

Review Essay

**“Colored Engravings for the People”:
The World According to Currier and Ives**

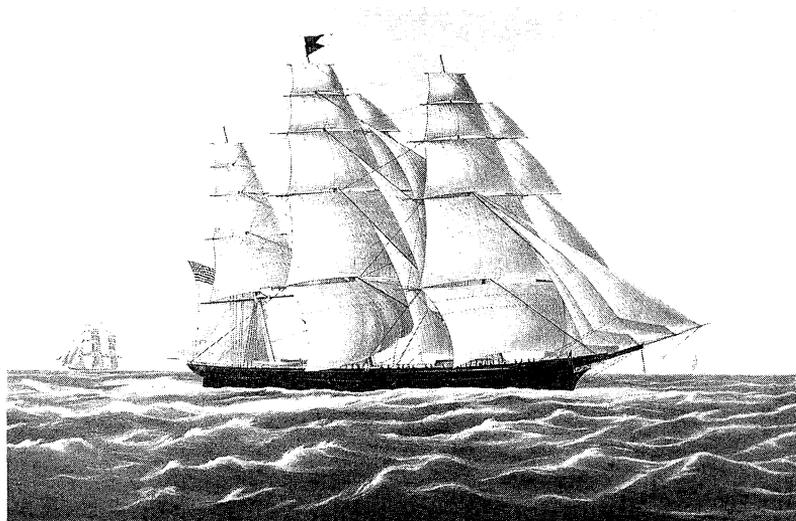
*“Mid pleasures and palaces, though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.”*

John Howard Payne, 1823

Bryan Le Beau

Currier and Ives called their company “The Grand Central Depot for Cheap and Popular Pictures,” and they proudly advertised their ware as “the best, cheapest, and the most popular pictures in the world.” They styled themselves “a democratic firm in a democratic country,” providing “colored engravings for the people,” and in the process created a legacy of some 7000 prints, which not only continue to please even the least well tutored eye but also provide a pictorial history of life in nineteenth century America.

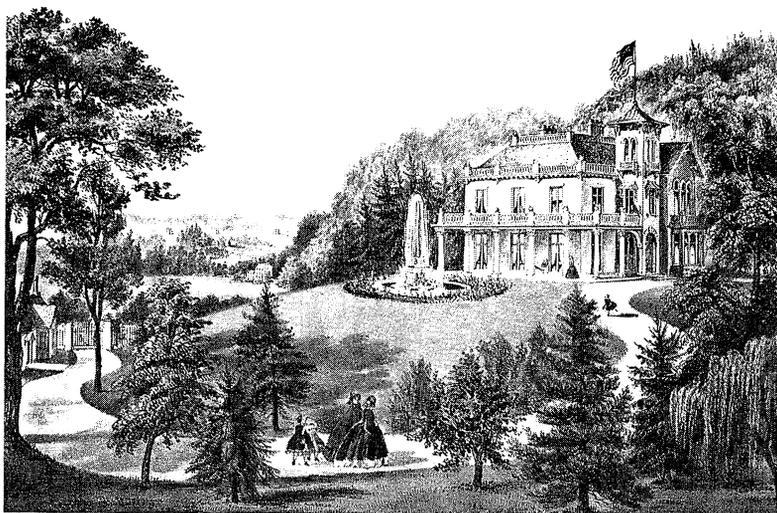
Perhaps appropriately, a major collection of Currier and Ives prints has arrived in the Heartland of America. Originally acquired beginning in the 1950s by Roy M. King of New York, and subsequently owned by Esmark and Beatrice Corporations, the collection of more than 650 prints is now in the possession of ConAgra, in Omaha, Nebraska. It is not the largest collection of Currier and Ives prints; the Library of Congress owns over 3000, and the Museum of the City of New York approximately 2900. Moreover, there are few, if any, prints at ConAgra that one cannot find in at least one of the several other large collections. Nevertheless, the collection is one of the largest, and, in terms of the quality of its pieces, one of the finest.¹



Courtesy of ConAgra, Inc.

Lithography, literally meaning “writing on stone,” was developed by the Bavarian Aloys Senefelder in 1798. It was not used in the United States for another twenty years, but, by then, it had undergone successive refinements and evolved into a profitable industry, especially in the fields of advertising and publishing. In 1825, John and William Pendleton established the first successful lithographic firm in the United States, but, before long, they were overshadowed by the company of one of their first apprentices, Nathaniel Currier.

Currier, a native of Roxbury, Massachusetts, founded his business in New York City in 1834. He began by producing items such as labels, handbills, sheet music, and architectural plans, samples of which are in the ConAgra collection, but not the art prints for which he would become famous. That breakthrough occurred in 1835, when, only four days after fire consumed thirteen acres of prime New York City real estate, Currier offered for sale a view of that fire, *Ruins of the Merchant Exchange, New York* (1835), complete with news text provided by the *New York Sun*. *Ruins*, which has been dubbed “the world’s first illustrated news extra,” was the first of hundreds of Currier and Ives disaster prints.² It sold thousands of copies and established Currier’s local reputation. Five years later, when he did the same for the steamboat *Lexington*, which had burned and sunk



Courtesy of ConAgra, Inc.

in Long Island Sound, taking with it over 100 lives, his national reputation was set, as well. (*Ruins* is in the ConAgra Collection; *Steamboat "Lexington"* is not.)

In 1852, James Merritt Ives, of New York, joined the firm as head book-keeper; five years later, he became a full-partner. Ives persuaded Currier to adopt a new kind of print, the undramatic representation of the places and pleasures of life, but he also improved the firm's printing process and modernized its marketing techniques. Together, Currier and Ives combined the art of illustration and the science of merchandizing to produce nearly 95 percent of all lithographs in circulation.

For the vast majority of prints, the production process was the same. Artists—sometimes well known, such as Eastman Johnson, but usually struggling for professional existence—provided drawings, from which lithographers produced black and white prints. The prints were fed, in an assembly line process, to several women who each applied a single color. It was an efficient and inexpensive process. Abundant, especially immigrant, talent was available—their labor was cheap, and their work produced few variations or errors.

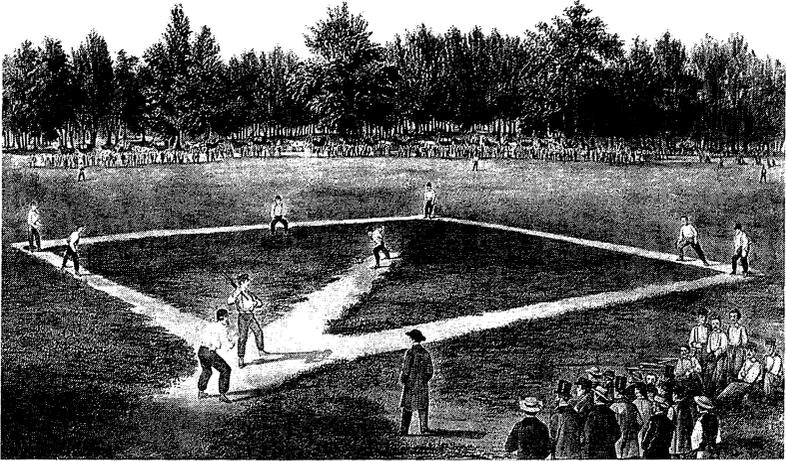
David Hunt, Joslyn Art Museum curator, has hung over 400 of ConAgra's prints, arranged in some forty-nine groups, throughout the corridors which connect the four buildings of the newly constructed corporate headquarters. (The



Courtesy of ConAgra, Inc.

rest of the prints are in storage.) The unusually large number of divisions was dictated by wall partitions; but, whereas such interrupted space might have proven unreceptive in less capable hands, Hunt has used it to advantage. He has employed the short expanses to present small thematic clusters that invite the viewer not only to inspect each print at close range but also to step back and take in the entire group at a glance, thereby drawing comparisons not so easily made in more traditional settings. Moreover, Hunt has taken advantage of the numerous sections to provide a substantial amount of information, placing at the start of each section manageable, digestible, portions of commentary, not only on the thematic group at hand, but also on Currier and Ives and on related nineteenth-century history. In sum, this is an extraordinarily large exhibit, hung without the benefit of a museum setting, but it has been well presented.

There are several ways to view the ConAgra Collection, titled, "Recapturing the American Spirit." One could, of course, simply proceed through all forty-nine sections in sequence, enjoying its more classic pieces, of which there are many, including: *Maple Sugaring*, *Early Spring in the Northern Woods* (1872); *Husking* (1861), from the Eastman Johnson painting; *Home to Thanksgiving* (1867); *Peytona and Fashion In the Great Match for \$20,000* (Undated); *Central Park, Winter: The Skating Pond* (1862); *The American National Game of*



THE GREAT FIRE AT CHICAGO, 1871. BY CURRIER AND IVES.

Courtesy of ConAgra, Inc.

Baseball (1866); *The Life of a Fireman* (1854); *Clipper Ship "Sweepstakes"* (1853), with the actual lithostone placed before it; *Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1868); *The Great Fire at Chicago* (1871); *The Arkansas Traveller* (1870); and, of course, *Home Sweet Home* (1869), complete with two stanzas from the John Payne song of the same title, noted above.

One of the drawbacks of proceeding in this manner, however, is that the collection's forty-nine sections occasionally overlap, if not duplicate, one another, thematically. There is little to distinguish, for example, *Pictures of Rural America* from *Rural Life*. Therefore, another approach might be to use the brief, but adequate, exhibition guide to select already established groups of prints into larger thematic sets, on subjects such as: city life; life in the country; fire-fighting; American history, in general; the Civil War, in particular; the American West; sports, in general; horse racing, in particular; and clipper ships.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Americans were fascinated—at times negatively, as well as positively—by their rapidly developing cities. Currier and Ives profited from that fascination, producing dozens of scenes from contemporary urban life, especially in New York City. Their pictures of the much celebrated *Customs House, New York* (undated), designed by Alexander Jackson

Davis, and *New York Crystal Palace for the Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations* (undated), for example, reflect the then dominant twin themes of growth and progress; while prints such as *Central Park Winter: The Skating Pond* (1862) assured viewers that moving to the city would not deny them such popular pastimes.

There are few allusions to urban hardships. But, soon after 1860, as the industrial revolution and urbanization reached full-stride and Americans found themselves residing in increasingly smoke-shrouded cities, Currier and Ives did shift their emphasis from urban to rural scenes. No doubt to satisfy the appetites of the many who by then had come to mourn the passing of life in the country, both in their own lives and in the life of the country, Currier and Ives offered solace in the idealized, romanticized glimpses of what they at least thought they had left behind. Especially recommended in the ConAgra Collection on this theme are *Life in the Country, Evening* (1862), *American Homestead: Winter* (1868), and, of course, *Peace and Plenty* (1871).

If Nathaniel Currier's reputation was established by prints presenting catastrophes, especially urban fires, to the people, it was sustained, in part, by his rendering of volunteer and professional fire-fighters, especially in New York City. Between 1835 and 1845, over 1000 New York City buildings were destroyed by fire. Thus, organized, if still volunteer, fire companies offered a much valued service. They became a source of civic pride, and the city's most prominent men, including Nathaniel Currier, belonged. Fires and fire-fighting became best sellers, and, some of the best of those prints are in the ConAgra Collection, including the still popular—at least to judge by its frequent use for insurance company calendars—*The Life of a Fireman* (1854).

Particularly favored by those who patronized Currier and Ives were those prints which recorded the events of American history. Here, as elsewhere, Currier and Ives gave the people what they wanted. From the landing of Columbus to the Spanish-American War, they stood by the tested and true, appropriating, as seen in the ConAgra Collection, scenes from the glorious battles of the American Revolution, a gallery of the nation's heroes, portraits of every American president through Grover Cleveland, and, even, lithographic political campaign banners, which Nathaniel Currier may have invented.

Given the enormous impact that the Civil War had on nineteenth century America, it is not surprising that Currier and Ives chose it as the source of so many of its prints. Neither should it be surprising that the prints were uniformly pro-Union, representing especially Union victories on land and at sea. Typical, from the ConAgra collection, are *The Battle of Gettysburg* (undated), *The Surrender of General Lee at Appomattox* (1865), and *The Terrific Combat Between the Monitor Two Guns and the Merrimac Eleven Guns* (1862), where, a caption reads, "the little monitor whipped the Merrimac and the whole school of rebel steamers."

On a more emotional level, there is *General Grant at the Tomb of Abraham Lincoln* (1868), and, for a more domestic audience, *Soldier's Home/Soldier's Dream* (1862). In *Soldier's Home*, the wife of a Union soldier, asleep but still clutching her husband's letter, dreams of his return. In the narrative beneath, we are assured that even the sleeping hours of such wives were filled with dreams of those "who at his country's call, went forth to war in freedom's sacred name." In *Soldier's Dream*, her husband sleeps by the campfire, dreaming of his return, and we are told that he who has reaped fame on the field of battle looks forward to sharing his honors "with those beloved ones who gathering come to bid their hero and husband welcome home."

Striking, though consistent with what we know in the shift of attitude in the North, were representations of life in the South after the war. Prior to the Civil War, Currier and Ives scrupulously avoided any reference to plantation life. As early as seven years after the war, however, as witnessed to in the ConAgra Collection, they did not hesitate to portray life in the South much as would Margaret Mitchell decades later. In *The Old Plantation Home* (1872), for example, we see blacks joyfully passing the time playing the banjo and dancing. In *A Cotton Plantation on the Mississippi* (1884), blacks and white work and play, side by side, in a world of peace and plenty; and in *Good Times on the Old Plantation* (undated), we glimpse the basic but nevertheless comfortable surroundings of the plantation worker's family cabin.

There are many scenes of the American West, and, not surprisingly, most reflect the nation's ideal of manifest destiny. There are those prints which present the majestic landscape of the West, such as *Rocky Mountains* (1866) and *Great West* (1870), as there are illustrations of the archetypal cabin, *Among the Pines, A First Settlement* (Undated); the romantic *Pioneer's Home on the Western Frontier* (1867); and, even, the democratic ideal of men taking a break from their homesteading duties to read and discuss the latest news, in *Arguing the Point* (1855).

Similarly, and not surprisingly, there is the less than politically correct rendering of Indian-settler confrontations. In *The Surprise* (1858), a mounted frontiersman gallops after and lassos a fleeing Indian. In *American Frontier Life: On the War Path* (1863) a lone pioneer watches, at a distance, a group of Indians gathered around a campfire, preparing for an attack; and, in *The Last Shot* (1858), a frontiersman, knocked from his horse by a pursuing Indian, manages to shoot his attacker, just in the nick of time.

Then, as now, Americans were more than a little attracted to the outdoor life, especially to sports, and Currier and Ives faithfully recorded that aspect of life, as well. In the ConAgra Collection is the still popular *Life of a Sportsman Camping in the Woods* (1872), as well as a number of more specific hunting and fishing scenes. But, there is humor, as well, as in *The First Bird of the Season* (1879), wherein five hunters simultaneously fire on, and totally destroy, a single bird; and in *Waiting for a Bite* (Undated), in which one not so intrepid outdoorsman fishes from the comfort of his easy chair, before the fire, in a barrel stocked with fish.

Perhaps most famous, and well worth the viewer's time, however, is *The American National Game of Baseball* (1866), recording "The Grand Match for the Championship at the Elysian Fields, Hoboken, New Jersey." It is a curious, perhaps prescient, title, because, regardless of which authority you choose, baseball was no more than a few decades old, and it certainly was not yet either the national game or the national pastime. But, in any event, Currier and Ives' rendering of the two uniformed teams, playing an organized game, is one of the earliest and best of baseball prints.

Just as important to nineteenth century Americans were their horses, and Currier and Ives cashed in on this obsession, as well, providing hundreds of prints on the subject. For the better heeled, or those who pretended to such, there were the many portraits of famous thoroughbreds, such as *The Celebrated Horse Lexington* (1855), or of those same horses in action, as in *Peytona and Fashion In Their Great Match for \$20,000* (Undated). But, if thoroughbred racing was "the sport of kings," harness racing was the sport of the people, and appropriately, it is represented in an equally large number of prints, including, for example, *Mr. Bonner's Horse Joe Elliott, Driven by J. Bowen* (1873).

Currier and Ives produced hundreds of prints of man-made means of transportation, including railroad trains and steamboats, but clipper ships, mostly done from the sketches of James Butterworth, stole the show. Clipper ships may have been among the most elegant man-made creations of the nineteenth century. They were intricate, beautiful, and fast. Americans loved them, as did, incidentally, many residents of the seaports of the Baltic and Mediterranean. Clipper ships were among the firm's best sellers, and they are well represented in the ConAgra Collection, including the above mentioned *Clipper Ship "Sweepstakes"* (1853), *Clipper Ship "Racer"* (1854), and *Clipper Ship "Flying Cloud"* (1852), which made the trip from Sandy Hook to San Francisco in a record 89 days.

More difficult to group, as they are dispersed throughout the many sections, but well worth noting, are the many prints, which Currier and Ives sold as "comics." These prints range from the gently humorous to the biting satirical, and include social commentary as well as political humor. Their purpose was spelled out in a Currier and Ives advertisement, which described the "comic colored pictures" as "laughable illustrations" of almost every aspect of life, as "pleasant and humorous designs free from coarseness and vulgarity," and as "good-natured bits of popular amusements and excitements of the times" intended "to drive away the blues and promise health by hearty and wholesome laughter . . . to make a room bright and cheerful, and everybody who enters it good natured and lively."

In the ConAgra Collection, on the political front, there are *Taking the Stump, or Stephen in Search of His Mother* (1860), on the presidential election of 1860; *Democratic Reformers in Search of a Head* (1876), in which Democratic Party leaders, seeking a presidential candidate, battle in a cloud of smoke, trampling on

rules of order and the law; and *Free Trade and Protection* (1888), wherein, on one side of the print, a bereft husband explains to his wife, while the family sits at a barren dining table, that he cannot feed them because free trade has cast him out of work. On the other panel, a contrastingly prosperous husband offers his wife money and a week's provisions, proclaiming: "Thanks to a protective tariff, I have plenty of work and good wages."

Other "comics" employed more social commentary. In a lighter vein, there is, in the ConAgra Collection, the ever-popular *His Mother-in-Law* (1872), in which a formidable older woman stands looming over a trembling son-in-law. There are the more didactic, such as *I Gave Credit. I Sell for Cash* (1870), which contrasts the economic losses due the former "old way" with the prosperity which results from the "new." And, not surprisingly, there are those "comics" which rely on ethnic and racial stereotypes, as with *The Heathen Chinees* (1871). In that print (which, understandably, ConAgra has in storage), a "cunning Chinese euchre player," Ah Sin, plays cards in a cabin in California with two prospectors. Ah Sin is clearly having a good time, and no doubt winning, while the two men eye him suspiciously, convinced that he must be cheating, a suspicion confirmed in the enclosed caption. The print was issued in the same year that a Los Angeles Riot led to the death, largely by hanging, of twenty-one Chinese.

One of Currier and Ives best known "comic" series, Thomas Worth's "Darktown Series," is not in the ConAgra Collection. Fortunately, several of Worth's other "comic" prints on this subject, from the same period—the 1880s and early 1890s—are included (though also in storage). They provide us with several examples of typical nineteenth century racist humor, ridiculing the aspirations of blacks to a better life, the life of white Middle and Upper Class America, and caricaturing them for failing to master even the rudiments of life in the white man's world.

There are, for example, *A Dude Belle* (1883), which pokes fun at the pretenses of an ostentatiously overdressed black woman, strolling through a crowd of amazed and leering women and men; *A Dude Swell* (1883), which does much the same for a black man; *De Cake Walk* (1883), subtitled "For Beauty, Grace and Style, de Winner [a black women] Takes de Cake"; and *A Mule Train on an Up Grade* (1881), in which a family struggles to pull their mule, carrying their earthly belongings, over a hill, inquiring in the process: "Golly! Where is Dis Yere Promis Land."

Photography greatly diminished the value of commercial lithography, and, beginning in the 1870s, sales of Currier and Ives prints began to decline, business operations to constrict. Nathaniel Currier retired in 1880, and James Merritt Ives died in 1895. Both were succeeded by their sons, but, in 1896, the firm's last print was issued, and, in 1907, the inventory was sold to Daniel W. Logan, Jr. Logan, son of a long-time Currier and Ives salesman and general manager, sold the remaining prints by the bundle and the stones by the pound.

Never intended to be timeless, the prints of Currier and Ives, like day old newspapers, soon disappeared and were largely forgotten. When they were first recalled, it was not with any great fondness. Typically, one New York critic, just after World War I, dismissed a show of nineteenth century memorabilia featuring Currier and Ives prints as “an exhibition of articles in bad taste designed to scare the public into the appreciation of good aesthetics.”³

In the 1920s, however, this sentiment began to change. People such as Harry T. Peters began to amass large collections, and, by the 1930s, when Americana was the rage, Currier and Ives were once again in vogue. Today, of course, Currier and Ives lithographs that once sold for 15 to 25 cents sell for \$1000 or more. Some of the larger prints, which originally cost \$1.50 to \$3, are valued at between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

Neither Nathaniel Currier nor James Ives pretended to promote fine art or to elevate American taste. They had an eye for the picturesque, and they aspired to have their work exhibited not in the nation’s museums but in its homes, stores, barbershops, firehouses, barrooms, and barns. And, in this, they were wildly successful. As Walton Rawls put it:

Up to 1835, there had been no such thing as illustrated news; no quick way for the man in the street to grasp the horror of a distant catastrophe; no way the urban mechanic could easily picture what a buffalo looked like (or a Mississippi River sidewheel steamboat); no way for a matron of modern circumstances to afford a colorful print for her parlor; no way for a Middle Border school marm to help her students visualize the exciting events of our nation’s founding.”⁴

Currier and Ives changed all that.

Currier and Ives created a unique panorama of life in nineteenth century America, its lifestyles, fashions, culture, and tastes. They did so, however, on terms that the buying public—certainly the majority of Americans—would accept, avoiding, wherever possible conflicting reality and controversy, and, where persuaded to take a stand, choosing “the side of the heaviest artillery.”⁵ As noted above, the harsh realities of urban life seldom appeared, and, learning early on that taking sides on such matters was bad for business, Currier and Ives avoided divisive issues such as slavery. They chided feminists, but only gently, and clearly finding it to their advantage, they stood four-square behind the temperance crusade.

As such, students of the world according to Currier and Ives have not always been flattering. Some have suggested that Currier and Ives passed on “the romance of America to future generations.” Others have argued that, in their quest to become a commercial success, they “incidentally schooled our citizens in what it meant to be American,” while still others have insisted that what they

produced was “imperialism personified.”⁶ There is some truth in all three assessments, but even the harshest of critics have commonly credited Currier and Ives with leaving us with an incomparable record of—some would say collection of artifacts from—life in nineteenth century America, from which the discerning eye can learn much.

The ConAgra Collection is free and open to the public, but with limited hours. For information call 402-595-4046, or write to ConAgra, Inc.; One ConAgra Drive; Omaha, NE 68102-5001.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive list of all known Currier and Ives lithographs, including print locations, see *Currier and Ives: A Catalogue Raisonne* (Detroit, 1984). The catalogue has been gathered from over 100 major public and private collections, including the Esmark/now ConAgra Collection. As all private collections are labeled PC, however, there is no way to tell if any of the ConAgra prints are owned exclusively by ConAgra.

2. Walton Rawls, *The Great Book of Currier and Ives' America* (New York, 1979), 21.

3. Quoted in the ConAgra Exhibit from *Antiques and Arts Weekly*, July 22, 1983.

4. Rawls, 60.

5. Russel Crouse, *Mr. Currier and Mr. Ives: A Note on Their Lives and Times* (Garden City, 1936), 18.

6. Harry T. Peters, *Currier and Ives, Printmakers to the American People* (1931; rpt. New York, 1976), I: 7; Rawls, 60; Quoted in the ConAgra Exhibit from the Raleigh, North Carolina *News and Observer*, July 12, 1983.