

Young Artists Contest

for artists ages 7-18

both writing and visual arts
are eligible

Contest Open
April 1-May 31



PORTSMOUTH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY



THE MATTER OF MEMORY

This year, our main exhibition is called “The Matter of Memory.” This show is about the objects we use to remember the past - mementos, keepsakes, things passed down through generations - but also about how our idea of the past is influenced by the types of objects we save.

What does that mean? Think about clothing. Do you have an outfit that you wear on special occasions? Do you take good care of it? How many times have you worn it? Compare that to your favorite shirt or your favorite pair of jeans. How many times have you worn them? Are they still in good condition?

Now imagine, a few hundred years from now, which piece of clothing is more likely to survive? When historians study objects from the past, they have to think about the how’s and why’s of the way those objects got to us. If all that survived to the present day were the fancy outfits, how would that influence the way we thought about how people dressed? Objects are one part of the bigger picture and when we think about where they came from and how they got here, we can develop an even deeper understanding of history.

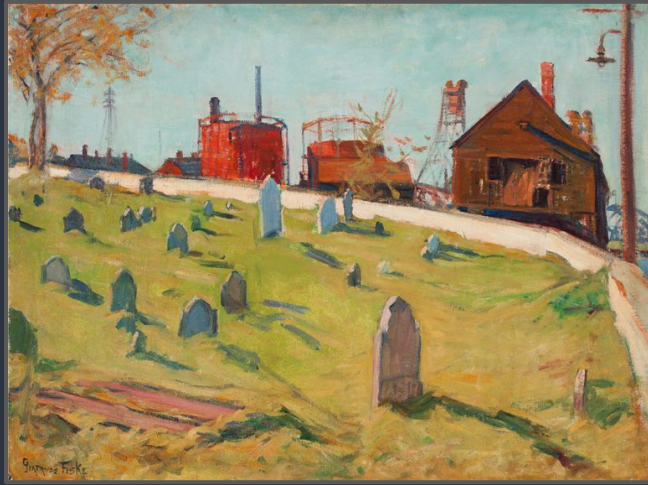
The Portsmouth Historical Society invites you to take a look at these objects from our exhibition and imagine where they came from. Who used them? What were their lives like? Why did they save these objects? Were they as meaningful then as they are now? Were they precious or ordinary? Can you “jump in” to one of the paintings and imagine taking a look around?

After you’ve taken a look at these objects, choose one that inspires you and create your own piece of art!

Maybe you’d like to write a story or a poem, or imagine an interview with someone who once used that object. You could imagine yourself as that historian living a few hundred years in the future - is that object still around? Do we still know what it was? You could also paint, color, or draw a picture!



“Portsmouth Burying Ground” by Gertrude Fiske, circa 1925



“Portsmouth Burying Ground” by Gertrude Fiske (1879 - 1961) is a painting of Portsmouth’s oldest cemetery, Point of Graves, which was established in 1671. Fiske painted the cemetery around 1925, so it also depicts some of the features and buildings on the Portsmouth waterfront a hundred years ago.

Fiske was born in Boston and studied art at the Boston Museum School. She was a talented American impressionist painter, but her art was unfortunately overshadowed for many years by male painters of the same style. Her work is now being discovered and enjoyed by a wider audience.

What was it like to see this graveyard in 1671? What about 1925? What does it look like today? Can you imagine the stories of the people who are buried there? What might Gertrude Fiske paint in Portsmouth today?



Portrait of Thomas P. Drown, circa 1805



Thomas Pickering Drown (1782–1849) was a Portsmouth silversmith. This portrait appears to be of Drown as a young man and there is hair enclosed in the frame that very likely belongs to him. The portrait was probably made as a keepsake for Thomas's wife, Mehitable Cutts Appleton Drown, and the black ribbon attached to the top suggests it may have also been used as a memorial to remember him after his death.

What do you think life was like for a silversmith in the early 1800's? Did Thomas like this portrait? What did his wife think about it? How did she feel looking at it after her husband passed away?



“Molly’s Table” circa 1750



An inscription on the bottom of this table tells us that it belonged to Molly Miles (~1718 - 1827) of Kittery Point, Maine, who was enslaved for much of her life. We don't have much information about her early life, but she gained her freedom in about 1783 and became well-known in the area in later life. A history of racism has meant the objects of enslaved and free people of color were often not preserved by historians and museums with the same care, so objects like Molly's table are rarer than they should be.

What was a day in Molly's life like? Molly Miles supposedly lived to be over a hundred years old - when she reflected on her long life, what do you think she realized?



Needlework Picture and Firescreen, circa 1875-1900



In the past, women were taught all kinds of needlework from a young age. These are two examples of an embroidery style called Berlin work, named after the city where the first patterns were published. They're made with large stitches and woolen thread. The example on top is a firescreen (an object designed to be put in front of a fireplace to protect people from too much light, glare, or heat), and the bottom example is a decorative tapestry depicting a knight and a lady.



Have you ever imagined living in the time of knights and damsels? Do you think people living over a hundred years ago imagined the same things? Do you know any embroidery, crochet, knitting, or other needlework? Would you have enjoyed learning these skills?



Watch and chain, circa 1770-1775



This watch was originally brought back as a gift for Sarah Sherburne Langdon by her husband, Woodbury Langdon, when he returned from a visit to England in 1775. Woodbury Langdon was the brother of John Langdon, who served in the United States senate and was governor of New Hampshire. The watch was passed down to Sarah's great granddaughter, then great great granddaughter, and was kept in the family until it was donated to the Portsmouth Historical Society in 1987.

As a wealthy woman in colonial Portsmouth, what do you think Sarah's life was like? Do you think she treasured this watch? How many hands did the watch pass through before it reached us? Imagine a story from the watch's point of view.



Mourning hair wreath for the Downs family, 1880-1900



Believe it or not, this intricate wreath is made of human hair! It may seem strange to us today, but wreaths and jewelry made with hair were a common way to remember a lost loved one in the Victorian era. This wreath was passed down in the Downs family and is made of the hair of various family members who had passed away. We also have examples in our collection of bracelets made of hair, brooches designed to hold locks of hair, and more.

Do you have any objects that were passed down from a loved one? What do you think this wreath meant to the members of the Downs family? What are other ways we remember people we've lost?



Gold mourning ring for Gregory Purcell (1727–1776)



It was a funeral custom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to present the minister, pallbearers, family members, and honored guests with mementos, including gold mourning rings such as this example, made for the funeral of Gregory Purcell. Gregory was a Portsmouth merchant. In 1758, he and his wife Sarah built the house now known as the John Paul Jones House. This small gold band has raised lettering on black enamel reading "GREGORY PURCELL ESQ. OB: 31 OCT 1776," and what is likely one of Gregory's hairs underneath the rectangular stone.

What do you think of this custom? What do you think life was like for Gregory and Sarah? How did Sarah's life change after her husband died?



“The Road from Portsmouth,” Sarah Haven Foster, circa 1870



Sarah Haven Foster (1827–1900) depicted many Portsmouth-area buildings and scenes in charming watercolors such as this example, as well as images of wildflowers and of European sites she visited on family trips. The bulk of her surviving work is in the Special Collections Room at the Portsmouth Public Library. She also published, with her brother Joseph H. Foster, *The Portsmouth Guidebook* (1876).

What would you put in a guidebook about your home town? What scene would you paint of the place you live? Imagine yourself in Sarah's painting - what are you doing?

Please submit your artwork on our website! We can't wait to see your creations inspired by our show!

SUBMIT HERE