in Canada and acclaimed by English critics. Although Duncanson was denied access to the same resources and artistic training as his White counterparts, as a free African American he found support among patrons and peers.
Attributed to Robert Peckham
American, 1785–1877

Professor Edward Hitchcock Returning from a Journey, 1838
Oil on canvas

Gift of Lucy and Caroline Hitchcock
P.1940.1

This scene portrays the family of Amherst College professor and president Edward Hitchcock and his wife, the botanical artist and illustrator Orra White Hitchcock, in front of their home in Amherst. Records indicate that Professor Hitchcock commissioned Peckham to paint botanical specimens in the 1830s, which affirms Hitchcock’s connection to the artist. The painting is notable for its setting outside the home, as most of Peckham’s portraits feature interiors. The choice underscores Hitchcock’s values: his work as a geologist, his ties to Amherst College, and his family. The depiction of Orra White Hitchcock with a young child in her arms emphasizes her maternal role over her artistry. Recently, museums and scholars have sought to recognize the importance of her contributions. Hitchcock’s Coal Strata is also on view.
Hitchcock was an artist and scientist. Her prolific drawings and watercolors of geology, paleontology, and botany were reproduced in journals and books to illustrate texts written by her husband, Edward Hitchcock, whom she accompanied on field studies to illustrate his findings. Though much of her work is unsigned, contemporaries noted her talent.

*Coal Strata* is a classroom drawing that Hitchcock created for her husband’s lectures at Amherst College to translate concepts into visuals. (Edward Hitchcock was a professor at Amherst beginning in 1826, and served as the College’s third president from 1845–54.) In the dedication to *Religion of Geology* (1851), Professor Hitchcock said of his wife, “Your artistic skill has done more than my voice to render that science attractive to the young men whom I instruct.”
The American Folk Art Museum’s 2018 exhibition Charting the Divine Plan: The Art of Orra White Hitchcock (1796–1863) brought increased national attention to Hitchcock as one of the first female scientific illustrators in the United States.
James Wayne Yazzie
American, 1943–1969

Navajo Dance (detail), 1961
Gouache on cardboard
Gift of Sanborn Partridge (Class of 1936)
1991.18

Yazzie was a self-taught Navajo (Diné) artist based in New Mexico. Navajo Dance depicts the Nightway, a traditional Navajo ceremony. The painting was made for a tourist market and is emblematic of the Santa Fe Studio School style. “The Studio,” at the Santa Fe Indian School, supported the training of Native American artists from the early 1930s to the 1960s, encouraging production of secular genre scenes to be sold commercially. While The Studio is credited with offering economic opportunity to Native artists and craftspeople and creating a market for Native American art among non-Native Americans, it was challenged by Native American artists in the late 1950s for being restrictive and overly focused on the preservation of traditions that White Americans presumed were disappearing. The School was replaced by the Institute of American Indian Arts.
O’Keeffe is considered a pioneer of American modernism. She was among the earliest artists in the United States to explore abstraction, developing her own style that centered on the precise use of line, natural forms, and distinctions of color. In 1915 the acclaimed photographer Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946) debuted her abstract charcoal drawings at his vanguard 291 gallery in New York, proclaiming, “Finally, a woman on paper.” O’Keeffe, however, did not remain “on paper” and soon began to create oil paintings, including *Red Snapdragons*.

*In 1946 she became the first woman to have a major solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, where she was praised for her “highly individual artistic expression.”*
Smith is recognized for his early development of hard-edge abstraction (a style defined by geometric, monochromatic shapes and defined edges) in the 1950s. Though celebrated during his lifetime and today, Smith often resided outside the spotlight. He didn’t accept invitations to join the American Abstract Artists, an organization in New York City created to promote abstraction, preferring to follow his own creative path. His goal, he said, was to “liberate form, shape, and concept,” which he did by looking to artists like Piet Mondrian and then working beyond this form of abstraction. On his association with Mondrian, Smith remarked that “writers have made too much out of Mondrian with me, and I’ve resented that.”

Smith acknowledged that his experiences of landscape and Native American art in Oklahoma, where he grew up, surface in his art.
Deborah Dancy
American, born 1949

*Untitled*, 2001
Cardboard intaglio

Purchase with Wise Fund for Fine Arts
2001.668

The African Burial Ground National Monument in Lower Manhattan marks the site of the largest and earliest African American cemetery. In use from the 1630s to 1795, the cemetery was uncovered in 1991 at the start of a construction project. Dancy created nearly one hundred artworks in connection to the burial ground, including prints, artist books, and paintings. She said, “Those individuals whose remains were discovered … needed and deserved to be named, even if symbolically.”

Since there was no information about the individuals whose remains were unburied (and later reinterred), Dancy inscribed names in her artwork to individualize those who were laid to rest at the graveyard. The names were pulled from probate and estate records that she found as part of her genealogical research.
Deborah Dancy  
American, born 1949

Nameless, 2001  
Cardboard intaglio

Purchase with Wise Fund for Fine Arts  
2001.669

Nameless represents two hands working, perhaps preparing cotton, which was a labor-intensive process performed by hand until the cotton gin was invented in the early 1790s. Dancy’s depiction of the hands seems to reveal her interest in memory and history as understood through fragments, and her work to recover the stories of Black individuals.
Carlson’s *EXIT* represents a landscape crowded with cultural artifacts and symbols: the lands of Anishinaabe, Dakota, and Ho-Chunk people in present-day Minnesota and Illinois. The iconography is specific: Man Mound (an earthwork effigy in Baraboo, Wisconsin), hand- and talon-cut mica forms from the Mississippian peoples, hands signing (in American Sign Language) “exit” or “outside,” and an “Exit” sign.

As Carlson has stated, her print critically reflects on cultural and historical erasure that was part of the colonial project in the United States. This deletion has led to sustained fears of cultural loss among Indigenous communities. She combats omission through reproduction of print imagery that asserts the important historical and contemporary presence of Native Americans as cultural producers.
Edward Hicks
American, 1780–1849

Peaceable Kingdom, ca. 1822–25
Oil on canvas

Gift of Stephen C. Clark
1951.384

Hicks trained as a decorative sign and coach painter and became a Quaker minister. There are sixty-two known versions of Hicks’s Peaceable Kingdom, all of which depict the verses Isaiah 11:6–9 in the Old Testament. Hicks’s images focus on the theme of harmony, uniting biblical and colonial reflections.

Four of the Kingdom paintings, including the Mead’s, represent the Natural Bridge in Virginia. Hicks likely based his depiction of it, like other aspects of his painting, on print reproductions. The landmark symbolized divine greatness—a stone canopy over the supposed peaceful agreement made between William Penn and the Lenni Lenape tribe. Penn was an English Quaker and colonist who sought to establish Pennsylvania as a site of religious freedom, an idea that appealed to Hicks.
In the nineteenth century, artists often aided scientists and industrialists by depicting “new” lands and resources and collecting and picturing plant and animal specimens. While Heade was interested in science and traveled to South and Central America in the 1860s and 1870s, his artistic vision took precedence. For example, Heade’s representation of male and female birds together is symbolic rather than a scene he would have likely observed in nature.

Heade remained an outsider to the art world for much of his life. He has since been applauded for his originality as a Romantic painter. His paintings defy the ideal of grand, majestic views like those by his friend Frederic Edwin Church (American, 1826–1900). Instead Heade’s paintings reflect his practice as an amateur naturalist and his skill at painting still life and landscape.