

MMFA

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE MONTGOMERY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

ACQUIRES IMPORTANT WORK BY HENRY FARNY

Museum purchases *Indian Encampment*, a 1911 painting by Henry Farny depicting the life of Native Americans during the 19th-century movement of settlers into the American West.



Henry François Farny (American, born France, 1847–1916), *Indian Encampment*, 1911, oil on canvas, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Ida Belle Young Art Acquisition Fund, 2021.3

Montgomery, AL, August 10, 2021 – The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) has purchased *Indian Encampment*, a 1911 painting by illustrator and painter Henry Farny depicting the life of Native Americans during the 19th-century movement of settlers into the American West. The rugged western mountain landscape depicts a narrow pass with small groupings of humans, animals, and dwellings. The composition and its contrasting forms—the formidable rock formations towering above the casual intimacy of the many signs of daily life—speak to the connection of these Native Americans to the natural world—its land and creatures. In his compositions, Farny typically

expressed his empathy and respect for Native American subjects he had come to know during expeditions he made up the Missouri River through the West from his home in Cincinnati. Oil paintings such as *Indian Encampment* date from later in the artist's career when he painted scenes such as this one in his studio in Cincinnati, based upon the drawings made earlier during his travels. The painting was originally acquired by his sister Leonie and descended in her family until purchased by the Museum.

In his work generally, Farny accentuated two primary themes: the importance of community in Native American life and the peaceful coexistence of Native Americans within the natural environment. *Indian Encampment* belongs to a group of images recording the life practices of nomadic peoples, living or moving in stark mountainous settings, where they erect their teepees beside glistening rivers that direct the viewer's eye into the distance. In this painting, Farny expresses the quietude, conviviality, and safety of settled camp life.

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

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Of this acquisition, currently on view in the Museum’s permanent collection galleries, Senior Curator Margaret Lynne Ausfeld states, “Studying this work, and that of other painters of Western subject matter from the perspective of the 21st century reveals a historical point of view specific to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and gives insight into the ways that stories of history are a product of their time and the beliefs of those that record them. Such works often depict a romanticized vision of Native American life and culture—an attitude that in many ways mourned the loss of ways of life without acknowledging the pain that this loss engendered. A deeper study of works like these allows us to understand and describe a more comprehensive, richer account of our shared past.”

Board Collection Committee Chair Camille Elebash-Hill added, “This significant addition to the Museum’s permanent collection reflects MMFA’s strategic plan and collections development priorities of acquiring art that fill gaps in our collection, often with works that better reflect the breadth of identities and experiences of residents of and visitors to the River Region.”

Board President Cathy Martin continued, “Identifying and acquiring works that help us compose a more relevant and inclusive narrative in our galleries—that’s what we are called and compelled to do. This work nests within our larger focus on addressing diversity, equity, access, and inclusion issues in concert with the larger museum community.” Director Angie Dodson placed the acquisition within the larger context of the Museum’s overarching plan of work, saying, “By no means are we alone in addressing this work—our efforts are part of a movement across museums and other cultural institutions to confront long-standing shortfalls in our practice. Sometimes that work manifests as challenging presentations of contemporary art, but at other times—as with this purchase—it manifests as re-positioning the Museum to be a place where more of us can find ourselves and our stories through American art and history.”

About the Artist



Nancy Ford Cones (American, 1869–1962), *Henry François Farny*, about 1902, gum kallitype, Cincinnati Art Museum, Centennial Gift of Mrs. Sells Stites, 1981.281

Artist Henry Farny (American, born France, 1847–1916) saw Americans and American culture with a point of view influenced by his status as a cultural outsider. Born in Ribeauvillé, France as François Henri Farny, the artist’s family immigrated to the United States in 1853.

The family first settled in Pennsylvania where Farny was befriended by an elderly Seneca Indian known as “Old Jacob.” Farny later wrote, “Of course he [Old Jacob] and I became great chums. He would take me to his camp, show me how to make moccasins, bows and arrows, and later when hunting parties of his tribe came near us he would take me to see the shy, unkempt children....and though we could not speak together, we soon learned not to be afraid of each other.” Thus, Farny’s appreciation of the challenges faced by Native Americans in the contemporary society of his time was first informed by this relationship with an elder of the once prominent people of the North East woodlands.

Farny’s interest in drawing began in his childhood and his earliest known drawing of a Native American was found in a school

songbook, made in 1861 when he was 14 years old. After his father’s death in 1863, Henry began to help support the family, now living in Cincinnati, by working as a bookkeeper and lithographer. He began his career as a professional artist in 1866 when he moved to New York to work as an engraver

and cartoonist for the popular periodical, *Harper's Weekly*. He studied painting in Europe in the 1870s and made his first trip to the American West in 1881. From that point, his primary subject matter became portraits of individual Native Americans and images of their daily activity, most of them made in gouache (a water-based paint) on paper. His oil paintings were made in his Cincinnati studio based on drawings and gouache paintings he made on his trips to the West.

Today, Farny's work is represented in major museums around the United States, including in his hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, and in institutions such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., The Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming. A major exhibition and accompanying catalogue of Farny's work, *Henry Farny Paints the Far West*, was produced by the Cincinnati Art Museum in 2007.

Picturing the "Golden West"

"The golden West isn't what it used to be."

Henry Farny, 1882

Artists' depictions of Native American life in the West in the 19th century supported what became a standard 20th-century interpretation of Western expansion—settlers, primarily of European descent, leaving their homes in search of promised prosperity, migrating from the cities and states of the overpopulated East Coast across the prairies, to expand the territory of the United States and develop the land and resources to build further wealth. These images were usually inspirational and celebratory; they emphasized the vastness of the land and its abundant resources, implying that there was an unlimited and unpopulated wilderness just awaiting settlement and economic development.

Today we recognize the limitations of images of a "Golden West," that downplayed the very real hardships and challenges of a terrain that was at best inhospitable to inexperienced Easterners and was far from unpopulated. By the time Farny painted *Indian Encampment*, the Western plains had for decades been inhabited not only by the native peoples who had made their homes there for a hundred years and more, but also by groups that had been forcibly removed from their own homelands in the Southeastern states.

Although Farny based his work on firsthand observations of people and the land, in paintings such as this one he created idealized images of Native American life, evoking a romantic and nostalgic vision of a mostly serene world in which his subjects lived in harmony with nature. By 1911, this idyllic image was unfortunately just that, an homage to a life that was no longer possible for people who had to adapt to a changing world and ways of life that were foreign to their traditional cultures.

In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt visited Cincinnati and attended an exhibition of Farny's work. In response, he told Farny: "the nation owes you a debt...you are preserving for future generations phases of American history that rapidly are passing away."

Looking back, it is clear that Farny was actually continuing the practice of presenting Native Americans as part of the larger tradition of "vanishing" cultures that assumed all Americans would eventually be assimilated into a larger American culture, one strongly influenced by the Western European tradition. Artists of the late 19th century generally believed that they were recording ways of life that were then passing into history, but in reality, they already had.

FOR YOUR SAFETY | COVID-19

We remain committed to serving our members and visitors in a safe and responsible manner, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To this end: all Museum visitors over the age of five **must wear a mask or face covering** while inside during their visit. **Social distancing is encouraged** and indicated by signage throughout the Garden and the Galleries. Following CDC and ADPH guidelines, we have increased the frequency that we **clean and disinfect high-touch areas**. Additionally, hand sanitizer is readily available for visitors. Please stay at home if you are feeling ill or have been exposed to COVID-19 in the fourteen (14) days prior to your visit.

MMFA BACKGROUND

The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts was founded in 1930 by a group of local artists as a place for both exhibiting art and space for art education. The original intentions of our founders—to exhibit and teach—continue to inspire and inform every action and activity here at the Museum which, since 1988, has shared the 277-acre Blount Cultural Park with our partners across the lake at the celebrated Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Today's MMFA visitors stroll through art-studded grounds and permanent collection galleries. They see compelling changing exhibitions and learn about art by playing in our interactive gallery, Artworks, making art in its bustling studios, or by participating in other engaging events and programs. And, as of late September 2018, MMFA visitors can now relax and recharge in the serenity of our stunning new three-acre sculpture garden.

While the Museum's collection is still home to the art of many of the regional artists who first established it, over time it has become known for its strength in American art and Old Master Prints. Recent, important acquisitions of art made by African American and Asian artists and works inspired by images and themes related to the experiences of these groups represent the breadth and depth of the lives and concerns of those who now call Montgomery and the River Region home. Through the exhibition of this work as well as the programs and events that help connect our communities with it, the MMFA is recognized as a leading arts and cultural resource here in the state and Southeastern region.

The MMFA is a department of the City of Montgomery and is supported by funds from the City of Montgomery, with additional funds from the Montgomery County Commission and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association. Programs are made possible, in part, by grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

GENERAL INFORMATION

WHAT: *Indian Encampment*, a 1911 painting by illustrator and painter Henry Farny

WHEN: On view now

WHERE: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
Wynton M. Blount Cultural Park
One Museum Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117

INFORMATION: mmfa.org
334.625.4333
@MontgomeryMFA

HOURS:
Galleries, Mondays, Closed
Sculpture Garden, Tuesdays–Saturdays, 10 AM–5 PM
Terrace, and Store: Sundays, Noon to 5 PM
Last entry at 4:45 PM

ADMISSION: Free! With ample, free parking.

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MEDIA CONTACT

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