

Local

Perspective

It took this artist two years — and tiny brushes — to create bird's-eye views of D.C.



Peter Waddell stands at the George Washington University Museum in front of one of his bird's-eye-view paintings of Washington. This one shows the District as Pierre L'Enfant designed it in 1791. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)



By

[John Kelly](#) | October 22, 2018

“I wanted a fire,” the artist **Peter Waddell** said as we gazed upon one of a pair of his monumentally sized paintings.

Peter’s paintings are bird’s-eye views of Washington — one as it looked in **Pierre L’Enfant’s** imagination, one as it looked in 1825. They went on display last week at the [George Washington University Museum](#).

Large the paintings may be — 6 feet wide by 5 feet high — but the details in them are tiny. There are tiny cows grazing on the Mall, tiny sailing ships in the Potomac, tiny pedestrians on the streets.

“I wanted a house on fire,” Peter said. “But we wanted a *historical* fire. We couldn’t find one. And it’s hard to get drama at 1/32nd of an inch.”

It’s hard to get drama, but it’s easy to get a cramp. It took Peter two years to complete the oil-on-canvas paintings. They were commissioned by **Albert H. Small**, [a 93-year-old philanthropist and collector of historical D.C. objects](#).

The scale is such that Peter had to render the tiniest details with a delicate, Size 00000 paintbrush.

“Made from the eyelashes of unborn mice,” Peter joked.

The paintings are the centerpiece of a new exhibit called “[Eye of the Bird](#): Visions and Views of D.C.’s Past.” Before dirigibles and airplanes, before drones and satellites, it was artists, engravers and printmakers who gave dirt-bound Earthlings an idea of what our cities looked like from above.

The GWU exhibit includes examples of aerialist art from as early as 1838. In those days, an entrepreneurial artist would walk the streets of a town, sketching each building. These sketches would form the basis of a larger work, each structure put in its place and enhanced by artistic license.

“A bird’s-eye view is a constructed reality in which you focus on small things,” Peter said. “Then you assemble those things. It’s not a snapshot. It’s one of the few genres of art that wasn’t taken over by photography.”

That’s because a photograph tends to smash things together: Buildings obscure one another. Streets vanish. Detail is lost.

The New Zealand-born Peter, 63, is artist in residence at Tudor Place, the historic Georgetown mansion. That’s where his studio is and where he labored on the paintings.

“I found it completely immersive, almost as if you’ve entered that world,” he said. “In the morning, to begin with, it seems like everything’s really tiny. Then you focus on one part and it’s completely all around you. It’s like being in the front row of the pictures.”

Along with **Jackie Streker**, the assistant curator of the Albert H. Small Washingtoniana Collection, and her predecessor, Anne Dobbertein, Peter consulted contemporary sources to find out what houses, shops, churches, armories and other buildings are known to have been in place in 1825.

For “The Indispensable Plan” — the painting of Washington as it was first meant to look — they pored over L’Enfant’s original manuscript at the Library of Congress. Peter placed an equestrian statue where the Washington Monument is now. The presidential palace is five times as large as today’s White House. The city is dotted with five fountains, as L’Enfant had wished.

The two paintings are an homage to the brilliant, headstrong Frenchman who envisioned a world-class capital in what was then largely farmland (but never, despite what you may have been told, a swamp).

The painting titled “The Village Monumental” — so called because for decades after Washington was founded, it was a collection of discrete villages — is meant to illustrate an actual day: June 17, 1825. It’s the day L’Enfant — penniless, angry, unloved by the Founding Fathers who had hired him — died.

That’s why Peter couldn’t include a fire. No records exist of a blaze on June 17, 1825. L’Enfant has been dead for nearly two centuries, but every day we walk where he wanted our footsteps to go.

Said Peter: “If he came back, he would recognize the city. He would not be mystified by where he was.”

“Eye of the Bird: Visions and Views of D.C.’s Past” is up until Dec. 23. The George Washington University Museum is open 11 to 5 Mondays and Fridays, 11 to 7 Wednesdays, 10 to 5 Saturdays and 1 to 5 Sundays. Closed Tuesdays. Admission is free.

Several programs are planned in connection with the exhibit. They include drawing workshops during the museum’s Nov. 10 Family Day, an “Arts and Drafts” social hour on Nov. 28 (\$15 admission), a lecture by Peter Waddell on Dec. 3, and a tour by assistant curator Jackie Streker on Dec. 7. For information, visit museum.gwu.edu/programs.

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