

Currier and Ives

Nathaniel Currier (1813-1888) and James Merritt Ives (1824-1895) were partners in the firm of Currier and Ives, the most important 19th-century lithographic company in America. Their prints were widely sold across the nation.

Nathaniel Currier, born in Roxbury, Mass., was apprenticed in his teens to a Boston lithographic firm. He established his own lithography business in New York City in 1835. The lithographer James Ives, born in New York City, entered into partnership with Currier in 1857. Currier retired in 1888, Ives a few years later; but the firm was carried on by their sons and flourished until 1907.

Lithography had begun in America in the 1820s. It was quicker and less expensive than engraving, hence the remarkable success of the firm of Currier and Ives. Soon after setting up business they produced extensive folios, usually based on paintings. Some of the work was crude, but the quality varied considerably. The star artists of the firm were Arthur F. Tait, who specialized in sporting scenes; Louis Maurer, who executed genre scenes; Fanny Palmer, who liked to do picturesque panoramas of the American landscape; and George H. Durrie, who supplied winter scenes.

So well known did Currier and Ives become that it was common to refer to any large mixed batch of prints as Currier and Ives prints. The firm was astoundingly prolific and produced prints on practically every aspect of the American scene. In the 1870s they issued four catalogs featuring 2800 subject titles.

Currier and Ives sometimes focused on current events. (In 1840 Currier produced what may have been the first illustrated "extra" in history when he depicted scenes of the fire that had broken out that year aboard the steamship Lexington in Long Island Sound.) Political cartoons and banners were commonly produced, like the Presidential Fishing Party of 1848, showing the candidates with fishing poles trying to hook fish on which names of various states are inscribed.

Historical prints were another field, and copies from the historical paintings of John Trumbull were especially popular. The Civil War print Battle of Fair Oaks, Va., May 31, 1862 shows the first balloon ever used for warfare observation. Sentimental prints included one showing a married couple walking along a riverbank and another showing a girl taking care of her little sister. There were also prints for children, such as Robinson Crusoe and His Pets and Noah's Ark; country and pioneer home scenes, which included Early Winter, a beautiful scene of people skating on a frozen pond before a snow-covered country cottage; and lithographed sheet music. Still other categories were Mississippi River prints, including On the Mississippi Loading Cotton and Midnight Race on the Mississippi; railroad prints that sometimes featured minute descriptions of trains, as in "Lightning Express" Trains Leaving the Junction; and home prints, which were produced in especially large quantities.

Currier and Ives avoided controversial subjects, although there was at least one print showing the branding of slaves prior to embarkation from Africa. Prints of sporting events focused on prize fights (like the 1835 match between John C. Heeman and the English champion Tom Sayers), boat races, and even, in the early stages of its development, baseball.

As America expanded, so did the demand for Currier and Ives prints. Today they provide a vivid picture of daily life in 19th-century America.

Additional Information

Currier & Ives

Lithographers

When one conjures up an image of Americana, chances are it's an image seen on one of the paintings, posters, or handbills produced by Currier & Ives. Currier had begun the business in 1835, but it wasn't until Ives joined him as a partner in 1857 that the firm became recognized for the artistry in its scenes of everyday American life, including horse-drawn carriages and sleighs, yachts, trains, and nature scenes, especially popular as Christmas cards. Original prints and paintings are coveted collectors' items even today. Currier and Ives were succeeded by their sons, who ran the business until it was liquidated in 1907.

James Ives

artist, publisher

Born: 3/5/1824

Birthplace: New York City

Ives was originally hired to be Currier's bookkeeper, but his art education led him to dabble in producing the drawings and paintings himself.

Died: 1/3/1895

Nathaniel Currier

lithographer, publisher

Born: 3/27/1813

Birthplace: Roxbury, Mass.

Died: 11/20/1888