The Art of Peril: Fires, Shipwrecks, and other Disasters Webb Gallery basement, 2013, curated by Sara Woodbury, Curatorial Fellow

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Introduction

From fires to earthquakes, floods to explosions, catastrophes saturate our popular culture, wreaking havoc in television broadcasts, Internet sound bites, film, and other media. Yet our fascination with calamity is not unique to our time. Disasters have always enthralled humanity with their seemingly effortless destruction, but during the 19th century, lithography, photography, and other technological advancements made images of catastrophe more readily available than ever before, reminding viewers of not just the fragility of human existence, but also its resilience. This exhibit explores our fascination with disaster, both natural and manmade, through a selection of prints, photographs, and other objects from the permanent collection. Most of these works date from the 19th century, but the 18th and early 20th centuries are also included. The North Gallery concentrates on maritime disasters, while the South Gallery explores fires, train wrecks, and other catastrophes on land.

North Gallery

Albert Bierstadt (German-American, 1830-1902)
The Burning Ship, 1869
Oil on canvas
Museum Purchase, from the Collection of Maxim Karolik, 1959-265.4

This painting likely depicts one of several ship burnings conducted during the Civil War by the C.S.S. *Shenandoah*. Originally a British steamer called the *Sea King*, this vessel was secretly bought by the Confederacy in 1864 and refurbished as a warship. Between 1864 and 1865, the *Shenandoah* attempted to disrupt the Union economy by seizing its merchant ships and whalers. Though Robert E. Lee had officially surrendered on April 9, 1865, the *Shenandoah* continued to capture ships until August of that year, when it eventually learned of its country's defeat.
The artist of this work, Albert Bierstadt, was one of the most popular American painters of the mid-19th century. While Bierstadt remains best known today for his depictions of expansive Western landscapes, he also executed marine scenes. This painting in particular demonstrates his mastery of light, with the fire appearing to emanate its own lurid heat.

Nathaniel Currier (American, 1813-1888), after James E. Butterworth (American, 1817-1894)
The Ships Antarctic of New York, Capt. Stouffer, and Three Bells of Glasgow, Capt. Creighton, rescuing the passengers and crew from the Wreck of the Steam Ship "San Francisco." 1854
Hand-colored lithograph
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 27.6.3.4-34

Like the more famous *Titanic* nearly 60 years later, the steamship *San Francisco* encountered disaster on her maiden voyage. Built in New York, the *San Francisco* was the newest ship constructed for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, which transported goods, people, and mail

between New York and California. In December 1853, the ship was caught in a winter gale in the Gulf Stream, sinking several days later. Of the approximately 700 people on board, over 300 died from exposure, drowning, or cholera, the latter the result of poor sanitary conditions on the ship. The survivors were rescued by three different vessels, the *Antarctic*, the *Three Bells*, and the *Kilby*.
This print depicts two of those rescue ships, the *Antarctic* and the *Three Bells*, circling around the *San Francisco* to retrieve the remaining survivors. Each ship is tilted at a dramatic diagonal, emphasizing the tumultuous marine conditions.

S.T. Gordon, publisher (American, died 1890), Sarony and Company, lithographers (American, 1853-1857)
Three Bells Polka cover sheet, 1854
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of Rush Taggart, 1991-55.3

In the aftermath of the *San Francisco* disaster, Captain Robert Creighton of the Glasgow-based ship *Three Bells* became a national hero. Creighton and his crew encountered the foundering *San Francisco* while en route to New York, and remained with it for six days, under turbulent conditions, until all survivors had been rescued. Creighton's willingness to stay with the ship captivated the American imagination, inspiring works such as this polka by composer T.J. Cook. Developed in Bohemia, the polka is a fast couples' dance that became extremely popular in the United States during the mid-19th century. Polkas were written to commemorate a variety of occasions during the height of its popularity, from the wedding of General Tom Thumb in 1863 to the heroism of the *Three Bells* crew.

John B. Guerrazzi (Italian, active 19th century)
The Burning of the American Fregate Philadelphia in the Harbour of Tripoli happily executed by the valiant Cap. Decatur to whom this plate is respectfully dedicated by his Obedient Servant/John B. Guerazzi/Sold in Leghorn, 1805, 1805
Engraving
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 27.6.3.3-36

Whereas most of the shipwrecks explored in this exhibition were accidental in nature, the burning of the *Philadelphia* was deliberate. Launched in 1799, the *Philadelphia* was a warship that was captured by Tripoli, located in Libya, in 1803. During the early 19th century, Tripoli had been seizing American trade vessels, and frigates such as the *Philadelphia* were sent to patrol the region in an effort to curb piracy. Rather than let the Tripolitans use the vessel for their own benefit, the American Navy decided to destroy the ship altogether. On February 16, 1804, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and a team of volunteers ignited the captured ship, ultimately sinking it.

This engraving was printed and sold in Leghorn, which is the Anglicized name of the Italian port city Livorno. While the Italian states were not official allies of the United States during this time, they were also subjected to Tripolitan piracy, and approved of American efforts to quell it.

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Currier and Ives (American, active 1837-1907), after W.K. Hewitt (American, active 19th century)
Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat Lexington in Long Island Sound on Monday Eveg. Jan. 13th 1840, by which melancholy occurrence; over 100 persons perished, ca. 1840-1857
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of Rush Taggart, 1990-2.50

This depiction of a burning steamship, the *Lexington,* was the first major-selling print produced by Nathaniel Currier, one of the most popular lithographers of the 19th century. Over the following decades, the Currier and Ives firm would market several disaster-themed prints, capitalizing on the public's fascination with catastrophe.
Currier's success with the *Lexington* lithograph is not surprising, considering the sensational nature of the wreck. Commissioned by Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1834, the *Lexington* was a paddlewheel steamship that offered ferry transport between New York, Rhode Island, and eventually Connecticut. During the evening of January 13, 1840, the *Lexington* was out at Long Island making its Connecticut run when several bales of cotton on board caught on fire, sending the ship up in flames. The spreading fire drove panicked passengers into the frigid water, where they soon died from exposure. Of the hundred or so people on board at the time of the disaster, only four survived.

Nathaniel Currier (American, 1813-1888)
Awful Explosion of the Peacemaker on Board the U.S. Steam Frigate, Princeton on Wednesday 28th, Feb. 1844, 1844
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of Rush Taggart, 1990-2.36

February 28, 1844 opened with celebration, but ended in disaster. The setting for this incident was the U.S.S. *Princeton*, the most advanced American warship of the era. Designed by John Ericsson, who would go on to create the Civil War ironclad *Monitor*, the *Princeton* featured the two largest cannons in the U.S. Navy: the *Oregon*, which could fire 12-inch cannon balls, and the newly installed *Peacemaker*, which also fired 12-inch cannon balls, and weighed more than 27,000 pounds.
To commemorate the Navy's achievement, a formal celebration occurred aboard the *Princeton*, with attendees including President John Tyler, his fiancé Julia Gardiner, and several members of the presidential cabinet. Celebration turned into catastrophe, however, when the *Peacemaker* exploded during a firing demonstration. Tyler and his fiancé survived unhurt, but several attendees were injured, and six men, including two of Tyler's cabinet members, were killed.

Nathaniel Currier (American, 1813-1888)

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View from the Rock of Gibraltar of the Burning of the U.S. Steam Frigate Missouri on the evening of August 26, 1843, after 1843
Hand-colored lithograph
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 1947-19.6

Launched in 1841, the *Missouri* was a frigate equipped with the latest steam-propelled technology. During her short career, the *Missouri* operated primarily within the Washington, D.C. area and the Gulf of Mexico, demonstrating the advantages of steam propulsion. She met her demise in Gibraltar in 1843, when sailors accidentally knocked over turpentine and ignited it. This Currier and Ives print shows the ship well after the fire had started, when it was reduced to a burning hull. Fortunately, the entire crew had managed to escape the ship, as is indicated by the lifeboats in the water.

Day and Haghe, publisher (British, 19th century), and Thomas Goldsworth Dutton, lithographer (British, ca. 1819-1891), after Edward Duncan (British, 1803-1882)
The Burning of the US Steam Frigate Missouri at Gibraltar, August 26, 1843, after 1843
Hand-colored lithograph
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 1947-19.10

This print, like the Currier and Ives lithograph next to it, depicts the burning of the frigate *Missouri.* In comparison to that print, however, this scene has a more subtle sense of composition and modeling. The print also includes a detailed textual account of the disaster, and states that the only casualty was "an unfortunate bear," a tamed animal that had become a mascot for the ship and its crew.

James Duffield Harding (British, 1798-1863)
A Whale Upsetting a Boat, 1822
Hand-colored lithograph
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 27.6.3.2-29d

Whaling was one of the most important industries during the first half of the 19th century, yielding oil for lighting and whalebone for corsetry, buggy whips, collar stays, and other everyday objects. It was a perilous endeavor, however, and whale attacks were not uncommon. This print likely does not depict a specific historical incident, but is demonstrative of the danger involved in this type of hunting.

Currier and Ives (American, active 1837-1907)
Nipped in the Ice, after 1877
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of John Wilmerding, Jr., 1966-86.20

Ice was a serious threat to ships in the 19th century, whether they sailed the Arctic Ocean in search of the Northwest Passage or navigated the tip of Cape Horn in South America. If a ship crossing frigid waters failed to reach warmer temperatures before winter set in, it would become trapped, or "nipped," in the ice, and would have to remain there until the spring thaw. In addition

to the danger of dwindling supplies and freezing temperatures, crew members had to contend with the possibility of shifting ice floes crushing their ships, leaving them marooned. Throughout the 19th century, Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, disastrous and otherwise, fascinated American audiences. While this print does not illustrate a specific event, it nonetheless appealed to the popular interest in such voyages.

<u>South Gallery</u>

Artist Unknown
La Ville d'Oppido, late 18th century
Hand-colored engraving
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 27.6.2-93

This engraving, with its brightly colored depictions of crumbling towers and fleeing inhabitants, depicts the destruction caused by a series of earthquakes that struck the southern tip of Italy in February 1783. Over a period of two months, five earthquakes and hundreds of aftershocks were recorded, triggering tsunamis. By the time the tremors ended, hundreds of towns and villages had been destroyed, and the death toll was estimated between 30,000 and 60,000, many of which resulted from disease and poor sanitary conditions.
This engraving is a *vue d'optique,* or "optical view," a type of print that depicts three-dimensional views of different places. *Vue d'optiques* are ideally viewed through a device called a zograscope, which consists of a magnifying lens and a mirror mounted to a stand. Viewers would place the print under the magnifying lens, which amplifies the print's sense of perspective, and then look at its reflection in the mirror. The bright, almost garish colors would have further enhanced the print's three-dimensional quality, inviting the viewer to more vividly imagine the catastrophe.

Stodbridge Lithograph Company (American, 1847-1971)
Ludger Sylbaris, Only Survivor of Mont Pelee; The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, 1903
Lithograph
Gift of Roy Arnold, 1965 (27.4-527)

Once called 'The Paris of the West Indies,' St. Pierre was the largest city in Martinique until two volcanic explosions from Mont Pelee in May 1902 unleashed enormous clouds of burning smoke over it. As one onlooker, watching from the relative safety of a boat, later recalled, "the wave of fire was on us and over us like a lightning flash...the town vanished before our eyes."
Of the thousands of inhabitants living in the city at the time, only three were known to survive the terrestrial disaster. One of these was Ludger Sylbaris, a convict spending solitary confinement in an underground cell. Though the volcanic smoke scalded Sylbaris, his subterranean cell ensured his survival, and he was rescued three days after the eruption. Sylbaris

had all charges against him dropped, and he subsequently began a new career with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, recounting his ordeal to intrigued audiences while sitting in a replica of his original cell.

Fellows and Burr (American, active late 19th-early 20th centuries)
Railroad Accident, ca. 1880-1930
Photograph
Museum Purchase, 1963-290.1

Fellows and Burr (American, active late 19th-early 20th centuries)
Railroad Accident, ca. 1880-1930
Photograph
Museum Purchase, 1963-290.2

Fellows and Burr was a photography firm based in White River Junction, Vermont around the turn of the 20th century. An advertisement printed on the backs of these two photographs states that the firm could take "views of residences, scenery, railroad accidents, schools, picnics, family gatherings, etc., on hand or on short notice."
The almost casual inclusion of railroad accidents alongside picnics and other events emphasizes the frequency with which train wrecks occurred in the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Hastily constructed railbeds, a preference for cheaper materials, and work policies that favored efficiency over safety were among the most common causes of accidents.

Artist Unknown
Train Wreck near Hartford, Vermont, late 19th-early 20th century
Photograph
Gift of Mrs. R.L. Henry, 1958-235.d

Like many railroad accidents from the turn of the 20th century, the circumstances of this wreck are unknown, though it appears that the bridge had collapsed. The large bags scattered about this scene suggest that it may have been a freight train carrying dry goods. It is unknown whether the people at the scene are passengers, crewmembers, or both.
The emphasis that American railroad companies placed on efficiency may have reduced costs and travel time, but it also made rail travel dangerous. Vermont's railroads were no exception, with one reporter describing them in 1903 as "the flimsiest, the most dangerous piece of public conveyance imaginable."

Artist Unknown
Railroad Accident, ca. 1902
Photograph
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John P. Arthur, 1983-37.125

Artist Unknown
Railroad Accident, ca. 1902

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Photograph
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John P. Arthur, 1983-37.126

Several men and women appear to relax in the grass at this train accident, giving these two photographs an unsettlingly bucolic feel. The often mysterious nature of early railroad accident photography reflects the scant nature of the actual investigations of the time. Until about 1910, most states allowed railroad companies to investigate their own accidents, a practice which often resulted in superficial reports. Such perfunctory assessments may have helped minimize the culpability of railroad companies, but it also made it difficult to detect errors in railroad practice, perpetuating accidents.

<u>Fires in 19th-Century Urban America</u>

Civilization's relationship with fire has always been ambivalent. Fire allows us to keep warm, cook food, and fuel our engines, but it can also extinguish the very structures and institutions it sustains. While urban fires have been a recurrent disaster throughout human history, it was especially pervasive in 19th-century America. At a time when buildings were still constructed primarily of wood and rapid development led to overcrowding, urban fires could be a daily occurrence.

The number of prints dedicated to famous fires underscores their prominence in the cultural landscape of 19th-century urban America, and the statistics that these images often include, such as the financial cost and the number of buildings destroyed, emphasize the economic as well as emotional impact of these events.

View from Coenties Slip; the Ruins, Merchants' Exchange, after 1835
Transfer-printed Staffordshire
Museum Purchase, 1964-48

Burning of the Merchant's Stock Exchange, after 1835
Transfer-printed Staffordshire
Gift of J. Watson Webb, Jr., 1953. (31.10-242a)

Representations of disaster are not limited to paper. In early 1836, three lithographs depicting the Great Fire of New York were transfer-printed onto Staffordshire plates (see the print hanging on the wall to your left for one of the scenes). The commemorative plates were sold as a set, and came in several different colors and sizes, including mulberry, brown, pink, and light blue.

The Fire of New York series remains unusual among Staffordshire plates for depicting a large-scale disaster, and underscores the significance of this particular blaze in the popular imagination at the time.

Fireman's Helmet, ca. 1837
Leather, paint, metal

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Collection of Shelburne Museum, 40.F.1.4.3-5

In 19th-century America, volunteer firefighters participated in an elaborate culture centered on their calling. When not extinguishing blazes, they participated in parades, competitions, and other events that portrayed firefighting as a heroic and masculine undertaking. This elaborate helmet, with its painted vignettes and eagle-shaped tip, is typical of the fancy headgear that fire chiefs and other authority figures would have used in pageants and similar ceremonies.
The recipient of this helmet, Captain Charles Simmons, was captain of the Hook and Ladder Company #2 in Boston sometime during the first half of the 19th century. A placard on the front of the helmet states that it was presented to him on June 2, 1837, probably to commemorate a formal occasion such as a retirement or promotion.

H.R. Robinson, publisher (American, died 1850), John T. Bowen, lithographer (American, ca. 1801-1856), and Alfred M. Hoffy, lithographer (British-American, 1796-1872)
The Great Fire of the City of New York, 16 December 1835, 1836
Color lithograph
Gift of Harry Shaw Newman, 1954-445.11

On the evening of December 16, 1835, a warehouse in New York caught on fire, and the resulting blaze quickly spread through the city's business district. By the time the fire was successfully contained the following day, over 500 buildings over 17 blocks were destroyed, including the New York Stock Exchange and the Mercantile Exchange.
Several factors contributed to the fire's extensive destruction. Gale-force winds quickly spread the flames, while freezing temperatures required firefighters to hack through ice to access water, slowing their efforts. A lack of gunpowder also paradoxically contributed to the fire's spread due to the common practice of detonating surrounding buildings in an effort to eliminate potential fodder available to the fire. In the aftermath of the New York fire, however, gunpowder techniques and other tactics would be reevaluated.

Artist Unknown (French)
Incendie de New York, after 1835
Hand-colored woodcut
Collection of Shelburne Museum, 27.6.11-47

An American catastrophe is interpreted through a French lens in this woodcut of the Great Fire of New York. The fire engines shown here are French rather than American in design, and would not have actually been used at this particular blaze. The firefighters' costumes are also French, with the feathered helmets recalling the headgear of the Roman imperial guard.
While the event depicted here occurred in America, the decidedly French flavor of this woodcut emphasizes the pervasiveness of our native culture in our perception of events, providing us with a framework through which we interpret and understand the world.

Currier and Ives (American, 1857-1907)
The Burning of Chicago, 1871
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of Rush Taggart, 1990-2.66

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Of all the fires in American history, the Great Fire of Chicago of 1871 remains one of the most infamous. Over the course of three days, it destroyed over 16,000 buildings and left over 100,000 people homeless, more than a third of the city's population at that time. Yet Chicago quickly rebuilt itself, becoming one of the most architecturally innovative cities in the United States. The Chicago fire also highlights the hostility directed toward immigrants during the 19th century. Traditionally the blaze has been blamed on an Irishwoman named Mrs. O'Leary, whose cow supposedly knocked over a lantern while being milked. A reporter later admitted to fabricating the story, but the anti-Irish sentiment prevalent at the time made Mrs. O'Leary an ideal scapegoat for the fire.

Currier and Ives (American, active 1837-1907)
The Great Fire at Boston, 1872
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of Rush Taggart, 1987-52.50

On November 9, 1872, the City of Boston experienced the largest fire in its history when a blaze started in a commercial warehouse on Summer Street. By the time it was contained 12 hours later, the fire had destroyed nearly 800 buildings over a 60-acre area in the city's business district, causing around $100 million in damage. It remains one of the costliest fire-related disasters in not only the history of Boston, but also the United States.

Currier and Ives (American, active 1837-1907)
The Great Fire at St. John, N.B., June 20, 1877, 1877
Hand-colored lithograph
Gift of Rush Taggart, 1990-2.49

1877 had been an unseasonably hot and dry year for the city of Saint John in New Brunswick, Canada, so when a fire ignited on June 20, it proved to be especially destructive. Two-fifths of its structures were destroyed, and over 75% of them lacked fire insurance, further exacerbating the disaster's expense.
Despite the extensiveness of the fire's damage, Saint John quickly recovered thanks to the disaster's publicity. Newspapers and other publications from around the world followed the event, indirectly producing an international surge of monetary donations. Prints such as this lithograph from Currier and Ives, with its detailed description of the fire's damage, undoubtedly contributed to the city's rebuilding by exposing the event to a large, sympathetic audience.

Artist Unknown, after Christopher Pearse Cranach (American, 1813-1892)
Burning of Barnum's Museum, after 1865
Color lithograph
Gift of Harry T. Peters, Jr., Natalie Peters, and Natalie Webster, 1959-67.125

While today his name is associated with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, infamous showman P. T. Barnum actually spent most of his career exhibiting oddities, both in traveling shows and at his

American Museum in New York. Opened in 1841, the museum contained many of Barnum's most famous attractions, including the Fiji Mermaid, and also featured a menagerie, a paintings collection, and a lecture hall for performances.
On July 13, 1865, however, the American Museum was destroyed in a spectacular fire. Though visitors and performers managed to escape, nearly all of the museum's contents, including its live animals, burned. The following day, the *New York Times* acknowledged the loss, saying that "almost in the twinkling of an eye, the dirty, ill-shaped structure, filled with specimens so full of suggestion and of merit, passed from our gaze, and its like cannot soon be seen again."