American Storybook: The Imaginary Travelogue of Thomas Chambers
South Gallery
July 21, 2018 – January 6, 2019

Join the Speed Art Museum in the adventure of a lifetime, with American Storybook: The Imaginary Travelogue of Thomas Chambers. Chambers (1808 – 1869), was the first artist working in America to make landscape painting accessible to a wider audience and broader socioeconomic class. During the mid-19th century, as the country faced the realities of urbanization, industrialization, and westward expansion, demand for paintings depicting the wonder of the untouched American landscape – and an interest the larger world - grew exponentially. Chambers was an entrepreneur at heart; over the course of his career, he set up studios in the major American cities of New York City, Boston, Albany, and Baltimore, catering to a new generation of picture collectors in America who wanted to decorate their homes and businesses with works of art.

Chambers’ unusually expressive, simplified interpretations of nature place him somewhere between the genres of folk art and fine art. Free of the painstaking realism that defined the style of his artistic contemporaries of the Hudson River School of painting, Chambers’ paintings are whimsically crafted illustrations of already sensational natural wonders such as Mount Vesuvius and Niagara Falls. He relied upon print sources found in contemporary tour guides and travel books for his subject matter, and his colorful interpretations evoke a fictional, fairytale world, just outside the reality of our own.

Inspired by the American Fancy style of 1790-1840, the American Storybook gallery space recreates the living room of a comfortable Victorian home, nestled in the heart of the American northeast. The space is designed to welcome the viewer into this jewel-box of an exhibition. “The Eskenazi Museum is
the largest repository of paintings by Chambers, and it was an incredible opportunity to showcase these fantastical landscapes,” said Erika Holmquist-Wall, curator of the exhibition. “I was interested in sharing the story of how these paintings were made. Who was the audience for these pictures, and how was he marketing them? It had to be a challenge, being a working artist in America in the 1840s, and while we know very little about Thomas Chambers as a person, he created a large body of work that was widely collected during his lifetime.”

American Storybook: The Imaginary Travelogue of Thomas Chambers is the second in a series of collaborations and exchanges between the Speed Art Museum and the Eskenazi Museum of Art. “This partnership is remarkable for several reasons. One is the opportunity to share real masterpieces from one of the country’s great museum collections with a broader audience in Louisville and our region. It is also far longer than most three-month loan agreements and gives us five years to organize additional exhibitions from the Eskenazi while it is closed for renovation (and after), and then gives IU time to share works from the Speed’s collection with students and the people of Bloomington,” said Speed Art Museum Director, Stephen Reily. “Museums in the same region sometimes consider each other competitors, when they should be friends; I am proud to model a new kind of regional partnership between museums.”

EXHIBITION CREDITS

Exhibition organized by Erika Holmquist-Wall, Chief Curator and Mary & Barry Bingham Sr., Curator of European & American Painting & Sculpture, made possible this season by Elizabeth W. Davis, A. Cary Brown & Steven E. Epstein, and Paul & Deborah Chellgren, along with Delta Dental, and Dinsmore.

ABOUT THE SPEED MUSEUM

MISSION: Where art from around the world invites and inspires diverse audiences to experience the power of creativity.

The Speed Art Museum is Kentucky’s largest art museum with a collection that spans 6,000 years of human creativity. An independent museum located on the campus of the University of Louisville, the Speed continues to play an important role in outreach initiatives, workshops, and art-related school programs. The Museum is situated at a crossroads between the city and the University of Louisville, adjacent to the busiest pedestrian thoroughfare on the University’s campus.

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