



SARAH MITCHELL of the New Bedford Whaling Museum holds the canvas of “Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage ‘Round the World” as it is installed. The newly restored 1,275-foot-long panorama, which had been shown only in sections for 50 years, was unveiled last July.

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A Whaling Tale

A quarter-mile-long painting from a bygone era makes its 21st century debut.

Long before internet streaming, television and cinema, armchair adventurers explored exotic lands through the moving panorama. In the 19th century — the age of the traveling circus and curiosities sideshows — these extraordinarily long paintings entertained live audiences across the country.

Set up in theaters, town halls or saloons, the paintings were cranked from one giant spool to another and narrated by an orator, sometimes accompanied by live music and special lighting effects. Over time, the panoramas wore out from repeated use by

traveling showmen, and the valuable canvases were often repurposed. Today, only 21 of these moving panoramas — out of probably thousands — remain. The longest such work, the 1,275-foot-long “Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage ‘Round the World,” has been shown only in sections over the last 50 years. That changed when the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts, which owns the work, unveiled the newly restored 1848 painting in a special exhibition last July.

“The New Bedford whaling panorama is a spectacular example of

a mass medium that has been virtually forgotten,” said landscape and panorama scholar Molly Briggs, who teaches design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “Moving panoramas weren’t just popular media, they were 19th century virtual reality.” The panoramas were prevalent at a time when the middle class was just beginning to travel for pleasure, she said.

The whaling panorama, recognized as the longest painting in North America until a Michigan artist painted a 11,300-foot piece in 2013, was created by Benjamin Russell and Caleb Purrington in the heyday of the American whaling industry. It shows a typical whaling journey that begins in New Bedford

— once the wealthy whaling capital of the country — heads toward the South Atlantic and eventually circles the globe.

Russell was the rare commercial artist who had also been a whaler. With Purrington, he accurately portrayed action-packed whaling scenes that he'd witnessed himself or heard about from returning mariners: lancing a black whale, "cutting in" to remove whalebone and blubber, and boiling strips of blubber at night to produce oil. The artists also captured details such as the distinctive church steeples in New Bedford, the rough seas of Cape Horn, a ship's upside-down flag, signaling distress, and a whale's dark red blood spewing into the ocean. The painting is on four spools, but the last half of one, which included New Zealand and Fiji, has been missing for more than a century.

The museum acquired "Grand Panorama" in 1918, though it was mostly in storage until the late 1950s. In the 1960s, sections were displayed at the New York World's Fair and at the Smithsonian before the painting disappeared from view again.

"It was mothballed for a long time," said Christina Connett, the chief curator

of the museum, which is located in New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park. In the '50s, the painting, which is crudely rendered and was intended to be viewed at a distance, was considered "worthless," but that appraisal missed the mark, said Connett, who saw sections of the panorama as a child. It's not fine art, but it's an "artwork of national historical importance," she said. "It's a folk painting."

Briggs, who serves on the advisory board of the International Panorama Council, said the panorama provides an extraordinary example of the medium's power to simulate movement through space. "Among these few surviving examples, some have scenes that are more discrete from one another," she said, "whereas this one has scenes that flow and flow."

What's remarkable about the panorama, in addition to its size, is how much information the artists were able to gather, said Jan da Silva, a cultural resource specialist at New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park. "They were tuned in to the news of the day and able to incorporate stories they'd heard into the painting," she said. For instance,

the painters included the 1820 sinking of the whaler Essex (the inspiration for Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick") and the 1847 eruption of Cape Verde's Pico do Fogo, events they hadn't seen firsthand. Their depiction of the volcano, with red lava reflected in the nighttime water and ship's sails, was a showstopper for 19th century audiences.

Over time, due to handling and exposure, the nearly quarter-mile of painted cotton sheeting began to deteriorate, and museum staff raised the possibility of restoring the work. The \$400,000 conservation project, partially funded by the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, was decades in the making. It was completed in late 2017 after nearly three years of labor. Conservators first worked on the painting, which is 8 1/2 feet high, atop a custom-built table in the whaling museum, carefully applying a gelatin-based spray to stabilize the fragile paint. Later, out of public view, they mended tears and stitched together pieces (it was in 13 parts when the process began).

The "Grand Panorama" was installed last summer as four stationary works in a historic mill in New Bedford. During the three months it was on display, visitors strolled along the length of the painting rather than sitting before a moving panorama. The exhibit will travel to other sites on the East Coast and to the West Coast between 2019 and 2021, before it returns to the museum. (A digital reproduction is being shown as a moving picture show at the museum through 2021.)

Connett said she wasn't prepared for the emotion she felt when she saw the full painting on display for the first time earlier this year. "We'd seen it in these 10-foot chunks through the years but never as one piece," she said. "You don't realize how incredible it is until it's hanging there in its entirety."

— MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN



JORDAN BERSON, director of collections at the museum, sprays a diluted adhesive over a section of "Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage 'Round the World" to fix pigment to the cloth and humidify the canvas. The restoration of the painting was completed in 2017.

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