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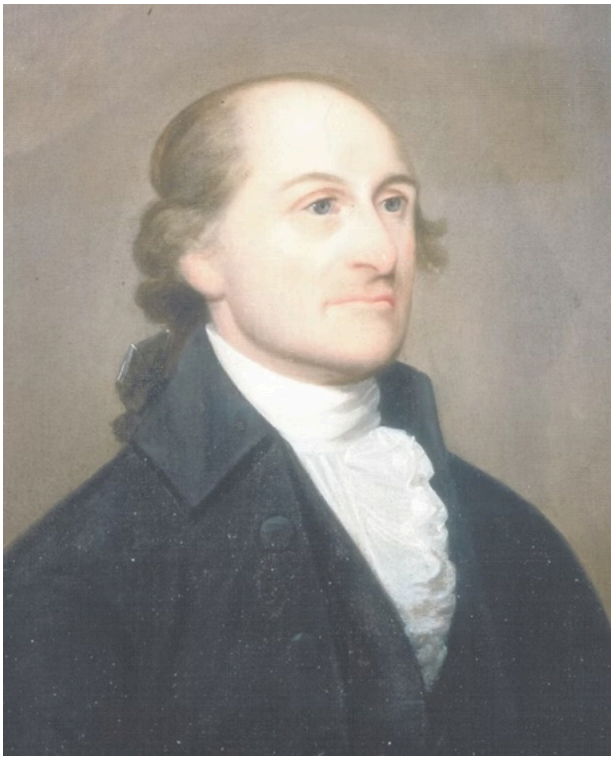
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2 hours ago

History comes to life at KMA

'Diplomacy at Home: The Domestic Lives of the Founding Families' celebrates nation's 250th

By JANE SIMS



John Trumbull (American, 1756–1843), John Jay, 1794, oil on canvas. COURTESY OF JOHN JAY HOMESTEAD STATE HISTORIC SITE

Historical artifacts are more than mere relics of the past, they have the power to spark dynamic discussions, curiosity, and community. At the Katonah Museum of Art exhibition, "Diplomacy at Home: The Domestic Lives of the Founding Families," everyday objects, furniture, portraits and correspondence belonging to the Founding Families come alive to tell the story of ho ounders' pri haped the early of American democracy.

"As we celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary, this exhibit provides a key opportunity to look at the Founders through their objects," said Grant S. Quertermous, guest curator of the KMA exhibition and curator and director of collections for the Richard Hampton Jenrette Foundation. "Each object in this exhibit tells a story — sometimes it's a story of triumph, other times it's a story of a struggle, but these objects are an integral part of our nation's history. At the heart of the exhibit is the extraordinary and ordinary evidence of lives lived with purpose, establishing a nation against the backdrop of running a home."

The exhibition is organized by the Katonah Museum of Art in collaboration with the Friends of John Jay Homestead and the Richard Hampton Jenrette Foundation. On view through Oct. 4, it aligns with the homestead's 250th anniversary and is a cornerstone of events planned by the town of Bedford and Westchester County as part of the nationwide 250th anniversary celebration.

"We are thrilled to collaborate with the Friends of John Jay Homestead and the Jenrette Foundation on this timely exhibit," said Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe, director and chief curator of the KMA. "Bedford is such a historic community, and tapping into its rich history and highlighting individuals such as John Jay, who lived just down the street from the museum, has particular relevance today."

"KMA is a great partner," said Caroline MacGill, board president of the Friends of John Jay Homestead. "When the Friends of John Jay Homestead received a grant from the Ford Foundation, we started to think deeply about what we could do to bring our nation's 250th anniversary to life. As the homestead is undergoing vital historic preservation and restoration work, we came up with the idea of bringing John Jay's personal collection out of storage and up for air. Around the same time, the Jenrette Foundation asked if we would like to have a portrait of Thomas Jefferson that was originally from the John Jay collection in honor of the 250th. This exhibit brings it all together, with many mutual benefits."

Focusing on the era of the Early Republic (1789-1815), the exhibition features the belongings of individuals from New York who played important roles in the formation and early admir tion of the national government



George Washington's Society of the Cincinnati Service Dinner Plate, c. 1785. Hard-paste porcelain, enamel and gilt. George Washington's Mount Vernon. Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

including John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and the brothers Robert and Edward Livingston.

"This exhibit gives us a glimpse of how these people lived as they were leading the country and putting policy together, all while managing their personal lives," said Mapplethorpe. "Just like in our times, their work and personal lives were seamlessly connected."

Many of the objects on display reveal how the home functioned as a hub of inspiration for ideas about governance and civic life, offering visitors insight into the origins of American democracy and its evolution over the past 250 years. "History is so much more than names and dates," said Quertermous. "We want people to walk away from this exhibit with a greater understanding of how the individuals who founded our nation lived. The chairs used by John Jay or Thomas Jefferson in their homes, the desks where important letters were written, and dinner plates that George and Martha Washington used for entertaining are as much a part of our nation's history as the names and dates of historical events."

The exhibition also underscores the crucial role of women, including Abigail Adams, Martha Washington and Sarah Jay, whose own forms of "domestic diplomacy" helped define the political and social culture of the times. "One especially interesting object in the exhibit is a bound list of invitations to dinner from 1787-88 that was kept by Sarah Jay," continued Quertermous. "The Jays frequently hosted dinners and used these opportunities to cultivate political alliances. Sarah recorded all of their dinner guests during this period in a bound list that reads like a 'who's who' of late 18th century American history."

"The research and preparation for this exhibit have given me new insight into John and Sarah Jay as this amazing power couple of the Early Republic," Quertermous added. "Jay was so many things — chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, governor of New York, diplomat, U.S. secretary of foreign affairs — but he was also a husband, father, grandfather, and a farmer in his retirement. It was fun to examine so many aspects of his life and present that life using objects."

While the founders were political strategists, writers and diplomats, Quertermous hopes visitors to the exhibit realize they were regular people.

"I think sometimes people are too quick to put the founders on a pedestal — both literally and figuratively — so it's important to realize they were regular people," said Quertermous.

"Material objects are such an effective way to illuminate the people and issues of the times," Mapplethorpe said. "Thinking about the people who lived in the past and seeing the objects they engaged with can be very meaningful and relevant to people living today."

At the KMA and concurrent with the exhibition is the program “Tiny Homes: Discover and Design” which offers children the opportunity to explore ideas of home and learn about architecture and interior design as they build model furniture, create their own textiles, and imagine the powerful stories objects can tell.



Armchair from U.S. Senate Chamber in Federal Hall, 1788-89, Mahogany, wool, and silk. Courtesy of John Jay Homestead State Historic Site

“We are always looking for ways to educate and engage our audiences through our programs,” Mapplethorpe said. “The arts aren’t extra, they’re central to individual well-being and to our communities, and they bring our communities together.”

ARTS & CULTURE