

Analyzing Lithographs from the Currier and Ives Collection

Overview: During the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives established a firm that sold thousands of lithographic prints to middle-class Americans. (Lithographs were works of art reproduced from a stone original). The firm employed dozens of artists to mass-produce these prints, and Currier and Ives prints decorated many households across America. Because these prints were so popular with the growing American middle-class, they represent an excellent window into the popular tastes and attitudes of an important cross section of American society during the nineteenth century. The Springfield, Massachusetts Museums have recently acquired many of these historic Currier and Ives prints which will be the basis of this project.

Historians often use art as valuable evidence reflecting the attitudes and values of a given historical epoch. During the nineteenth century, the United States was a young and expanding republic seeking to create a unifying national identity. Unlike the European powers such as France and England which had national identities forged over the course of centuries, the young United States was originally the creation of thirteen distinct colonies to which were added many new and unique states as the young nation expanded westward. The early American public had to contend with numerous centrifugal forces that could easily pull the nation apart. These included the vast size of the nation as it expanded westward, and the deep cultural differences between three very distinctive regions: the manufacturing North, the slaved-based economy of the South and the independent spirited new states of the West (the West first defined as the territories

just east of the Mississippi River and later redefined as the trans-Mississippi West). Each region had very distinct economies, culture and political culture.

During the nineteenth century, one of the major challenges of the political and cultural leadership of the young republic was to try to tie these distinct regions together, not just politically and economically but culturally. The search for a distinct AMERICAN identity that transcended region was a major preoccupation during the United States' first hundred years. Americans often felt a certain inferiority complex toward the great European nations such as England and France and were very anxious to have American power and culture respected. Toward this end Americans took great pride in the nation's growing literature, as writers like Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville helped establish a distinct American literature that contributed to Americans' sense of having a unique culture and identity. Thus, in the nineteenth century, art of all forms was crucial to the creation of Americans' own sense of themselves.

Project One: Images of War and the Emerging American Nationalism: Throughout America's history, its national identity has often been defined by war. From Washington crossing the Delaware through Francis Scott Key's "Star Spangled Banner" to the statue of American soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima, war has shaped America's identity and defined American patriotism. War has often been used as a national unifier. Students should examine about a dozen prints from the Currier and Ives collection online (or go to the museum in person) that depict battles and wartime leaders. Most of these will be listed under the category of "Creating an American Identity". Students should study these

prints and look for several important themes, including some of the following (your paper need not include all these themes but we will touch on all of them in class discussion):

- How is war depicted?
- How are wartime leaders from Washington through Andrew Jackson to Lincoln depicted?
- How is the common soldier depicted?
- How do these images promote a sense of national unity and how are they designed to instill a sense of patriotism? (This is especially important during the Civil War. The prints represent the perspective of the North. How do they seek to inspire support for the Union?)
- What are some of the symbols of patriotism in these works? What role does the flag play?
- What role, if any, do women play? How do these prints define patriotism in terms of masculinity?
- How close are these depictions of war to the reality of war that you've been studying?
- Why do you think war played such an important role in creating the nation's identity?
- Why do you think these images were so popular (to this day many appear in history textbooks and are still familiar to many Americans)?
- Do these images still shape Americans' sense of nationhood? In what, if any ways have Americans' view of the nation and war changed or remained the same?
- Your own personal reflections?

Students should write a 4-6-page essay touching on these themes and including your own reflections. Several prints from the Currier and Ives collection you should pay attention to are:

- *Washington Crossing the Delaware*
- *Battle at Bunker Hill*
- *Surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown*
- *Perry's Victory on Lake Erie*
- *General Andrew Jackson at New Orleans*
- *The Union Volunteer*
- *The Union Volunteer Home from War*
- *Battle of Bull Run*
- *Light Artillery*
- *Surrender of General Lee at Appomattox*
- *The Soldier's Dream of Home*
- *Home from War: the Soldier's Return*
- *The Soldiers Grave*

Project Two: Fires and Fire Fighters:

Firefighters have always held a special place in Americans' esteem and popular imagination, never more so than in the years following the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001. Students wishing to may substitute a project researching firefighting and the great fires of the nineteenth century for project one. This paper should include brief descriptions of how fires were fought and the how firemen lived (you'll be surprised to learn many were quite rowdy, and firefighters were often members of gangs). After researching firefighting and some of the great fires of the nineteenth century, students should examine some of the interesting prints from the Currier and Ives collection on this subject and take a similar approach to the previous project. Questions might include:

- How are these fires portrayed?
- Why do you think fires like the Chicago Fire of 1871 held such power over the popular imagination?
- How are fire fighters portrayed and how realistic were these depictions?
- Are there similarities between the depictions of fire fighters and soldiers at war?
- Your own reflections.

The relevant prints in the Currier and Ives Collection can be found under the category "American Progress" and include the following:

- *Ruins of the Merchants Exchange, N.Y.*
- *The Burning of Chicago*
- *Great Fire at Boston*
- *The Burning of the New York Crystal Palace*
- *The American Fireman "Always Ready"*
- *The Life of a Fireman, "The Fire"*
- *The Life of a Fireman, "The Alarm"*
- *The Life of a Fireman, "The Ruins"*
- *The Life of a Fireman, "The Race"*