**PAUMANOK PRESERVED**

**By ALBERT T. GARDNER**

*Research Fellow*

*O to go back to the place where I was born,*
*To hear the birds sing once more,*
*To ramble about the house and barn and*  
*over the fields once more,*
*And through the orchards and along the old*  
*lanes once more.*

*O to have been brought up on bays, lagoons,*  
creeks, or along the coast,
*To continue and be employed there all my*  
*life,*
*The briny and damp smell, the shore, the salt*  
*weeds exposed at low water,*
*The work of the fishermen, the work of the*  
eel-fisher and clam-fisher; . . .
*I laugh and work with them, I joke at my*  
*work like a mettlesome young man . . .*

—Walt Whitman, *A Song of Joys*

These nostalgic verses summarize the prime attractions of William Sidney Mount’s pictures of life in America on Setauket shore a century ago; they might also serve, just as they stand, as the point of departure for a biography of the man himself. He could easily have enjoyed the life of a successful and fashionable portrait painter in Manhattan (and he painted many portraits), but his heart was not swayed long by the blandishments of the metropolis from its deep attachment to the rural North Shore villages of Setauket, where he was born, and Stony Brook, where for most of his life he made his home in the mansion of his grandfather Jonas Hawkins.

Very few American communities can boast a pictorial record of old days such as that to be found in the works of William Sidney Mount. Setauket and Stony Brook have there, meticulously preserved, a record not merely of local topography but of local history, atmosphere, and color. Many cities have not such a rich cultural heritage as that of these tranquil Long Island towns.

But Mount’s paintings of the everyday scenes he found about him at home have for us today more than local significance. For they record a day when America was predominantly an agricultural nation, and capture in a most attractive way a phase of our national history that even in Mount’s lifetime was rapidly disappearing. Though the artist lived in a period of rapid change and national expansion, many small farming and fishing communities like Stony Brook lingered on in rural isolation, away from the bustle of growing industrial cities and the excitements of the western frontier.

Mount was a lover of out-of-doors, a musician, a thrice-welcome guest at apple-paring bees and country dances where his melodious fiddle sang above the laughter of merry-makers. He was a connoisseur of barns and sheds, an admirer of the stark, classic art of the country carpenter, whose rule-of-thumb structures furnished the background and stage for so many of his most appealing anecdotes. Others might sigh fashionably over the glories of the Parthenon or the local Custom House, disguised with pediment and columns as an ancient temple, but Mount, not bemused by fashion, found meaning in humble, useful buildings without histories.

His paintings of farm scenes in the countryside close to the homestead are finished to an exquisite degree with colors as pert and glossy as those of a new buggy. By some art in his handling of pigment every fence rail and pebble is given a rich and glistening newness, and shingled houses have, under his hand, a neat elegance. His pictures are as vibrant and suave in form as the fiddle he invented—“The Cradle of Harmony.” The actors who posed for scenes in his bucolic dramas—friends and relatives—all sparkle with wholesome well-being, and the polished clarity of a perpetual spring morning fills the atmosphere.
Self-Portrait, 1832, by William Sidney Mount (1807-1868). From the Whitney Museum. This painting and those on the following pages are included in the current exhibition of Mount's work at the Metropolitan Museum.

It is our good fortune that the congenial surroundings of his home place bound him to a restricted region—one which he knew intimately, one which he obviously loved. This knowledge and love gave him what was perhaps his most valuable faculty as an artist. Certainly it has endowed his canvases with a tremendous interest that, to us, is almost entirely lacking in the Italianate landscapes and "fancy pictures" painted by so many American artists of his time. Mount's "Scenes Within the Nation" were granted by contemporary
Paintings by William Sidney Mount: Long Island Farmhouses, in the Metropolitan Museum, and Boy and Girl Dancing in a Barn, from the Melville Collection
Paintings by William Sidney Mount: Bargaining for a Horse, from the New-York Historical Society, and Raffling for a Goose, in the Metropolitan Museum
critics to have a certain interest as rustic anecdotes which might amuse the connaisseur of cabinet pictures, but many complained that he ought to apply his talents to subjects of a more genteel character. His preoccupation with the barnyard was thought to be not quite in keeping with their romantic ideal of an artist “seeking The Beautiful.” Fortunately Mount paid these refined gentlemen little heed. To him a pig was just as paintable and possibly as beautiful as any soulful-eyed Clarinda. Though Mount’s paintings have never been without admirers, he has suffered, with many of his contemporaries, a certain amount of undeserved neglect. In his case, however, interest in his work has been renewed and is steadily growing. In 1942 the Brooklyn Museum honored him with the first comprehensive exhibition of his works, and now the recently published monograph by Miss Cowdrey and Captain Williams assures him of the place he merits as a significant nineteenth-century American artist. In addition, there exists today in the Melville Collection a remarkable group of Mount’s paintings, augmented with journals, letters, documents, and personal memorabilia—a carefully assembled collection that is almost unique in its extent and variety in the annals of American art.