

THE NATIONAL SPORTING LIBRARY & MUSEUM

Celebrates and Preserves America's Field Sports



MEGHAN MARCHETTI/DWR

*This unique
Virginia research
library and
art museum
captures the
sporting life
through centuries.*

BY DR. PETER BROOKES

A story with an inside setting isn't exactly what you expect when you breathlessly flip through the pages of your just-arrived *Virginia Wildlife* magazine. But bear with me for a minute while I tell you about a unique Virginia place where the outdoors is celebrated indoors.

Welcome to the National Sporting Library & Museum (NSLM), a cultural institution nestled in the horse country hamlet of Middleburg in Loudoun County that celebrates rural American sporting traditions and life.

For more than 70 years, the NSLM has honored the heritage of America's country field sports—angling, wingshooting, and equestrian pursuits—by collecting, preserving, and exhibiting its own and others' artwork and literature.

For those who love America's traditional field sports and their special cultural history, the NSLM is a must see; not surprisingly, *Conde Nast Traveler* named the NSLM one of America's top 51 museums—and the best in Virginia.

With its own wonderful woods and waters, Virginia is, indeed, a fitting home for the NSLM.

Though much of our sporting culture was inherited from Europe, without a doubt, America has made an indelible impression on Continental field and water sports, including, perhaps most notably, broadening and democratizing access to them.

Blessed with exceptional natural resources and championed by the likes of outdoors advocate Theodore Roosevelt and artists and writers from Ogden Pleissner to Ernest

Hemingway, the sporting life has become deeply embedded in America's consciousness.

A Wide Cast

NSLM's library offers some 20,000 books, periodicals, and other archival materials; the collection is particularly well-suited for those interested in the history, practice, and traditions of country sports. Topics range from foxhunting, horseracing, steeplechasing, polo, and equitation to fly fishing, upland and waterfowl wingshooting, shooting sports, hunting, veterinary science, animal husbandry, and even farriery.

No worries: Our best friend—the sporting and working dogs—are represented in the stacks, too.

Conveniently, the main floor reading room, besides long tables for work or study, has a cozy nook with sunlit easy chairs—ideal for sinking into and leafing through a volume or two from the collection. The NSLM isn't a public lending library; its holdings can't be checked out and taken away like at the corner library, but the public is welcome to browse and read in-house for free, for pleasure or research.

When I visited, along one stretch of the reading room was the exhibit "The Art of the Angle," which highlighted the original wood engravings of



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Barry Moser, Wesley W. Bates, and Chris Wormell, who supplied their remarkable artistry to a trio of essential fishing titles: Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It," John N. Maclean's "Home Waters," and Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River: The Centennial Edition." The exhibit included a first edition of "A River Runs Through It," appropriately accompanied by two bamboo cane fly rods from the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, my wife had to rouse me from my delightful daydreaming about the cold, clear Virginia waters—or others—into

which those classic cane rods may have been cast and the wild, wily trout that may have been netted, fooled by a well-presented dry fly.

Another exhibit, "Drawn to Nature: 300 Years of Natural History Illustration," focused on drawings of flora and fauna created between the 16th and 19th centuries. The NSLM usually rotates exhibitions, which extend for five months, twice a year.

The library shelves also hold rare and antiquarian works, dating back to the 16th century, in the F. Ambrose Clark Rare Book Room. An accompanying archive collection includes letters, diaries, mounted foxhunting hunt records, photographs, and other items, stretching back two centuries.

Among the rare books, I was particularly taken by a thick, leather-bound tome which had actual fly fishing flies affixed to its sturdy pages, serving as a clever combination of a fly-fishing encyclopedia, fly box, and work of art.

Also shelved in the climate-controlled Rare Book Room were the library's more than 90 editions of conservationist Izaak Walton's iconic 17th century "The Compleat Angler," often dubbed the "Bible of Fishing," a work that is amazingly still popular and in print today.



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NSLM Director
and Head
Curator, Claudia
Pfeiffer, amid
the "Intrepid
Audubon: The
Birds of America"
exhibit.



Though access to the rare book collection is by appointment and supervised, these prized works of literature are being digitized and are available online along with a card catalog of the NSLM's material holdings. More than 2,000 books have already been digitized, with NSLM staff hoping to complete the project by 2027.

What a boon to the academic, writer, or the merely curious.

Just think: If a trip to Middleburg isn't possible, you can visit the NSLM virtually, never leaving the comfort of your study—although a visit to charming Middleburg and scenic Virginia horse country is a treat any time of year.

In support of education and research, the library staff is also available for inquiries from scholars and other specialists regarding the NSLM's book collection as well as questions on America's sporting traditions and life.

More Than Books

Not a bibliophile?

You're in luck: Next door to the library in a separate building is the art museum, which houses several hundred works, including paintings, sculpture, works on paper, objets d'art, and other country sport-related pieces.

The museum's collection is deep in 19th and early 20th century American and British works, especially on equestrian themes, wingshooting, wildlife, fishing, landscapes, rural life, and animal art.

During my visit last fall, I was able to take in a showing of John James Audubon, titled, "Intrepid Audubon: The Birds of America," which featured some of his contributions to the world of art and science. By the time you read this, the Audubon exhibit, which was temporarily on display at the NSLM, will have decamped for another museum or returned to its originating museum. Of course, it'll have been replaced by another well-curated presentation from loaned or acquired works.

With its unique literary and artistic holdings, the NSLM reciprocates as a host museum by lending out its

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Top left: A visit to the National Sporting Library and Museum is worth the time. Top right: A collection of flies that are part of the "The Art of the Angle" exhibit. Bottom right: Foxhounds and a Terrier in a Stable Interior, 1878 by John Emms (English, 1844–1912), Oil on canvas, 39 x 52 inches and a gift of Mrs. Felicia Warburg Rogan, 2008.

artworks, books, and other materials to participating public and private collections around the country and across the world.

The NSLM also holds various programs and events throughout the year, including lectures, book signings, film festivals, educational programs, and tours, making the museum a cultural hub of sporting life in Northern Virginia.

Though the United States largely inherited the field sports and their traditions from Europe, Americans have expanded and reshaped it into a uniquely vibrant and accessible sporting life—one that is arguably the envy of much of the world. The NSLM has played a vital role in preserving



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and documenting the art, literature, and culture of the country field sports, making it an unexpected treasure for anyone interested in this fascinating facet of American history and heritage.

Dr. Peter Brookes is an award-winning outdoor writer who enjoys fishing, hunting, and all other outdoor pursuits.

Explore the Digital "Angling in Special Collections" Exhibition

A digital version of the 2020 exhibition Angling in Special Collections, which featured books, ephemera, and art focused on angling from the National Sporting Library & Museum's collections, appears on the NSLM website. The exhibit included books from the F. Ambrose Clark Rare Book room including a first edition of "The Compleat Angler," and two of the earliest American books on the sport of angling, a large collection of mounted and framed flies from the George Chapman collection, a bamboo fly rod built by Henry "Hank" Woolman III, and angling related art from the Museum's permanent collection.

See it at: express.adobe.com/page/avoZzEkiIHZLo or scan QR ▶

