

STATE OF THE ARTS



In his painting “The Green Gorge,” Thomas Paquette depicts a Mississippi River vista that is part of a 72-mile national park running through the Twin Cities. Images provided by Groveland Gallery

The parks that art built

Artists helped establish America’s national parks. Now they are celebrating the centennial of the National Park Service.

By MARY ABBE
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Artists may seem like strange bed-fellows in the country’s 59 national parks, but they’ve been there since before Congress and President Ulysses S. Grant set aside the Yellowstone Valley and 1.2 million surrounding acres as the country’s first national park in 1872.

“Think of Thomas Moran, who painted Yellowstone, and William Henry Jackson, who photographed it,” said John Anfinson, a park historian and superintendent of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. “People didn’t believe the stories about the grandeur of that landscape until Moran came back East with his paintings and Jackson with the photos that helped persuade Congress.

“Photographers Carleton Watkins and later Ansel Adams were very involved with Yosemite. So artists have played a huge role in actually creating our national parks.”

This summer, artists are also helping to celebrate the 2016 centennial of the National Park Service, the government agency that maintains the country’s nationally designated parks, rivers, monuments, landmarks, buildings and so on.

Park-themed shows and events will be held in museums, galleries and parks around the country. In Minneapolis, Groveland Gallery is presenting two park exhibits plus artist talks, workshops and events through Aug. 13. Come fall, the Phipps Center for the Arts in Hudson, Wis., is planning a multimedia show on the theme of “National Parks: Personal Narratives” to run Oct. 21-Nov. 27.

One offbeat summer program will display poetry on official park signs in the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and on trail signs in four other national parks ringing the Great Lakes. In one verse, Egyptian-American poet Moheb Soliman riffs about his phone that “calls all birds with its barbaric app.”

Such untraditional art delights Anfinson, himself an unconventional park ranger, having earned a doctorate in American history from the University of Minnesota and worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before joining the Park Service. The Mississippi park he



Paquette’s “Sanctuary Between Cities” evokes a bucolic Mississippi River within an urban setting.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CENTENNIAL EXHIBITIONS

A sampling of the ways in which regional museums, galleries and parks are celebrating the centennial of the National Park Service:

Groveland Gallery: The exhibitions “America’s River” and “Sea to Sea” run June 11-Aug. 13, with artist talks and slide show at 7 p.m. July 14 and a Plein Air SmackDown 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Aug. 6, followed by a sale of the works. (All events free. 25 Groveland Terrace, Mpls. 612-377-7800, grovelandgallery.com)

Phipps Center for the Arts: “National Parks: Personal Narratives,” a national, juried multimedia exhibition. (Oct. 21-Nov. 27. Free. 109 Locust St., Hudson, Wis. 1-715-386-2305, thephipps.org)

Great Lakes Poetry Art Installation on park signs at Apostle Islands, Pictured Rocks, Sleeping Bear Dunes, Indiana Dunes, Isle Royale National Lakeshore. (nps.gov/apis)

For more information about arts in the national parks, go to nps.gov/arts

oversees is a 72-mile stretch of riverfront that winds through the Twin Cities area and encompasses graffiti-splashed bridges and industrial sites as well as bucolic shorelines and canoe landings.

“Artists were there at the beginning of the park system, so it’s great to have them there today,” Anfinson said. “I encourage artists, writers and musicians to do the art of the 21st century. I think it has to be different if it’s going to appeal to people today.”

‘Good painting territory’

Given their dramatic vistas and family-friendly associations, national parks

hold natural attractions for artists.

“Most parks were chosen for some geological or plant feature — canyons, geysers, giant redwoods — that make them spectacular,” said Groveland director Sally Johnson. “Many of us remember being packed into the back of the station wagon and driven out to Yellowstone as kids, so we have an emotional tie, too. When you combine spectacular locations with emotional attachment, well, that makes for good painting territory.”

Groveland’s main show, “America’s River,” will feature about eight large oil and 30 small gouache paintings, the latter about the size of playing cards, by Minneapolis-born,

Pennsylvania-based artist Thomas Paquette. His images range from miniature, sun-splashed views of Minneapolis to a hip-booted fisherman casting a line under the Stone Arch Bridge and gravel “mountains” on Pig’s Eye island.

“I’m looking for beauty in smokestacks, power lines, the lock-and-dam,” said Paquette, whose landscape paintings have been featured in solo museum shows throughout the United States and have hung in 18 U.S. embassies on five continents.

Three of his luminous landscapes now hang in the U.S. ambassador’s residence in Moscow, which “is a big deal,” he said. “I think they bring

my work into trouble spots when they’re trying to show the grandeur of America.”

Conversing with the beavers

Groveland’s other show, “Sea to Sea,” features national park paintings by 20 artists, most of whom have participated in the park system’s highly competitive artist-in-residence program.


“I didn’t have a kayak, so the park’s cleanup crew would drop me off at an island with a walkie-talkie and they’d pick me up in the evening,” said Holly Swift, an Edina-based painter who was an artist in residence at Voyageurs National Park in northern Minnesota several years ago.

“Water is a constant in my work — waterfalls, rapids, reflections — and up there it turned out to be a beaver pond,” Swift said. “The beavers had made a dam, and I’d draw them moving in and out of the water, but they did not like me being there. Four of them would come and whack their tails, then swim away. We had quite a conversation. Being there heightened my awareness of sounds — deer, loon calls, fish jumping.”

The featured art ranges from aerial views of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway to waves crashing on the shore of Washington’s Olympic National Park, and shadows gathering in the rugged gullies and canyons of South Dakota’s Badlands.

“Usually my work is all about water, reflections, bent grasses, but then I had a chance to go to Death Valley in 2010,” said Jean Gumper, who teaches at Colorado College and has had residencies in at least four national parks. “It was 103 degrees at the end of March, and the next weekend it snowed. It has gigantic views with dramatic metamorphic rocks, huge deserts, incredibly colored springs and white alkali flats. I usually work big, but I fell in love with the place and did a whole series of little woodcut prints of flowers from Death Valley.

“One of the things that’s very interesting about the parks is that they are open to all different types of interpretations,” she said.

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