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New Book Puts the Spotlight on the Concord Museum's Thoreau Collection

*“All this is perfectly distinct to an observant eye,
and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most.”*

Henry Thoreau, November 3, 1861

Concord, MA/ On the occasion of the 120th anniversary of the Concord Museum in historic Concord, Massachusetts, the Museum is pleased to announce the publication of a new book, ***An Observant Eye: The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum***. Explore for the first time in a fully-illustrated book the role that objects – including those in the Concord Museum's extraordinary collection – played in the life of Henry D. Thoreau. Thoreau is best known as the author of *Walden*, universally acknowledged to be one of the great books of American literature, and of “Civil Disobedience,” one of the most influential essays in the worldwide democratic tradition.

Published by the Concord Museum and written by David F. Wood, Concord Museum Curator, the 160-page, full-color, hardcover book opens with a ground-breaking essay, “A Common Sense Applied to the Objects: Thoreau and Material Culture,” followed by seven chapters examining some 150 objects from the collection, each pictured in color. The book also includes a checklist of an additional 100 objects in the Thoreau collection. Designed by Gilbert Design

Associates, Inc. of Providence, with 120 color illustrations by David Bohl, a well-known museum photographer, the new book is a treat for the eye as well as the mind.

An Observant Eye is supported by a Museums for America grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency; the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and several private foundations and individuals.

The book has a two-part purpose. The first is to make the Concord Museum's unique collection of objects related to Henry Thoreau and his family better known. Many details of Thoreau's everyday life in Concord can be discerned in these objects, and for this reason alone they are well worth study. The second purpose is to explore the role that objects—including some of these very objects—played in Thoreau's intellectual life. This might, at first, seem like a contradiction; why should a self-proclaimed idealist care about objects at all? But Thoreau did care about objects, and paid a close and particular attention to them. He was distinctively aware of the ability objects have to communicate. In this, as in his approach to natural history, his thinking is remarkably current.

Most of the household and personal objects that can reliably be associated with Henry Thoreau (1817–1862) and his family are in the Concord Museum. Remarkably, half of the 250 objects in the Thoreau collection came to the Museum, directly or indirectly, through one source, Henry Thoreau's sister, Sophia. Sophia Thoreau helped manage her brother's literary legacy in the years immediately following his death, and she is largely responsible for the preservation of his material legacy as well. *An Observant Eye* places this material legacy in context, underscoring the benefit of using objects to teach history and offers a more in-depth, accessible exploration of the collection than is possible in the Museum's Thoreau Gallery where many of the objects are exhibited.

Author David F. Wood researches and writes on colonial- and Federal-era Concord craftsmen, including cabinetmakers, silversmiths and clockmakers. He is the editor and a contributor to *The*

Concord Museum: Decorative Arts from a New England Collection. He has been Curator at the Concord Museum for the past 20 years.

An Observant Eye: The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum has recently received four awards. The American Association of Museums awarded the book honorable mention in their national Museum Publications Design Competition. The competition, which acknowledges excellence in the graphic design of museum publications, is the only national, juried event involving publications produced by museums of all kinds and sizes. Also, the New England Museum Association has awarded *An Observant Eye* second place in their annual Publications Design Award competition. NEMA's annual Publication Awards Program recognizes excellence in design, production, and effective communication. Entries are judged by a panel experienced in publication, design, marketing and communications. Awards are given to those entries which most effectively present their message to the intended audience. The American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) honored the book with their Leadership in History Award of Merit. The AASLH Leadership in History Awards, now in its 62nd year, is the most prestigious recognition for achievement in the preservation and interpretation of state and local history. Awards for 2007 represent 72 organizations and individuals across the United States. An annual award selected by a panel of Historic New England staff and outside experts who evaluate recent monographs on aspects of New England culture named *An Observant Eye* the Historic New England Honor Book 2007.

Copies of *An Observant Eye: The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum* retail for \$39.95; \$35.96 Museum members, plus 6.25% sales tax. Shipping cost is US/Canada \$8.00 first book, \$3 each additional book. To order a copy, call, email or stop by the Concord Museum Shop; (978) 369-5477; cm1@concordmuseum.org. The book is also available at www.amazon.com.

Since 1886, the Concord Museum has served as a center for learning and cultural enjoyment for the region and as a gateway to the town of Concord for visitors from around the world. The Museum's outstanding collection of 27,000 objects includes icons of American history and literature—the 1775 Paul Revere lantern, Ralph Waldo Emerson's Study, the desk on which Thoreau wrote *Walden*—as well as exceptional furniture, silver, ceramics and needlework. The

permanent exhibition *Why Concord?* responds to visitors' questions about Concord's distinguished past and its preservation today and addresses the principles of freedom, self-government, environmentalism, and our shared cultural heritage. Changing exhibitions have focused on the business of clockmaking, the Concord grape, toys and memories, teapots, David Sibley's birds and the mapping of America. Curriculum-based school programs engaged nearly 10,000 children from 53 Massachusetts towns and 9 states last year in role-playing, problem solving and exposure to real artifacts. Lectures, tours, family programs and community events further lifelong learning and enjoyment for 6,500 participants yearly. The Concord Museum is accredited by the American Association of Museums.

The Concord Museum is located in historic Concord, Massachusetts at the intersection of Lexington Road and Cambridge Turnpike. The Museum is wheelchair accessible and has ample free parking on Cambridge Turnpike. For further information contact the Concord Museum at (978) 369-9609 (Taped information); (978) 369-9763 (Reservations); E-mail: cm1@concordmuseum.org; Web site: www.concordmuseum.org

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