A GIFT OF CURRIER & IVES LITHOGRAPHS

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The first-floor gallery of the American Wing is currently featuring an exhibition of lithographs published by Currier & Ives that were given to the Museum by Miss A. S. Colgate from her outstanding collection. Miss Colgate has selected singularly beautiful impressions of prints of yachting and of rural landscapes to make an exhibition of Americans on Land and Sea. This first important group of Currier & Ives prints to enter the Museum will remain on show through the summer.

Much has been written about Currier & Ives, and deservedly so, for they were by all odds the most energetic and successful print publishers who have ever worked in the Americas. Their mail-order catalogues and their agents pushed their lithographs from New York to the Pacific, into South America, across to Europe, and down to Australia. Their seven thousand titles compose the longest inventory known for any print publishers anywhere. Just brute bulk alone makes their achievement impossible to dislodge from history.

This success story started by accident. In 1828 a fifteen-year-old boy, Nathaniel Currier, went from his native Roxbury, Massachusetts, to Boston. There he got a job as printer’s devil under the Pendleton brothers, who had started America’s first successful lithographic firm four years before. As luck would have it, the Pendletons’ French pressman was the first competent and professional lithographic printer in the United States and therefore grounded young Nathaniel in that clean tradition of lithographic printing in which the French have always excelled.

When Nathaniel was twenty-two his shrewd, good-humored energy drove him to New York, where he started out in partnerships but soon set up for himself. He turned out the job printer’s usual run of billheads, trade cards, views of cities, and sentimental pin-up girls until he was twenty-seven, when a spectacular news event gave him his chance. On the evening of January 13, 1840, the steamer Lexington, running from New York to Stonington, fired her boilers so hot that the smokestack ignited the wood around it. The captain tried to head the blazing side-wheeler landward, but the tiller ropes had charred through and the engines stopped when she was two miles off shore. There a hundred and twenty-three persons were either burned or drowned in the high, icy seas. Only four men saved themselves by straddling cotton bales adrift from the ship’s cargo. A day after the news reached New York, Currier published a broadside, gaudy with a picture of midnight flames, that was displayed all over town by newsboys and pushcarts. Currier’s scoop in pictorial journalism made such an impression that he was still getting orders for the Lexington lithograph eleven months after the fire.

This apt disaster capped Currier’s dozen years of experience in lithography and enabled him to launch his business on a new national footing. He soon developed a popular line of patriotic and sentimental subjects and continued to issue news pictures whenever they were warranted by events such as the race between Peytona and Fashion in 1845. Nathaniel Currier had already established the policy followed by the firm until the very end.

In 1852 his growing business made him hire a bookkeeper, eleven years younger than he, whose name was James Merritt Ives. Young Ives proceeded to examine much more than his ledgers and quickly developed a shrewd eye for the public taste in pictures. In 1857 they formed a partnership that lasted until 1880 when Currier retired. After Ives retired in 1895 the firm declined until the terminal auction in 1907.

Currier & Ives published a range of subjects almost as wide as life itself. In the 1870’s they
classified their offerings as “Juvenile, Domestic, Love Scenes, Kittens and Puppies, Ladies Heads, Catholic Religious, Patriotic, Landscapes, Vessels, Comic, School Rewards and Drawing Studies, Flowers and Fruits, Motto Cards, Horses, Family Registers, Memory Pieces and Miscellaneous in great variety, and all elegant and salable Pictures.”

All of these varied pictures were produced by the same simple process that Currier had learned in his teens. As long as he was in the firm the lithographs were printed in black and white and then water-colored by hand. The colors were often painted on by girls lined up at long tables, each one brushing on one color as the prints passed through her hands. Four hundred years before, the gothic woodcuts must have been colored quite as simply. In the old woodcuts, as in the lithographs, the black and white lines serve merely to guide the paint brush and look thin before coloring.

After Currier retired, the firm kept up with developments in lithography by printing each color from a separate stone to speed production and to achieve more elaborate gradations. Ives had to have the colors printed outside his own shop as he did not own the equipment for chromolithography. “Chromos” do not deserve the bad name that has stuck to them from some of the poor examples. The Currier & Ives chromos of yachts are some of their handsomest prints.

Nowadays Currier & Ives lithographs evoke so much of our American family past that it is next to impossible to disentangle them from memory and sentiment in order to place them in the world history of printmaking. One curious fact is that out of this vast and far-flung output nothing seems to have left a mark on Europe except the Darktown Comics, which appealed to England as exotics. But then most popular single-sheet prints probably have little effect outside their local public. Certainly the Images d’Epinal, the very crude French equivalents of Currier & Ives, and the popular lithographs of Mexico and the Argentine were unknown to us. It may be that in our age of universal literacy prints can make a deep impression on far-away people only by traveling as book or magazine illustrations, as supercargoes to a text that helps to stick them in the memory.

Another odd fact is that so many draughtsmen collaborated in making the Currier & Ives lithographs that a single personality rarely dominated. Mr. Currier and Mr. Ives left a stronger mark on their prints than any single artist except Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait in the pictures of hunting and fishing, Durrie in the snow scenes, and Thomas Worth in the Darktown Comics. Yet even these artists did not touch the stones on which their paintings and drawings were copied by professional lithographers. The firm bought pictures and had them copied or adapted on stone by specialist lithographers who often divided up the work—one copying the trees, another the figures and so on. The print became as anonymous as most works of art made before 1300, or at any age in the Orient. In the case of Currier & Ives the vision of the original designer survives most often in the large folio prints that retailed at $1.50 to $3. These sold to richer people than the small prints priced at 15 to 20 cents apiece. The big prints are almost always the ones that flash to the mind’s eye at the mention of Currier & Ives. Maybe the richer buyers looked more at how a picture was drawn, and the poorer ones at what was drawn. Or maybe the firm thought that their better designs deserved publishing in a larger format. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that Currier & Ives lithographs are one of the very few categories of art in which size has something to do with excellence.

Just what is the quality that attracts us in Currier & Ives? This is hard for an American to say because we stand too close to see. We read the stories of our grandparents in them, and we love them too fondly to judge them. But a foreigner certainly could not help being charmed by the freshness of an innocent eye, and often by the rush with which they dramatize a great age as it was gathering strength and speed.