

Wilde at the Falls:

Touring the Falls with Oscar Wilde

March 27 - July 10, 2016



CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY

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In partnership with the “Wilde on the Borders” Conference, hosted by Niagara University, Wilde at the Falls: Touring the Falls with Oscar Wilde features historical Niagara Falls works on paper from the Castellani Art Museum (CAM) of Niagara University collection paired with notable quotes by Oscar Wilde following his 1882 visit to the Falls. Wilde’s quotes offer us unique insights into multiple facets of Niagara Falls such as Niagara as a symbol, advertising Niagara, extraordinary events, the preservation of natural beauty and the Free Niagara Movement.

This exhibiton pairs “sourced” quotations with selections from the CAM’s Charles Rand Penney Historical Niagara Falls Print Collection. The word sourced is quoted because, according to the Annotated Poetry Foundation Biography of Oscar Wilde, “Wilde has been credited with all kinds of quips he didn’t say, or might have said, or is said to have said. For example, when Wilde entered New York Customs on a visit to America in 1882, he is supposed to have told the agents: ‘I have nothing to declare except my genius.’ Did he really? Who knows?”

Wilde Lectures in Buffalo, New York

“On February 8th, 1882, Wilde lectured in Buffalo, NY. It was his twelfth lecture of the tour overall, and he was beginning to grow weary of the travel. ‘I’m dreadfully tired...it isn’t the lecturing. I delight in giving my lectures. The traveling has nearly used me up. I haven’t been used to it you know. At home I’d get up in the morning, have breakfast, do some writing, and then maybe start off for Egypt or some other distant [part], but take my time about it all.’ Fortunately for Wilde, the lecture in Buffalo, NY was a rare matinee, and there was time for him to take a much needed break with a visit to Niagara Falls. He boarded the 6:10 p.m. train over the Central Railroad to Niagara Falls, some twenty miles north of Buffalo.”

- *Buffalo Express*, February 10, 1882.

Wilde at the Falls

*“And is at First Disappointed and Critical—
But Grows Enthusiastic at Last”*

- *Buffalo Courier* [Special Dispatch],
February 9, 1882, Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada

“The day was all that could be desired for sight-seeing. Oscar Wilde, who made his headquarters at the Prospect House, breakfasted early, and wrapping himself in his long fur coat, stood out on the veranda of the hotel for nearly an hour steadily gazing at the scene before him. A carriage was ordered at nine o’clock, and in company with his agent, Mr. Vale, they started for the different points of interest. The change of scenery and fresh air seemed to please Mr. Wilde.

After dinner Wilde conversed on his morning’s adventure. To use his own words, he said: ‘When I first saw Niagara Falls I was disappointed in the outline. The design, it seemed to me, was wanting in grandeur and variety of line, but the colors were beautiful. The dull gray waters flecked with green are lit with silver, being full of changing loveliness, for of all the loveliest colors are colors in motion. It was not till I stood underneath the Falls at Table Rock that I realized the majestic splendor and strength of the physical forces of nature here. The sight was far beyond what I had ever seen in Europe.’ Wilde leaves tonight [February 9, 1882] by the Great Western and Michigan Central railways for Chicago, Illinois.”

Niagara Falls



Today there are twin cities of Niagara Falls—one is in the state of New York, but it had not yet been incorporated at the time of Wilde’s visit. The other, in Ontario, Canada, was

where Wilde visited the Prospect House (pictured above in 1880). The hotel sat very close to the precipice of the Horseshoe Falls, serving to enhance the sublime beauty and heighten the rush of the water over the Canadian Falls.

Selected excerpts from Oscar Wilde Returns. *New York World*, August 12, 1883 and oscarwildeinamerica.org – A Resource of Oscar Wilde’s Visits to America and cmgwww.com/historic/wilde.

NIAGARA AS A SYMBOL

As the first image of an American natural wonder available to Europeans, Father Hennepin's view of Niagara Falls *Untitled (Chute D'eau de Niagara)* from *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America* (1698) immediately became a ubiquitous symbol of the vastness and awesome nature of the New World; firmly establishing this extraordinary cataract as an emblem of the vast continent, a wonder of the natural world, and a metaphor for tumultuous political commentary and environmental preservation.



*"All art is at once surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril."*

An example of the first print of Niagara Falls. The image was created based on an original journal entry by Father Louis Hennepin (1626-1705), a Roman Catholic priest and missionary of the Franciscan Recollet order. Hennepin's view was first published 1697 in Utrecht in the first edition of *Nouvelle Decouverte d'un tres grand Pays Situe dans l'Amerique*.

After Louis Hennepin (1626-1705), *Untitled (Chute D'eau de Niagara)* from *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, 1698, second-state engraving, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006

*"I think that God, in creating man,
somewhat overestimated his ability."*

This third known image of Niagara Falls features Elijah rising towards heaven in a fiery chariot on the left. The Falls appear to be greatly heightened and gesturing onlookers appear small on a large bluff in the foreground. As is the case in most seventeenth-century prints of natural phenomena, Niagara is more the occasion for religious allegory than a focus in and of itself.

Sebastian Leclerc, *Chute de la Riviere de Niagara*, ca. 1700, etching, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006



ADVERTISING NIAGARA

Another example of the application of Niagara Falls as an iconic symbol was commercial advertising. Niagara Falls, an instantly recognizable image, appeared in countless advertisements in both Europe and the United States. Imagery of Niagara Falls was used by companies and factories (such as Headley Chocolate Company, based in Baltimore, MD) that were not physically located anywhere near the Falls, or even New York State.

A trade card shaped like an artist's palette, upon which is printed a view of Niagara Falls from Prospect Point. On the verso of this image is the following text, "The Niagara River. Can't be swept back with a broom, neither can you expect to get 'as good a wash' with an imitation as you do with the genuine DINGMAN SOAP. Use only the genuine Dingman's Soap. Always the Best! Always the Purest! and, like Niagara Falls, THE WONDER OF THE AGE!"

Trade card for *The Dingman Soap Company*, ca. 1880, chromolithograph, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006



“Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.”

“Over the centuries, poets, essayists, historians and ordinary visitors have struggled, and often failed, to find words to describe the lure of these waters. Yet in the end, a single word – an old, well-used word – best captures the essence of Niagara. In spite of mankind’s follies and nature’s ravages, in spite of scientific intrusion and unexpected catastrophe, in spite of human ambition and catchpenny artifice, the great cataract remains what it has always been, and in the true sense of the word, Sublime.”

-Pierre Berton, *Niagara: A History of the Falls*, 1992.

Arthur Lumley (1837-1912), *Niagara Seen With Different Eyes* from *Harper’s Weekly*, 1873, wood engraving, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006



EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS

Niagara Falls has been the scene of many fascinating events over the years. From military exploits, notorious escapades, daredevil high wire walkers to personal tragedies; the public is forever fascinated by the goings-on at Niagara Falls. Even when an event did not actually take place at Niagara (for instance, the 1901 Pan-American Exposition which took place in nearby Buffalo), Niagara Falls was still the subject of choice for inspiration.

“There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

This lithograph was used to advertise a performance by M. Hanlon in France rather than at Niagara Falls. This circumstance is indicated both by the language of the poster and by the fact that the United States flag is shown on both sides of the river, a mistake that is unlikely for a poster issued for a North American performance. It is likely that Hanlon never performed his “Exercises on the Perilous Ladder” at Niagara, but just made the claim to boost his reputation in Europe. The Hanlon Brothers were an acrobatic troupe and theatrical producers in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries combining comedy, acrobatics and illusions in a spectacular way.

Hoster, *Exercises on the Perilous Ladder*, ca. 1850-60s, lithograph with hand color, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006



"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

An unusual view of Niagara from Asa Smith's *Illustrated Astronomy*. Christopher Lane offered insight about this work in *Impressions of Niagara: The Charles Rand Penney Collection* (1993). *Illustrated Astronomy* was written by the principal of Public School No. 12 in New York City. Smith's stated goal was "to present all the distinguishing principles in physical Astronomy with as few words as possible." This particular image records a meteor shower that took place in November 1833. The two cataracts are shown from the Canadian shore.

Asa Smith, *View of the Meteoric Shower, as seen at Niagara Falls on the Night of the 12th and 13th of November, 1833* from *Smith's Illustrated Astronomy, Designed for the use of the Public or Common Schools in the United States*, 1863, wood engraving. Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection. Museum Purchase Fund, 2008



PRINTS FOR THE WEALTHY

Prints were used for home decoration by the wealthier classes. While popular printmakers were issuing inexpensively produced lithographs, other print publishers aimed to create prints of such quality that they could be proudly displayed in the homes of the upper middle class and the very wealthy. These prints were issued in much smaller quantities on very expensive paper. The images were drawn by accomplished professional artists with skilled craftsmen completing the elaborate processes of hand coloring in tremendous detail. Once again, Niagara Falls was a popular subject for these prints, impressive for their artistic excellence, high quality of production and superior aesthetic appeal.

"I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best."

The illustration on the right is the most celebrated image of the Falls – the "official" hand-colored lithograph of Frederick Church's monumental 1857 painting, *Niagara*. The print was sold by subscription; artist's proofs cost \$30, regular edition prints cost \$15 (\$780 and \$390 respectively, in today's currency). The first subscriber was the 19th President of the United States – Millard Fillmore (1800-1874) from Buffalo, NY. The original painting, is in the permanent collection at Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Frederick E. Church (1826-1900), *The Great Fall-Niagara*, 1875, engraving with hand color, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006



"Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination."

A humorous illustration showing the water at Niagara Falls diverted to provide power for the factories that have been built along the river, leaving a cliff and a series of pipes where the water used to be. New tourist attractions, such as a fish pond, barrel jump chute, *Genuine Niagara Falls* water tasting station and a Whirlpool carousel, have been developed to take advantage of the dry riverbed. Although this lithograph presents a comical approach, it reflected serious preservation issues for Niagara Falls and the surrounding region.

J. S. Puatle (?), *Save Niagara Falls From This* from *Puck*, 1906, chromolithograph, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection, generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006



This exhibition is presented in partnership with the
Wilde on the Borders: Symposium, Theatre, and Art,
held at Niagara University on April 2, 2016.



Albumen silver print. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gilman Collection, Purchase, Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee Gift, 2005.

Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) rich and dramatic portrayals of the human condition came during the height of the prosperity that swept through London in the Victorian Era of the late 19th century. Wilde's official biography tells us, "At a time when all citizens of Britain were finally able to embrace literature the wealthy and educated could only once afford, Wilde wrote many short stories, plays and poems that continue to inspire and provide humorous historical commentary to millions around the world. An Irish playwright, poet, and essayist, Wilde may be the most famous quotessmith in literary history."

On February 8, 1882, after his seventh lecture in America in just over a week, Oscar Wilde traveled north from Buffalo, NY crossing

the border by train to Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada to play the role of tourist.

In typical Wilde fashion, his response to seeing the falls was paradoxical, proclaiming it "one of the earliest,

if not the keenest, disappointments" of a bride's married life, yet appreciating its aesthetic and spiritual power as "a sort of embodiment of pantheism." Wilde's visit to Niagara Falls is both microcosm and metaphor for all of what might be called Wilde's 'border crossings' – national, classed, sexual, religious, and aesthetic. *Wilde on the Borders* celebrates Wilde's complexity through the forms he expressed: essays, theatre, and art. This event features a Wilde day of lively academic discussions hosted by the English Department.

Additional events being presented on the occasion of the *Wilde on the Borders: Symposium, Theatre, and Art* include:

March 31, 2016-April 4, 2016

Lady Windermere's Fan

The inaugural production of Oscar Wilde by Niagara University's acclaimed Theatre Department, in the Leary Theatre. For more information, please contact 716-286-8685 or visit theatre.niagara.edu.

Saturday, April 2, 2016

Guided tour of Wilde at the Falls: Touring the Falls with Oscar Wilde

with Michael Beam, Curator of Exhibitions at 4:00 p.m.

Please contact 716-286-8200 or visit castellaniartmuseum.org for more information.

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Museum and Shop

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716.286.8200 fax: 716.286.8289
Tuesday to Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, 1:00 - 5:00 p.m.
Docent tours available upon request. Call
716.286.8200 for additional information.

Castellani Art Museum at the Falls

Conference Center Niagara Falls
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