

**Currier and Ives: An America Panorama
Shaping the American Identity**

**Curriculum Partnership between the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts and
Bay Path College
Longmeadow, Massachusetts**

**“USING THE LITHOGRAPHS OF CURRIER AND IVES TO DEFINE AND
REFLECT THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN IDENTITY;
A VISUAL INQUIRY’**

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An interesting way for students of the visual arts to investigate eras of cultural identification and diversity is to view and analyze images created during evolutionary periods. The Currier and Ives collection of lithographs provides such an opportunity.

Struggles toward a national identity, mainstream beliefs and values, social realities and cultural ideals are all revealed in the prolific works of the Currier and Ives firm. Mass produced and marketed, these lithographs echo the popular tastes, mores and thoughts of middle class America during the 19th century.

America was searching for a unifying identity while acknowledging varying views on issues illustrating the mood of the new country. Recognition of contrasts is often seen as thematic in the works of Currier and Ives. Issues included:

- Vast differences between the geographic landscape of the East and the West.
- Cultural differences between the regions of New England and the eastern seaboard states, the mid-west and the western, new frontier, of the country.
- Urban development and industrialization.
- The more free spirit of the West.

The Currier and Ives Collection illustrates how societal issues were perceived. They provide a sort of diary of social consciousness. These lithographs provided middle class America with affordable art that thematically reinforced cultural values and beliefs.

These images are compositionally related to the great works by notable artists and landscape painters of the 19th century. In fact, some of Currier and Ives artists included the likes of George Inness, Eastman Johnson and George Henry Durrie. The connection with well known artists of the time period allowed for the compositions of the Currier and Ives works to be compared with the large scale, oil paintings by these same artists.

Any study of the visual arts must include analysis of compositions by specific artists and themes within the context of historical time periods and cultural eras. The Currier and Ives collection provides such an opportunity. The themes as defined using the medium of lithograph and divided into categories by subject matter provide an opportunity for analysis. Each composition can be examined as a single composition or in conjunction with others of similar theme to search for common denominators of expressive technique and the use of color and line. The inquiry can be furthered by looking at earlier and later compositions by the same Currier and Ives firm in order to recognize trends and changes within the visual statements.

The Currier and Ives prints, while serving as a mirror of the American taste, also reflects in trends on sculpture and the latest in styles of sculpture and architecture during the 19th century.

The following topics provide options for research, discussion and essay/paper writing:

- Landscape painting: the Hudson River School of paintings of Thomas Cole and Frederic Church as echoed in the landscapes of Currier and Ives
- Manifest Destiny
- The Majestic West
- Progress and Industrialization
- Nature
- Still Life
- Sculpture
- Declaring Independence
- Photography
- The Aftermath of War
- Solitary Work Ethic
- Seasons: example, Winter
- Exteriors
- Portraits of Domestic Interiors
- Cycles of Life

Classroom Learning Experiences as Related to the Currier and Ives Collection

Upon viewing and researching selected Currier and Ives prints and themes, students should have the following **Learned Outcomes** and be enabled to do the following:

- Recognize a Currier and Ives lithograph.
- Identify and discuss the typical Currier and Ives compositional style.
- Describe themes and biases.

- Recognize an important artist's style in the prints that these same artists created for Currier and Ives.
- Contrast the microcosm represented in particular lithographs with the macrocosm of the 19th century as defined through large scale oil paintings, sculpture and architecture of the same period.
- Compare individual lithographs to each other.
- Identify the cultural identity of the emerging nation as depicted within the context of Currier and Ives prints.

American Art

Compositional Analysis Discussion/Paper Option #1

Project: Focus on several Currier and Ives compositions of similar theme. Note the use of the elements of design (line, shape, form, value, color, texture and pattern) and the principles of design (balance, harmony, proportion, rhythm, scale, and focal point). Draw the major lines and note the patterns they create. Is there a tendency to repeat an area of dominance in the same place again and again? Are there repeated patterns, as in the treatment of trees and rocks? Is this done in a random fashion or with purposeful placement to stabilize the composition? How are diagonals used in the compositions? Do they unify the designs or are they used to divide the subject matter?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples.

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style.

Option #2: 19th Century Landscape as Defined by Currier and Ives and Compared to the Paintings by the Artists of the Hudson River School

Project: Look for similarities in basic divisions of compositional space. Compare Currier and Ives landscape lithographs with examples by Thomas Cole (St. John in the Wilderness or View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts). How is perspective achieved? How is mood achieved? Do you, as the viewer, feel big or small, in the context of the large world view presented? How do the landscape paintings by Frederic Church change your feelings? How is the sense of awe achieved within the large scale paintings? Do the lithographs make you feel somewhat the same?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples.

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style.

Option #3: The Majestic West: The Wonder of It

Project: Compare the figural group style as seen in the works of Currier and Ives with the pyramidal, sculptural groupings by such artists as George Caleb Bingham (Jolly Flatboatmen, 1846). Note how those triangular structures echo the shape of the Great Seal of the United States and the elaborate compositions of the Baroque and Romantic artists of Europe. How do lines and triangles create space within the two-dimensional picture plane? How do gestures help relate one figure to another and each to an aspect of the larger composition? Is the resulting scene “staged” or naturalistic? What feelings do those group figural groups evoke? What is the mood?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples.

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style.

Option #4: Millennial Progress and Conflict

Project: Pastoral harmonies versus violence are two opposing themes that were surprisingly popular during the 19th century. In most of the works by the great painter Asher Durand, we see the world at peace; all aspects of a scene are in harmony with each other. In other Durand works, there is violence. Likewise, in the Currier and Ives lithographs, we see the theme of peace and harmony, solitude and serenity. We also see fire and a violent sea, charging horses and men at odds with each and their position within society. What is the role of the cemetery as a theme? Is it related to peace or violence? Choose 4-6 examples of these ideas expressed in the print works of Currier and Ives. Compare and contrast them. How do they echo the journalistic and poetic sentiments of the time period?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples.

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style.

Option #5: Spiritualism

Project: During the 19th century the idea of spiritualism, an invisible presence, became popular. Ships were often seen upon calm seas at dusk as ghostly apparitions or witnesses of previous history as well as the unknown. Ships in violent seas were seen as symbols trying to float in a turbulent (or not fully defined) world. Choose some Currier and Ives images of ships skimming the calm seas; then choose and analyze prints showing the violent and overwhelming power of the sea. Which you prefer? How do the use of line and diagonal change the calm sea? How do these representations compare with works of ships at sea by Fitz Hugh Lane (Boston Harbor at Sunset, 1850-55)? How is the sense of drama achieved? How does light come into play in creating a mood?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes using actual prints as examples

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Option #6: Nature: Recording God's Little Creatures

Project: Study the Currier and Ives bird prints. Compare them to each other and to those by James Audubon and Martin Johnson Heade. How is the basic composition structured? Are there backgrounds? Are birds shown in their nest? Are rabbits peaking out of holes? Do the works by Currier and Ives seem to be scientifically accurate? Do they seem to be romanticized? Are they specimens or "forest friends"?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Option #7: The Close-up World of Still life: Sarah Peale Versus the work of Currier and Ives

Project: Every wall loves to have a still life hung upon it. Just as today, every homemaker of the 19th century sought to decorate her walls with pictures to enhance "Home Sweet Home." Currier and Ives had a variety of options available in the form of still life lithographs featuring fruits, vegetables, and flowers in various settings. Easily recognizable as fruits and assorted other household items, these compositions inspired a sense of comfort and welcome within the middle class home. How are these Currier and Ives scenes structured? How do they compare with the very realistic paintings by Sarah Peale and her brothers? How do the Currier and Ives prints compare in terms of naturalistic representation when compared to the more folksy, stenciled and theorem paintings of fruits and flowers that were also popular during the 19th Century? What are the parallels? What are the contrasts?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Option #8: Sculpture: Positioning the Figure- Parallels and Contrasts

Project: Note the stance of the figures in the lithographs of Currier Ives. They are exemplary of those positions preferred by the artists and sculptors of the 19th century. Compare the work of Horatio Greenough, the painter John Trumbull, and the standing portraits and scenes by Currier and Ives. Note that the stance is the same. What other

parallels exist among the lithographs, the sculptures and standing portraits of politicians and leaders?

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style

Option #9: Photography: Stealing the Portrait?

Project: The arrival of the photograph and its increased popularity enabled middle class America to have a picture of their loved ones. Note how esteemed leaders of the country are featured in Currier Ives prints in a manner similar to that of a photograph. Examine Currier and Ives prints. Look for examples of this “photo-stance.” Note that the prints can be more subtle. How can this happen? Research some portrait prints by Currier and Ives and look for common denominators or style.

Discussion Length: 5-10 minutes: use actual prints as examples

Paper Length/Format: 3-5 pages: use MLA paper format, source citation and documentation style