

Fires and Floods

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE

FIRES FUELED BY YEARS OF DROUGHT AND oppressive hot weather are a near constant worry for people in our western states. At the same time, people in our southeastern and southern states face extended and severe heat and rainfall events. People in all low-lying coastal zones are concerned with rising sea levels, which will lead to flooding and ultimately the need to abandon those areas for higher ground.

Our climate is changing, patterns are shifting, and the consequences are far-reaching and catastrophic. To name just a few: agricultural challenges that affect food supplies; temperatures that make it dangerous for people to work outdoors; the rise of previously unknown and spreading pathogens that affect health and longevity; changes in fish and shellfish populations; declines or even extinction of certain critical animal species; economic, social, and political tragedies.



This issue's topic—fires and floods—is difficult to talk about without bringing up concerns about climate change. This is for good reason. Analysis of the evidence makes it very clear that we are nearing a point of no return; intolerable temperatures and rising sea levels will soon dramatically change life for every person on this planet, and people will die. People are already dying. But I'd like to widen the lens a bit as we think about fires and floods.

Fire and water are powerful elements, each necessary for our existence but also capable of causing unbelievable damage. How can it be that something essential for life can also take life

away? People have been pondering this paradox for centuries, often in the form of tales and myths.

Myths are stories that serve a profound purpose by providing answers to timeless questions about the world and our existence in it: How did we and everything in the world around us come into existence? Why is there good and evil? What happens when people die? Why are there catastrophic natural events—fires, floods, lightning, earthquakes, tornadoes—that kill people and sometimes wipe out entire towns?

Over time different cultures have come up with different stories to answer these questions, and these stories have been passed down over generations. In time these stories have become sacred tales—myths packed with meaning about our world and our place in it. Myths have become tied to religion, worship, culture, and art. And they are as relevant to us today as they were to the ancients because deep within lie words of wisdom.

FIRE

People have long considered fire to be one of the basic elements of the universe, along with water, air, and earth. So it is natural that people have developed stories about where it comes from and what it means. Fire, of course, has two sides: it provides comfort and heat, it's used to cook food to make it more palatable, and it can be used purposefully to clear land or even structures to prepare for renewal; on the other hand, when fire is out of control, it is dangerous, destructive, and something to be feared.

Most myths across time and from around the world focus on a few similar aspects of fire.

A very common one is how people first obtained fire; many myths say that a god or an animal gave fire to people. In Greek mythology, Prometheus outwitted Zeus, who had previously taken fire away from people, by taking the flare of eternal fire from Mount Olympus and giving it once again to people. Other fire myths speak to the ability and methods of making and controlling fire and the fact that this ability separates people from animals. Some tales speak of fire as the center of a household, providing what is necessary to a good life. In Hindu mythology, Agni, the god of fire, represents the essential energy of life in the universe. He consumes things, but only so that other things can live. Then there is the story of the phoenix—a mythical bird that is destroyed by flames only to rise again from its own ashes—a story of rebirth and renewal.

WATER

Creation stories are found in virtually every culture across time, and such stories often begin by speaking of an abyss of water. The oldest Indian text, the poetic Rigveda (c. 1200 BCE), states: "In the beginning, darkness was hidden by darkness; all this [world] was an unrecognizable salty ocean." The Maidu, a Native American tribe in northern California, uses a motif that also appears in Siberian mythology, stating: "In the beginning . . . all was dark, and everywhere there was only water." Or, according to the first chapter of the Hebrew Bible: "In the beginning the gods created heaven and earth . . . and the spirit of the gods hovered over water." Water, it seems is the source of life.

Rain is welcomed in traditions worldwide. Innumerable prayers and rituals are performed to attract rain—an essential source of water for drinking and agriculture. The Hopi, living in the desert of northern Arizona, depend on the summer monsoon and winter snow for the success of their

crops. To ensure sufficient moisture, they invite many of the roughly two hundred Katsina spirits from the nearby mountains to bring rain, doing so during rituals that involve dancing and singing.

The flood myth is universal, found in cultures throughout Australia, Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas. But there are two strains of this myth. An old Egyptian hymn greets the Nile, and the spirit of the Nile announces: "I am . . . the provider of the fields with plenty," to which the gods answer: "There was no happiness until you came down! . . . 'Canal of happiness' will be the name of this canal as it floods the fields with plenty." Egyptians needed the annual flood to ensure a successful farming season.

An example of myths related to undesirable flooding can be found in Chinese origin myths. Nuwa, a mythical goddess, was responsible for the taming of the Yellow River's flood waters by patching holes in the sky and building dams. (The Yellow River has long been considered to be extremely dangerous and flooding there has caused millions of deaths.) The most familiar flood myth is that of Noah and his ark, Noah being chosen by god to be saved from a global deluge that killed everyone else and to save animals that could go on to procreate after the flood waters receded. The story of Noah is very similar to several Mesopotamian stories from centuries earlier. The essence of the flood myth remained relevant over time.



As I read the pieces in this issue and view the art, I find it helpful to stand back from the political issues facing us with regard to climate change and fires and floods. You may wish to do the same. Climate change is a mighty force, and the future of humankind is uncertain as a result. But fires and floods have been with us for a very long time.

So, let's start with a few fire and flood events depicted in art . . .

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. She has called Maine her home for the last thirty years.

• www.shantiarts.com • www.christinecotephoto.com



Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), *Eruption of the Volcano Vesuvius*, 1821.
National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, Denmark.

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in southern Italy in 79 CE was one of the deadliest and best-known eruptions in European history. Mount Vesuvius erupted in the early afternoon, spewing ash and pumice that blanketed the area. At some time in the night, pyroclastic flows in the close vicinity of the volcano began. The flows were rapid-moving, dense, and very hot, wholly or partly knocking down all structures in their path, wiping out several towns and dramatically altering the landscape. Countless people were incinerated or suffocated. By the evening of the second day, the eruption was over, leaving heavy haze in the atmosphere. As recently as 2003, human remains were still being excavated from ash deposits. The number of people killed has never been determined.

Johan Christian Dahl is regarded as the first Norwegian painter to reach a level of artistic accomplishment comparable to that attained by the greatest European artists of his day.

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/johan-christian-dahl>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Vesuvius



Samuel Elyard (1817–1910), *Burning of the Barque India*, c. 1845. Watercolor on paper.
Australia's Museum of the Sea, Sydney, Australia.

The *India* departed Greenock, Scotland, in June 1841 with 186 immigrants seeking a new life in the Australia colonies. Six weeks into their voyage, while two hundred miles off the coast of Brazil, the boat was engulfed in flames after a burning candle fell onto spilled medicinal rum. Elyard's painting is based on a sketch by a survivor, Robert Allan. The painting captures the terrified passengers clinging to the boat's bowsprit along with flames and thick smoke. The painting also shows a small boat taking passengers away from the chaotic scene and a solitary figure floating on a piece of debris. All but seventeen people were rescued by the French whaling ship *Roland*, seen to the right in the painting. The survivors were taken to Rio de Janeiro and later completed their journey to Port Phillip on the *Grindlay* of Liverpool.

Samuel Elyard spent most of his life in Australia, his father moving there in 1821. He studied art and also worked in the Colonial Secretary's office. He exhibited his work in Sydney and Paris.

<https://www.sea.museum/2017/09/08/meeting-descendants-disaster-sea>



Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847–1915), *The Ryōgoku Fire Sketched from Hamachō*, 1881. Color woodblock print. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.

Within two weeks in early 1881, two great fires devastated parts of Tokyo: Ryōgoku on January 26 and Kanda on February 11. Strong seasonal winds quickly spread the fires. This print, which captures the Ryōgoku Bridge in the background, is based on a sketch the artist made while the fire was ablaze. Over 10,000 buildings in Tokyo were destroyed, including the artist's own house.

Kobayashi Kiyochika, a Japanese artist, was best known for his color woodblock prints and newspaper illustrations. Woodblock printing fell out of favor during this period, and many collectors consider Kobayashi's work the last significant example of this type of art.

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/136605/the-great-fire-at-ryogoku-drawn-from-hamach-kobayashi-kiyochika>



Chadwick, H. D., *San Francisco Earthquake of 1906: Burning of San Francisco. Looking toward the Bay*, April 1906. National Archives at College Park.

At 5:12 AM on Wednesday, April 18, 1906, the coast of northern California was struck by a major earthquake with an estimated magnitude of 7.9. As damaging as the earthquake and its aftershocks were, the fires that burned afterward were even more destructive. It has been estimated that up to 90 percent of the total destruction was the result of the fires. In the course of three days, over thirty fires, mostly caused by ruptured gas mains, destroyed approximately 25,000 buildings on 490 city blocks. More than 3,000 people died.

Almost immediately after the quake, planning and reconstruction plans were hatched to quickly rebuild the city. Reconstruction was swift and largely completed by 1915, in time for the 1915 Panama–Pacific International Exposition that celebrated the reconstruction of the city and its “rise from the ashes.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1906_San_Francisco_earthquake



Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909), *Midsummer's Eve Bonfire on Skagen's Beach*, 1906.
Skagens Museum, Skagen, Denmark.

Peder Severin Krøyer was born in Norway but was schooled and lived much of his life in Denmark. In 1882 he spent several months in the small fishing village of Skagen on the northern tip of Denmark. Skagen had a developing art and literary community of which Krøyer became a part. Thereafter he divided his time between Skagen and Copenhagen.

Several well-known local artists, members of a group called Skagen Painters, and community members appear in *Midsummer's Eve Bonfire on Skagen's Beach*. Although Krøyer himself disliked the painting, thinking it too dark, recent art critics consider it to be Krøyer's most important work, representing a reflection of his own life and a tribute to the people who contributed to his success.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midsummer_Eve_Bonfire_on_Skagen_Beach



The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was one of the deadliest industrial disasters in the history of the United States. The fire broke out on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911. The Fire Marshal later concluded that the likely cause was an unextinguished match or cigarette butt that was tossed in a scrap bin containing two months' worth of fabric cuttings. The fire caused the deaths of 146 garment workers—123 women and girls and 23 men—who died from the fire, smoke inhalation, or falling or jumping to their deaths. Most of the victims were recent Italian or Jewish immigrant women and girls. The doors to the stairwells and exits were locked, a common practice at the time to prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks and to reduce theft.

The factory was located in the Asch Building, which was built in 1901. Later renamed the Brown Building, it still stands at 23–29 Washington Place near Washington Square Park on the New York University campus. The building has been designated a National Historic Landmark and a New York City landmark.

The fire led to legislation requiring improved factory safety standards and helped spur the growth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), which fought for better working conditions for sweatshop workers.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle_Shirtwaist_Factory_fire



Eduard Gurk (1801–1841), *Porzellangasse, Schmidgasse, Vienna*, 1830.
Watercolor. Albertina, Vienna, Austria.

In early times, ice jams had the potential to cause disastrous flooding in populated areas near rivers. Flooding could escalate rapidly, and the very cold water made it nearly impossible to survive. In 1830 an ice jam on the Danube River resulted in flooding in Vienna that was among the worst in recorded history. Viennese artist and imperial court painter Eduard Gurk made a series of “official” paintings depicting the flood and efforts to provide relief to the city’s citizens. The top image above shows rescue efforts as well as the construction of fences to keep ice and other objects from ramming into buildings and boats. The bottom image shows the dire situation outside the city where conditions were especially tragic.

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Vienna-the-flooded-quarter-of-Leopoldstadt-Jaegerzeile-on-2-March-1830-Watercolour_fig3_341215805



Francis Danby (1793–1861), *The Deluge*, 1840.
Oil on canvas. Tate London, United Kingdom.

Francis Danby’s *The Deluge* is a unique representation of the Great Flood story told in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. God sends a flood to punish mankind’s wickedness but allows Noah and his family to be saved. A stormy sea rages around a rocky peak and massive tree branches, to which humans and animals are clinging desperately. A blood-red sun can be seen setting to the left. In the lower right hand corner, an angel weeps over the death of a child.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/danby-the-deluge-t01337>



Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875), *Flooding in Saulie*, c. 1870.
Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot chose to become an artist after two failed apprenticeships to become a draper. He traveled extensively around Europe and spent time painting and drawing outdoors. As his work developed, topographical detail became suppressed in favor of mood and atmosphere, especially apparent in the landscapes that he painted from memory. While he is considered a realist, his influence on impressionistic landscape painting was immense.

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/jean-baptiste-camille-corot>



Artist unknown. Print illustrating the tsunami that followed the Meiji Sanriku earthquake of 1896. University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

The 1896 Sanriku earthquake was one of the most disastrous seismic events in Japanese history. The 8.5 magnitude earthquake occurred on the evening of June 15, 1896, roughly 103 miles off the coast of Honshu, the largest and most populous island of Japan. It resulted in two tsunami waves reaching heights of 125 feet. (Hawaii experienced waves of up to thirty feet.) The tsunami destroyed about 9,000 homes and caused at least 22,000 deaths. Large numbers of victims were found with broken bodies or missing limbs. Most deaths occurred in Iwate and Miyagi.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1896_Sanriku_earthquake#Magnitude



Isaac Levitan (1860–1900), *Spring. High Water*, 1897. Oil on canvas.
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

Isaac Levitan's work is known for its simplicity, lyricism, and emotion. This painting captures all the subtleties of spring—budding trees, strong shadows, light green grasses in the background, and high water. The buildings in the background appear to be partially under water, and it is hard to tell if the boat in the foreground has been left there on purpose or floated away on the high water and ran aground.

<https://my.tretyakov.ru/app/masterpiece/10836?lang=en>



Johan Hendrik van Mastenbroek (1875–1945), *Ondergelopen boerderij te Neder-Asselt* (Flooded Farm in Lower Asselt), 1926. Black chalk on brown paper.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Johan Hendrik van Mastenbroek is well known for his drawings and paintings of the Rotterdam harbors. He liked to sketch outdoors in rainy weather because of the beauty of the skies and the colors: “I could stand and feast on the wonderful cloud formations and the color-rich battle between sun and clouds.” Given its low elevation, the Netherlands is highly susceptible to flooding. It is only because of its system of dikes, dams, and flood gates that two-thirds of the country remains above water.

<https://www.simonis-buunk.com/artist/johan-hendrik-van-mastenbroek/artworks-for-sale/1334/>



Gregor Perušek (1887–1940), *Flood in Ohio Valley*, 1937.
Oil on canvas. Private collection.

The 1937 Ohio River Flood remains the flood of record for many locations along the Ohio River, leaving an estimated 350 dead and nearly one million homeless. The entire river was effected, with record flooding from Point Pleasant, West Virginia, to the Ohio's confluence with the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois.

Gregor Perušek was born in what is now Slovenia in 1887. He moved to Cleveland, Ohio, at the age of fourteen and lived there for the rest of his life. He was an award-winning artist, instructor, and for a time was the director of the Crafts and Art Center In Cleveland.

<https://www.weather.gov/iln/1937OhioRiverFlood>



Josepha Jane Battlehooke (attributed), *The Great Fire of London*, 1675. Oil on panel.
Museum of London, London, United Kingdom.

The Great Fire of London occurred over a period of four days in September of 1666. It started in a bakery just after midnight and spread rapidly, in part due to the delayed response of city officials. In the end, the fire gutted the medieval City of London inside the old Roman city wall as well as a large area outside and to the west of the wall.

The view in this painting is from a boat in the vicinity of Tower Wharf. The painting depicts Old London Bridge, various houses, a drawbridge and wooden parapet, the churches of St. Dunstan-in-the-West and St. Bride's, All Hallow's the Great, Old St. Paul's, St. Magnus the Martyr, St. Lawrence Pountney, St. Mary-le-Bow, St. Dunstan-in-the East, and the Tower of London.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Fire_of_London

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Fire_London.jpg