

# NEWS RELEASE

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[Digital images available upon request]

## CLARK ART INSTITUTE EXHIBITION STUDIES ARTISTIC RESPONSES TO NATURE'S EXTREMES

*More than thirty-five works on paper reveal evolving influence of scientific advances on nineteenth-century depictions of natural disasters, remote landscapes, and the power of nature*

Williamstown, Massachusetts—A new exhibition, *Extreme Nature!*, on view at the Clark Art Institute November 10, 2018–February 24, 2019, examines how nature's extremes—remote, fantastical, and unpredictable—permeated artistic imagery throughout the nineteenth century. During this period, news outlets detailed natural disasters around the globe, researchers defined modern scientific fields, and authors like Jules Verne popularized the science fiction genre. More than thirty-five prints, drawings, photographs, and books included in the exhibition explore how artists absorbed and responded to emerging research in the physical and life sciences to probe nature—from volatile weather patterns and celestial activity to the earth's cavernous depths.

*Extreme Nature!* is organized by Michael Hartman, a 2018 graduate of the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art, which is jointly administered by the Clark. "Michael brings a fresh and informed curatorial perspective to works on paper in the Clark's collection," said Olivier Meslay, the Hardymon Director of the Clark. "The exhibition provides a fascinating consideration of many rarely-seen works. It is an excellent representation of the value of the collaboration between the Clark and Williams College in preparing the next generation of art historians."

Artists seeking to mitigate nature's unknown dangers transformed hazardous events into awe-inspiring portrayals of natural phenomena, which enabled viewers to imagine the extent of nature's boundaries and its destructive potential. "The images on view illuminate how the birth of modern scientific disciplines and the rise of popular science influenced artists and drove the public consumption of images and experiences," said Hartman. "These sensational works on paper allow visitors to immerse themselves in the spectacle of nature's extremes."

*Extreme Nature!* presents images of natural subjects—some documentary, some invented, and many a fusion of the two—across four thematic sections: Natural Disaster, Alluring Landscapes, Volatile Atmospheres, and Extremes Imagined.

### **Natural Disaster**

The public's interest in nature's unrelenting fury developed into a morbid fascination with disaster in the nineteenth century. Popular magazines and scientific journals transformed floods, fires, and catastrophes at sea into cataclysmic spectacles.

Currier & Ives issued lithographs like *The Great Fire at Boston, Nov. 9 & 10, 1872* (1872) to document the devastating blazes that engulfed the city, while Winslow Homer (American, 1836–1910) contemplated water’s unbridled power in etchings such as *Saved* (1889), portraying a rescue in choppy waters. The eight eruptions of Mount Vesuvius in the nineteenth century formulated the basis of a popular fireworks show staged in New York that purported to reenact the decimation of Pompeii. Charles Graham’s (American, 1852–1911) *Fire-Works at Manhattan Beach—“The Last Days of Pompeii”* (1885) transforms the prospect of disaster into an eerily beautiful and exciting occurrence.

### **Alluring Landscapes**

Mountainous topographies, rocky bluffs, and plummeting waterfalls by artists such as Aaron Draper Shattuck (American, 1832–1928) illustrate how the modern foundation of geology and other natural sciences influenced artistic portrayals of the landscape. The replication of nature’s minutest details in Shattuck’s *Monument Mountain* (c. 1862) in southern Berkshire County, Massachusetts, in William Westall’s (English, 1781–1850) *Entrance to Peak Cavern, Derbyshire* (c. 1822), and in a late 1890s color photochrom of Niagara Falls elicited wonder and excitement among viewers who might imagine the exhilarating experience of encountering these geographic phenomena. William Bradford’s (American, 1823–1892) photographs of towering arctic icebergs and Timothy O’Sullivan’s (American, c. 1840–1882) *Cañon de Chelle, Walls of the Grand Cañon about 1200 feet in height* (1871) brought these locales into the popular mindset while also scientifically documenting geological features using the latest in photographic technology.

### **Volatile Atmospheres**

The late-eighteenth-century invention of the hot air balloon contributed to modern meteorology. By the end of the century, new discoveries in weather encouraged an interest broader than the bounds of the atmosphere—one that questioned the stars, considered the moon’s formation, and examined the power of the sun. Scientists’ observations from the air, as well as increasing global travel, brought heightened awareness of atmospheric conditions. Publications like early meteorologist Luke Howard’s 1803 classification of clouds as cumulus, stratus, and cirrus inspired artists such as Joseph Mallord William Turner (English, 1775–1851) and John Martin (English, 1789–1854) to portray weather’s volatility with greater attention to detail. William Baillie’s (Irish, 1723–1818) dramatic *The Three Trees* (c. 1800) depicts a zigzagging lightning bolt as it strikes three trees on a hilltop. Based on Rembrandt van Rijn’s (Dutch, 1606–1669) etched landscape of the same name, Baillie’s etching added darkened storm clouds and violent lightning, suggesting an interest in the relationship between electricity and this severe form of weather.

### **Extremes Imagined**

Like the tales told in the newly popular science fiction novels of the nineteenth century, prints and illustrations conveyed captivating stories. Inspired by scientific revelations, artists utilized rich imagery to create mysterious worlds that transported an eager public into nature’s unknown. Alphonse de Neuville’s (French, 1835–1885)

illustrations for a late-nineteenth-century edition of Jules Verne's immensely popular *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) brought readers to the depths of the ocean in vivid detail, describing marine animals and plants of the as-yet unexplored sea floor. Others, such as Charles Marie Dulac (French, 1865–1898) sought to create works that exemplified the relationship among humanity, nature, and spirituality. In his lithograph *The Wind* (1892–93) Dulac idealizes nature without distorting it, communicating a sense of the divine that inspires an emotional response.

*Extreme Nature!* is drawn primarily from the Clark's permanent and library collections with additional material on loan from The Troob Family Foundation, Williams College Museum of Art, and Williams College's Chapin Library. The exhibition is on view in the Eugene V. Thaw Gallery for Works on Paper.

## ABOUT THE CLARK

The Clark Art Institute, located in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, is one of a small number of institutions globally that is both an art museum and a center for research, critical discussion, and higher education in the visual arts. Opened in 1955, the Clark houses exceptional European and American paintings and sculpture, extensive collections of master prints and drawings, English silver, and early photography. Acting as convener through its Research and Academic Program, the Clark gathers an international community of scholars to participate in a lively program of conferences, colloquia, and workshops on topics of vital importance to the visual arts. The Institute's library, consisting of more than 275,000 volumes, is one of the nation's premier art history libraries. The Clark houses and co-sponsors the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, one of the nation's preeminent art history programs.

The Clark, located at 225 South Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts, has a three-star rating in the Michelin Green Guide. Galleries are open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is \$20; free year-round for Clark members, children 18 and younger, and students with valid ID. Free admission is available through several programs, including First Sundays Free; a local library pass program; EBT Card to Culture; Bank of America Museums on Us; and Blue Star Museums. For more information on these programs and more, visit [clarkart.edu](http://clarkart.edu) or call 413 458 2303.

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