



Release Date: June 13, 2019

Artistry of Fireworks Explored in National Gallery of Art Library Installation



Romeyn de Hooghe (1645–1708), plate 6 from *Divo et invictissimo Leopoldo I. P.F.A. fidei in Hungaria...*, c. 1686, engraving, National Gallery of Art Library, Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund

Washington, DC—Fete books were produced in 17th- and 18th-century Europe to describe a variety of important public occasions—religious festivals, state visits, aristocratic marriages, military victories, coronations, and royal birthdays—and to provide information about explosive displays used to entertain the attendees of such events. *In the Library: Pageantry and Pyrotechnics in the European Fete Book*, a new installation from the National Gallery of Art Library, presents an array of festival books and technical manuals that illustrate the technological and artistic evolution of firework displays and the methods for recording them in Europe. Through 20 examples of books and engravings, the exhibition captures these records and the ephemeral events they portray, both of which were used by rulers to project their power and prestige. *Pageantry and Pyrotechnics* is on

view in the East Building Study Center from June 24 to September 6, 2019, Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The installation is organized by the National Gallery of Art and is curated by Yuri Long, rare book librarian, National Gallery of Art.

About the Installation

Fireworks likely originated in Asia around the ninth century. Although their development is most often attributed to China, they were also used in ancient India. During the Middle Ages, this technology found its way to Europe, where it was first manufactured in Italy. By the 14th century, fireworks were used for religious festivals and public entertainment, as well as in military applications and books of science, which often included information on gunpowder and its uses. During the Renaissance, so-called fire masters created increasingly complex displays, resulting in the establishment of pyrotechnic schools throughout Europe.

In the 17th century, artists began to visually capture these pyrotechnic delights in fete books, primarily illustrated through etchings and engravings. These printing techniques allowed artists to render the fantastic spectacles in a variety of new ways, making full use of finer lines, large-sized prints that could be produced more easily, and, in the case of etching, more direct contact between the artist's hand and the surface of the printing plate. To represent the ephemeral fireworks through still images, artists developed strategies that evolved over time and were employed differently in various regions. For example, German baroque prints often used a tiered approach, showing the mechanics of the display in the foreground and the resulting explosions in the background, as seen in Balthasar Neumann and Andreas Nunzer's *Beschreibung der brennenden Feuer-Bühn, welche zu höchsten Ehren der durchlauchtigsten Fürstin und Frau, Frau Elisabeth, Gebohrnen Erb-Prinzessin zu Hungarn und Böhmeimb...* (1725), commemorative of the visit of Archduchess Maria Elizabeth of Austria (1680–1741) to Würzburg. In Nunzer's rendering, the fireworks, placed in the pavilion of the Fortress Marienberg, illuminate both the fortress and the nearby river.

Romeyn de Hooghe's *Divo et invictissimo Leopoldo I. P.F.A. fidei in Hungaria assertori, rebellium dormitori, Turcarum debellatori ob Budam septimò inexpugnabilem armis victricibus occupatam, ignes triumphales Bruxellis extractos dedicant consecrant[que] fama et gloria* (c. 1686) shows how artists attempted to condense various stages of fireworks into a single image. De Hooghe includes not only the fire masters, but also various small vignettes in the foregrounded crowd, evoking the spirit of the event beyond the ephemeral incendiary displays.

Other artists chose to use a particular moment in time to encapsulate an entire fireworks production. A plate by Antonino Bova (after Niccolo Palma) from Pietro La Placa's *La reggia in trionfo per l'acclamazione, e coronazione della Sacra Real Maestà di Carlo infante di Spagna, re di Sicilia,*

Napoli, e Gerusalemme... (1736) documents the 1734 coronation of King Charles III of Spain (1716–1788) as ruler of Naples and Sicily. The volume includes engravings that describe the town houses of the local nobility as they were decorated for the event, as well as the temporary structures assembled along the parade route, where a fireworks display was erected in the square of the royal place.

Some artists focused on individual rockets and effects, while others created an overall sense of the spectacle, prioritizing expression over accuracy. The *Description des feux d'artifices faits a l'honneur du Roy a Lille* (1680) records a celebration of King Louis XIV of France (1638–1715) held on the occasion of his visit to Lille in 1680. The fete included an allegory of rebirth from war in which a large monument of peace surrounded by flaming altars rose from the debris of war and corpses of the Titans, while four trumpeting figures proclaimed the glory of the king and the pacification of Europe.

Other works on view include Girolamo Cardano's *Hieronymi Cardani mediolanensis, medici, De subtilitate: libri XXI* (1559), an encyclopedic survey of information about explosives for military and entertainment purposes during the Renaissance; John Bate's *The mysteries of nature and art.: In foure severall parts. The first of water works. The second of fire works. The third of drawing, washing, limming, painting, and engraving. The fourth of sundry experiments* (1635), a devotion to fireworks with detailed instructions and woodcut illustrations showing special effects such as a rotating fire wheel and a flying dragon; and Pierre Faber's *Reception de tres-chrestien, tres-iuste, et tres-victorieux monarque Louys XIII. roy de France & de Navarre...* (1623), which depicts water-based pyrotechnic structures set off on the Rhône.

Library and Rare Books Collection

The National Gallery of Art Library holds more than 400,000 books and periodicals, including over 15,000 volumes in the rare books collection, with an emphasis on Western art from the Middle Ages to the present, particularly the Italian, Dutch, Flemish, French, German, Spanish, British, and American schools. The collection features an extraordinary range of material, from manuscripts and early printed books to annotated catalogs and price lists, from landmark publications such as Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* to serials produced by Dada artists. Special emphasis is given to the areas of collection catalogs, biographies of artists, manuals on technique and materials, architecture, color theory, the early history of photography, festival books, travel literature, emblem books, and artists' books.

The National Gallery of Art Library was founded in 1941, the year the Gallery opened to the public. In 1979 the completion of a new seven-story facility in the Gallery's East Building and the establishment of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA) allowed the library to broaden the purpose and scope of its collection. A major national art research center, the library serves Gallery staff, CASVA members, visiting scholars, and researchers.

National Gallery of Art Library installations are available for viewing from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

To access all other holdings of the library, which is open Monday through Friday, visitors must make an appointment. Call (202) 842-6511 or email refdesk@nga.gov for more information.

Press Contact:

Laurie Tylec, (202) 842-6355 or l-tylec@nga.gov

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt, Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc, and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Department of Communications

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353

e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Anabeth Guthrie

Chief of Communications

(202) 842-6804
a-guthrie@nga.gov

Newsletters

FOR JOURNALISTS:

[Sign up here](#) to receive the latest news briefs from the National Gallery of Art Communications Office.

GENERAL PUBLIC:

The Gallery also offers a broad range of newsletters for various interests. [Follow this link to view the complete list.](#)

AVAILABLE PRESS IMAGES ▼

[Press Images](#)

To order publicity images: Click on the link above and designate your desired images using the checkbox below each thumbnail. Please include your name and contact information, press affiliation, deadline for receiving images, the date of publication, and a brief description of the kind of press coverage planned.

PRESS KIT ▼

[Press Release](#)

PRESS CONTACT ▼

Laurie Tylec
(202) 842-6355
l-tylec@nga.gov

Questions from members of the media may be directed to the Department of Communications at (202) 842-6353 or pressinfo@nga.gov

The public may call (202) 737-4215 or visit www.nga.gov for more information about the [National Gallery of Art](#).

RSS (NEWS FEED)

http://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/press/rss/press_feed.xml

