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**Exhibition Dedicated to Innovation in 19th-Century America Opens at the
Smithsonian American Art Museum July 15**

***United States Patent and Trademark Office Collaborating with Museum for Educational
Outreach and Public Programs about Inventing***

The exhibition “The Great American Hall of Wonders” examines the 19th-century American belief that the people of the United States shared a special genius for innovation. It explores this belief through works of art, mechanical inventions and scientific discoveries, and captures the excitement of citizens who defined their nation as a “Great Experiment” sustained by the inventive energies of Americans in every walk of life. “The Great American Hall of Wonders” will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from July 15 through Jan. 8, 2012. The museum is the only venue for the exhibition, which is organized by Claire Perry, an independent curator who specializes in 19th-century American cultural history. Until 2008, Perry was curator of American art at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

Through a collaboration with the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the museum will present a robust series of public programs and educational outreach about today’s inventors and inventions as a contemporary complement to the exhibition. These programs will include webcast public lectures, an inventors’ symposium and clinic, and hands-on activities for children and families, as well as outreach to schools and professional development workshops for educators.

“The Great American Hall of Wonders” investigates questions that are still critical today. The exhibition reveals both the successful experiments of the past, as well as the ones that went awry, and invites today’s citizens to explore a valuable legacy left by the founding fathers: a belief in the transformative power of American inventiveness.

““The Great American Hall of Wonders’ examines the belief in American ingenuity that energized all aspects of 19th-century society, from the planning of scientific expeditions and the development of new mechanical devices to the painting of landscapes and scenes of everyday life,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art

Museum. “There could be no better collaborator for this exhibition than the United States Patent and Trademark Office. The museum now occupies the noble historic building that was the Patent Office home during the Industrial Revolution, so our organizations share close historic bonds. The opportunity to work together on a project about the innovative character of Americans is a joy.”

The exhibition will feature more than 150 objects, including paintings and drawings by pre-eminent artists, including John James Audubon, Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin, Frederic Edwin Church, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Thomas Moran and Charles Willson Peale, as well as sculptures, prints, survey photographs, zoological and botanical illustrations, patent models and engineering diagrams. The exhibition explores six subjects that served as cultural lightning rods during the period—the buffalo, giant sequoia and Niagara Falls represent American beliefs about abundant natural resources for fueling the nation’s progress, while inventions such as the clock, the gun and the railroad link improvements in technology with the purposeful use of time.

Peale’s iconic self-portrait “The Artist in His Museum” (1822), which will greet visitors at the entrance to the exhibition, embodies the ideas set forth in the exhibition. Peale—museum founder, artist, scientist, inventor and former saddlemaker—depicts himself at the threshold of his museum, a democratic reinterpretation of an Old World “wunderkammer” or cabinet of curiosities. Its galleries were filled with portraits of the founding fathers, natural history specimens, mechanical inventions and a massive mastodon skeleton. At a time when many Americans feared that the country would not survive the passing of the founders’ generation, Peale insisted that it was not the revolutionary generation, but rather invention itself that lay at the heart of the national project. The next generation began to define what their democratic nation would be in their scientific and artistic descriptions of America’s bounteous nature and in mechanical inventions aimed at improving their lives.

“The United States began with an act of imagination,” said Perry. “The topic of the exhibition is not science, art or mechanical innovation per se, but rather what Americans of the 19th century believed about those endeavors and how they deployed them to direct their lives and the nation. They considered ingenuity to be their most important asset. Over the course of the century the United States as we know it came into being, and from all indications the process was a seat-of-the-pants business. As we confront the complexities of our 21st-century stewardship, knowing where we have come from may show us where we are headed.”

“When the Founding Fathers wrote our Constitution, they knew promoting ‘the Progress of Science and useful Arts’ was critical to the strength and longevity of our nation,” said David Kappos,

under secretary of commerce for intellectual property and director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office. “The United States Patent and Trademark Office is proud to be part of this exhibition uniting American innovation, ingenuity and artistic talent. While America’s innovative history is fascinating subject on its own, it will be even more spectacular to experience this exhibition in a building—once home to the Patent Office—that has been dedicated to invention and the arts for more than 150 years.”

The museum’s National Historic Landmark building is a fitting place to display the exhibition. On July 4, 1836, President Andrew Jackson authorized the construction of a patent office on this site. The building was designed to celebrate American invention, technical ingenuity and the scientific advancements that the patent process represents. The building was always intended for public display of patent models that were submitted by inventors. By the 1850s, more than 100,000 people each year visited the building, which became known as the “temple of invention,” to see the designs that filled display cabinets in the exhibition galleries. In addition to patent models, the government’s historical, scientific and art collections were housed on the third floor. The Patent Office occupied parts of the building from 1840 to 1932.

Publication

An illustrated book, *The Great American Hall of Wonders: Art, Science, and Invention in the Nineteenth Century* will accompany the exhibition. It is written by Perry and co-published by the museum and London-based publisher D. Giles Ltd.

Credit

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About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Follow the museum on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, ArtBabble, iTunes and YouTube. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Website: americanart.si.edu.

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