“What so pleasant as to see some pageant or sight go by, as at coronations, weddings & such like solemnities, — to see an ambassador or a prince met, received, entertained with masks, shewe, fireworks, &c. . . . So infinitely pleasant are such shews, to the sight of which often times they will come hunredths of miles, give any mony for a place, and remember many years after with singular delight.”

—Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy

Through December the Museum is holding a display of Fireworks in the Print Gallery. This fireworks show, although noiseless, is nevertheless extensive, tracing the development of the art of pyrotechnic displays with examples from the Museum’s collection.

From time immemorial the element of fire has held a mystic and religious significance for men. When not actually the object of worship it has almost always served as an instrument of consecration. The thunderbolt of Zeus, the vestal flame, the Promethean gift, the cleansing pyre of Hindu and Norse burials, the symbol of the

ABOVE: Fireworks display of Saint George and the Dragon, from the title page of John Babington’s “Pyrotechnia; or a Discourse of artificiall Fire workes for Pleasure,” 1636. Gift of Philip Hofer, 1952

Burning Heart of the Counter Reformation, the eternal flame on the Unknown Soldier’s tomb—these are all expressions of the universal awareness of the divine qualities of fire. It is inevitable that for great celebrations in every part of the world some form of fireworks are a part of the rejoicing: our July Fourth, Britain’s Guy Fawkes’ Day, France’s Bastille Day, the Feast of the Resurrection in many countries, the Yule Log in the North, to name only a few. And in the East almost any festal occasion is an excuse for a pyrotechnic display.

It is impossible to trace with any exactitude the origins of fireworks as we know them. We can say safely that the discovery, somewhere in Asia, of the possibilities of saltpeter as an aid to combustion led to the gradual development of pyrotechnic mixtures. As early as 1232 the Chinese employed explosive missiles which burst during flight or on the target, and in India war rockets seem to have been used in very early times. This knowledge spread gradually to Europe, where early in the fourteenth century the German monk Berthold Schwarz invented the gun, adapting a pyrotechnic mixture for his purpose. It was two hundred years later that the Portuguese introduced firearms to China.

Although there is no definite evidence of when fireworks began to figure in Chinese civil
life the place that they eventually occupied in
the daily life of the people was remarkable.
Crackers are still a feature of weddings, birth
celebrations, funerals, lunar eclipses, the New
Year, and the settlement of personal quarrels.
Curiously enough, representations of fireworks
are rare in Chinese art. They do not seem to
have been considered a suitably classical subject.

The first appearance in Europe of pleasure
fireworks, as distinguished from warlike
devices, was probably in Italy. Vannoccio Biringuccio,
who wrote one of the earliest fireworks treatises
(Pirotechnia, 1540), tells us that “from these
fires composed of forceful and horrible materials
bringing harm and terror to men, a happy and
pleasing effect is also produced and, instead of
fleeing from it, the people willingly go to see
it.” Biringuccio described how in former times,
in his native Siena on the Feast of the Assump-
tion and in Florence on Saint John’s Day, it
was the practice to present shows employing
figures of wood and plaster that emitted fire
from their mouths and eyes. Cylinders that pro-
jected fireballs were also used.

The girandola, or “whirler,” was the most
popular form of fireworks display. “Indeed, al-
though it was a beautiful thing and cost much
money, it was a useless thing to make. Never-
thless, those times were truly golden, that is,
they had much gold to spend for things without
consideration of the expense, and fireworks had
no other purpose than amusement, and endured
no longer than the kiss of a lover for his lady, if
as long. . . . It was customary to make this thing
in many places, and . . . truly it was an in-
genious and beautiful thing to see it produce
so many effects in fire, just as living things do
by themselves. Now of all the said festivals,
only this one has remained in Rome in Castel
Sant’ Angelo . . . at great celebrations. But in-
stead of constructing this edifice they make use
of the whole castle, which is indeed a very
pleasing shape.”

At the time Biringuccio wrote, Italian fire-
works had already emerged from being mere
accessories and stage effects. Pyrotechnic dis-
plays were coming to be accepted in their own
right for public rejoicings as well as religious
festivals. Scenic settings, backgrounds, and
buildings were still present, but they had come
to be regarded more and more as subordinate
to the fire effects “to enhance which they were
designed and disposed.”

In England and France fireworks displays
developed along Italian lines. In a manuscript
cited by Montfaucon, describing the historic
visit in 1520 of Henry VIII with Francis I
near Guines, on the Field of the Cloth of Gold,
we are told of “the singular appearance in the air
of a great salamander or dragon, artificially con-
structed; it was four fathoms long, and seemed
to be filled with fire, very horrible and terrible.
. . . Many were greatly frightened thereby,
thinking that it must be a comet or some mon-
ster or portent, as nothing could be seen to
support it. It passed over the chapel where
Mass was being said, across the camp, with an
undulating motion, as fast as a foot soldier could
travel, as far as Guisnes, mounting as high in the
air as a crossbow would carry an arrow.”

Elizabeth of England delighted in such shows.
Describing the “Princelye pleasures, at the
Courte of Kenelwoorth . . . presented before the
Quenes Maiestie: in the yeare I575,” David
Gascoigne wrote: “On the next day, being
Sunday, there wer fireworks shewed upon the
water, the which wer both strange and wel
executed; as sometimes passing under the water
a long space, when all men had thought they
had been quenched, they would rise and mount
out of the water againe, and burne very furiously
untill they were utterlie consumed.”

By the seventeenth century there were two
distinct schools of pyrotechny in Europe: the
Southern, dominated by the Italian tradition
and centering in Bologna, and the Northern,
with its celebrated fireworks masters at Nurem-
berg. The distinction between the two lay not
so much in any variation of the actual fireworks
used as in the methods of presenting the display.
The fundamental reason was a religious one.
The Italian tradition was based, as Biringuccio
described, on early observances of religious
festivals, in which more or less elaborate struc-
tures were erected for fireworks, with the
“temple” or “machine” as an essential feature.
In and upon this edifice the fireworks were dis-
posed, and until the time for the show the
pyrotechnists kept their mysteries to themselves.

To Northern fireworkers, influenced by the Reformed Church, all this reeked of papism. Veering to the other extreme, their devices were all out in the open, ranged in ordered lines for the public to admire before they were fired. When a fort or castle or some other structure was used it was always incidental to the fireworks themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, that Northern representations of the displays are chiefly concerned with the actual fireworks, showing each item, down to the last unit, with Teutonic thoroughness. The Italian prints, on the other hand, usually concentrate on the architectural aspects of the display, allowing the fireworks themselves to be suggested by a few lines and twirls. In this respect both schools remained true to their artistic traditions. The Italian genius has always been classical and architectural, while the German tendency has been toward the Gothic and ornamental.

Europe’s fireworks spectacles reached a peak of elegance and lavishness in eighteenth-century France. Following the tradition set by Louis XIV at Versailles, Paris was the scene of a number of extraordinary displays. For the marriage of Louis XV’s daughter to Philip of Spain, in 1739, the entire reach of the Seine from the Pont Neuf to the Pont Royal was turned into one vast theater for fireworks. This show aroused such a frenzy of public enthusiasm for fireworks that Frézier revised the little pamphlet that he had published in 1705 and produced his classic Traité des feux d’artifice pour le spectacle. More than fifty years later this volume was among those which Napoleon included in the library that went with him on his Eastern campaign. It is significant that the best artists and engravers of the day were employed to make enduring memorials of these evanescent displays for a society that had not yet been shattered by the even more significant fireworks of the French Revolution.

The nineteenth century continued the custom of commemorating royal visits, coronations, and other state occasions with pyrotechnical tours de force, one of the most astonishing being that given for the crowning of Alexander II in Moscow, in 1856. A new development, ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, was the international trade fair. London’s Crystal Palace in 1851 set the style, and other cities were quick to follow with exhibitions of their own, at which fireworks were an inevitable feature.

In the world of today a fireworks display no longer seems to capture the popular imagination as it once did. Perhaps fireworks have too grim a connotation in our time, with the terrifyingly imminent shadow of Hiroshima’s mushroom hanging over us all.

And yet, in all probability, this is the very moment when a rocket’s-eye view of history can be most revealing. In the brief and flaring light certain moments seem to stand out with a curious and wonderful clarity. They are like candid shots snapped at a party before the guests had time to freeze into a formal pose. In these prints of fireworks we can still regard the past, caught forever in the midst of its laughter while the celebration was still at its height.
LEFT: Fireworks at Ryogoku Bridge, woodcut by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858). This view of Tokyo's traditional celebration of the opening of the Sumida River illustrates the outstanding feature of Japanese fireworks displays: shells that burst in the air, exhibiting patterns of astonishing symmetry and beauty.
Joseph Pulitzer Fund, 1918.

RIGHT: Golden Rain, Indian miniature. Kangra school, Rajput, Pahari, xviii century. Rogers Fund, 1918
LEFT: The “girandola” at Castel Sant'Angelo in 1579, on the anniversary of the pope’s election, engraved by Ambrogio Brambilla. Probably the most famous fireworks display in Europe, the girandola was a feature of Roman celebrations as early as the XV century. Michelangelo is credited with some of the effects. In 1887, when frescoed rooms in the castle showed damage, the display was moved to the Pincio. Flaming tar barrels can be seen in this print, and, at right, an open-air fish restaurant. Dick Fund, 1941. RIGHT: The Easter celebration of the Spaniards in Rome, 1603, in the Piazza Navona, engraved by Antonio Tempesta. In many parts of the world the Resurrection is still celebrated with fireworks and cannon salutes. Whittelsey Fund, 1951
Fireworks at Nuremberg, 1570, engraved by Jost Amman. In northern Europe fireworks tended to follow a military, rather than a religious, pattern. The mock siege, with a castle specially built for the occasion, was an inevitable point of departure. In this print, one of the earliest known representations of a pyrotechnical show, the organization of the entire set-up is clearly seen, as well as the combined wonder and terror of the spectators. Dick Fund, 1953
ABOVE: Fireworks on the Schiessplatz of St. Johannes, Nuremberg, 1665. This anonymous print is a characteristic representation of Nuremberg fireworks. The display was arranged as a “master piece” by pupils of Georg Carl Hornung, and the engraving served as a kind of diploma. Dick Fund, 1953.

LEFT: Display of fireworks from Antwerp cathedral to honor the entry of the Cardinal Infante Ferdinand of Spain in 1673. Engraving by Theodore van Thulden after Rubens. Dick Fund, 1945
Fireworks in Hanover, 1727, on the coronation day of George II of England, with the king's birth date and monograms of the royal family. Engraving by Johann Brühl. Dick Fund, 1953

A display in the high baroque tradition on the River Vyver, the Netherlands, in honor of the visit of William of Orange in 1692. Engraving by Romeyn de Hooghe. Dick Fund, 1931

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Fireworks display presented to the king and queen by the city of Paris on January 21, 1782, drawn on the spot and engraved by Moreau le Jeune. The Dauphin, oldest child of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, whose birth this magnificent spectacle celebrated, lived only seven years. Dick Fund, 1930
Fireworks for the coronation of Alexander II, in Moscow, 1856. Lithograph by Gilbert after Blanchard. This stupendous display featured a choir of one thousand voices and a band of two thousand instruments, with artillery firing in time to the music. Whittelsey Fund, 1954

Bird’s-eye view of the inauguration of the Brooklyn Bridge on May 24, 1883, with a display of fireworks. Lithograph published by A. Major. The Edward W. C. Arnold Collection, 1954