

VOLCANO!

Mount St. Helens in Art

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Portland Art Museum recognizes and honors the Indigenous peoples of this region on whose ancestral lands this museum now stands. These include the Willamette Tumwater, Clackamas, Kathlamet, Molalla, Multnomah and Watlala Chinook Peoples and the Tualatin Kalapuya who today are part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and many other Native communities who made their homes along the Columbia River. We also want to recognize that Portland today is a community of many diverse Native peoples who continue to live and work here. We respectfully acknowledge and honor all Indigenous communities—past, present, future—and are grateful for their ongoing and vibrant presence.

LAWETLAT'LA

Mount St. Helens has been a sacred place to Native Americans for thousands of years. It is known as *Lawetlat'la* (“Smoker”) to the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. While the volcano figures prominently in traditional stories of all the tribes living within eyesight, it has special significance for the Cowlitz People because it is the most prominent landmark of their ancestral home.

Lawetlat'la's intermittent eruptions over the ages determined not only its name, but also its character in numerous creation stories. These tales differ greatly, but all share the idea of the mountain as a supernatural being with the ability to unleash mighty forces, both destructive and generative. The volcano is not only a place charged with spiritual energy, but simultaneously a powerful entity, which Native people visit to seek guidance, whether on a personal quest or as part of community ceremonies.

In the years following the 1980 eruption, *Lawetlat'la* became a symbol of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe's “mountain of resentment” that had built up due to the persistent, unfair treatment of their people and lands; tribal federal recognition was only confirmed in 2000. In 2013, Mount St. Helens was listed in the National Register of Historic Places for its significance as a Traditional Cultural Property of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and the Yakama Nation, who now work with the Forest Service in managing the sacred upper reaches of the mountain.

INTRODUCTION

The Portland Art Museum proudly presents this tribute to Mount St. Helens on the fortieth anniversary of the eruptions of 1980. Spanning the period from 1845 to the present, this exhibition is the first survey of works of art inspired by the mountain. Although 175 years is barely a blip in geologic time, the art bears witness to an extraordinary era in the long, cyclical life of the volcano.

The beauty of Mount St. Helens has ranged from bucolic to savage. Before the eruptions, painters delighted in depicting its pleasing conical shape rising high above the verdant landscape. The 1980 eruptions challenged artists to capture the thrilling and terrifying displays of nature's sublime power. When the smoke cleared, the new apocalyptic face of Mount St. Helens compelled the depiction of its haunting majesty. Since then, the rapid return of life to the mountain has captured the attention of photographers as well as scientists from many fields. Although the volcano seems to have reclaimed its serenity, some artists have begun to look to the future. Mount St. Helens will erupt again.

We are pleased to welcome you to this celebration of a great wonder on our horizon.

MOUNT ST. HELENS BEFORE 1980

Volcanic activity often creates a mountain of unique beauty, which attracts the eyes of artists. Stratovolcanoes like Mount St. Helens are particularly famed for their pleasing symmetrical slopes and crater peaks. They are one of nature's truest conical forms because they are built slowly in layers, or strata, by successive eruptions.

The first known depictions of Mount St. Helens were created by explorers in the 1840s; Henry James Warre visited in 1845 and was followed by Paul Kane in 1847. At this time, the mountain was nearing the end of an eruptive period (1800–1857). On view here are their remarkable records of the volcano erupting steam and ash from vents near Goat Rocks on the north side. These smaller eruptions presaged the wholesale destruction of this area in 1980.

After 1857, painters celebrated the beauty of Mount St. Helens by depicting it nestled harmoniously among its surroundings. Paintings of the great mountains of the Cascade Range were in demand to decorate homes and businesses in Portland, as well as to satisfy collectors who desired depictions of the American West. Displayed here are works by local artists and visitors showing Mount St. Helens up to its transformation in 1980.

THE ERUPTIONS OF 1980

Mount St. Helens inspired art as never before when it awoke on March 27, 1980. Impressive eruptions continued until 2008, but the great eruption on May 18, 1980, surpassed all the others by far. The top 1,300 feet of the mountain collapsed in a massive landslide, releasing the blast that gutted the north side. The eruption and resulting effects decimated human infrastructure and killed 57 people and countless animals. Human fragility in the face of nature's might was made abundantly clear, and those witnesses who escaped immediate danger watched in wonder at the grandeur of the event. Artists were compelled to render one of nature's most stunning displays of power. The 1980 eruption remains the most amazing and destructive geologic event in North America in modern times.

This room displays works created by artists in Portland and Seattle in the years after the eruption. These depictions of Mount St. Helens erupting are distinctive for having been created by eyewitnesses to the event. The works demonstrate the complexity of conceptual approaches present in the Pacific Northwest art scene in the early 1980s. The eruption and its effects became a long-term focus of expression for two Portland artists interested in landscape and city views: George Johanson and Henk Pander.

AFTER THE CATACLYSM

When the great eruption subsided, utter devastation was revealed. The blast had completely scoured the landscape north of the volcano down to the bedrock. Dense, old-growth forests had been blown down or incinerated up to nineteen miles away. Mud and ash clogged the land and waters, turning their vivid colors an almost uniform putty grey. The scene was as apocalyptic as the eruption itself.

Photography's capacity to capture vast vistas, fine detail, and minute variations in light and atmosphere made it the perfect medium for recording the aftermath. Numerous local and international photographers were drawn to the mountain; most chose black and white to heighten the drama of the bleak, almost monochrome scenes. Over the following years, they captured sudden as well as incremental shifts in the terrain. While their works are ostensibly documentary, they are highly emotive in expressing the terrible beauty of the desolation. The renowned landscape artists Frank Gohlke and Emmet Gowin were especially inspired by the subject, winning acclaim for creating extraordinary photographic essays over the following decade.

URSULA K. LE GUIN AND “THE LADY”

Mount St. Helens fascinated Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018), the renowned author best known for her science fiction novels. The volcano was visible from her house in Portland’s Northwest Hills and she was enthralled by its many moods in the ever-shifting weather and light. She watched the great eruption all day, declaring it “the biggest thing I ever saw or hope to see.” Le Guin referred to the mountain as “the Lady” and chose to depict it visually:

When “the Lady” started shaking and doing strange things in 1979, my love of her beautiful presence became a driving interest, almost a fixation. While she was dormant I had made sketches trying to catch the pure line of her almost-but-not-quite symmetrical flanks and the clouds that wreathed around her head like veils. As activity increased and ash eruptions began to blacken the cone, I drew what I saw as best I could, sitting at my study window, using binoculars to bring details close. Experimenting then with chalk pastels, I found them a good medium for the drama of ash and cloud and snow going on there, 60 miles away overland and 9,000 feet up in the air.

From In the Blast Zone: Catastrophe and Renewal on Mount St. Helens,
Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, 2008

Le Guin’s family has kindly allowed a selection of her pastels to be shown here for the first time.

AN ACTIVE LANDSCAPE: RECOVERY AND FUTURE

Mount St. Helens and its surroundings have dramatically changed in the last forty years. The volcano has begun rebuilding itself; two lava domes now sit in the crater, surrounded by a growing glacier. Significant rockfall and debris flows continue, requiring frequent revisions of topographic maps. Color has returned to the once-bleak vistas as plants and animals now thrive where life seemed unimaginable. The area around the volcano has rebounded far faster and with greater diversity than scientists had thought possible. We are reminded of something that Native Americans have long appreciated: eruptions bring not only destruction, but also renewal.

Frank Gohlke returned to Mount St. Helens several times in the decade following the eruption, visiting some of the same viewpoints to record the evolving saga of rebirth. His photographs illustrate both short- and long-term changes. The majestic landscapes emerging at Mount St. Helens are considered in the photographs of Diane Cook and Len Jenshel, who visited in 2009, and those of Buzzy Sullivan, who visited in 2017. Brad Johnson and Cameron Martin reflect on the instability of the mountain, pointing to when the epic cycle of destruction and regeneration will begin anew.