



DESTINATION
ART

BY JAMES LANCEL MCELHINNEY

ARTISTS & INSPIRATION IN THE WILD

Yellowstone and Yosemite may be more famous, yet the largest publicly protected park in America's lower 48 states is Adirondack Park in northeastern New York, owned not by the U.S. government but by New York State. In the middle of it, *Adirondack Experience: The Museum on Blue Mountain Lake* is the latest iteration of a private, nonprofit museum that arose from the 1948 formation of the Adirondack Historical Association, and the establishment of The Adirondack Museum 11 years later, on the former site of a hotel built in 1876.

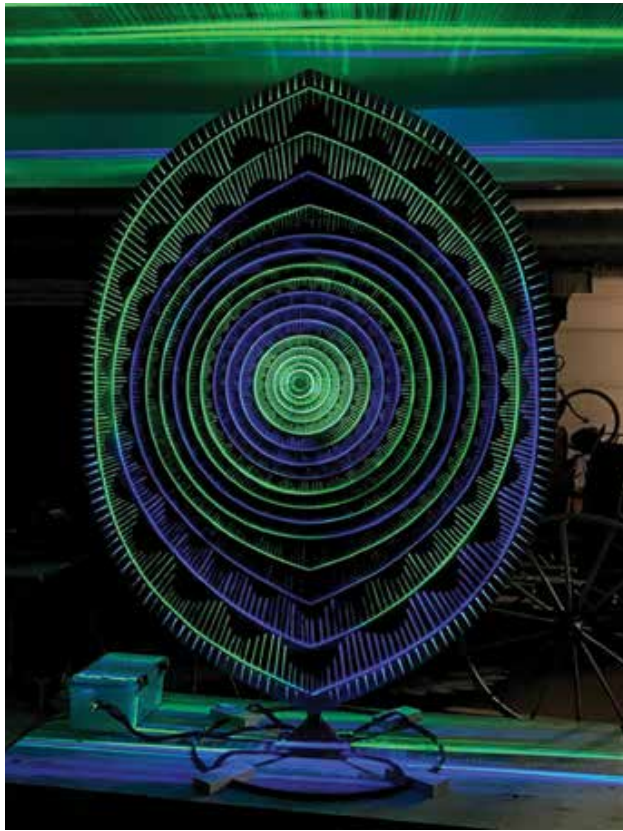
According to the website of ADKX, as the museum is known today, its original mission was "ecological in nature, showing the history of man's relation to the Adirondacks. The first objects collected were from the Blue Mountain Lake area. The exhibits featured the Marion River Carry Railroad engine and passenger car, the steamboat Osprey, a stagecoach, several horse-drawn vehicles, a birch bark canoe, and dioramas depicting various aspects of life in the Adirondacks."

Following a renovation, the museum repurposed its original exhibitions hall as a home for its art collection, dubbing it *Artists & Inspiration in the Wild* and welcoming the public back inside last May. This past January, I braved the cold to visit ADKX curator Laura Rice and speak with her about the genesis of this permanent installation. Having been greeted by the registrar and other staff members, I accompanied Laura into the exhibition, where she started by explaining that the 32-acre campus has multiple buildings, each with a different focus. Several of these displays had needed to become more interconnective, in order to offer visitors a less siloed experience. As Laura put it:

We mapped out a series of exhibitions that would tie them together for visitors, starting with *Life in the Adirondacks* ... here's what the Adirondack Park is, and so forth. The next thing on the list was making use of this incredible art collection. We wanted to have a place that would be permanently dedicated



(TOP RIGHT) ADKX's main entrance ■ (RIGHT) The Light Gallery; photos courtesy ADKX



TYLER SCHRADER (b. 1996), *Cosmic Portal*, 2022, ash, poplar, maple, and LED lights, 9 x 6 feet, 2023.015.0001

to the art. We faced some challenges with that. Most visitors think of us as a museum of history, not of art. I remember standing in the lobby of this building before it was reconfigured. I watched a woman push a baby stroller inside, look at an installation with paintings and say, “Oh, it’s just art,” and wheel right back out. I thought, “Well, there’s a problem! How do we engage people who might not be interested, who might be a little intimidated by the idea of art?”

ADKX visitors often consist of intergenerational groups that include small children, parents, and grandparents. The challenge for Laura and her colleagues, then, was to create something that all age groups would find engaging, without alienating the traditional art lover who prefers a quieter, more contemplative experience.

Laura continued, “So we started taking a deep dive into the collection, thinking about works we did not have, and would like to have, and the kinds of artists not represented, especially 19th-century women. We have a large and vibrant Mohawk and Abenaki community that is traditionally from the Adirondacks, including artists doing amazing things. They were under-represented, too.” Logically, the museum has been making acquisitions to fill these gaps.

Laura and her colleagues met with designers to develop spaces where, by immersing themselves in the art collection, visitors would be inspired to approach the museum’s other exhibits in fresh and exciting ways. By capturing

SANFORD R. GIFFORD (1823–1880), *A Twilight in the Adirondacks*, 1864, oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in., 1963.124.0002



CHARLES CROMWELL INGHAM (1796–1863), *The Great Adirondack Pass, Painted on the Spot*, 1837, oil on canvas, 48 x 40 in., 1966.114.0001, gift of Harold McIntyre Grout

a sense of place, the artworks help define how people think of the Adirondacks — as “Forever Wild.” Interpretive wall panels and labels make sparing use of the term *wilderness* because the museum wants to acknowledge the fact that the Adirondack region has long been inhabited by the Mohawk and Abenaki, who were displaced by newcomers seeking to profit from extractive industries and seasonal tourism. The artworks now on view were selected to tell those stories from different perspectives.

As we toured the exhibition, Laura described how this vision was put into action:

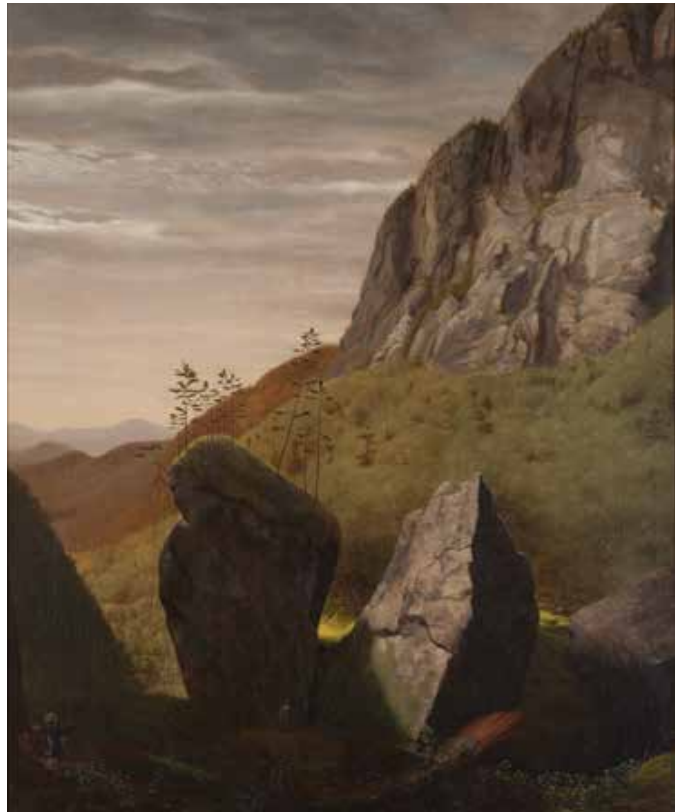
The challenge was reaching all ages. How do you appeal to children without turning off older art aficionados? So, we used a number of different strategies. One was to put the interactives in the center of each gallery, which gives kids something to do while the adults look at art. We had worried about maintaining that quiet, contemplative experience with a lot of kids running around. For the most part, people are respectful, and the kids are occupied. We’ve seen conversations occurring between kids and their elders about the art, and there’s nothing more natural than children and art.

Artists & Inspiration in the Wild is divided into four sections: *Light*, *Water*, *Forests*, and *Mountains*. Within each gallery, artworks ranging from oil paintings to baskets, ceramics, woodwork, metalwork, and textiles address a common theme. Initially this presented the designers with daunting challenges because the conditions under which a watercolor may be safely displayed are quite different from those for a canoe paddle. Exhibiting such a variety in the same gallery would require a subtle manipulation of light levels.

Laura said ADKX hopes “to bring in all sorts of different works from different periods.” She continued, “Coming next year is *Cosmic Portal*, which is nine feet tall and six feet wide. It was created by an up-and-coming woodworker in the Adirondacks named Tyler Schrader, who makes incredible layers of wood with LED lights that can respond to electrical impulses in the ground, moving the lights accordingly. It offers an opportunity to expand the collection in ways we haven’t addressed before.”

Laura called my attention to a sculpture by Margaret Jacobs (b. 1986), “an up-and-coming artist in the Mohawk Nation. She does a lot of work, as many do, with ideas about cultural identity and sovereignty. This piece is called *Carrying Knowledge: Mint*. It’s her take on a pack-basket with mint leaves. It’s about that connection with the natural world, herbal medicine, and knowledge of what nature does to benefit humankind, how that’s being carried forward into the future.”

We made our way to *Twilight in the Adirondacks*, a painting by Sanford R. Gifford (1823–1880). Laura explained that this yellow-orange



PAUL MATTHEWS (1933–2019), *Cascade Sunset (The Dark Hills)*, 2001, oil on linen, 50 x 60 in., 2001.053.0001



DAVID KANIETAKERON FADDEN (b. 1970), *He Peers through the Trees*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 24 in., 2022.014.0002

sunset scene is one of four canvases Gifford painted in the same location, each capturing a different light effect. This one was made on a hunting trip he took during the Civil War, which had already claimed his brother's life. As a member of the New York State Militia's Seventh Regiment, Gifford himself had faced mobs during the 1863 New York City Draft Riots. "When you look at the light in this painting," Laura noted, "you get a sense of the sorrow and rage the artist felt."

We came to another large canvas, a vertical composition of gigantic boulders at the foot of a rocky escarpment, Charles Cromwell Ingham's *The Great Adirondack Pass*. Laura observed, "The first time people saw this, what impressed them wasn't Ingham's skill as a landscape painter, but his accurate portrayal of the landscape, in scale with human beings. Painters, poets, and writers were inspired to come and stand on that spot. It was around that time that American artists were searching for something that would define them as American — as opposed to European. That connection to the landscape started to take on nationalistic overtones. The landscape symbolized who we were as a nation: pioneer settlers going out to conquer, and thus improve the land. That idea of *wilderness* really lingers in the American imagination."

The awesome power of nature is also captured in the painting *Cascade Sunset* by Paul Matthews (1933–2019), and in a brooding depiction of Ausable Chasm (which some call the Grand Canyon of the Adirondacks) by Samuel Colman (1832–1920). The jumbled forms and slashing brushstrokes of John Marin's watercolor *Adirondacks, Near Owl's Head* (1947) convey a sense of latent violence, while in Harold Weston's *Giant* (1922), dumping clouds swarm a bulging summit above broad snowy pastures. A more pastoral view is captured by Rockwell Kent in a 1961 painting of

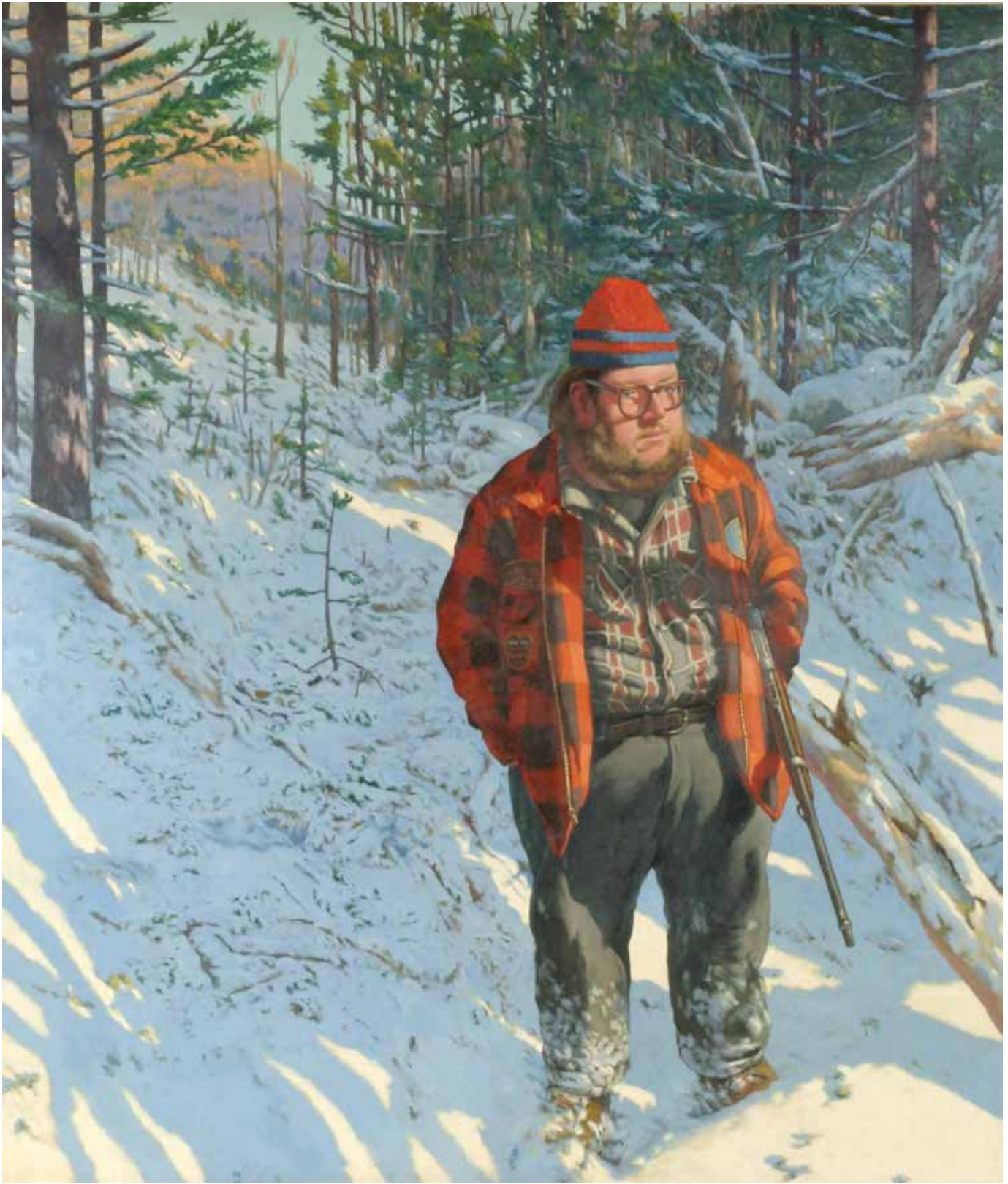
his Asgaard Farm, while Ellen Phelan's 2008 print *Autumn Border* celebrates wildness in the artist's garden. Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait's *A Good Time Coming* (1862) is a picture that could almost serve as an upbeat pendant to Gifford's elegiac *Twilight*. Laura explained that Tait's title is based on a line from Sir Walter Scott's novel *Rob Roy*, a reference to paradise after death. "It was painted in 1862 as the Civil War was becoming very bloody. So Tait was presenting the Adirondacks as a place to find peace and camaraderie in the midst of this awful event."

Nearby is a globe-shaped basket (1998) by a Mohawk artist named Florence Benedict; according to Laura, it "also speaks to peace and fellowship and camaraderie, but in a very different way, and these works are hundreds of years apart." Pairing disparate objects like these can be traced back to the African American artist Fred Wilson's groundbreaking 1992 exhibition, *Mining the Museum*, at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. Today a growing number of curators and artists are decolonizing museum narratives. On view at ADKX, for example, is *He Peers Through the Trees*, painted by Akwesasne Mohawk David Kanietakeron Fadden, who runs the Six Nations Iroquois Cultural Center 70 miles away in Onchiota, New York. His smiling portraits of indigenous people torpedo racist stereotypes such as the glum-faced cigar-store Indian.

In 1978, Don Wynn (b. 1942) became the first contemporary artist granted a solo exhibition at the Adirondack Museum, due in part to the international acclaim he had garnered as a participant in the New Realism movement. On view at ADKX now is his portrait of *Cedric Gates*, or *A Hunter in the Snow (Orion)*, which offers a contemporary take on Tait's *Still Hunting on the First Snow*.



JOHN MARIN (1870–1953), *Adirondacks, Near Owl's Head*, 1947, watercolor over graphite on paper, 15 1/4 x 20 1/4 in., 2011.050.0001



DON WYNN (b. 1942), *Cedric Gates or A Hunter in the Snow (Orion)*, 1975, oil on canvas, 90 1/2 x 78 in., 2003.025.0001, gift of Jack Beal and Sondra Freckelton

Not all of the paintings here are representational, however: a 1972 color-field painting by Ludwig Sander resonates with Edith Mitchell's *After the Microburst* (1996–99), a vibrant quilt that echoes the feminist aesthetic of Canadian-American artist Miriam Schapiro.

During my visit, I was drawn to several notebooks on display, including a hunting-trip sketchbook from 1870 by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge, an illustrator best known for his humorous paintings of poker-playing canines. Another sketchbook had been produced by self-taught artist Seth Moulton, who fashioned paintbrushes from his grandchildren's hair. A series of small, gorgeous watercolors by an

artist known only as L.L.S. captures the unspoiled beauty of the Adirondacks in the 1870s.

These are just a few highlights in this engrossing and comprehensive installation. At the far end of the building, visitors come upon the Art Lab / Robillard Family Makerspace, a kid-friendly, hands-on learning environment designed in collaboration with Adirondack artist Barney Bellinger. There visitors can discover that, in Bellinger's words, "everyone is an artist, builder, crafter, or maker." ●



Information: ADKX (theadkx.org) is located 90 minutes by car from Lake Placid, two hours from Albany, and three hours from Montreal. This year it is open daily between May 14 and October 24.

JAMES LANCEL MCELHINNEY is a visual artist, essayist, and author of the *Sketchbook Traveler* books, as well as many writings that explore intersections between art, landscape, history, and the environment. He resides in the Champlain Valley and Manhattan with his spouse, the noted art historian Katherine Manthorne, and a cat named Maeve. *American Nocturnes*, a selection of McElhinney's recent landscapes, will open on June 14 at Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe (gpgallery.com).

(LEFT) **ARTHUR FITZWILLIAM TAIT** (1819–1905), *Still Hunting on the First Snow: A Second Shot*, 1855, oil on canvas, 54 x 76 in., 1965.036.0001 ■
(BELOW) **CASSIUS MARCELLUS COOLIDGE** (1844–1934), Untitled page from an Adirondack Hunting Trip Sketchbook, c. 1870, pencil on paper, 2019.072.0001

