Primary Maker: David Cusick  
Title: Three Iroquois: Atotárho Protected by Black Snakes, Flanked by Deganawida(?) Offering Wampum and Hiawatha(?)  
Date: ca. 1827  
Medium: Watercolor, black and brown ink, and brown gouache over graphite on beige paper, laid on canvas  
Dimensions: Sheet: 15 3/16 × 16 3/4 in. (38.6 × 42.5 cm)  
Credit Line: Gift of Lansing Thurber  
Object Number: X.520[dup]  
Classification: DRAWINGS  

Curatorial Remarks:  
David Cusick’s watercolor scene depicts the founding of the Iroquois League, an event which is frequently dated to around 1500 but which the artist claims happened 100 years before Columbus. Atotárho, wrapped in protective snakes, is seated on the ground at the center. Cusick explained in his book that at Atotárho’s request, the snakes were replaced by “a large belt of wampam [sic]; he became a law giver, and renewed the chain of alliance of the Five Nations and framed their internal government.” The two flanking figures, not mentioned in the text, may be Deganawida, who holds the wampum, and Hiawatha, on the right. The Tuscarora brothers David and Dennis Cusick were among the founders of what has been called the Early Iroquois Realist watercolor style. The two were among the many children of Nicholas Cusick, a converted Christian who fought on the American side in the Revolutionary War and recruited other Tuscarora and Oneida men for the cause. Commissioned a lieutenant in 1799, Nicholas Cusick reputedly saved the life of the Marquis de Lafayette. After the war, he accompanied a
missionary to Buffalo, New York, serving as an interpreter in negotiations with chiefs of the Seneca mission. By 1802 he had permanently moved his family to the Tuscarora reservation near Niagara Falls. Under the care of Samuel Kirkland, the missionary who converted his father, David Cusick attended the Hamilton Oneida Academy for the coeducation of Indian and Euro-American boys from 1794 to 1800. He became a physician but is best known as the author of David Cusick’s Sketch of Ancient History of the Six Nations. An important contribution to the fields of ethnohistory and cultural studies, the book detailed Iroquois traditions, history, and myth. It sold very well, especially to tourists who flocked to the region after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. First published in 1827 without illustrations, it was reprinted in 1828 with four woodcuts, and published again in 1848 after the author’s death. Although Dennis Cusick produced signed watercolors, no signed original works by his elder brother are known. A number of contemporary individuals, however, recorded seeing watercolors by David Cusick, and the present work is one of three watercolors in the Society’s collection that have been convincingly attributed to him by comparing their stylistic conventions to the less skillful woodcuts by an unknown engraver, most likely after Cusick’s original designs, which appear in the 1828 edition of Sketches. These works communicate Iroquois subject matter through the styles and techniques of Euro-American “folk art.” However, contemporary accounts mention that Cusick adopted other subject matter as well.

Physical Description:
Iroquois folkart termed ‘picture writing’

Inscribed: Inscribed at upper left in brown ink: “No. 2.”
Related Objects: