

1998

## The domestication of history in American art: 1848-1876

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THE DOMESTICATION OF HISTORY IN AMERICAN ART

1848-1876

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Jochen Wierich

1998

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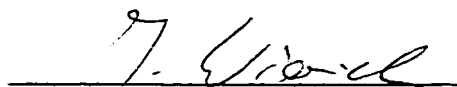
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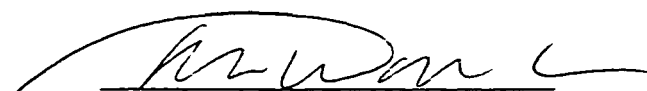
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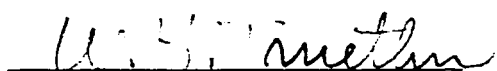
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## Acknowledgments

I consider this dissertation a culmination in several ways. It is, of course, the final product of my graduate studies at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg. It is also a personal milestone, marking the distance from where I am today to where I was when I became curious in older American art as an exchange student at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Before that my only encounters with American art were through exhibitions of twentieth-century American art in German museums.

My instinct is to thank all the individuals who helped me on the way. Space constraints make it more expedient to be concise. Among those individuals who shaped my thinking about American art and culture before I entered graduate school on the Ph.D. level, I want to thank especially Martin Christadler, Olaf Hansen, Herwig Friedl, Hubertus Günther, and William Oedel. My decision to venture into graduate school followed after two years as a museum professional under the generous mentorship of D. Scott Atkinson. I am indebted to Scott for providing crucial professional and intellectual support. Thanks to Roger Stein and Margaretta Lovell for their encouragement and advice when it came to moving on to graduate studies.

With much gratitude and humility do I acknowledge my principal dissertation advisor, Alan Wallach. On a personal and professional level, I feel fortunate to have studied with him. Alan was a patient and exacting teacher, reader, and advisor throughout graduate school. Moreover, Alan was sensitive to the linguistic and conceptual challenge I faced in translating my ideas across cultures. I am grateful to the other members on my dissertation committee: Richard Lowry, Grey Gundaker, Katherine Levesque, and



William Truettner. Rich also deserves much credit for being a consistent source of inspiration beyond the dissertation. Many more people offered their encouragement and advice during different stages of the dissertation, including Terry Lachin, Robert Haywood, Robert Scholnick, Robert St. George, Robert Gross, Mary Panzer, Elizabeth Johns, Barbara Groseclose, Angela Miller, and Sylvia Yount. I am thankful to many librarians and archivists at various institutions in the United States and Germany, including those at the Library of Congress, National Museum of American Art, Archives of American Art, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Pennsylvania Historical Society, and New-York Historical Society.

Family and friends helped me in so many tangible and intangible ways. Never in this life can I sufficiently thank my mother, Anneliese Wierich. My aunt, Gerda (Danni) Wierich deserves a special *Dankeschön*. I want to thank Jean Brown, who was much more than an administrator, Robin Veder, Emily Mieras, Mat Cohen, Gretchen Schoel, Marie Maxwell, Larry Jackson, and Richard Shuster for being available and keeping my spirits up. Some friends in Germany did not have the chance to be around and give their support, but they were present in spirit, including Thomas Nischann, Anne Lux, Reinhard Flessner, and Sunil Bansal.

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## Abstract

This dissertation traces the decline of history painting and its domestication in other artistic forms in the United States. In the three decades between the Mexican-American War and the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, the market for historical art went through a major transformation. Artists shifted from historical to contemporary subjects or represented historical themes in everyday-domestic settings. Monumental history painting, which was supported by art unions and private patrons during the antebellum period, came under critical attack and lost its status as a form of high art. Critical opinion turned especially against paintings of historical struggle and heroic sacrifice which seemed to be removed from the domestic experiences of middle class audiences. Painters domesticated the high moral drama of history painting in more intimate scenes.

I analyze the contest over historical representation from several directions. Part One, consisting of three chapters, discusses the institutional changes affecting the transformation of historical art. I focus on two institutions, the American Art-Union and the Cosmopolitan Art Association, a number of private patrons from Philadelphia and New York, and several art critics and art journals. Part One establishes a historical framework for the discussion of three individual painters discussed in Part Two. The careers of Emanuel Leutze, Lilly Martin Spencer, and Eastman Johnson allow me to trace the domestication of history through a spectrum of cultural forms including history, genre, and portrait painting. Throughout my dissertation I discuss other artists who contributed to this shift in the pictorial representation of history, including George Caleb Bingham, George Boughton, Daniel Huntington, Thomas Rossiter, Peter Rothermel, and Richard Caton Woodville.

This study links the decline of history painting to a cultural process which included specific constituencies -- artists, patrons, critics -- competing for cultural authority. Antebellum history painting had a weak institutional basis and was unable to consolidate a supportive audience. The focus on three painters and their attempts to negotiate changing perceptions of what constituted historical authenticity reveals a complex process in which history painting lost its credibility. In discussing the Metropolitan Fair in aid of the United States Sanitary Commission of 1864 and the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, I link history painting's decline with the broader phenomenon of popular historicism. By 1876, history painting was still able to generate popular interest, but it no longer carried much status as high art.

My approach to the transformation of history painting relies on various methodological and theoretical sources, including the social history of art, cultural studies, material culture, and the philosophy of history. The dissertation applies this theoretical framework to the study of history painting and other historical representations, as well as the artists, audiences, and institutions involved, and brings into focus an emerging bourgeois art public in the United States.

## **Introduction:**

### **History Painting as Cultural Conflict**

In November 1865, the main art attraction in New York was the exhibition of Daniel Huntington's Republican Court in the Time of Washington, or Lady Washington's Reception (fig. 1). President of the National Academy of Design and a well-established painter of historical subjects, portraiture, landscape, and still-life, Huntington was preeminently qualified for such a large and ambitious composition (66 x 109 inches). Inspired by Rufus Wilmot Griswold's highly popular The Republican Court, American Society in the Days of Washington (1854), the painting contained the likenesses of sixty-four persons assembled in the spacious drawing room of George and Martha Washington's town house in Philadelphia. Huntington took the general idea from Griswold and invented the specifics, including costumes, architectural details, and identities of individual figures. Despite the fact that this was a crowded composition, the critics agreed that Huntington succeeded in making Mrs. Washington the clear center. As observers commented, Huntington took some artistic license by placing her on a dais; but it was understood that this device helped reenforce the idea that the principal subject was Mrs. Washington's and not her husband's reception. Her levees, as Griswold had written, took place on Friday evenings and became a gathering place for the prominent ladies and gentlemen residing in Philadelphia. Women of various generations figure prominently in the three central groups that make up the composition, while the men are more dispersed and more relegated to the background. George Washington himself, though still prominent, joins as a by-stander, ready to introduce a young lady, commonly identified as

Miss Harriet Chew, to his wife, the "queen." Huntington was not the first painter in America to focus on the domestic life of Washington and his wife, but nobody had painted it on such a scale; neither were the Washingtons ever so explicitly associated with the trappings of aristocracy.<sup>1</sup>

Huntington's painting introduces a complex of questions that are central to this study. What audience did Huntington address? How "popular" was an aristocratic subject in a society that ostensibly had shed all vestiges of aristocratic life? Who, in 1865, could identify with a representation of domesticity so far removed in time and social experience? What I propose to investigate is the social and cultural process by which historical narratives in painting were constructed and validated in a society that was transforming itself into a modern nation state. My focus is on the period between the Mexican-American War and the Centennial celebration. Most painters active during this period, whether figure or landscape painters, had to somehow cope with the changing social perception of what was historical truth. Throughout this essay, I will touch on many paintings of history and genre which are today lost; and the names of their producers may be forgotten. To narrow my discussion, I selected three painters, Emanuel Leutze, Lilly Martin Spencer, and Eastman Johnson, who are currently

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<sup>1</sup>See Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Republican Court: or, American Society in the Days of Washington (1854; reprint, New York, 1867), especially the chapter "Society in Philadelphia," 253-328. See also Description of Mr. Huntington's Picture of Lady Washington's Reception Day Engraved by A.H. Ritchie, N.A. (New York, 1867), which contained a key to the picture.

relatively well-known but were not always of interest to historians of art and culture. These three painters bring into focus different pictorial solutions in a cultural process that I call the domestication of history. What I will trace through Leutze, Spencer, and Johnson is the cultural struggle over and eventual rejection of grand historical narrative in art. Huntington's Republican Court helps us crystallize the problem of narrative and audience response in mid-nineteenth-century history painting, and it will set the stage for further discussion of the genre.

In 1855, a literary reviewer for The Knickerbocker praised Griswold's book for focusing on aspects in the lives of Washington and his "court" that had long been neglected: "their social intercourse, their family habits and customs, their recreations, and the routine of their domestic life." In other words, Griswold revealed something in history which conventional historical narratives left out:

History ever, when treating of topics the most interesting and illustrious, is apt to grow dull and heavy in dry detail; its mere adherence to statistics, to the record of events, render it, if not unreliable, yet unimpressive. This is why we seldom learn to look upon the men of history as *actual*; for their social, their home life, is rarely depicted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Anonymous, "Literary Notices," The Knickerbocker 45 (January 1855), 74. For a discussion of Griswold's book in the context of aristocratic pretensions in American culture at midcentury, see Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York, 1992), 415-417.



Taking his cue from this invitation to focus on "actual" men and women, Huntington represented the father and mother of their country in a domestic, feminized setting. This conception, however, led some critics to notice a problem of historical interpretation: the painting unmistakably cloaked the republican ancestors in aristocratic milieu. How, then, could it still be interpreted as commonplace and routine, and, if so, by whose standards? One critic suggested ironically that the painting failed in its effort at aristocratic pretension, for "our suckling aristocracy" in 1865 "would laugh at it."<sup>3</sup>

The critical consensus was that Huntington's "court" had its appeal with the general public. "Snobbish as it seems," remarked the critic Clarence Cook, "[the painting] will attract large numbers whose democratic sense is tickled by the least suggestion of anything like aristocratic pageantry connected with our Government." To those who sought escape in royal pomp, "the line of plebeian Presidents is to stretch to the crack of doom, and murdered rail-splitters are to be forever succeeded by boorish tailors." Huntington, as Cook concluded, showed "no higher mind than willingly to pander" to these anti-Lincoln and anti-Johnson sentiments.<sup>4</sup> Both critical comments quoted in these last two paragraphs were concerned with the audience response to Huntington's

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<sup>3</sup>Eugene Benson, "The Republican Court in the Time of Washington," The Round Table 2 (October 21, 1865), 103. For a helpful bibliography of Benson's criticism in various journals, see Robert J. Scholnick, "Between Realism and Romanticism: The Curious Career of Eugene Benson," American Literary Realism 14, 2 (Autumn 1981), 242-261.

<sup>4</sup>Clarence Cook, "Mr. Huntington's 'Republican Court'," New York Daily Tribune 25 (October 21, 1865), 9.

Republican Court. What seemed to trouble most critics, though, was not the fact that the contemporary "aristocracy" shunned the picture, but that it struck a cord with the "democratic" masses.

The length and depth with which the New York press attacked Republican Court indicates that there were issues at stake which went beyond what Huntington or the visitors who were seeking escape from the "plebeian" present were able to imagine. Huntington was accused of selling out to merely commercial interests. He and the other two "proprietors" -- the engraver A.F. Ritchie and the publisher Emil Seitz -- rented space on 625 Broadway where they exhibited the large picture under gas-light, surrounded by drapery, and a protective green cord. In a corner of the room was an etching of the picture and a book for visitors to enter their names as subscribers to the engraving. The New York Daily Tribune, which blamed Huntington for pandering to popular sentiment, stated that the "pecuniary success" of Huntington's, Ritchie's, and Seitz's "business speculation" was "already secured when the subject had been chosen."<sup>5</sup> The art journal New Path reiterated this statement in stronger terms: "An easy running machine is set in motion, which is found efficacious in grinding down and polishing the casual visitor into the meek subscriber." The condemnation of the painting in these terms may remind the twentieth-century observer of the passive consumers of culture described in Adorno's and

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<sup>5</sup>Cook, "Mr. Huntington's 'Republican Court,'" 9.

Horckheimer's essay on the "culture industry."<sup>6</sup> What the critics of Huntington's painting had in mind was the reduction of aesthetic experience to the level of spectacle, for the two reviews mentioned above extensively covered the commercial arrangements, the exhibition design, and other aspects of presentation and display. The reviewer for New Path sarcastically commented that all that was missing were "tin 'perspectives'" to help those "who have skill to look, can see the picture so very much better!"<sup>7</sup>

As we shall see in later chapters, the similarities in critical rhetoric were not coincidental. Some critics wrote for more than one publication and were thus able to stage a more effective "campaign" against artists. Clarence Cook, for instance, was art critic for the New-York Daily Tribune as well as editor of the New Path. On the other hand, the Huntington exhibition illustrated that the critical profession was far from cohesive. The critic for Round Table, Eugene Benson (who at different points of his career also wrote for, among others, Atlantic Monthly, Appletons' Journal, Galaxy, and New York Evening Post) noted at the beginning of his review of Republican Court that if such a subject had to be painted, it should be commissioned from Huntington rather than any other living painter. After all, Huntington had a distinguished artistic lineage. His

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<sup>6</sup>See Max Horckheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturindustrie, Aufklärung als Massenbetrug," in Dialektik der Aufklärung (1944; reprint, Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 128-176.

<sup>7</sup>Anonymous, "Mr. Huntington's 'Republican Court in the Time of Washington'," The New Path 2 (November 1865), 176. My description of the exhibition design is based on this account.

mother was related to the history painter John Trumbull, portrayed in Republican Court as leaning over the shoulder of his seated father, Governor Trumbull. At New York University, Huntington studied with Samuel F.B. Morse, a former student of Benjamin West and Washington Allston. Beginning in the 1830s, Huntington established himself as a history painter, focusing on English history and religious allegories. Yet after paying respect to Huntington's reputation, Benson was quick to qualify that he deemed the picture "unsatisfactory both as a collection of portraits and as a historical composition." After describing in detail where he found Huntington at fault, Benson summarized: "We consider the picture a failure . . . a loose, disjointed record: the work of a painstaking man of small capacity, who has no skill in drawing, only a weak and timid sense of color, and whose whole theory of art militates against the possibility of his producing a genuine historical picture."<sup>8</sup>

Benson was not alone in pronouncing Huntington's painting a failure. Indeed, if the negative reviews agreed on something, it was exactly this: Republican Court was unacceptable as a historical picture. Calling it "portraiture only," the critic for the Nation demanded "let no future advertisement of the engraving speak of it as a historical picture,

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<sup>8</sup>Benson, "The Republican Court in the Time of Washington," 103. For biographical information on Huntington, see Henry T. Tuckerman, Book of the Artists (New York, 1867), 321-332; Natalie Spassky, American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Vol. 2 (New York, 1985), 56-58; and Wendy Greenhouse, "Daniel Huntington and the Ideal of Christian Art," Winterthur Portfolio 31, 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1996), 104-140. Greenhouse reminds us that Huntington's religious allegories and subjects from English history far outnumbered his paintings of American civic history. See 121, note 31.

for that it is not; it is a crowd of miniatures."<sup>9</sup> Even in matters of accuracy of historical research -- the yardstick to which all historical art had to conform -- Huntington's critics found the picture wanting. Benson pointed out that neither the room nor the details of the ceremony were documented, and he concluded: "We suspect that his principles are very tolerant as to all matters of historic verity." Taking issue with the descriptive pamphlet published by Ritchie and Seitz, which gave detailed account of Huntington's working method in establishing an authentic "court" picture, the critic for New Path quipped: "in view of the very feeble picture produced, we regret for the painter's sake that the pamphlet has been so frank."<sup>10</sup>

Although Huntington's representation of the republican ancestors as a court society turned out to be objectionable, the critics were less confident about dismissing the subject matter of the painting. Benson admitted that "it is a good subject, and one that ought to interest every born American." The critic for the Nation urged his readers to imagine "how pleasant and instructive it would be to have as perfect a reproduction as possible of Washington's drawing-room as it really was." The highly critical New Path conceded: "Now, a drawing-room scene is not the noblest subject for Art, but may be excused as a good way to bring interesting people together, on canvas, as in life. And a

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<sup>9</sup>Anonymous, "Works of Art now on Exhibition," The Nation 1 (October 12, 1865), 473.

<sup>10</sup>Benson, "The Republican Court in the Time of Washington," 103. Anonymous, "Mr. Huntington's 'Republican Court in the Time of Washington'," 177.

drawing-room scene, being of itself uninteresting and artificial, needs vigorous and realistic treatment to make it enduring." Yet the same critic left no doubt that Huntington's treatment fell far short of the mark: "this drawing-room assemblage in its utter absence of meaning, purpose, or leading idea, is a fair representation of the American Art of the past."<sup>11</sup>

From these various comments, we can thus extrapolate several major issues which weighed into the critics' decision in judging Huntington's picture a failed historical representation. Evidently, a number of formal criteria guided the critics' judgment, including composition and accuracy as well as color and drawing. But there loomed a troubling question behind this list of criteria: to what end should this formal vocabulary be applied? Although they expressed their concern over the painting's seductive effect on a mass audience -- in a commercial as well as political sense, the critics did not state what the social function of history painting should be. It was as if the critics did not know what to do with Huntington's combination of drawing-room domesticity and courtly pomp. Within the traditional format of grand manner painting, he had arranged a miniature assemblage of "actual" historical characters. One comment made by Clarence Cook seemed to encapsulate the general sense of frustration: "The more we look at this picture the more the puzzle grows -- why was it painted?"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>"Works of Art now on Exhibition," 473. "Mr. Huntington's 'Republican Court in the Time of Washington'," 178.

<sup>12</sup>Cook, "Mr. Huntington's 'Republican Court'," 9.

The painting's incongruities which puzzled the critics lie at the heart of this essay. The introduction of domesticity and its correlate, femininity, into history painting; a picture which catered to the aristocratic yearnings of a democracy-weary audience yet was shunned by the real aristocrats; the commercial "sell-out" by the President of the National Academy; all of these conceptions and misconceptions beg for further analysis. How could historical art become so controversial? Why did Republican Court have to be relegated to the annals of "American Art of the past?" Huntington's painting thus evoked the absence of some form of historical art that could be but was not yet actualized. If the subject of domestic history was "good," as Benson had indicated, how could it be realized within the framework of what he called a "genuine historical picture?" Our task then is to clarify the process by which historical works were validated. This means we will have to analyze the various social and artistic forces that contended for the privilege of placing the stamp of "genuine" on historical art. We will also have to address the question: why was domesticity a neglected subject in historical art in the first place? And who made it a worthy historical subject?

### **The Hierarchy of Genres**

Responsible for the elevated position of historical subjects in art was a hierarchy of genres which had its origins in Renaissance art theory and practice. Leon Battista Alberti attempted to define a set of principles for the art of painting in Della pittura (1436) and made special reference to painters of *istoria*. Not until the emergence of the

French academy in the seventeenth-century did history painting become academically codified as grand manner painting. The theoretical foundations for the supremacy of history painting were articulated by the First Painter to the King and head of the Royal Academy in Paris (*Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*), Charles Le Brun, and by its leading *amateur honoraire*, or lay member, André Félibien. Both Le Brun and Félibien held up Nicolas Poussin as a model for emulation.<sup>13</sup> Two eighteenth-century critics, La Font de Saint-Yenne and Denis Diderot, expanded the academic discourse into the more public arena of pamphlets. It is Diderot who is commonly credited for introducing the phrase *les grandes machines* into French criticism, describing a type of large, epic, and multi-figured history painting.<sup>14</sup> The critical and institutional reflection on the hierarchy of genres and the grand style culminated in the late eighteenth-century with Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses delivered to a select audience of students, professors, and critics at the Royal Academy in London. In his third discourse, Reynolds defined the grand style as "perfect form . . . produced by leaving out particularities, and

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<sup>13</sup>On the institutional context for Le Brun's and Félibien's ideas, see Thomas E. Crow, Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris (New Haven and London, 1985), 23-30. For a more general discussion, see Nicolaus Pevsner, Academies of Art, Past and Present (1940; reprint, New York, 1973), 93-95.

<sup>14</sup>On La Font, see Thomas Crow, Painters and Public Life, 6-18. On Diderot, see Crow's Introduction to Diderot on Art, Vol 1, John Goodman, ed. (New Haven and London, 1995), IX - XIX. On Diderot and *les grandes machines*, see Jean Sez nec, "Diderot and Historical Painting," in Aspects of the Eighteenth Century, Earl Reeves Wasserman, ed. (Baltimore, 1965), 129-142. In his Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Chicago and London, 1980), Michael Fried has translated "les grande machines" as "enormous constructions" (164).



retaining only general ideas." Its subject matter "ought to be either some eminent instance of heroic action, or heroic suffering. There must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the public sympathy."<sup>15</sup>

The tradition of the grand style can thus be summarized as follows: history painting, preferably in form of allegory, mythology, or biblical subject, made a more significant contribution to the humanistic tradition than landscape, genre, still-life, or portraiture and therefore stood at the apex of the hierarchy of genres; it demanded from its practitioners a technical proficiency which they could only acquire through strenuous academic training, as well as exceptional erudition; its subject matter was serious -- historical characters had to display noble qualities; although they represented the human passions, history painters had to follow the proper rules of decorum. The challenge for the historical painter was to find a significant moment in the historical annals or in more recent history and present it in a way that allowed the audience to transcend its everyday experience upon viewing the image and extract a lasting moral lesson from it.<sup>16</sup>

As is well documented in the literature on art and society in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and England, the discursive formation of such an artistic

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<sup>15</sup>Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses on Art (Chicago, 1945), 131.

<sup>16</sup>A brilliant summary of the tradition described in this and the previous paragraph is Rensselaer W. Lee, Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting (New York, 1967).

hierarchy was shaped by social and cultural conflicts. As Thomas Crow has shown in Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris, the state was a vital though unreliable source of patronage for large-scale history painting. The state did use its privilege to commission historical works from the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, to appoint a *Premier peintre* (First Painter to the King) from its ranks, and to control, through censorship if necessary, the art critical discourse. However, with the introduction of the annual Salon in 1737 the state relinquished some control, and as a consequence, history painting became "public property." It was ultimately this public space which belonged neither to the throne, nor the nobility, which allowed Jacques-Louis David to forge a highly popular type of history painting that temporarily brought him into alliance with the revolutionary forces.<sup>17</sup>

The permeability of state control over art production and consumption brought other forces into the public sphere. Although he wanted to be accepted by the Academy as *peintre d'histoire*, Jean-Baptiste Greuze became famous as *peintre de genre*. Denis Diderot praised Greuze's moralizing family dramas set in domestic interiors, including Filial Piety (1763, Hermitage, Petersburg) and Village Bride (1761, Louvre, Paris), and held them up as examples of history painting. Although it is tempting to associate both Diderot and Greuze with the emerging bourgeoisie, Diderot published for a very small

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Crow, Painters and Public Life, Chapter 1, 20; for his discussion of David, see Chapter 7 and Postscript, 211-158.

circle of connoisseurs, and Greuze sold his rustic family scenes to French aristocrats.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Michael Fried's claim that the French middle-class was largely irrelevant to the transformation of the artistic hierarchy is unconvincing. Robert Rosenblum seems to have a strong case for arguing that the moralizing tendencies in Greuze's art have much to do with "middle-class virtues."<sup>19</sup>

In eighteenth-century England connoisseurs and critics praised history painting as an instrument in the formation of public virtue, but its actual practice was more shaped by the pressures for cultural consensus in the public sphere than by aristocratic pretensions.<sup>20</sup>

Early in the century Jonathan Richardson had formulated the following high ideals:

"Painting relates the Histories of Past, and Present Times, the Fables of the Poets, the Allegories of Moralists, and the good Things of Religion; and consequently a Picture, besides its being a pleasant Ornament, besides that 'tis useful to Improve and Instruct us, 'tis greatly instrumental to excite proper Sentiments and Reflections."<sup>21</sup> Yet preceding Richardson's Essay by fifteen years, Richard Steele reminded the readers of the Tatler

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<sup>18</sup>See Crow, Painters and Public Life, Chapter 5, 134-174. On the relationship between Diderot and Greuze regarding family and education, see Greuze et Diderot: Vie familiale et éducation dans la seconde moitié du XVIII siècle, exhibition catalogue (Clermont-Ferrand, 1984).

<sup>19</sup>Fried, Absorption and Theatricality, 4. Robert Rosenblum, Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art (Princeton, 1967), 50-51.

<sup>20</sup>This analysis draws on David Solkin, Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven and London, 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Jonathan Richardson, An Essay on the Theory of Painting (1725; reprint, London, 1971), 10-11.

that the inculcation of public virtue was useless, if painters did not succeed in making grand themes relevant to the private consumer of art:

for to fill a room full of battle-pieces, pompous histories of sieges, and a tall hero alone in a crowd of insignificant figures about him, is of no consequence to private men. But to place before our eyes great and illustrious men in those parts and circumstances of life, wherein their behaviour may have an effect upon our minds; as being such as we partake with them merely as they were men; such as these, I say, may be just and useful ornaments of an elegant apartment.<sup>22</sup>

Toward the end of the century, as Richard Solkin argues, grand manner painting in England was a compromise of "academic doctrine" and "consumer-oriented formulations of the highest pictorial genre." In Benjamin West's famous The Death of General Wolfe (1770, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) Wolfe was "the domesticated modern hero" but "a hero nonetheless," embodying the qualities of "patrician origins, exalted rank, [and] martial prowess."<sup>23</sup>

From the two nations which could have served as principal sources of inspiration

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<sup>22</sup>Richard Steele, Tatler (August 10, 1710), quoted in Solkin, 203.

<sup>23</sup>Solkin, 211, 213. The classic essay on the impact which West's Death of Wolfe had on the classical tradition of history painting is Edgar Wind, "The Revolution of History Painting," Journal of the Warburg Institute 2 (1938-1939), 116-127.

in defining a hierarchy of genres, the United States inherited a complex legacy. At the end of the eighteenth-century, despite Joshua Reynolds' efforts to promote its exalted ideals, history painting in the grand manner tradition had gone through a process of compromise and modification and had been challenged by moralizing genre painting (Greuze, Hogarth).<sup>24</sup> The absence of a strong tradition of state patronage made art production in the United States distinct from France and England. As a reluctant and almost absent patron of the arts, the government left a vacuum which private patrons and institutions could fill.

History painting's weak institutional basis in the United States would thus explain another incongruity in the production of Huntington's Republican Court never directly mentioned in the reviews. The painting presented a domesticated image of the state, but Huntington and his associates worked independent of any state commission. By 1867, Republican Court was already sold to the private collector A.T. Stewart whose new "millionaire mansion" on Fifth Avenue in New York was nearing completion.<sup>25</sup> Sent by Stewart to Paris the same year, the picture became one of a few history paintings, vastly outnumbered by landscape paintings, which represented American art at the Exposition Universelle. The committee in charge of the American entry was one of "well-known

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<sup>24</sup>On Hogarth, see Solkin, Painting for Money, 78-105. The standard Hogarth monograph is Ronald Paulson, Hogarth: His Life, Art and Times 2 Vols. (New Haven and London, 1971).

<sup>25</sup>See Jay E. Cantor, "A Monument of Trade: A.T. Stewart and the Rise of the Millionaire's Mansion in New York," Winterthur Portfolio 10 (1975), 165-197.

connoisseurs of art" (including one lawyer, one art critic, and several industrialists and art dealers) appointed by the artists Frederic Church, Edwin White, and Jasper F. Cropsey who acted on behalf of a non-government organization, the National Academy of Design. The committee raised private funds for crating and shipping a total of seventy-five works, only six of which were history paintings.<sup>26</sup>

As will shortly be discussed, the "crisis" in history painting was an international phenomenon. However, there were particular national conditions that precipitated any "crisis." That in the United States the relative absence of state art patronage resulted in a cultural contest over history painting has hardly been acknowledged by twentieth-century scholars of the history of American art. In tracing the scholarly debate over history painting from its early twentieth-century neglect to its recent "rediscovery," I hope to demonstrate that the cultural contest is an ongoing one.

### **The Twentieth-Century Critique of American History Painting**

According to a periodization which the art historian Virgil Barker introduced in the 1930s, Republican Court fell into a period which Barker -- using a term from Walt Whitman's Specimen Days -- called the "middle range;" it encompassed the years between 1829 and 1882. Barker remarked: "in history-painting, during the middle range,

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<sup>26</sup>See Carol Troyen, "Innocents Abroad: American Painters at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, Paris," The American Art Journal 16 (Autumn 1984), 3-29; for a discussion of the organization and committee membership, see especially 4-5.

practically nothing of artistic merit was accomplished."<sup>27</sup> Although many post-World War II art historians reassessed nineteenth-century American art and judged it more generously, history painting was still often ignored or discounted. In her survey American Painting of the Nineteenth Century, published in 1969, Barbara Novak included brief discussions of history painting in chapters on John Singleton Copley and Washington Allston. According to Novak, Allston's example shows that "history painting for the American artist was doomed to failure"; and based on this assumption she omitted history painting from the remainder of her study.<sup>28</sup> However, Novak's dismissal of history painting appears far less gratuitous if one considers her second book Nature and Culture (1980). Here she offers a conceptual clarification to her earlier statement that the project of history painting ended with Allston: "The overtures to sublimity in America's early history painting were readily transferred to the landscape." And later we learn that "the transfer of the rhetoric and aims of history painting to landscape was substantially effected by a single artist--Thomas Cole".<sup>29</sup> Yet as William Truettner and

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<sup>27</sup>Virgil Barker, "The Painting of the Middle Range," The American Magazine of Art 27 (May 1934), 233. Barker revised this periodization in his American Painting, History and Interpretation (New York, 1950), devoting a section to "Mid-century history painting" under the larger division of "The Mid-Century--1830 to 1860" (Barker, 463-477). Barker briefly mentioned Lady Washington's Reception, describing the engraving as "the most popular framing prints of the postwar period" (Barker, 470).

<sup>28</sup>Barbara Novak, American Painting of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1969), 50.

<sup>29</sup>Barbara Novak, Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875 (London, 1980), 19. Note that Novak's periodization here is almost identical with Barker's "middle range."

Alan Wallach have demonstrated in Thomas Cole: Landscape into History (1994), this process did not happen by the fiat of Cole's romantic genius but involved a complex struggle between his own aspirations and that of his patrons.<sup>30</sup>

Lillian B. Miller, examined the broader cultural and social conditions of art production from the Revolution to the Civil War and broke a path for a reevaluation of history painting. Miller, as well as the cultural historian Neil Harris, introduce Sir Joshua Reynolds as the central intellectual source of influence in the American conception of history painting.<sup>31</sup> In Miller's account, Reynolds' ideas in America blended with Alison's associationism. Alison's Essays on Taste, circulated in the United States after 1815, located aesthetic experience not in universal ideas but in particular sensations. Aesthetic pleasure and edification thus lay in an individual's capacity to form associations with "his own country's scenery, customs, traditions, and history." This acceptance of associationism in the United States, according to Miller, added Enlightenment empiricism to Reynolds' classicism. The direction that these ideas took as they were translated into

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<sup>30</sup>See Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in William Truettner and Alan Wallach eds., Thomas Cole: Landscape into History, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C., 1994), especially Part II, "Patronage," 33-47. See also his "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy," Art Magazine 56 (November 1981), 94-106.

<sup>31</sup>Lillian B. Miller, Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790-1860 (Chicago and London, 1966), especially 17-20. She claims that Reynolds' "Discourses and the Autobiography, were as widely read in this country as in his own" and that copies could be found in "every private library that contained works on the fine arts" (Miller, 17). See also Neil Harris, The Artist in American Society: the Formative Years, 1790-1860 (1966; reprint, Chicago and London, 1982), 11-14.



American art institutions and a patronage system was toward nationalism and democracy.<sup>32</sup> While the influence of Reynolds cannot be easily dismissed, it is questionable how important his ideas were for mid-nineteenth-century practitioners of history painting. When the critics faulted Republican Court for its lack of unity and its preoccupation with details of costume, were they strictly following Reynoldsian principles? Ending their studies with the Civil War, both Harris and Miller imply that one era in American art closed and another began. While they chose a convenient and sensible chronology, they avoided any investigation of history painting as it was entering a critical transition. One example of a mid-nineteenth-century revision of Reynolds' strict classification can be found in Miss Ludlow's A General View of the Fine Arts (1851). Ludlow listed under "Historical . . . all those designs which represent man in any of his relations -- allegorical and mythological subjects, battle pieces and portraits, as well as scenes drawn from history and common life."<sup>33</sup>

In a series of lectures, subsequently published in the book Grand Illusions: History Painting in America, William H. Gerds and Mark Thistlethwaite broke new ground for the study of history painting.<sup>34</sup> Grand Illusions widens the scope of

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<sup>32</sup>Archibald Alison, Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste (New York, 1830), 33, quoted in Miller, Patrons and Patriotism, 19.

<sup>33</sup>Miss Ludlow, A General View of the Fine Arts (New York, 1851), republished with an introduction by Daniel Huntington as Manual of the Fine Arts, Critical and Historical (New York, 1875), 42.

<sup>34</sup>Mark Thistlethwaite and William Gerds, Grand Illusions: History Painting in America (Fort Worth, Texas, 1988), especially 8-10 and 70-71. For an earlier study that

investigation in its discussions of artists and critical movements that had been neglected by Novak and other art historians. Gerdt's reminds us that during the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s there were "hundreds or even thousands of works being exhibited that fall into the category of History or Grand Manner art."<sup>35</sup> Thistlethwaite argues that in their effort to paint works that were more accessible to larger audiences, history painters turned to genre painting for inspiration. This transformation led to a type of 'genrefied' history painting which aimed at "more intimate and familiar portrayals of history."<sup>36</sup> Thistlethwaite here extends a concept he first developed in his book on the nineteenth-century iconography of George Washington, namely the humanization and domestication of the father of his country.<sup>37</sup> In Grand Illusions Thistlethwaite's persuasive iconographic analysis breaks down when it comes to the Civil War. "Why history painters refrained from picturing the war remains a mystery," Thistlethwaite states. It is as if the cataclysmic force of civil war broke the history painters' spirits, made them abandon their iconographic tradition, and leave the field to the photographers. On the other hand, Thistlethwaite warns that "to claim that the Civil War 'ended' history painting would clearly be wrong." That the Civil

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follows the development of history painting over almost two decades, see Gilbert Tapley Vincent, "American Artists and their Changing Perceptions of American History, 1770-1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1983).

<sup>35</sup>Grand Illusions, 63.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup>See Mark Thistlethwaite, The Image of George Washington: Studies in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American History Painting (New York, 1979).

War ends up as a "problem" and source of confusion in his analysis points to the limitations in Thistlethwaite's approach. His attempt to establish iconographic consistency and causality glosses over deeper divisions in American society that went beyond the Civil War.<sup>38</sup>

Two recent collections of essays have broadened my perspective of the connections between history and visual culture. Picturing History, edited by William Ayres, builds on and elaborates Gerdt's and Thistlethwaite's inclusive approach. History painting in all its variations emerges as a continuing tradition. Even the Civil War, covered in an essay by Bruce Chambers, is now no longer *terra incognita* for the historian of American history painting. More pertinent for the present study is Thistlethwaite's essay "A Fall From Grace: The Critical Reception of History Painting, 1875-1925." Here he picks up chronologically where his earlier essay left off. His discussion of the exhibition of Rothermel's Battle of Gettysburg at the Centennial Exhibition leads him back to the ostensible failure of history painters to adequately represent the Civil War. Again, he stresses the wider public acceptance of photography

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<sup>38</sup>Grand Illusions, 50. For a similar argument, see also Martin Christadler, "Geschichte der amerikanischen Malerei zwischen Revolution und Bürgerkrieg (1770-1870)," in Thomas W. Gaehtgens ed., Bilder aus der Neuen Welt: Amerikanische Malerei des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts, exhibition catalogue (München, 1988), 36-42. Christadler argues that history painting after the Revolution was symbolically charged with republican, nationalistic, and religious meanings. Beginning with Benjamin West and continuing up to Emanuel Leutze history painters were able to make a convincing case for the sacred mission of the American nation state. Christadler reads Winslow Homer's Prisoners from the Front (1867, Metropolitan Museum of Art) as an ironic admission that the Civil War put the republican value system into question.

as a historical record and provides a formalist explanation: "photography's reduced format essentially domesticated and allowed a measure of control over the horrors and tragedies of war."<sup>39</sup> While Thistlethwaite's essays introduced the concept of domestication in historical representation, the causes and larger implications remain to be fully explored. The Civil War, as I shall argue, only intensified a disaffection with history painting among artists, critics and the wider public that started before 1861.

What, then, makes history painting a privileged artistic form? And what are the social conditions that precipitate an erosion of its cultural authority? A collection of essays, Redefining American History Painting, edited by Patricia Burnham and Lucretia Giese provides new insights into the subject. They define history painting through a triad of principles: historicity, narrativity, and didactic intent. These principles, around which the book is organized, imply an answer to the first of our two questions. Historicity makes claims to historical truth and is preoccupied with accuracy; narrativity is the level of story-telling and "language" through which sequence and causality are constructed; didactic intent, finally, makes up the "moral center," and is therefore the most ideological and political of the three levels. A combination of these three ingredients, according to Burnham and Giese, runs through the different examples of history painting covered across a spectrum of social and ethnic groups by the essays in this book. In terms of

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<sup>39</sup>Mark Thistlethwaite, "A Fall from Grace: The Critical Reception of History Painting, 1875-1925," in William Ayres, ed., Picturing History, American Painting 1770-1930, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1993), 180.

claiming "founding fathers," Burnham and Giese credit Reynolds with supplying the "theoretical base for history painting in America" but later offer an important modification: "even in Reynolds's time actual practice did not match up with theory." In Burnham's and Giese's definition, no serious challenge to history painting as a hegemonic extension of ruling groups existed until the 1970s. Yet such an argument perpetuates the stigma that has been attached to history painting all along: that it is a dead and stale form.<sup>40</sup>

Although I do not reject the entire theoretical framework which informs Burnham's and Giese's collection of essays, I question the underlying assumption that the dominant mode of history painting went unchallenged in the nineteenth-century. The period and the artists that I investigate allow me to analyze a specific point of discontinuity in the history of history painting. My argument is that between 1848 and 1876, history painting was so drastically transformed that it lost its credibility. My interest throughout this study is in the challenges that brought down and discredited history painting as a privileged genre. Consequently I am interested in what happened to history painting in the process and how it was relocated in other modes. This transformation of history painting in the United States was intricately connected to developments in Europe.

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<sup>40</sup>Patricia Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese, eds., Redefining American History Painting (Cambridge, 1995), 1-14.

## The Crisis of History Painting

The French Revolution temporarily put an end to the operations of the Royal Academy. In 1790, a group of young dissidents under the leadership of David petitioned the National Assembly to abolish the Academy altogether. Three years later the Academy closed its doors only to be reopened and reorganized in 1795 as part of the *Institut de France*. Now called the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* the Academy was operating under government control. In 1816, under the Bourbon King Louis XVIII, the Academy reestablished itself as *Académie des Beaux Arts* and during the Second Empire assumed its old name *Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture*.<sup>41</sup> As Harrison and Cynthia White have stated, beginning with "the glorification of Napoleon," and continuing through the restoration, the Second Empire, and the Third Republic, history painting became an important symbolic form of government "legitimation." But history painting was no longer restricted to "purely" classical and biblical subjects; it now included battles and other contemporary patriotic subjects. According to Francis Francina, the marriage between the French government and the Academy was annually staged at the Salon, "organized by the Academy, but on behalf of the State (a major buyer), on State premises and at State expense."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>See Pevsner, Academies of Art, 199-200.

<sup>42</sup>Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World (Chicago and London, 1993; first edition 1965), 16-17. Francis Francina, "Modern Practices of Art and Modernity," in Francina et al, eds., Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century, (New Haven and

Albert Boime has argued that the official art which emerged under the constitutional monarchy in France was a compromise between romantic and classic-academic styles, an art of the *juste milieu*.<sup>43</sup> The state thus remained an important promoter of "official" art, but it was unable to significantly influence or anticipate aesthetic decisions made by the art buying public. An analysis of the buying habits of French private collectors by the Whites reveals a trend which began in the eighteenth-century. The market for smaller easel paintings vastly outnumbered that for large wall-filling canvases, and it encompassed increasingly genre, landscape and still-life painting. After 1756 Dutch genre works commanded the same prices as French history paintings or those of any other nationality. By the middle of the nineteenth century the prices for French genre paintings exceeded those of French history paintings.<sup>44</sup> One might thus conclude that in nineteenth-century bourgeois houses the predominance of genre paintings largely replaced that of religious art of the previous century.<sup>45</sup> While history paintings which portrayed scenes of brutality and terror still attracted large audiences at the Salons, there was no room for such works in the mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois

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London, 1993), 60.

<sup>43</sup>See Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York, 1971), especially 15-21.

<sup>44</sup>See White, *Canvases and Careers*, 33-44. On the collecting habits of the eighteenth-century Parisian bourgeoisie, see Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, 42-44.

<sup>45</sup>On the popularity of small devotional paintings in seventeenth-century France, see *Painters and Public Life*, 45.

parlor. Even at the Salons, an increasing number of paintings focused on more intimate moments of history; this penchant for "historical anecdote" became later known as the *style troubadour*.<sup>46</sup>

Patricia Mainardi has demonstrated how the centralized French state and its institutions, Academy and Salon, lost control over the definition of "official" art and in the process had to accept the substitution of the traditional artistic hierarchy by "anarchic" eclecticism. In Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867, Mainardi focuses on international expositions held in Paris, in 1855 and 1867, and the consequences for the art world of the Second Empire. She traces the connections between the "death of history painting," the favorite art form among conservative critics, and the rise of genre painting, championed by progressive forces.<sup>47</sup> By 1870, "the classical system of categories, according history painting the highest prestige, had been overturned; the best painting of the second half of the nineteenth century was intimate in subject, small in size."<sup>48</sup> In their study Romanticism and Realism, Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner have argued that the assault on the traditional hierarchy of genres in France was spearheaded by Romantic artists who capitalized on the

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<sup>46</sup>See Canvases and Careers, 91-92. On the emergence of the *style troubadour* in France and its introduction into England, see Roy Strong, Recreating the Past: British History and the Victorian Painter (New York and London, 1978), 98.

<sup>47</sup>Patricia Mainardi, Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867 (New Haven and London, 1987). See especially Part III, "The Universal Exposition of 1867: The Death of History Painting in France," 123-197.

<sup>48</sup>Art and Politics of the Second Empire, 1.



potentials of the tradition but on the other hand "developed the supposedly minor, or 'inferior', kinds of art, such as landscape or, even more drastically, book illustrations, and gave new significance to 'sketches' and 'studies' ".<sup>49</sup> However, academic classicism, or Grand Style, remained a residual force throughout the century. Pierre Bourdieu has described the social interdependency between forces that helped maintain history painting's academic status while allowing for flexibility in practice: "Far from being the product of a direct dependency and submission, the affinity or complicity between this orderly painting -- which is hieratic, calm, serene and has modest and gentle colours, noble outlines and idealized figures -- and the social and moral order it seeks to maintain or restore is born from the specific logic of the academic order, and from the relations of dependence in and through independence which link it to the political order."<sup>50</sup> The Academy was thus able to at least in part accommodate the Romantic "revolt."

Painting in the Grand Style remained a difficult pursuit in England. Despite Benjamin West's success in attracting royal patronage for history paintings and John

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<sup>49</sup>Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art (London, 1984), 38.

<sup>50</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production (New York, 1993), 247. Bourdieu here describes the academic system in mid-nineteenth-century France. Individual painters that figure as examples in this text passage are Horace Vernet and Jean-Léon Gérôme. In a footnote, Bourdieu makes reference to the official blessing given to "the followers of Ingres . . . from 1841 onwards," (302). Another important study of the production of taste and value in art is Bourdieu's Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). On the continued validation of what she calls "Grand Art" by state authorities beyond 1870, see Patricia Mainardi, The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic (Cambridge, 1993), 15.

Singleton Copley's "up-to-date attitude to marketing" them, other examples demonstrated that history painting was "a road to financial disaster." The total number of history paintings at Royal Academy exhibitions from its inception in the 1760s until the 1830s did not exceed ten percent.<sup>51</sup> In his Recreating the Past: British History and the Victorian Painter, Roy Strong has convincingly shown that during the reign of Queen Victoria history painting was revived; according to Royal Academy exhibition records, the presence of history paintings peaked in the 1840s, and then slowly fell off again in the next three decades.<sup>52</sup> As Strong argues, the initial low success rate for history painting in the grand manner, did not prevent painters from pursuing historical themes in other forms. He divides history painting in Great Britain into three categories which followed one another successively: Gothic Picturesque, Artist-Antiquarian, and Intimate Romantic.<sup>53</sup> Strong's study stresses continuity over disruption in the production of history painting. While Mainardi's accounts of the Second and Third Empire emphasize the struggle between progressive and conservative forces, Strong's Victorian England moved inexorably toward liberalization if not democratization of the arts. Yet Strong's assumptions deserve closer examination. In 1842, the British government announced a

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<sup>51</sup>See The Painted Word: British History Painting, 1750-1830, Peter Cannon-Brookes, ed. (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, New York, 1991), 7. As examples of financial failure, Cannon Brookes lists the painters James Barry, William Blake, and Benjamin Robert Haydon.

<sup>52</sup>Roy Strong, Recreating the Past, 36.

<sup>53</sup>Strong, Recreating the Past, 13.

commission for historical paintings to decorate the new Houses of Parliament. The exhibition of cartoons at Westminster Hall the following year attracted large numbers of visitors, but critical observers questioned the value of giving the "lower classes" free entry to see the noble works of art.<sup>54</sup>

The discussion of nineteenth-century history painting could be extended to Germany, Italy, and Belgium where it coincided with the rise of nationalist movements. Emanuel Leutze, the subject of Chapter 4, studied and later taught painting at the Düsseldorf Academy. He was a sympathizer of and activist among the liberal bourgeoisie which opposed authoritarian rule. Although we are here mostly concerned with the Leutze reception in the United States, the fact that by the 1850s several influential German critics were discussing the "crisis in history painting" has relevance for the ongoing discussion.<sup>55</sup> Due to the political and territorial fragmentation of Germany until its unification in 1871, history painting was not tied to a centralized state as in France. At mid-century there were at least three competing "schools" of history painting in Germany: the Rome-trained Nazarenes under Peter Cornelius, the allegorical-

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<sup>54</sup>See Rebecca Jeffrey Easby, "The Westminster Hall Exhibitions: Art for the Masses?" Paper delivered at the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies Eleventh Annual Conference, Yale Center for British Art, April 11-13, 1996. See also Strong's account of the exhibition in Recreating the Past, 35-36.

<sup>55</sup>See, for example, a 1856 article by the art critic Anton Heinrich Springer, "Die Krisis in der historischen Malerei," in Kunsttheorie und Kunstgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland, Band I, Werner Busch and Wolfgang Beyrodt, eds. (Stuttgart, 1982), 220-223. Springer attributes the decline of history painting in Germany to the diminishing artistic influence exerted by the academies in Düsseldorf and Munich (220).

historical Wilhelm von Kaulbach, and the Düsseldorf-based realism represented by Karl Friedrich Lessing.<sup>56</sup>

Regardless of national differences, during the first half of the nineteenth century there emerged an independent and international art business which made it possible for somebody like the French painter Paul Delaroche, who specialized in scenes from English and French history, to gain celebrity in France, England and the United States.<sup>57</sup> There were audiences on both sides of the Atlantic that had very similar literary and artistic tastes. In England, France, and Germany the main countries to which American history painters looked for models, history painting was an "official" art, tied to academies and government authorities. But patronage shifted gradually from the state and the court to a wider market of art entrepreneurship.<sup>58</sup> The success of painters like

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<sup>56</sup>The division into these three "schools" can be found in Götz Pochat, "Friedrich Theodor Vischer: Gedanken zur Form und Funktion der Historienmalerei im 19. Jahrhundert," in Ekkehard Mai and Anke Repp-Eckert, eds., Historienmalerei in Europa: Paradigmen in Form, Funktion und Ideologie (Mainz am Rhein, 1990), 253. On the beginnings of nineteenth-century historical mural painting in Germany, especially in Munich, see Frank Büttner, "Bildung des Volkes durch Geschichte. Zu den Anfängen öffentlicher Geschichtsmalerei in Deutschland," in *ibid.*, 77-94. Pevsner, Academies of Art, 200-225, provides an overview of the art academies in Düsseldorf and Munich.

<sup>57</sup>Delaroche's Napoleon Crossing the Alps (1848) went on a successful tour through the United States and was widely discussed in newspapers and periodicals. Although it leaves much to be desired concerning Delaroche's international career, the standard monograph introduction is Norman D. Ziff, Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth-Century French History Painting (New York and London, 1977). For a more recent study of Delaroche's work, see Stephen Bann, Paul Delaroche: History Painted (Princeton, 1997).

<sup>58</sup>See Weiss, Canvases and Careers, 76-79, 94-95.

Delaroche who rendered history in meticulous detail indicates that the bourgeois penchant for historicism was an international phenomenon. Historicism also brought into focus the need for painters to make their works relevant for bourgeois domestic experience.

### **Historicism and Domesticity**

In his classic study Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art, Robert Rosenblum traced the beginnings of nineteenth-century historicism in the arts to David. While "David's painstakingly realistic images of antiquity" were charged with didactic intent, as Rosenblum contends, his academic followers produced vulgarized imitations resembling "waxwork bas reliefs."<sup>59</sup> Although such notions of historicism's artistic decline have been subject to revision, from the standpoint of academic doctrine, a vulgarization was taking place. For historicism replaced Reynolds' ideals of universal truth with scientific veracity, it brought the noble grand style down to the level of factual historical incident. Heroic action was thus a unique moment in time but one that could be accurately reproduced in the present. While its eclecticism made it difficult to find any unifying style in historicism, a useful definition for a historicist aesthetic must include its "waxwork" precision in surface detail and the attempt to produce an effect of perfect

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<sup>59</sup>Rosenblum, Transformations, 76. The phrase "waxwork bas reliefs" was first used by an English traveller visiting Paris in 1803 (Rosenblum 75, note 90).

authenticity. Historicism was driven by a positivistic belief in the authority of facts.<sup>60</sup>

As Georg Lukács has argued, in the post-Napoleonic period, also known as Biedermeier in Germany, historicism was motivated by political reaction which resulted in an intense preoccupation with the Middle Ages. In discussing the rise of the novel, Lukács notes that by focusing on "mediocre heroes," Sir Walter Scott's novels appealed to the bourgeoisie's desire to resist the dynamic historical process which led to its own ascendancy. According to Lukács, Scott's historicism introduced a "prosaic" element into the representation of heroism.<sup>61</sup> At least in one work by David we can detect a mixing of the prosaic and the heroic: his Death of Marat (1793, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), though in the tradition of apotheosis and christian martyrdom, was authentic in every detail, from the bathtub to the wooden box and other personal objects (the bathtub and Charlotte Corday's dagger ended up in Madame Tussaud's museum). The historicist aesthetic could be adapted to contemporary reportage, reduced in this instance to Marat's slumped body killed during an everyday domestic activity.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>This succinct list of style characteristics in historicist painting can be found in Herwarth Röttgen, "Historismus in der Malerei -- Historismus in Italien," in Historienmalerei in Europa, 282-285.

<sup>61</sup>Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1962; reprint, Lincoln and London, 1983), 26, 36. On the relationship between bourgeoisie, proletariat, and historical process, see Lukács' "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971).

<sup>62</sup>See Jörg Traeger, "Kaiserliche Inkarnationen. Napoleon-Bilder, von Jacques-Louis David zu Heinrich Heine," in Historienmalerei in Europa, 166-167. On the reportage aspect of David's painting, see Rosenblum, Transformations, 82-84. See also the brief

By reconciling the prosaic and the heroic, historicism undermined the academic hierarchy of genres which had kept the two in distinct categories. Indeed, as Strong has argued for the Victorian age in England, through literary and visual forms history became so widely accessible to the middle and lower classes that history painting lost its status as a privileged aesthetic experience. In an age of historicism all historical representation was theoretically subject to similar standards of factual truth.<sup>63</sup>

What consequences did this international bourgeois interest in the past have for the practice of history painting in the United States? In a country where the middle-classes seemed to emerge with great social force one would expect history to become a popular preoccupation.<sup>64</sup> Although many scholars seem to agree that popular interest in history in the United States was less prevalent in the first half of the nineteenth-century than the second, in the 1840s and 1850s consuming history was no longer an exclusively elite pursuit.<sup>65</sup> The middle-class was reading historical romances and the works of

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discussion of Death of Marat as an "attempt to make art unambiguously transparent" in Crow, Painters and Public Life, 258.

<sup>63</sup>See Strong, Recreating the Past, 33.

<sup>64</sup>For classic studies focusing on the "emerging" middle class in the United States see, for instance, Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge and New York, 1989); and Burton J. Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America (New York, 1976).

<sup>65</sup>This assessment is based on my reading of the following principal studies of historicism in the United States: George H. Calcott, History in the United States (Baltimore, 1970); David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge, 1985); and Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory (New York, 1991).

popular historians, and it had access to images of the past through paintings, prints, book illustrations, and photographs.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, many institutions founded during this period collected documents and preserved historic sites which represented to their members real or imagined links to a noble past.<sup>67</sup>

According to George Calcott, American historicism drew its inspiration from German philosophy, above all the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder, and from the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. Calcott comes up with the following helpful definition: "Historicism was the belief that anything in the present must be understood primarily in terms of its historical development, the belief that the past makes and is the primary means of understanding the present."<sup>68</sup> For the production of historical art this meant that artists had to find historical subjects that provided keys to understanding, and

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<sup>66</sup>See Peter Marzio, "What Shall We Hang On the Walls? And Why?" in The Democratic Art: An Exhibition on the History of Chromolithography in America, 1840-1900, exhibition catalogue (Fort Worth, Texas, 1979). Among the many lithography companies that produced prints for middle class homes before the introduction of chromolithography was Nathaniel Currier who set up shop in New York in 1835. On book illustrations, see Gerald W.R. Ward, ed., The American Illustrated Book in the Nineteenth Century (Charlottesville, 1987). One highly popular illustrator of historical scenes was Felix Octavius Carr Darley; see Sue W. Reed, "F.O.C. Darley's Outline Illustrations," in Ward, 113-136. Although the first few decades of photographic practice were limited to portraiture and science, by the 1850s Mathew Brady and others were using photography as a historical medium. See Mary Panzer, Mathew Brady and the Image of History, exhibition catalogue (Washington and London, 1997).

<sup>67</sup>See Leslie W. Dunlap, American Historical Societies, 1790-1860 (Philadelphia, 1974). Dunlap points out that by imposing high membership rates and other restrictions historical societies maintained exclusivity (Dunlap, 38). See also Charles B. Hosmer, Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement (New York, 1965).

<sup>68</sup>Calcott, 7.



making sense, of the present. Historicism turned historical painters into antiquarians and inventors of tradition. Popular historicism reinvigorated an art form which had languished during the first quarter of the century. During the 1840s and 1850s painters such as Leutze and Rothermel were leaders in the pictorial invention of historicism. Yet painters had to adapt to an art buying public that was increasingly interested in exploring history through domestic themes.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, historicism evolved across a spectrum of cultural forms relating to domesticity. The successful effort to preserve Mount Vernon in the 1850s, largely orchestrated by women, was only the beginning of a larger movement to recreate the past through historic homes.<sup>69</sup> Popular forms of historicism made the traditionally elevated concept of history painting a problematic one. Between the Centennial and the end of the century, history paintings became the repertoire of tableaux vivants and historical pageants.<sup>70</sup> Something also changed in the way in which history paintings were consumed. While history paintings in their traditional association with the state were intended as public art, Leutze and others painted for private collectors; engravings of their works hung in middle-class homes. To what degree, then, was an elite audience able to preserve history painting as a privileged

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<sup>69</sup>See Hosmer, Presence of the Past, Chapters 2-4.

<sup>70</sup>See David Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill and London, 1990), 16-18.

form of historical memory? And who contested such claims to historical authority?<sup>71</sup>

### **The Gender of History**

Our inquiry into the changing modes of historical representation is by necessity one into the social construction of "history." We will have to trace the social fabric of historicism and its domestication through issues of class, cultural authority, and gender. Within the institutional framework of art academies women were largely excluded until the second half of the nineteenth-century. In order to highlight the achievements of women artists against these odds Elizabeth Ellet published her encyclopedic Women Artists in All Ages and Countries (1859).<sup>72</sup> The antebellum women painters in the United States appearing in Ellet's book were predominantly active in the lower categories of the hierarchy of genres, miniature portraits, still-lives, and such. Those that ventured into

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<sup>71</sup>In a sermon delivered in Litchfield County, Connecticut, in 1851 Horace Bushnell presented a radical critique of the history of great men and events: "What we call History, considered as giving a record of notable events . . . I conceive to be commonly very much of a fiction." What went as "unhistoric" in this great record were "all the beneficent causes and powers included in the lives of simply worthy men; causes most fundamental and efficient, as regards the well-being and public name of communities. They are such as flow in silence, like the great powers of nature." Throughout his sermon Bushnell referred to women at home as a silent and natural cause that went unnoticed in official historical records. See Bushnell, "The Age of Homespun," in Work and Play (New York, 1881), 378-379.

<sup>72</sup>Elizabeth Ellet, Women Artists in All Ages and Countries (New York, 1859). For Ellet's discussion of women artists's position in the hierarchy of genres, see especially page 3.

history painting were often members of "artistic family businesses."<sup>73</sup> In 1841, for instance, Jane Sully Darley's Mary, Queen of Scots, saluting her Troops, after her escape from Loch-Levan Castle (location unknown) appeared in the catalogue of the Artists' Fund Society exhibition in Philadelphia.<sup>74</sup> Her father Thomas Sully was a highly respected portrait painter in that city. Female sculptors, among them at least one black woman, Edmonia Lewis, often produced ambitious statues of historical heroes and heroines, but their success was often marred by male prejudices.<sup>75</sup>

Feminist art historians have drawn our attention to the connections between academic hegemony and women in art.<sup>76</sup> Suffice it to say that the nineteenth-century professionalization in art education, production, and distribution, coupled with the romantic myth of individual genius, kept women at the margins of "official" art (increasingly determined by a network of critics, art dealers, and later museum professionals). The case of Lilly Martin Spencer, discussed in Chapter 5, complicates

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<sup>73</sup>I borrow this term from Deborah Cherry, Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists (London and New York, 1993), who devotes the first chapter to "Family Business" in the nineteenth-century British art world. Prominent family businesses in the United States were the Peale and Sully families.

<sup>74</sup>"The Picture Saloon" Philadelphia Saturday Courier (May 22, 1841).

<sup>75</sup>See Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology (New York, 1981), 10.

<sup>76</sup>See, for instance, Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses, especially 114-116; Linda Nochlin, Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays (New York, 1988), especially Chapter 1, 1-36; and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History (New York, 1992).

this account. Spencer gained her initial fame as a self-taught artistic prodigy and was expected to paint in the "higher branches" of art; but she made her career in a "lower" genre, domestic genre painting.

Scholarship on literary modes of production can provide valuable insight into women's attempt to gain professional acceptance. Georg Lukács' argument that the novel is a middle class genre has been restated in Nina Baym's introduction to the second edition of her influential Woman's Fiction. Positing a "reciprocity" between republican government and middle class economy, she claims that domesticity was central to the formation and education of republican citizenry and helped stabilize the middle class. As the site of woman's fiction, domesticity was the link between self and the world or "world history." In this middle class definition of domesticity, "the home and the world would become one."<sup>77</sup> In a more recent book, entitled American Women Writers and the Work of History, Baym further investigates women's interaction with history through the printed word. Her research turned up "more than 150 women who produced historical writing in over 350 different works," including didactic novels, religious tracts, children's books, dramatic poetry, and other literary forms. The women, whom she defines as "Anglo-Protestants from the middle or upper-middle classes," promulgated a specific

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<sup>77</sup>Nina Baym, Woman's Fiction (Chicago, Il., 2nd edition, 1993), XXI, XXIII, XXIV, XXVII. See also Mary Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (New York and Oxford, 1984). Kelley's investigation of twelve women writers, or "literary domestics," shows that domesticity was not an advantageous position for women to launch a career in publishing.

Protestant-republican "master narrative of world history."<sup>78</sup> Since home and history were not mutually exclusive concepts, Baym concludes, antebellum women were able to participate in public life and helped in shaping the dominant version of universal history. As my chapter on Emanuel Leutze will show, however, universal history might have been a convenient doctrine in justifying Anglo-Saxon supremacy, but it was difficult to represent. In many ways, universal history clashed with the domestic values of the middle-classes.

This perspective from a literary historian makes clear that during the first half of the nineteenth-century women writers were able to intertwine historical and domestic narratives. But if women pursued a master narrative that legitimized the ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon middle-class, what made their productions different from that of the male romantic historians?<sup>79</sup> And did women painters have the same creative freedom as women writers in shaping historical discourse? In Great Britain in the 1850s, as Deborah Cherry has shown, critics recognized domestic paintings as a distinctive category and in debates set them apart from history paintings. In the normative world of art production, she argues, domesticity was equated with femininity and difference. It was through the construction of bourgeois femininity that women painters intervened in the official art

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<sup>78</sup>Nina Baym, American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1995), 1,3,7.

<sup>79</sup>See, for instance, David Levin, History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman (Stanford, California, 1959).

world.<sup>80</sup>

An analysis of the domestication of history in art is thus closely related to the broader feminization in American culture.<sup>81</sup> But these were not identical developments. As Huntington's Republican Court reveals, a male artist could produce a feminized history painting which was rejected by male critics as too "artificial" and "popular." In the chapters that will follow I hope to demonstrate that this painting encapsulated a number of contradictions in the American art public which could not be easily resolved. Through the careers of three painters -- Emanuel Leutze, Lilly Martin Spencer, and Eastman Johnson -- I will trace a cultural conflict which manifested itself in the critical debates over the value of monumental history painting on the one hand and domestic genre painting on the other. Leutze's monumental paintings of Washington as revolutionary hero marked the height of popularity for romantic history painting on a grand scale. But Leutze's monumentalism rapidly lost critical and institutional support. Many Americans preferred more domesticated images of past as well as present historical figures and events. Lilly Martin Spencer, who earlier in her career had professed her desire to paint noble and morally uplifting themes, more successfully marketed herself as a painter of domestic genre. In her War Spirit at Home she combined a historically significant event -- the Union victory at Vicksburg -- with a scene of domestic life.

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<sup>80</sup>Painting Women, 120-124.

<sup>81</sup>See Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York, 1978).

Eastman Johnson, who had worked with Leutze in Germany, was poised to become successor to his mentor but instead translated historical themes into genre and portraiture. His most significant contribution perhaps to the domestication of the national hero was Boyhood of Lincoln. Johnson's picture seemed to resolve at least in formal terms the conflict over historical representation that preoccupied the art public during the middle third of the nineteenth-century. The Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia codified Johnson's ascendancy and the arrival of critical standards that made the traditional artistic hierarchy obsolete. Johnson's works not only stood out against traditional modes of historical art as practiced by Leutze and Spencer, it also represented artistic "purity" within the Centennial's commodified historical space. Before we enter into a discussion of these individual painters, we will need to place them within the historical context of institutional change.

## Part I

### Chapter 1:

#### History Paintings and Institutional Change

In 1844, the painter Francis W. Edmonds exhibited four works at the National Academy of Design. Two of them, An American Boy's Inheritance (location unknown) and The Image Pedlar (fig. 2), were depictions of boyhood scenes; another, Sam Weller (location unknown), was based on a character in Charles Dickens's Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (1837); the fourth contribution, Beggar's Petition (location unknown), dealt with old age. Contemporary descriptions of these paintings focused on their moralistic, sentimental quality. An American Boy's Inheritance portrays a farewell scene in front of a rural cottage. A boy in his teens bids farewell to his weeping sister and his mother, who is uttering a final prayer. Sam Weller was Edmonds' portrayal of Sam as a bootblack working outside an old inn in London. Although Sam Weller entered Dickens's story as a young man, the bootblack image in nineteenth-century genre art was typically associated with boyhood.<sup>1</sup> At least one critic noted that the third painting in this group of boyhood scenes, The Image Pedlar, stood out. He referred to it as "an effort of a higher order," an attempt "to elevate the class of works to which it belongs" (meaning genre painting).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Sarah Burns, Pastoral Inventions--Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture (Philadelphia, 1989), 297-332.

<sup>2</sup>"Editor's Table," The Knickerbocker 23 (June 1844), 597. For a more detailed description of the other three paintings and their critical reception, see H. Nichols B. Clark, Francis W. Edmonds: American Master in the Dutch Tradition, exhibition



Twenty years before Huntington's Republican Court, Edmonds introduced historical "miniature" within a genre painting. The setting was reminiscent of Greuze's eighteenth-century domestic genre paintings. A rustic family, including at least three generations, is gathered in a domestic interior. Quite in contrast to his French precursor, who usually arranged all figures around one compositional center, Edmonds split the composition of The Image Pedlar into three focal points: the realm of domestic chores in the kitchen on the right, echoed through the basket of apples in the foreground; the central group around the peddler displaying his plaster sculptures to women and children; and the three male representatives of the family near the open window on the left. The moral center of the painting is located on the male side of the picture. The young boy, dressed in the uniform of the continental army and face to face with the bust of George Washington, is receiving a history lesson from his grandfather. It was the theme of patriotic education which convinced the critic for The Knickerbocker that Edmonds had invested a "humble subject" with "moral dignity."<sup>3</sup>

Edmonds introduced an intergenerational bond which linked past and present in significant ways, but the moral lesson imparted from patriarch to grandson was not so transparent. Elizabeth Johns has read the painting as a political allegory, an allusion to the election campaign strategies by both Democrats and Whigs of peddling images of

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catalogue (Washington, D.C. and London, 1988), 78-79.

<sup>3</sup>"Editor's Table," 597.

their political "founders." She points out that in the 1840 and 1844 elections the Whigs coopted the image of George Washington and the Democrats that of Andrew Jackson (included on the tray of statues). Although he acknowledges the importance of the Washington statue, the Edmonds scholar H. Nichols B. Clark argues that the inclusion of a Napoleon statuette on the tray evidences Edmonds' admiration for the French military leader. The inclusion of Napoleon is indeed a decisive factor in the outcome of the history lesson Edmonds staged for his audience, but in more complex ways than Clark would allow.<sup>4</sup>

The boy looks directly at Washington, the metaphorical past, and in extension outward through the open window, the metaphorical future. But the iconography of the scene suggests neither initiation into Whig politics nor abstract ideals of freedom and democracy. The boy's dress and pose, the drum, his location underneath the rifle and the powder horn on the wall (if the rifle was the base line of a triangle, his head would be at the apex), all point toward an initiation into military exploits. But this reading would make the figure of Napoleon (and, by association, Jackson) worthy of emulation, a formidable hero in the pantheon of great men rather than the incarnation of "latter-day despotism."<sup>5</sup> The Napoleon statuette, though smaller than the Washington bust, forms the apex of a central compositional pyramid. In fact, it is so high that it would probably be invisible for the boy. What Edmonds enacted for the beholder, then, was a problematic

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<sup>4</sup>See Elizabeth Johns, American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life (New Haven and London, 1991), 54; Clark, 76.

<sup>5</sup>Johns, American Genre Painting, 54.

historical lesson. As our discussion of Leutze will demonstrate, any painting that forced a comparison between Napoleon and Washington was bound to be controversial. The introduction of this comparison into a genre that relied on vernacular "humor" to appeal to its audience perhaps contributed to Edmonds' inability to sell the picture.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Edmonds must have had an audience in mind when he submitted this and the other three paintings to the National Academy exhibition. Indeed, no other painter during this period was more connected with the major art institutions located in New York. He had received full membership as an Academician in 1840 and beginning in 1843 served in several administrative capacities at the National Academy. By 1844, he held additional managerial offices with the American Art-Union and the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts. Through his artistic and social connections he easily gained membership to the exclusive Sketch Club. Edmonds not only painted for these various institutions and their members, he was an institutional organizer who could influence aesthetic and administrative decisions. If The Image Pedlar was a critical success but could not attract a buyer, where did Edmonds miscalculate? How did his interpretation of history through a vernacular theme meet or neglect to meet the expectations of the very institutions for which he served? This question not only concerned Edmonds but also the three painters which I focus on.

When Leutze died in 1868, his career had overlapped with Spencer's since the early 1840s and with Johnson's since the end of the same decade. Leutze and Spencer

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<sup>6</sup>See Johns, 55. Edmonds gave the picture to the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts.

were "products" of the art union system which flourished during the 1840s and early 1850s in various cities. Johnson entered the art world when the art unions were dissolving and the market was becoming more decentralized. Yet Worthington Whittredge, who had been a student in Düsseldorf of Leutze and Johnson, later claimed that the American Art-Union shaped Johnson's career in significant ways: "That invaluable 'genre' picture 'The Old Kentucky Home', by Eastman Johnson -- although painted after the Union was broken up, would never have been painted, I opine, had it not been for an inspiration begotten of the Union . . . ." <sup>7</sup> Even if Whittredge overstated the case, the Art-Union left a seemingly incongruous legacy for the 1850s that needs to be explained. How could one institution generate a market for both monumental works such as Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware (1851, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and the smaller genre paintings by Edmonds, Spencer, and Johnson? In order to gauge the shifts in taste that these painters represent, we need to place them within the context of institutional change. The starting point for this analysis is the National Academy of Design which was in the position to set academic standards that could be universally applied.

### **National Academy of Design: Setting the Standards**

Through the promotion of history painting, the Academy's rival institution, the

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<sup>7</sup>Worthington Whittredge, "The American Art Union," The Magazine of History 7, 2 (February 1908), 66.

American Academy of Fine Arts, had made its claim for legitimacy. Despite John Trumbull's concerted effort, however, as Carrie Rebora has demonstrated, the Academy of Fine Arts failed to consolidate the interests of patrons, artists, and the wider public.<sup>8</sup> As head of the Academy of Fine Arts, Trumbull antagonized a group of younger artists, led by Samuel F.B. Morse and Asher B. Durand, by keeping them second-class members in an institution ruled by laymen. Defying Trumbull's authoritarian control of the Academy's plaster cast collection, Morse and his group founded an independent drawing class. But more fundamental issues separated this group from the laymen who governed the old Academy. Morse stated his opposition when he proclaimed that artists were the best judges of artistic questions, and they should be in control of their own training.<sup>9</sup> The founding of the National Academy of Design was the outcome of this struggle for professional autonomy. It was governed by artists and sponsored through admission fees to its exhibitions. Unlike the Royal Academy in London which was subsidized by the government during its early years of existence, the National Academy was financially independent. However, it gave honorary membership to a host of "amateurs." These individuals came from New York's wealthy merchant class. During times of financial

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<sup>8</sup>See Carrie Rebora, "History Painting at the American Academy of the Fine Arts," in Redefining American History Painting, 229-241.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed account of the circumstances that led up to the division, see Carrie Rebora, "The American Academy of the Fine Arts, New York, 1802-1842" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1990), especially 268-270.

crisis, they supplied the Academy with lucrative loans.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this shift of institutional authority, the National Academy did not significantly contribute to enlightening the public about history paintings. But the founding artists would have been most of all concerned with establishing a rigorous academic curriculum for their students rather than turning out droves of insufficiently trained history painters. While full membership in the National Academy depended on submission of a representative "specimen," most academicians fulfilled their duty with portrait paintings. In 1852, twenty-five years after it was founded, the Academy's inventory listed only eighteen American subject paintings.<sup>11</sup> In general, Academy exhibitions were a barometer of artistic production. From its foundation in 1826, the Academy gave institutional backing to the fledgling school of landscape artists, including Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty, and Asher B. Durand (the Academy's second president). In the area of subject paintings it was also more inclusive than exclusive. A variety of genre painters, including William Sidney Mount, Francis Edmonds, and George C. Bingham, were able to find an institutional home at the Academy. One historian of the

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<sup>10</sup>According to Harris, The Artist in American Society, 1790-1860, 280, one lender was the merchant Charles Leupp. For a summary of the National Academy's beginnings within the context of professionalization, see Thomas Bender, New York Intellect (New York, 1987), 126-130. For discussions of the relationship between the American Academy and the National Academy, see Harris, 92-99; and Paul Staiti, Samuel F.B. Morse (Cambridge, 1989), 149-175. For general histories of the National Academy, see Thomas S. Cummings, Historic Annals of the National Academy of Design (Philadelphia, 1865); and Eliot Clark, History of the National Academy of Design, 1825-1953 (New York, 1954).

<sup>11</sup>See Abigail Booth Gerdtz, ed., An American Collection: Paintings and Sculpture from the National Academy of Design, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1989), 11.

National Academy, Eliot Clark, writing in 1854, ascribes their academic legitimacy to the growing influence of the Düsseldorf school of painting in America. Clark explains: "the meticulous realism and finish of the German painters met with immediate approval and had an appreciable influence upon the younger painters both in subject matter and technique. The religious picture was being replaced by the anecdotal or story-telling theme. To the older school it was thought to be a 'low' form of expression lacking in elevated moral significance."<sup>12</sup>

Although Clark gives no specific names, one representative of the "older school," was Samuel F.B. Morse, the Academy's first president. Inspired by Benjamin West and Washington Allston, Morse stated early in his artistic career that he wanted to pursue the "intellectual branch of the art. Portraits have none of it; landscape has some of it, but history has it wholly."<sup>13</sup> One of his early attempts in this category was The Landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth (1810-11, Boston Public Library). He soon followed his mentor Allston to London where he studied with West. Morse returned with the ambition to create a grand style which was distinctly national and appropriate for American republicanism. His first effort, The House of Representatives (1822, Corcoran Gallery of Art), gave the audience a grand view of the everyday operations inside one of America's principal political institutions. It was a didactic statement about the mundane workings of democratic government. Morse's second ambitious work, Gallery of the Louvre (1831-

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<sup>12</sup>Eliot Clark, History of the National Academy of Design, 1825-1953, 53.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Staiti, Samuel F.B. Morse, 32.

33, Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago), was designed to familiarize the American public with the grand tradition which Morse had studied in Europe and thus contribute to the general refinement of taste. Coinciding with Morse's involvement in founding the National Academy were his Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts which he gave on several evenings at the New York Athenaeum in 1827. Following Reynolds' example, Morse attempted to define an artistic program that would match the professional aspirations of the National Academy. Morse, who in his own words, addressed the "most fashionable and literary society of the city," filled the Athenaeum to the last seat each of the four nights.<sup>14</sup> His lecture laid out general principles of artistic discernment pertaining to the sister arts and included little theoretical guidance on judging history paintings or any of the other artistic genres.

Only the fourth of his lectures dealt more directly with painting. Morse continued to speak in broad formal categories, addressing Lines, Forms, Lights, Darks, and Colors, the material that painting has "at [its] command to excite the imagination." But he illustrated his general remarks with specific examples from art history. Regarding the "law of order" in painting, he explained "that every picture should have some part which attracts the eye first, whether in Portrait, Landscape, Historical, or Epic painting, one principal spot around which all that is introduced must rally." He then mentioned two battle scenes, Giulio Romano's Battle of Constantine and Trumbull's Battle of Bunker's Hill as examples of disorder and order respectively. Romano's composition he described

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<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Samuel F.B. Morse, Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts, Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., ed. (Columbia and London, 1983), 20.



as "painful confusion," whereas in Trumbull's picture, although it represented "incidents quite as numerous as the other, the eye is drawn at once to *this spot*. It examines what is there, and then passes to the consideration of the next most important part. In this place, then, should be the principal action." In an earlier draft of the lecture Morse elaborated on the connection of order and intelligibility with another example. Explaining the "relation of *Whole* and *Parts*," Morse initially planned to refer his audience to "the Coronation of Josephine by Jacques-Louis David as illustrating the want of this relation; for with all its numerous beauties, there is the capital defect of a disregard to proper subordination of parts; each part is carefully and beautifully wrought; but each solicits to be examined first. The most accurate delineation of parts will scarcely compensate for this neglect of a whole."<sup>15</sup> What Morse encapsulated in this lecture, then, were neoclassical principles of visual order which he had inherited from mostly eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists such as Reynolds, Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy, and André Félibien. He wrote these lectures, however, not to win new audiences for history painting but to enlighten and impress the same audience that would have been familiar with Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill (Fig. 3) and The Coronation of Josephine by Napoleon (1805-1807, Musée de Louvre, Paris) from exhibitions at the American Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Morse, Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts, 88, 92, 93, 107, 125.

<sup>16</sup>Trumbull's Battle of Bunker's Hill was exhibited at the American Academy of Fine Arts in 1816, David's Coronation in 1826. See Rebora, "The American Academy of the Fine Arts, New York, 1802-1842," 61, 83.

It would be wrong to blame Morse for the National Academy's failure to generate support for history painting beyond a small social circle. But his artistic output as well as public discourses point to a general problem for those who attempted to consolidate the art public for history painting: namely how to make academic standards comprehensible for a mass audience without compromising them. Morse offered a theoretical foundation for connoisseurship but no solution to the problem of how to bridge the gap between academic aspirations and popular taste. As an institution, the National Academy was too isolated to reach beyond a clientele that had already proved rather fickle in the case of the American Academy of Fine Arts. The National Academy lacked a popular base for Morse's classicizing standards.

To further illustrate this deficit in public participation, which aided the rise of the American Art-Union, one can cite a review of the second exhibition of the National Academy in 1827. Writing for the United States Review and Literary Gazette, Daniel Fanshaw preceded his review of the art works with an analysis of the hierarchy of genres. In his ranking, the highest department consisted of three heads, Epic, Dramatic, and Historic. In defining the Epic he quoted from the Swiss painter Fuseli:

The Epic plan . . . is the loftiest species of human conception; the aim is to astonish, while it instructs; it is the sublime allegory of a maxim . . . If it admits history . . . for its basis, it hides the limits in its grandeur; if it select characters to conduct its plan, it is only in the genus their features reflect, *their passions are*

*kindled by the maxim, and absorbed in its universal blaze.*

The Dramatic, according to Fanshaw, "is so called from interesting us by the *actors*; our attention is mostly absorbed in observing their passions and their character, and, whether the painter represents real or fictitious characters, it is the *persons*, and not the *event*, with which we are occupied." The Historic, he concluded, "portrays a *fact*, an *event*; its characters may be ideal, provided truth is observed in time, place, and custom, and that it records an event which has happened; the *event*, not the *persons*, are principal."<sup>17</sup> Of these three categories, it was only the Dramatic that he found represented in the present exhibition. But unlike later reviewers of academy exhibitions who deplored the absence of works in the historic and epic departments, Fanshaw was willing to excuse this lack. Like Morse, Fanshaw was interested in anointing the National Academy and critics like himself as ultimate authorities on artistic value. By quoting from Fuseli, Fanshaw claimed endorsement for his categories from the current president of the Royal Academy in London.

A few more points in Fanshaw's article need to be addressed, because they bear on the evolution of history painting in the period that I focus on. Fanshaw's conception was more "modern" than Morse's in that it allowed, if not explicitly called for, the expression of romantic passion in the higher department of art. He also went beyond Morse's neoclassical framework by reminding the history painter that the portrayal of fact or event

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel Fanshaw, "The Exhibition of the National Academy of Design," The United States Review and Literary Gazette, 2 (July, 1827), 244-45.

was a worthy pursuit, but that there was a nobler and grander composition, "the sublime allegory of a maxim." Although Fanshaw believed that these categories could be easily mixed, art critical commentaries some decades later saw a deeper conflict between "allegory" and "fact". While Morse and Fanshaw tried to establish solid aesthetic principles that would be universally accepted, their language was vague enough to leave much room for interpretation and contention. What, for instance, was a "universal blaze" in epic composition? What was a "fact" in history painting, and what made a character "ideal?" Fanshaw made it quite clear that this type of discourse was not meant for mass consumption:

An exhibition of paintings, sculpture, architectural designs, and engravings, does not attract to it that class of people who are fond of nine days' wonders, *lusus naturae*, calves with six legs, and kittens with three tails; these are not the frequenters of picture exhibitions; they are the intelligent, the educated, the refined part of the population, who go not merely to please the eye, to gratify an idle curiosity, but who go to drink in intellectual pleasure as they would from a poem or other fine work of the imagination.<sup>18</sup>

The American Art-Union, as we shall see, promoted a high art tradition to advance national culture. It made a greater effort at making high art accessible to the

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<sup>18</sup>Fanshaw, 242.

middle class by offering a low membership rate and by charging no admission fees to their gallery. As Lillian B. Miller has argued, a middle class taste was more or less formed even before the Apollo Gallery, the precursor to the Art-Union, began its operation.<sup>19</sup> I would argue, though, that middle class taste, due to the absence of any significant government involvement in the arts, was very much contested. This cultural vacuum would explain why the Art-Union managers at least rhetorically threw their support behind epic art while at the same time endorsing genre painting, which neither Morse nor Fanshaw considered serious enough to include in their discourses. To the Art-Union managers both art forms could potentially help consolidate disparate constituencies into one art public.

#### **American Art-Union: Bringing High Art to the "Firesides of All"**

In the 1840s the market for paintings very much depended on personal negotiations between patron and artist. The burgeoning art institutions relied on personal networks between members of similar social status. This was true for the art unions in Philadelphia and New York, both managed by a closely-knit circle of merchants, doctors, lawyers and other professionals. But at the same time, art unions brought a new impersonal element into the sale and acquisition of art objects. Joseph Sill, for instance, an influential art patron in Philadelphia, noted with little enthusiasm that he had apparently won a painting at the 1848 lottery of the American Art-Union, painted by an

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<sup>19</sup>See Miller, Patrons and Patriotism, 170.

artist he had never heard of before. However, when he finally received the painting, My Grandmother by T.H. Smith, which from his description can be identified as a genre scene, he wrote: "the whole picture is better than I expected."<sup>20</sup> This new anonymity in the transmission of art between producer and consumer did not change the art world overnight. But it potentially eliminated any direct contact between artist and patron, laying the grounds for the rise of dealers, critics, and other art professionals.

Founded in 1839 as the Apollo Association and incorporated in 1840, the American Art-Union collected five dollars from each of its members and gave them the chance to win a painting at the annual distribution. In addition, each subscriber received an engraving of a work of art selected by the committee of managers. The element of chance in the distribution of art works was not the only egalitarian policy that the Art-Union managers devised. Throughout much of its operation, the Art-Union gallery was free to the public, in contrast to the National Academy which charged entry fees. The relationship between the two institutions was strained, despite the fact that managers and artists of both institutions were linked by social and professional ties. Art-Union managers occasionally served as officers with the National Academy, and artists exhibited at both institutions and thus increased the visibility of their pictures and the chances of sale. In addition, professional artists, amateur artists, and patrons shared leisure time at elite, exclusively male clubs such as the Sketch Club and The Century

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<sup>20</sup>Joseph Sill Diaries, January 16, 1849, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (microfilm Archives of American Art, Rolls P 29-30).

Club.<sup>21</sup> Within this male-dominated art world women artists like Lilly Martin Spencer were excluded from any management role. As a female artist Spencer could only receive the status of Associate at the Academy. Yet these gender biases did not prevent her from benefiting by the art union system, first in Cincinnati and later in Philadelphia and New York. In fact, her genre and still-life paintings became a staple of American Art-Union distributions and an example of its catholic taste.<sup>22</sup>

### **Annual Distribution: Eclecticism and Public Virtue**

The American Art-Union exhibitions included almost every conceivable category of painting except portraits, which were the domain of the National Academy. There was one very obvious explanation for such eclectic taste. The American Art-Union managers catered to a membership volume that was close to 19000 when it peaked in 1849. After paying for the annual engraving and for the publication of the Transactions of the American Art-Union and the Bulletin of the American Art-Union, the managers still had

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<sup>21</sup>For a roster of original Century Club members, see John H. Gourlie, The Origin and History of "The Century" (New York, 1856). See also Harris, 115, 127. For a discussion of the relation between Art-Union and National Academy, see Charles E. Baker, "The American Art-Union," in Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, ed., American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art-Union, Vol.1 (New York, 1953), 176-197.

<sup>22</sup>One historian of the American Art-Union claims that in 1851 "Lilly Martin Spencer was among the 14 best-paid artists." See Mary L. Natale, "The American Art-Union, 1839-1851: A Reflection of National Identity" (M.A. thesis, Harvard University, 1993), 227.

large sums to spend on the purchase of pictures for distribution.<sup>23</sup> Although this desire to produce volume resulted in the acquisition of many moderately priced paintings in the lower and middle tier of the hierarchy of genres (for example still-life, genre, landscape, and seascape), the Art-Union remained a supporter of the so-called higher branches of art, meaning figure paintings of historical, allegorical, or religious character, as well as allegorical-historical landscapes.

An analysis of the engravings selected by the Art-Union managers for distribution provides insights into the programmatic decisions they made. The engravings for the second and third year of operation signaled higher aspirations. The two prints after John Blake White's General Marion in His Swamp Encampment Inviting a British Officer to Dinner (1840) and George H. Comegy's The Painter's Dream (which the managers retitled The Artist's Dream, n.d.) were historical and allegorical respectively. The managers also showed their support of historical art by announcing a prize for the best painting of an American history subject in 1842. That same year they distributed to their subscribers a print of John Vanderlyn's Caius Marius Amidst the Ruins of Carthage (1807). This was a rare classicizing history painting appearing either on the distribution list or chosen for engraving. Perhaps the only other prominent work in that tradition was Henry Peters Gray's allegory The Wages of War (1848) which appeared on the distribution list in 1849.

Leutze's productions were more characteristic of the types of historical images

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<sup>23</sup>In 1849, for instance, the Art-Union purchased 460 works at a total cost of \$45,386.77. See Baker, "The American Art-Union," 161.



sought by the American Art-Union: romantic in subject matter and naturalistic in execution. In 1844, the managers chose Leutze's Return of Columbus for print distribution, though the engraving faced several delays and was never produced.<sup>24</sup> Other Leutze images chosen for print distribution were Sir Walter Raleigh, Parting with His Wife (1846), and The Image Breaker (1850). In addition, Leutze's The Attainder of Strafford (1849) and The Knight of Sayn and the Gnomes (n.d.) appeared as etchings in the Bulletin in 1849 and 1850 respectively. The interest in classicizing architecture and men and women in roman togas had given way to the medieval court and dungeon interiors from Tudor and Elizabethan history. In 1848 the American Art-Union distributed a large print of Daniel Huntington's The Signing of the Death Warrant of Lady Jane Grey (after 1846) to its subscribers. According to Huntington scholar Wendy Greenhouse, the fascination with English history in American culture peaked during the 1840s. Greenhouse relates the popularity of Huntington's British history scenes to the predominantly Protestant audiences who attempted to come to terms with the growth of catholicism in America.<sup>25</sup> But this shift from classicism to medievalism during the 1840s signaled a larger transformation in historical literacy.

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<sup>24</sup>The engraving was probably intended to be after Leutze's Return of Columbus in Chains to Cadiz (1843, Brooklyn Museum of Art).

<sup>25</sup>See Wendy Greenhouse, "Daniel Huntington and the Ideal of Christian Art," Winterthur Portfolio 31, 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1996), 103-140. See also her essay "Imperiled Ideals: British Historical Heroines in Antebellum American History Painting," in Giese and Burnham, eds., Redefining American History Painting, 263-276; and idem "The American Portrayal of Tudor and Stuart History, 1835-1865" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1989).

Even if the audience was unfamiliar with the particular historical incident and its literary source, images of English queens in distress could always produce a thrill. The nineteenth-century prototype for this subject was Paul Delaroche's The Execution of Lady Jane Grey (1834).<sup>26</sup> The intimate portrayal of historical characters in a struggle between life and death was more accessible than the image of a defiant Roman general whose fate supposedly invited the audience to ponder larger historical circumstances. Finally, the romantic-medieval images that Americans were able to see during the 1840s were highly theatrical and could trigger associations with contemporary stage performances.<sup>27</sup>

The managers' commitment to historical art had its limitations, though. In 1843, only one year after the distribution of Caius Marius, they selected a genre scene as print premium: William Sidney Mount's Farmers Noonning (1836), owned by Art-Union manager Jonathan Sturges. In 1844, the Art-Union for the first time decided to distribute two print premiums to its members. In addition to Leutze's Raleigh Parting from His Wife (1842), the managers chose Sparking (fig. 4) by Edmonds, a genre painting which I will discuss later in this chapter. In 1847, the managers paired George C. Bingham's Jolly Flatboatmen (1846) with Huntington's Sibyl (1839), the one a genre painting, the other historical. In 1850 and 1851, the final two years of its operation, the American Art-Union membership received sets of five prints each. These two sets included engravings

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<sup>26</sup>For a discussion of Delaroche's influence on American painters, see Lois Marie Fink, American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salon (Cambridge, 1990), 43.

<sup>27</sup>For a discussion of the popularity of melodrama in America, see David Grimsted, Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1987).

after images by history painters (Leutze, Ranney), genre painters (Woodville, Mount, Edmonds) and landscape painters (Cole, Durand, Cropsey, Kensett). While there were practical reasons for this apparent inclusiveness of different genres, there were also more programmatic-political issues at stake. The managers and their supporters defended the Art-Union's inclusiveness as an expression of liberal taste. Its detractors interpreted it as a sign of contradiction and weakness. From its inception, the Art-Union was a target for the polemical attacks of those who regarded it as a commercial venture. Many of the Art-Union critics were artists themselves or at least pretended to speak for artists' interests. The following passage, written by an anonymous "artist," appeared in the "Editor's Table" of the Knickerbocker magazine in November 1850:

I have been a close observer of the progress of the Art-Union in our midst, and I dare say it has its great and glaring faults; but at the same time it has its benefits. Where Art itself is not perfect, (and who will avow its arrival at perfection in this country?) can its aids and helps be perfect? I sincerely believe that, in the main, the desire of the managers of the Art-Unions throughout this country is to advance the interests of art. Would that I could say they have no other design; but of that hereafter. At present, I shall confine myself to the idea, that the whole evil lies in *the want of personal and artistical sympathy between the men who merely manage the money of, and the men who contribute the pictures to, the Art-Union.* Art-Unions contribute to keep Art before a talking, lounging, gossiping,

rendezvous-ing public, at their rooms. They do not elevate Art itself, nor distribute its influence within the chambers of the great public.<sup>28</sup>

Not only did "artist" take offence at the manager's money-making attitude, he questioned the entire Art-Union public. It seems that the type of "public" that Fanshaw assumed stayed away from art exhibitions was now occupying the galleries of the Art-Union. "Artist" concluded that there existed indeed another "great public" that stayed away from the din and noise that presently filled the Art-Union galleries.

Yet others argued that it was exactly its popular appeal, its pedestrian taste, that made the Art-Union a valuable institution. In 1849, for instance, the Literary World devoted one of its fictive conversations in the column "The Colonel's Club" to the subject of comparing National Academy and Art-Union. One of the gentlemen, asked to list the things that outdid the National Academy's exhibition that season, responds:

Why, everything. The shop windows, with their constant variety of prints and pictures tempting you with their bright colors, and eliciting the most catholic criticism from chimney-sweeps up to millionaires. The Art-Union with its accessible gallery, which if it doesn't always provoke praise never picks your pocket; to say nothing of other influences which are at work popularizing the arts, and working the public taste up to a point which it would never have reached

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<sup>28</sup>"Editor's Table," The Knickerbocker 36 (November 1850), 479.

under the old order of things. The Academy is nearly deserted this year, with its hundred and fifty portraits and three busts, as it deserves to be.<sup>29</sup>

The debate, which was also carried on in other journals and newspapers, revolved around the question which institution could be the more effective tool in defining "public taste."

The Literary World thus anticipated and refuted point by point the critique that "artist" would raise one year later in the Knickerbocker. "American Painters have not as much reason to complain of the public as some of them seem to suppose," said the Colonel, "*Quere*, If the public hav'n't some cause to complain of the painters. Is not contemporaneous popularity and appreciation generally the reward of the meritorious artist?" Maybe the artists who complained about the lack of sophistication among the public got what they deserved. And perhaps the fact that the Art-Union fostered an indiscriminating public taste was a necessary by-product in the successful commercialization of art. Continued the Colonel: "If its walls are covered with poor pictures, it proclaims the poverty of American Art, for it stands ready to purchase good pictures, pay a good price, and hang them in a good light, where a hundred thousand people will be sure to look at them. Our artists cannot say that they are piping and nobody is dancing as long as the Art-Union is ready to lead off at the tune of a thousand dollars apiece for the first pictures they buy."<sup>30</sup> It was not by dint of more expertise but

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<sup>29</sup>"The Colonel's Club," The Literary World 4 (April 21, 1849), 358.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 359.

entrepreneurship that the American Art-Union wrested the power to be the principal arbiter of taste from the National Academy. Until the arrival of the International Art-Union in 1849, which I will discuss shortly, the American Art-Union dominated the definition of public taste.

### **Serving an Elusive Public: Edmonds' *Sparkling***

Both defenders and detractors of the American Art-Union evoked the "public" in their speeches and writings. The discursive ubiquity of the "public," however, revealed a dilemma which the Art-Union shared with other art institutions in modern society. A poignant example, as Thomas Crow has demonstrated in Painters and Public Life, was the elusiveness of the eighteenth-century French Salon public.<sup>31</sup> In a similar way, the Art-Union's public was both real and imagined. As was pointed out earlier, the managers all knew each other's social background, but they could be less sure about their audience's. Moreover, as Crow has demonstrated, the term "public" had a political dimension which went beyond what constituted an audience. A public could form "opinions" and turn these into political action. This presence of a vaguely defined but potentially threatening public created a major contradiction in the operation of the Art-Union. Its managers wanted to raise *and* popularize the standards of art. If its detractors thought the outcome was mediocrity, to its supporters that was the necessary step toward preparing the public for the appreciation of the great works of art still to come.

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<sup>31</sup>See Crow, Painters and Public Life, especially 1-44.

To address the dilemma of a public both present and absent, the managers followed several strategies. In their rhetoric, they claimed to represent a public taste that was both high-minded *and* popular, all under the banner of a class-transcending nationalism. In their purchases, distribution of prints, and exhibitions, they seemed to give no special preference to historical art over genre works. The latter category allowed in some instances for subjects that portrayed men and women interacting in the domestic sphere. In addition, the American Art-Union put its resources into the purchase of landscape paintings which consistently formed the majority on its annual distribution lists. Its agenda thus covered an aesthetic spectrum that tried to appeal, as the Literary World stated, to "chimney-sweeps" and "millionaires."

The desire to serve different constituencies and forge them into one art public echoed through the speeches that the managers delivered at the American Art-Union's annual meetings. In the annual report of 1844, Charles Briggs stated:

Though a love of art is a universal feeling, which has been manifested in all ages and by all races, yet among the ill-informed and unthinking, paintings and statues are regarded as luxuries to be indulged in only by the rich and effeminate; and in this misconception is found one of the greatest obstacles to success in an undertaking like this of the Art-Union. And when it is remembered that works of art are rarely found but in the houses of the rich, or else shut up carefully in galleries, where the inquiring glances of the vulgar poor rarely penetrate, it cannot

be wondered at that such a feeling should exist. But it is the aim of the Art-Union to dispel such errors as these, and to convey to the abodes of common life works of intrinsic merit, which wealth does not always possess the discrimination to appropriate to its own use.<sup>32</sup>

This analysis of the art public was not very different from Fanshaw's a decade and a half earlier. According to Briggs, art was still kept from the poor and vulgar, but unlike Fanshaw who would have liked to keep it that way, the Art-Union should make it its mission to penetrate the "abodes of common life." Fittingly, the managers selected as one of the engravings for distribution that year F.W. Edmonds' Sparking (fig. 4): "The subject of the picture is of homely, but of universal interest; one that will appeal to all hearts, and to all understandings, and will require no labelling to make it perfectly understood."<sup>33</sup>

This was one of two courtship scenes Edmonds submitted to the National Academy of Design in 1840, the other being The City and the Country Beaux (c. 1839, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute). As Nichols B. Clark has shown, while both were similar in subject matter and could be considered a pair, Edmonds applied more technical ambition to painting Sparking.<sup>34</sup> He put a masterful touch to the handling of

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<sup>32</sup>Charles Briggs, Transactions of the American Art-Union for the Year 1844, 6.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>34</sup>Clark, Francis W. Edmonds, 52-53.



light effects in this dark interior scene. Light disseminates from two sources: one from the fireplace on the left, casting a warm glow on the central amorous couple, and the other from a candle partially visible through an open kitchen door on the right hand corner. The glow of the firelight extends into the young man's face, as he gazes longingly at the young woman peeling apples. Her eyes cast down, she maintains a posture of modesty, but the artist alludes to the implicit sexual theme in a significant detail. An apple has fallen off her lap and now lies on the floor casting its own small shadow. A reviewer for the *Knickerbocker* remarked: "The management of light and shadow . . . is masterly." He continued his comment by comparing Edmonds with David Wilkie: "The great Scottish artist is one of the few who have carried all the principles of the *grand style* into the commonest subjects . . . . Mr. Edmonds' paintings exhibit the same attention to the correct rules of taste."<sup>35</sup>

The engraving by Alfred Jones, of course, could not do justice to Edmonds' virtuosity in rendering light and shadow. Stripped of these visual means of reenforcing the story, the engraving relied more on the pun of "sparking." As the earlier comment makes clear, the universal intelligibility of the story greatly appealed to the Art-Union managers. By 1844, as we noted earlier, Edmonds, a professional banker, held managerial offices with several art institutions, including the National Academy and the Art-Union. Yet with the selection of Sparking the managers set a precedent that went beyond favoritism toward one of their group. Here was somebody who combined the

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<sup>35</sup>"Editor's Table," *The Knickerbocker* 16 (July 1840), 82-83.

technical qualities of the Old Masters with a commonplace genre theme.

As Rachel Klein has pointed out, most of the engravings that the American Art-Union distributed over the years reflected its "gendered vision of public virtue." The managers chose images that illustrated male exploits in history and preferred masculine sociability over domesticity even in the selection of genre scenes, including Bingham's Jolly Flatboatmen and Mount's Farmers' Noonning.<sup>36</sup> But with Sparking the American Art-Union diverted from this policy. Elizabeth Johns has argued that most courtship scenes of that period cast women as mere objects of exchange, denied them agency, and thus helped reenforce masculine control in the domestic realm.<sup>37</sup> Women in Edmonds' images differ significantly from the self-assertive, even mockingly aggressive *hausfrau* type we encounter in Lilly Martin Spencer's kitchen scenes. Yet by representing what Johns calls a "standoff" between the sexes, Edmonds appeared to make young men and women independent actors in a social drama which symbolically pitted seduction against domestic duty.<sup>38</sup> Universal intelligibility may have worked as a perfect strategy to espouse masculine ideology, but it nevertheless generated images which related directly to the domestic experience of a female audience. What made Sparking such an appropriate image for distribution was the fact that it surrounded a domestic subject with the aura of the "grand style."

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<sup>36</sup>Rachel Klein, "Art and Authority in Antebellum New York City: The Rise and Fall of the American-Art Union," The Journal of American History 81 (March 1995), 1545.

<sup>37</sup>Johns, American Genre Painting, 142-147.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 147.

According to Rachel Klein's analysis, the Art-Union made some concessions to public taste, but its political ideology which "upheld old Federalist notions of patrician stewardship" made it a profoundly conservative institution.<sup>39</sup> But even if we regard the Art-Union as an ideological child of the older American Academy of Fine Arts, something had changed in the way the hierarchy of genres was transmitted.

### **The Abandonment of Epic Art**

The Literary World stated in one of its articles in support of the Art-Union, "Let Art be brought home to the firesides of all."<sup>40</sup> Utopian as it seemed, the managers of the Art-Union subscribed to this credo of universal public art education. As the selection of Edmonds' Sparking and later Woodville's Mexican News (War News from Mexico, fig. 5) and Old '76 and Young '48 (1849, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore) showed, the American Art-Union discovered the market for homely art, but it had to reconcile this new market with a didactic program derived from older patrician values. How could the Art-Union instill public virtue among its audience with paintings of everyday life?

The managers' self-declared mission was to provide the country with a universal language that was like the "silent poetry" of Leonardo Da Vinci, as one of them put it.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Klein's research has established that the majority of Art-Union officials were Whigs, and the few Democrats involved represented the conservative element of that party. See Klein, "Art and Authority in Antebellum New York," 1542.

<sup>40</sup>"Art Items: The American Art-Union," The Literary World 3 (November 4, 1848), 792.

<sup>41</sup>John Jay, Transactions of the American Art-Union for the Year 1844, 17.

It was a language that would unify a public through taste and virtue, transcending all class strife, gender difference, and political disagreement. To be most effective in their effort, the Art-Union managers sought ways to have art penetrate the domestic sphere. As William J. Hoppin remarked in 1847, "many citizens of the laboring classes [were] quietly and decorously availing themselves of the privileges of the gallery." But, he concluded, "it is not with the visit to the gallery that its benefits terminate. It begets tastes, simple and cheap in their gratification, which strengthen the domestic ties. It suggests employments which add new charms to home, however poor and scanty be the accommodation to which that sacred name is applied."<sup>42</sup> This desire to infuse home life with the cultivating influence of the arts was perfectly in line with the Art-Union's cultural conservatism.

Yet Hoppin's speech in 1847 marked a shift in emphasis from the year before that deserves closer analysis. At the 1846 meeting he gave his credo for monumental art:

Will it be said that there is no necessity in America for these higher -- these more important productions? -- that the smaller displays of Art -- portraits, landscapes, conversation pieces, still-life subjects, fruit and flower pieces, statuettes, busts, engravings and daguerreotypes are sufficient to fulfill among us all the important functions with which Art is charged? I think . . . that we can hardly over-estimate the beneficial influence of Monumental Art upon the general character of a people

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<sup>42</sup>William J. Hoppin, Transactions of the American Art-Union for the Year 1847, 21.

like ourselves. It would bring before us in our daily walks the idea of *country* in a visible shape. It would impersonate her to us as a kind mother -- as a being to love and honor -- to live for -- to die for . . . We need something tangible to cling to and rally around. --We need the outward types and symbols afforded by Monumental Art.<sup>43</sup>

Hoppin was aiming here for a type of art that was conceptually equivalent to Fanshaw's Epic Art. It was an art that so far had no roots in the United States, for "Art, as the popular Teacher of great moral truths . . . has scarcely any existence amongst us . . . We have built no temples for her. We have given her no home in our market places."

Hoppin himself admitted that the Art-Union's capacity to sponsor monumental art was limited: "The works which we demand, need long study in their preparation -- years of labour in their execution. Private wealth is not sufficient to buy them . . . I say then, distinctly, it is upon our own General and State and Municipal Governments that we must call."<sup>44</sup> This was one more contradiction that the managers needed to explain to the membership. They wanted to nurture examples of monumental art but they had to concede that their "private" resources in sustaining such art were limited. Hoppin simply shifted the responsibility of funding onto the state.

A year later, in 1847, he focused on the "humanizing" influence of art on those

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<sup>43</sup>Hoppin, Transactions of the American Art-Union for the Year 1846, 19.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 18, 21.

who were "endowed with natural refinement of feeling" but "pent up in the dark streets of cities."<sup>45</sup> To these impoverished urban masses art represented, "domestic ties" and "new charms to home." Yet as if he wanted to affirm his audience that he was not relinquishing art's higher principles he added: "teach us the impressive lessons of history and the sacred truths of religion." Only toward the end of his speech, did Hoppin make another attempt to rally artists to the cause of history painting: "your Committee regret that so little attention is being paid to Historic Art, and still more, that the means which have been provided by the National Academy for instruction in that technical element, upon which the successful prosecution of it depend -- the knowledge of Form -- have been so generally neglected."<sup>46</sup> The shift was perhaps less significant to Hoppin's audience than it would seem to us, but his agenda in 1847 was much more modest than the previous year. He made no sweeping calls for monumental art, did not use the phrase 'High Art' and placed his observations on historical art at the end of his speech.

Hoppin's shift of emphasis evidenced the Art-Union's difficulty in pursuing its dual task. It not only had to generate an art public for high art but also find artists who could deliver works of high art for this art public to worship. Despite efforts by Hoppin and others to make the Art-Union the catalyst for monumental or historical art, American artists did not exactly overwhelm the organization with examples. The historical artists that figured prominently -- Emanuel Leutze, Peter Rothermel, Henry Peters Grey, Daniel

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<sup>45</sup>Hoppin, Transactions of the American Art-Union for the Year 1847, 21.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 22, 26.

Huntington, Junius B. Stearns, James Glass, Thomas Rossiter -- worked in disparate modes and moreover faced competition from genre artists who specialized in scenes of contemporary life but also ventured into historical subjects. The American Art-Union showed consistent support of historical art but like the National Academy was unable to impose universal standards. As Hoppin indicated, the American Art-Union managers saw the association as a seedbed for artists who worked in the grand style, but they looked to the state as the ultimate source of large-scale commissions. Underneath its grand rhetoric the Art-Union was an incorporation of private citizens which packaged art for public and domestic consumption. Its successor organization, the Cosmopolitan Art Association, placed the link between art and domestic virtue at the core of its aesthetic program. Although the Civil War brought a premature end to its operation, the Cosmopolitan Art Association turned out to be far more adaptable than the American Art-Union in addressing middle class concerns in an age of "Victorian didacticism."<sup>47</sup>

### **Cosmopolitan Art Association: "Religion in Everyday Life"**

The Association's founder and chief financial manager, C.L. Derby, used the same basic incentive that had served the American Art-Union so well in attracting subscribers: to lure them with the possibility of high return for a low investment. But Derby, who had learned from the Art-Union's mistakes, made the Cosmopolitan Art Association a more efficient operation. He avoided any collision with New York state law against lotteries

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<sup>47</sup>For an analysis of Victorian didacticism, see Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 507-532.

by moving his operation to Sandusky, Ohio. Another major improvement was to streamline the production and distribution of engravings. The Art-Union was chronically late in delivering the annual engravings to its members. Rather than jeopardizing its customer's loyalty with such tardiness, the Cosmopolitan Art Association chose for its annual distribution British art works that were "ready-made" for the print market.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to management problems, the Cosmopolitan Art Association also avoided programmatic ambiguities that had contributed to the American Art-Union's vulnerability. After the arrival of the International Art-Union in New York in 1848, the American Art-Union became embroiled in a war of words with its new competitor. Launched by the French art dealership Goupil, Vibert, & Co, the International Art-Union quickly attracted subscribers for its lottery of French, other European, and American art. It also became a distributor for American artists who were disenchanted with the American Art-Union, among them William Sidney Mount. The Art-Union attacked its rival on two grounds: French art was lascivious and sensuous, and the International was a purely commercial venture which masqueraded as a public institution. Yet the International Art-Union had enough public support among American critics to make a sustained counter-offensive. Especially the Home Journal, under the editorial leadership of Nathaniel Parker Willis, came to its defense. The Home Journal welcomed the International Art-Union as an institution that would raise the standard of art in the United

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<sup>48</sup>Carl Bode points to the fact that in 1856 the Association picked Faed's "Saturday Night" for its first annual print distribution based on the image's suitability for engraving as much as its theme. See his The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840-1860 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954), 84-85.



States and challenge what Willis called "merchant amateurs."<sup>49</sup> Derby would have known only too well that the Cosmopolitan Art Association could only operate successfully if it avoided getting embroiled in a similar controversy.

Through its official organ, the Cosmopolitan Art Journal, which began publication in 1856, the Association shared its mission with a readership that exceeded that of the Art-Union's Bulletin. In many ways, the Cosmopolitan Art Association simplified its message. It proclaimed itself a contributor to artists' commercial success and to art's sacred mission in a heartless world. Its editorials spoke to the need for national art and held up foreign models for emulation. When it purchased the entire Düsseldorf Gallery in 1857, the Association acquired a collection that had lost some of its earlier appeal but still stood for the highest quality in modern European art. The Association was determined not to let the ideological differences that had driven a wedge between the International Art-Union and the American Art-Union get in its way. It glossed over its commercial side with heavy doses of moralizing rhetoric under the banner of Art's sacred mission.

### **No Use for History Painting**

On one programmatic issue in particular did the Association part ways with the Art-Union. The promotion of history painting was not on the Association's agenda. History painting was largely absent on its annual distribution lists and its Journal made

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<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Klein, 1551. Klein gives a good summary of the conflict. For another account, see Baker, "The American Art-Union," 143-152.

only brief, though always polite references to Leutze. When it mentioned history painters at all, they were relatively obscure even by mid-nineteenth-century standards.<sup>50</sup> The Journal seemed to project all its expectations for the ideal in art onto sculpture. In the first two editions alone, the Journal included lengthy reports on the sculptors Carl Müller, Henry Kirk Brown, Thomas Crawford, and Hiram Powers. Again, artistic choice went hand in hand with business acumen, for the Association owned a copy of Powers' The Greek Slave, the most prestigious prize of its first lottery. The Greek Slave was a relatively large example, though. The sculptures that both American Art-Union and Cosmopolitan Art Association were more likely to present to the public were, according to Carl Bode, "of the private, domestic kind."<sup>51</sup>

In the Association's effort to domesticate art there was no need and therefore no room for history paintings. Introducing Faed's Saturday Night to its readers, the Cosmopolitan Art Journal stated its preference for a type of art that directly and in simple terms impressed "a lesson . . . upon every heart." And in the accompanying article "Saturday Night's Sermon," it reiterated this message: "It is a religion in *every-day life* which we want."<sup>52</sup> In an article that introduced the engraving for 1857, the editors

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<sup>50</sup>In the first edition of "Art at Home," for instance, the Journal quoted from the Pittsburgh *Chronicle* which mentioned "Historical Painting" by a "Mr. McClury," and the fact that he studied with Leutze in Düsseldorf. Both journals were probably misinformed, for McClury, who left with Leutze on the same ship to Europe, was a fellow-artist and traveller. See Cosmopolitan Art Journal Vol 1, No 1 (July 1856), 15. Hereafter cited as CAJ.

<sup>51</sup>Bode, Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 99.

<sup>52</sup>"Saturday Night's Sermon," CAJ 1, 1 (July 1856), 12-13.

informed their readers that "This picture [Saturday Night] now ornaments thousands of households. The subject was one to stir up the *home-heart*."<sup>53</sup> The Journal coupled this call for every-day spirituality with a rhetoric that questioned what it considered 'high art' precepts. In its first edition the Journal began its editorial policy of interspersing short quotations by John Ruskin with the following one: "The modern 'ideal' of high art . . . . does indeed depend on some appeal to the inferior passions."<sup>54</sup>

By 1860, the final year of its publication, the Journal had crafted an anti-high-art position that was charged with class-terminology: "If it were possible for the 'high-art' philosophers to carry their point, and only paint first-class works, at first-class prices (which only the rich, of course, could purchase and hold) we should despair of any progress on the part of the people in art-taste and culture. It is by giving *all classes* access to, and possession of, works of the studio and burin, that a love for the beautiful must become a common trait."<sup>55</sup> In its call for class-transcendence through taste and refinement the article echoed an earlier rhetoric used by the managers of the American Art-Union in defending their institution against accusations of mediocrity. The Cosmopolitan Art Journal was unapologetic about mediocrity. In fact, the issue of standards in art was strictly determined by the laws of market economy. If "the great laws of demand and supply" reigned supreme, "competition" would force artists "to

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<sup>53</sup>"'Manifest Destiny.' The Engraving of the Current Year." CAJ 2, 1 (December 1857), 45.

<sup>54</sup>John Ruskin, quoted in CAJ 1, 1 (July 1856), 13.

<sup>55</sup>"The Dollars and Cents of Art," CAJ 4, 1 (March 1860), 30.

accept a merely commercial price for their labor." There would still be gradations of price, depending on "the artist's reputation or individual excellence," but, the article concluded, "as works multiply, this standard, according to the immutable laws of trade and compensations, must deteriorate, even from its present point, and we probably shall see *good* works of the easel ere long placed within easy reach of persons of small means and moderate pretensions."<sup>56</sup> Thus the Journal's philosophy came down to one central principle: artists had to accept the needs of art consumers as the ultimate measure of their success. In such a world, history painting was doomed. It was too labor-intensive and too complex to compete with art forms that could be more easily produced, reproduced, and more easily understood.

### **The Feminization of Art**

Finally, history painting collided with another goal which the Cosmopolitan Art Journal formulated for its organization, namely to create an intimate communion between subscribers and artists. As one mission statement said: "The subscribers have a common sympathy, and gradually grow to feel like a great brotherhood . . . . This magazine proposes to become the organ of communication among this host of co-workers, thus to bring them more intimately together."<sup>57</sup> In this effort, the Association not only appealed to women as consumers but clearly marked them out as agents. In the second year of its

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>57</sup>CAJ 1, 2 (November 1856), 46.

publication, the Cosmopolitan Art Journal published a host of letters from women subscribers and concluded: "They are very cheering, as showing how widely-spread is the Art-taste among our countrywomen. Where is the woman that is a gentle woman, who is not a friend of Art and Letters?"<sup>58</sup> The Journal lured women into its sphere by assigning them general importance and specific agency, for in a call to women to serve as honorary secretaries, it promised "we propose to make each lady, who interests herself in the matter, our *Private Secretary*."<sup>59</sup>

The Cosmopolitan Art Association was articulating a larger cultural shift that one might call the domestication of art consumption. Advertising the engraving Manifest Destiny for the year 1857, the Cosmopolitan Art Journal stated: "Homes which are not able to possess a canvas-treasure, from its great cost, may yet introduce two or three, or more, worthy engravings to its walls, and thus enjoy a presence which otherwise would be a stranger. It does not, then, become the friend of art-taste to ignore or to neglect the claims of the steel reproduction of the masterpieces of art, but rather to encourage their dissemination." The engraving itself was after a picture by the British artist Solomon entitled The Favors of Fortune. It was a domestic scene of a group of ladies sitting and standing around a card table, one of them telling the other her fortune. The article described each lady's dress and demeanor and concluded: "its story makes it a charming

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<sup>58</sup>"The Ladies! - God Bless Them!" CAJ 1, 3 (March 1857), 92.

<sup>59</sup>"Expressly for the Ladies," CAJ 1, 2 (November 1856), 68.

parlor piece, a boudoir companion, or a library ornament."<sup>60</sup> These instructions indicate that within the middle-class home women had become important arbiters of taste. The Cosmopolitan Art Journal was appealing to a readership that "used" art as a private home ornament. In its domesticated form, art could still serve its public role of moral edification but all within the feminized realm of influence, reform, and beauty.

The Cosmopolitan Art Journal stated the doctrine of women's benevolent influence in these terms: "The end and aim of effort ought to be to introduce some new element which shall be like oil on troubled waters, to soothe antagonism, and restore a loving peace among men. What is that element does the reader say? Disseminate a love for Art and Literature, and you have the instrument of reform. Encourage the Beautiful, and you crush out the Deformed . . . something more general, more cosmopolitan, is needed to act upon masses, and prove the Angel of Mercy to society."<sup>61</sup> As we shall see in the chapter on Lilly Martin Spencer, this feminization of art consumption was a mixed blessing for the producers of art. For now, we need to examine who in the 1850s was still buying large historical paintings and whether these collectors followed the cultural shift toward "homely" art represented by the American Art-Union and Cosmopolitan Art Association.

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<sup>60</sup>"Manifest Destiny," CAJ 2, 1 (December 1857), 45-46.

<sup>61</sup>"The 'Women of America' and the 'Cosmopolitan'," CAJ 2, 1 (December 1857), 44.

## Chapter 2:

### Private Patronage for History Painting

The City remain'd quiet all night and peace I hope is again establish'd. Went up to Mr. Hubard's to sit for a full-length sketch he is painting for me, but only sat a few minutes, being interrupted by some Ladies who brought a little Boy to sit to him. I afterwards went up to Mr Carey's, accompanied by a Colour'd Man who carried Mr. Hubard's Historical Picture of "Molly Pitcher" at the Battle of Monmouth. I wish'd Mr Carey to see it, as he may be obliged to raffle it -- Mr. Carey admired it very much, particularly the female figure, and cheerfully said he would contribute to the lottery.

On Friday, May 10, 1844, Philadelphia merchant, art collector, and amateur artist Joseph Sill entered this description in his diary. William James Hubard (1807-1862) was a young painter from England where he had first established a reputation as silhouettist. After emigrating to America, he gave up silhouette cutting for portrait painting. Between 1828 and 1832 he lived mostly in Philadelphia and Baltimore and became a protégé of Sill's. By 1844 he had moved on to Richmond but maintained close ties to Philadelphia where, according to Sill's diaries, he kept a studio. Hubard had painted "Molly Pitcher" in expectation of a \$200 prize that Godey, the publisher, had announced for the best history painting in which a woman would be the principal character. Sill's diary does not disclose whether the award was canceled or only

delayed, but Hubbard was desperate to turn his picture into cash by way of a raffle. Sill's patron-friend from Philadelphia, the publisher Edward L. Carey, would contribute his share to the raffle.<sup>1</sup>

Besides introducing two staunch supporters of history painting conducting their art business, Sill's diary entry provides insight into the social fabric of art production usually left out of more official accounts. When he expressed relief over the "peace" that had been restored, Sill most likely referred to the anti-Catholic riots that had flared through Philadelphia after Irishmen attacked a Nativist gathering on May 3rd. The riotous atmosphere lasted for a few days culminating in the burning of a Catholic church.<sup>2</sup> Sill had to wait for the social turbulence to subside before he could safely walk to Hubbard's studio to sit for his portrait and carry "Molly Pitcher" to Carey's house. We also learn about the everyday bystanders, "some Ladies," seemingly disturbing Sill's peace, and the "Colour'd Man," who is a complete blank in the account, although he is the one entrusted with carrying the valuable picture.

This episode reveals to us the personal network through which an antebellum history painter found his clients. But besides the obvious desire to protect himself and the painting from the riotous mob, how much on a personal, financial, and ideological

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<sup>1</sup>Sill Diaries, May 10, 1844. On William J. Hubbard, see George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, eds., New-York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860 (New Haven and London, 1957), 331-332.

<sup>2</sup>For a lengthy description of these events, see J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1884), 663-668.



level was a collector like Sill really invested in history painting? To the Sills and Careys of Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and elsewhere, history paintings metonymically stood for the ideal of high art. The ideological promise of high art was one of peace and social order. As Terry Eagleton has persuasively shown, an ideology is only an effective means of social control, if a social group in power manages to make its beliefs relevant and ultimately natural for those in lower social positions.<sup>3</sup> But as our previous chapter demonstrated, the burgeoning art institutions in the United States were rather ineffective in providing a solid platform for history painters.

There were, however, a number of patrons who bought large-scale art works to add lustre to their private collections. The men who supported American art institutions during the first half of the nineteenth-century as officers, benefactors, or honorary members, frequently had art collections of their own. Indeed, institutions such as the American Art-Union and the National Academy of Design were public extensions of their private collecting activities. Although many of the most prestigious works in private collections ultimately made it into the municipal museums erected after the Civil War, the incorporation of these disparate collections into public trusts was a slow process. As Paul DiMaggio has demonstrated persuasively for the Brahmin class in Boston, antebellum social elites did not heavily invest in art institutions for the promotion of high

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<sup>3</sup>See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York, 1991), especially Chapter One, "What Is Ideology?" Summarizing Louis Althusser's definition, Eagleton states: "Ideology for Althusser is a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in a society," 18.

art, since they had not yet agreed on a classification system or cultural hierarchy.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that this institutional weakness did not prevent the American history painters Peter Rothermel, Emanuel Leutze, Daniel Huntington, and Henry Peters Gray from enjoying great status among a specific group of collectors deserves closer analysis. As representative collectors of history paintings, I will discuss Joseph Sill, Edward Carey, and Joseph Harrison from Philadelphia, and Charles Leupp and Marshall O. Roberts from New York. Although only a cross-section of the total number of patrons active during the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s, this group formed a core of consistent support. All of these patrons owned at least one painting by two or more of the four painters mentioned. As I will discuss in the last part of this chapter the vogue for large American history paintings did not last very long. In the 1860s and 70s, collectors turned to figure painters such as Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, and George Boughton, whose representations of the past and of contemporary life carried less narrative and moralizing weight.

First I want to make a few principal points regarding the study of antebellum patronage. What motivated a group of patrons in appropriating history paintings? How successfully did history paintings serve this wealthy, predominantly urban patron class as symbols of class identity? Such a class analysis needs to take into account two arguments. On the one hand, each patron individually stood for the rise of the American self-made man, the "architect of his own fortune," as an obituary for Charles Leupp put

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<sup>4</sup>See Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), 374-397.

it.<sup>5</sup> This myth, which has an empirical basis, obscures attempts at class-analysis of American patronage. Lillian B. Miller, for instance, searched for common traits among a disparate group of patrons, including Philip Hone, Luman Reed, Leupp and others; but she reduced class to a matter of taste and concluded her analysis with the tepid statement that what the "northern men of wealth" had in common was "the taste, morality and social values of their generation" and that "their collections, rather than reflecting sharply individualized taste or experience, conformed to a pattern that indicated that they enjoyed the same subjects and patronized the same artists."<sup>6</sup> Thus Miller failed to explore the link between aesthetic taste and class-formation during this important phase of art institutionalization. I shall argue that instead of preventing the formation of class-interest, the myth of the self-made man fitted the needs of these patrons very well. Patrons thus found pictorial metaphors of their own ascendancy in images of historic struggle.

On the other hand, as Alan Wallach argues, the elites in antebellum America were fractured and still in need of institutional consolidation. Simply put, during the first half of the nineteenth-century the urban elites lacked what Wallach has called "institutional bases for high art."<sup>7</sup> Yet as his analysis on the relationship between Thomas Cole and his

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<sup>5</sup>"Obituary," The Crayon 6 (November 1859), 353.

<sup>6</sup>Lillian B. Miller, Patrons and Patriotism, 156.

<sup>7</sup>See Alan Wallach, "Long-term Visions, Short-term Failures: Art Institutions in the United States, 1800-1860," in Andrew Hemingway and Will Vaughan eds., Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790-1850 (Cambridge, 1997), 303-319.

patrons has shown, class had a great impact on artistic production, though with contradictory results. When he painted ambitious historical works, Cole moved away from one class of patrons and gained only luke-warm support from another. Cole thus became caught up in a historical shift from aristocratic to bourgeois patronage in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Other painters of Cole's generation such as Samuel F.B. Morse and Washington Allston, who painted grand historical subjects for popular exhibition, faced similar problems finding suitable patrons. A subsequent generation of history painters, including Leutze, met a larger and more sympathetic audience. They capitalized on the institutional support of art unions and the distribution of engravings and developed ties with private patrons.

Private entrepreneurship in the arts was essential to the constitution of what one might call in Habermasian terms a *Kunstöffentlichkeit*, a bourgeois public sphere in which artists, patrons, critics, and their audiences theoretically could negotiate issues of aesthetic judgment.<sup>9</sup> While there was critical debate in American print media, patrons were far less interested in openly discussing aesthetic concerns. They either discussed their ideas privately or, if they went public, in sermonizing speeches. Although they had

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<sup>8</sup>See Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in William Truettner and idem, eds., *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C., 1994), especially Part II, "Patronage," 33-47. See also idem, "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy," *Art Magazine* 56 (November 1981), 94-106.

<sup>9</sup>Although Habermas does not use this term *per se*, I extrapolate the concept of *Kunstöffentlichkeit* from a process described by Habermas that led to the emancipation of artists from "the guild, the court, and the Church," and to the "institution of art criticism." See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Bürger (Cambridge, 1982), 40-41.

much influence over what kind of historical images the "public" would consume, private patrons and artists did not engage in public debates over the interpretation of history. Through their support of history paintings American collectors of the second quarter of the nineteenth century sought to establish artistic value that could unite fractured elites. They favored historical themes which not only fitted their own ideology but were also popular among the general public.

### **History Paintings for the Drawing Room**

As was true for the art institutions we discussed in Chapter 1, American history paintings in these private collection were interspersed with genre, landscape, and portrait paintings, as well as sculpture (plaster casts); rarely were these collections exclusively of American art. The collectors who are most frequently mentioned as early patrons of American art are Philip Hone, Luman Reed, both from New York, and Robert Gilmor of Baltimore. Because I am here more concerned with a different set of collectors, my discussion of these men will be brief.

Gilmor and Hone submitted catalogues of their collections to William Dunlap for inclusion in his three volume History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States (1834). American art formed only a small part of their collections. Gilmor owned portraits by Stuart (one of George Washington), Jarvis, and Trumbull (a historical portrait), still-life paintings by Raphael Peale and Sarah Peale, and landscape paintings by Thomas Cole, John Groombridge, and William Wall. The core of his collection were

European Old Master paintings, especially by Dutch and Flemish landscape and genre artists.<sup>10</sup>

Philip Hone submitted a catalogue which emphasized the English and American examples of his collection. In the closing statement to this list Hone combined self-aggrandizement with modesty: "The above are all the works of artists now living, and I do not know of a finer collection of modern pictures. I have several old pictures, some of which are dignified by the names of celebrated painters; but I do not esteem them sufficiently to induce me to furnish you with a catalogue." Not only did Hone's list reflect his personal ranking of art works, it was a testimony to his confidence as a connoisseur. He offered several paragraphs of comment to the first two pictures that appeared on the list, Charles R. Leslie's Anne Page, Slender and Shallow (1825, location unknown) and Gilbert Stuart Newton's The Dull Lecture (n.d., location unknown). Leslie was an American artist who lived in England and taught at the Royal Academy. Newton was a Canadian-born nephew of Gilbert Stuart and studied with his uncle in Boston before leaving for Europe. Scenes from Shakespeare such as Leslie's became highly popular among the American public. This type of literary painting was a hybrid of genre and history painting and its reception did not require a high degree of erudition. Thus, Hone limited his analysis to commonplace statements ("Shakespeare himself did not tell

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<sup>10</sup>William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Art of Design in the United States (1834; reprint, New York, 1965), Vol. 3, 272-275. For a valuable discussion of Gilmor's collection see Anna Wells Rutledge, "Robert Gilmor, Jr. Baltimore Collector," The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 12 (1949), 19-37. See also Barbara Novak, "Thomas Cole and Robert Gilmor," Art Quarterly 25 (Spring 1962), 41-53.

his story more eloquently than does this graphical and fascinating representation of one of his best scenes") and to superficiality ("there is a quaintness in the furniture and decorations of the room admirably adapted to the subject"). Brief comments accompanied the other pictures on Hone's list, among them Domestic Happiness, by T. Clater, dated 1828 ("A fine representation of an English Cottager and His Wife and Children: drawn with great spirit, and superior in coloring to any of the works I have seen of this artist"); landscapes by Cole and Thomas Doughty; and historical portraits by Morse of Lafayette and Thorwaldsen.<sup>11</sup>

Luman Reed was of similar social background as Hone and shared with him a penchant for paintings with simple narrative content. Reed decided to build a collection of mostly contemporary American art and to nurture native talent. In particular, he aided in significant ways the careers of the artists George Whiting Flagg, Asher B. Durand, and Thomas Cole.<sup>12</sup> He "discovered" Flagg when the artist premiered at the National Academy of Design at the age of seventeen and subsequently became his chief patron. Flagg specialized in figure paintings that were either literary-historical or pure genre. Flagg contributed to Reed's collection two Shakespearean scenes, Murder of the Princes in the Tower (c. 1833-34) and Falstaff Playing King (c. 1834), as well as Lady Jane Grey

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<sup>11</sup>Dunlap, 276-277. For more information on Hone, see especially Alan Nevins, The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851 (New York, 1936); and Edward Pessen, "Philip Hone's Set: The Social World of the New York City Elite in the 'Age of Egalitarianism,'" New York Historical Society Quarterly 56 (October 1972), 285-308.

<sup>12</sup>Throughout this discussion of Reed's collection I am indebted to Ella M. Foshay, ed., Mr. Luman Reed's Picture Gallery, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1990).

Preparing for Execution (c.1834), rapidly advancing as a historical subject *célèbre* in antebellum visual culture. In 1835 Reed commissioned a group of historical portraits of seven presidents of the United States from Asher B. Durand. In addition, Durand painted for Reed one scene from the history of New York, Peter Stuyvesant and the Trumpeter (1835) and one genre work, The Pedler (1835-36). All of these works (one could add William Sidney Mount's Bargaining for a Horse, 1835, and Undutiful Boys, 1835) betray a preference for literalism mixed with Yankee humor and nostalgia (considering that this merchant capitalist owned images of old-fashioned trade practices, horse trading and peddling). Yet despite Reed's pedestrian taste, he was determined to own a work that would put a stamp of historical importance and grandeur onto his private museum, his "patriotic shrine."<sup>13</sup> It was thus that he threw his support behind Cole's ambitious historical allegory The Course of Empire (1833-36). According to the installation plan which Cole sketched for his patron, this cycle of five paintings was to fill almost an entire wall.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Gilmor and Hone, Reed sought and found his chance to include a monumental, historically ambitious work in his gallery.

Reed, in a sense, exemplified the taste of an entire generation of collectors active between 1840 and 1860. His collection served as a direct source of inspiration, for after his death in 1836 it was maintained by his friends Jonathan Sturges and Charles Leupp

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<sup>13</sup>I borrow this term from Alan Wallach. See his "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy," 103.

<sup>14</sup>Illustrated in Mr. Luman Reed's Picture Gallery, 59.



and during the 1840s exhibited in the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts.<sup>15</sup> The collectors that I will discuss during the rest of this chapter had much in common with Reed. They were of relatively humble origin, grew wealthy early in life, and spent much of their leisure time on artistic self-education. While Joseph Sill's and Edward Carey's rise to membership in the social elite was unremarkable, that of Harrison and Roberts had a more glamorous side. These men were merchant capitalists, pioneers of sorts, who generated all or much of their wealth by investing in railroads. Leupp, on the other hand, tied his fortune to land speculation and railroad stocks after he had already established himself as a successful merchant. Like Reed they adopted a heroic ideal of art collecting, and they believed that moralizing history paintings were supreme art objects. Yet at the same time they harbored a taste for mundane subject matter considered low in the hierarchy of genres. For at least a decade, artists such as Huntington, Gray, Rothermel, and Leutze supplied this class of patrons with works of historical subjects. Some of these, which were ambitious historical allegories in the tradition of Cole's Course of Empire, were more suitable for public spectacle than for the private drawing room. More commonly these painters approached religious, historical, and literary themes on canvases of a more modest scale.

Two Philadelphia contemporaries of Hone, Gilmor, and Reed were Joseph Sill and Edward L. Carey. Both men had art collections at home, aided local art institutions, cultivated personal relationships with artists, and socialized with one another as well as

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<sup>15</sup>See Mr. Luman Reed's Picture Gallery, 19-21.

with other collectors. Both were instrumental to the early development of Leutze's career, and one of them, Joseph Sill, befriended and patronized Rothermel.<sup>16</sup>

Carey acquired his wealth in the expanding market of publishing. The publishing house of Carey & Hart had operated in the profitable gift-book industry which provided Carey with an entrée to the world of engravers and artists. Another connection to the arts was his marriage to the sister of Charles Robert Leslie. Carey thus had at his disposal the expertise and familiarity of an Anglo-American artist who commanded respect as a successor to Benjamin West and Joshua Reynolds. Carey owned some Shakespearean paintings by Leslie and a number of other English paintings some of which were considered rarities in America.<sup>17</sup> His taste in American art corresponded with the editorial choices that he made in illustrating gift-books. His collection thus included two of Huntington's works based on Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Mercy's Dream (1848, Museum of American Art, Philadelphia) and Christiana and Her Family in the Valley of the Shadow of Death (n.d., location unknown) but also Mount's The Painter's Triumph (1836, Museum of American Art, Philadelphia).<sup>18</sup> In addition to American and English

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<sup>16</sup>For information of Carey I rely on Neil Harris, The Artist in American Society, especially 112-113, and William G. Constable, Art Collecting in the United States of America (London and Edinburgh, 1964), 19. The best introduction to Sill's life and patronage are The Diaries of Joseph Sill. I have worked with a microfilm copy at the Archives of American Art, Roll P 29-30.

<sup>17</sup>A helpful resource for my discussion of Carey's collection was Carolyn Sue Himelick Nutty, "Joseph Harrison, Jr. (1810-1874); Philadelphia Art Collector" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1993), 49-50.

<sup>18</sup>For further study on artists as gift book illustrators, see David Lovejoy, "American Painting in Early Nineteenth-Century Gift Books," American Quarterly 7, 4 (Winter

art, Carey owned a few examples of the Düsseldorf school. His collection was "modern," as Sill noted, and unlike Hone, Gilmor, and Reed, Carey seems to have avoided European old masters from the beginning.<sup>19</sup> His leadership among Philadelphia's patron community culminated with his election as fourth president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Carey's desire was to launch the career of an American master, and Leutze appeared to possess the required talent. While other young artists stagnated and never achieved their highest potential, such as Reed's George Whiting Flagg or Sill's William Hubard, Leutze more than fulfilled his promise. Carey and Sill encouraged Leutze to study at the Düsseldorf Academy and provided him with financial backing. Sill noted in his diary: "Mr. E.G. Leutze, a young artist of surpassing merit has been encouraged to go to Europe by several of his friends, who promised him commissions, and agreed to pay one half of the amount in advance, to enable him to go. Amongst the rest of his friends, I promised to contribute my mite; but when the hour of his departure approach'd, and the money was needed, he found two only who were ready to advance to him -- Mr. E. Carey and myself."<sup>20</sup> Leutze went and soon supplied wealthy Philadelphians with historical

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1955), 345-361. Although it focuses on two gift-books produced in Boston, The Token and The Atlantic Souvenir, the article describes at length the type of art that Carey would have solicited for his publication. Lovejoy points out that Leslie's Ann Page, Slender, and Shallow as well as Newton's The Dull Lecture, owned and highly valued by Philip Hone, were engraved for gift-books.

<sup>19</sup>See Joseph Sill Diaries, 16 June, 1845.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., November 23, 1840.

pictures. Sill diligently kept records of Leutze's movements and of new paintings sent to Carey who served as Leutze's principal agent. On April 15, 1843, Sill noted that Carey remitted \$1000 to Leutze for pictures he had sold on the artist's behalf. Sill proudly kept record of artists, patrons, and other visitors who came to see Leutze's paintings at his and Carey's residences.

Carey did not live to see the monumental examples of history painting which Leutze produced in the 1850s. Surely he would have been pleased to see Leutze rise to national prominence and return the investment of his Philadelphia patrons many times over. Yet for reasons that will become apparent in my discussion of Carey's fellow-patron Sill, Leutze was breaking the mold of the literary cabinet-size art that his early Philadelphia patrons preferred to buy. Carey certainly appreciated Leutze's work as an illustrator, for he commissioned a "Vignette" for the 1840 edition of a gift-book called Diadem. He seemed to be willing to follow Leutze in his grander aspirations, indicated by his commission for Leutze's The Landing of the Northmen (fig. 6), to which we will return in a later chapter.

Sill was of more moderate wealth than the other patrons discussed in this chapter. As a merchant, he ranked within the richest occupational group in Philadelphia which gained its position during and after the War of 1812.<sup>21</sup> Yet he probably did not make the transition to merchant capitalist; that is, he kept his money in his business rather than

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<sup>21</sup>I am here indebted to Stuart Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia," in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, eds., Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History (New Haven and London, 1969), 165-208.

diversifying his assets in speculative ventures such as land and railroad stock. He approached his collecting activities with the same economic conservatism. His collection was small. He did not buy on impulse but liked to develop a personal rapport with the artist, studying a picture before purchasing it. For instance, in September 1845 after he saw Rothermel's Ruth and Boaz (location unknown) on display at the sales room of a Philadelphia art dealer Sill remarked in his diary: "If I could afford \$200 I would be glad to purchase it." Intrigued by the painting, Sill subsequently recorded visits to Rothermel's studio and his tribulations in withstanding the "temptation" to buy it; yet he also began to convince himself that "I am almost certain I would obtain the price asked for it at any time." By December 1847, Rothermel was working on a second version of Ruth and Boaz commissioned by Sill.<sup>22</sup>

Another indication that Sill was a collector of smaller caliber than his friend Carey, was his own house on Chestnut Street. His collection was small enough to fit into one room, a spacious Federal-style drawing-room. After he hung Leutze's Prince Hal and King Henry (location unknown), which the artist had sent from Düsseldorf, Sill wrote: "Altogether our Room looks very well, and is something like a Gallery!"<sup>23</sup> Unlike his fellow-collectors, Sill never altered his house to include the type of private art gallery built by Luman Reed. Sill represented a taste for historical subjects shared by other Philadelphia collectors, among them John Towne who owned Leutze's Cromwell and His

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<sup>22</sup>See Sill Diaries, entries for September 8, 10, and 30, 1845; December 29, 1847.

<sup>23</sup>Sill Diaries, December 16, 1843.

Daughter (1843, location unknown) and John Knox and Mary Queen of Scots (1845, location unknown). Yet in the 1850s the vogue for history paintings among private collectors was beginning to lose its momentum. Rothermel still enjoyed steady employment but also relied on the art unions in Philadelphia and New York. On December 16, 1852, Sill attended the final sale of the remaining American Art-Union pictures and reported the results to Rothermel. Rothermel's Defence of Toleration (n.d., location unknown) sold for \$675.00 and was thus in the highest price range. When the artist still expressed some disappointment, Sill had the following advice: "I suggested that its [Defence of Toleration] large size was an objection to many, as it was difficult to find a place for so large a work in a modern Drawing Room."<sup>24</sup> According to Katherine Grier's history of drawing room or parlor culture, the American mid-nineteenth-century urban parlor changed not only in size but also in its symbolic function. In addition to being the more representative, official room of the house, the parlor became a "comfort" zone, decorated with fashionable upholstery. In the typical Victorian parlor described by Grier, a large-scale history painting would have been out of place.<sup>25</sup> It took a different kind of collector, with ambitious taste and a large gallery, to accommodate the grand history paintings Rothermel and Leutze were producing. Such a collector was Joseph Harrison.

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<sup>24</sup>Sill Diaries, December 17, 1852.

<sup>25</sup>See Katherine C. Grier, Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930 (Washington and London, 1988; revised edition), 69-71.

### From Drawing Room to Private Gallery

Harrison's collection of history paintings dwarfed those of Sill and Carey. It marked the arrival of a new opulence in art collecting. His success story in becoming "the leading Philadelphia art collector of the third quarter of the nineteenth century," as his recent biographer Carolyn Sue Himelick Nutty states, seems to be a familiar one by now.<sup>26</sup> Born as one of ten children to a Philadelphia grocer, Harrison began his career as a machine-maker's apprentice. He soon was able to apply his talents in engineering to the development of a more efficient steam locomotive. Having established himself as a locomotive manufacturer, Harrison was commissioned to be the chief engineer of the Moscow-to-St.Petersburg Railroad. Upon his return to Philadelphia, he erected a mansion which included an art gallery. Harrison's life was that of an antebellum business prodigy, a success story which he narrated in a memoir entitled The Iron Worker and King Solomon (1869). Another monument of Harrison's achievement was his art collection. Nutty argues that Harrison's interest in history paintings expressed the search for "historical association" by a "self-made man whose fortune was formed half a world away."<sup>27</sup> But her reading of Harrison's life as a two-part narrative -- the young engineer goes out to conquer the world (Russia) and returns to spend the rest of his life searching for moral truths in art -- is a classic variation of the self-made man romance. While this is not the place to rewrite Harrison's biography, Nutty's study begs for more critical

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<sup>26</sup>Nutty, 2. In the following discussion I am indebted to her extensive research on Harrison.

<sup>27</sup>Nutty, 429.

scrutiny. Although it constituted "only" one fifth of his entire collection, Harrison was obsessed with history painting. His desire to add mythological grandeur to his life culminated in the commission of The Iron Worker and King Solomon from Christian Schussele in 1863. When he returned from Europe he brought with him Benjamin West's William Penn's Treaty with the Indians (1771-72, Museum of American Art, Philadelphia) which he had bought in London. He eventually owned several works by Benjamin West, historical and religious. Rothermel did not need to follow Sill's advice and paint smaller-size pictures, as he found an enthusiastic supporter in Harrison, who purchased his Patrick Henry Before the House of Burgesses (1851, Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation) from the Philadelphia Art-Union. Harrison also bought from Rothermel two large Shakespearean scenes as well as a Civil War painting. Another indication of Harrison's penchant for grand themes was the fact that he owned four paintings representing the life of Columbus. He also owned the fashionable Lady Jane Grey led to her Execution (1864, location unknown) by Edward Harrison May. But there was a less glamorous side to Harrison's remarkable career as entrepreneur and art patron. After his return to Philadelphia, he became known for ruthless and greedy practices in acquiring real estate. In 1860 he made arrangements for the evacuation of his collection, left the United States for Europe ("apparently disgusted with the war," remarks Nutty) and did not return until 1863.<sup>28</sup> Yet he had no scruples about giving a ceremonial speech at the unveiling of Rothermel's monumental The Battle of Gettysburg in 1870, and

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<sup>28</sup>Nutty, 128.



praising the nation's war effort.

There was another aspect to Harrison's collection which seemed to counteract the high-mindedness of history painting. Under the rubric of "history painting" Harrison accumulated a number of representations of female nudes. He owned a Leutze picture, innocently entitled The Wood Nymph (n.d., Rokeby Collection, Barrytown, New York), which Nutty describes as "simply a delightful nude in an intimate setting."<sup>29</sup> This type of "fancy" picture gave artists some freedom to explore nudity in painting. It was not exclusively a male domain, however, for Lilly Martin Spencer painted several images in this vein. Harrison also owned Vanderlyn's Ariadne Abandoned on the Isle of Naxos (1809-1812, Museum of American Art, Philadelphia) which was exhibited in a separate pavilion at the 1864 Sanitary Fair exhibition.

Harrison's taste for grand themes was thus complemented by pictures of ideal female nudity. His decision to make history paintings a focus of his collection derived from a combination of contradictory impulses. History was a means of self-aggrandizement but also provided lessons of humility; the past offered a realm of heroic fantasies bordering on sentimentalism but also a storehouse of traditional values. Harrison's rise to financial success and social status outran that of most of his Philadelphia and New York contemporaries. History paintings provided gratification to his opulent taste. Living up to the myth of self-made man he took pride in his humble origin as an "iron worker," but he also sought ways to overcome the stigma of *arriviste*.

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<sup>29</sup>Nutty, 356.

Unlike earlier collectors who preferred the "simplicity" of landscape and genre art, Harrison revelled in an abundance of historical narratives. Yet his was probably the last of the so-called millionaire mansions that housed such an extensive collection of history paintings. Harrison's patronage of American history painters was primarily for those associated with Philadelphia. Due to the influence of patrons like Harrison the city remained a conservative stronghold of history painting into the 1870s.

### **Consolidating Elite Taste in New York**

The collecting habits of wealthy New Yorkers followed a similar pattern. Most antebellum New York collectors would have personally known Reed and Hone. Abraham Cozzens, for instance, whose collection was described in a series on private collections in The Crayon, was president of the American Art-Union.<sup>30</sup> In addition to managing the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, Jonathan Sturges and Charles Leupp served as members and patrons of the American Art-Union, the National Academy of Design, and the Century club. The collecting habits of such patrons as Cozzens, Sturges, and Leupp fueled the market for contemporary American landscape and figure painting. Both Sturges and Leupp began as merchants and in the 1840s rose to the rank of "genuine merchant prince," as one Leupp biographer put it, turning to land development, banking and railroad investment.<sup>31</sup> Leupp owned three historical scenes by Leutze. All three were

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<sup>30</sup>See "Our Private Collections, No. III," The Crayon 3 (April 1856), 123.

<sup>31</sup>See James T. Callow, "American Art in the Collection of Charles M. Leupp," Antiques 118 (November 1980), 998. See also "Our Private Collections, No. IV," The

quite dramatic in subject. Henry VIII and Holbein (before 1856, location unknown) shows Holbein kneeling before the king, asking for protection in a dispute with a nobleman. The exact subject matter of another Leutze painting, Light and Shadow; or A Summons by the Vehme Gericht (1856, location unknown) is unclear, but it suggests a medieval feud between knights. Finally, there was a scene from revolutionary history, highlighting a female protagonist. Mrs. Schuyler Burning Her Wheat Fields on the Approach of the British (1852, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) was most likely inspired by Elizabeth Ellet's Women of the American Revolution (1848). Catherine Van Rensselaer Schuyler is represented at the moment she sets her grain field on fire to prevent the British troops from harvesting it. The fact that this event was more legend than historical fact would not have distracted from the moral drama of the scene. Leupp also owned a historical image by John G. Chapman, entitled Dominican Torquemada Interrupting the Negotiation between Ferdinand and Isabella and the Jewish Deputy (ca. 1848, location unknown), based on a description in Prescott's History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic (1839). Yet for every dramatic image by Leutze and Chapman in Sturges' and Leupp's collections, there was one in the contemporary genre or literary style by Mount or Edmonds. In many ways, the taste of New York's merchant-capitalists paralleled exactly that promoted by the Art-Union.

The taste for opulence, however, expressed in large history paintings, found an adherent in at least one New York patron. Marshall O. Roberts was one of the most visible

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Crayon 3 (June 1856), 186.

collectors of the period. He was the owner of Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware (fig. 7), a connection about which I will have more to say in another chapter.<sup>32</sup> Roberts was a decade younger than Sturges and Leupp, which accounted for some of the differences in his approach to collecting. He had more in common with Harrison in Philadelphia or two patrons of Leutze's in Washington, William Corcoran and George W. Riggs, than with Sturges or Leupp. Roberts made his way up from clerk in a grocery store and as shipchandler. Appointed U.S. naval agent by President Harrison in 1841, he landed profitable government contracts during the Mexican War. After the war he widened his fortune through merchant shipping, railroad expansion, and the commercial use of the telegraph. Like many of his generation, Roberts participated in the general expansion in commerce, transportation, and communication, but he was one of a few who actually stood at the helm of a rapid acceleration of capital flow. His political home was with the Whigs and later the Republican party which represented both national stability and economic progress.

In 1856 the Crayon introduced the Roberts collection to the public as part of its "Our Private Collections" series. At that point Roberts owned Leutze's Landscape (n.d., location unknown) and John Knox before Mary Queen of Scots (most likely John Towne's version) in addition to Washington Crossing the Delaware. In his gallery there were also three images by Huntington, including two historical compositions, The Good Samaritan (1853, New Jersey State House) and Lady Jane Grey in the Tower (n.d.,

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<sup>32</sup>The following sketch of Roberts' life is largely based on information in The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York, 1893) Vol. 3, 350; and on Harris, 280.

location unknown), another example of what both George Strong and Wendy Greenhouse have called the nineteenth-century "hagiography" of Lady Jane Grey.<sup>33</sup> But historical art, according to the Crayon report, did not dominate the collection. Roberts owned landscapes by Church, Durand, Kensett, Gignoux, and Oddie. There were portraits by Peale, Sully and Waugh, a religious painting by Chapman, and two works by Ranney, at least one of which was a western subject. Also, for the first time, an Eastman Johnson painting was mentioned in the possession of one of the leading collectors. The Crayon, referred to Johnson's Organ Boy (before 1855, location unknown) as simply "another gem."<sup>34</sup>

A second published report on the Roberts gallery, which was purportedly open to the public at all times and free of charge, appeared in 1870 in Putnam's Magazine. In contrast to the Crayon article fourteen years earlier which simply listed the collection's contents, Eugene Benson, the reviewer for Putnam's, wrote a critical commentary. Politely but severely Benson argued his main observation: by the standards of modern art criticism Roberts' collection was outdated. Benson cloaked his critique in a rhetorical

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<sup>33</sup>See Strong, Recreating the Past, 42; and Greenhouse, "Daniel Huntington and the Ideal of Christian Art," 132. For an illustration of the New Jersey State House version of The Good Samaritan, see Greenhouse, 127. Since Huntington often painted several versions of the same picture, I am not sure this is the version owned by Roberts. The identification of Roberts' version of Lady Jane Grey in the Tower poses a similar problem. According to Greenhouse, Huntington painted all of the Lady Jane Grey paintings after 1846, including commissions from the collectors John Towne, Samuel E. Lyon, and James Robb, as well as from the American Art-Union in 1847 (Greenhouse, 132).

<sup>34</sup>"Our Private Collections, No. IV," The Crayon 3 (August 1856), 249.

device. He evoked the image of an "urbane author of a time that is past . . . addressing the 'gentle reader'."<sup>35</sup> He advised the reader to approach the gallery through this "fiction of our fathers' time." First, Benson described how the 'gentle reader' encountered a "Huntington of twenty years ago." Upon seeing Mercy's Dream, the "genial companion, whose face is peaceful and gladdening, and without a suggestion of the influence of railroads and newspapers, is suffused with pleasure."<sup>36</sup> Huntington's Good Samaritan, according to Benson, "gives credit to Mr. Huntington's study of some of the old masters," but exemplifies altogether "a style of art that belongs to the past." Henry Peters Gray, whose work had much in common with Huntington, did not fare much better. Benson showed some admiration for a half-length portrait of a girl and then concluded: "The mechanic, the mere picture-maker, had little to do here; the artist, pervaded with a sense of his subject, has done every thing; and yet the man who painted this picture is often in complete subjection to the very ideas which, inherited with his time, have cheapened the work of Mr. Huntington . . . . We cannot help regretting that both Mr. Huntington and Mr. Gray do not oftener content themselves with the simple fact of nature; that they do not care more for actual men and women and children, and less for story and symbol or allegory, which make illustrative puppets of human beings."<sup>37</sup>

Chapter 3 will have more to say about the opposition between nature and allegory

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<sup>35</sup>Eugene Benson, "Pictures in the Private Galleries of New York, No. III," Putnam's Magazine 6 (October 1870), 376.

<sup>36</sup>"Pictures in the Private Galleries of New York, No. III" 376.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 377-378.

which became part of critical attack on history painting launched by Benson and other critics. At this point in our argument it is important to note that he rang the death-knoll for a particular aesthetic that had emerged from the art union and academy system; he declared as *passé* the quasi-official art of the 1840s and 1850s which had represented popular patriotism and piety. Yet he gave a resounding apologia for one painting in the Roberts collection which stood for a different aesthetic, which also had been promoted by the art unions. Woodville's War News from Mexico (he also referred to it as "News from the Mexican War") deserved "a place of honor in Mr. Roberts' gallery, for he has no American *genre* picture comparable to it" (Benson's italics). Benson explained: "It is expressive of an epoch; it is a bit of local history of vast significance. . . . Many of our older readers, doubtless are well acquainted with this picture, for we believe it dates from the old Art-Union days in New York."<sup>38</sup> Benson's memory in this article was highly selective, for he omitted the strong ties that Gray, Huntington, and Leutze had had with the American Art-Union. The nostalgia with which he surrounded Woodville's picture reveals a significant juncture in the history of art criticism and art collecting in the United States in 1870. History painting as practiced by Leutze, Gray, and Huntington, was no longer a usable or "collectable" past. Benson was searching for a different tradition and he found it in Woodville's "bit of local history of vast significance." What he pointed up was a nostalgia for genre painting which would soon determine some of the aesthetic choices made by a post-Civil War generation of private collectors.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 379.

### Consolidating Private Collections for Museums

Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware (149 x 255 in.) was probably the last monumental American history painting that went into a private collection. Harrison and Roberts did not have any followers. In a consolidation process that led to the incorporation of many private collections into art museums, the value of history painting diminished further. However, collectors of American art did not abandon history painting overnight. There was a lingering taste for grand, operatic themes. Leutze, Huntington, and Gray "survived" the sloughing off of history paintings. Their works were added to the collections of men like John T. Johnston and William Blodgett whose holdings ended up in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>39</sup> Increasingly, grand themes came packaged in large landscape paintings by Church, Bierstadt, and Moran. One owner of Bierstadt's works was William W. Corcoran, who single-handedly established his museum in Washington, D.C. Corcoran owned a number of traditional history paintings, including works by Leutze, Gray, and Huntington.<sup>40</sup>

Some Gilded Age collectors "re-privatized" art in "millionaire mansions," where art became part of exotic domestic interiors, decorated in orientalist and renaissance

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<sup>39</sup>Benson reviewed both collections for Putnam's Magazine 5 (May 1870), 534-540; for Johnston, see 6 (July 1870), 81-87. On the formation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see Calvin Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1970).

<sup>40</sup>For an in-depth discussion of the early history of Corcoran's museum, see Alan Wallach, "On the Problem of Forming a National Art Collection in the United States: William Wilson Corcoran's Failed National Gallery," in Gwendolyn Wright, ed., Studies in the History of Art: The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology (Washington, D.C., 1996), 113-125.



fashion. In the early 1880s the interiors of the largest private treasure houses in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Newport, Washington, D.C. and some other places were photographed and published in an exclusive edition, entitled Artistic Houses.<sup>41</sup> Some collectors, including A.T. Stewart and August Belmont, constructed private gallery spaces in the tradition of Reed, Harrison, and Roberts. Their collections were documented in a lavishly illustrated book by Earl Shinn.<sup>42</sup> These collectors bought heavily into French salon art and vied for the possession of works by Bougereau, Gérôme, and Meissonier. Many of these paintings had historical themes: pre- and post-revolutionary French history seemed to replace English history, Marie Antoinette switched places with Lady Jane Grey at the execution block. Roberts owned Napoleon at Fontainebleau (1845) by Paul Delaroche, as well as Marie Antoinette Listening to Her Death-Warrant (1851). Corcoran owned French artist Charles Louis Muller's Charlotte Corday in Prison (1875, location unknown), another female heroine/victim of the French Revolution. Stewart acquired Meissonier's monumental 1807: or Friedland (1875, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) directly from the salon exhibition (purportedly without having seen it); Stewart also owned Triumph of Germanicus; or Thusnelda

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<sup>41</sup>I have relied on Arnold Lewis, James Turner, and Steven McQuillin, eds., The Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age, (New York, 1987). Artistic Houses was originally published in two volumes by D.Appleton and Company in 1883-84. The two volumes contained a total of 203 photographs of 97 buildings.

<sup>42</sup>See Edward Strahan [Earl Shinn], The Art Treasures of America 3 Vols. (New York, 1879-1883). For an excellent essay on the millionaire's mansion phenomenon, see Jay E. Cantor, "A Monument of Trade: A.T. Stewart and the Rise of the Millionaire's Mansion in New York," Winterthur Portfolio 10 (1975), 165-197.

(1873, Neue Pinakothek, München) by German academic artist Carl von Piloty (Earl Shinn referred to Piloty as the "German Delaroche"); the encounter between a sixteenth-century German banker and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire was represented in Carl Becker's Fugger the Banker and Charles V (1870, Nationalgalerie Berlin) in the John Wolfe collection. This is only a sample of American private collections. Clearly, American history seemed to have disappeared from them. American history painting had lost its value as cultural capital.

One post-Civil War collector who almost exclusively bought American art provides a clue to this conundrum. Born in 1848 dry-goods merchant Thomas B. Clarke began collecting in 1872. In 1890 he abandoned his dry-goods business and devoted his mercantile skills to the art trade. As Barbara Weinberg has suggested, the fact that his business instinct might have motivated Clarke in 1899 to put his collection of American art up for sale, left a blemish on his otherwise spotless record as a civic leader.<sup>43</sup>

Although he specialized in American figure art, history painting was almost entirely absent from Clarke's collection. The collection can function as an index to what happened to history in American art. Clarke was a loyal supporter of Winslow Homer's work. By the time of the collection's final sale, Clarke owned some thirty-seven oil paintings and watercolors by Homer -- altogether a very representative list ranging from

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<sup>43</sup>Throughout this discussion of Clarke I am indebted to H. Barbara Weinberg detailed and comprehensive study "Thomas B. Clarke: Foremost Patron of American Art from 1872 to 1899," The American Art Journal (May 1976), 52-83. Weinberg states that with one exception the New York press did not negatively respond to the 1899 sale. See Weinberg, 67-68. See also Sarah Burns, Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America (New Haven and London, 1996), 204-205, 211-212.

his anecdotal early Civil War paintings to the gloomier Maine coast seascapes. In Homer's large compositions such as The Life Line (1884, The Philadelphia Museum of Art) and Maine Coast (1896, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), history was reduced to an ongoing existential struggle between humanity and the forces of nature. In Life Line a male rescuer, holding the unconscious body of a shipwrecked woman, precariously dangles on a rope suspended between the abandoned ship and the land. Maine Coast contains no sign of human presence. Historical change is obliterated, literally "washed out," by the giant surf breaking against coastal rock formation. The point here is not that Clarke necessarily saw any historical associations in such images, or that he contemplated history on a philosophical level, but that Homer's elemental drama replaced the monumental historical art that had filled the galleries of Roberts and Harrison.<sup>44</sup>

More typical of the historical art that gained popularity after the Civil War were colonial revival images. Clarke owned two works by Charles X. Harris entitled Colonial Days (n.d.) and Colonial Gallantry (n.d.). Suggestive of colonial revival themes were also Irving J. Beaufain's Washington at the Bedside of Colonel Rahl (n.d.), Leo Moeller's A Patriot at Valley Forge (n.d.), and Douglas Volk's Accused of Witchcraft (1884) and Puritan Maiden (n.d.). The fact that these works are today unlocated indicates the low

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<sup>44</sup>For recent scholarship on the problematics of history in American art during the second half of the nineteenth century, see Alexander Nemerov's "'Doing the Old America': The Image of the American West, 1880-1920," in William H. Truettner, ed., The West as America: Reinterpreting the Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C., 1991); and Eric M. Rosenberg's "'... one of the most powerful, horrible, and yet fascinating pictures . . .!' Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic* as History Painting," in Redefining American History Painting, 174-192.

value which they already had in the 1890s when they were sold together with Clarke's "masterpieces" by Homer and Inness. The presence of colonial revival art in the Clarke collection further complicates our interpretation of the motivations which drove an entire generation of collectors born one or two decades before the time of the Civil War. As Sarah Burns has portrayed them, they were fiercely independent but also deeply involved in the ongoing process of incorporation. If Homer's subject matter evoked a sense of "raw power," "vicarious adventure," and manly "wilderness action," colonial revival pictures represented the historical fantasy of communal stability, ruled by prescribed social rituals and even justice based upon superstition.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the most successful painter of colonial revival themes was the Anglo-American George H. Boughton. Clarke owned three of his works, although judging by their titles -- On the Surrey Road (n.d.), The Page (n.d.), The Widow's Garden (n.d.) -- they were not necessarily colonial revival in subject matter. Together with Eastman Johnson, Boughton was one of few American artists whose names regularly appeared in the reviews of post-Civil War private collections, even those that otherwise favored European art. Like Boughton, Johnson reduced pictorial narrative to a bare anecdotal minimum. Johnson was a painter of contemporary life, but he chose subject matter that portrayed a present that was on the verge of becoming the past. Clarke owned twelve Johnson paintings, a larger number than any other collector, including the nostalgic and

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<sup>45</sup>See Burns, Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America, 203, 205, 209. Other principal Homer collectors discussed by Burns are Edward Dean Adams (1846-1931) and John Graver Johnson (1841-1917); see Burns, 198-199, 203-204.

domestic Southern Kitchen Interior (1867, location unknown) and New England Peddler (1879, location unknown).

The juxtaposition of Clarke's collection with contemporary and earlier examples reveals a complex history of elite taste. Clarke distinguished himself from contemporaries such as A.T. Stewart in that he avoided ostentatious European works, preferring either small anecdotal scenes or larger paintings of "tragic themes" such as Homer's The Life-Line. While American history paintings in the grand manner tradition figured prominently in at least two major private collections before the Civil War (Roberts, Harrison), they became marginal in the post-Civil War "millionaire mansion" (Stewart), or disappeared altogether (Clarke) .

The institutional neglect of history paintings discussed in the previous chapter thus seems to have affected collection practices in general. During much of the antebellum period when the hierarchy of genres still held some currency, collectors sought to own history paintings for their perceived aesthetic and social status. As the century progressed, they discovered that history paintings held little value as long-term investment. Yet the change in aesthetic priority among private patrons was also a response to a number of critical voices that emerged in the 1850s. Indeed, art critical discourses severely undermined the aesthetic value system maintained by art institutions and private patrons. The full impact of this critical attack on one painter, Emanuel Leutze, and his support system will be the subject of Chapter 6; the following chapter will introduce the principal critics and their theoretical positions.

### Chapter 3:

#### History Painting and the Critical Profession

"it is not alone in the historical and landscape *genres* that we must search for the individuality of a nation . . . have we no domestic nationality to evolve? Have we no *poesy of home*, whose episodes shall warm the heart and thrill the nation"

In July 1861 the art critic for the Knickerbocker made this clarion call for pictures of home-life that could ameliorate the chilling effects of the Civil War and "warm the heart" of a divided nation.<sup>1</sup> According to Lucretia Giese, the Civil War had a stifling effect on history painting, because it was a modern "'total war'" and thus "pictorially awkward, if not intractable" for traditional history painters.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Knickerbocker touched on a deeper cultural contest over historical art that went far beyond the immediate impact of the Civil War. The reviewer's perception of a link between "domesticity" and "nationality" was not accidental. During the 1860s and 1870s a number of prominent critics were voicing their discontent with history painting, and they based their critique on similar grounds: history painting did not speak to the needs of the the wider public, it failed to address popular sentiments which revolved around nation and home.

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<sup>1</sup>"American Art," Knickerbocker 58 (July 1861), 50.

<sup>2</sup>Lucretia Hoover Giese, "'Harvesting' the Civil War," in Redefining American History Painting, 80-81.

Eugene Benson, Clarence Cook, and James Jackson Jarves had different aesthetic and political viewpoints, but they had one thing in common: a disdain for the conventional history painting of the antebellum period. Drawing its theoretical inspiration from three main sources -- John Ruskin, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, and American Transcendentalism -- the new art critical elite went on a crusade for "truth" in art. These critics saw most contemporary history paintings as infected by false ideals and in one way or another expressed their preference for "domestic nationality." They saw genre painting as a more suitable form for representing patriotic and domestic themes.

I will attempt to show in this chapter how and why the terms 'nationality', 'domesticity', and 'poetry' became key terms in the critical movement to reform history and genre painting. In order to understand what motivated the critics to fulminate against history painting and to question the traditional validity of the hierarchy of genres, we must turn first to the critics' unique social position.

### **The Critical Profession in American Society**

Although the disparate arbiters of taste active at mid-century agreed that American art was ripe for reform, there was much difference over aesthetic strategies in bringing reform about. According to Habermas's analysis of the art critic's role in modern society, to speak argumentatively endowed him with authority and independence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>My synopsis throughout this paragraph is based on Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 17th edition, 1987), 56-58.

Habermas points to eighteenth-century France where the narrower Salon societies dissolved into a wider public sphere; in the process, he argues, the art critic, or *Kunstrichter*, became essential to the expression of public opinion in art matters. Art criticism was institutionalized alongside museums and academies. The modern critic's function was thus dialectical: he spoke both for and to the general public; he voiced and legitimated a broader "opinion," and helped to refine the taste of those he was thought to represent. At mid-century, the American art critic faced several obstacles in professionalizing his vocation. The United States still lacked a strong institutional basis in which art criticism could flourish. Since the critics perceived the art public's sensibility underdeveloped, they had to claim modest goals and assume the role of educator rather than spokesman or prophet.

The modern critic in America inhabited a marginal social position, for he was an outsider to the patron class, while at the same time he kept aloof from the larger public of art consumers and gallery audiences. Out of this marginality, however, critics forged alliances with both collectors and intellectuals. Thus, James Jackson Jarves (who was also a collector) entered into a debate with Lyman Beecher, whether or not Italian medieval art was an art of the "common people."<sup>4</sup> And, although he was quite critical of the M.O. Roberts collection, Eugene Benson (who was also a painter) became quite enamored with the principal private collections of New York, when he reviewed them for

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<sup>4</sup>See Jarves's *The Art-Idea* (1864; reprint, Cambridge, Ma., 1960), 156-160.



Putnam's Magazine.<sup>5</sup>

As one would expect, though, critics did attack collectors as a class. A second article that appeared in the Knickerbocker during the Civil War pointed out the professional critic's class antagonists, namely "the new class of patrons, who having been suddenly enriched by the war . . . buy pictures much in the same manner as they do jewelry, because they think them necessary to command recognition of their position in society."<sup>6</sup> Resentment of the corruption of art by the *nouveau riche* echoed through similar editorials. Critics accused artists of turning into mercenaries. Benson, for instance, regarded the French painter Meissonier as a "consummate picture-maker" and tradesman who raised his work "to the level of a fine art by extraordinary skill in manipulation," only to sell them to "picture-dealers and rich connoisseurs."<sup>7</sup> Clarence Cook, inspired by Ruskinian-Pre-Raphaelite ideas, saw the art world increasingly dominated by "wall street operators." His primary target among artists became the landscape artist George Inness whom he called a "charlatan" and whose success with collectors he considered based on "mercenary puffery."<sup>8</sup> Critics were thus inclined to

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<sup>5</sup>See Putnam's Magazine 5 (May 1870), 534-540; 6 (July 1870), 81-87; 6 (October 1870), 376-381.

<sup>6</sup>"Literary, Art, and Dramatic Gossip," Knickerbocker 61 (February 1863), 175.

<sup>7</sup>"Meissonier," Appletons' Journal 2 (September 11, 1869), 119.

<sup>8</sup>"National Academy of Design," New York Daily Tribune 27 (May 9, 1867), 2. For a study of Cook's intellectual development and a bibliography of his various art critical writings on architecture and painting, see John Peter Simoni, "Art Critics and Criticism in Nineteenth Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1952), especially 231-348.

suspect collectors like Joseph Harrison and M.O. Roberts for inflating their collections with history paintings. Their self-assigned mission, then, was to purify "high art" from the contamination of money and the marketplace.

This reform movement in art criticism became vocal in the 1850s, peaked shortly after the Civil War, and then lost its momentum. 1855 was an important year for two American aesthetes who were deeply affected by Ruskin's ideas. William Stillman founded The Crayon and Jarves published Art-Hints, his first book-length study.<sup>9</sup> While Benson and Cook directed their criticism against a few vulgar picture-buyers, Jarves was more concerned with the uneducated masses. In the introduction, Jarves described an encounter with two types of American visitors at the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice. One was "a young American, whose appearance denoted a cultivated mind," and who, in order to properly see Titian's ceiling paintings, lay himself flat on the stone floor, assuming the position of a true art-lover. The other type was a group of American tourists which stormed into the church, urging the tour guide to "'do up the sights' in the most expeditious manner possible," and left without having seen the ceiling paintings. Jarves concluded from this incident that "We need Art-students, men of sincerity and labor, who will not hesitate to go on their backs and knees, if need be in the dust, to read the soul language of the mightiest minds in Europe." The majority of Americans, Jarves implied, lacked the reverence necessary for art appreciation and needed to be taught to

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<sup>9</sup>On Stillman, see Simoni, 57-119. On Jarves, see Francis Steegmuller, The Two Lives of James Jackson Jarves (New Haven, 1951).

open their heart and soul to art.<sup>10</sup>

While Jarves implied that artistic "reform" in America could only be achieved by submitting to the authority of European old masters, other critics gave very different advice. The language of reform resonated through the pages of the New Path, founded by the "Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art," a group of younger artists and critics inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite-Brotherhood. One of the principal editors for New Path was Clarence Cook. The first article in the New Path's 1863 inaugural edition lay out the group's principles. The new generation of artists, so it claimed, "are not hampered by any traditions, and they enjoy the almost inestimable advantage of having no past, no masters and no schools." The New Path regarded public ignorance in art matters in a positive light and thus directly opposed Jarves: "Add, that they [American artists] work for an unsophisticated, and, as far as Art is concerned, uneducated public, which, whatever else may stand in the way, will not be prevented by any prejudice or preconceived notions from accepting any really good work which may be set before it." Like Jarves, however, the New Path associated art education with masculine labor: "wherever we find an interest in Art widely diffused through any community we shall discover on examination that it is the result of education, and has been brought about by a few men working, consciously or unconsciously, on true principles and with earnest zeal." The editors of New Path not only anticipated an ideal of the masculine artist popularized during the

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<sup>10</sup>Art-Hints (New York, 1855), 2-4, 13.

Gilded Age but also ranked critics among this masculine elite.<sup>11</sup> The journal introduced an educational agenda that centered around brotherhood and masculine activism in the arts. The article closed with the statement: "for we cannot point to the works of any one man in proof of the revolution which we predict."<sup>12</sup>

None of the reform-oriented critics seemed to believe that it would take only one great artist to transform the nation's taste. Writing for the Round Table in 1863, Eugene Benson concluded that "it may be questioned whether the genius of any modern people may be embodied in the works of a single man . . . We must look rather to an assemblage of geniuses for its complete expression." Among the "living painters" who embodied what he called "American genius" in art, Benson listed the following "representative men": "Gifford, Kensett, and Church, among landscapists; Eastman Johnson, George Boughton, Mount, Inman, Eliott, and Baker, among *genre* and portrait painters; Palmer, H. K. Brown, and J.M. Ward, among our sculptors." Excepting Gifford, whom he characterized as "approaching to the magnificent, the opulent, and the intense in nature," Benson saw "little or no sympathy with the tragic or grand element of life and nature," among this group of artists. He ranked Eastman Johnson as "our best *genre* painter,"

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<sup>11</sup>On issues of gender and art during the Gilded Age see Sarah Burns, Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America (New Haven and London, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>New Path 1, 1 (May 1863), 1-3. For an excellent analysis of Ruskinian influences on the New Path aesthetic program, see Roger Stein, John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900 (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 147-156. For a study of the Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art, see Linda S. Ferber and William Gerdtts, eds., The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1985), especially 11-37.

showing "affiliation with the truly human and democratic . . . yet he has not done anything tragic and introspective, as well as dramatic and objective, [that] would justly be classed with the genius called Shakespearean." By omitting history painters from his list, Benson made it clear that none of them displayed "dramatic power and intensity of feeling."<sup>13</sup>

By 1869, however, when he wrote "Historical Art in the United States," Benson had found an example of contemporary historical art worthy of praise: Winslow Homer's Prisoners From the Front (fig. 8). For Benson, Homer's Civil War painting was a reminder of past and present mistakes in American history painting. For "historical art in America does not mean such undazzling and unpretending pictures as the 'Prisoners from the Front;' it means rather the composed, the invented, the false, the conventional paintings which we shall not have the bad taste to mention, but which have won appropriations from Congress, and are the disgrace of the nation." Trumbull's Signing of the Declaration of Independence (1786-1819, United States Capitol Art Collection) represented a significant event, but, according to Benson, "it is historical art not on a level with its subject. The talent of the artist was inadequate, his training still more so." Whether Declaration of Independence or Emancipation Proclamation, he argued, "Historical painting is inadequate to embody the significance of these subjects." Benson concluded that "The finest pictures are not those which are painted to represent historical events . . . Historical art is the best *contemporary* art; it is portrait-painting at its highest

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<sup>13</sup>Round Table 1 (December 19, 1863), 21-22.

level; it is *genre* painting; it is landscape-painting." Benson's demotion of history painting and promotion of the "lower" genres sounded radical but his disillusionment was shared by others.<sup>14</sup>

No longer was the historical artist called upon to document national sentiment. The Knickerbocker review with which we opened this chapter illustrates how nationalist rhetoric could easily be coupled with aesthetic arguments. It called upon artists:

Dare to be National! Honestly evolve the spirit, the *genus loci* of the country in which you live. Be true to the indigenous poesy of the soil which cherishes you. Tell some story, record some sentiment which shall fix upon the page of immortality the date of our nativity. By national art we mean the expression of national poesy.<sup>15</sup>

The Knickerbocker thus freely adopted Hegel's notion that art could express the spirit of a nation and combined it with war-time blood-and-soil rhetoric:

Why should *genre*-painting not succeed with us? . . . . Then, why should there be a dearth of the *depeinture* of the poesy of American homes? Why go to Europe for models when we have them at our own threshold? Our forefathers made

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<sup>14</sup>"Historical Art in the United States," Appleton's Journal 1 (April 10, 1869), 45-46.

<sup>15</sup>Knickerbocker 58 (July 1861), 49.

sacrifices in subduing and settling this goodly soil, and it is for their children to perpetuate their spirit by fostering American Art. Let the public set the example of patronizing *genre*-paintings of the American brush, and we will give them a national art to be proud of.<sup>16</sup>

Strident nationalism was not an option for those who strove to carry the critical profession to a new level of sophistication and authority. Nationalism appealed to a popular audience's instinct, but art and art criticism, most of them would have agreed, was primarily concerned with ideas.<sup>17</sup> For the modern critic who wanted to demonstrate his aesthetic versatility it was simply not enough to evoke the national chant of 'Home, sweet home,' as the Knickerbocker critic did at one point of his argument. Yet the article articulated a concept that was gaining credibility among more sophisticated critics, including Benson: that *genre*-painting was a serious art form which could express significant national ideas. As we saw in previous chapters, the American Art-Union and

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>17</sup>Emblematic of the critics' reservation against the blinding influence of nationalism was perhaps the following encounter between art critic Charles Lanman and an art ignoramus from the country. Meeting in the Rotunda of the Capitol, Lanman explains to the man one of Trumbull's paintings of "shirt-sleeve heroes of the Revolution." Lanman described his interlocutor's response as follows: "he asked question after question, and finally, slapping his hand vehemently upon his thigh, he almost shouted -- 'Yes, thm's the fellers that licked the British! Them's the fellers for me!' It excited in him, to an intense degree, the passion of *National vanity*: while in me, who love my native land, I believe, as well as any man, the only feeling was that, as a work of art, the picture was a poor concern, and unworthy of the Capitol of a nation as great as ours." See "On the Requisites for the Formation of a National School of Historical Painting," Southern Literary Messenger 14 (December 1848), 728.

the Cosmopolitan Art Association had popularized scenes of everyday-life which appealed to a wide audience. It was now the task for critics to give the public elevation of genre painting a theoretical rationale.

### History, Genre, and Literary Art

The American Art Union had supported the genre painters Mount, Bingham, Woodville, and Edmonds. It had helped Spencer disseminate her work and had indirectly influenced Eastman Johnson's career. Yet the term "genre," originally a French word for type, had only recently been introduced into the English language and its definition was not uncontested.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Johns' book American Genre Painting has provided new insight into the various practices of genre artists in the United States. But although Johns emphasizes the need to ground the study of antebellum genre painting in discussions of "ideology," "cultural construction," and "social change," she neglects the fact that the term itself was evolving.<sup>19</sup>

In June, 1849, in a review of fifty-six artists from Düsseldorf, the Bulletin of the American Art-Union listed the following subjects: "two are of a religious character; four historical or heroic; fourteen are *tableaux de genre*, or representations of common life in

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<sup>18</sup>See Wolfgang Stechow and Christopher Comer, "The History of the Term *Genre*," Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin 33, 2 (1975-76), 89-94. According to Stechow's and Comer's research, the term 'genre' in its common use did not enter the English language until 1846 with the translation of Franz Kugler's Handbuch der Geschichte der Malerei (1837). See especially 92, 94.

<sup>19</sup>Elizabeth Johns, American Genre Painting (New Haven, 1992), XII.



its every-day relations," adding landscapes, illustrations of literature, marine views, still life, and portraiture.<sup>20</sup> This statement marked one of the earliest attempts by an American publication to define the term "genre." The editors for the Bulletin associated genre with representations of the past rather than contemporary life. When reviewing the twenty-sixth exhibition of the National Academy of Design in 1851, the Bulletin lamented the fact that American artists were neglecting their own history due to the "want of a picturesque past history." Artists encountered the same dearth of material in the department of genre, the Bulletin opined, for "everyday life in America has always been unpictorial . . . . That charm which the softening touch of time lends to the most ungainly structure, and those gay costumes and festive gatherings in which people of more lively temperaments indulge, are rarely to be found among us."<sup>21</sup> Picturesqueness as a criterium of aesthetic judgment, which could easily conflict with a critic's call for sincerity in art, was here used to describe a way of seeing the past shared by historical and genre painters.

Only a few years later, in 1856, The Crayon provided a critical redefinition of genre, coupled with an attack on literary art. Discussing the latest work by illustrator F. O. Darley (whose work the American Art-Union had also championed), The Crayon divided the "so-called illustrative Art" into the "true and the false, or the really and the seemingly illustrative." The latter, according to the critic (most likely William Stillman), "embraces the great part of all the so-called *genre* Art, the story telling -- all that which,

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<sup>20</sup>"Gallery of the Düsseldorf Artists," Bulletin of the American Art-Union 2 (June 1849), 8.

<sup>21</sup>Bulletin of the American Art-Union (May 1, 1851), 21-22.

be its theme Shakespearian, Goldsmithian, historical, or Scriptural, does no more than repeat in form what the writer has said in words."<sup>22</sup> The author introduced a second meaning of genre, namely that of "story-telling," which differed from, though it did not exclude, representations of everyday life. This was a serious attack on the conventions that had dominated both history and genre art for the previous thirty years or so. For "literary" art had represented noble and ideal qualities and had therefore occupied a higher position in the hierarchy of genres. Yet this hierarchy was essentially put to rest by the second, broader meaning of *genre*. If *genre* included all the story-telling, that is, narrative, forms of art, the traditional hierarchy of genres had become meaningless.

The critics' assault on literary art, whether history or genre, took other directions. A series of articles on Pre-Raphaelitism which appeared in The Crayon can shed some light on the anti-literary position. The third installment introduced the aesthetic principles of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and what sort of artistic production it rejected. After describing at length the false principles that conventional artists had applied in historical compositions, the article advised painters mockingly:

In composition, arrange all your figures in balanced groups, inclining to the pyramid vertically and horizontally, let them be based on curves or circles, according to your fancy; this makes it look pretty, and is thought subtle by the *dilettante* . . . . But the greatest rule of all for the manifestation of a conventional

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<sup>22</sup>The Crayon 3 (December 1856), 370.

historical picture is, -- to avoid what young ladies call 'ugliness,' let every man's complexion be clear unless he be a rascal, in that case make him as bilious as you please. You will find the theatre an admirable place of study.<sup>23</sup>

Although it did not support Pre-Raphaelitism unequivocally, The Crayon used this occasion to restate its low estimate of historical art which it considered contrived and theatrical. Indeed the entire theoretical edifice built around the concept of "decorum" came under critical scrutiny.<sup>24</sup> Inveighing against "prettiness, which would only become the frontispiece to a Ladies' Book of Fashion," the writer postulated: "What regions of Poetry and Fact are there to illustrate beyond the ordinary beaten track! How many noble deeds have a moral, and require an expounder? -- why go to the antique countries for heroic actions, when such lie at our door every day, lie within our houses and our hearts? Should not the artist *be* the Poet and *create* his own subjects?" What the article insisted on was a firm delineation of the difference between the verbal and the visual arts:

*Are* the thoughts of *writers* more generally discoverable than those of *painters*? It seems to us that they do not need to be, for surely the presentation of a visible scene, in form and color to the eye, is a more advantageous basis for comprehension than when it is only left to the imagination of the reader . . . Look,

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<sup>23</sup>"The Two Pre-Raphaelitisms," The Crayon 3 (November 1856), 322.

<sup>24</sup>On the history of the concept of decorum in art, see Rensselaer W. Lee, Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting, 34-41.

too, at the fascinations of a picture, who does not turn to it? --the veriest child, the greatest boor, the most frivolous women, all find interest in a picture--whereas not one of them can open a book.<sup>25</sup>

Although The Crayon was not always in line with Ruskinian ideas, it here espoused Ruskinian orthodoxy (including Ruskin's class- and gender prejudices). The painter had to look for noble themes not in books but in facts and in what was visible. While The Crayon heeded Lessing's discourse on the nature of literary and pictorial or plastic representation, it did not abandon the doctrine *Ut Pictura Poesis*.<sup>26</sup> Painters could be poets within the boundaries of their own medium. In the critical debate over "truth" and "falseness" poetical art became something of an antidote to theatrical and verbose art.

The ideal of the poetic artist was not an entirely new invention. At one point Thomas Cole represented that ideal.<sup>27</sup> If an artist ventured into the realm of allegorical art, he came especially close to the sister art of poetry. Yet allegorical art was not a sure way to success with the critics. It could easily lead to a fall from grace. The critic for the

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<sup>25</sup>The Crayon, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>The Bulletin had introduced Lessing's famous essay through articles that were adopted from British art critic Anna Jameson and from lectures by the London-based American artist Robert Leslie. See Bulletin of the American Art-Union (June 1849, April 1850), 22, 10.

<sup>27</sup>In a review of Cole's Course of Empire one journal remarked: "He paints poems rather than pictures . . . He might have dreamed an epic or a book of ballads." Albion 9 (October 5, 1850), 477. For a similar reference to Cole see Albion 15 (January 26, 1856), 45. See also Alan Wallach, "The Ideal American Artist and the Dissenting Tradition: A Study of Thomas Cole's Popular Reputation" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University 1973).

Albion found Cropsey's allegorical pair The Spirit of War and The Spirit of Peace poetic and conceded that "the effect may be pronounced eminently Dantesque." But the thrust of the article was highly critical of the paintings, ranking them only slightly above two similar "trashy common place [allegorical] compositions" by Sir Edwin Landseer.<sup>28</sup> The Bulletin championed Huntington as a poetic artist, although that very quality made his work too "picturesque" and therefore lacking "epic or heroic passion which the subject frequently demands."<sup>29</sup> Writing for the Bulletin in 1851, the poet and critic Henry T. Tuckerman introduced Sir David Wilkie as the poet among British artists. Of Wilkie's pictures, Tuckerman wrote: "Like the poems of Burns, they speak directly to the heart and fancy, to the sense of humor and of humanity, and, humble as is their apparent aim, few works of art breathe so universal a language."<sup>30</sup> The critical expectation for painting as a universal language was shifting toward genre and the representation of everyday life.

As Benson had observed, Eastman Johnson, whose genre work he considered "truly human and democratic," was one painter who seemed to fit this ideal. Another painter of such promise whom Benson singled out was George Boughton. In an article for Appleton's Journal Benson introduced the British artist who resided in the United States as "a painter of sentiment, simple, true, unforced, never betrayed into

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<sup>28</sup>"Fine Arts: The National Academy of Design," The Albion 11 (April 24, 1852), 201. The reader may remember that Cropsey's allegorical pair was bought by Philadelphia collector Joseph Harrison.

<sup>29</sup>"The Huntington Exhibition," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (April 1, 1850), 5.

<sup>30</sup>Henry T. Tuckerman, "Sir David Wilkie," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (April 1, 1851), 3.

sentimentality, never morbid or unreal." Like Tuckerman's Wilkie, he was a "humorist," but Boughton fell just "short of *power* in his pictures of sentiment, power such as we find in Burn's songs." But despite such qualifications, Benson wholly endorsed Boughton as a "poet-painter -- not a mediocre painter who writes verses, nor a good painter who writes bad verses; but an artist who has a poetic sense, who is never vulgar or incongruous, but one who has a fine perception of the fitness of things, and is truly human."<sup>31</sup> The poetic artist, as the reform-minded critics configured him, painted in a realist style, chose his subjects from everyday life, and endowed his scenes with sentiment.

Genre painting thus emerged strengthened, though changed, from the art critical "revolution." No longer was genre simply associated with representations of low-life; it was now poetic and pure. As we shall see in chapters 5 and 6, this consolidation of genre had different consequences for Lilly Martin Spencer and Eastman Johnson. History painting, on the other hand, was more fundamentally affected by the art critical call for reform. The chapter on Leutze will throw these changes in the reception of history painting into relief. Before we get to Leutze, however, we need to conclude our discussion of the complex connections between the aesthetic "revolution" and the crisis of history painting.

### **History Painting Discredited and Restored**

Much criticism had been vented against the historical paintings in the Rotunda of

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<sup>31</sup>"George Boughton," Appleton's Journal 3 (January 1, 1870), 11-13.

the Capitol, culminating in the negative reception of Powell's The Discovery of Mississippi by De Soto (1855).<sup>32</sup> Rarely, however, did critics conclude that history painting was an unworthy pursuit altogether. In 1848 Charles Lanman, for instance, saw "Colonel Trumbull's National picture of one hundred and twelve legs, in knee breeches" (a reference to Trumbull's Declaration of Independence) pass away and sink into "insignificance," but still declared the field of history painting wide open. Lanman detected bad examples of "national vanity" not only in the Rotunda paintings but also, in reference to art of the Mexican-American War, especially "Currier's lithographed daubs of Capt. May and the battle of Buena Vista." In the same article Lanman deemed the painters of the "Flemish school" (he gave no examples) exceptional in their approach to national character. But the impulse toward nationality did not come from history painters who "drew on Religion," instead, it came from "the large class of those who devoted themselves to landscape, village and tavern scenes, rustic carousals, and all the varieties of still life." Although he did not explicitly urge history painters to focus on these lower artistic genres, Lanman asserted that "They are national, because they express the character of the common people of the country in their common everyday affairs, for it is here that the peculiarities of every nation are most strongly developed."<sup>33</sup> There emerged a critical perception at mid-century that history painting should not be dealing with wars

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<sup>32</sup>Clarence Cook summed up the response when he referred to Powell's work in the Capitol Rotunda as the worst of all the "eminently ridiculous historical pictures." See "The National Academy of Design," New-York Daily Tribune 27 (May 9, 1867), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Lanman, "On the Requisites for the Formation of a National School of Historical Painting,," 728.

and battle-scenes at all but with the everyday lives of ordinary people.

This new ethos echoed through the pages of art journals and other art critical writings. The Crayon, despite its reputation as a journal concerned with issues of landscape representation, followed history painting quite consistently. Its discussions of historical works by older artists, including Leutze, and younger ones such as Edwin White, Christian Schussele, E.H. May, and John W. Ehninger, ranged from respectful to disapproving.

Yet when it dealt with history painting in a substantial discussion rather than a brief notice, The Crayon took a decidedly critical view. In one of its first articles, entitled "The Incentives and Aims of Art," the journal claimed that painting should represent the "whole history of the passions, as told in the physiognomy, the attitudes and bearing of the characters portrayed." The author noted that "the historical painter wields a more powerful wand over the imagination than the most life-like historian, even when aided by the accessories of fiction;" he then laid out the following methodology: "From the actual, he passes to the ideal man; from the tenants of the earth to those of a higher sphere: and, in doing this, he embodies conceptions springing out of mundane subjects, in forms of celestial purity."<sup>34</sup> What the article expounded was a transcendental approach to history painting; spirituality had to be uncovered in the world of mundane objects.

In its attempt to spiritualize art, The Crayon soon encouraged artists to shed the burden of history altogether. "Art has something to teach of Immortality," it announced,

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<sup>34</sup>The Crayon 1 (January 24, 1855), 51-52.



but it is not "the use of Art to wait on and elucidate History, which is itself but a monitor for the assistance of the Politician, and the demands of which are better supplied by the chronicle than by painting."<sup>35</sup> This effort to divorce the artist from the task of monitoring or chronicling facts led the editors of The Crayon to the claim that John Ruskin did not go far enough in shedding artistic conventions. In Modern Painters Ruskin took issue with Reynolds' definition of the Grand Style, especially what he perceived as Reynolds' false distinction between poetry and history. Ruskin arrived at a redefinition of "greatness" in art which moved away from Reynolds' rigid academicism toward a romantic "great man" theory.<sup>36</sup> Pronouncing Ruskin a "bad theorizer," The Crayon found fault with his lack of consistency and accused him of replacing one set of conventions for greatness with another. "We need to be rid forever of the formulists, the rhetoricians, logicians, and grammarians of Art," the Ruskin critic urged his readers. "We must advise the pupil. Say what you feel, show what you see, without a thought of precedent." Artistic excellence depended on "spiritual qualities," the author proposed. "The spirit of the Universe looks kindly on us from Nature as well as from the eyes of man . . . . The artist knows among all the impressions made on the human eye, how many go deeper and strike the soul." The Crayon thus read and revised Ruskin through the filter of Emersonian Transcendentalism. The synopsis of this viewpoint was: "Art must be

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<sup>35</sup>"The Revelation of Art," The Crayon 1 (November 28, 1855), 335.

<sup>36</sup>See Ruskin's elaborate argument with Reynolds in Modern Painters Vol. 3, Part IV. I have consulted the new edition of Modern Painters, David Barrie, ed. (New York, 1987), especially Chs. 1-3, 283-306.

prophecy, not history."<sup>37</sup>

Taking its cues from Ruskin and from the American Transcendentalists, The Crayon chipped away at the last vestiges of the grand style. In an article, fittingly entitled "Home Heroics," The Crayon broached the subject of proper costume in historical painting and conceded: "we are willing to admit that it would be difficult to conceive a beautiful or dignified figure in our nineteenth century costume." But it dismissed such concerns as "trifles" that will not "destroy a noble composition." The Crayon thus arrived at a highly idealistic and moralistic concept of a heroism of modern life:

There is a heroism in the commonest true life worthy an Art mightier than that of Phidias -- subjects more fraught with high and holy meaning than any the Middle Age has given us, in the history of every suffering, aspiring heart . . . and no man can be a true artist without finding in his own history that which better satisfies the definition of heroism than the actions of Greek or Crusader. They are Home Heroics that touch and better the heart -- that Art which most humbly goes down into the depths of our poor human heart is the highest, best.<sup>38</sup>

Yet not all the critics were willing to go to this extreme and excuse the artist from

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<sup>37</sup>"John Ruskin," The Crayon 4 (November 1857), 329-336. For a study of the relationship between transcendentalism and art criticism, see Janice Simon, "The Crayon, 1855-1861: The Voice of Nature in Criticism, Poetry and the Fine Arts" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1990).

<sup>38</sup>The Crayon 1 (February 14, 1855), 97.

the task of recording history. The Crayon, itself, contributed to a redefinition by calling for a more inclusive concept of historical work. In an article that introduced German "*Culturgeschichte*" to its readers, the author urged:

We want histories of merchants, of lawyers, of artists, of scholars, of farmers, of savants, of mechanics, of all sorts of men and women in relation to all sorts of occupations and conditions; all classes of society must be thoroughly historianized in order to pave the way for the possibility of a national or universal history that shall reflect truthfully the realities of this world.<sup>39</sup>

This purported turn toward cultural inclusiveness paved the way for a redefinition of historical art.

Although Benson and Cook wrote some of the most caustic comments about history painting, they and other critics had to reconcile their aesthetic standards with a new relativism which made all artifacts equally valuable as records of cultural history. The Civil War, which was difficult to represent in conventional artistic forms, contributed to this aesthetic relativism.<sup>40</sup> It generated a massive output of visual images by engravers and photographers, a pictorial atomization of sorts of a larger historical event. In light of this challenge to the authority of painting, art critics began to praise its value as faithful

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<sup>39</sup>"Man in History," The Crayon 6 (December 1859), 370-371.

<sup>40</sup>See Lucretia Hoover Giese, "'Harvesting' the Civil War," 64-65.

historical record. In April 1865, the New Path praised two paintings of the Civil War for the "sincerity of their effort." One was F.B. Carpenter's President Lincoln Reading the Emancipation Proclamation to the Cabinet (1864, United States Capitol). The painting's "great value is simply as record," the critic (Clarence Cook?) commented. "We hold that he has produced a picture which better deserves a place in the National Capitol than any work that is there, with the single exception of Trumbull's much ridiculed, but valuable, 'Signing of the Declaration.'" To make a negative reference to the historical paintings in the U.S. Capitol was a standard rhetorical device among the critical profession, but the rehabilitation of Trumbull was a recent phenomenon. Although Trumbull's painting was full of historical inaccuracies, it functioned to this critical reformer as a model of sincere effort at accuracy. The second work marked out for praise by the New Path was a simple sketch of The Army of the Potomac at Cumberland Landing by J. Hope, identified as "Late Captain U.S. Volunteers." Both pictures, the critic, concluded, were examples of "quiet, modest protests . . . against the false and theatrical styles which have been and are still in vogue, especially in the treatment of historical subjects."<sup>41</sup>

The restoration of Trumbull's reputation by the New Path signaled a larger conceptual shift. In contrast to Benson and The Crayon, it reasserted Trumbull's accomplishment as faithful historical recorder. The New Path thus planted the seeds for the post-Civil War survival of history painting as a form of antiquarianism.

Cook's description of the painter Edward L. Henry in his Art and Artists of Our

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<sup>41</sup>"Notices of Late Exhibitions," New Path 2 (April 1865), 62-64.

Time (1876) illustrates how antiquarianism not only laid the foundation for the Colonial Revival but also contributed to the domestication of history painting:

His pictures of old colonial life are the best products of his later time; his war-pictures were somewhat too ambitious for his talent. But in depicting scenes from the quiet, domestic life of a hundred years ago, here at home, he is entirely in his element, and no one can be more familiar than he with all the details of the furniture, dress, and the architecture of that time . . . . Mr. Henry has a house which is a museum of antiquarian curiosities in the field of relics of colonial life.<sup>42</sup>

Ironically, antiquarianism relied on a modern ethos of scientific exactitude in researching the past. Benson considered Jean Léon Gérôme the master of this new historical method. In an article for Appleton's Journal, Benson admitted that Gérôme lacked "the tenderness of a poet," but clearly showed "the triumph of logic," being "the first painter who ever studied to place his figures in the precise natural or architectural scene of the actual men and women of the particular epoch he proposed to illustrate."<sup>43</sup>

Two representations of the life of Washington, reviewed in The Crayon in 1859, exemplify American versions of this modern taste for antiquarianism. The one was Edwin Whites' Washington Resigning his Commission (1859) which was commissioned

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<sup>42</sup>Clarence Cook, Art and Artists of Our Time, H. Barbara Weinberg, ed. (New York and London, 1978 ), Vol. 3, 266.

<sup>43</sup>"Jean Léon Gérôme," Appletons' Journal 2 (November 1869), 438-439.

by the State of Maryland. The Crayon praised it for being "true in costume and character" and "judicious" in its "use of accessories." The other was Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon (fig. 9) by Thomas Rossiter and Louis Rémy Mignot. The two painters had spent many months of research and work on this painting, much of it on site at Mount Vernon. According to the review, it successfully combined figures (including Washington, Lafayette, Martha Washington, and black slaves), landscape, and architecture, into an image that "possesses all the interest which the time and place calls for."<sup>44</sup>

Thus, in the 1850s, domesticity, in combination with poetic sentiment and antiquarian accuracy, emerged as a kind of *juste milieu* in historical art.<sup>45</sup> However, domesticity as *juste milieu* seemed to form a fragile compromise between the various constituencies that had contributed to the erosion of traditional history painting. The readiness among various social groups and their institutions to domesticate history painting suggests a complex, perhaps reluctant acceptance of a modern, scientific attitude toward the past. In the following three chapters I will test these assumptions by focusing on three artists whose careers highlight the changes in history and genre painting discussed in Part I.

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<sup>44</sup>"Sketchings: Domestic Art Gossip," The Crayon 6 (October 1859), 318-319.

<sup>45</sup>I am using the term *juste milieu* in the sense of "middle way" or "a tendency, not a style," as Francis Francina has described it in relation to the official French art sponsored during the 'July Monarchy' of Louis-Philippe. See "Modern Practices of Art and Modernity," in Francina et. al. Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century (New Haven and London, 1993), 62-68.

## Part II

### Chapter 4:

#### Emanuel Leutze: Contested "High Art"

##### Prologue: Leutze at the Metropolitan Fair and the Critical Legacy

In 1864, Marshall O. Roberts, the owner of Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware (fig. 7), seized the opportunity for a grandiose public showing of the painting. Roberts was a member of the art commission for the Metropolitan Fair organized in support of the United States Sanitary Commission. Also on the committee were the former president of the American Art-Union, Abraham Cozzens, as well as a number of artists associated with the Art-Union, including Leutze, Huntington, Worthington Whittredge, and John F. Kensett, who was named chair of the committee. The Art-Union's legacy was even present among the ten women who were on the art commission, for their committee was chaired by Mrs. Jonathan Sturges, wife of a prominent patron during the days of the Art-Union. Cozzens and Roberts were part of the three-member Committee of Exhibition; they were joined by William Blodgett.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a complete list of committee members and works of art exhibited, see Catalogue of the Art Exhibition at the Metropolitan Fair in Aid of the U.S. Commission (New York, 1864). For a list of works sold at auction, see Catalogue of Paintings and other Works of Art, Presented To The Metropolitan Fair in Aid Of The U.S. Sanitary Commission, To Be Sold At Auction (New York, 1864). At the Great Central Fair in Philadelphia, a similar pattern of power-sharing between patrons and artists took place. Joseph Harrison, Jr., was in charge of the Fine Arts Committee. Two other important antebellum collectors on the committee were John H. Towne and Henry C. Carey, brother of Edward Carey. Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Towne served on the Ladies' Committee. Prominent Philadelphia artists on the Committee were Thomas Moran, Christian Schussele, and John Sartain.

The Metropolitan Fair brought together the cultural forces we discussed in Part I. On one side were collectors, patrons, and artists, whose aesthetic preferences represented the legacy of the American Art-Union; on the other, stood a group of critics eager to topple their cultural authority. By making Leutze's monumental Washington the centerpiece of an exhibition that comprised a total of 360 works, Roberts drew the critics' attention not only to this work but also to himself.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition became an opportunity for the critic Clarence Cook to stake out his critical position. Although he included other painters in his critique of the Metropolitan Exhibition, Leutze epitomized for Cook the false standards of "high art" promoted by the exhibition organizers:

We presume that a desire to have some striking picture with a subject that should appeal to our patriotism, in the most conspicuous place in the gallery, prompted the Art Committee to hang Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" in the commanding position it occupies, covering, as it does, the entire north end of the

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Leutze was represented by works mostly in Philadelphia collections. He was outnumbered by Peter Rothermel who had a total of eighteen works in the exhibition. See Catalogue of Paintings, Drawings, Statuary, etc. of the Art Department in the Philadelphia Great Central Fair (Philadelphia, 1864).

<sup>2</sup>Mathew Brady, who was a member of the committee, took several photos of the main gallery and edited them in book form. See Recollections of the Art Exhibition, Metropolitan Fair, New York, April 1864 (New York, 1864). A copy is in the Worthington Whittredge Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.



room. On several grounds, we should have been glad to see it differently placed. We dislike, exceedingly, the spirit in which the subject is treated, the arrangement of the figures and the style of the painting; and we should rejoice if the popular verdict, on seeing the picture again, after its long seclusion, should prove that the day is passing away when a production so essentially commonplace, not to say vulgar, can be elevated to the rank of a masterpiece.<sup>3</sup>

The Metropolitan Exhibition became a crucial event in the cultural contest over historical art and Washington Crossing the Delaware a symbol of that struggle. Making himself the champion of "popular verdict," Cook blew the trumpet for a final call to arms against Leutze and the "false" style of history painting that he represented; it was also an attack on Roberts and other collectors who advertised the painting as a masterpiece. By describing Washington Crossing the Delaware as "vulgar," Cook negated any claim Leutze and his patrons might make for the contested category of "high art." Most critics also denied the picture any merits as a didactic or moral lesson. When another Leutze painting, The Triumph of the Cross (1865, location unknown) -- which depicted Isabella and Ferdinand observing a Christian procession in front of the Alhambra as Moors seek refuge from the cross -- was exhibited at the Artists' Fund Society in New York in 1865, a critic for The Nation commented: "It is as unreal and theoretical as 'Washington Crossing

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<sup>3</sup>"The Exhibition of Pictures at the Metropolitan Fair," New York Daily Tribune 23 (April 9, 1864), 12.

the Delaware.' It is absurdly false in an historical regard . . . It is as incapable of teaching anybody anything or of giving a moment's pleasure as the worst of the Capitol pictures."<sup>4</sup>

As one would expect, the New Path largely echoed Cook's harsh critique of Leutze's contribution to the Metropolitan Fair. In its review of the same exhibition the Round Table critic (Eugene Benson?) simply dismissed Washington Crossing the Delaware as "pretentious and commonplace" and went into a mixed review of the artist's Venetian scene Belated Maskers (ca. 1860, location unknown).<sup>5</sup> The Round Table reserved its harshest language for the year 1865 when it reviewed Leutze's Triumph of the Cross at the Artists' Fund Society. The article coupled its critique of Leutze with that of his patron Roberts. "As for Mr. Leutze, we are almost ready to despair when we see such an utterly execrable piece of scene-painting as this 'Triumph of the Cross' not only bought by a person of considerable reputation for good taste, but actually put in the most prominent place in their gallery by a society of artists [Artists' Fund Society], and we need cite no other case than this in proof of the truth of our assertion, that American art has reached its lowest point." The conflict between critics, patrons, and artists was coming to a kind of denouement. Leutze was the symbol of bad taste that had to be

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<sup>4</sup>"The Sixth Annual Exhibition of the Artists' Fund Society of New York," The Nation 1 (November 16, 1865), 631. My description of the painting is based on the account in this article.

<sup>5</sup>See "Our Artists and Their Critics," New Path 2 (May 1864), 4-5. In reference to Cook's scathing articles in the Tribune, the New Path critic disingenuously stated that "we read these notices, not knowing and hardly able to guess who the author of them might be" (4). "Pictures at the Metropolitan Fair," Round Table 1 (16 April, 1864), 281.

erased. Leutze, the article went on, "has crammed himself with a little cheap, showy learning, that amazes common people, and amuses the instructed; but he was always what he is now, a clap-trap scene painter, without the power, as without the will, to move a single honest heart or stir any but the shallowest nature to its depths." What motivated this desire to break into such a tirade, to verbally "exorcise" Leutze? The following paragraph from the same article provides further clues:

Yet, up to this time, he has gone on conquering; getting commissions from Congress and from wealthy citizens, slapping off great daubs, miscalled "historical pictures," with a facility that seemed to have no limit, and saluted on every fresh achievement with more and more fulsome praises, and more and more lavish rewards. It would really seem, however, as if such a picture as this "Triumph of the Cross" might open a few eyes, and reveal the true character of the high art we have been worshiping so long and so blindly.<sup>6</sup>

In the combined assault of these various critics there emerged a similar message: Leutze and the support system that had touted him as the official painter of grand themes presented a sham form of cultural authority. This illegitimate cultural power, so the critics agreed, was epitomized in the collusion of interest between Roberts and Leutze,

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<sup>6</sup>"The Artists' Fund Society. Sixth Annual Exhibition." Round Table 2 (9 December, 1865), 221.

and, in the case of Westward the Course of Empire (fig. 10), between the government and Leutze. Rhetorically, the critics made "history painting" a code word for the false precepts of "high art."

An exchange of words in the pages of the Independent shortly after Leutze's death added to the dismantling of Leutze's reputation as a monumental history painter. The article which initiated this exchange asserted that Leutze lacked "anything like an engrossing theory or idea of his own." Leutze, it seemed, had completely failed to win an audience for his pictorial design of universal history. To the critic, Leutze simply represented a phase of immaturity in American taste:

His historical pictures were very captivating to our inexperienced eyes; they always presented to us a well-dressed company of ladies and gentlemen, posed decorously in masquerade. The marble floors; the quaint furniture; the gorgeous dresses -- the knights in green doublets, the ladies in crimson robes, and the pages in striped trowsers; the steel armor and the latticed windows -- all had a peculiar fascination for our untraveled eyes, and fully satisfied our longings for the romance of the mediaeval ages, of which we have no remnants among us.<sup>7</sup>

No longer did critics distinguish between Leutze's more domestic history

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<sup>7</sup>"Emanuel Leutze," Independent 20 (July 30, 1868), 4.

paintings, which the above quotation described, and his monumental works. Leutze, so the critic argued, rose to fame by taking advantage of American artistic naiveté and a misguided desire for a past. Two weeks later the Independent published a defense of Leutze by the painter William Beard but followed it by an editorial which reiterated and elaborated its first article. In its response to Beard the Independent continued its invective against Washington Crossing the Delaware:

It is seen to much better advantage when reduced to the size of a bank-note than when covering an entire wall in Mr. Roberts's gallery. It would appear excellently well as an illustration in *Harper's Weekly*, or as an ornament on the side of a locomotive, or as a paper-hanging in a country tavern; but, judged as a commanding work of art, it is great only in its size, and interesting only in its subject.<sup>8</sup>

The all-out attack on Leutze in the wake of the Metropolitan Fair had a damaging effect on his reputation and on the critical estimation of American history painting in general. The negative reception received further support in an account by the early twentieth-century art historian Samuel Isham. Isham's chapter on "Figure and Portrait Painting before the Civil War" in his The History of American Painting (1905) amounted

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<sup>8</sup>"Mr. Beard on Mr. Leutze," Independent 20 (August 13, 1868), 4.

to an elaborate obituary for history painting. He referred to the works of Daniel Huntington as corresponding "with the lowest ebb of taste in the country, when thought was most platitudinous and when conception of real distinction in art was smallest." Leutze, whom he called "a sort of Teutonic Paul Delaroche," represented to Isham "the culmination of a certain type of historical painting in America . . . Pictures like his are still produced in Germany and, with modifications for national taste, everywhere in Europe, but they have practically ceased here," because "their execution demanded a training that was not to be had in America."<sup>9</sup> Isham officially declared all interest in Leutze's works dead. Americans, so his argument went, had shed Leutze's Teutonic influence and in the end their native taste prevailed. Writing at a time when the American art public was confronting European modernism, Isham provided something of a history lesson for his readers: in the history of American art the age of Leutze was a dark one.

Is our analysis of Leutze's work today necessarily predicated on a mountain of disparaging accounts? If one follows Barbara Groseclose's argument, the negative campaign against Leutze by American critics would seem to result from a misunderstanding of his true intentions. According to Groseclose, Leutze was an ardent believer in freedom and his major works were directed toward a German bourgeois

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<sup>9</sup>Samuel Isham with supplemental chapters by Royal Cortissoz, The History of American Painting (New York, 1927), 285, 291, 296.

audience struggling to liberate itself from the forces of repression.<sup>10</sup> I do not want to dismiss the German connections that Groseclose's research has established. But much of my analysis shows that Leutze's work, by generating critical debates over as well as popular interest in history painting, functioned as a touchstone for the various constituencies that contested and made up the art public in the United States. Moreover, Groseclose's attempt to narrow Leutze's audience to one nationality seems to be rather limiting, for it assumes that national loyalty somehow transcended the push and pull of different (trans-national) markets.

As William Truettner has demonstrated in various publications on Leutze and other history painters, a web of historical meanings complicates our effort at understanding mid-nineteenth-century history paintings. In writing about Leutze's The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortez and his Troops (fig. 11), William Truettner has shown how one painting has remained an "enigma to critics of Leutze's time and . . . continues to confuse us today."<sup>11</sup> Truettner offers a perceptive reading of one history painting that has been the catalyst for debate ever since it was first exhibited in the rooms of the American Art-Union in 1848.

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<sup>10</sup>See Barbara S. Groseclose, Emanuel Leutze, 1816-1868: Freedom Is the Only King, Exhibition Catalogue (Washington, D.C., 1975), especially 29-47; and Groseclose, "Washington Crossing the Delaware: The Political Context," The American Art Journal 7 (November 1975), 70-78.

<sup>11</sup>"Storming the Teocalli--Again Or, Further Thoughts on Reading History Paintings," American Art 9 (Fall 1995), 86.

I agree with Truettner's main points: history paintings recreated the past to make sense of the present, painters and their audiences sought a "usable past" that was adaptable to current ideological needs, and, as I shall discuss, Storming of the Teocalli violated the cultural codes of historical myth-making. Once a history painting had lost its immediate function as a mediator between past and present, one could argue, it lost its value and was bound to become either insignificant or a liability. In light of the evidence that I presented in Part I this would explain why different constituencies (patrons, collectors, critics) gradually lost interest in history paintings and favored more domesticated art forms. Yet this explanation seems to be an unsatisfactory answer to a more complex question that vexes us in this chapter: How did Emanuel Leutze, a major painter who was courted by America's wealthiest patrons and by high-ranking government officials, become a representative of a "dark age" in American painting?

### **Leutze's Beginnings: "Fancy Subjects"**

In Haphazard Personalities, a book of reminiscences of artists he knew personally, the essayist and amateur landscape artist Charles Lanman referred to Leutze as "a perfect war horse of a painter."<sup>12</sup> The statement captured much of Leutze's reputation as it emerged during his life-time and was turned into art historical lore after his death in 1868, leading up to Isham's "Teutonic Delaroche." Lanman finished his account of Leutze with

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<sup>12</sup>Haphazard Personalities: Chiefly of Noted Americans (New York, 1886), 178. Lanman attributed the statement to the painter William Sidney Mount.



two examples of the artist's physical "courage and endurance." In one incident Leutze climbed up "one of the highest mountains in Switzerland" in one day and without a guide; on another occasion he "recklessly jumped into the water" of the Rhine after missing a boat, and the current swept him downstream for five miles until he regained the boat which had been delayed by an accident.<sup>13</sup> Leutze had assumed an image that was perfectly fitting for the creator of such monumental history paintings as Washington Crossing the Delaware and Washington Rallying His Troops at the Battle of Monmouth (fig. 12). How did Leutze achieve such larger-than-life stature? How did he advance to becoming the premier monumental history painter in the United States during his lifetime?

From the various accounts of his early career we know that Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze was nine years old when he moved with his parents to Philadelphia from Schwäbisch-Gmünd, Germany, in 1825.<sup>14</sup> His father was an artisan who died when Emanuel was in his teens. Political persecution may have been one of the reasons Leutze's father had left his native Württemberg. But economic stagnation combined with lack of political freedom may have been motivation enough for the Leutzes to join one of

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<sup>13</sup>Haphazard Personalities, 258-259.

<sup>14</sup>The most comprehensive source of information is still Raymond Stehle, The Life and Works of Emanuel Leutze (Washington, D.C., 1972). For Leutze's early career see especially Chs. 1 and 2. In addition I consulted Groseclose, Emanuel Leutze, 1816-1868: Freedom Is the Only King, Chs. 1-4, and Charles G. Leland, "E.G. Leutze," Sartain's Union Magazine 9 (December 1851), 420-421.

the early waves of nineteenth-century German emigration to the United States. Young Emanuel Leutze contributed to the family-income by painting the backs of chairs and an occasional portrait. Around 1834, he enrolled in the art studio of John Rubens Smith, beginning formal training to become a professional painter. In 1836 he exhibited at the second Artist's Fund Exhibition and was immediately given membership in that organization.<sup>15</sup> What followed were a few years of itineration and thwarted effort, including a commission to paint famous statesmen to be engraved for the publication of Longacre and Herring's National Gallery of Distinguished Americans, a project that folded during the panic of 1837. After working as an itinerant portrait painter in the Fredericksburg, Virginia, area for a while, he was back in Philadelphia at the end of the decade. Sometime during the year 1840 Joseph Sill and Edward Carey decided to sponsor his studies in Europe.

The subjects of his early works other than portraiture were, as Barbara Groseclose puts it, "quasi-religious, quasi-literary topics that tend toward, but do not arrive at, history painting."<sup>16</sup> Leutze's contemporaries used the term "fancy subjects" to describe such

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<sup>15</sup>On May 25, 1836, Leutze was nominated as candidate for membership and unanimously elected. Among the Society's Honorary Amateur Members were Henry Carey, Edward Carey, and John Towne from Philadelphia, Robert Gilmor from Baltimore, Philip Hone from New York, and Nicholas Longworth from Cincinnati. Joseph Sill was a Life Subscriber. The Society also had a very distinguished list of Honorary Professional Members. See Artists' Fund Society Minute Books, 1835-43, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

<sup>16</sup>Groseclose, Freedom Is the Only King, 16.

pictures. In his biographical sketch in Sartain's Union Magazine, Leland made a distinction between Leutze's very early work from before 1836 ("fancy subjects") and of the kind of work he exhibited after his return to Philadelphia in 1839 described as "in the style known to European artists as *genre painting*." Leland ranked some of Leutze's portraits of that period as "valuable as fancy pieces, independent of the merit which they possessed as likenesses." He concluded that Leutze's art produced for the Philadelphia art public before his departure for Europe showed "indications of poetic Art."<sup>17</sup>

Some of the works that are today lost and that we only know through contemporary descriptions indicate the nature of Leutze's artistic beginnings. For Edward Carey, his principal Philadelphia patron, he painted Child and Lute (ca. 1836, location unknown) which, according to Sartain's, represented "a beautiful female . . . holding a lute before a young child, whose fingers have just drawn from the instrument its mysterious notes; while the entire attitude and expression are wonderfully indicative of surprise as at a new discovery." The second "beautiful little picture" that Leutze painted for Carey was The Poet's Dream (1840, Museum of American Art, Philadelphia).<sup>18</sup> Leutze's fancy pieces showed his talent for grand figural composition. In a series of articles which it ran through May and July of 1841, the Philadelphia Saturday Courier reviewed Leutze's contributions to the Artists' Fund Society, referring to them as

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<sup>17</sup>Leland, "E.G. Leutze," 421.

<sup>18</sup>Leland, "E.G. Leutze," 21.

"pictures of the cabinet order." In discussing a small painting entitled Madonna (ca. 1840, location unknown), the critic concluded: "If Mr. Leutze had done nothing else, this would prove that he has genuine culture to place him upon almost any position to which he may aspire."<sup>19</sup>

While he was at the Düsseldorf Academy, first enrolled as a history painter in Johann Wilhelm Schirmer's class and then as an independent student under Carl Friedrich Lessing, Leutze still supplied his Philadelphia constituency with a number of literary and fancy subjects. According to Joseph Sill's diary, these included The Return ("a fine Fancy Picture," ca. 1840, location unknown) for the Artists' Fund Exhibition and a scene from Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" for the collector Joseph Ingersoll. An earlier portrait, entitled Melanie (ca. 1840, location unknown), was engraved by John Sartain for the Artists and Amateurs Association, the precursor of the Philadelphia Art Union.<sup>20</sup>

How exactly Leutze's reputation spread to New York is difficult to determine, but as early as November 25, 1842, Sill paid a visit to Carey's house to see Leutze's Raleigh Parting from his Wife (1842, location unknown), painted for Abraham Cozzens of New York.<sup>21</sup> Of the \$1,000 that Carey sent to Düsseldorf in 1843 was \$400 paid by the Apollo Association of New York for Columbus in Chains (1842, Collection Richard

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<sup>19</sup>"The Picture Saloon: Gems of the Gallery," Philadelphia Saturday Courier 2 (May 8 and July 3, 1841), 4.

<sup>20</sup>Sill Diaries. See entries for April 27 and August 23, 1841, and January 23, 1843.

<sup>21</sup>Sill Diaries. November 25, 1842.

Manoogian).<sup>22</sup> This painting was also exhibited at the National Academy of Design that year. With these two paintings Leutze announced to his American audience that he was now pursuing serious historical subjects. The Raleigh and Columbus paintings foreshadowed a specific approach to history painting that critics came to identify with Leutze: an abundance of meticulous detail in costumes and other accessories and a concentration of action into one particular moment of human drama (here in the lives of two famous explorers) that bordered on the melodramatic. The overall effect was highly theatrical. Leutze thus displayed his mastery of the predominant mode of romantic history painting and soon overshadowed all other American competitors. Within the next few years, Leutze became something of a flag-ship artist for the American Art-Union and broadened his base of private patronage in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, and beyond.

### **History Painting, Race, and Manifest Destiny**

By 1849, when he shipped The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortez and His Troops (fig. 11) to New York, Leutze already had a distinguished career. He had studied in Düsseldorf with Wilhelm von Schadow, Schirmer, and Lessing, had visited Munich where he studied works by Wilhelm von Kaulbach, Peter von Cornelius, and Karl Theodor von Piloty, had worked in Venice and Rome, and was now teaching at the

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., May 9, 1843.

Düsseldorf Academy. The painting had been commissioned around 1846 by Amos Binney, a Boston businessman, scientist, and trustee of the Boston Athenaeum, where Binney directly interacted with William H. Prescott, author of The History of the Conquest of Mexico (1843). Although no concrete evidence exists, it is quite conceivable that at some level Leutze and Binney (and perhaps Prescott) collaborated in determining the topic and perhaps outcome of the commission.<sup>23</sup> Binney, who died in 1847, was unable to see the painting completed. In the Art-Union Gallery catalogue it was listed as owned by Mrs. Amos Binney. In the New York press, the painting was advertised as "one of the leading attractions of the gallery."<sup>24</sup>

Loosely based on Prescott's description, Leutze chose to represent the first of two attempts by the Spanish conquistador and his troops to rout the Aztecs in their capital. Master of climactic action that he was, Leutze focused on a moment in the battle when Spaniards and Aztecs were locked in a vicious deadly combat on top of the great pyramid, the teocalli. Reminiscent of revolutionary history paintings by John Trumbull and John Singleton Copley, the two war parties converge in a central group. In Trumbull's Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill (fig. 3), for instance, an aide to Warren and a British officer simultaneously clasp a bayonet and prevent the

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<sup>23</sup>See William Truettner, "Storming the Teocalli--Again," especially pp. 59 and 87, and notes 3 and 38.

<sup>24</sup>"The Paintings on Exhibition at the Art-Union," The Literary World (September 8, 1849), 204.

British soldier from plunging it into the dying general. Trumbull thus concentrated on a moment of noble action that distinguished two foes as equally endowed with christian mercifulness.<sup>25</sup> In the Storming of the Teocalli, however, the central group is interlocked in a merciless exchange of deadly force. The foremost Indian warrior has buried his spear into a falling Spaniard, at the same time swinging his battle-club at another Spaniard whose knife pierces the warrior's heart. Behind these combatants the two main warriors of each respective party are poised to meet one another -- the Spaniard distinguished by his black uniform and massive armor, the Aztec by his elaborate head-dress, jewelry, and white toga. To further contrast Leutze's romantic battle scene with a neoclassical model: Trumbull's diagonal composition of war action opens up into the central pietà of the dying Warren and his mourners; Storming of the Teocalli overwhelms the viewer with a swelling and ebbing wave of destruction, most massively concentrated around the central temple entrance and spilling over sideways, downwards, and upwards where Spaniards wave their flag, mangle children, and Aztec women pray to their idol. The procession of death and sorrow winds its way through billows of smoke and is accompanied by the frantic drum beat of an Aztec drummer standing at the edge of the central platform.

Ron Tyler has argued that Leutze intended Storming of the Teocalli as a pacifist

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<sup>25</sup>For a detailed analysis of the painting, see Patricia M. Burnham, "John Trumbull, Historian: The Case of the Battle of Bunker's Hill," in Redefining American History Painting, 37-53.

statement, especially against the background of the American invasion of Mexico.<sup>26</sup> But even if this was true, the painting's very sensationalism, its "spectacle," would have undermined that message. In his recent article on the painting, William Truettner questions a number of critical responses to the Storming of the Teocalli that came out in response to the The West as America exhibition. Truettner takes issue with what he calls the "Aztecs-as-victims" position. He cites several reasons why such a reading is problematic and historically inaccurate: Leutze had too many ties with Art-Union patrons who were no pacifists and no friends of the "Mexicans and Indians in the newly conquered territories;" he was too much a product of his time to escape racial stereotyping; and the military deadlock of the scene itself seems to suggest no moral superiority of either Aztecs or Spanish. Such a reading would be supported by Reginald Horsman's study on Race and Manifest Destiny which reminds us that while Democrats and Whigs were split over the issue of territorial expansion into Mexico, both based their arguments on the racial ideology of Anglo-Saxon superiority.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, moral intelligibility, or "absence of moral advantage," as Truettner puts it, explains the mixed reception of the painting by contemporary critics.<sup>28</sup> The Bulletin of

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<sup>26</sup>See Ron Tyler, "Historic Reportage and Artistic License: Prints and Paintings of the Mexican War," in Picturing History: American Painting 1770-1930, 114.

<sup>27</sup>"Storming the Teocalli--Again," 77. See Reginald Horsman, Race and Manifest Design: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London), especially Chapter 11, 208-228.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 86.



the American Art-Union was full of praise for Leutze's technical mastery in unifying Prescott's narrative into one composition. But the reviewer took exception to the "subject," which "transcends those limits in the representation of human passions, beyond which Art should never trespass." Older paintings of the "Murders of Innocents and Martyrdoms of the Saints" had at least made use of "Scriptural association or the introduction of several redeeming features which softened the horror of the scene," (as Trumbull did in Death of Warren), but in The Storming of the Teocalli "nothing mitigates the terrible ferocity of the action."<sup>29</sup>

The Literary World, on the other hand, was able to extract a historical lesson from the painting, although it was not a very uplifting one: "It is a great historic consummation. It is not only the fierce fight between desperate foes, but the final struggle of the two races--the decisive death-grapple of the savage and the civilized man--the victory of the civilized over the savage, with all its immense results, which we have before us on the canvas." The reviewer concluded that the painting was ultimately not satisfying and stated as one reason: "Beyond a certain point in the delineation of the terrible, nothing is gained by the accumulation of horrors. The work seems to us to be weakened in its moral power by the over tension of all its forces in one direction."<sup>30</sup> The writer for the Literary World was struggling for words to articulate his discomfort. Such

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<sup>29</sup>"The Gallery--No. 3," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (July 1849), 6-8.

<sup>30</sup>"The Paintings on Exhibition at the Art-Union," 204.

confusion highlights, I believe, an inability to fully come to terms with an excess of what he called 'moral power.' (Perhaps this 'moral power' can be translated into what Bryan Wolf in his discussion of the painting calls "Historical Inevitability.")<sup>31</sup> Leutze encapsulated in one "horrible" picture what took Prescott several books to write. Whatever the allegorical subtext (gender, race, religion) to Leutze's rendition, it portrayed the confrontation between Spaniards and Aztecs in its historical inevitability, a senseless massacre without moral winner.

It is difficult to conceive of this bloodshed as a "sentimentalized drama," as Wolf suggests. In Wolf's description "groups of women flee marauding soldiers, bare-breasted mothers desperately defend their children, and babies die in the name of war and conquest."<sup>32</sup> But how can the destruction of the family be at stake, if the Aztec women are associated with savagery, human sacrifice, and idolatry? Leutze's romantic 'historic consummation' came without a hint of sentimentality. It was the absence of domesticity and the cold illustration of war that transcended the conventions of dramatizing history in art and made this painting so incomprehensible to its audience. Leutze was indeed showing the muscles of a "war-horse," a point that did not elude James Jackson Jarves when he wrote of The Storming of the Teocalli in 1855:

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<sup>31</sup>Bryan J. Wolf, "How the West Was Hung, Or, *When I Hear the Word 'Culture' I Take Out My Checkbook*," American Quarterly 44, 3 (September 1992), 423.

<sup>32</sup>"How the West Was Hung," 423.

We have all that is horrible in battle without the spirit that redeems the struggle. Convulsed flesh and streaming gore are given with shuddering fidelity, but the sublimity of human strife in the repose of anguish too deep for utterance, the aroused passions concentrated into one desperate *coming* life-effort for all that makes earth dear, or subdued by the exhaustion of freedom's last futile blow, are wanting. Pictorial is unfortunately as common as verbal rant. Exaggeration of physical action is mistaken for the quiet of deep mental emotion.<sup>33</sup>

Jarves was reminding his readers of an aesthetic principle which Reynolds and others had expressed much earlier: battle scenes were not suitable subjects for truly historical art. Jarves' advice pointed to a larger problem which painters of American history faced in painting any type of conflict, including the recent Mexican-American War. One pictorial solution was to allegorize the present through selected images of the past. As William Truettner argued in two earlier essays, many history paintings produced between 1840 and 1860, scenes of discovery, conquest (see Storming of the Teocalli), and settlement, were inextricably linked to the era of westward expansion.<sup>34</sup> Episodes from the lives of Columbus, De Soto, Cortez, Henry Hudson, Daniel Boone, and even

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<sup>33</sup>James Jackson Jarves, Art-Hints (New York, 1855), 290.

<sup>34</sup>See his "Prelude to Expansion: Repainting the Past," in The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, William Truettner, ed., Exhibition Catalogue (Washington, D.C., 1991), 55-95; and "The Art of History: American Exploration and Discovery Scenes, 1840-1860," The American Art Journal (Winter 1982), 4-31.

Washington (a more problematic expansionist hero, as I shall discuss) provided pictorial evidence for the idea that the march of Anglo-Saxon civilization was predestined. The Storming of the Teocalli, however, as Truettner correctly points out, posed more of a pictorial problem than a solution for Eastern audiences hungry for lessons from the past.

While Leutze exhibited at the American Art-Union such stirring scenes, he continued to produce historical paintings that were far more subdued and domesticated. In November 1849, the Bulletin of the American Art-Union reported that visitors could see two different examples of Leutze's "striking . . . versatility" -- The Storming of the Teocalli (here referred to as "Mexican Battle Scene") and in an adjacent gallery his Attainder of Strafford (1849, location unknown). "The one is a representation of confused, vigorous, all-pervading Action -- the other of deep, silent concentrated Thought." Charles I is represented in a moment of emotional agony. He is about to sign a document that would lead to the arrest and subsequent execution of his friend Strafford who refused to swear loyalty to the king in Parliament. The king is in a private room, surrounded by and torn between his wife ("traces of grief in her face") and the Parliamentary representative behind his chair (with "iron inflexibility"). In contrast to its mixed reception of Storming of the Teocalli ("confused" and "vigorous") the Bulletin was unequivocal in its support of The Attainder of Strafford which it illustrated in the same November edition. The painting literally brought history to life: "You may almost hear him [Charles] breathing through his nostrils, as he sits with compressed lips and wrinkled brows." Yet this dramatic moment of deliberation had significant historical

consequences: "One seems to read the whole history of the English Revolution in these two figures. It is a pictorial abstract of the entire struggle."<sup>35</sup> Leutze was thus most successful when he pleased his audience in two areas: bringing historical characters and details to life and realizing the 'pictorial abstract' of a historical conflict.

From the reviews of these two paintings we can develop a partial answer to the question: what were the criteria with which nineteenth-century viewers judged a Leutze painting? What, to use Bryan Wolf's term, made a history painting a "transparent form of seeing?"<sup>36</sup> First, the assemblage of facts (architecture, costume, body language) had to be correct by standards of popular taste; any errors on this end could seriously damage a painting's chances for success. Second, the characters had to come alive, or the picture discredited itself as a tableau vivant, as mere stage setting. Third, the painting had to imply a historical program, a moral roadmap, or it was accused of unintelligibility or even moral nihilism.

Perhaps no other group of historical paintings suited the taste of nineteenth-century viewers more than those of English and Scottish subjects. One explanation for the ubiquity of representations of the lives of Lady Jane Grey and other British heroines in American art collections was the popularity of *le style troubadour*.<sup>37</sup> The *style*

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<sup>35</sup>"The Gallery--No. 5," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (November 1849), 15-16.

<sup>36</sup>See "How the West Was Hung," 420.

<sup>37</sup>According to Wendy Greenhouse, American artists and viewers would have known the *style troubadour* through the works of David Wilkie, Paul Delaroche, and Charles Leslie. They were "small-scale, highly detailed paintings of scenes from the private lives

*troubadour* was a type of figure painting that did not consume a painter's time and labor as much as the production of a *grande machine* did. Yet it was still historical and allowed the painter to display his skill at painting costumes and characters accurately. Applied to English history, it provided American audiences with a fictive lineage, a remote, medieval past. Americans could thus indulge in historical fictions of royal women betrayed and beheaded, while reminding themselves that they lived in a better age. In their anecdotal character, the paintings of British history did not require extensive historical analysis. In addition, their small scale made them perfect parlor pieces. Any historical program, however, became subordinate to the splendor of costume and gothic interiors.

Greenhouse has attributed more than twenty paintings of Tudor and Stuart history to Leutze's brush. Remarkably, though, Leutze seems to have largely avoided execution scenes, perhaps because he considered them vulgar.<sup>38</sup> Leutze sought to convey historical

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of great figures from the past." She also refers to them as "domesticized recreations of . . . private moments from the lives of the famous." See Greenhouse, "The American Portrayal of Tudor and Stuart History, 1835-1865," 42-43, and note 66. See also Gabriel Weisberg and Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu, Redefining Genre: French and American Painting, 1850-1900, Exhibition Catalogue (Seattle, 1995), 25. In the introduction Weisberg credits the French painters Fleury Richard and Pierre Révoil with introducing *peinture troubadour* into French art. He cites as his reference Marie-Claude Chaudonneret, Fleury Richard et Pierre Révoil: La Peinture troubadour (Paris, 1980).

<sup>38</sup>See Greenhouse, 59. Stehle's annotated list of paintings mentions a work called Lady Jane Grey in Prison (1864). But as this title suggests, Leutze preferred a more contemplative scene over the more dramatic moment of Lady Jane Grey's execution. See Stehle, "Annotated List" in The Life and Works of Emanuel Leutze, 19.

significance through the portrayal of human emotions. Some of his most famous paintings of English history, including The Attainder of Strafford, John Knox Admonishing Mary Stuart (1845), and The Courtship of Ann Boleyn (1846) are domestic scenes that foreshadow and stand in causal relation to larger historical developments. But for a history painter of Leutze's aspirations the domesticating *style troubadour* offered limited possibilities.

As early as 1847, Leutze had worked out an ambitious historical design that appeared in excerpts in the Bulletin of September 1851.<sup>39</sup> The general tendency to go beyond the anecdotal in history that we discussed is confirmed in his statement

that a thorough poetical treatment of a picture required that the *anecdote* should not be so much the subject as merely the means of conveying some first clear idea, which is to be the inspiration of the picture -- that the artist as poet should first form the clear thought as the groundwork, and then adopt or create some anecdote from history or life, since painting can seldom or never be narrative but contemplative. Having arrived at this point I soon concluded that in history sufficient stuff could be found to express almost any idea, and determined to follow the historical branch of Art.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Henry Tuckerman published it in third-person form in Artist-Life, or Sketches of American Painters (New York, 1847), 176.

<sup>40</sup>"Return of Mr. Leutze," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (September 1851), 95.

Having laid out the groundwork of his method, Leutze proceeded to add specific ideological content to what he meant by 'stuff.' According to Leutze, a visit to his native Swabian Alps became a kind of epiphany. He found the "romantic ruins of what were once free cities . . . in which a few hardy, persevering burghers bade defiance to their *noble* oppressors." From here, he saw the "course of freedom" and the "love of liberty," almost vanquished in the old world, find "a new world for its home":

This course represented itself in pictures to my mind, forming a long cycle, from the first dawning of free institutions in the middle ages, to the reformation and revolution in England, the causes of emigration, including the discovery and settlement of America, the early protestation against tyranny, to the Revolution and Declaration of Independence.<sup>41</sup>

We can thus understand The Storming of the Teocalli and its incomprehensible barbarity as part of a historical cycle, another 'romantic ruin' in the 'course of freedom.' But Leutze's view of history was not cyclical like Thomas Cole's. Leutze's belief in historical progression through the dialectical struggle between tyranny and freedom was based on the concept of universal history.

In a general sense, nineteenth-century historians understood universal history as a

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<sup>41</sup>"Return of Mr. Leutze," 95-96.



form of world history, divided into three parts: Ancient, Middle, and Modern. This methodology was applied to the teaching of history in order to provide students with "a plan of classification . . . to arrange whatever historical knowledge [they] may afterwards acquire."<sup>42</sup> In a more philosophical sense, universal history entailed a secularized form of teleological thinking. In his Philosophy of History, Hegel distinguished between different methods of historical inquiry: original, reflective, and philosophical. Once a historian had passed through the level of empiricism, or original history, he or she entered the stage of reflective history which was subdivided into universal, pragmatic, critical, and fragmentary history. Philosophical history was the realm of metaphysical and speculative thought, the inquiry into the "ultimate purpose of the world," the *Endzweck* of all historical process.<sup>43</sup>

Although a direct influence of Hegel's system on Leutze is difficult to prove, the interest in universal history among a general public and among more specialized

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<sup>42</sup>Emma Willard, A System of Universal History, in Perspective (Hartford, 1835), iii. Willard's book was designed for schools and included a study plan for teachers. Another history book for schools was Thomas Keightley, Outlines of Universal History, Comprising a Concise History of the World (Philadelphia, 1831).

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, Hegel's Philosophy of History (Ithaca and London, 1974), 51. My discussion of Hegel's ideas is largely based on Wilkins' excellent summary of Hegel's introduction to The Philosophy of History. The first German edition of Geschichtsphilosophie (1837) was based on Hegel's lecture notes and on notes taken by students. The first standard English translation appeared in 1858. Contemporaneously with Hegel, French historians worked on the concept of universal history. See especially Jules Michelet, "Introduction à L'Histoire Universelle," in Précis de L'Histoire Moderne (Paris, 1827). The earliest English edition I was able to locate is M. [sic] Michelet, Modern History, with an introduction by A. Potter (Glasgow, 1848).

historians and philosophers must have left its traces on his mind as he was forming his concept of historical "cycle."<sup>44</sup> Leutze's programmatic statements came close to inventing the pictorial equivalent to Hegel's reflections over the *Endzweck* of history. I suspect, however, that Leutze ultimately received most of his inspiration from the Romantic historians, especially George Bancroft and William Prescott, who supplied his imagination with vivid material.<sup>45</sup>

History in Hegelian terms was a succession of events that superficially seemed accidental, but upon reflection revealed its rational and providential laws. The Storming of the Teocalli thus illustrated Cortez's course of destruction following the glorious discovery of the continent by the noble Columbus. Columbus was a more edifying hero to Leutze, for he devoted at least six paintings to the great discoverer.<sup>46</sup> Leutze showed his affinity with the romantic historians Bancroft, Motley, Parkman, and Prescott, as he

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<sup>44</sup>On the ideological conflation of universal history, cyclical history, and artistic eclecticism in nineteenth-century France, see Patricia Mainardi, Art and Politics of the Second Empire, 70-72. Mainardi argues that French artists learned about universal history largely through Victor Cousin's lectures in 1828. From the philosophers Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder, Cousin developed opposing concepts of decadence and progress in universal history.

<sup>45</sup>On the development of historical ideas and the historical profession in the United States, see Bert J. Loewenberg, American History in American Thought: Christopher Columbus to Henry Adams. (1972). According to Loewenberg, Bancroft's five volume A History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent (1834-1874) followed a Hegelian telos. Bancroft's historical narrative relied on three guiding principles: progress was a law of the universe, the theory of knowledge was based on Reason, and America's destiny was Democracy.

<sup>46</sup>Number based on Stehle's annotated list. See The Life and Works of Emanuel Leutze.

was searching for "representative men."<sup>47</sup> In the historical charisma of such men (rarely women) history offered glimpses of historical purpose. Columbus was to Leutze what the Bohemian fourteenth-century reformer Johann Huss was to his teacher Lessing: Columbus and Huss were heroic individuals who followed their ideals at the risk of persecution and death.<sup>48</sup> Such romantic fantasies of individual valor were complemented by racial ideologies that considered certain races collectively doomed to extinction. As Truettner has persuasively argued, American observers of Storming of the Teocalli could easily associate the Aztecs' fate with that of the Native Americans.<sup>49</sup> Both had traits of nobleness and savagery. The extinction of the Aztecs seemed to foreshadow that of

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<sup>47</sup>See David Levin, History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman (Stanford, California, 1959), Ch. 3, 49-73.

<sup>48</sup>For general discussions of the connections between Lessing's work and Leutze's Columbus series, see William H. Gerdts, "The Düsseldorf Connection," in Grand Illusions, 146-152, and Wend von Kalnein, "Einleitung," The Hudson and the Rhine: Die amerikanische Malerkolonie in Düsseldorf im 19. Jahrhundert, 12. Of the several Huss paintings by Lessing, Americans were most familiar with The Martyrdom of Huss which was exhibited at Boker's Düsseldorf Gallery. The painting was reviewed in many newspapers and journals. See, for instance, "Lessing's Martyrdom of Huss," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (April 1851), 9-10. The Bulletin praised the work as an outstanding example of contemporary history painting of "calm grandeur" (9) and an "exactness in detail which would have seemed pedantic and trivial to spectators" in the time of Raphael (10). In the same issue, the Bulletin quoted the Kölnische Zeitung which claimed that Leutze's Washington "'produces a grander, freer, more human state of feeling than the *Huss*'" (12). For a negative review, see "The Collection of Pictures By the Artists of Düsseldorf," The Crayon 3 (January 1856), 21-23. The critic attacked the painting as the embodiment of Düsseldorf style materialism and referred to it as "tableau vivant" (22).

<sup>49</sup>Whether or not Leutze intentionally conflated South and North American Indians, he provided his audience with visual clues by including North American artifacts. See "Storming the Teocalli--Again," 66-67.

Native Americans.

One of the main tropes of racial classification for romantic historians, as Levine has shown, was that of the "vanishing race." In Prescott's history not only were the Indians destined to vanish but also Moors and Jews. Prescott thus provided Leutze with the 'stuff' for another "vanishing race" picture.<sup>50</sup> In 1848, the American Art-Union had on its distribution list Leutze's The Mission of the Jews to Ferdinand and Isabella (1848, location unknown). The Bulletin provided the legend to the picture which it took directly from Prescott's book:

The negotiation was suddenly interrupted by the inquisitor general, Torquemada, who burst into the apartment of the palace, where the sovereigns were giving audience to the Jewish Deputy, and drawing forth a crucifix from beneath his mantle, held it up, exclaiming, 'Judas Iscariot sold his master for thirty pieces of silver. Your Highnesses would sell him anew for thirty thousand; here he is, take

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<sup>50</sup>See Levine, History as Romantic Art, Ch. 6, 126-159. Keightley began his Outlines of Universal History with a system of racial classification. In Chapter One he claimed: "It is to the Caucasian race that the history of the world must mainly confine itself, for with that race has originated almost all that ennobles and dignifies mankind." See Keightley, 2. On the scientific racialism that gave credence to the notion that Caucasians were destined to rule the world, see Horsman, Race and Manifest Destiny, especially 43-61 and 139-157. On Protestant American attitudes toward Mexicans during the 1840s, see also Thomas R. Hietala, Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America (Ithaca and London, 1985), 152-166. Hietala's focus is on "racist and ethnocentric biases among the Democrats" and how these biases undergirded the doctrine of manifest destiny (153).

him, and barter him away.' So saying, the frantic priest threw the crucifix on the table and left the apartment. --Prescott's *Ferdinand and Isabella*, Vol. II, p. 137.<sup>51</sup>

The fate of the Jews, according to Prescott, was sealed with their expulsion from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella. But this was also the "moral turning point in Spanish history," as Levine points out, for the expulsion story in Prescott's book followed "his description of Columbus' departure for America."<sup>52</sup> Leutze would have been aware of these historical connections and exploited them for their instructive as well as melodramatic potential. In the scenarios given by Prescott and Leutze, both Jews and Aztecs were facing imminent expulsion or extinction. And although Prescott and Leutze chose to represent these groups in the most stereotypical form ("bartering" Jews and "child-sacrificing" Aztecs), they also tried to persuade their audience that such lapses into stereotypical behavior were "excusable," since both groups were victimized by the Spanish inquisition and conquistadors.

Both England and Spain represented a medieval moral darkness, the historical

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<sup>51</sup>"Catalogue of Paintings," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (June 25, 1848). The first edition of Prescott's History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella was published in 1839. Leutze's painting had a precursor in a work called Die Trauernden Juden im Exil (1832) by the Düsseldorf artist Eduard Bendemann. Wend von Kalnein refers to this work as of "stille Trauer und Passivität" (in The Hudson and the Rhine, 11). In discussing the "Gallery of Düsseldorf Artists," the Bulletin mentioned "'The Jews in Exile,' by Bendemann" as one of "a higher class of works" that were not exhibited in New York. See Bulletin of the American Art-Union (June 1849), 13.

<sup>52</sup>Levine, 148.

backdrop against which Leutze could paint the final act of the unfolding of "freedom" on the American continent. One other painting from this decade served as a historical foreshadowing of the culmination of Leutze's "course of freedom" portrayed in his two monumental works Washington Crossing the Delaware and Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way. On commission for Edward Carey, who died before its completion, Leutze painted The Landing of the Northmen (also referred to as Norsemen, fig. 6) which some critics considered one of his greatest triumphs of that period, equal to his great Columbus paintings.<sup>53</sup> While most of Leutze's Columbus paintings portray the discoverer at various stages before and after his journey, Landing of the Northmen depicts Europeans actually setting foot on American soil.<sup>54</sup> The Northmen, in Leutze's historical narrative, were the true discoverers of the New World.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>See, for instance, "The Bazaar," The North American 7 (October 8, 1845), 2, and "The Picture Galleries," The North American 7 (October 27, 1845), 2. Leutze completed the painting while he was in Rome. After Edward Carey's death, the work was purchased by John Towne from Philadelphia. Sill went to see the painting shortly after it arrived at Towne's residence. His lengthy diary entry contained some criticism: "as a composition it is neither, in my opinion, imposing or agreeable; nor does it convey any grand ideas." See Joseph Sill Diaries, September 5, 1845. For a review of Landing of the Norsemen and other works in the Towne collection (including Leutze's Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox), see "Two American Pictures," National Intelligencer 34 (November 14, 1846).

<sup>54</sup>According to Stehle's annotated list, the one exception was Columbus First Landing in America (1863), which was exhibited at the Great Central Fair in 1864. See Stehle, The Life and Works of Emanuel Leutze, 7.

<sup>55</sup>Stehle suggests as a possible source the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries in Copenhagen, which began publication of its proceedings in 1837. See Stehle, "Annotated List," 25. The Library of Congress has a collection of writings bound in one book pertaining to the various pre-columbian journeys to America by Icelanders and

The painting completed a racial saga that Leutze could cobble together from Prescott and various other historical sources. Prescott and the other romantic historians subscribed to a racial theory that linked the origin of liberty with "Teutonic Germs." According to Levine, this genealogy led to the assumption that "Americans were descendants of a 'race' that had long been fated to carry liberty across the earth."<sup>56</sup> The Northmen were thus true harbingers of Teutonic blood. In Leutze's painting, they survived the arduous journey across the Atlantic in good spirit and health. One of them eagerly picks a bunch of grapes (perhaps an allusion to the mythic Vineland) while another carries his blonde maid on shore, ready to people the New World with Northern European offspring. The Landing of the Northmen thus complemented his other pictures of racial conflict. Race was central to Leutze's pictorial narrative of 'historical cycles.' In his cast of racial characters, Aztecs and Jews, although they deserved sympathy, were too weak to resist Spanish might. But the Spanish were morally on a downward spiral. In the script that Leutze was following, the ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon and other

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Scandinavians. The various documents in English, French, German, and Scandinavian languages all maintain that America was "discovered" at the end of the tenth century in two separate voyages by Biarne Heriulfson and Leif Ericson. See Charles Christian Rafn, Antiquitates Americanae (Copenhagen, 1845). Barbara Gaehtgens has linked Leutze's Northmen to the Anglo-Saxon chieftains Hengist and Horsa, but her evidence (she notes that the two chieftains appeared on an official seal for the United States designed by Thomas Jefferson in 1775) remains inconclusive. See Barbara Gaehtgens, "Fictions of Nationhood," in Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Heinz Ickstadt, eds., American Icons: Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art, (Chicago, c. 1992), 167-169.

<sup>56</sup>Levine, 75.

Northern races was predestined.

At the end of the decade, Leutze had a loyal following of American collectors and the support of the American Art-Union. But neither his patrons nor the critics expressed much enthusiasm for his grand historical program. They focussed on individual paintings and a narrower historical content. Now that he had broadened his range from domestic to epic themes, would Leutze continue to receive commissions for large historical works? His private patrons and the American Art-Union audience were familiar now with heroes struggling through history, embarking and disembarking, striving to discover and settle another continent, conquer another race. They had seen a cast of characters from English history, royalties and religious fanatics, intriguing, plotting, and victimizing innocent men and women. But how long would the urban bourgeoisie in New York and elsewhere continue to support Leutze's ambitious historical plan? Was Leutze not asking too much from them? What did his 'historical cycle' contribute to the lived experience of his American audience? Washington Crossing the Delaware was the *grande machine* that brought these question into relief.

### **The End of the "Grande Machine": Washington Crossing the Delaware**

Washington Crossing the Delaware was a timely picture. The exhibition of its second version (the first version was severely damaged by fire but was ultimately restored) at the Stuyvesant Institute in New York in 1851 coincided with the prevailing atmosphere of patriotism following the end of the Mexican-American War and the



Compromise of 1850 which temporarily eased the national divide over slavery. The American Art-Union had been promoting Leutze as a painter of great epic potential. The International Art-Union under Goupil, Vibert, & Co. acquired the painting and the rights to engrave it. Its value could only increase, as some private collectors were ambitiously adding large-scale history paintings to their private galleries. Washington Crossing the Delaware was subsequently bought by Marshall O. Roberts for the substantial sum of \$10,000.<sup>57</sup> David Leavitt from New York commissioned Leutze to paint Washington Rallying his Troops at the Battle of Monmouth (fig. 12) and another commission followed at the end of the decade: Washington at the Battle of Princeton (1859, location unknown) for William McDonald of Baltimore.

George Washington, so it seemed, was the ideal hero. The Washington hagiography which had ramifications on all levels of society, from the Washington Monument to the movement to preserve Mount Vernon, did not show a sign of ebbing. The famous crossing of the Delaware river from the Pennsylvania side to Trenton, New Jersey, followed by a highly successful surprise attack on the British army was considered one of Washington's greatest military achievements. Thomas Sully's painting of the event, Passage of the Delaware (1819, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), was a more static rendition than Leutze's romantic 'storm and stress' version. At the Stuyvesant

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<sup>57</sup>For a history of the two versions of Washington Crossing the Delaware, their ownership and exhibition, see Natalie Spassky, et al., American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vol 2 (New York, 1985), 13-14.

Institute and at its next venue, the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, Washington Crossing the Delaware attracted large crowds. But within the course of a decade and a half it and its companion piece Washington at the Battle of Monmouth became principal targets in the critical debate over history painting.

Early commentators were impressed by the painting's sheer size and its overwhelming visual impact. As the reviewer for The Albion stated, "You feel embued with the spirit, animated by its impulse, and flushed with its excitement, ere you have breathing time to break it up into groups or to scan its details."<sup>58</sup> Another reviewer described the painting's ability to immediately captivate the viewer and evoke the principal action: "It had that kind of historic interest which seemed to send a thrill through the system and to carry the mind back to the time when Washington, at the head of the Continental troops, worn down by want and sickness, and dispirited by the successes of the enemy, thought it necessary to make a daring attempt, to serve the great cause in which the future liberty of the country was involved."<sup>59</sup> In its September 1851 issue the Bulletin of the American Art-Union announced the completion of the painting and its purchase by Goupil (perhaps not too begrudgingly, for the AAU was going out of business). On this occasion the Bulletin reviewed Leutze's past achievements, especially those associated with the American Art-Union, but also noted: "He does not attempt the

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<sup>58</sup>"Washington Crossing the Delaware: By Leutze," The Albion 10 (November 1, 1851), 525.

<sup>59</sup>"Leutze's Painting," Georgetown Advocate 10 (April 6, 1852), 2.

highest class of subject, nor frequently enter into the loftiest regions of the imagination. He confines himself chiefly to the representation of the warring passions of our race--the loves and hates of human beings. In this walk he has been eminently successful."<sup>60</sup> In November, however, after having seen Washington Crossing the Delaware, the reviewer for the Bulletin had only unreserved praise. Like the other two reviewers quoted, this one was struck by the painting's visual power "at presenting at one view, the multitude of contemporaneous circumstances," which made it superior to any literary account:

How tame the descriptions in Marshall and other writers appear beside this canvas, so full of life and motion! How much more powerful and lasting will be the impression made by even a brief inspection of it than by a careful reading of any treatise of history! It gives a body and substance to our ideas; and hereafter, when we think of Washington, in connection with the passage of the Delaware, the image in our minds will be complete and glowing, and not that vague and confused one, which is all we should have gained from books.<sup>61</sup>

Leutze could not have wished for a better endorsement, for it said in so many words what he had stated as his artistic goal in the same journal: to paint an idea and not simply an

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<sup>60</sup>"Return of Mr. Leutze," Bulletin of the American Art Union (September, 1851), 96.

<sup>61</sup>"Leutze's Washington," Bulletin of the American Art-Union (November 1851), 131.

anecdote. The Bulletin, of course, was celebrating its own long-standing support of Leutze. It assigned him the greatest triumph that any history painter could possibly achieve, the ability to replace the history books. To many observers Leutze brought Washington alive.

But here also lay a problem. For Leutze's Washington forced the American public to face a vexing issue: what type of representative man was Washington? Why bring him back to life as a military leader on monumental scale? What Leutze's painting provoked was a renewed debate over what type of hero Washington really was. The American Whig Review faulted the painting for being too "melodramatic" and too much of a "tableaux vivant," but it also admitted that Leutze strove to capture "the complete idea of a hero." That idea, the author stated, "would demand no exaggeration of Washington's real character, for there was throughout his life such dignity and force, so modulated by the mildness of modest self-control, as never to suggest the slightest taint of bravado or rebellion." Leutze, the article concluded, fell short of meeting this idea.<sup>62</sup>

The critical success of a Washington representation not only depended on the hero's expression but also on the immediate setting. As Mark Thistlethwaite has pointed out, during the 1840s Washington had largely been represented as a humanized figure in such scenes as John Gadsby Chapman's Washington in His Youth (1841, location unknown). The same year that Leutze's painting arrived in the United States, Junius B.

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<sup>62</sup>"The American School of Art," American Whig Review 16 (August 1852), 143-144.

Stearns painted his Washington as a Farmer, at Mount Vernon (1851, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts). Rossiter and Mignot closed the decade with another domesticated rendition of Washington (Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon, fig. 9). And although it is possible that the American public was able to reconcile the two opposing sides of Washington, the heroic and the domestic, this contradiction put serious strains on the enthusiastic reception of Leutze's painting.<sup>63</sup>

The iconography of Washington as Cincinnatus had deep roots in the public perception of the 'father of his country'. Cincinnatus had left his plow when called upon to defend the Romans in battle. As general, Cincinnatus displayed great courage and military skill, but he returned to his plow as soon as he had fulfilled his patriotic duty. Beginning in the 1790s, Americans had adapted the Cincinnatus story to mythologize their leader as a peace-loving, industrious, but also domesticated hero. Washington's roots were at Mount Vernon, not the battle fields of Trenton, Monmouth, or Princeton.<sup>64</sup>

However, Washington's prototype in distant antiquity became overshadowed by

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<sup>63</sup>See Mark Thistlethwaite, The Image of George Washington, especially Chs. 2-4. In Thistlethwaite's analysis the various aspects of Washington imagery were reconciled by "the society's democratic spirit" (13). Thistlethwaite seems to oversimplify the complex set of responses which Leutze's Washington paintings elicited.

<sup>64</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the Cincinnatus myth and its iconography, see Garry Wills, Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment (New York, 1984). Although he does not address Leutze's painting, Wills discusses representations of Washington at Princeton by Charles Willson Peale and John Trumbull. In his discussion of these works and throughout his book Wills makes various references to the Napoleon iconography of David, Antoine-Jean Gros, and other French artists. See Wills, 189-190.

the great French leader of more recent memory, Napoleon Bonaparte. America's popular press was eager to dismiss the connection. The Literary World wrote in 1849 that "Washington has no resemblance to Napoleon. He was no despot."<sup>65</sup> But such denials only reinforced the comparison between the two statesmen. Especially two Napoleon pictures by David and Delaroche, which were exhibited in the United States and distributed as prints, became visible reminders of the comparison. A copy of David's Napoleon Crossing the Alps (1800, Musée National du Château, Malmaison) by Bass Otis travelled through the United States in the 1820s.<sup>66</sup> In 1848, only three years before the arrival of Washington Crossing the Delaware, Delaroche's Napoleon Crossing the Alps was exhibited at the National Academy of Design. Although Delaroche's Napoleon painting was not as extensively reviewed as Leutze's Washington, the reception was generally positive. Perhaps most instructive for a comparison with Leutze's painting were some of the merits of Napoleon Crossing the Alps that the reviewer for The Albion pointed out. According to this commentator Delaroche's was far more truthful than David's version of the same subject. The reviewer disparagingly referred to David's

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<sup>65</sup>"Varieties," Literary World 4 (February 3, 1849), 110. The Literary World was quoting from Guizot's Democracy in France. For a similar response, see "Lines--On the Statue of Washington in the Capitol," Southern Literary Messenger 2 (March 1836), 253. The poem referred to Washington as "A Perfect hero, free from all excess;\Above Napoleon, though he dazzled less."

<sup>66</sup>The copy of David's Napoleon was on exhibit at the American Academy of the Fine Arts in 1828; sometime in the late 1820s it travelled to the Peale Museum in Baltimore. See Carrie Reborá, "The American Academy of the Fine Arts, New York, 1802-1842," 83, and Lillian B. Miller, Patrons and Patriotism, 132.

rendition as an "allegory." Indeed, Napoleon "did not caper across the Pass of St. Bernard mounted on his prancing war-horse," as David depicted him. Delaroche was historically accurate by painting Napoleon "bestriding a rough and sorry mule." Napoleon was here portrayed as an everyman who "might be mistaken for any officer of his army," but he was still recognizable by his "immortal head" and "the unmistakable expression of that face." Moreover, the great achievement of Delaroche's Napoleon painting was its perfect balance between action and repose: "Calm and somewhat stern, full of deep thought, and high resolve, and concentrated energy, the expression of Napoleon's face is rather that of one abstractedly musing, than of one who is bending his attention to the difficulties and the dangers that beset him. In short . . . it will arrest the notice of the frivolous, and rivet that of the thoughtful beholder."<sup>67</sup>

Delaroche's picture thus established a certain standard of how to appropriately represent the statesman under extreme duress. Although Americans might have preferred to associate Washington with Cincinnatus, comparison with Napoleon became unavoidable. Nathaniel Parker Willis, art editor of the Home Journal, enthusiastically reported the arrival of Delaroche's painting. In a second article his admiration for Delaroche knew no bounds: "you feel as if the painter's pencil, like the wand of a conjuror, had opened a spirit-mirror of the Past, showing to your eye the ideal of Napoleon's most trying hour, as its soul-type was imprinted in transfiguration." Willis

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<sup>67</sup>"A New Picture by Paul Delaroche," The Albion 7 (October 14, 1848), 499. See also "Delaroche's Picture of Napoleon," Literary World 3 (October 21, 1848), 753.

concluded: "We want such a portrait of the soul of Washington."<sup>68</sup>

In one of the longest reviews of Washington Crossing the Delaware, the critic for the Richmond Whig agonized over the signs of Napoleonic temperament in Washington's features. He praised Leutze for rendering the head of Washington with "an air of majesty and command." The entire person of Washington he considered "truly heroic in every line and lineament. There is fixed resolution in every limb and feature . . . . There is then something very impressive in the contrast between this energetic but concentrated mien and that of the group below, where the sturdy pioneers of the icy flood, the blanketed sick soldiers, and the anxious look of officers, display emotions that disturb not the mind of the pilot then guiding his country's fortunes through dangers." But a few paragraphs later the Richmond Whig found fault with Leutze on the same issue:

Our national mind associates with Washington a majestic repose of character and person never disturbed under the most trying circumstances . . . . However excitable he might have been *in action*, Mr. Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" is rather too *theatrical* in character and position to harmonize with our notion of how he must have looked that moment of suspense, whether our general associations of him are too stoical or not. I have praised the fixed resolution rendered by the artist, but there is a want of repose, of expression to give dignity

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<sup>68</sup>"Editorial Letters," Home Journal (October 28, 1848), 2. See also "The Fine Arts. Delaroche's Napoleon." Home Journal (October 14, 1848), 2.



and grandeur to the noble figure . . . . His sense of power and of success should be more solemnly rendered in that majestic form and visage. In general expression there are more those of a mere *military* hero. We can imagine Napoleon looking at us, and perhaps Murat's excitable temperament might thus exhibit itself, but certainly not so the "Father of his Country."<sup>69</sup>

The issue of representing Washington "in action" presented a conceptual dilemma. On one hand, Leutze's Washington seemed to lack the repose that Delaroche had achieved in Napoleon Crossing the Alps. On the other hand, it would have taken much courage for any American critic to concede that Napoleon was actually a calmer and more stoic leader than Washington. Napoleon had to be cast as a negative example, "a mere *military* hero" like Leutze's Washington; the comparison with Murat, famous for his vainglory on and off the battlefield, was equally condemning. In any case, Leutze forced his American audience to accept an image of Washington which bore little or no resemblance to their cherished Cincinnatus, but which had much in common with

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<sup>69</sup>"From Our New York Correspondent," Richmond Whig 45 (November 7, 1851), 2. The reference to Murat was most likely to Joachim Murat (1767-1815), brother-in-law to Napoleon Bonaparte and a high-ranking military leader during the Napoleonic wars. Murat first exhibited the quickness of his temper as a fanatic Jacobin. From cavalry commander during the battle of Aboukir, Egypt, Murat steadily moved up the ranks in subsequent military campaigns such as in Spain and Russia, always displaying both flamboyance and courage. Napoleon rewarded him with the grand-duchy of Berg (1806) and the throne of Naples (1808). Murat was captured and executed by Austrian troops after he attempted to regain control of Naples.

Napoleon.

By 1868, the specter of Napoleon was a familiar reference. Or at least, so it seemed to the critic for the Independent from whose verbal attack on Washington Crossing the Delaware we quoted earlier:

It irresistibly calls to mind the French painter David's world-famous "Napoleon Crossing the Alps," in which the hero sits on a prancing charger, and is robed in a high-flying mantle, such as angels commonly wear on windy clouds: --a work which all Europe once admired, but at which all Europe now laughs. Mr. Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" received, in its day, the nation's verdict of approval; but as sure as truth is truth and art is art, the picture must sink into the class of ambitious failures and detected cheats.<sup>70</sup>

After the initial exhibition of Washington Crossing the Delaware, however, any associations with Napoleon could not diminish the enthusiasm among Leutze's patrons for representations of Washington. In 1853, in support of the New York Gallery of the Fine Arts, a group of patrons organized the so-called "Washington Exhibition" which featured Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware, Washington at Dorchester Heights (1852-53, Boston Public Library), Washington as the young Virginia Surveyor (n.d.,

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<sup>70</sup>"Mr Beard on Mr. Leutze," The Independent 20 (August 13, 1868), 4.

Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York) as well as Washington portraits by Gilbert Stuart, Pye, and Powers (portrait bust). Other pictures in the Washington Exhibition held at the former galleries of the American Art-Union were Leutze's Hester Prynne and Little Pearl (ca. 1853, location unknown), Leslie's Anne Page, Slender and Shallow (1825, location unknown), and Cole's Course of Empire (1833-1836, New-York Historical Society).<sup>71</sup>

The exhibition clearly carried the stamp of the American Art-Union. It also contained German, English, and Belgian works from the Düsseldorf Gallery. The organizers had thus assembled highlights from two principle collections: M.O.Roberts' and that of the New York Gallery of Fine Arts. These were supplemented by Boker's Düsseldorf Gallery soon to be sold to C.F. Derby's Cosmopolitan Art Association. Besides ostensibly supporting the New York Gallery of Fine Arts, Roberts and other patrons staged a major endorsement for Leutze's attempt to secure a government commission for the Capitol. It was in connection with this hope that Leutze ventured into his next monumental Washington painting.

With Washington at the Battle of Monmouth Leutze made another daring attempt at representing the 'father of his country' as war-hero. This time, he chose a battle in which Washington was known to have passionately reprimanded General Lee who was ordered to engage the British army but at the first exchange of fire ordered his men to

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<sup>71</sup>The exhibition received an extensive review in "The Washington Exhibition," New York Evening Post 12 (March 10, 1853), 1. See also "Fine Arts -- The Washington Exhibition," The Albion 12 (March 12 and 26, 1853), 129 and 153. A briefer but no less positive notice appeared in The Knickerbocker 41 (April 1853), 367.

retreat. After Washington's intervention Lee reorganized his troops and returned to his position. Leutze turned to an event that presented far more compositional difficulties than Washington Crossing the Delaware. In his Monmouth painting Leutze had to show Washington in the thick of an ongoing battle. If Leutze wanted to convince his American critics that Washington could be represented as a calm and noble leader in battle, he was "altogether wide of the mark," as The Albion quipped. The article began by quoting from a pamphlet that described the painting at length. The pamphlet made clear that Washington was anything but composed: "The flush of wrath yet reddens the cheek of Washington, indignation lowers upon his brow, some scorn yet lingers on his lip, and the starting muscles of his sword-hand show that, although his self possession is beginning to return, the intensity of his excitement has not yet begun to abate." The flush of passion alone might have been excusable, but according to the critic, the entire composition was "incongruous" and "mismanaged." The article concluded:

We attribute Mr. Leutze's failure to a vulgar and inartistic idea, that a burst of unwonted passion on the part of the great hero of the Revolution might be best expressed by a caracol on the part of his horse. This is of a piece with the whimsical notion of the late lamented Mr. Greenough, that in an equestrian statue of the same immortal Chieftain, the go-ahead genius of his country could be most fitly typified by a charger on a swinging trot. What others may call this, we don't

know. It strikes us as being low Art.<sup>72</sup>

The critics were turning to harsher vocabulary in attacking Leutze's monumental art. Beyond the immediate failure of the Monmouth picture as a convincing composition and representation of a worshipped leader, critics were expressing a more general impatience with Leutze's grand style. In a lengthy review for The Crayon one critic reiterated a critique that had already been directed against The Storming of the Teocalli:

If men must paint war, let them at least think of its noble phases, --of its heroism, its self-sacrifices and fortitude under physical suffering, --something of moral significance which shall redeem its blood-thirstiness. There is nothing of this in Leutze's picture. There are some wounded and dying men, who give us only the ghastliness of death; some men running, evidently because they are afraid of some other men. Some have been hurt, but you might well imagine they had been hurt in a riot. It is altogether rather a theatrical kind of a business -- a got-up affair.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, half a decade before Americans would witness again the "ghastliness of death" on

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<sup>72</sup>"Fine Arts -- Washington at Monmouth. By E.Leutze," The Albion 18 (November 11, 1854), 537.

<sup>73</sup>"Leutze's Washington at the Battle of Monmouth," The Crayon 1 (January 10, 1855), 22. See also the reply in defense of Leutze's picture, "Leutze's Washington," The Crayon 1 (January 31, 1855), 67.

battle-fields, one of the largest battle pictures ever painted in the United States to that date, was completely dismissed. During the first wave of its popularity, Washington Crossing the Delaware was in many ways incontestable, but it stirred up questions about monumental history painting and hero-worship that Leutze seemed to ignore when he painted Washington at the Battle of Monmouth.

By 1855, the positive reception of Washington Crossing the Delaware was overshadowed by critical attacks. Jarves' critique in Art-Hints echoed that of The Albion and of The Crayon. In Washington Crossing the Delaware, Jarves wrote, "we find the man most noted of all the world for serenity and majesty of demeanor, standing with scenic effect in the stern of the boat, and pointing onwards with all the declamatory energy of a stage hero. Such action as this shows that the artist neither understood the character of his subject nor the rules of high Art."<sup>74</sup> After the "Washington Exhibition," the painting stayed in Roberts' home and only appeared again as a public spectacle during the Metropolitan Fair.

### **Westward the Course of Empire**

As Washington Crossing the Delaware was bearing the brunt of criticism in the wake of the Metropolitan Fair, Leutze was collecting fresh cudos for his recently finished mural painting Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (fig. 10). Again, the

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<sup>74</sup>Art-Hints, 290-291.

timing was right for Leutze. Most critics and observers praised Leutze for offering the war-torn nation a positive view of the future. When the New York Evening Post first announced Leutze's commission, it openly expressed its misgivings: "With due respect to the government and the artist, we think we have several stern realities to deal with just now, without dabbling in the allegorical."<sup>75</sup> But only two months later the paper had apparently received more detailed information and fully endorsed the project, praising Leutze for his plan and the government for its patronage.<sup>76</sup>

The initial reception by most Washington papers was highly favorable. The Daily National Intelligencer welcomed the mural in two enthusiastic articles, one before and one after its official unveiling. In June 1862, it supplied its readers not only with a preview of the yet uncompleted painting but also with a patriotic sermon:

Nothing more clearly indicates the vigorous power of this young and growing nation than this, that, while a civil war of unequalled magnitude is raging in her midst, she calmly puts forth her energies in all the peaceful arts, and provides for the future of a united nation, as if the war were but a momentary impediment . . . .

At this time, and just this time, the picture which Mr. Leutze is completing at the Capitol possesses extraordinary interest. It is a great historical picture, an epical

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<sup>75</sup>"Art Gossip," New York Evening Post 60 (September 21, 1861), 1.

<sup>76</sup>See "Fine Arts. The New Picture for the Capitol at Washington," The New York Evening Post 60 (November 13, 1861), 1.

view of the future of America. It is no allegory, no borrowed ideal fantasy, but a real living, actual, breathing fact. It belongs as much to our history as Trumbull's Surrender at Yorktown or Vanderlyn's Landing of Columbus. It is only anticipatory, not retrospective, and scarcely even anticipatory. While the colors are yet wet upon the fresco, living emigrants are crossing the snow crowned peaks of the mountains of the far West just as we behold them in the painting.<sup>77</sup>

Leutze was at the peak of his success. He had created a "real" allegory. A painting that was "epical," "actual," and "anticipatory." With Westward the Course of Empire he seemed to redeem the nation and the art of history painting.

The mural marked a grandiose finale to Leutze's epic historical cycle. Bishop Berkeley, from whose poem "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" (1726) Leutze had taken the title for his painting, had predicted that after declining in Europe civilization would move westward and find its historical fulfillment in America. The decisive stanza in the poem ran: "Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;/ The four first Acts already past,/ A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;/ Time's noblest Offspring is the last."<sup>78</sup> But did Leutze intend to paint an allegorical end of

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<sup>77</sup>"The Picture at the Capitol," Daily National Intelligencer 50 (June 27, 1862), 1.

<sup>78</sup>The entire poem is cited in William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, Vol. 1, 23. See also Peter Freese, "'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way': The *translatio*-Concept in Popular American Writing and Painting," Amerikastudien 41, No. 2 (1996), 265-295. Freese states that "The final



history?

In an age of western expansion Leutze was not alone in defending the concept of historical destiny as predicted by Bishop Berkeley. According to a review of E. L. Magoon's book Westward Empire; or, the Great Drama of Human Progress (1856), the four acts of Berkeley's poem translated into "the age of Pericles, the age of Augustus, the age of Leo X., and the age of Washington." Progress was a universal law, the reviewer explained, and Magoon traced it through "literature, art, science, philosophy, and religion of the respective ages, which represent the course of universal history." Revising the Hegelian concept of history, the reviewer reminded the readers that "our view of liberty, unlike that of the ancients, does not elevate the State over the individual."<sup>79</sup> But it was to the State that Leutze turned in 1854 to find patronage for painting the final, fifth act of westward historical progression.

In a letter to Montgomery Meigs, his principal contact in the government, Leutze wrote that he considered a government commission the most desirable way to complete his historical cycle. Buoyed by the success of his Washington painting, Leutze wrote:

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stanza, appropriately opening with 'westward' and closing with 'last,' sums up the underlying idea of *translatio imperii* in the famous line that 'Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way' and combines the Biblical idea of the succession of four heathen empires as leading up to the fifth empire of the Son of God with the Aristotelian notion of a complete action unfolding in five acts" (273).

<sup>79</sup>"Literary Notices," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 14 (December 1856), 121.

The good the art unions have been able to do is limited, an artist is not made by such encouragement, that every thing he may paint may find a market, that he may not starve! that's his bodily care but an artist's mind must be fed with high hopes with prospect of applause -- in one word an artist must have a high aim and a hope when he has attained it to find a reward suitable; many will struggle, some will fall on the way, but their footsteps will be glorious landmarks in a nation's history. Give us a chance, our history is the history of the liberty, the history of a struggling world for more than three centuries; not confined to our own shores, we seek the causes of our institutions in every clime where oppression has been, where noble man broke a tyrants chain or sought refuge from it by braving the ocean and an unknown wilderness.<sup>80</sup>

As Leutze conceived it, Westward the Course of Empire brought to a conclusion the "history of a struggling world." As the Washington-based Daily National Republican aptly described the painting, history was literally unfolding in one pictorial space: "The painting transpires just as a train of emigrants, way-worn and foot-sore, rest beneath a rocky cliff, on a lofty summit of the rocky mountains, previous to prosecuting the downward march." The reviewer left no doubt that the fruits of struggle were within

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<sup>80</sup>Letter from Leutze to Meigs, February 14, 1854, Architect of the Capitol, Washington, D.C. Leutze's otherwise flawless English slipped into a literal translation from German. The phrase "history of the liberty" translates into German "Geschichte der Freiheit."

reach. Ahead of the emigrant train lay a "rich golden landscape," and visible were small signs of domesticity, "the wreathes of smoke from a thousand camp fires." It was "God's tapestry -- the woods and meadows, and streams --[that] rolls away to the Pacific, till it dies away in the illimitable perspective."<sup>81</sup> Westward the Course of Empire did not simply illustrate the fifth act in world history, it gave further credibility to manifest destiny ideology. Commented the National Intelligencer in its second review: "in these dark days of trial, we felt the beauty of the whole marvellous production, almost as a prophetic conviction that the idea of our 'manifest destiny' could not perish."<sup>82</sup>

The painting's overall concept was far from self-evident. Rather than assuring its viewers that the end of history was within reach, the painting contained more indications that the historical struggle was not over. Leutze had not included a black figure in his earlier oil study (1861, National Museum of American Art). While he was working on his mural in the Capitol during the summer of 1862, Abraham Lincoln and Congress were debating the political feasibility of emancipating all slaves. When Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 Leutze's mural was nearly completed. Leutze's introduction of a black person into his historical painting must have been his immediate response to these political events. One obvious reading is that Leutze indeed saw full emancipation as a culmination or even prerequisite for the course of freedom.

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<sup>81</sup>"Leutze's Great Picture," Daily National Republican (January 15, 1863), 2.

<sup>82</sup>"Leutze's New Painting," The National Intelligencer 50 (November 27, 1862), 3.

This is confirmed in Anne Brewster's article for Lippincott's Magazine in which she recounts meeting Leutze in Washington. During the interview the author made the following remark: "There is a group almost in the centre of your picture -- a young Irish woman seated on an ass holding a child -- the ass is led by a negro. Did you mean this group to teach a new gospel to this continent, a new truth which this part of the world is to accept -- that the Emigrant and the Freedman are to be reconciled and worked with?" Leutze approved of her reading and "his eyes fairly laughed with joy at my comprehension of his thoughts."<sup>83</sup> On a second level, Leutze pacified any racial fears his audience might have harbored. The West could absorb emancipated slaves and thus function as a racial 'safety valve' for overcrowded Eastern urban centers. Yet there was also some ambiguity to the black man's presence in the image; he was travelling alone, without family, raising fears of racial amalgamation.<sup>84</sup>

Most observers skirted around this explosive issue. The reviewer for the Daily National Republican praised Leutze for realizing an "American idea" (perhaps cognizant of the prejudice against Leutze's Germanic traits) and for daring "to impersonate on the

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<sup>83</sup>"Emmanuel [sic] Leutze, The Artist," Lippincott's Magazine 2 (November 1868), 536.

<sup>84</sup>See Horsman, Race and Manifest Destiny, 272-279. Horsman argues that with the opening of California the racial politics of the 1840s were extended into a territory claimed by Free-Soilers for "the free white working man" (274-275). While expansionists used the racial safety valve argument in defending the acquisition of territories from Mexico, they also believed that Anglo Saxons would "outbreed and replace a variety of other races" (279).

walls of the Capitol a group of live Americans, clear-eyed matron, blond women, and rough and tough young architects of the republic -- heroes of the axe and spade."<sup>85</sup> Yet he avoided any mentioning of the black settler as participant in the westward caravan, a clear symbolic reference to the political consequences of emancipation. The above quoted preview in the National Intelligencer listed as the cast of characters "women eagerly stretching forward to view the promised land, some worn by toil and privation; stalwart men, in every variety of Western costume, shouldering on the toiling animals; here a group of wistful mules; here oxen with patient faces, horses, boys, negroes."<sup>86</sup>

Depending on his or her racial politics, a critic could read Leutze's painting as a perpetuation of social hierarchy (white women at the pinnacle, black men at the lower end), or, as in Brewster's interpretation, of new social alliances (Emigrant and Freedman). But the fact that Leutze decided at all to make emigration the theme of this major historical painting did not elicit much astonishment or even objection from the critics.

The emigration theme had been projected into the distant past and into the realm of religious providence, as in Weir's Embarkation of the Pilgrims at Delft Haven, Holland, July 22nd, 1620 (1837-43, United States Capitol). It had also been explored in sentimental genre scenes such as Charles F. Blauvelt's The German Emigrant Inquiring

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<sup>85</sup>"Leutze's Great Picture," 2.

<sup>86</sup>"The Picture at the Capitol," Daily National Intelligencer 50 (June 27, 1862), 1. By December of that year the National Intelligencer spoke no longer of "negroes" but of "the *contraband*." See "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," Daily National Intelligencer 50 (December 17, 1862), 3.

His Way (North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh) which was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1855.<sup>87</sup> Such pictures universalized the emigrant theme and detached it from any specific geo-political context. But depictions of emigrants as socially marginal characters, as in Bingham's The Squatters (1850, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), made the theme artistically and politically problematic.<sup>88</sup> Emigrants who were neither heroic, noble, nor amusing did not neatly fit into history or genre painting.<sup>89</sup> Leutze ventured into new territory by monumentalizing the theme in such a heroic and melodramatic design.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>See "National Academy of Design -- Closing Notices," Home Journal (April 14, 1855), 3. In 1851, the Home Journal mentioned a painting entitled The Emigrant's Last Look at his Native Land by "Mr. Carter" (possibly Dennis Malone Carter). See "Art and Artists," Home Journal (March 1, 1851), 3.

<sup>88</sup>For a discussion of this image in the context of westward expansion, see Elizabeth Johns, "Settlement and Development: Claiming the West," in The West as America, 202-203. Also see her discussion of the same painting in "The 'Missouri Artist' as Artist," in Michael E. Shapiro et al, eds., George Caleb Bingham, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1990), 112-118. Bingham sent the painting to the American Art-Union in 1851. In their sale catalogue of 1852, the Art-Union managers described the painting in domesticating terms: "A family has built its log cabin in the midst of a clearing, and commenced housekeeping." Quoted in Johns, "The 'Missouri Artist' as Artist," 187, note 67.

<sup>89</sup>In discussing T.H. Beard's North Carolina Emigrants--One of a Series of Pictures representing "Poor White Folks," exhibited at the National Academy in 1846, the Home Journal expressed its disdain for the painting's subject: "We have always doubted the propriety of choosing subjects of such painful interest as this composition represents. It is one of those subjects that a feeling mind revolts at, and turns away from with a sensation of loathing." See "The Fine Arts. National Academy of Design," Home Journal (May 9, 1846), 3.

<sup>90</sup>As Vivien Fryd has argued, Leutze's mural completed the "iconographic program" of the United States Capitol. See Fryd, Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860, (1992), 209.

Leutze wrote an eight-page memorandum to legitimate his epic treatment of the emigration theme. He stated that his intention in the mural and its border ornaments was "to represent as near and truthfully as the artist was able, the grand peaceful conquest of the great west."<sup>91</sup> Yet everything about this picture seemed to betray the implausibility of "peaceful conquest." The critics noted that the women in Leutze's mural were showing the signs of "toil and privation." Leutze's own language suggested epic struggle: "A party of Emigrants have arrived near sunset on the *divide* (watershed) from whence they have the first view of the pacific slope, their 'promised land' 'Eldorado' having passed the troubles of the plains . . . Emigrant Train of wagons toiling up the slope, jolting over the mountain trail, scarcely a road, or diving into water worn gullies--upheld by the drivers from tilting over."<sup>92</sup> Especially the women in Leutze's script seemed to lack real faith in this El Dorado: there is a "suffering wife, with her infant in her arms," carried to the rock by her husband, and there is "a young woman with a still younger girl in her lap . . . straining to look at the far land -- in doubt whether there be not more troubles ahead."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Quoted in Justin G. Turner, "Emanuel Leutze's Mural *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*," Manuscripts 18 (Spring 1966), 15.

<sup>92</sup>Turner, 14. Leutze's notes appeared in slightly altered form in Henry Tuckerman, Book of the Artist (New York, 1867), 336-338. The above quoted passage read: "an emigrant party, travel-stained and weary, who for long weeks have toiled on in the face of formidable difficulties over the vast plains on the hither side of the Rocky Mountains, have reached, near sundown, the point whence the waters flow in the direction they themselves are going, and from which they catch the first glimpse of the vast Pacific slope -- their land of promise. El Dorado, indeed . . ." (336-337).

<sup>93</sup>Turner, 14-15.

Although Leutze leaves no doubt that the emigrant train will reach its destination, the illustration of struggle continues in the mural's arabesques where "the standard bird shields union and liberty under his wings" and "Indians creeping and flying before them."<sup>94</sup> There was thus no end to historic struggle, only a brief respite on the mountain peak to mount the stars and stripes and to view a distant landscape of promise.

Yet before Leutze painted his epic history of western emigration, other painters had already begun to paint the settlement and domestication of the West. As Patricia Hills has argued, William S. Jewett's The Promised Land--The Grayson Family (1850, location unknown), for instance, portrayed a westward-bound family in "the legacy of conversation pieces," more fit for the "middle-class parlor" than the wilderness.<sup>95</sup> Mr. Grayson wears a tie and is neatly coiffured, Mrs. Grayson leans comfortably against a tree, their son is dressed for a day's outing rather than a long and strenuous journey.<sup>96</sup> The painting documented an event that had occurred four years earlier. But, in 1850, whatever hardships the Graysons experienced on their initial western emigration were invisible. Representing the Graysons on a hill-top surveying the Sacramento valley, the painting has all the trappings of domesticity. While it was only a short distance from

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<sup>94</sup>Turner, 15. In Tuckerman's transcription the "standard bird" became "the eagle" and the "Indians" were presented as "the stealthy savage." (Tuckerman, 338).

<sup>95</sup>"Picturing Progress in the Era of Westward Expansion," in The West as America, 98.

<sup>96</sup>One commentator stressed the struggles and sufferings the Graysons encountered on their journey but assured readers that with piety and determination the family reached the promised land. See "The Emigrant's Family," Home Journal (Nov. 16, 1850), 2.



Jewett's western conversation piece to the entirely domesticated world of William Fuller's Crow Creek Agency, Dakota Territory (1884, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas), Leutze's mural only evoked the fruits of toil and conquest in an allegorical El Dorado.<sup>97</sup> The western emigration theme thus remained an unresolved historic struggle in Leutze's interpretation.

The most applicable lesson that American critics found in the painting related to the Civil War and its destructive impact on the course of the nation's history. The Daily National Intelligencer, which we quoted earlier, extracted a larger lesson of historical promise from Leutze's mural: "Let those who idly believe that this nation has seen its best days; let those who falsely imagine that this *experiment* of a Republic has proved at last to be a failure, ponder upon these hopeful teachings of the times in which we live. This vast nation has not yet fulfilled its destiny!"<sup>98</sup> Although the Republic appeared to be dangerously close to abandoning its predestined historical course, Leutze's prophetic painting gave assurance that the nation had a redemptive future.

The critics from Washington interpreted the painting as an affirmation of progress and moral uplift. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who visited Washington early in 1862 and later published his impressions in the Atlantic Monthly, described some of the effects which

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<sup>97</sup>Fuller's picture graced the front cover of The West as America exhibition catalogue. It was discussed by and illustrated in Julie Schimmel, "Inventing 'The Indian,'" The West as America, 184-185.

<sup>98</sup>"The Picture at the Capitol," Daily National Intelligencer 50 (June 27, 1862), 1.

militarization had on the city: "we saw the free circulation of the nation's life-blood (at the very heart, moreover) clogged with such strictures." After seeing the cartoon of Leutze's mural and a sketch, Hawthorne emphasized the picture's ability to instill the war-troubled observer with hope: "it looked full of energy, hope, progress, irrepressible movement onward, all represented in a momentary pause of triumph; and it was most cheering to feel its good augury at this dismal time, when our country might seem to have arrived at such deadly stand-still."<sup>99</sup> But how did the painting fare outside of war-beleaguered Washington? Was Leutze able to use the momentum and restore history painting's credibility?

The New York Evening Post announced in 1863 that Leutze's government commission had not been "so profitable for him, in a pecuniary sense" and that he was planning a trip to New York to resume "his old profession of portrait painting."<sup>100</sup> Leutze's reputation with the New York press continued to slide. The critics did not bother to go to Washington to see the mural. The negative reception of Leutze's work at the Metropolitan Fair makes it unlikely a viewing of Westward the Course of Empire would have made a difference. A final blow against this allegorical work came again from the Independent. Contradicting the most positive reviews which denied it was an allegory at all, the reviewer for the Independent emphasized that the mural was only

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<sup>99</sup>Hawthorne, "Chiefly About War-Matters," Atlantic Monthly 10 (July, 1862), 46.

<sup>100</sup>"The Artist Leutze," New York Evening Post 62 (January 31, 1863), 1.

allegory, and a bad one to boot. As an illustration of "Bishop Berkeley's immortal line" the painting was mere "ornament." Moreover, without its literary reference, the painting was incomprehensible: "Probably no one would ever guess at the meaning of the picture without the accompanying legend; and with it the picture is useless." The critic then followed with his most lethal rhetorical jab:

It is not a very important subject; for the Bishop's prophecy is simply a truism. The star of empire takes its way westward because, having risen in the east, it has no other way to take. It was hardly worth while to pay so much money for an ambiguous illustration of so evident a truth.<sup>101</sup>

By stripping Leutze's mural of its allegorical concept and presenting it to the reader in its literal meaning, the critic denied Leutze's work any lasting historical value or claim to aesthetic greatness.

## **Conclusion**

Leutze's historical cycle ran its course within a period of approximately twenty years. It began with a series of Columbus paintings and culminated in western emigration. Although he had a few loyal patrons, institutional support for Leutze was

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<sup>101</sup>"Emmanuel [sic] Leutze," Independent 20 (July 30, 1868), 4.

weaker than it appeared. The American Art-Union was an ideal form of patronage for Leutze's beginnings, but The Storming of the Teocalli also highlighted the limitations of what Leutze could accomplish with the aid of this institution. His Washington paintings attracted some patrons who had a taste for monumental history painting. But after Washington Crossing the Delaware Leutze needed a government commission to accomplish the monumental work he wanted to paint. He had to wait ten years to get one. The lack of an institutional support system for monumental art made Leutze vulnerable to critical attack. He was painting against a critical movement which was increasingly impatient with historical melodrama. The popularity which Leutze's works enjoyed as large exhibition pieces made them even more suspect as examples of "high art." Leutze's American reputation which had risen with the American Art-Union to the status of genius fell to that of a "cheat." With him an entire school of history painting was discredited. Beginning in the 1850s, when Leutze was at the height of his success, the contest over "high art" no longer concentrated on history painting only but came to include genre painting as well. As the following two chapters will demonstrate, the process of reassessing the aesthetic value of history painting also prompted a revalidation of genre painting.

## Chapter 5:

### Lilly Martin Spencer: Gender, Genre, History

#### War Spirit at Home

Sometime in 1866, there appeared in the window of Campbell's Frame Shop in Newark, New Jersey, a painting by the artist Lilly Martin Spencer. On June 12 the *Newark Daily Advertiser* reported: "Another of Mrs. Lillie M. Spencer's paintings is on exhibit at Campbell's. It illustrates the *War Spirit at Home*, and, like all of Mrs. Spencer's very original productions, tells its own story."<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly, the painting was a group portrait of Spencer's family celebrating the news of Grant's victory at Vicksburg on July 4, 1863. The artist herself, holding a baby in one hand and the *New York Times* in the other, spreads the good news while a domestic servant listens and the three Spencer children march playfully through the parlor.<sup>2</sup> As in other domestic scenes painted by Spencer, this domestic interior most likely resembled her own familiar surroundings, which in 1866 would have been Spencer's Newark home. In a very concrete sense, she was thus telling her "own story."

War Spirit at Home; or Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg (fig. 13) was Spencer's own story in an additional sense. Although they ultimately read her presence

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Robin Bolton-Smith and William Truettner, Lilly Martin Spencer: The Joys of Sentiment (Washington, D.C., 1973), 209.

<sup>2</sup>James Thomas Flexner refers to the painting disparagingly as "nauseous glutinosity" featuring "cute infants, some with chubby limbs emerging from nursery dishabille, parading in paper hats." See Flexner, That Wilder Image, 193.

differently, both David Lubin and Elizabeth O'Leary point out the significance of the domestic servant who turns her head toward Spencer and the viewer.<sup>3</sup> As O'Leary has convincingly argued, the inclusion of domestic servants in nineteenth-century genre paintings gave visual testimony to the growing frictions within middle-class households between mistresses and servants. In letters to her parents, Spencer complained repeatedly about lazy and dishonest household help. Genre painting was the ideal pictorial form to treat this domestic issue, and Spencer made ample use of it. Through her kitchen scenes, she was able to provide herself and her audience comic relief from a conflict that was fraught with class, racial, and gender tensions. Social conflict was thus part of Spencer's domestic experience and went into the creation of War Spirit at Home. The humorous double entendre of genre painting, a form of visual and verbal pun, allowed Spencer to infuse the celebration of a momentous historical event with domestic meaning.

A commonly used classification for this subject matter today is "domestic genre."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See David M. Lubin, Picturing a Nation (New Haven and London, 1994), 195-198, and Elizabeth L. O'Leary's At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Painting (Washington, D.C. and London, 1996), 105-107. Lubin reads the servant's portrayal as sympathetic. O'Leary, on the other hand, detects a strained relationship between mistress and servant.

<sup>4</sup>Isham, in The History of American Painting, states: "Domestic *genre*, the reproduction of the immediate life of the time, requires a perfection of workmanship to relieve the commonplace subjects, and [William S.] Mount and [Richard C.] Woodville had no successors" (291). Although this by no means constituted the first use of this category, I found Isham's disparaging account revealing. Like history painting, he discussed domestic genre as an artistic form that represented a dark age of American art.

Helen S. Langa has made a strong case that Spencer's focus on "urban household subjects and female experience" was not "felicitous" but based on necessity, that is to say, her "responsibility for the family's economic survival." Pointing to scenes portraying strong, assertive women, such as Shake Hands? (1854, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus) and Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses (1856, Brooklyn Museum) Langa concludes that, while Spencer was a bystander to the women's rights movement, "her domestic genre paintings represent an intervention in the tradition of imagery that ordinarily depicted women as unassertive respondents to male action and emotion."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the personal was indeed political. Yet Langa's argument, while it breaks through the stereotype of Spencer as passively sentimental, perpetuates a bifurcation that posits "female" domestic "experience" versus "male" artistic "tradition," economic "necessity" versus autonomous "action."

I would argue that any discussion of Spencer's biography, artistic production, and institutional links, needs to take into account an important conceptual distinction made by Deborah Cherry in her book on Victorian women artists in Great Britain. Cherry here applies Griselda Pollock's analysis of works by Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot to her own discussion of Victorian domestic painters. As quoted in Cherry's book, Pollock stresses how women as artistic producers are shaped by "spatially orchestrated social

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<sup>5</sup>Helen D. Langa, "Lilly Martin Spencer: Genre, Aesthetics, and Gender in the Work of a Mid-Nineteenth Century American Woman Artist," Athanon 9 (1990), 40.

structure which is lived at both psychic and social levels."<sup>6</sup> Tracing these spaces of femininity and their discursive construction, Cherry reminds us that: "There was no causal relation between the woman artist's domestic situation and the kind of pictures she made, no formative link between her home life and her scenes of home. On the contrary, relations between these two different historical registers were manufactured in and by nineteenth-century cultural discourses." Indeed, Cherry concludes, there could be a "disarticulation between the mode of femininity lived by a woman artist and that version which she represented in her domestic paintings."<sup>7</sup>

Such a post-structural analysis points to a fallacy in both O'Leary's and Lubin's interpretation of Spencer's domestic paintings as documents of personal family drama/romance. Although she discusses Spencer not only within the context of the artist's personal household but also as a producer working for a larger market, O'Leary's focus is on the artist's strained relationships with domestics. The limitations of this focus are made evident in her discussion of War Spirit at Home. Referring to the historical events that served as the occasion for the painting, she claims that Spencer "probably intended the painting to represent the supportive spirit of an anonymous family whose husband and father had gone to war." Two sentences later O'Leary shifts perspective and

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<sup>6</sup>Griselda Pollock, quoted in Deborah Cherry, Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists (London and New York, 1993), 123. The quote is taken from Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art (London, 1988), 66.

<sup>7</sup>Painting Women, 126, 127.



writes: "The painting may be approached as a mapping of the artists' own circumstances, though Ben [Spencer's husband] did not enlist."<sup>8</sup> Only on the level of personal experience, then, is O'Leary able to reconcile the conflicting narratives of patriotic intention and domestic struggle.

In his Spencer chapter in Picturing a Nation, Lubin offers a reading more open to what he terms "modern culture's multitiered, multidirectional operations."<sup>9</sup> Yet Lubin never quite integrates his discussion of Spencer's domestic genre paintings and her personal struggle with middle-class values into the book's larger narrative of nationhood and representation. For instance, reading one of Spencer's personal family scenes painted during the time of the Civil War, The Artist and Her Family at a Fourth of July Picnic: A Day to Remember (c. 1864, National Museum of Women in the Arts), Lubin refers to it as "an allegorical commentary on the state of the nation." When he turns to War Spirit at Home, Lubin collapses all distinction between personal experience and nationhood, literalism and allegory. According to Lubin's allegorical explanation, "the painting puts forth a Christian philosophy of redemptive agony," expressing "the feelings of a woman whose children could not see or hear, let alone comprehend, her motherly pain." But in the next paragraph he claims that War Spirit "literally" depicted "a gulf between a mother and her children." As I will show later in my discussion of Spencer's

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<sup>8</sup>O'Leary, At Beck and Call, 107.

<sup>9</sup>Picturing a Nation, 161.

allegorical art, Lubin consistently collapses any distinction between Spencer's personal and pictorial concerns.<sup>10</sup>

In different ways, both O'Leary and Lubin ground their discussions in a focus on personal conflict rather than social structure, continuing an interpretative approach which both Pollock and Cherry attempt to avoid, namely the identification of domestic paintings as "authentic depictions of women's experience."<sup>11</sup> My intention here is not to completely depersonalize Spencer's artistic production but to probe the issue of feminist intervention in light of the institutional and critical changes discussed in previous chapters. Langa's hypothesis of a feminist appropriation of genre painting in War Spirit at Home is a convincing one. Feminist art historians have pointed out how institutional restrictions prevented women from pursuing the academic education and merit system that would have qualified them for history painting. As a consequence of academic exclusion, women were predominantly active in the "lower" genres -- still-life painting, genre, portraiture.<sup>12</sup> But War Spirit at Home poses a set of questions that seem to make the category of "domestic genre" itself problematic. What exactly was the connection between gender and genre during a period when the authority of the traditional hierarchy of genres was weakening? How did War Spirit at Home, a painting that portrayed both ordinary domestic life and the commemoration of a significant historic event, relate to

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<sup>10</sup>Picturing a Nation, 191, 197, 198.

<sup>11</sup>Painting Women, 123.

<sup>12</sup>See Introduction, note 75.

history painting? The case that I will make is that history was never coincidental to Spencer's artistic aspirations. Yet rarely did she deliberately attempt to break down the barriers between domestic genre and history painting as in War Spirit at Home.

The interpretive challenge that War Spirit at Home poses is this: in hindsight it looms large as an innovative formal attempt at combining three pictorial modes -- portraiture, genre, and history, a realist "masterpiece" which preceded Thomas Eakins' famous Gross Clinic (1875); but the reception history of Spencer's painting during her lifetime was far from glamorous. Besides a notice in the Newark Daily Advertiser, the press seemed to largely ignore the painting. Why, one wants to ask, did the painting end up in a Newark frame shop rather than the exhibition gallery of the National Academy of Design? During the 1840s and 1850s Spencer had enjoyed support by the Western Art-Union and the American Art-Union and later the Cosmopolitan Art Association. Somewhere along the way, she lost her support system and the opportunity for critical recognition.

### **Nicholas Longworth**

Spencer's early career in Marietta and Cincinnati, Ohio, had similarities with Leutze's beginnings in Philadelphia. Leutze's Philadelphia patrons had a counterpart in Spencer's main supporter in Cincinnati, the collector Nicholas Longworth. Like Sill and Cary, Longworth had eclectic taste but considered historical art superior to other artistic genres. Like Leutze, Spencer made her debut with so-called fancy pictures. But, by the

late 1840s when both artists were promoted by the American Art-Union, Leutze had a network of private patronage for history painting, while Spencer was struggling to receive commissions for flower paintings and portraits.

In the fall of 1848, Lilly Martin Spencer left Cincinnati and set up her studio on Broadway in New York. Spencer came with a number of credentials. She had the support of Cincinnati's foremost patron of the arts, Nicholas Longworth, who had launched the career of several Ohio artists, including the famous sculptor Hiram Powers.<sup>13</sup> Longworth and Edward D. Mansfield, the editor of the Cincinnati Chronicle, who had brought Spencer's work to Longworth's attention, had successfully promoted a myth of the artist's origins that would follow her for the rest of her life. By the time she arrived East, Spencer was already touted as a native talent and genius with humble origins on a Western farm.<sup>14</sup>

This myth rested on the assumption that real artistic talent could only be found in the Western parts of the country, away from the East Coast and the corrupting influences

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<sup>13</sup>See Denny Carter Young, "The Longworths: Three Generations of Art Patronage in Cincinnati," in Kenneth R. Trapp, ed., Celebrate Cincinnati Art (Cincinnati, 1982), 29-48. Nicholas Longworth (1782-1863) was a lawyer whose prosperity derived from real estate investment in Cincinnati and the surrounding Ohio Valley. By 1820 he was able to retire and devote himself entirely to art collecting, wine producing, and horticultural activities such as growing strawberries.

<sup>14</sup>Under the heading "A Self-Educated Artist" the Literary World, November 18, 1848, 832, announced to its readers Spencer's arrival "from the West." The article closed: "If any one is doubtful of the possibility of American achievement under disadvantageous circumstances, we would suggest a visit to the rooms of Mrs. Spencer."

of Europe. A second crucial element in the myth was the notion that the native artist from the West was self-taught.<sup>15</sup> In Spencer's case, the myth was built on half-truths. She was born in England to highly educated French parents, Angelique Le Petit and Gilles Martin. Around 1830 the Spencer family moved to New York, and not until three years later did they settle on a farm outside of Marietta, Ohio. Spencer was not "self-educated" but had a teacher in her father, who was known to be a very skilled draftsman.

Now that Spencer's "genius" was discovered, what sort of artistic career did her benefactors have in mind? As a figure painter, Longworth calculated in 1841, she deserved no less than to study with the most accomplished men in the profession, John Trumbull and Washington Allston. Edward Mansfield informed a friend in Marietta that Longworth offered \$500 "towards furnishing Miss Martin the means of instruction -- at Boston."<sup>16</sup> A few days later Longworth wrote directly and explained, "I doubt not Mr. Alliston [sic] will give her all the instruction in his power." On her way to Boston, she would "stop a day or two at New Haven, where she would meet with Col. Trumbull, see

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<sup>15</sup>According to Elizabeth Ellet and other Spencer biographers, her first "independent" artistic production was a drawing on her bedroom wall which revealed the fourteen-year old as a young prodigy. See Ellet, Women Artists in All Ages and Countries (New York, 1859), 320. The fact that Spencer was raised on a Western farm provided Ellet with a background for casting Spencer as a child of nature, "constantly, like Rosa Bonheur, in the open air," brimming with "strength and health" (319). A more extensive analogy between these two female artists would go beyond the scope of this essay. I refer the reader to Linda Nochlin's discussion of Bonheur in "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in Women, Art, and Power, 170-175.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to S.P. Hildreth, September 15, 1841, Lilly Martin Spencer Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm Roll 131.

the collection of his works and obtain useful advice & instruction."<sup>17</sup> It is highly doubtful that Longworth personally knew either of the two artists, and his optimism regarding Allston's readiness to instruct seems naive. But the artistic path that he envisioned for Spencer was leading toward history painting. Not surprisingly, the one art work that she mentioned when reporting back home after her first visit to the Longworth residence was a "large and splendid painting of [Benjamin] West" which "is most beautiful but I think I could do as well."<sup>18</sup> The West painting that Spencer saw was the Ophelia and Laertes (1792, Cincinnati Art Museum) which Longworth had purchased at an auction in New York after it had been successfully exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the American Academy in New York. It would have confirmed to Spencer the elevated character of Shakespeare subjects in painting. However, she declined Longworth's offer to seek instruction in Boston. Instead, she moved to Cincinnati where she would receive advice from the local portrait and animal painter James Beard. With this move Spencer seemed to delay the necessary training which she needed to become a competent history painter.

The approximately fourteen paintings by Spencer that Mansfield saw at the 1841 exhibition established a few themes on which her reputation would rest for the remainder of her career: domestic scenes with a sly sense of humor and infant portraits. Yet the

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<sup>17</sup>Letter to S.P. Hildreth, September 18, 1841, Spencer Papers.

<sup>18</sup>Letter to mother, November 3, 1841, Spencer Papers. For a discussion and illustration of the painting, see Denny Carter Young, 34-35.

largest piece in the exhibition was a literary subject, a fanciful adaptation of Shakespeare's Richard III , entitled The Vow (location unknown). Mansfield, who measured it at about twenty by ten feet, gave the following description: "The scene of this painting is a Gothic Hall in France, in the Middle Ages, in which the rout and revel of a nuptial banquet is represented as suddenly checked, by the apparition of the ghost of the bride's former lover, in complete armor, who is dead in distant Palestine, a martyr of the Holy War, and who in accordance with a vow on his departure, now returns to claim his faithless betrothed."<sup>19</sup> This type of painting tapped into the popular appeal of Shakespeare illustrations in antebellum America. Earlier in the century such well-known artists as Washington Allston and Charles Leslie had pursued Shakespeare material and in the following decade the history painters Leutze, Rothermel and Huntington continued to do so. Anecdotal subjects from Shakespeare and Milton were popular as well as respectable, though not quite equal to serious history paintings. In Cincinnati, Spencer painted more Shakespearian themes. In 1842 she set a high goal for her future career: "I want to try to make all my painting have a tendency towards morall [sic] improvement as far as it is in the power of painting, speaking from those who are good and virtuous, to counteract evil."<sup>20</sup> History painting was the highest artistic category in which a painter could realize these ideals. Nicholas Longworth had encouraged her to pursue her artistic

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<sup>19</sup>Edward Mansfield, The Marietta Intelligencer, August 25, 1841, Spencer Papers.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Edith S. Reiter, "Lilly Martin Spencer," Museum Echoes, Vol. 27, No.5 (May 1954), 37.

calling and become a painter of ideal themes, but his blessing alone was no guarantee for success. Spencer discovered that she had to rely on the institutional backing of art unions.

### **The American Art-Union and Nathaniel Parker Willis**

By 1847, Spencer was renting a studio in the building of the recently founded Western Art-Union in Cincinnati. She reported to her parents that she had "promised a large fancy piece for the New York Art-Union and one for this Art Union;" she had also "done several small pictures which generally sell more readily."<sup>21</sup> When she moved to New York the following year, she was expecting to find an audience that was receptive to paintings of literary themes. If she was able to establish herself as a painter of literary and fancy pieces, Spencer and her patron friends assumed, she would be able to garner support for works that dealt with grander moral and historical themes. Soon after her arrival in New York, Spencer must have informed one friend in Cincinnati of her problems in finding buyers for more serious art, for he responded:

It is only because instead of two pictures of your peculiar "genre", you have not had twenty! The plain truth is that pictures remarkable for Maternal, infantine, and feminine expressions in which little else is seen but flesh, white drapery, and

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<sup>21</sup>Letter to parents, October 2, 1847, Spencer Papers.



fruits, constitute your triumphs, according to popular estimations. It is a pity that such pictures as your 'Ophelia' which I consider your chief d'oeuvre, don't take! and 'pity tis, tis done', as Shakespeare says.<sup>22</sup>

The New York art market made it extremely difficult for Spencer to pursue loftier goals. She had to struggle to consolidate her position in her "peculiar genre" and had no energy left to even attempt breaking into the higher grounds of history painting.

Spencer entered the New York art world at a moment of intense competition, especially in the field of history painting. At the American Art-Union's annual distribution in 1848, there were at least twenty-five paintings of historical, allegorical, religious, or literary subjects.<sup>23</sup> Although it was far outnumbered by landscape paintings, historical art had a very strong presence compared to previous years. The exhibition of these works in the galleries of the Art-Union evidenced the managers' dedication to history painting in the United States. Spencer, who was represented with two pieces, The May Queen (location unknown) and Fruit Girl (location unknown), could view the latest productions by Leutze and other exponents of historical art.

Emanuel Leutze's The Mission of the Jews to Ferdinand and Isabella was number one on the distribution list and thus given the highest honor. Other paintings represented

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<sup>22</sup>Frank Carnes, December 10, 1848, Spencer Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Distribution List, Transactions of the American Art-Union (New York, 1849).

scenes in the lives of Washington, André, Nathan Hale, Columbus, Montezuma, Cromwell, Napoleon, and Luther. But there was also William Ranney's Veterans of 1776 returning from the War (1848, Dallas Museum of Art) which portrayed generic historical types rather than famous historic characters.<sup>24</sup> The group of convivial veterans in tattered uniforms had more in common with William S. Mount's merry-making farmers or George C. Bingham's dancing flatboatmen than with the noble Washington or André that appeared in traditional history paintings. So quotidian and common were these figures that they became contemporary characters in the minds of exhibition visitors. The Home Journal, for instance, admired the "expression of the [Bowery] b'hoy dancing gayly by the side of the cart."<sup>25</sup> Listed as number one hundred on the distribution list was Thomas Cole's four part series The Voyage of Life. The presence of Cole's allegorical series took the Art-Union's popularity to new heights. It secured the Art-Union a dramatic increase in subscriptions within the last few weeks preceding the distribution of prizes as well as a steady flow of visitors through its galleries.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of this work as "historical genre," see Mark Thistlethwaite, "The Most Important Themes: History Painting and Its Place in American Art," in Grand Illusions, 40-42. See also Wendy Greenhouse, "The Landing of the Fathers: Representing the National Past in American History Painting, 1770-1865," Picturing History: American Painting 1770-1930, William Ayres, ed. (New York, 1993), 58-59. Greenhouse cites Ranney's painting as an example of the "genrefication" of history. I borrow from her the expression "generic historical types."

<sup>25</sup>"The Fine Arts," Home Journal (November 25, 1848), n.p.

<sup>26</sup>On the popularity of Cole's work as a religious allegory, see Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire" in Thomas Cole: Landscape into History, William Truettner and idem, eds. (New Haven and London, 1994), 98-101. See

While these various forms of historical or allegorical art seemed to prove that the Art-Union provided fertile ground for aspiring artists of ideal themes, Spencer entered the New York art world at a moment when history painting was intensely scrutinized by art critics around the country. Many of them would have agreed with Charles Lanman's optimistic declaration in the Southern Literary Messenger that "the field, spread out before the American Historical Painter is as wide as the domain of Art can make it," but at the same time art critics believed that the highest achievements in history painting were still out of reach for a majority of American painters.<sup>27</sup> One of the New York weeklies that became keenly interested in the fate of history painting in America was the Home Journal. Under the editorial control of Nathaniel Parker Willis, it promoted the highest standards for history painters. Throughout the late 1840s and early 1850s, the Home Journal closely monitored history paintings at Art-Union exhibitions and elsewhere. Shortly after the highly successful 1848 Art-Union exhibition Willis glowingly wrote that "art, in its touching and impressive form of history, has achieved honorable triumphs, if not imperishable renown." And he urged younger painters to pursue historical art, to heroically continue "their perilous march over the moral Alps." Yet such clarion calls for historical art were almost always accompanied by admonitions of some kind. Willis warned the young painters not to fall into "offences and vulgarities in painting of

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also his "The Voyage of Life as Popular Art," Art Bulletin 59, no. 2 (June 1977), 234-41.

<sup>27</sup>Charles Lanman "On the Prerequisites for the Formation of a National School of Historical Painting," Southern Literary Messenger 14 (December 1848), 730.

historical pretensions."<sup>28</sup>

Although Willis was preoccupied with history painting more than any other art form, he did not personally review Leutze's grand works Washington Crossing the Delaware and Washington at the Battle of Monmouth. Instead he printed English translations of German newspaper reviews. Willis preferred to play a kind of gatekeeper to the higher regions of art. His comment to the "neophyte" painter of a piece entitled "Infant Bacchus" was: "It is in historical painting, as in poetry, no mediocrity of talent is admissible."<sup>29</sup> Willis's attacks on mediocrity in history painting went hand in hand with his hostility toward the Art-Union.<sup>30</sup>

In his crusade against mediocrity and in defense of beauty, Willis conflated artistic excellence and female purity. In his cultural agenda, both artists and women had to be protected from the harsh world of commercialism. One can surmise some of Willis' attitude toward Spencer's work from several references to her in the pages of the Home

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<sup>28</sup>"The American Art-Union," Home Journal (March 17, 1849), n.p.

<sup>29</sup>"Art and Artists," Home Journal (February 8, 1851), n.p.

<sup>30</sup>See Rachel N. Klein's detailed account of Willis' attack in, "Art and Authority in Antebellum New York City: The Rise and Fall of the American Art-Union," 1548-1554. Klein persuasively argues that Willis used "taste" and "refinement" as cultural capital to compensate for his relative lack of social status vis-à-vis that of the Art-Union managers. Willis invented himself as a defender of elitism and European sophistication and accused the Art-Union of "egalitarianism." He remained largely an outsider to what Klein calls the male sociability and "patrician republicanism" of the Art-Union leadership.

Journal.<sup>31</sup> In a review of the 1851 exhibition of the National Academy of Design, the Home Journal informed its readers that Spencer's work had been purchased and immediately removed "from the gaze of the vulgar."<sup>32</sup> Four years later, on the occasion of a visit to her studio, this reference to male protection of Spencer's female vulnerability was more fully articulated: "This worthy lady has been so severely criticized, that every gentleman must feel a chivalrous impulse to defend her against all comers."<sup>33</sup> The reviewer stated that "it may be steadfastly asserted that she has much genius in thought, design, touches of human nature, and the rendering of domestic and still-life."<sup>34</sup>

Through positive reenforcement of Spencer's "domestic" genre, the Home Journal and its chief editor underlined what John Ruskin had stated negatively in regard to women artists who attempted historical painting. Ruskin's dismissal of Anna Mary Howitt's large-scale history painting Boadicea Brooding over Her Wrongs, sums up his position. In a private letter rather than in published criticism, Ruskin advised Howitt to "leave such subjects alone."<sup>35</sup> In a similarly patronizing fashion Willis' editorial comments had set high standards for Spencer, or any woman artist willing to pursue

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<sup>31</sup>In the Spencer Papers, Willis' name appears first on a list of people who "knew Mrs. Lilly Martin Spencer . . . very well and were great admirers of her genius and her philosophy." Spencer Papers, "Miscellany."

<sup>32</sup>"National Academy of Design," Home Journal (May 3, 1851), n. p.

<sup>33</sup>"Studios of American Artists," Home Journal (February 16, 1856), n. p.

<sup>34</sup>"Studios of American Artists," *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Deborah Cherry, Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists, 187.

history painting. As Willis insisted in the pages of the Home Journal, history painting was "a department which requires industry, sensibility, imagination, and power of the highest order."<sup>36</sup>

Yet Willis' patronizing standards did not remain unchallenged. In her review of Spencer's work at the Philadelphia Art-Union, Henriette A. Hadry cited the artist as an example for female accomplishment in the arts, refuting any notions that women's art needed chivalrous male protection. Spencer's abilities, she claimed, stood their ground "without that affectation of courtesy that would yield undue indulgence for feminine weakness or delicacy, -- and thereby debar her from the benefit of fair criticism." Hadry's article on Spencer made larger emancipatory claims:

Education has done much to sweep away the absurd prejudices that would limit the sphere of woman to the skilful performance of household duties, and that made the exercise of the highest gifts of nature an innovation of man's jealously guarded privileges. And in the present progressive age, it will be readily conceded by the most enlightened, that there is no department in literature or art, in which she may not consistently strive to excel, and in which her success, as author or artist, can reasonably intimate the want of those virtues and attractions that make her lovely and beloved in the various relations of private life. But

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<sup>36</sup>"The American Art-Union," Home Journal (March 17, 1849), n. p..

while the growth of this sentiment is gradually leading to her social emancipation, and encouraging future efforts to perseverance, it must be acknowledged, that as yet, the occasions are rare, and therefore regarded as remarkable, that a woman appears as a competitor, coequally with the other sex, for distinction in the higher branches of art or science.<sup>37</sup>

Despite such sisterly support, Spencer did not completely venture into the "higher branches." After her move to New York, Spencer repeatedly wrote her parents describing how hard she worked on improving her painting skills. On March 29, 1850, she reported: "When we came to New York, I found myself so inferior to most of the artists here that I found that if I did not want to be entirely lost among them I would have to make the closest study of almost every part of my art;" and "I found myself deficient in drawing drapery and even coloring;" and then, a few months later, "I am all the time trying to improve, and still always find myself trying, like the boys in the streets running after the back of the carriages, although running, but seldom catching up."<sup>38</sup> Spencer found herself in a predicament. Her prospects of breaking into a field dominated by Leutze, Rothermel,

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<sup>37</sup>Henriette A. Hadry, "Mrs. Lilly M. Spencer," Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art 9, 2 (1851), 152-53. For an excellent introduction into the correlations between women artists and feminist activism in England see Deborah Cherry, "Women Artists and the Politics of Feminism 1850-1900," in Clariss Campbell Orr, ed., Women in the Victorian Art World (Manchester and New York, 1995), 49-69.

<sup>38</sup>Letters to mother, March 29 and June 5, 1850, Spencer Papers.

and a few others were dim. After the collapse of the American Art-Union the market for historical art would shrink even further. She continued to pursue her 'peculiar genre' with which she had already received some recognition. Throughout the 1850s she exhibited humorous genre scenes of women engaged in what Hadry had called "skilful performance of household duties." Her principal patron during the later half of the 1850s became the Cosmopolitan Art Association.

### **Cosmopolitan Art Association**

Founded in 1854, the Cosmopolitan Art Association's commissions contributed to Spencer's income during a period of economic hardships. Yet in 1856, one year before a financial panic hit the country's economy, she considered leaving the profession for good.<sup>39</sup> However, never before was her work so widely circulated as in the years when the Cosmopolitan Art Association bought and engraved it.

In its campaign to appeal directly to women, the Cosmopolitan Art Association eagerly promoted Spencer as a living exemplar of women's achievement in the arts.<sup>40</sup> The Cosmopolitan Art Journal espoused an overall philosophy regarding women that was

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<sup>39</sup>See letter to mother, September 10, 1856, Spencer Papers.

<sup>40</sup>I gleaned helpful information on Spencer's connections with the Cosmopolitan Art Association from Carl Bode, The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1956; Helen S. Langa, "Lilly Martin Spencer: Genre, Aesthetics, and Gender in the Work of a Mid-Nineteenth Century American Woman Artist;" and Elizabeth Johns, American Genre Painting, 162, 164, 168.



a combination of Willis' sentimental adulation and the Art-Union managers' practical business instinct. In an article that advertised Spencer's Kiss Me, and You'll Kiss the Lassies and other works slated for the annual distribution, the Journal introduced the artist as a heroine who overcame "obstacles everywhere thrown in woman's way."<sup>41</sup> At other times, however, it only matter-of-factly stated that the artist was busy and prospering ("Her pictures command large prices").<sup>42</sup>

Assuming that Spencer was a more accurate judge of her own economic situation, her letters contradict such statements and provide evidence that she was not prospering. In the letter dating from September 10, 1856, Spencer gives the following account of her frustrations regarding "the picture manufacturing business":

there are large auctioneering establishments (and these establishments are increasing frightfully) where they pay miriads of german and french painters of no reputation, to copy popular engravings and pictures (of course you know what kind of pictures) upon canvasses 25x30 inches in size, for from three to four dollars, a piece. They then put a frame of from nine to ten dollar in value, about them, and then sell this picture, frame and all, for about 20 or 25 dollars, and still make smart profits, as they call it on them. The middling classes supply

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<sup>41</sup>CAJ, 1, 1 (July 1856), 27.

<sup>42</sup>CAJ, 4, 3 (September 1860), 127.

themselves with pictures from this quarter entirely, and the very rich are beginning to think it vulgar and unfashionable to have their beautiful walls covered with pictures. So you may see by this that the glory, the poetry of art is entirely gone from here.<sup>43</sup>

If neither the middling classes nor the rich bought her paintings, who would? Although the rich bought domestic genre works by Edmonds, Mount, and others, Spencer's were not to be found in the collections of the patrons we discussed in previous chapters.<sup>44</sup> Over the years, Spencer developed relationships with the wives of some of the leading collectors, including Mrs. August Belmont and Mrs. M.O. Roberts, but such social ties did not lead to commissions. The middle class buyers, on the other hand, constituted a market for lithographs and other engravings more than paintings, as her own success with the pair of portraits of "ragged" black children, Power of Fashion (location unknown) and

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<sup>43</sup>Letter to mother, September 10, 1856. Spencer Papers. In the same letter she states "Some time ago I sold two pictures on a credit of three or four months, to an association called the Cosmopolitan Art Association. I am very much afraid I shall never get any thing from them. I have been told that it is a very uncertain affair."

<sup>44</sup>A comment by Joseph Sill may shed some light on the ambivalence that private collectors felt towards Spencer's work: "Went to see 2 Pictures by Mrs Spencer of Cincinnati exhibiting at the [Philadelphia] Art Union Building -- one of them called "Domestic Happiness" contains 4 figures as large as life, which are well drawn and painted with force, alth' rather too tame in colour -- the children especially are well painted -- The price is \$350! -- a large price for the Picture of a Lady artist; but her style is good and would do credit to many artists of long established reputation." See Sill Diaries, November 12, 1849.

Height of Fashion (location unknown), evidenced.<sup>45</sup>

Bolton-Smith and Truettner have argued that Spencer's artistic career was closely tied to "the middle classes, who were both eager to purchase culture in the form of art and quick to assert their preference for scenes with which they could identify."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, from her selection of anecdotal and humorous themes, to the domestic everyday settings, down to her tongue-and-cheek titles that directly address the viewer (Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses, Shake Hands?), Spencer captured a world of domestic production and consumption that was only too familiar to most of the Cosmopolitan Art Association members. But Spencer's frustrations with the buying habits of the 'middling classes' suggests that her collaboration with the Cosmopolitan Art Association was not without tensions. Rather than challenge Spencer to pursue grand historical themes, the Cosmopolitan Art Association encouraged her to rely on personal experience. One would thus expect such tensions to surface in the representations of domestic life which the Association commissioned from her.

David Lubin has argued that Spencer's work of that period articulated ironic

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<sup>45</sup>Bolton-Smith and Truettner point out the similarities to Muntz's The Banjo Player and The Bone Player. Muntz's as well as Spencer's paintings were engraved in Paris and distributed in the United States by the picture dealer William Schaus. See The Joys of Sentiment, 39. Johns refers to the pair as "two condescending lithographs of black children playing 'dress-up,'" revealing Spencer "to have calculated her audience very knowledgeably." See Johns, American Genre Painting, 239, note 38.

<sup>46</sup>The Joys of Sentiment, 31.

distance from and affirmation of the ideological formations of an American bourgeoisie.<sup>47</sup>

Yet this seems to resolve too easily the general dilemma that Spencer was facing: the market for domestic genre allowed her to turn her domestic identity into a source of artistic authority, but it pulled her further away from painting ideal themes. Moreover, as the reception of her work during the 1850s showed, some critics considered her kitchen and family scenes low and vulgar.

In a review of Jolly Washerwoman (1851, Hood Museum, Dartmouth College), one of Spencer's first paintings of a woman at her daily chores, the Albion noted that "Mrs. Soapsuds at her tub . . . does so evidently relish a joke, that the fun is really catching." But the reviewer also reminded Spencer that "the great Dutch painters of the very homeliest scenes contrived to elevate them by their tone and treatment." The following year, the Albion reviewed Spencer's A Future President (n.d., location unknown), the portrait of a "chuckling, crowing, slobbering baby, laid out upon a pillow." Spencer failed to capture the "graces of infancy" and displayed "deficiency of good taste." The reviewer advised Spencer to stick to "comic subjects . . . such as the young negro boy smoking his cigar in . . . the Power of Fashion." The Home Journal, under Nathaniel Parker Willis' editorship, remained Spencer's steadfast supporter. In the report of a studio visit from which we quoted earlier, the Home Journal asserted that Spencer had "much genius in thought, design, touches of human nature, and the rendering of domestic and

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<sup>47</sup>See David Lubin, Picturing a Nation, 160-162

still-life."<sup>48</sup> In an article on the National Academy of Design exhibition that year, the Home Journal listed Spencer's work among the "genre" artists Edmonds and Johnson and referred to it as "supra-Dutch verities."<sup>49</sup> Although it seemed that she was thus establishing herself among the foremost genre painters, Spencer's career was actually stagnating. She still had no major private patronage, and her work was attacked by one of the leading art journals, The Crayon.

In its extensive review of Spencer's The Young Husband (1854, Masco Collection) and The Young Wife (location unknown), which ran over two columns, The Crayon credited her with "a truly remarkable ability to paint," but criticized her on many grounds. The reviewer accused her of "vulgarism," poor drawing, a "frivolous" choice of subject, and deemed her unsuccessful "as a painter of humor:" "If Mrs. Spencer would paint noble pictures, she must leave out her attempts at humor." This reviewer concluded that she was presently pursuing a subject that was improper for a female artist: "Is there in her woman's soul no serene grave thought, no quiet happiness, no tearful aspiration, to the expression of which she may give her pencil? Being a woman, she should have some deeper, tenderer conceptions of humanity than her brother artists, something, at all events, better worth her painting, and our seeing, than grinning house-maids or perplexed young wives."<sup>50</sup> More encouraging was The Crayon's positive reception of her contributions to

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<sup>48</sup>"Studios of American Artists," Home Journal (Feb. 16, 1856), n. p.

<sup>49</sup>"Topics Astir. National Academy of Design," Home Journal (March 22, 1856), n. p.

<sup>50</sup>"Exhibition of the National Academy," The Crayon 3 (May 1856), 146.

the annual Academy exhibition of 1858, Fi! Fo! Fum! (1858, Private Collection) and Gossip (ca. 1858, location unknown). It called the latter a "masterpiece." Yet, as in other reviews that we quoted, the critic was not quite comfortable with the subject: "There is a vigor of the brush, and a successful rendering of expression in this picture which astonishes as much as one is repelled by the intense vulgarity of the scene."<sup>51</sup> Spencer thus fell short of the aesthetic standards set by the Crayon not only for being a "vulgar" artist but for being a vulgar "woman" artist.

The market for paintings of domestic themes was thus a mixed blessing for Spencer. In such paintings as Gossip, she succeeded to render a "vulgar" subject with a grandeur that impressed even the most high-minded critics. Labels such as "supra-Dutch varieties," could mean critical approval but could also connote a lower type of genre. Most dispiriting, however, must have been the dismissal of her work as inappropriate for a female artist.

If genre painting was too "low" and history painting was considered too "high" for Spencer, what could she paint?

### **Spencer as Historian and Allegorist**

Spencer was still determined to rest her reputation on works that dealt with more ennobling subjects. Due to continuing financial troubles Spencer moved her family to

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<sup>51</sup>"Sketchings. Exhibition of the National Academy of Design," The Crayon 5 (June 1858), 177. For further discussion of Gossip, see The Joys of Sentiment, 51-52.

Newark, New Jersey, in 1859. The signs that she would succeed in the pursuit of historical themes were not auspicious, though. In December she wrote to her parents: "I think there is no poorer business than that of an artist. Photographing is destroying portrait painting and fancy and historical pictures are no more cared for than so much rubbish, now and then there will be a person who will buy a fancy piece without buying it at auction, but this is hardly enough to enable a person to live."<sup>52</sup>

However, a survey of Spencer's located and unlocated works reveals that over the next two decades she pursued history in a variety of expressions.<sup>53</sup> In the late 1850s, the editors of Godey's Lady's Book commissioned from her a "series of original designs" illustrating Elizabeth Ellet's The Women of the American Revolution.<sup>54</sup> Other titles and images suggest historical or quasi-historical themes. War Spirit at Home was part of a series of war-related paintings that included The Home Guard (ca. 1873, location unknown) and Home Is for the Brave (ca. 1866, location unknown). The Fifteenth Amendment (1873) is the title of another unlocated image that refers to a historical event of great significance. She painted at least two historical portraits, one of Ulysses S. Grant (ca. 1872, location unknown) and the other of John C. Fremont (1867, location

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<sup>52</sup>Spencer to parents, December 29, 1859, Spencer Papers.

<sup>53</sup>Bolton-Smith and Truettner, The Joys of Sentiment, still provides the most comprehensive and recent checklist. Unless otherwise noted, all references to titles, locations, and dates are from this checklist.

<sup>54</sup> See Elizabeth Ellet, Women Artists, 325. See also entry in Bolton-Smith and Truettner, 189.

unknown). It is difficult to make a convincing case for Spencer as a history painter based on such scanty evidence. But the fact that her domestic genre works have predominantly survived rather than her earlier literary paintings or the later historical pictures should not close the case either. The safest conclusion one can probably draw is that Spencer was unable to build a patronage network for historical paintings after she moved away from New York.

Spencer probably met and sketched Grant on the occasion of his visit to the house of Marcus Ward, the Governor of New Jersey.<sup>55</sup> Ward's wife Susan was a relative of Nicholas Longworth. The Wards, it seems, assumed the function of friends, guardians, and business partners. When the Spencers moved to Newark, New Jersey, in 1859, they bought their house on 461 High Street from Ward. The contract allowed them to pay the price of \$4000 in installments over several years and the interest in the form of paintings.<sup>56</sup> Through her friendship with the Ward family, Spencer potentially had access to a powerful circle of Republicans, but unlike Emanuel Leutze and Eastman Johnson, she was unable to garner significant support from the new Republican elite.

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<sup>55</sup>Ward was defeated when he first ran for governor in 1862 but won in 1865. During the Civil War he rendered numerous services visiting camps and battle-fields and gained a reputation as the "Soldiers' Friend." Other philanthropic activities included the New Jersey Historical Society, the Newark Library Association, and the New Jersey Art-Union. See Robert Sobel and John Raimo, ed., Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States, 1789-1988 (New York, 1988), 1022; and Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography Vol. 6 (New York, 1889), 352.

<sup>56</sup>Benjamin Spencer explained the terms of the contract to Lilly M. Spencer's parents in a letter, dated October 14, 1860. Spencer Papers.



At the beginning of the Civil War, Spencer showed some renewed interest in allegorical painting. Our Future Americans (mid 1860s, location unknown), a double child portrait dating from about 1860, had allegorical overtones. Robin Bolton-Smith and William Truettner make a convincing case that these are most likely portraits commemorating the Ward children Catherine and Francis who had passed away, or of children from another prominent family.<sup>57</sup> Given that the Spencers were struggling to pay Ward the balance on the house at a time when their income was at an all time low, it is quite possible that Ward accepted this painting as a payment. The size of the painting, 62 x 51, further suggests that such a transaction could have taken place. This portrait would fall under a category that Elizabeth Ellet described as "semi-allegorical."<sup>58</sup> It was the kind of patriotic allegory that made youth the emblem of national promise and regeneration. Under the banner of "Young America," variations of this popular allegory could be found in the print culture of the 1850s as well as in photography. The allegorical photographer Gabriel Harrison, for instance, produced daguerreotype images of his children representing "Young America."<sup>59</sup> Instead of looking for nationalistic meaning in dead heroes, the nation's history was embodied in the unfulfilled promise of youth and thus projected forward into the future. Spencer's effort to turn death into a life

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<sup>57</sup>Joys of Sentiment, 193.

<sup>58</sup>Ellet, Women Artists, 323.

<sup>59</sup>Illustrated in Grant B. Romer, "Gabriel Harrison -- The Poetic Daguerrean," Image 22 (September 1979), 15.

affirming allegory was quite in line with the psychological mechanisms through which many Northerners learned to look at death and suffering as positive, even rejuvenating forces.<sup>60</sup>

Spencer's search for morally uplifting themes culminated in the large allegorical painting Truth Unveiling Falsehood (fig. 14). If she intended the painting to be an allegorical comment on the Civil War, the message got lost, for no contemporary or later commentator made that connection.<sup>61</sup> The painting has always been interpreted as a generic allegory, representing personifications of the struggle between good and evil, virtue and vice. It thus followed an allegorical convention of conveying moral narrative through dualism. Spencer had explored such a dualism in her pairings of youth and age. A contemporary example in landscape painting that she would have most likely known was Jasper F. Cropsey's pair The Spirit of War and The Spirit of Peace (1851).<sup>62</sup> Such

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<sup>60</sup>For an exemplary study of these and other psychological reactions to the Civil War, see George M. Fredrickson, The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union (New York and Evanston, 1965). See especially Chapter Six, "'This Cruel War': The Individual Response to Suffering," 79-97.

<sup>61</sup>Bolton-Smith and Truettner, otherwise very sensitive interpreters of Spencer's work, found little redeeming quality in Truth Unveiling Falsehood and judged it harshly: "Apparently the artist was unwilling to accept two decades of humorous genre scenes as her ultimate accomplishment, but one could wish that she had not attempted instead this random account of Henri Fuseli and assorted old masters. Not only was the subject an unresolved pre-Freudian nightmare but the artist's concept of allegory seems to have become warped in the twenty-year interval. It must be inevitable that a suppressed Victorian dream results in an unhappy love affair or a grotesque painting." Joys of Sentiment, 207.

<sup>62</sup>For an insightful discussion of this allegorical pair see Angela Miller, Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875 (Ithaca and

allegorical images often used scenes from a distant past to allude to the present. They included visual clues that allowed the viewer to relate the image to specific historic persons or events and thus complete the implied didactic meaning. But in their general conception they remained historically vague and abstract.

According to several sources, Truth Unveiling Falsehood had been on Spencer's mind for twenty years before she even began to develop it.<sup>63</sup> That means her idea to paint a large allegorical piece can be dated back to the mid to late 1840s, suggesting a number of artistic precedents. Rembrandt Peale's Court of Death (1820, Detroit Institute of Art), for instance, first exhibited in 1820, was also a bifurcated composition. It went on a second national tour in the 1840s and twice, in 1845 and 1848, was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York. In a pamphlet published in connection with the first exhibition Peale denied that the painting contained allegorical conventions; if anything, it was a "natural" allegory.<sup>64</sup> When Spencer wrote in her description of Truth Unveiling Falsehood that this was an allegory that should be read as factual rather than emblematic, she echoed Peale's literalist conception.

Although a different type of allegory, Cole's Voyage of Life inevitably comes to mind. Cole's allegorical series was exhibited at the Western Art-Union in Cincinnati in

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London, 1993), 122-126.

<sup>63</sup>See Joys of Sentiment, 206.

<sup>64</sup>A comprehensive study of Peale's painting is Ellen Hickey Grayson, "Art, Audiences, and the Aesthetics of Social Order in Antebellum America: Rembrandt Peale's 'Court of Death'" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1995).

1847 when Spencer was still there. She would have again encountered it in New York where in 1848 it was the great draw at the American Art-Union's annual distribution and Youth became the annual engraving the following year. Although it had lost some of its fame by the time Spencer started her painting, Cole's series was still in circulation as a popular print. Like Cole, Spencer relied on a lengthy descriptive text to supplement the visual image. One reviewer of Spencer's painting remarked: "It is a poem in colors, an allegorical work, and like the allegory of old John Bunyan, will live forever."<sup>65</sup>

Spencer thus attempted to rejuvenate a tradition of popular moralizing allegory in the United States, but her allegorical painting met a similarly harsh rejection as Leutze's Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way. A critic for the New York Herald wrote a particularly caustic review, referring to Truth Unveiling Falsehood as a "farrago of allegorical and metaphysical balderdash." The following comment points at the reasons why the painting met such resentment: "In sensational works of this character there is much to get rid of before one comes to the real art at all, and so little of that when it is gotten at, that the whole thing, intangible as meaningless, vanishes as soon as it is approached and touched."<sup>66</sup> Thus, Spencer's allegory became another "victim" of a modernist disdain for allegorical contrivance, fueled by the voices for aesthetic renewal

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<sup>65</sup>Newspaper clip, Spencer Papers. John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress was one of the most popular literary texts in nineteenth-century America and became a source of inspiration for several visual artists, among them Peale, Cole, and Spencer. To my knowledge a study of Bunyan's influence on the visual arts remains yet to be written.

<sup>66</sup>Newspaper clip, Spencer Papers.

that we discussed earlier. Lubin has recently proposed the following reassessment of Truth Unveiling Falsehood. Although the "painting is normally considered an aberration in Spencer's oeuvre," Lubin notes, "its bifurcation of femininity into selflessness and selfishness may in fact have been Spencer's way of summing up an entire adulthood divided painfully between family and career." While Spencer may have encoded such personal meaning into the painting, this does not contradict my own reading of Truth Unveiling Falsehood as a belated contribution to the tradition of romantic allegorical painting.<sup>67</sup>

In War Spirit at Home, painted only a year earlier, Spencer demonstrated her inventiveness in combining domestic genre with a historical event. It too had precedents in the recent past. American genre painters before her had represented contemporary history as collectively shared news. A well-known nineteenth-century news-image was Richard Caton Woodville's War News from Mexico (fig. 5). The American Art-Union praised the painting warmly when it arrived from Düsseldorf and had it engraved for membership distribution. Bryan Wolf has discussed the painting as an example of how mid-nineteenth-century artists responded to and participated in a "cognitive revolution" brought about by the proliferation of news media.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Spencer can be located within a broader shift in American society toward forms of mass mediation which not

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<sup>67</sup>See Lubin, Picturing a Nation, 200.

<sup>68</sup>Bryan Wolf, "All the World's a Code: Art and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Painting," Art Journal (Winter 1984), 333.

only repackaged but restructured information. News transformed history (or at least its romantic variant) into a commodity that was valued for its immediate gratification of the need for knowledge. But the extended family that Woodville's painting gathered under the roof of the 'American Hotel,' as the inscription reads, stood for a hierarchically ordered republican *civitas* not an open society.

Spencer's The War Spirit at Home departed from Woodville's war news image in several ways. Most obviously, she shifted the central location of news consumption from the public arena of Woodville's 'American Hotel' into the home. Here, the reader and listener are both women, mistress and maid. The power difference between these women is clearly demarcated. The mistress holds the newspaper and claims the authority of the word. The maid listens attentively but continues her work. Like the African-American laborer in Woodville's painting, she keeps her assigned place. In another respect, however, Spencer's composition is asymmetrical to Woodville's. The central characters on the porch of the 'American Hotel' react passionately to the news, much in contrast to the calmer attitude of the African-American and an older woman standing to the side of the central group. In The War Spirit at Home the two women neither mirror the excitement of Woodville's young men nor the resigned passivity of the bystanders. Their response is dispassionate and calm. The main scenario of the war being far away from home, the news of a decisive Northern victory at Vicksburg was valuable information that

could stir patriotic emotions, but it did not disturb a family's domestic routine.<sup>69</sup>

War Spirit at Home undermined the conventions of historical representation through the central female figure. Deriving her power from her positions of mistress, mother, and principal speaker/reader, she replaced the victimized female heroine who had been the dominant type of female character in antebellum history painting.<sup>70</sup> Yet these positions are staged in a playful balancing act. The woman holds the printed page, the main visual signifier that a momentous day in history is commemorated, while cradling her baby at the same time. The baby, itself, one hand on her mother's breast, one foot on the page, physically connects the woman's positions of mother and historical witness/interpreter.

## Conclusion

While Spencer found a contemporary form for expressing the intersection of femininity, domesticity, and history, she was unable to reach an audience receptive to her work. After all, as we saw in an earlier chapter, the one or two years following the end of the Civil War were crucial to the formation of a reformist agenda in art production and

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<sup>69</sup>Based on a reading of her letters, neither Spencer nor her immediate relatives were directly involved in the war effort. But even if the war had brought personal tragedy home to the Spencers, the painting displaces any personal affliction onto the impersonal level of news.

<sup>70</sup>See, for instance, Wendy Greenhouse, "Imperiled Ideals: British Historical Heroines in Antebellum American History Painting," in Redefining American History Painting, 263-276.

reception. Roughly between 1864 and 1869, Clarence Cook pronounced the metaphorical death of Leutze and the Düsseldorf style, James J. Jarves announced the arrival of an American school of "home painting," and Eugene Benson called for historical art that was contemporary. Spencer's War Spirit at Home fitted the aesthetic criteria espoused by the spokesmen of this critical movement, but it failed to get their attention. A younger male artist by the name of Eastman Johnson had already received the stamp of approval from critics and patrons. Johnson had returned from art studies in Germany (under Leutze) Holland, and France, and he painted humble domestic subjects. Johnson fitted the critics' prophetic agenda. They agreed that he could redeem American art and rid it of "vulgarity," both in genre and in history.



## Chapter 6:

### Eastman Johnson: Low Life and "High Art"

The more you study Eastman Johnson, the more impatient you become. He had so many skills that you want to shake him from not putting all together into a masterpiece.

Writing about one hundred years after the painter Eastman Johnson first reached national fame, the American art historian James Thomas Flexner thus expressed his frustration with Johnson's refusal to paint anything that amounted to a "masterpiece."<sup>1</sup> Flexner blamed two factors: the Civil War and the era of "industrialism and capitalism" which deprived genre painters of Johnson's generation of something to profoundly believe in. While painters such as Emanuel Leutze left a legacy of historical melodrama, Johnson and other genre painters left one of "triviality."<sup>2</sup>

Such dissatisfaction with Johnson's inability to fully exploit his own artistic potential is echoed by other twentieth-century scholars. In an article entitled "The Failure of a Successful Artist," Kenneth Ames stated that Johnson's "artistic power" simply "fizzled out." According to Ames' assessment, Johnson was his most productive and confident self when he "probed more deeply into America's conscience," painting "some

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<sup>1</sup>James Thomas Flexner, That Wilder Image (1962; reprint, New York, 1970), 204.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

of the most sympathetic images of Black people painted in this country in the nineteenth century," before he turned completely to portraiture and became a "weary picture-merchant." Ames offered one main reason for Johnson's "failure." He wanted to "create an American art which would be a true expression of his time" but was overburdened by his own "adherence to European high polish."<sup>3</sup>

More recently, scholars have begun to reevaluate Johnson's portraiture from different perspectives. Suzaan Boettger, for instance, has explored the links between Johnson and William Blodgett, the prominent art collector and Union supporter, through one family portrait. In another article, John Davis has discussed the negative reception of Johnson's portrait of the Brown family with its ostentatious display of a banker's wealthy home. Patricia Hills recently revised her own earlier neglect of Johnson's portraits. In an essay that concluded an exhibition catalogue on Johnson's series of Cranberry harvest pictures, Hills wrote that Johnson's abandonment of genre painting around 1881 was not merely a personal "monetary consideration" but related to a more general shift in "taste and attitudes about art that occurred in the late 1870s."<sup>4</sup> Despite such helpful

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<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Ames, "Eastman Johnson: The Failure of a Successful Artist," Art Journal 22, 2 (Winter 1969/70), 174-176.

<sup>4</sup>Suzaan Boettger, "Eastman Johnson's *Blodgett Family* and Domestic Values During the Civil War Era," American Art 6, 4 (Fall 1992), 51-67; John Davis, "Children in the Parlor: Eastman Johnson's *Brown Family* and the Post-Civil War Luxury Interior," American Art 10, 2 (Summer 1996), 51-77; Patricia Hills, "Afterword/Afterwards: Eastman Johnson's Transition to Portrait Painting in the Early 1880s," in Marc Simpson et al., eds., Eastman Johnson: The Cranberry Harvest, Island of Nantucket, exhibition catalogue (Timken Art Gallery, San Diego, 1990), 78.

reassessments, Ames' perception of a rift between a younger and an older Johnson -- the one sympathetic to slaves, poor blacks and whites, New Englanders at maple-sugar harvest camps, cranberry gatherers, and rustic old folks from Nantucket; the other a "weary" portraitist of New York's upper crust -- still remains unchallenged.

In this chapter I will argue that no real split existed in Johnson's career. Rather, he moved very purposefully back and forth between rustic genre scenes and cosmopolitan portraits. Johnson deliberately turned away from Leutze's mode of historical painting and embraced two less discredited modes of expression: genre and portraiture. He made this shift without completely shedding an interest in historical subjects and in the historical meaning of the present. However, patrons and critics embraced Johnson as a "pure" genre painter, an artist who could bring about a renewal of American art in light of history painting's flaws. That he started his career during the 1850s when the tide had begun to turn for history painters was a coincidence; that he managed to strike a chord with those critics and patrons who were most disaffected with history painting was not.

### **Johnson Eclipses Leutze**

Eastman Johnson's early career was closely tied to Leutze. When Johnson contemplated his first trip to Europe in 1849 to complete his art education, one of his advisors, the Art-Union official Andrew Warner, urged him to go to Düsseldorf and study with Emanuel Leutze. The Art-Union leadership always prided itself on having greatly

aided Leutze's success.<sup>5</sup> From Düsseldorf Johnson reported home with youthful braggadocio that life in Leutze's studio was jolly-good fun, filled with beer-drinking and other "animation."<sup>6</sup> One of his principal assignments was to paint a small copy of Washington Crossing the Delaware for the International Art Union which would use Johnson's version for its engraving. How crucial Leutze's influence was is debatable. Eager to erase what they considered the pre-modernist connections between American artists and the Düsseldorf Academy, some scholars have entirely dismissed its influence on Johnson. Some have emphasized Johnson's two-year-long stay in Holland as formative for his style; others have given much importance to his studies in Paris in the studio of Thomas Couture, despite the fact that he stayed only for one month.<sup>7</sup> Before we further engage in this debate, it is important to note that under Leutze Johnson was able to witness first hand the production of a grand historical picture, a picture that was

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<sup>5</sup>For biographical information on Johnson throughout this chapter, I relied on three principal sources: William Walton, "Eastman Johnson, Painter," Scribner's Magazine 40, 3 (September 1906), 263-274; John I.H. Baur, An American Genre Painter: Eastman Johnson, exhibition catalogue (Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1940); and Patricia Hills, The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson: The Sources and Development of His Style and Themes (New York and London, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Letter to Charlotte Child, March 1851, quoted in Baur, 13.

<sup>7</sup>Soon after Johnson's death, the artist Will H. Low claimed that "the art of Flanders and Holland made so direct and sympathetic an appeal to Johnson that his sojourn in Düsseldorf was comparatively brief and its lessons had little or no visible effect on his life-work." See, Will H. Low, "The Field of Art," Scribner's Magazine 40, 2 (August 1906), 253. For a discussion of Couture's influence on Johnson and other American genre painters, see Albert Boime, Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision (New Haven and London, 1980), especially 589-602.

presented to the American public as a "masterpiece." There is some evidence that in the 1860s and 1870s, in the maple-sugar camp and the cranberry harvest scenes respectively, Johnson attempted to turn a series of sketches of ordinary rural activities into one large genre work, perhaps intended to rival the grand productions of Leutze and Couture.<sup>8</sup> But before he made these attempts, Johnson had thoroughly disassociated himself from Leutze's historical manner. Indeed, he made his mark in the American art world as a painter who was decidedly unlike Leutze, both in style and temperament.

Clarence Cook, Leutze's most vociferous critic, carefully distinguished between Leutze's and Johnson's contribution to the Metropolitan Fair. After finishing his review of Leutze and the painter Thomas Hicks, Cook led into his discussion of Johnson: "How gracious is the contrast, as we turn from this work to the beautiful art of Eastman Johnson, thus far almost the only painter of the figure in America, who shows both depth of feeling and skill in execution." And as if to further stress the gulf between Johnson and Leutze, Cook concluded: "One such conscientious painter as Mr. Johnson, we are happy in believing, will neutralize the evil influence of 20 men who neither care what

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<sup>8</sup>See Sally Mills' essay "'Right Feeling and Sound Technique': French Art and the Development of Eastman Johnson's Outdoor Genre Paintings," in Eastman Johnson: The Cranberry Harvest, 53-68. Mills points out that Johnson was able to directly observe Couture work on a large mural commission and on Romans of the Decadence. After his return to the United States, according to Mills, Johnson was able to maintain a "direct link" with Couture through the collector William T. Blodgett (58).

they paint nor how."<sup>9</sup> From a later vantage point it seems odd that Johnson struck such a chord with the critics based on a few small-sized paintings that included his portrait of a young chimney sweep, called The Savoyard.<sup>10</sup> But as Cook's and other critics' comments document Johnson was seen as something of an emblem, more a "neutralizer," though, than a revolutionary.

By the time he was appointed a member of the art committee of the Metropolitan Fair other critics had done their share in building up Johnson's reputation. The magazine Round Table, mostly through the art critical columns written by Eugene Benson, had praised Johnson since its inception in 1863. Probably from Benson's pen was a piece entitled "American Genius as Expressed in Art" where one finds the following description:

Eastman Johnson, our best *genre* painter, shows its [American genius'] affiliation with the truly human and democratic. Mr. Johnson, in a style completely his own, rivals the best *genre* painters of the continent, and presents us with renderings of the life of our people; and though as yet not risen to great imaginative work, he has given us pictures full of reality, refreshingly human in their interest, and more

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<sup>9</sup>Clarence Cook, "The Exhibition of Pictures at the Metropolitan Fair," New-York Daily Tribune 23 (April 9, 1864), 12.

<sup>10</sup>According to Hills, Johnson painted at least three versions of The Savoyard. See The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson, 45.

comprehensive than the works of any American artist. He has shown an appreciation of all sides of life, and but that as yet he has not done anything tragic and introspective, as well as dramatic and objective, would justly be classed with the genius called Shakespearean.<sup>11</sup>

Like the twentieth-century scholars we quoted earlier, critics were thus aware that Johnson was not producing the masterpiece that he was thought to be capable of. What he delivered, though, was a type of genre painting focused on "human interest" that could replace theatrical and contrived history paintings à la Leutze. Reviewing the art exhibition at the Metropolitan Fair, Eugene Benson echoed James Jackson Jarves' call for "home painting," when he referred to Eastman Johnson as "the most genuine and comprehensive painter of home life that we have ever had." Benson elaborated:

Mr. Johnson is not adequately represented in the present exhibition. But the three little pictures from his easel on the walls of the gallery are admirable pieces of painting and expression, and have that simple and domestic look that wins our love and makes us feel grateful to the artist for so affectionately rendering

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<sup>11</sup>[Eugene Benson?], "American Genius as Expressed in Art," Round Table 1 (19 December, 1863), 22.

subjects that are closely connected with the heart of to-day.<sup>12</sup>

In Art-Idea, which came out in 1864, Jarves pronounced Johnson the ideal American practitioner of "home painting." However, he resented a certain complacency in Johnson, an unwillingness to leave New York and go where "he could be stimulated by the competition and example of equal or greater abilities."<sup>13</sup> Benson and other critics, quoted in an earlier chapter, would not have agreed that home painters needed to go abroad to perfect their art. According to the nationalistic creed of critics that emerged during the Civil War, home painters could stay home, paint native subjects, and still compete with foreign masters. Reviewing the American contribution to the 1867 Exposition Universelle Cook anointed Winslow Homer and Eastman Johnson as official representatives of native art: "It is impossible not to feel that in Mr. Homer and Mr. Eastman Johnson, American art has two names, at least, that will make her respected in whatever competition."<sup>14</sup> The basis for Johnson's validation as official American painter had been established earlier when his artistic skills and family ties helped him gain access to a network of private patrons.

Johnson's biographers have noted that the artist's father, a career-politician in the

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<sup>12</sup>Eugene Benson, "Pictures at the Metropolitan Fair," Round Table 1 (16 April, 1864), 281.

<sup>13</sup>The Art-Idea, 182-183.

<sup>14</sup>"The National Academy of Design," New-York Daily Tribune 27 (May 9, 1867), 2.



state of Maine, was well-connected in Boston and Washington, the two cities where Eastman Johnson was able to secure most of his early portrait commissions.<sup>15</sup> Before he left for Europe, his clientele included literary celebrities, such as Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, and respectable socialites, such as "Dolly" Madison. In 1852 -- Johnson had already left Düsseldorf for The Hague -- William Blodgett bought a small Johnson painting when the American Art-Union holdings were sold.<sup>16</sup> In the Dutch capital Johnson painted portraits of August Belmont, the American Ambassador to Holland and his family. When The Crayon published its series of articles on private art collections in the spring of 1856 Johnson had been back from Europe for less than a year. None of the "old" collectors -- Abraham Cozzens, Jonathan Sturges, Charles Leupp, or John Wolfe -- appeared to own works by Johnson. The genre painters most commonly found in their collections were Francis Edmonds and William S. Mount.<sup>17</sup> The only Johnson picture mentioned in the series was a work called Organ Boy (before 1855, location unknown) in the M.O. Roberts collection.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>See Hills, The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson, 21-22, and Baur, 6.

<sup>16</sup>See Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, ed., American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art-Union, 210.

<sup>17</sup>See notes 26, 27, 29 in Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup>This work is probably identical with one entitled The Junior Partner listed in the American Art-Union Sales Catalogue as No. 36. The description reads: "A little boy seated upon his grand organ." See Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, 210. A Crayon article on the Rev. E.L. Magoon, number six in the series, simply mentions Johnson's last name without any reference to a title. I have been unable to verify whether the Magoon collection contained a work by Eastman Johnson. This was the only collection in the

By 1864, Johnson had already painted his first major family portrait (commissioned by William Blodgett) in the tradition of Dutch conversation pieces; two works exhibited at the Metropolitan Fair, The Savoyard and Postboy, were owned by August Belmont and M.O. Roberts respectively. When Eugene Benson reported in 1870 to the readers of Putnam's Magazine from his visit to major private collections in New York, August Belmont, William Blodgett, William Taylor Johnston, and M.O. Roberts each owned one or more of Johnson's paintings.<sup>19</sup> As was noted in an earlier chapter, these collectors often emphasized French contemporary art but also sought representative examples of contemporary genre painting from other nations. Johnson thus shared the honorable company of such painters as the French artists Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier and Robert Fleury, the Spaniard Edward Zamacois, the German Ludwig Knaus and Meyer von Bremen, the Belgian Florent Willems, and his British-born countryman George Boughton. Although the works one finds in these collections often had historical themes, the named artists treated them almost entirely as genre. The name of the French genre painter Edouard Frère, with whom Johnson was frequently compared by the critics, rarely appeared in these collection reviews, perhaps a sign that collectors preferred the

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Crayon series where the name "Mrs. Spencer" appeared. For the Roberts and Magoon collections, see The Crayon 3, "Our Private Collections, No. IV" (August 1856), 248, and "Our Private Collections, No. VI" (December 1856), 374.

<sup>19</sup>For Roberts, see note 30, Chapter 2. For other installments of the series "Pictures in the Private Galleries of New York," see Putnam's Magazine 5 (May 1870), 534-540, and 6 (July 1870), 81-87.

American exemplar of contemporary genre (Johnson) over the French original (Frère).

Unlike Leutze's work, Johnson's was unencumbered by negative criticism and it became the favorite choice among New York's leading collectors of contemporary art. This shift in popularity was confirmed by the selection committee for the American art department at the Exposition Universelle.<sup>20</sup> With four paintings and one sketch, Johnson ranked among the principal contributors. Yet the committee also paid tribute to the "old guard" and included works by Leutze, Huntington, and Gray. The only younger history painter represented was Edward May. Most American critics, however, clearly cast their vote on the side of Johnson and Homer. Apparent in these two artists' pictures of the recent past and of contemporary life was the prominence of African-Americans. In Johnson's case, we can trace the connections between race and genre painting to his early preoccupation with Dutch art.

### **The Touch of an Old Master**

Sometime during his sojourn in The Hague, Johnson became known among his peers as the "American Rembrandt." Biographical tradition also has it that Johnson was invited to become official court painter in the Dutch capital but declined. There is evidence that Johnson avidly copied Rembrandt and other Dutch old masters while in

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<sup>20</sup>For a discussion of the critical reaction to American art as well as a check list of works exhibited, see Carol Troyen, "Innocents Abroad: American Painters at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, Paris," The American Art Journal 16 (Autumn 1984), 3-29.

Holland.<sup>21</sup> Whether he carried the reputation of "American Rembrandt" with him when he entered the studio of Thomas Couture in Paris is unknown. Some of his artist friends in Paris, including the American George P.A. Healy and the German Ludwig Knaus, may have introduced him as such.<sup>22</sup>

How far Johnson or his critics perpetuated his "American Rembrandt" persona is questionable. There are, however, two incidents later in Johnson's career that connect him with Rembrandt. A direct reference appeared in one of Eugene Benson's articles for Appletons' Journal dating from 1871. Benson praised Johnson as a realist who had "a genius akin to the greatest master, to Rembrandt," although Johnson fell short "of the tremendous *power* of Rembrandt."<sup>23</sup> There is also one telling incident which evidences how comfortable Johnson felt in Rembrandtesque masquerade. In a self-portrait dating from 1899 Johnson appears in Dutch seventeenth-century costume which he donned on the occasion of the Twelfth Night celebration at the Century Club (Private Collection). Wearing a dark suit, hat, and frilled lace collar, in the "authentic" style of Rembrandt's wealthy Amsterdam clients, he sits in a bare interior, slightly slouched back, posturing as a Dutch burgher. With his Van Dyck beard and moustache Johnson gives the appearance

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<sup>21</sup>Among the few known copies after Rembrandt are those of the Anatomy Lesson. Written documents give evidence that in Holland Johnson studied Rembrandt, Hals, and Van Dyck, as well as works by Rubens in Antwerp. See Walton, 267; Baur, 13-14; and Hills, 41.

<sup>22</sup>See Mills, 56.

<sup>23</sup>Eugene Benson, "'Dropping Off--A Sketch by Eastman Johnson,'" Appletons' Journal 5 (4 March, 1871), 255.

of a Frans Banning Cocq, the Civil Guard leader, having stepped out of Rembrandt's Night Watch. At age sixty-five Johnson thus paid homage to Rembrandt by proudly and playfully portraying himself in the disguise of a high ranking Dutch burgher.<sup>24</sup>

Forty years earlier when he returned to the United States from his European studies, Johnson was far from being an immediate household name. "Who is Mr. Johnson? We confess our ignorance," stated a critic for The Albion when reviewing the 1856 spring exhibition at the National Academy of Design. The critic approved of Johnson's contribution, The Card Players, and concluded "Mr. Johnson has been evidently an *habitué* at the Düsseldorf Gallery."<sup>25</sup> Yet this was one of the few reviews which directly linked Johnson with Düsseldorf. Moreover, any Düsseldorf association that might have stuck with Johnson was through genre, not history painting. Building on his various experiences in Germany, Holland, and France, Johnson had so thoroughly absorbed an old-master technique that he was able to make his works look both mature and fresh. One of Johnson's very first contributions to the American Art-Union exhibition, The Peasants of the Rhine, elicited favorable comments for its subject and

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<sup>24</sup>The painting is illustrated in D. Dodge Thompson, "Frans Hals and American Art," The Magazine Antiques 136 (November 1989), 1170-1183. Although Johnson's self-portrait from 1899 invites associations with Frans Hals who was very popular during the late nineteenth century among a variety of American artists, including William Merrit Chase and Robert Henri, Thompson offers no convincing reason why Johnson would have exchanged his Rembrandt persona for that of Hals. For another illustration of the self-portrait, see Walton, 264.

<sup>25</sup>"Fine Arts," The Albion 15 (March 29, 1856), 153.

technique: "a charming group of a peasant-woman and child, well-conceived, well-drawn, and well-coloured."<sup>26</sup> Card Players, a humble interior scene of three men at a card table and a young woman looking on, struck the reviewer for The Albion as indicative of great "powers," and "intent, and yet how easy and natural, the positions and the expression of the faces."<sup>27</sup> Johnson was not only studying the old masters, however, he was keenly aware of genre paintings by his contemporaries Richard Caton Woodville and Ludwig Knaus. Both The Card Players and The Counterfeiters apparently were based on a composition by Knaus entitled Die Falschspieler (The Counterfeiters) from 1851. Woodville's The Card Players (1846) was bought by the American Art-Union in 1847, and Johnson might have seen it there.<sup>28</sup> But what distinguished Johnson from his immediate contemporaries as well as older genre painters such as Edmonds and Mount was his concentration on anonymous peasant types.

Other paintings from Johnson's Dutch period were called A Brabant Peasant or simply Dutch Interior with Woman and perhaps not even intended as exhibition pieces.<sup>29</sup> But Johnson was showing a penchant for figures and places that invariably showed life in poverty, in humble surroundings, and on the verge of becoming a distant past. Johnson's highly successful Savoyard shows a Mediterranean young man in ragged clothes leaning

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<sup>26</sup>"Fine Arts," The Albion 10 (11 October, 1851), 489.

<sup>27</sup>"Fine Arts," The Albion 15 (29 March, 1856), 153.

<sup>28</sup>See Johns, American Genre Painting, 179, 241, note 10.

<sup>29</sup>Listed in Baur's checklist as No. 2 and 7. See Baur, 60.

against a wall. If his American audience was inclined to take a hard look at this picture they might have recognized the similarity to young victims of urban poverty. Yet Johnson's rendition was ostensibly in the tradition of eighteenth-century representations of Savoyards by Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean-Baptiste Greuze. His Savoyard was thus most likely viewed as a picturesque slice of European poverty, a representation Johnson's audience could project into a pre-modern foreign past.<sup>30</sup>

After his return to the United States Johnson turned to the portrayal of two groups that came to represent a picturesque American living past: Chippewa Indians living in reservation territory near Superior, Wisconsin, and African-American house-slaves in Washington, D.C. While his exploration of Chippewa life amounted to a series of ethnographic crayon sketches, Johnson's familiarity with the "secret city" of Washington's slave population served him as the subject for a major exhibition piece.<sup>31</sup> What made Negro Life at the South (fig. 15) such a successful painting is the fact that Johnson's audience did not have to make the connection between black slaves and Dutch peasants.

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<sup>30</sup>The complex responses by American audiences to nineteenth-century French peasant paintings, which are beyond the scope of this study, are the subject of Laura Meixner's French Realist Painting and the Critique of American Society, 1865-1900 (Cambridge, 1995). On the Savoyard theme as developed by Watteau and Greuze, see Edgar Munhall "Savoyards in French Eighteenth-Century Art," Apollo 87 (February 1968), 86-94.

<sup>31</sup>I borrow this expression from John Davis' title "'Secret City': Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South*," paper delivered at the Annual American Studies Conference, Washington, D.C., October 31, 1997. For a more comprehensive study of the historical and political context to Johnson's painting, see Davis "Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South* and Urban Slavery in Washington, D.C.," Art Bulletin 80 (March 1998), 67-92.

To most viewers it was perfectly legible as a genre picture *sui generis*.

### **Picturesque Ruins of Slavery**

It is much easier to say what *genre* pictures are not, than to define what they are. They are not, for instance, portraits, or landscapes, or historical compositions, or allegories, or fruit or flower or animal pieces, or still life, or marine views, or views architectural; yet they may, and do, in part embody the characteristics of these several styles. Wilkie, we should say, was a *genre* painter, and so was Hogarth, and so was Teniers; in short, in a large majority of cases, the human face divine is an ingredient -- not purporting to be a likeness, and not assuming the grand airs of history.<sup>32</sup>

With this paragraph began one review of the 1859 spring exhibition at the National Academy of Design. In this, as in most other reviews, Johnson's Negro Life at the South stood out as the center of critical attention. Although his background before 1859 prepared him well for such fame, Johnson seemed to strike many observers as something of a "surprise invader."<sup>33</sup> I want to trace to three factors the tremendous success of the

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<sup>32</sup>"Fine Arts," The Albion 37 (May 7, 1859), 225.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas Crow coined this phrase in discussing the impact of Jean-Baptiste Greuze's work on the French Salon audience. See Crow, Painters and Public Life, 134.



painting that began in 1859 and lasted for at least two decades. As the opening passage indicates, Johnson taught the critics and the audience a lesson in genre painting; in the wake of this exhibition he emerged as the American Wilkie, a painter of humble yet "divine" subjects. Second, through the form of contemporary genre, Johnson was able to make the controversial subject of slavery palatable to a broad audience. Third, as the institution of slavery became associated more with the past than with the present, Negro Life at the South could easily be adopted as a nostalgic emblem of the past. Renamed Old Kentucky Home after a popular Stephen Foster song, the painting continued to draw attention as a quaint, picturesque episode in the history of African-American life.<sup>34</sup>

As the above quotation from the Albion suggested, genre painting filled a void left open by history painting. The positive reception of Johnson's painting as a showpiece of contemporary genre signaled a major transition in art reception. The vast majority of critical voices stated their preference of contemporary figure art over history painting. The Albion article focused entirely on genre painting, putting Johnson on a pedestal, followed by such artists as Charles F. Blauvelt, George C. Lambdin, J.C. Thom, and E. W. Perry. Other reviewers considered the mundane Negro Life at the South more

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<sup>34</sup>The reception history of Negro Life at the South between 1859 and 1876 has been carefully researched by John Davis. He summarizes the development as follows: "it [Negro Life at the South] went through a process of dehistoricizing that rendered it symbolic in a more general way--drained of its specific topical, geographic, and temporal significance." See Davis, "Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South*," 84. Although I agree with Davis' analysis of dehistoricization, I argue in this chapter that Johnson's genre works also invited a simultaneous rehistoricization.

important than the more high-minded historical and allegorical contributions by Thomas Rossiter, Louis Lang, and Dennis Malone Carter.<sup>35</sup> Many critics used the occasion to elevate Johnson to the position of ideal genre painter. The critic for the Albion, for example, exhorted readers that if they did not experience the catching subject of "Negro life" made "palpable," they had "no taste for *tableaux de genre*."<sup>36</sup>

Johnson's painting received its blessing from the more elevated corners of the critical profession. The Crayon found the picture "a very instructive one in relation to Art." The Crayon, like The Albion, praised the painting's instructional value by way of negation. Negro Life at the South was "humble," "conscientiously studied," "vivid," full of "human sympathy," even beautiful, but it was "not 'high Art,' for the reason that the most beautiful thoughts and emotions capable of Art representation, are not embodied in the most beautiful forms, and in the noblest combinations." In a somewhat convoluted fashion, the critic attempted to sum up for the Crayon readers why Johnson's picture was important in setting a new aesthetic standard. The Crayon used the painting as a reference point in validating art theory. The discussion of Johnson was part of a lengthy exhibition review which included an extensive discourse on what the critic called "critical

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<sup>35</sup>See, for instance, "The National Academy Exhibition," New York Daily Tribune 19 (May 21, 1859), 6. Among the many merits this critic found in Johnson's two contributions, The Pets and Negro Life at the South, were their "remarkable atmosphere" and "the sentiment of the story they tell . . . which appeals at a glance to a common human interest."

<sup>36</sup>"Fine Arts," 225.

theory." In the course of this critical essay, the critic touched on Hegel and the Pre-Raphaelites and concluded by creating a theoretical bridge between the material and the spiritual, the objective and the subjective: "External nature being material form, and therefore objective, when nature comes before us in Art reflected by human sentiment, it becomes subjectively visible to us, and according to our view, more beautiful because radiant with the charm of man's spirit." According to the Crayon, Johnson's depiction of slavery somehow transcended the "lowly life" of its subject and revealed "sentiment" and "human sympathy" which made it a prime example of a theoretical principle.<sup>37</sup>

One commentator seemed to be less convinced of the painting's high aesthetic status. The New York Daily Tribune stated in one of its three articles devoted to the exhibition that "the promise of American art is in landscape" while "human life is wanting in picturesqueness."<sup>38</sup> But in a following article the same reviewer admitted that Johnson's work was "the special attraction of this Exhibition," although it was "a sort of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of pictures," giving rise "to quite as many painful as pleasant reflections."<sup>39</sup> Another observer, however, seemed to enjoy the picturesque qualities of Negro Life at the South with less qualms. It was "a piece of character-painting of which Wilkie would not have been ashamed," ranging from "a mulatto Antinous, his back

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<sup>37</sup>"National Academy of Design," The Crayon 6 (June 1859), 191.

<sup>38</sup>"Exhibition of the Academy of Design, Second Article," New York Daily Tribune 19 (May 13, 1859), 7.

<sup>39</sup>"The National Academy Exhibition, Concluding Article," New York Daily Tribune 19 (May 21, 1859), 6.

turned to the spectator," to "a venerable negro woman" in the window with her "mulatto baby," to "a pretty young lady, of the Caucasian race," and finally to the "soul of the scene -- an old banjo-player absorbed in his music, and heedless alike of the quaint 'small darkey,' who presses close to his side."<sup>40</sup> The viewing and the verbal description (critics employed racist language but coyly placed it in quotation marks) of Negro Life at the South was thus mostly painless. To the Albion critic, the painting simply presented "a truthful and most artistic glance at the *dolce far niente* of our coloured brethren."<sup>41</sup>

Although Johnson seemed to have taken a bold step in exploring the explosive issues of slavery and miscegenation, he kept African-American life contained within the convention of domestic genre. The picturesque content of Johnson's picture elicited mostly patronizing responses. While he thus told "a chapter from 'Slavery As It Is,'" as one critic put it, Johnson also emerged as the painter who depicted slavery as it was.<sup>42</sup>

Although Old Kentucky Home, as the picture was referred to as early as 1859, clearly irritated some viewers and secured Johnson the reputation of someone who could not "be beat at the nigger,"<sup>43</sup> the majority of Johnson's audience was disposed to read the painting on the level of "human sympathy." An increasing nostalgia for antebellum

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<sup>40</sup>"The Academy of Design," New York Times (April 20, 1859), 2.

<sup>41</sup>"Fine Arts," 225.

<sup>42</sup>"The National Academy of Design," New York Daily Tribune, 6.

<sup>43</sup>See "Art Gossip," Cosmopolitan Art Journal 4 (June 1860), 82. John Davis has located two references to the painting as "The Old Kentucky Home" and "The Kentucky Home" for the year 1859. See Davis, 70.

times, prevalent both North and South, facilitated such readings. The Crayon led the way, praising the veracity of Johnson's rendition of "American architectural ruins": "the time-worn clapboards and disintegrated bricks, the broken window-sashes, the rotten beams of a dismantled shed, with just enough of a moss-covered roof left to make the sheltered space underneath a receptacle for all kinds of kitchen implements and a lounging-place for darkies; all these objects are perfectly painted, and in perfect harmony with the characters portrayed."<sup>44</sup> In addition to being a contemporary genre painting, Old Kentucky Home was thus also regarded as a record of the past.

Johnson successfully translated his German and Dutch "low-life" studies into a formula for an American genre painting in which African Americans took center-stage. Such genre painting by an "American Rembrandt" would have especially appealed to the older families in New York who traced their ancestry to a Dutch past. The colonial revival in New York was clearly oriented toward Dutch roots. Founded in 1835, the exclusive Saint Nicholas Society became the social club for "old" New Yorkers of Dutch (and English) lineage. The membership list of this patrician institution included the male descendants of the Astor, Livingston, Roosevelt, Schenck, Van Buren, Vanderbilt, Van Rensselaer, and many other distinguished families.<sup>45</sup> Also a member was the genre

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<sup>44</sup>"National Academy of Design," 191.

<sup>45</sup>In some cases, the Society was clearly willing to apply its rules liberally. William B. Astor, for instance, who was among the founding members in 1835, was of German ancestry. His father John Jacob Astor had emigrated to the United States from Walldorf, Germany, in 1784. Astor married Sarah Todd, who was of English descent, in 1785. The

painter Francis W. Edmonds. Although the by-laws required that anybody could be a member whose ancestral roots to New-York were prior to 1785, the memory of Dutch heritage was the focal point of the society.<sup>46</sup>

When Charles Fenno Hoffman gave an anniversary speech in 1848, he expressed one of the founding principles of the society, namely that Holland was the cradle of liberty. Attracted by the spirit of liberty, a succession of Dutch, Walloons, Swedes, Huguenots, Germans, and Puritans (those who were persecuted by New England "intolerance") flocked to the Dutch colony and determined the later ethnic mix of the state of New York. The spirit of benevolence in colonial New York, according to the speaker, had its mild effects on slavery, an institution now "effaced." Through "natural sentiment" and "custom," slavery developed into "literally 'a domestic institution.'" However, "notwithstanding this familiar contact with the race, *amalgamation* . . . . was utterly unknown to our forefathers. The mulatto mixture was introduced here from other

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Vanderbilts, whose Dutch ancestors settled on Staten Island in the seventeenth-century, did not gain immediate membership. The names of Cornelius II and William K. Vanderbilt, both grandsons of Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt, appeared for the first time on the membership list for 1870. See Saint Nicholas Society of the City of New York (New York, 1881). All membership information is taken from this edition.

<sup>46</sup>See "Charter," "Constitution," and "By-Laws" published in Saint Nicholas Society of the City of New York (New York, 1881). An article in The Knickerbocker magazine made it quite clear that the preservation of Dutch heritage was the society's *raison d'être*: "our Society was instituted for the purpose of preserving the remembrance of the ancient habits and customs of our Dutch forefathers, the founders of this great city, in danger of destruction by the inroads of the nomadic tribes of New-England." See "Proceedings at the Festival of Saint Nicholas," Knickerbocker 53 (February 1859), 200. See also note 53 below.

States."<sup>47</sup> The notion that slavery in New York was an institution of the distant past and in its day benign and free of racial mixture, contributed to the complex pleasure of viewing Old Kentucky Home when it was first exhibited at the National Academy.

Johnson's representation of slavery in the present-day South made the viewer a voyeurist of the consequences of amalgamation. While Northern audiences were thus able to point their fingers at the breakdown of racial barriers in the South, Johnson's picture also elicited a sense of nostalgia that was quite in line with the doctrine of benign slavery in the "olden" Knickerbocker days. When Hoffman claimed that these days bore the signs of "Order" and "Happiness" before the "schoolmaster was abroad among these primitive people," he was speaking here of both slaves and their masters.<sup>48</sup> The invention of a Dutch tradition as it was taking shape in antebellum New York cast slavery as a picturesque element in the colonial Dutch world where society was harmoniously organized around domestic relationships.

Such nostalgia for simplicity and order in race- and class relationships had an increasing appeal among audiences in the urban Northeast. By 1867, when the future of the emancipated slaves had become the most urgent issue of public policy, Johnson's painting was acclaimed for its "historic value." When it came up for sale, after the death of its second owner, the cotton broker William P Wright, Old Kentucky Home was

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<sup>47</sup>Charles Fenno Hoffman, The Pioneers of New-York, An Anniversary Discourse (New York, 1848), 24, 32-33.

<sup>48</sup>Hoffman, 33.

advertised in a sales catalogue as follows: "A faithful and charming picture of domestic life in the 'South,' one which will be feelingly recognized by many, and yearly increase in historic value as time speeds us onward from the 'days gone by.'"<sup>49</sup> The promise of increasing "historical" value probably did its share in attracting the interest of Robert L. Stuart, who purchased Old Kentucky Home for \$6,000 (a very high price for a genre work).<sup>50</sup> The same year, Henry Tuckerman wrote in Book of the Artist that genre painting was "picturesque." In describing Johnson's picture, Tuckerman was quite aware of its nostalgic "charm," for he very deliberately presented his description through the voice of another critic:

"But the picture is now interesting in another respect. Here we see the 'good old times' before the 'peculiar institution' was overturned -- times that will never again return. The very details of the subject are prophetic. How fitly do the dilapidated and decaying negro quarters typify the approaching destruction of the 'system' that they serve to illustrate! And, in the picture before us, we have an

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<sup>49</sup>Quoted in American Landscape and Genre Paintings in the New-York Historical Society, Vol. 2 (New York, 1982), 232. Before Wright came to own the painting it must have been in the possession of John F. Kensett. A handwritten receipt in the Kensett papers signed by Johnson and dated April 14, 1859 states that he sold Negro Life at the South to Kensett for \$1,200. See "John F. Kensett Papers," Archives of American Art, Roll No. 1533.

<sup>50</sup>On Stuart as an avid collector of American genre art, see Lesley Wright, "Men Making Meaning in Nineteenth-Century American Genre Painting, 1860-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1993) 153, 164-166.



illustration also of the 'rose-water' side of the institution. Here all is fun and freedom. We behold the very reality that the enthusiastic devotees of slavery have so often painted with high-sounding words. And yet this dilapidation, unheeded and unchecked, tells us that the end is near."<sup>51</sup>

Tuckerman employed a double strategy in deflecting sentimental misreadings of Johnson's painting: he not only quoted another critic but also chose a passage which placed the nostalgic terminology of slavery in quotation marks. Yet at the same time such language only added fuel to a notion shared by others in the critical profession: in its realistic portrayal of "humble subjects" genre could be more historically truthful than history painting.

For critics such as Tuckerman, however, the true merit of the picture lay beyond its portrayal of slavery. Echoing the Crayon critic of 1859, he asserted that Johnson surpassed "many of our older artists, who imagine themselves to be fitted for the realms of so-called 'high art.'"<sup>52</sup> Johnson had developed the recipe for a type of genre that transcended the limitations of history painting and its "high art" pretensions. To Tuckerman and others, Johnson demonstrated that genre painting could be naturalistic, sincere, and poetic, qualities which many found missing in history painting. Genre

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<sup>51</sup>Tuckerman, Book of the Artist, 468. John Davis has identified the source of Tuckerman's quotation as an article in the New York Evening Post, January 30, 1867.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 234.

painting was thus liberated from an older stigma of being a "lower" form of painting. Johnson drew unanimous critical acclaim for he was both reformer and old master.

Over the next decade, Johnson successfully employed the genre formula of Old Kentucky Home in a variety of pictures featuring black and white "poor folks" in humble domestic interiors. As early as 1858, Johnson had begun to make trips to Mount Vernon (his father's second marriage was with a relative of George Washington), at least once accompanied by his painter-friend Louis Rémy Mignot. In Kitchen at Mount Vernon (fig. 16), which he exhibited at the National Academy in 1860, Johnson incorporated into one image history, race, and domesticity. But Johnson reduces the subject to a black mother feeding her children in what Patricia Hills calls an interior of "ramshackle furniture, fallen plaster and worn stone floors."<sup>53</sup> Johnson again displaced history into a genre format, here especially reminiscent of humble Dutch kitchen scenes. He chose to capture Mount Vernon at a moment of abandonment before the preservation society turned it into a historical shrine.

Genre became Johnson's trademark. At the 1867 Exposition Universeille in Paris, he was represented by three major genre works: in addition to Old Kentucky Home there were Fiddling His Way (1866, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk) and Sunday Morning (fig. 17). Fiddling His Way portrayed a black travelling musician performing for a white

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<sup>53</sup>Hills, 55.

household, Sunday Morning a pious family of poor whites gathered around the hearth.<sup>54</sup>

Both scenes were rustic interiors with universal appeal to the taste for genre among American and European audiences. But Johnson did not rest his reputation on genre only. Having established himself as both reformer and old master, he used his reputation to attack the primacy of history painting through portraiture.

### **Lincoln: A New (Anti)Hero**

The more one reflects over portrait-making, the more it appears to be an art by itself, requiring special talents. Properly speaking, it comes under the head of Historical art, and the best portrait artists of the past have generally been also historical artists.<sup>55</sup>

Around 1881 Johnson made this statement concerning his large double-portrait Two Men, better known today as The Funding Bill (fig. 18). Both men represented were Johnson's friends who, according to the artist, were observed one day engaged in a political conversation regarding the upcoming bill to refund the national debt. While this

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<sup>54</sup>An engraving based on this painting was entitled The Emigrants' Sunday Morning. See copy in Leutze Artist File, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

<sup>55</sup>Johnson, "Two Men," clip of article in Eastman Johnson Artist File, New York Public Library, New York.

was a political issue of large economic consequence, it was not an event that by most nineteenth-century standards would have been considered historically significant. Johnson's was a very private picture in a similar way as Spencer's War Spirit at Home, but it lacked the latter's momentous historical association with a great military victory. Yet Johnson, as the above statement indicates, thought of The Funding Bill as more than a private moment of parlor talk. The importance that critics gave the painting when it was exhibited at the National Academy of Design seemed to confirm his confidence.<sup>56</sup> The critical elevation of portraiture as a form of historical art, however, dated back to Johnson's first historical portrait, The Boyhood of Lincoln (fig. 19).

Johnson painted his Boyhood of Lincoln during a period when the cult of Lincoln produced an unprecedented demand for popular images of the dead president.<sup>57</sup> The fact that his painting had popular appeal and yet stood out among other representations indicates that Johnson had become very adept at striking a mood in his audience. Representative was a short statement in the exhibition review in Galaxy: "Eastman Johnson's 'Boyhood of Abraham Lincoln' -- a picture which not only appeals to the art

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<sup>56</sup>See Hills, 125-126. One of the sitters, Johnson's brother-in-law Robert W. Rutherford, was a member of the Saint Nicholas Society. Through Rutherford Johnson would have known about the nostalgia for a simple "Dutch" life shared by the society members.

<sup>57</sup>Two helpful resources for the study of Lincoln's image in popular prints are Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, Mark E. Neely, Jr., The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print (New York, 1984), and Holzer, Washington and Lincoln Portrayed: National Icons in Popular Prints (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 1993).

sentiment of every visitor, but to the popular sympathies. It is in every respect a noble work, worthy of the artist and of the subject." The image of the boy absorbed in a book by the fireside was calculated to evoke somber and sentimental feelings in the viewer. Instead of monumentalizing the dead president in a scene of heroic action, Johnson portrayed him as a self-absorbed youth surrounded by the warm light of the fireside, a divinely inspired prodigy. Avoiding any signs of manly posturing, Johnson rejected the conventions of portraying the statesman and in effect feminized Lincoln. By thus humanizing the president, Johnson made a deliberate attempt to metaphorically rescue Lincoln from degradation at the hands of cheap image peddlers.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of Johnson's own production up to that point, Boyhood of Lincoln was a synthesis of his earlier images of children engaged in various activities and of the interior genre scenes of poor folks sitting around the hearth. The Lincoln portrait bears a close resemblance to The Chimney-Corner (1863, National Museum of American Art), the genre portrait of a black man who studies his book (the bible) with equal intensity. As studies of the Lincoln image in print culture have documented, one popular motif that emerged during Lincoln's lifetime and flourished after his death associated him with

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<sup>58</sup>Holzer estimates that the "cult of the First Family" began with Lincoln and anticipated the present-day media appetite for images epitomized by *People Magazine*. See Holzer, Washington and Lincoln Portrayed, 145. Louis Prang produced a chromolithograph after Johnson's Boyhood of Lincoln and thus converted the picture into an image for mass-consumption. The relatively large chromo (21 x 16 4/4 inches) sold for \$12 a copy. See Peter Marzio, The Democratic Art, 125.

learning and erudition.<sup>59</sup> Tapping into this popular perception, Johnson turned Lincoln into a kind of genre hero.

As a student in Leutze's studio, Johnson had painted a copy of what was probably the most heroic rendition of an American statesman. Twice after copying Leutze's Washington Johnson came close to painting heroes in action. But his two Civil War paintings, The Wounded Drummer Boy (1862, Union League Club, New York) and A Ride for Liberty -- The Fugitive Slaves (1863, Brooklyn Museum of Art), both celebrated anonymous heroes, ultimately peripheral to the center of historical action.<sup>60</sup> With Boyhood of Lincoln Johnson further undermined the tradition of heroic painting. The charismatic hero of Washington's or Napoleon's mold was thoroughly domesticated. Indeed, in Johnson's Lincoln portrait domesticity not only feminized but also ennobled the young hero.

How far Johnson distanced himself from Leutze is made evident in a direct comparison with Leutze's own Lincoln portrait (Abraham Lincoln, fig. 20). Leutze's large painting commemorated the president's second inauguration in March 1865.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>See, for instance, a moving but entirely staged photograph of Lincoln and his son Tad reading by the photographer Anthony Berger (1864, The Lincoln Museum), illustrated in Holzer, Washington and Lincoln Portrayed, 162. The image served as the model for a highly popular print (1865, The Lincoln Museum), illustrated in Holzer, 163.

<sup>60</sup>See Hills, 80-81.

<sup>61</sup>My discussion here relies on Barry Schwartz's, "Picturing Lincoln," in Picturing History, 144. Neither Stehle nor Groseclose discuss Leutze's Lincoln portrait.

Leutze had Lincoln strike the more conventional pose of a true statesman. The entire background of this portrait supported his imposing figure, including a most classicizing architectural view of the Capitol, an attentive civilian and military crowd looking up toward the man at the helm of state, and most of all Horatio Greenough's controversial sculptural group Rescue (1837-1853, U.S. Capitol) which appears behind Lincoln's left shoulder.<sup>62</sup> Lincoln's popular image differed from that of Washington in a crucial regard: he had never had the opportunity to show his valor in military battle. The closest Lincoln came to being mythologized for his physical prowess was as a flatboatman steering his boat across the Missouri river.<sup>63</sup> Through the presence of Greenough's statue, Leutze added historical drama to an otherwise static historical portrait. Indeed, the calm and deliberate Lincoln and the violence of the Rescue group contrast and complement one another. One of Lincoln's hands firmly rests on two bound volumes (the bible and the Constitution of the United States), the other seems to signal the president's inner resolve. But Lincoln's entire figure appears waxen and inanimate. Leutze thus encountered a pictorial problem shared by other Lincoln portraitists: how could one make a convincing representation of what was essentially the ineffable inner character of the man?

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<sup>62</sup>The sculpture was placed into a storage facility in 1958. For an insightful discussion of Greenough's Rescue, see Fryd, Art and Empire, 89-104.

<sup>63</sup>See the popular print Lincoln as a Flatboatman on the Mississippi River (1860, Brown University Library), illustrated in Holzer, 88. The text below the image reads: "Peter the Great, to whose genius Russia owes her fame, served an apprenticeship to ship building. Abraham Lincoln has served an apprenticeship to flatboating, and may he yet guide the Ship of State with his own inherent honesty of purpose."

Unwilling to concede anything to Leutze, the critics took the Portrait of Abraham Lincoln only as another sign of artistic deterioration. According to the New Path, the painting was Leutze's "worst performance;" he "utterly failed to understand his subject." Although the journal referred to the difficulties of capturing what it called Lincoln's "rugged outside," all that Leutze was able to produce was "a softly, mealy-mouthed, sawney orator of the graceful school." In typical New Path style, the article closed with the ironic sentence: "But, Mr. Leutze, we know, is a great historical painter."<sup>64</sup> When Johnson began his Lincoln portrait three years later, he would have been aware of the pictorial challenge and of Leutze's failure. Patricia Hills has pointed out that Johnson's Boyhood of Lincoln "brought history painting in America to the intimate and humanizing scale of genre." According to Barry Schwartz, Johnson had the option to paint a Lincoln image in the "grand style," as the artists Dennis Malone Carter and Francis Bicknell Carter did, but chose to paint in the manner of historical genre.<sup>65</sup> But it needs to be emphasized that, after Johnson's critical success with Old Kentucky Home and the other works discussed so far, a grand historical painting was not an option. Eugene Benson perceptively assessed Johnson's artistic reputation in 1868 as follows:

As a painter of the familiar, Mr. Johnson takes his rank next to the English

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<sup>64</sup>"Mr. Leutze's Portrait of Abraham Lincoln," The New Path 2, 7 (July, 1865), 120.

<sup>65</sup>Hills, 94; Schwartz, in Picturing History, 135.



On one hand, Johnson's Lincoln portrait escaped the critical rejection vented against traditional heroic art; on the other hand it was the adequate response to what George Forgie has called the "post-heroic age."<sup>67</sup> Johnson was perhaps the quintessential post-heroic painter to follow the heroic Leutze. Benson's pathos in closing his discussion of Boyhood of Lincoln in the Galaxy article encapsulates this notion: "When the beginnings of life are so bare and poor, the development may be simple and strong, but it must be sad and homely. Our best men have had such a boyhood, and our best men were not more than Lincoln."<sup>68</sup>

#### **A Historical Afterthought: Johnson's *Milton***

In 1875, having successfully erased all traces of his early association with Leutze's history painting, Johnson paid a rare tribute to his friend and teacher. But his Milton Dictating to His Daughter (fig. 21) only in subject directly recalled Leutze's Cromwell and Milton (fig. 22). In execution Johnson's Milton painting had more in common with Boyhood of Lincoln than Leutze's Milton painting. Johnson portrays the

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<sup>67</sup>George B. Forgie, Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age (New York, 1979). In his Introduction, Forgie limits the "post-heroic age" to the period of 1821-1861. I believe that my own reading of Boyhood of Lincoln as post-heroic, or rather anti-heroic, is still within the conceptual framework of Forgie's analysis. Forgie argues that "the war brought a post-heroic age to a close by ending the psychological thralldom to the past that had defined it" (292). As I argue throughout this chapter, Johnson was a "victim" of a similar psychological burden but distanced himself by redefining heroic painting.

<sup>68</sup>"Eastman Johnson," 112.

blind Milton dictating Paradise Lost to one of his daughters. Milton's eyes are closed, his entire being is that of poetic inspiration, the spirit rules the body; one of his daughters sits at a desk, her back is turned to the viewer; the other daughter leans over her chair absorbed in her father's discourse. The mood is one of deep pathos and absorption. Leutze's painting of Milton at the organ, entertaining Cromwell and his entourage is more theatrical and anecdotal. Milton literally performs.<sup>69</sup>

Despite such differences, most critics regarded Milton Dictating to His Daughter as a failure, a kind of aberration in Johnson's development. Reminiscent of the criticism that Leutze's historical paintings had encountered, Johnson's Milton did not seem to be a living, breathing human being. Said one critic: "The figure of Milton himself rather resembles a stuffed lay-figure than a man." The only redeeming quality this critic found was in the two daughters, "the turn of whose heads, and the graceful beauty of whose pose, almost make one wish that Mr. Johnson had cut them from his canvas and given them simply as a study of womanhood."<sup>70</sup> Without entirely condemning Milton Dictating, another critic simply dismissed it as "nothing very novel . . . . The subject has frequently been treated by English artists." He referred to Johnson's two other contributions to the Academy exhibition, The Peddler and The Toilet, as "subjects more

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<sup>69</sup>Groseclose describes the painting as "theatrical" and "stilted." See Freedom is the Only King, 53-54. In 1879 Earl Shinn [Edward Strahan] referred to the painting, then already in the Corcoran collection, as "a Düsseldorf composition *pur sang*." See Shinn The Art Treasures of America, 11.

<sup>70</sup>"The Arts," Appletons' Journal 13 (May 8, 1875), 600.

suiting to Mr. Johnson's style and genius."<sup>71</sup> In reviewing the same exhibition, The Evening Post mentioned Johnson's painting as "a large and important composition," but then closed its review by stating: "it will be noticed that there is an unusual lack of large pictures, which is a good feature."<sup>72</sup> Milton Dictating was considered behind the times. Although Johnson's representation of Milton in old age was contemporaneous with other paintings of the same theme, such as the Hungarian painter Milaly de Munkacsy's version of 1878, his audience seemed to almost unanimously agree that he had stepped outside of his proper *métier*, genre painting.<sup>73</sup>

None of the critics captured that sentiment more eloquently than Henry James. In his exhibition review for the journal Galaxy, James chastised Johnson's "desire to be complex, suggestive, [and] literary" in Milton Dictating and deemed it a failure. At the beginning of a long discussion of Johnson, James referred to the painting as a "very decided error." He suggested "we must cancel the Milton altogether and talk only about the daughters . . . restoring them to their proper sphere as pretty Americans of the year 1875." The female figures formed "a very picturesque . . . group," similar to The Peddler, "a success almost without drawback." (James described the subject as "a young countrywoman buying a paper of pins from an old peddler.") According to James, the peddler "with his beaver hat, his toothless jaws and stubby chin, is charmingly painted."

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<sup>71</sup>"The Fine Art," New York Times 24 (April 10, 1875), 3.

<sup>72</sup>"The National Academy of Design," The Evening Post 74 (April 7, 1875), 2.

<sup>73</sup>Munkacsy's version is mentioned in Hills, 159.

The picture "has a Dutch humility of subject, but also an almost Dutch certainty of touch." James concluded, "Mr. Johnson will never be an elegant painter--or at least a painter of elegance. He is essentially homely."<sup>74</sup>

While it is possible that Johnson was testing the critical climate for more ambitious historical works, the reception of Milton Dictating would have convinced him that such an attempt was a waste of labor. As Johnson's statement in connection with the exhibition of Two Men (The Funding Bill) illustrates, he was content to rest his reputation as "historical artist" on portraiture alone.

One answer to the question why a painter of "humble subjects" became a favorite portraitist of bankers and merchants in opulent domestic interiors, seems to suggest itself. Johnson's reputation as "American Rembrandt" was perfectly in line with the self-image of the Blodgetts, Hatchs, and Browns who sat for him. In his conversation pieces, Johnson's sitters could act out an imagined world of Dutch merchant humility and pride. At the same time, Johnson's picturesque genre scenes attracted such different collectors as Robert L. Stuart (who preferred genre), Marshall O. Roberts (who preferred large and theatrical history paintings), and August Belmont (who preferred contemporary European art).<sup>75</sup> But Johnson not only consolidated the various efforts among elite audiences to

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<sup>74</sup>"On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited," The Galaxy 20, No.1 (July 1875), 91-93.

<sup>75</sup>For an earlier discussion linking Johnson's genre subjects with an audience which the author refers to as "liberal America," see Boime, Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision, 602. I find this description too unspecific and even misleading, for Leutze's patrons could also be considered "liberal." I refer the reader to an insightful discussion of

find a standard for "high art." He also offered a solution that was sanctioned by those critics who claimed to speak for popular taste. He had invented a kind of "high" genre for a post-Civil War art public weary of both historical painting and "low" genre.

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the American patronage for genre art in Wright, "Men Making Meaning in Nineteenth-Century American Genre Painting, 1860-1900," 135-181.

## Conclusion:

### History Painting and the Centennial

In the preceding pages I have attempted to outline the metamorphosis of historical art into domestic forms over the period of three decades. The division into two parts -- one devoted to a history of institutions and criticism, the other to individual artists or case studies -- was a convenient solution to the problem of organizing the material; conceptually, however, these two parts should be regarded as the inseparable branches of one narrative. What complicates our endeavor to understand the changing representations and perceptions of history is the instability of aesthetic discourse, the definition of such terms as 'high art' and *genre* (the one bracketed in apostrophes, the other italicized by most mid-nineteenth-century observers). I have interpreted these discursive indeterminacies as indicators of cultural conflict. Through aesthetic discourse various groups voiced their ideological and economic interests and made a symbolic claim to cultural authority.

The cultural contest over history I have outlined has parallels in Paul DiMaggio's analysis of institutional change in nineteenth-century Boston. According to DiMaggio, "High culture," in the sense of "a strongly classified, consensually defined body of art distinct from 'popular' fare . . . failed to develop in Boston prior to the 1870s because the organizational models through which art was distributed were not equipped to define and sustain such a body and a view of art." Referring to the American Art-Union as one example of "failed" cultural entrepreneurship, DiMaggio states "the market declassifies

culture: presenters of cultural events mix genres and cross boundaries to reach out to larger audiences." As an example of what DiMaggio calls an "elite status group" the American Art-Union ultimately failed to establish its cultural legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Part One we traced the various institutional attempts to establish the boundaries between art that was "high" or sacred and art that was "low" or vulgar.<sup>2</sup> Both, the American Art-Union and the Cosmopolitan Art Association, mixed "high cultural" rhetoric with commercial salesmanship. Unlike its predecessor, however, the Cosmopolitan Art Association had no use for history paintings and instead located the "sacred" in lower genres in order to appeal directly to domestic consumers. Prior to the establishment of large municipal museums, investment in history paintings by private collectors was sporadic and inconsistent. Although a few collectors' private galleries became an exception, most houses were not designed for large historical paintings. The conflict over the status of history painting culminated in the 1850s with the emergence of a reform-oriented group of critics seeking professional legitimation for itself. As Eugene Benson, James J. Jarves, Clarence Cook and others attacked the opulent taste of collectors such as M.O. Roberts and Joseph Harrison, they accelerated a consolidation process that

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<sup>1</sup>Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston," in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., Rethinking Popular Culture (Berkeley, California, 1991), 375, 378, 380.

<sup>2</sup>On the problem of "sacralization" in American culture, see Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988), especially Chapter Two.

stripped historical art of its elevated status and led to a legitimation of genre painting. By the time the Centennial Exhibition offered another grand public venue, history painting was largely abandoned by elite groups, including collectors, critics, and artists.

### **History into Artifacts**

The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was a historical spectacle of unprecedented proportions. The organizers of the Centennial made a powerful symbolic claim for America's role as a world leader among industrializing nations. While this national confidence was displayed in technology, commerce, and the arts, history served as the backdrop which made modern achievements meaningful.

Several weeks before Centennial Day, July 4, the New York Daily Tribune called for collective acts of commemoration and suggested the following: one patriotic song or hymn should be sung across the nation "by the whole assembled people," "detached scenes of history" might be "reenacted on the spots where they occurred" and "devices, tableaux and processions . . . readily designed." The article justified such action by appealing to a spirit of civic religion: "the moral power of a multitude expressing collectively any lofty faith or purpose is something incalculable."<sup>3</sup> At the Metropolitan Fair in 1864, Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware had symbolized history

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<sup>3</sup>"Centennial Day, July 4," New York Daily Tribune (June 13, 1876, .



painting's ability to serve this need for collective memory. At the Centennial, history painting was overshadowed by a massive display of historical artifacts.

Modelled after similar exhibits at the Sanitary Fairs, a New England log cabin housed a kitchen exhibit with all the accoutrements and costumed characters of "Ye Olden Times."<sup>4</sup> These old-time displays demanded modern means of crowd-control. Reported one newspaper, "The New England log cottage is so besieged by visitors that policemen stand at the door and admit them by detachments."<sup>5</sup> History was not only reenacted or staged, it was literally "emblazoned" into artifacts, as Sylvia Yount has shown. This "commodification of history," as Yount put it, especially manifested itself in the unprecedented number of souvenirs which the Centennial offered to visitors.<sup>6</sup> Commodification extended to artifacts less affordable to the average visitor. David Scobey's brilliant description of one such stately piece of furniture, a colossal oaken bedstead made in Grand Rapids, deserves to be quoted at length:

Its headboard rose nearly eighteen feet, crowned with a carved American eagle; its massive, Renaissance-revival frame contained some half-dozen sculptural niches

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<sup>4</sup>See Rodris Roth, "The New England, or 'Olde Tyme,' Kitchen Exhibit at Nineteenth-Century Fairs," in *The Colonial Revival in America*, Alan Axelrod, ed. (New York and London, 1985), 159-183.

<sup>5</sup>"Centennial Topics," *New York Daily Tribune* (June 10, 1876), 2.

<sup>6</sup>Sylvia L. Yount, "'Give the People What They Want': The American Aesthetic Movement, Art Worlds, and Consumer Culture, 1876-1890" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 1995).

which displayed such culture-heroes as Columbus and Gutenberg. At the center of the footboard was a statue of the goddess Columbia; in the middle of the headboard stood her symbolic mate, George Washington, presiding under an elaborate Gothic arch . . . It was an altarpiece to both American patriotism and the cult of domesticity, a huge conjugal bed on which founding mothers and fathers might conceive a nation: *George Washington slept here.*<sup>7</sup>

History at the Philadelphia fair, whether as artifact, spectacle, or souvenir, came in all sizes and at different price levels.

The ideal George Washington for the Gilded Age was a commodity rather than a heroic demigod. A direct comparison between Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware, no doubt the pivotal Washington representation at the Metropolitan Fair, and the image of Washington carved into the headboard of an oaken bedstead at the Centennial, as described by Scobey, illustrates this transformation. The seemingly indiscriminate exploitation of the cult of Washington at the Centennial further contributed to his desacralization. In one display Washington was brought back to life through a modern contraption. As described by Robert Rydell, a "nine-foot-tall working model of George Washington's tomb" opened at "regular intervals" and "Washington rose from the

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<sup>7</sup>David Scobey, "What Shall We Do With Our Walls? The Philadelphia Centennial and the Meaning of Household Design," in Robert W. Rydell and Nancy Gwinn, eds., Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World (Amsterdam, 1994), 87-88.

dead."<sup>8</sup> In this Centennial fairy land it seemed as if P.T. Barnum had come to Mount Vernon.

As Sylvia Yount has pointed out, visitors met the "domesticated Washington" at the U.S. Government Building where the general's revolutionary campsite was partially recreated. These Washington relics, "arranged in casual disarray," included his uniform, some pieces of furniture, pots, pans, pistols, and a sword.<sup>9</sup> The Sanitary Fairs had set the precedent with their abundance of historical relics sold and displayed in curiosity shops. At the Philadelphia Great Central Fair these curiosities were assembled in the William Penn Parlor, furnished "as nearly as possible after the style of the days of William Penn." Here Benjamin West's Penn's Treaty with the Indians owned by Joseph Harrison shared a room with Penn paraphernalia, including a "Needle-work in Silk, 1763: Representing Penn's Treaty with the Indians," "William Penn's Study Chair," "William Penn's Razor," and other personal items such as "Pair of Shoes worn by one of the Penn Family--over one hundred and fifty years old."<sup>10</sup> The Washington relics became the principal attraction for relic-hunters at the Centennial. Although the "originals" were not for sale this time,

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<sup>8</sup>Rydell, 35.

<sup>9</sup>Yount, 100.

<sup>10</sup>See William Penn Parlor Committee, Memorial of the William Penn Parlor, in the Great Central Fair (Philadelphia, 1864), 5-11. In comparison, the curiosity shop at the Metropolitan Fair was not arranged around a specific historical theme. A random sample of items listed in the catalogue included a miniature of Mary Queen of Scots (No.29), Tecumseh's war club (No.46), Henry Clay's death-bed (No.104), and a bronze bust of Napoleon I (No.186). See Catalogue of Articles Contained in the Museum and Curiosity Shop of the Metropolitan Fair (New York, 1864), 3-8.

reproductions were available to visitors in the form of stereoscopic views.

That such relic shrines easily stole the show from history paintings can be evidenced by two examples. Among the many "eyewitness" accounts written in the wake of the Centennial was one called Samantha at the Centennial. Narrated in first-person and in dialect, Samantha and her husband Josiah were "Yankee" characters from the country fumbling their way through the big city (i.e, Fairmount Park). Samantha has a naive attraction to history paintings. Upon seeing one of the more monumental paintings in the French art exhibition, Rizpah Defending Her Sons from the Vultures, she reflects: "It was a horrible, scareful picture but fearfully impressive. When I look at anything very beautiful, or very grand and impressive, my emotions lift me clear up above speech." But such devotion to the "terribleness" of 'high art' pales at the overwhelming emotion which the sight of George Washington's relics stirs in her: "what feelins I did feel as I see that coat and vest that George had buttoned up so many times . . . and then to see the bed quilts worked by his own mother . . . . Why, they all roused up my mind so, that I told Josiah I must see Independence Hall before I slept."<sup>11</sup>

William Dean Howells, on assignment to write for the Atlantic Monthly, expressed a different sort of puzzlement over the relics. Commenting on the placard which accompanied the display, Howells faulted the text "Coat, Vest, and Pants of George Washington" for its historical inaccuracy ("whereas it is his honored waistcoat

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<sup>11</sup>Marietta Holley, Samantha at the Centennial (Hartford, 1884, first edition ca. 1877), 520-521, 535.

which is meant, and his buckskin breeches"). This deviation from the historical truth, he considered "a real drawback to one's enjoyment of the clothes, which are so familiarly like, from pictures, that one is startled not to find Washington's face looking out of the coat-collar." Although Howells assessed the authenticity of the Washington relics with confidence, something troubled him about the contemporary fascination with relics: "There are also similar relics of other heroes, and in the satisfaction of thus drawing nearer to the past in the realization of those historic lives, one's passion for heroic wardrobes mounts so that it stays at nothing."<sup>12</sup> History as a moral universe, as a source of cultural authority, seemed to be no longer accessible at the Centennial. The assemblage of Washington artifacts, caused great thrills of historical experience to one visitor (Samantha), while it cast another (Howells) into ruminations over the epistemological emptiness of such a display.

At the Sanitary Fairs, visitors were asked to step into the past and judge it in light of the present. The colonial simplicity of domestic life which Northern viewers found at the New England Kitchen, for instance, reminded them of the personal everyday sacrifices which the Civil War required from each individual family. At the same time here was a demonstration how far progress had removed them from their colonial origins. In contrast, the Centennial broke down the sense of distance between past and present: Washington slept here *eternally*. In many ways the Centennial symbolized the type of

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<sup>12</sup>William Dean Howells, "A Sennight of the Centennial," Atlantic Monthly 38 (July 1876), 103.

historicism which Walter Benjamin criticized for giving "the 'eternal' image of the past," accumulating "a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time."<sup>13</sup>

### **Women's Historical Production**

While it evoked the past in myriad ways, especially through the figure of Washington, the Centennial lacked a cohesive historical narrative which would have allowed visitors to locate historical authority. The organization of women's historical contributions thus left many visitors with the impression of disjointedness.

Especially the presentation of women artists at the Centennial was complicated by the debate over feminist strategy and the politics of gender representation. The Woman's Building was constructed after the Woman's Centennial Committee had been informed that there was not enough room for a women's section in the Main Building. Women artists were thus split into two camps, those who competed for awards with male colleagues in Memorial Hall and those who shared space with their "sisterhood" in the Women's Building.<sup>14</sup> The critic for New Century for Women lamented this split and suggested the more accomplished women artists who exhibited at Memorial Hall placed

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<sup>13</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations (New York, 1968), 262.

<sup>14</sup>For a lucid account of the different strands of feminism which went into the planning of the Woman's Building, see Mary Frances Cordato, "Toward A New Century: Women and The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, 1876," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 107 (January 1983), 113-135.

individual ambition over the higher cause of promoting the advance of the entire sisterhood.<sup>15</sup>

Women artists, until then more acknowledged in the production of historical sculptures, contributed a number of historical paintings to the Memorial Hall art exhibition. Mrs. I. Robinson Morrell showed The First Battle Won by the Puritans and General Washington Welcoming a Provision Train, 1778 (n.d., both unlocated).<sup>16</sup> The artist Anna M. Lea showed at least one painting with historical background. Lea, who had the credentials of working in London, received mostly praise. Her Patrician Mother (n.d., location unknown), dressed in antique costume, had a pose that struck one critic as "noble and imposing." Another work by Lea, St. Genevieve (n.d., location unknown), framed the theme of motherhood in a manner of "religious peace and beauty," as the same critic observed.<sup>17</sup>

Lilly M. Spencer sent Truth Unveiling Falsehood and two other paintings to Philadelphia to be exhibited in the art section of the Women's Pavilion. She had been in contact with John Sartain, the Art Director of the Centennial, for he invited her to send

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<sup>15</sup>"Pictures by American Women," 1.

<sup>16</sup>Imogene Robinson Morell's scene from Puritan history did not fare well with the critics. See S.N.C., "Art at the Exhibition," Appletons' Journal (June 3, 1876), 726. The reviewer found Morell's Miles Standish and the Indians (probably identical with The First Battle Won by the Puritans) "horribly coarse in color," and "wooden in drawing," lowering "the impression of all the paintings which hang near it."

<sup>17</sup>See E.E.G., "Memorial Hall. Pictures of American Women," The New Century for Women (May 27, 1876), 2.

her paintings directly to him to be hung at Memorial Hall, the official art building.<sup>18</sup> But in the end, Spencer agreed to an arrangement between the Ladies Art Association, of which she was a member, and the New York Women Centennial Union, to display her work in the Women's Pavilion. Her friend Emma Dietz, who had helped negotiate this arrangement, had high hopes for the painting: "Words cannot express my admiration for that painting, nor how deeply I am impressed with the importance of its being placed where the world can see it; particularly its rulers! In no way could the beauty of Truth or the enormity of Falsehood be so deeply impressed on the Mind, as by seeing it so vividly & beautifully portrayed."<sup>19</sup>

Spencer and her supporters miscalculated if they thought that at the Women's Pavilion the painting's moral grandeur would receive the attention it deserved. Most commentators celebrated the Women's Pavilion as a showcase for women's achievements in arts and crafts not the fine arts. J. S. Ingram's illustrated catalogue, for instance, found the art exhibition at the Women's Pavilion too disorganized and cluttered, and it concluded "as might be expected, where but little discrimination was exercised, a majority of those works of art were not up to the standard of the other articles of women's work exhibited in the building."<sup>20</sup> Among the historical productions that Ingram's

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<sup>18</sup>See John Sartain to Lilly Martin Spencer, March 28, 1876. Lilly Martin Spencer Papers.

<sup>19</sup>Letter to Lilly Martin Spencer, April 7, 1876. Lilly Martin Spencer Papers.

<sup>20</sup>J.S. Ingram, The Centennial Exposition, Described and Illustrated (New York, 1876), 268.



considered noteworthy was one in the women's needlework section: "a picture in worsted work, representing the 'Death of Douglas in Defence of Mary Queen of Scots.'"<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not Spencer's Truth Unveiling Falsehood would have found a more receptive audience in Memorial Hall remains a matter of speculation. Most fair spectators were more drawn to domesticated forms of historical display than to the heavy didacticism of grand moral allegories.

### **The Centennial as Art History**

The exhibition of art works in Memorial Hall and its Annex, organized by John Sartain as head of the Centennial Art Bureau and by the members of the Advisory Committee on Art, included a considerable number of history paintings.<sup>22</sup> As was to be expected in an exhibition that paid tribute to colonial days, however vaguely defined, the history of the Puritans became a popular subject. F.O.C. Darley contributed Puritans

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<sup>21</sup>See Ingram, 367-68. For further exploration of the connections between gender and design reform, see Roger Stein, "Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in Its American Cultural Context," in In Pursuit of Beauty, exhibition catalogue (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986).

<sup>22</sup>The Committee consisted of Worthington Whittredge, William J. Hoppin, John Taylor Johnston, James L. Claghorn, Peter Rothermel, and Henry Gibson. See What Is The Centennial? And How To See It (Philadelphia, 1876), 15. The total number of American art works was estimated at thirteen hundred. For a general discussion of the American art exhibition, see Lillian B. Miller, "Engines, Marbles, and Canvases: the Centennial Exposition of 1876," in Indiana Historical Society. Lectures 1972-1973. (Indianapolis, 1972), 20-21.

Barricading their Houses Against Indians (n.d., location unknown), and George Boughton's Pilgrims Going to Church (1867, New-York Historical Society) became one of the "crowd-pleasers at the fair."<sup>23</sup> Of the "old guard" history painters, Emanuel Leutze was represented by only one work, The Iconoclast (1846, location unknown). Daniel Huntington received critical acclaim with his allegory Philosophy and Christian Art (1868, Los Angeles County Museum) and won an award with Charles V. Pope Clement VII, and Titian (1876, Private Collection). Robert Walter Weirs' Taking the Veil (1863, Yale University Art Gallery) portrayed the consecration of an Ursuline nun in Rome and became a counterpoint to the Puritan subjects.<sup>24</sup>

The Philadelphia history painter Peter Rothermel made something of a triumphant return at the Centennial. His monumental Battle of Gettysburg (1870, Pennsylvania State Museum, Harrisburg) held a prominent place in the American art department. It was the one painting in the United States section that could rival two spectacular contributions from France (Rizpah) and Austria (Homage of Venice to Queen Catherine Cornaro). These grand canvases attracted much popular attention, but neither these nor any other traditional history paintings elicited much admiration from critics.<sup>25</sup> In the Centennial

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<sup>23</sup>Yount, 100.

<sup>24</sup>Informative discussions of these two artists can be found in Daniel Huntington, et. al., The Quest for Unity: American Art Between World's Fairs, 1876-1893, Exhibition Catalogue (Detroit, 1983), 58, 65.

<sup>25</sup>The exhibition of English art formed an exception. It was universally praised as superior to other nations and contained numerous history paintings, including those by Benjamin West. Many of these paintings were reproduced in John Filmer's The

literature the popularity of such works was often made the subject of humorous comments. In one sketch which appeared in Frank Leslie's illustrated catalogue one of two gentlemen standing in front of the Rizpah painting points his umbrella straight at the heroine. Although she is fending off the vultures, the umbrella attack creates the illusion that she is fighting another opponent outside the picture. A sign visible at the side of the painting reads: "Do Not Touch With Canes Or Umbrellas."<sup>26</sup> The notion that history paintings were curiosities exposed to undignified reception and ridicule only diminished their value as art objects.

Howells, who approached these works with a more serious disposition, referred to Rizpah as "horribly fascinating" and "a powerful achievement of ghastly fancy." The Catharine Cornaro picture with its "cumbrous gorgeousness" struck him as one of Austria's "needless exposures." Rothermel's Battle of Gettysburg, probably the largest and most ambitious battle painting in the United States to that date, elicited a very carefully crafted comment from Howells: "To be sure, Mr. Rothermel does not spare a huge slaughter of rebels in his Battle of Gettysburg, but I heard it said that this picture was not a work of art. I do not know about such things myself. I had a horrific interest in the spectacle."<sup>27</sup>

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Illustrated Catalogue of the Centennial Exhibition (New York, 1876).

<sup>26</sup>Frank Leslie's Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition (Philadelphia, 1876), 144.

<sup>27</sup>Howells, "A Sennight of the Centennial," 94-95.

Rothermel's picture was a huge curiosity painted on canvas. Frank Leslie's catalogue attempted to boost the painting by reassuring its readers that "at first sight it presents a confused mass of men, but five minutes quiet examination begins to develop its points."<sup>28</sup> To most other observers the picture was irredeemable no matter how much time one spent with it. Noted the art critic for the Aldine: "It is a fearful and wonderful production, about the size and shape of a drop-curtain and of the same order of merit."<sup>29</sup> One of the most uncompromising rejections came from the critic for Appletons' Journal who stated that the "picture is bad in every sense." The critic took this as an opportunity to remind readers that battle painting was artless and vile:

We have often expressed the opinion in the JOURNAL that, whatever else its points, a work of art can never afford to be repulsive or disgusting. Rothermel seems in this painting to have taken an almost fiendish delight in bringing forward, almost to the feet of the spectator, multitudes of the bodies, bloody and wounded, of dead men; and when the eye, sickened with the confusion and turmoil of the fight in the distance, drops upon the near images, it is caught and horrified by the sight of so much death, which would be appalling if it were not painted so weakly. It is the life and not the death of battle with which art can

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<sup>28</sup>Frank Leslie's Illustrated Historical Register, 372.

<sup>29</sup>John V. Sears, "Art in Philadelphia," The Aldine 8 (June 1876), 198.

legitimately concern itself.<sup>30</sup>

For the art critical profession, the Centennial became a litmus test for what was "legitimate" and "illegitimate" art. While the critics considered Rothermel's picture a disaster, most agreed that Johnson passed the test with honors. Johnson was lavishly represented through Old Kentucky Home (which by then was its official title), Sunday Morning, Bo-Peep, The Old Stage Coach, Corn-Husking, What the Shell Said, and Milton Reading "Paradise Lost" to His Daughters.<sup>31</sup> The Nation, which stood out as one of the few negative reviews, dismissed the Milton picture as "a faded conventionalism, altogether too high-heeled and courtly to touch the heart."<sup>32</sup> Johnson was thus reminded that his critical reputation rested on genre not history painting. Although none of the critics explicitly made the comparison, it was understood that Johnson's intimate genre paintings were the antidote to Rothermel's excess of horror. To Clarence Cook, Rothermel's "picture of blood and fury" was destined to "make us the laughing-stock of

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<sup>30</sup>S.N.C., "Art at the Exhibition," Appletons' Journal (June 3, 1876), 726.

<sup>31</sup>The vast promotional literature on the Centennial was not a very reliable guide to the art. One guide book referred to Old Kentucky Home as "landscape." See The Centennial Exhibition of 1876. What We Saw, And How We Saw It. Part I. Art Glances (Philadelphia, 1876), 10-11.

<sup>32</sup>E.S. [Earl Shinn?], "The International Exhibition -- XI. American Art -- II," The Nation (August 3, 1876), 72.

every foreign critic."<sup>33</sup> Although Johnson's contribution could perhaps salvage the American art exhibition from disgrace, it was still subject to the vulgar gaze and even the touch of fair visitors. Reported the Aldine, the Memorial Hall exhibition space lacked "proper safeguards for the treasures intrusted to the keeping of the Bureau [of Superintendence of the Fine Arts Department]":

Had such a person been in authority, he would have spared us the dismay occasioned on the opening day by seeing such pictures as Eastman Johnson's "Old Kentucky Home" and Boughton's "Pilgrims Going to Church" exposed all day, entirely unprotected, in the narrowest passages of Memorial Hall. A dense throng surged through these passages from morning until night, pushing and struggling each way, and, naturally enough, shoving the weakest to the wall. On the wall, shoulder high, some of the finest pictures ever painted in America were hung up, without so much as a cord to keep off the scrambling masses of men, women and children bent on fighting their way out of the suffocating press.<sup>34</sup>

A picture like Battle of Gettysburg was not only bare of any positive instructional value;

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<sup>33</sup>Clarence Cook, "A Centennial Blunder," New-York Daily Tribune (May 4, 1876), 2. Cook coupled his critique of Rothermel with an attack on John Sartain's authority in organizing the art exhibition. He accused Sartain of ignoble motives in boosting a picture (Battle of Gettysburg) which he was commissioned to engrave.

<sup>34</sup>"Art in Philadelphia," The Aldine, 196.

it was even dangerous, for it could arouse an already disruptive, unruly crowd.

More significantly, Battle of Gettysburg stood in the way of the critics' interest in extrapolating a "purely" art historical canon from the "promiscuous" space of the Centennial. This movement was led by Clarence Cook, who, as we discussed in an earlier chapter, moved away from his rigorous dismissal of historical art at the Metropolitan Fair toward an acceptance of antiquarianism in art. In his series of reviews for the New York Daily Tribune, Cook focused almost exclusively on older American art, restricting his first article to general remarks and devoting four more articles to Copley, West, Stuart, and Allston.<sup>35</sup> Yet Cook did not write these art historical tracts merely to eulogize the "old masters" -- he very deliberately put them in their place. The Benjamin West of Cook's account shamelessly "flattered the King . . . the nobles [and] the ladies." He advised his readers to go and see West's works at the Philadelphia Academy as well as at "Cypher's curiosity shop on Broadway" where The Resurrection of Christ (probably the 1794 version, Swarthmore College) was located. In his first article, Cook had lamented that the exhibition contained too little by Trumbull, West, Sully, and "those curious phenomena Rossiter, Lang, Leutze, Powell and the rest."<sup>36</sup> The search for American old master tradition sparked by the Centennial thus led to a temporary reversal of fortune for Leutze as a 'curious phenomenon'. The Centennial also helped solidify Eastman

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<sup>35</sup>See Clarence Cook, "Features of the Fair: Fine Art Department, American Pictures," New-York Daily Tribune (June 1, 3, 7, 9, and 17, 1876).

<sup>36</sup>Cook, "Features of the Fair," (June 1, 1876), 2, and (June 7, 1876), 2.

Johnson's position as "old master." Appletons' Journal promoted the American art exhibition as a comprehensive "collection" which brought together works from different "private galleries," including "artists of distinction from Stuart, Copley, and Benjamin West, to Eastman Johnson and Sanford Gifford."<sup>37</sup>

The critical reception of the Centennial exhibition thus reveals a strenuous effort to separate historical spectacle from historical art. In order to find merit in older historical art, critics did not validate artists on aesthetic grounds but as curiosities. In a way, the pictures were merely "relics" that stood for the "phenomena" who once painted them. Historical paintings thus became incorporated into what Robert Rydell has called a "galaxy of symbols" which helped assert cultural hegemony.<sup>38</sup> But while the Centennial established social cohesion through consumerism and immediate gratification, as an aesthetic space it was not far removed from the type of antebellum museum DiMaggio analyzed: a "promiscuous combination of genres."<sup>39</sup>

While the organizers of the Centennial failed to impose aesthetic order, academic art departments and major museums which emerged in the 1870s made it their task to define such order. In the wake of this post-Civil War institutional consolidation in the United States many history paintings simply disappeared, some ended up eternally

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<sup>37</sup>S.N.C., "Art at the Exhibition," 726.

<sup>38</sup>Robert Rydell, All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916 (Chicago and London, 1984), 2-3.

<sup>39</sup>DiMaggio, 376.



condemned to a life in storage, others were donated to major art museums, where they became attractions for visitors but remained liabilities for curators.<sup>40</sup>

The Centennial marked an endpoint to the domestication of history painting which I have traced through the different cultural practices of art production, display, collection, and criticism. During the middle third of the nineteenth-century, artists, critics, and audiences struggled to redefine historical art. Emanuel Leutze, Lilly Martin Spencer, and Eastman Johnson offered different solutions to the "crisis" of history painting. Leutze's monumental style of history painting revitalized the genre but was ultimately rejected. Both Spencer and Johnson approached historical themes through domestic genre painting, but only Johnson succeeded in receiving critical and institutional validation. By 1876, when these three painters briefly crossed paths again (one of them posthumously), the question of history painting's aesthetic value was largely settled.

This does not mean that grand historical narratives in art were dead. By the turn-of-the century, mural projects for large municipal libraries and other civic buildings had revived monumental historical art. The Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alvaro Siqueiros invented modernist solutions to large-scale historical painting, as did Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry, and many other twentieth-century mural painters. But history painting never regained its status as an elevated art

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<sup>40</sup>I am grateful to Elizabeth Johns for discussing with me her talk "Assessing the Meaning of a National Collection: Emanuel Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware as a Case Study" which she delivered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 26, 1993.

form. Today, as the field of historical representation is largely dominated by blockbuster films and a plethora of sites on the world wide web, it strikes me as oddly appropriate to end this essay with the words by a critic from 1848: "the field, spread out before the American Historical Painter is as wide as the domain of Art can make it."

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Fig. 1. Daniel Huntington. The Republican Court  
(also known as Lady Washington's Reception). 1861.  
66 x 109 inches. The Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the  
Crescent-Hamilton Athletic Club.



Fig. 2. Francis William Edmonds. The Image Pedlar.  
ca. 1844. 33 x 42 inches. The New-York Historical  
Society, New York.



Fig. 3. John Trumbull. The Death of General Warren  
at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775.  
1786. 25 x 34 inches. Yale University Art Gallery.



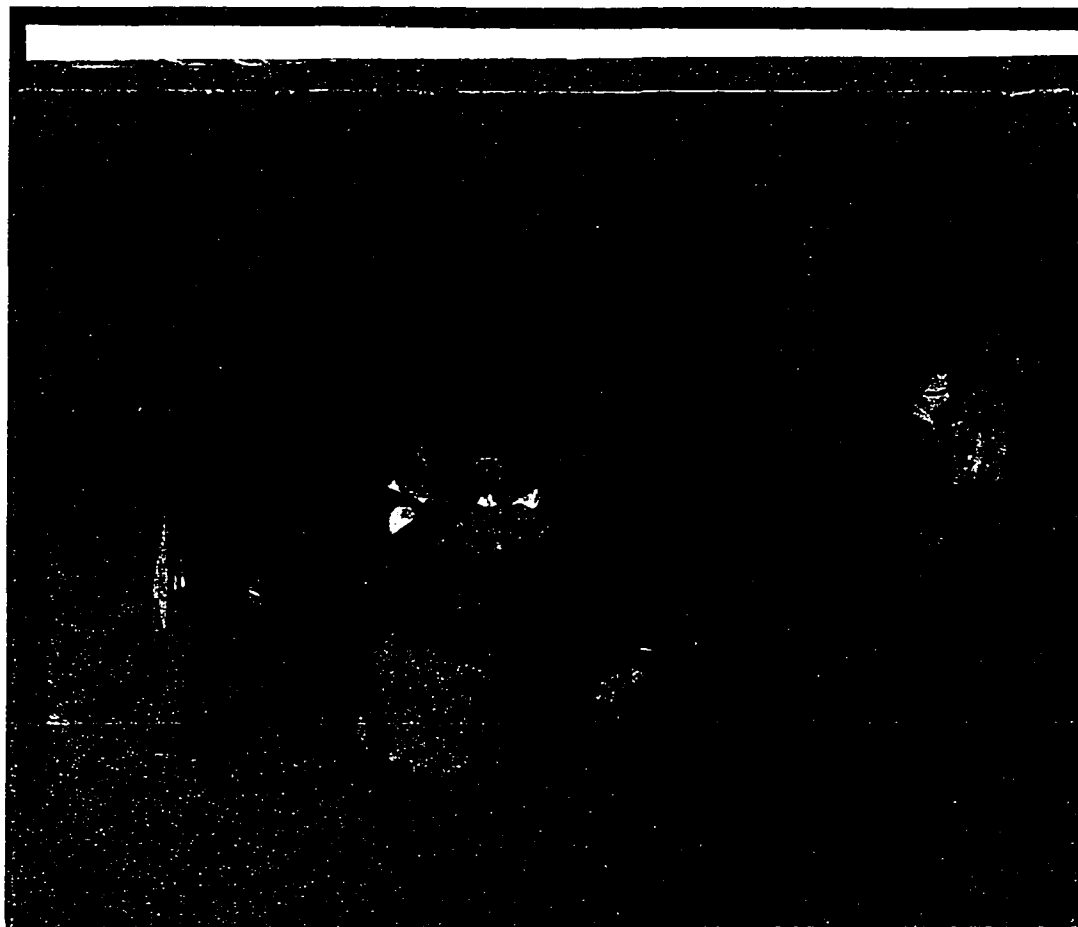


Fig. 4. Francis William Edmonds. Sparking. 1839.  
19 15/16 x 24 inches. Sterling and Francine  
Clark Art Institute.



Fig. 5. Richard Caton Woodville. War News from Mexico. 1848. 27 x 24 3/4 inches. The Manoogian Foundation, on loan to the National Gallery of Art.



Fig. 6. Emanuel Leutze. Landing of the Northmen.  
1845. Sammlung Vollmer, on loan to the Kunstmuseum  
Düsseldorf.



Fig. 7. Emanuel Leutze. Washington Crossing the Delaware. 1851. 149 x 255 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gift of John Stewart Kennedy, 1897.



Fig. 8. Winslow Homer. Prisoners from the Front.  
1866. 24 x 38 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of  
Art; Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922.



Fig. 9. Thomas Pritchard Rossiter and Louis Remy Mignot. Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon. 1859. 87 x 146 1/2 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bequest of William Nelson, 1905.



Fig. 10. Emanuel Leutze. Westward the Course of  
Empire Takes Its Way. 1862. 20 x 30 feet. United  
States Capitol.



Fig. 11. Emanuel Leutze. The Storming of the Teocalli. 1848. 84 3/4 x 98 3/4 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum; The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.





Fig. 12. Emanuel Leutze. Washington Rallying the Troops at Monmouth. 1853-54. 156 x 261 inches. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum; Gift of Mrs. Mark Hopkins, San Francisco.



Fig. 13. Lilly Martin Spencer. The War Spirit at Home. 1866. 30 x 32 1/2 inches. Collection of the Newark Museum; Purchase 1944, Wallace M. Scudder Bequest.



Fig. 14. Lilly Martin Spencer. Truth Unveiling Falsehood. 1868. Location Unknown (Photo: National Museum of American Art. Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C.)



Fig. 15. Eastman Johnson. Negro Life at the South.  
1859. The New-York Historical Society.



Fig. 16. Eastman Johnson. The Kitchen at Mount Vernon. 1857. The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida, Original Cummer Bequest.



Fig. 17. Eastman Johnson. Sunday Morning. ca. 1866.  
The New-York Historical Society.

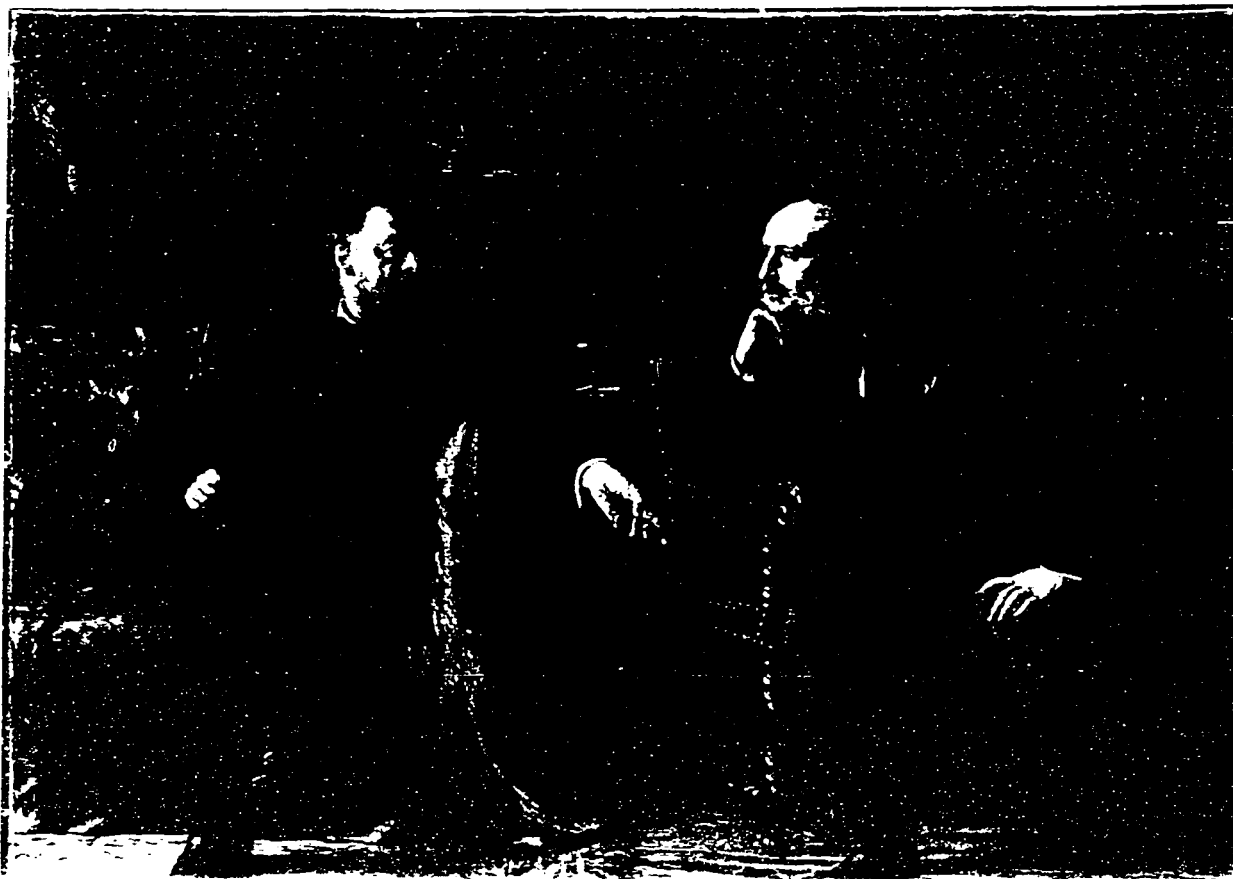


Fig. 18. Eastman Johnson. The Funding Bill. 1881.  
60 1/2 x 78 1/4 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of  
Art; Purchase, Robert Gordon Gift, 1898.

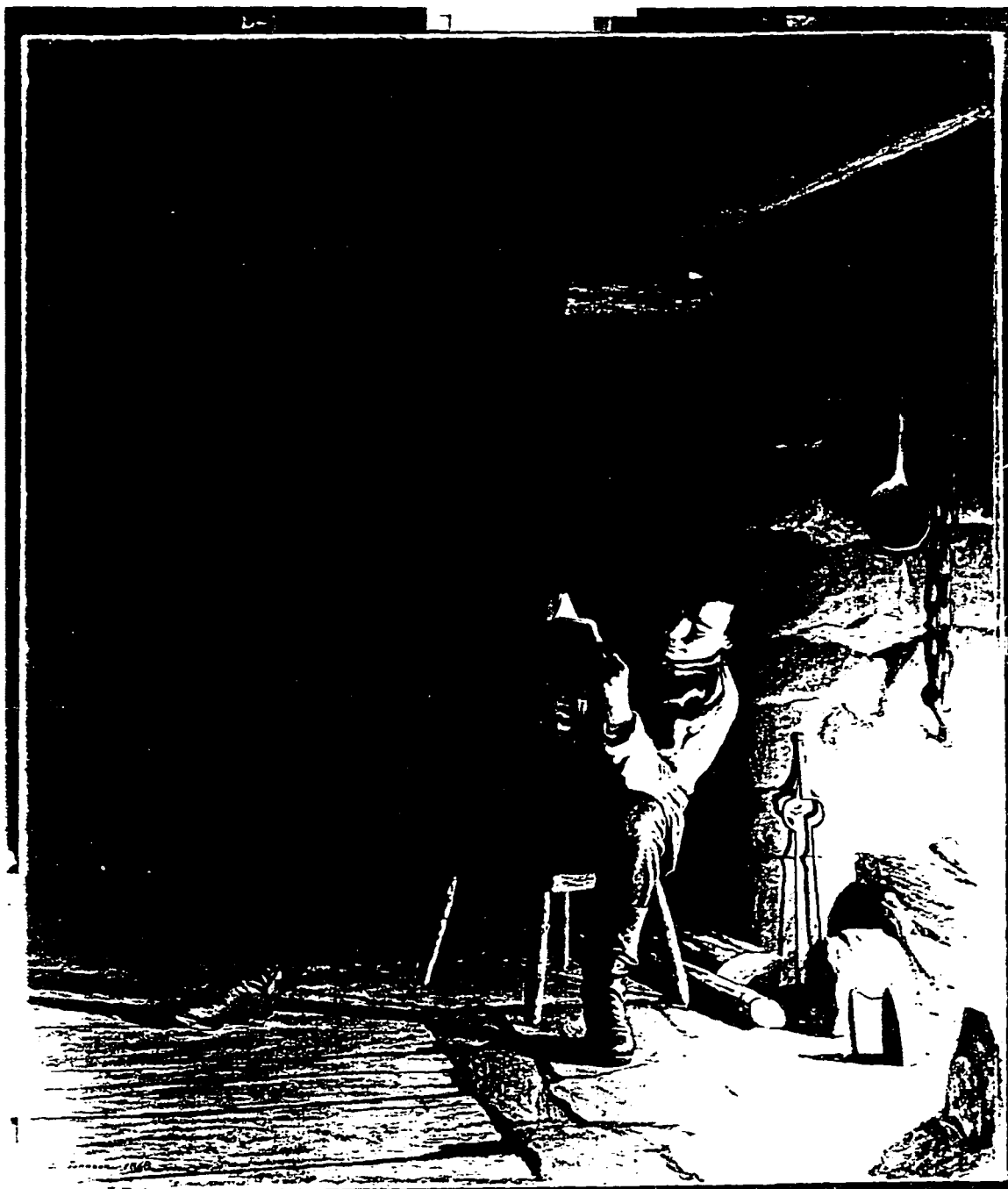


Fig. 19. Eastman Johnson. Boyhood of Lincoln.  
1868. 117.7 x 94.8 cm. University of Michigan  
Museum of Art; Bequest of Henry C. Lewis





Fig. 20. Emanuel Leutze. Abraham Lincoln.  
1865. 69 x 50 inches. Union League Club, New  
York.



Fig. 21. Eastman Johnson. Milton Dictating  
"Paradise Lost" to His Daughter, 1876. 63.7 x  
76.4 cm. Blanden Memorial Art Museum; Gift of  
Charles G. Blanden.



Fig. 22. Emanuel Leutze. Cromwell and Milton. The Corcoran Museum of Art.

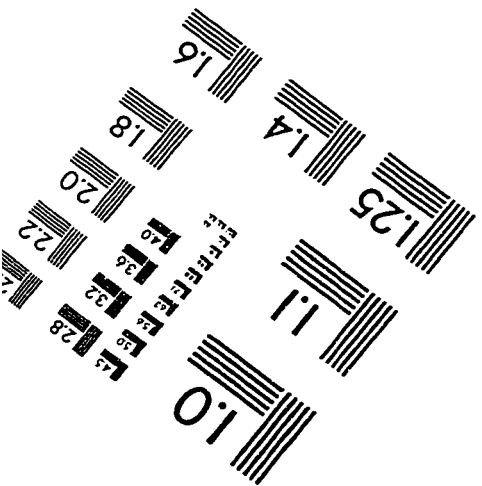
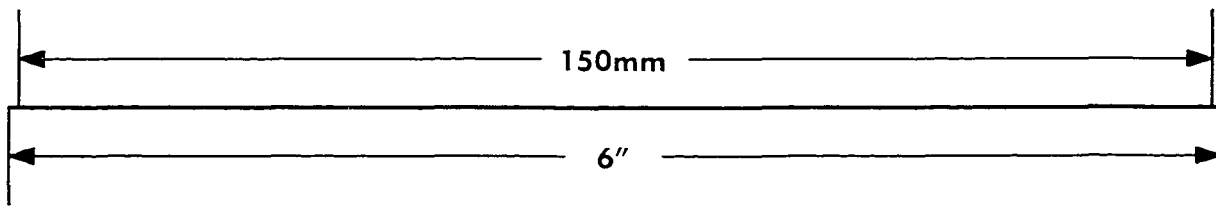
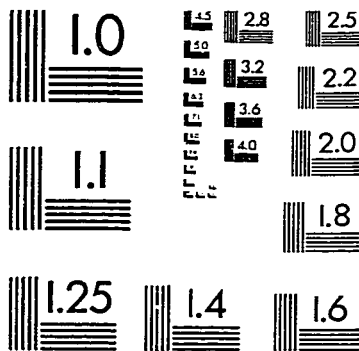
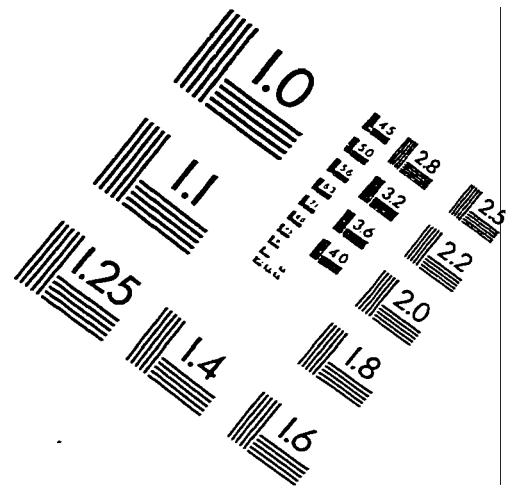
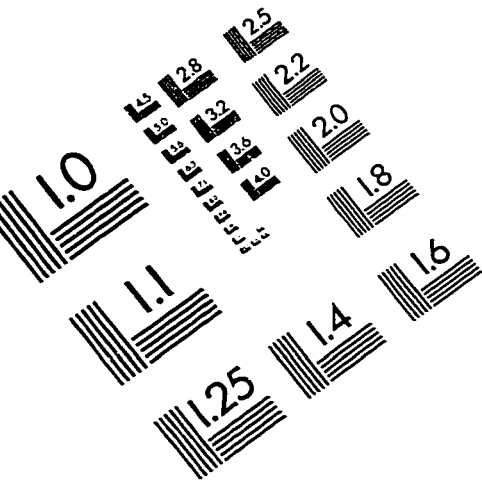
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