Throughout most of human history, fish were first and foremost a form of sustenance, and the act of fishing was the practical means to attain a food source. While today sport fishing is a long-held pastime, the first forays into angling as primarily a leisure activity are not documented until the twelfth century, beginning with French texts, followed by German references in the early 1200s. Artwork and illustrations depicting angling arose much later, spurred by Great Britain’s landed gentry adopting the sport. It is here that the exhibition Angling in the Western World begins, with the purpose of highlighting the history of artistic representations of angling as a means of recreation.

**RARE BOOKS, 15th - 19th Century**

The earliest such representation is the frontispiece of The Treatise Of Fysshynge wyth an Angle. This treatise, defining angling as being undertaken with “a rod and a line and a hook,” was first published in the English language as part of the second edition of The Boke of St. Albani’s in 1496 for the attention of gentlemen. The essay elevated the sport to a worthy activity equal to “hawkynge and huntynge and wyth other dyvers mater right necessary to be knowen of noble men.” The volume contained the now-iconic woodcut of a medieval angler standing at a riverbank catching a fish, with a basketful of the day’s catch at his side and London depicted in the background. This and other illustrations in sixteenth through mid-nineteenth century publications including the first edition of Isaak Walton’s The Compleat Angler..., 1653; sporting books illustrated by artists like Francis Barlow, Henry Thomas Alken, and Samuel Howitt; and the proliferation of sporting prints are the foundation for the developing Western aesthetic in angling art.

**BRITISH PAINTINGS, 19th Century**

The burgeoning of the genre originating in Great Britain by the early nineteenth century equally reflects the growth in popularity of the sport among the leisure class. With the era’s enclosure movement, the best river banks in England became aristocratically-owned private property. Additional-ly, members of the upper

Teaming with Nature: James Prosek
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On public display for the first time are selected watercolors painted by contemporary artist, writer, naturalist and conservationist James Prosek for the latest edition of his book Trout of the World, issued March 2013. The watercolors are presented with rare books selected by Prosek from the NSLM collection that illustrate the legacy he honors and challenges. Trout of the World led Prosek to undertake a naming inquiry that has confronted 19th century ideas of taxonomy in favor of seeing a more fluid world that emphasizes diversity.

Contemporary artist-naturalists Robin Hill and Meg Page, both deeply connected to the natural world, continue in the spirit of Dürer, Wilson, Catesby, and Audubon rendering flora and fauna from near and far. Unlike their predecessors, however, who oftentimes found themselves cataloguing new species in a lush, abundant, and untouched environment, Hill and Page as naturalists face the modern issue of documenting and preserving wildlife in a diminishing habitat. As artists, their exhibit of thirty masterful interpretations distinguishes them from their peers and presents work that rises to the level of their forerunners.

**Angling in the Western World**

*September 28, 2013 - March 23, 2014*

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classes had begun to travel to the rugged Scottish Highlands to vacation and partake in plentiful sport and recreation. By the early nineteenth century sporting art was well-established. In England and America, these tastes influenced artistic expression, and a proliferation of paintings of game fish would ensue in the mid- to latter half of the nineteenth century. This flourishing of realistic, detailed still lifes and trompe l’oeils with a focus on the day’s catch was a natural extension of the “Can-Do” spirit of the 1940s.  

FRESHWATER, 20th Century

During the interwar and post-WWII period in America, artists including Frank Weston Benson, John Whorf, and Ogden Minton Pleissner became recognized for their sporting subjects in both oil and watercolor. As highly trained landscape artists, each developed individual styles and applied painterly techniques to their respective sporting compositions, bringing the genre into the twentieth century. Historically, the best sporting artists have also been sporting enthusiasts. Pleissner described himself as “a painter of landscapes who also liked to hunt and fish,” and Benson’s angling paintings were drawn from his extensive experiences as an avid fly fisherman who embarked upon annual salmon fishing trips. Even artists like Regionalist painter Paul Sample created his own series of distinctive compositions based on his 1952 travels to fish and sketch in Iceland, its waters renowned since the nineteenth century for their abundant game fish.

With the increasing manufacture of motorized boats, saltwater angling began to be undertaken as a sporting activity as well. By the 1920s using a fly rod to fish for tarpon and then the 1930s, for bonito and permit (also a saltwater fish), had gained popularity. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that deep sea fishing for species such as marlin would become prevalent, with the writings of Zane Grey and Ernest Hemingway underscoring the sporting nature of the challenging quarry. This new sport would attract artists and sculptors, offering fresh subject matter and contemporary compositions.

The diversity of salt- or freshwater angling artwork that developed over the centuries reflects the evolution in both sporting preferences as well as artistic movements. Additionally, these images resonate with a unifying theme. They appeal because they reflect the desire for leisure and recreation, whether undertaken for quiet contemplation or for hearty excitement. In the timeless words of Isaac Walton, the author of the still-in-print Compleat Angler and a founder of the genre, “I have laid aside business, and gone a-fishing.”

William Tylee Ranney (American, 1813 - 1857)
The Lazy Fisherman, 1850
Private Collection

Ogden Minton Pleissner (American, 1905 - 1963)
Fishing the Heartbeats, the Wind River, Wyoming, c. 1936
Private Collection

Mike Stidham (American, contemporary)
Untitled (Tarpon), c. 1990
Private Collection

James Montgomery-Flagg
Tossing Trout, c. 1950
oil on canvas
Private Collection