

THE ART OF MACKINAC



by Steve Brisson

For centuries, artists from across the country and around the world have found inspiration in the breathtaking beauty of Mackinac Island. Now, many of their works can be appreciated together at a new art exhibit on the island itself.

(Photo courtesy of Pixabay.)

For years, Mackinac State Historic Parks had a growing art collection and no proper venue to present it. Thanks to a generous donation from the Richard and Jane Manoogian Foundation, the Parks were able to convert the historic Indian Dormitory—located in Marquette Park below Fort Mackinac—into a state-of-the-art facility to exhibit the collection in 2010.

The Indian Dormitory was originally constructed in 1838 but only served its original purpose for eight years. From 1867 to 1960, it was used as the Mackinac Island Public School. In 1966, the structure was acquired and restored by Mackinac State Historic Parks and served as a restored historic building for three decades.

Adapting the facility for use as an art museum required the addition of an elevator, fire suppression, and climate control. Six indoor galleries feature the art of Mackinac—including fine and decorative

arts, Native-American collections, historic maps, and photography. A changing gallery displays an annually juried art exhibition on a particular theme. The facility also includes a hands-on art studio where adults and children can create their own Mackinac art.

The following images come from the museum's fine arts collection, which is exhibited in the main gallery. The earliest drawings, sketches, and paintings of Mackinac Island date to the early nineteenth century. Some of them are documentary in nature—such as the Belton or Davis sketches—rather than driven by artistic expression, but all are evocative representations of the island.

The majority of the works were clearly inspired by the beauty of Mackinac. White's painting, for example, is a stunning piece of folk art that initially appears part of a dream but, on closer inspection, reveals a detailed, charming, and heartfelt depiction of a lively community.

Several of the drawings and paintings were acquired decades ago, others more recently. The opening of the museum has spurred the acquisition of numerous other pieces over the last seven years. During the spring of 2017 alone, six new works dating from the 1920s to the 1960s were added to the museum's long-term exhibition.

The museum presents its collection to the public, providing a place to contemplate the beauty of Mackinac as seen through the eyes of visiting and resident artists over the centuries. The annual show and art studio bring the story up to the present, with the latter space also hosting special programs sponsored by the Mackinac Arts Council. In 2018, Mackinac State Historic Parks will add an artist-in-residence program to the museum, which will provide even greater opportunities for visitors to explore their artistic side as inspired by the beauty of Mackinac Island.





(All photos courtesy of the Mackinac State Historic Parks Collection.)

MICHILIMACKINAC FROM ROUND ISLAND

Francis Smith Belton, 1817

Pen and ink with watercolor on paper

On loan from Manoogian Collection

Major Francis Smith Belton conducted a tour of inspection of Fort Mackinac in the fall of 1817. While conducting his official duties, he also completed several drawings of the island. Belton's view of Mackinac Island from Round Island prominently features Fort Holmes towering over Fort Mackinac. Belton likely caught Fort Holmes in its last months of use because there is no record of occupation after the autumn of 1817. The topography of the island is somewhat distorted, but the view offers a fairly accurate representation.

MICHILIMACKINAC

William Dashwood, circa 1820–1829

Oil on canvas

The oldest-known painting depicting Mackinac Island—Michilimackinac by William Dashwood—was commissioned by Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. McDouall in the 1820s. McDouall served as the British commander of Fort Mackinac during the War of 1812. Dashwood's work commemorates McDouall's successful capture of the U.S. warships *Tigress* and *Scorpion* in September 1814.

After the British successfully repelled an American invasion force during the Battle of Mackinac Island in August 1814, McDouall ordered his men to capture the two vessels, which were preventing supplies from reaching the British garrison. With the removal of the blockade, the British were able to remain in control of Mackinac Island. McDouall finally returned the island to American control in July 1815, after the war had ended.



FAIRY ARCH

Henry Chapman Ford, 1874

Oil on canvas

On loan from Manoogian Collection

Born in Livonia, New York, Henry Chapman Ford studied in Paris and Florence before serving in the American Civil War, during which he provided sketches for the illustrated press. Discharged from the service due to poor health in 1862, he settled in Chicago. Ford is credited as being the first professional landscape painter to reside in the city, where he helped found the Academy of Design. In 1866 and 1869, he made painting tours of the western United States.

Ford moved to Santa Barbara, California, in 1875, where he spent the rest of his life. He became well known for his watercolors, oils, and etchings of Spanish missions. Ford completed his 1874 painting of the Fairy Arch on Mackinac Island shortly before moving to California. The work is a realistic and detailed—yet somewhat idealized—portrayal of nature. Fairy Arch was located on the island's eastern shore below Arch Rock and was destroyed in the 1940s during a misguided erosion-control effort.





FORT AND ISLAND OF MACKINAC

Caleb F. Davis, 1839

Pen and ink on paper

In August 1839, Detroit artist Caleb F. Davis visited Mackinac Island and completed a pen and ink drawing on paper. Viewed from the south, his drawing displays Fort Mackinac and the village. The new Indian Dormitory is prominently visible to the right, located below the fort. Davis's work represents a time of great change on Mackinac Island. The days of the fur trade were over, fishing was the main activity, and the era of tourism was just beginning.

UNTITLED VIEW OF MACKINAC ISLAND

Hannah White, 1830–1834

Oil on velvet

Hannah White was a sister of Amanda Ferry, whose husband, the Reverend William Ferry, operated the Protestant mission on Mackinac Island. White joined the group in about 1830 and taught at the mission school as late as 1834. Her painting offers an unusually distorted view of Mackinac Island. Nonetheless, the work is filled with a high level of detail regarding the topography and architecture of the island in the early 1830s. The accuracy of White's depiction is confirmed by other contemporary artwork, maps, and written accounts. Many of the landmarks portrayed still exist.

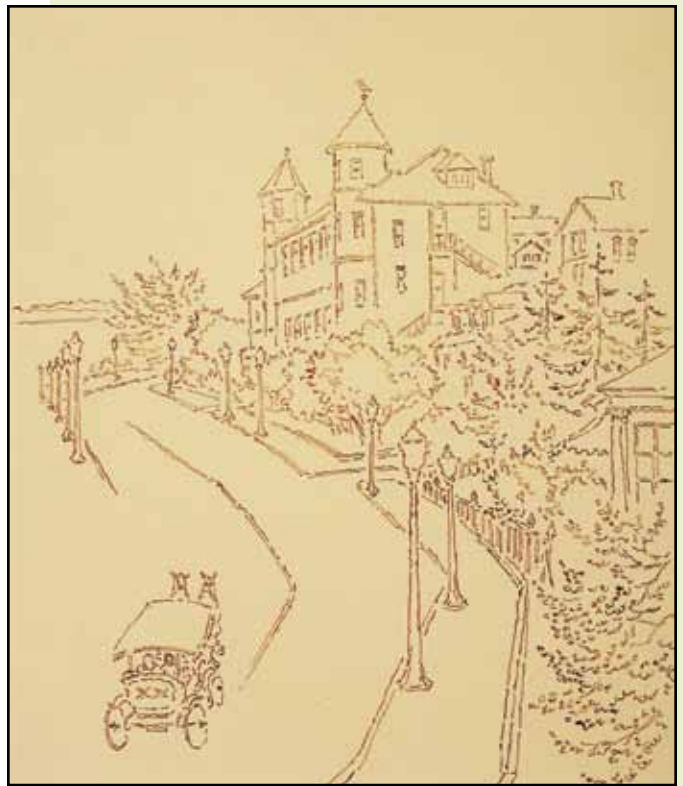
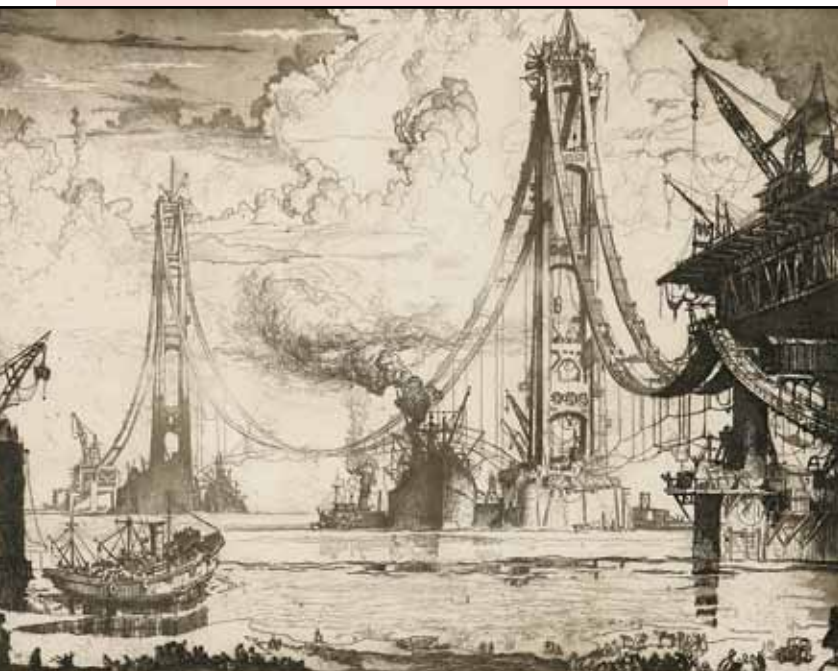
BUILDING THE BRIDGE, MACKINAC STRAITS

Reynold Weidenaar, 1957

Etching on paper

Born in Grand Rapids, Reynold Weidenaar studied at both the Kendall School of Design and the Kansas City Art Institute. Prominent etchers quickly recognized the quality of his work, and he soon received national acclaim through invitational exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Carnegie Institute. He was also a full member of the National Academy of Design.

Weidenaar worked mostly on copper using the intaglio processes—including etching, engraving, drypoint, aquatint, softground, and mezzotint—and produced more than 200 prints. He became one of the first artists in the United States to revive the technique of mezzotint printmaking. Weidenaar's painting of the Mackinac Bridge is one of three of his works on exhibit at the Mackinac art museum. His work captures the spirit and innovation during the construction of the mighty bridge that immediately became one of Michigan's most enduring symbols.



UNTITLED SKETCH OF MACKINAC ISLAND

Stanley Bielecky, circa 1960

Pen and ink on paper

Born in Germany and raised in East Chicago, Indiana, Stanley Bielecky pursued his art studies after winning several competitions and scholarships. He received his first formal training in the 1930s at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and enrolled in additional courses at the Chicago Art Institute. He worked as a commercial artist before becoming an instructor in fine arts at Valparaiso University in 1941. During World War II, he served in the U.S. Army in Europe from 1942 to 1945.

Following the end of the war, Bielecky resumed his teaching position at Valparaiso until 1957. He continued to paint and exhibit nationally until poor health forced him to retire in the early 1970s. Bielecky first came to Mackinac Island in the 1930s and sometimes worked as a bartender or carriage driver on the island in order to paint there. His favorite subjects were the common man at work or play on Mackinac Island; his home state of Indiana; and his other favorite haunt, New Orleans. 🇺🇸

Steve Brisson is deputy director for Mackinac State Historic Parks and curator of the Mackinac Art Museum exhibits.