

Letter from Thomas Moran to Ferdinand Hayden and Paintings by Thomas Moran

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In March 1871, Congress appropriated \$40,000 “For continuing the geological survey of the Territories of the United States, by Professor Hayden, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior.” Two months later, the nearly four-month-long survey began.

Medical doctor and geologist Dr. Ferdinand Vandiveer Hayden selected more than 30 scientists, technical personnel, and artists, including photographer William Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran, to join the survey of the Yellowstone region in northwest Wyoming territory. There had been scientific expeditions to the area as early as 1860, and Hayden began exploring the sources of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers beginning in 1869. But, the 1871 Hayden expedition provided scientific corroboration of earlier tales of thermal activity, produced lengthy descriptive reports and an improved map of Yellowstone, and offered extensive visual proof of the area’s unique geological features through Jackson’s photographs and Moran’s drawings and paintings.

William Henry Jackson was both a painter and a photographer with ties to New York and Nebraska. In 1869, he’d won a commission from the Union Pacific Railroad to document the scenery along various train routes. Hayden had seen his work and was

impressed. Thomas Moran came from a family of modest means that moved for economic gain from Bolton, England, to the United States in 1844. He was an accomplished artist when he joined the survey to capture the natural splendor of the American West in pencil, watercolor, and paint. He spent about 40 days in the Yellowstone area documenting more than 30 different sites. Moran and Jackson, who often traveled separately from the rest of the Hayden expedition, were at the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone from July 27 to 31, 1871. While there, Moran kept a diary, made sketches, and helped with photography. In early August, Moran left the expedition with its military escort to begin the long journey back home to Philadelphia.

Sometime after Moran’s return east by September 1871, he moved from Philadelphia to Newark, New Jersey, and began to paint *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (featured on p. 119). Hayden returned to Washington, D.C., in late October to prepare the official report of the expedition. His report,

complete with photographs and artwork, likely helped to generate support for a major piece of federal legislation. In late December 1871, just a month after Hayden’s return from the West, “An Act to set apart a certain tract of land lying near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River as a public park” was under consideration in Congress.¹

In January 1872, Moran’s illustrations of Yellowstone, based on his sketches, appeared with an article, “Wonders of the West,” in *Scribner’s Monthly* and then again in February, with Hayden’s article, “The Wonders of the West – II,” in *Scribner’s Monthly*. On February 27, 1872, in the midst of congressional deliberations, the House Committee on Public Lands issued a report that read,

This whole region was in comparatively modern geological times the scene of the most wonderful volcanic activity of any portion of our country. The hot springs and the geysers represent the last stages—the vents or escape pipes—of these remarkable volcanic manifestations of the internal forces. All these springs are adorned with decorations more beautiful than human art ever conceived, and

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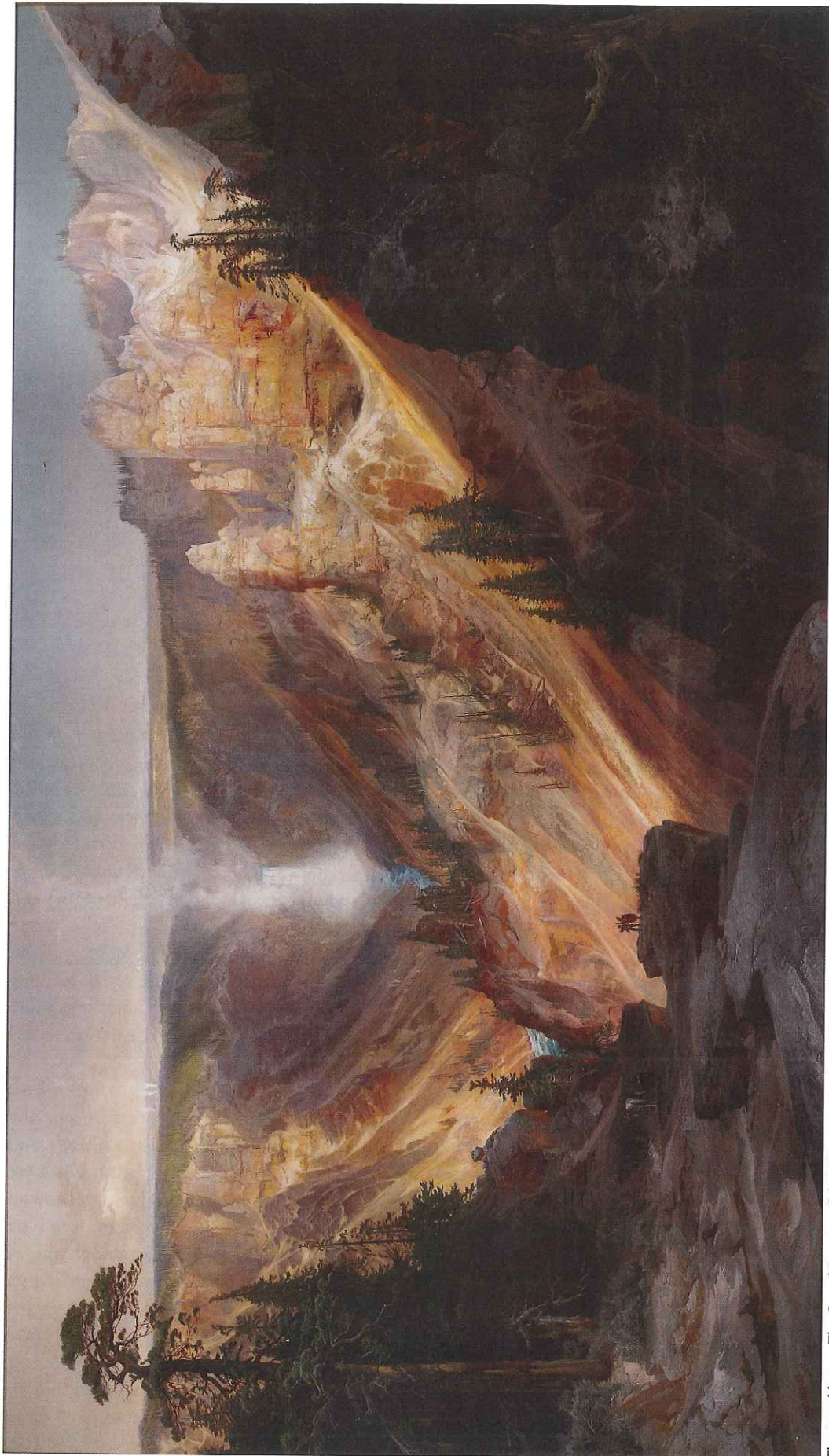
61 Sherman Avenue
Newark N. J.

March 11th 1873

Mr. F. V. Hayden,

My dear Sir

I have been intending to write to you for some months past but I have been so very busy with Yellowstone drawings, & so absorbed in designing & painting my picture of the Great Cañon that I could not find the time to write to anybody. The picture is now more than half finished & I feel confident that it will produce a most decided sensation in Art circles. By all Artists, it has heretofore been deemed next to impossible to make good pictures of strange & wonderful scenes in nature; & that the most that could be done with such material was to give topographical or geologic characteristics. But I have always held that the grandest, & most



Thomas Moran, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872, oil on canvas, 84 x 144 1/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Lent by the Department of the Interior Museum, L.1968.84.1



Thomas Moran, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1893–1901, oil on canvas, 96 ½ × 168 ¾ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of George D. Pratt, 1928.7.1

TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTS

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which have required thousands of years for the cunning hand of nature to form.²

Since most members of Congress had never seen the area with their own eyes, Moran's drawings and Jackson's photographs, along with Hayden's descriptions, had likely influenced the Committee's appreciation of Yellowstone's artistic works of nature. On March 1, two days after the House Committee on Public Lands issued its report, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Act Establishing Yellowstone National Park into law. It became the first national park, not only in the United States, but anywhere in the world. The law declared that the area would be protected from private development and therefore preserved in perpetuity, "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."

The "benefit and enjoyment" Moran had experienced in Yellowstone was

evident in a letter he wrote from Newark, New Jersey, on March 11, to Ferdinand Hayden. In describing his progress on *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, he explained how moved he had been by his visit and how the scenery challenged him as an artist,

I have always held that the grandest, most beautiful, or wonderful in Nature would, in capable hands, make the grandest, most beautiful, or wonderful pictures; and the business of a great painter should be the representation of great scenes in nature. All the above characteristics attach to the Yellowstone region and if I fail to prove this, I fail to prove myself worth of [the] name of painter.

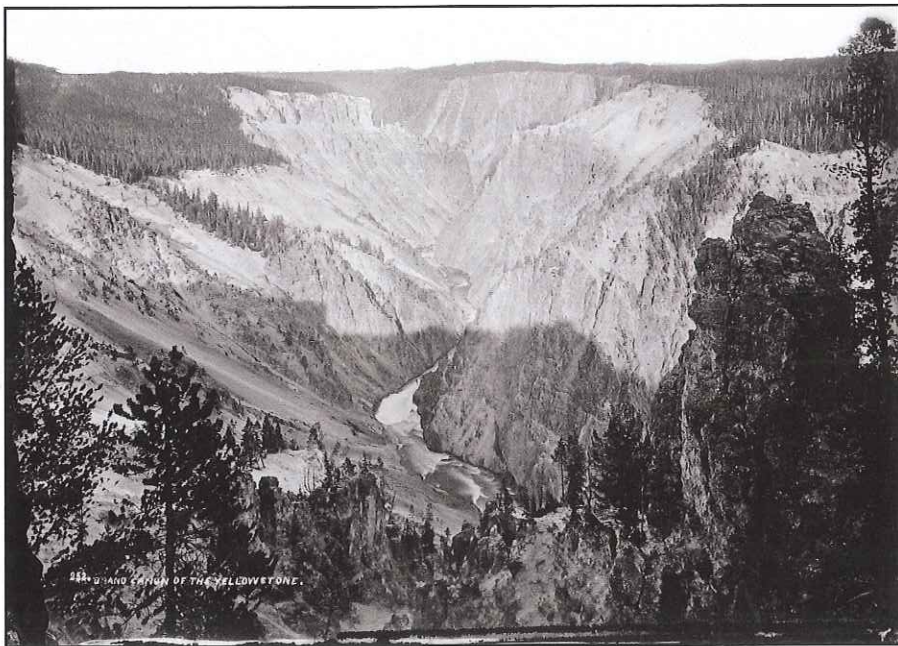
It was not enough for Moran that his painting be beautiful, he felt it must also accurately depict nature, if not an exact scene. While many of his

friends thought the painting a "great success," Moran believed that it would not be finished until the scientific eye of Frederick Hayden had gazed upon it. Hayden's "deep knowledge of nature and her workings," wrote Moran, would reveal whether the painting had captured the "truth" of Yellowstone. The painting was to be a melding of the artistic and the scientific, combining Moran's artistic eye and sensibility with Hayden's knowledge of "cause and effect in nature."³

On April 29, 1872, people were invited to Moran's studio to see the completed 84-by-144¼ inch work, and it was thought to be a faithful likeness. However, the painting does not show an accurate view. Rather, Moran assembled various sketches and photographs of different geological features to depict the scene. He also added a few figures, including himself, Jackson, and a Native American, as well as a fallen deer. Nevertheless, in the following month, the painting was exhibited at Clinton Hall, an auction room in New York City,

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Invite students to imagine that it is 1871, that they are each Ferdinand V. Hayden, and that Congress has just appropriated \$40,000 for them to conduct a survey of the Yellowstone area. Explain that they are to use the money to assemble a team to accompany them, and to purchase supplies for an expedition to describe, document, and map a large area of land. Ask them to make a list of the types of people (with what skills) they would bring. Encourage them to share their lists, then provide information from the background essay about Moran and Jackson, and lead a class discussion about what value artists and photographers, in particular, might have brought to the expedition.
 2. Provide students with copies of the letter Moran wrote to Hayden in March 1872 (the first page is re-printed with this article; the subsequent pages are available at www.docsteach.org, search "Moran"). Ask students to describe the tone of his letter and explain what activity Moran was engaged in at the time he wrote it. Next, show students *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=17832>). Attempt to project it so students might see it actual size (84-by-144 1/4 -inches); or ask them to review the Museum *EyeLevel* blog post and related Flickr photostream at <http://eyelevel.si.edu/2009/05/picture-this-morans-on-the-move.html>. Lead a class discussion asking students to what extent they think Moran "proved himself worthy of the name painter."
 3. Ask students to review Moran's diary entries of the Hayden Expedition for July 25–30, when he was sketching in the canyon. The diary can be found on the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov/yell/historyculture/thomasmoransdiary.htm. Challenge them to try to sketch an image of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone based on what they read. Then, divide students into three groups and ask each group to look at one of the following collections and compare their sketches:
 - a. Moran's watercolors of the same scenery in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection, such as *Above Tower Falls, Yellowstone, 1872*, at <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=17812> or *Excelsior Geyser, Yellowstone Park, 1873*, at <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=17818>; or
 - b. Photographs taken by Jackson that are available online from the National Archives at www.archives.gov/research/arc/. Conduct a "Digital Copies Search" on "Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone"; or
 - c. Other artworks available from the Yellowstone National Park website at www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/moran/.
- Finally, tell student groups that *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* has been called "a visual lesson in natural history."¹ Also explain that although based on his first-person experience in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone landscape, this monumental painting does not show any one view of it accurately. Rather, Moran assembled various sketches and photographs of different topographical and geological features of the area to depict the scene. Ask the groups to share scenes they located from the various sources that they think are reflected in Moran's painting. And ask them what sort of impact they think these images had on members of Congress considering legislation to protect Yellowstone.
4. Show students the first five minutes of "This is America," the first episode of the Ken Burns series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (Available at www.pbs.org/nationalparks/watch-video/#914). Ask them to write a one-page reaction as though they were Hayden or Moran.
 5. Encourage students to conduct research into one of the following topics and present their findings to the class:
 - a. Ferdinand Hayden, Thomas Moran, and/or William Henry Jackson
 - b. The U.S. Geological Survey, Hayden's connection to it, its history, and its work today. (Note, students might find the 3-D photographs on the USGS site to be of interest. See <http://3dparks.wr.usgs.gov/index.html>)
 - c. George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, or other artists who accompanied other expeditions. For example, see *Campfire Stories with George Catlin* at <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/catlinclassroom/>
 - d. Additional details about the Hayden Survey (who else participated, Hayden's reports to Congress, etc.)
 - e. The role of Congress in the establishment of the first National Park at Yellowstone
 6. Invite a surveyor to class to describe his/her work, show students his or her tools, and explain how surveying has changed since the 1870s. Encourage students to prepare questions ahead of time.
- Note**
1. Nora Panzer, *American Landscapes (19th-Century Selections)*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, n.d. Available at http://americanart.si.edu/education/pdf/american_landscapes.pdf



Note about the Document, the Photograph, and the Works of Art

Thomas Moran's letter to Ferdinand Hayden, and William Henry Jackson's photograph of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone (NARA identifier 516696), come from Record Group 57; Records of the U.S. Geological Survey, 1839 - 2008; Series: Hayden Survey, William H. Jackson, Photographs, compiled 1869 - 1878.

Moran's *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872, and *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1893-1901, are both on view at the second floor galleries of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. The 1872 painting was loaned to the Museum in 1988 by the Department of the Interior Museum. The 1893-1901 painting is in the Museum's permanent collection. There is also another late Moran work of the same scenery in the Museum collection. See *Rainbow over the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1900, oil on canvas, 30 1/8 by 37 inches, (1988.49.1) available online at <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=17862>.

to some critical acclaim. Then by mid-May, the painting traveled first to the Smithsonian and then to the Capitol, where Moran hoped to interest Congress in purchasing it. According to the *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston),

A surprisingly beautiful work of art, now on exhibition in Washington, namely Moran's painting of the Yellowstone Cañon, was on Tuesday placed in the old Hall of Representatives at the Capitol, and hourly attracted immense crowds of spectators, both general and connoisseur.⁴

Moran's dream was realized as the painting was purchased by the Federal government for \$10,000 in June 1872.

After much success as a landscape

painter following the purchase of *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, Moran went back to Yellowstone and its Grand Canyon in 1892. He wanted to create a second large-scale painting of this landscape; this time to exhibit at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 (known as the Columbian Exposition). Moran was accompanied by several World's Fair Commissioners from Wyoming, which had joined the Union in 1890. William Henry Jackson also went along to photograph the landscape, as he had done more than 20 years earlier. However this time, Moran's trip was sponsored by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, for which he was contracted to make a painting. Although the men's presence at the National Park caused quite a stir, Moran made many pencil sketches on site, several of which

are in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection. The sketches reveal Moran's attention to detail and are often filled with color notations. The resulting artwork is *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1893-1901 (shown on page 120), which depicts a slightly different view than the earlier painting. It is also larger and more broadly brushed as Moran was less interested in geological precision than in capturing light and color.⁵

Notes

1. Official title of the legislation; see www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=45.
2. House Committee on Public Lands Report [number 26 to accompany H.R. 764] on Yellowstone Park, February 27, 1872; 42d Cong., 2nd Sess. See www.yellowstone-online.com/history/1872.html.
3. Letter from Thomas Moran to Frederick V. Hayden, March 11, 1872; Hayden Survey - Letters Received January 1866-March 1874 [Entry A1-16]; Records of the Geological Survey, Record Group 57; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.
4. "A Beautiful Painting," *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston) (May 24, 1872): 1-4.
5. The 1893-1901 painting received little acclaim at the time of its unveiling, perhaps due to the public's familiarity with Yellowstone. In 1900, Moran returned to the area once more and made some changes to the work. Moran loaned the painting to the Museum in 1917 until it was purchased from Moran's widow two years after the artist's death in 1926.

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