

William Sidney Mount

a biography



William Sidney Mount, *Self Portrait*, 1828, oil on panel, The Long Island Museum, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Ward Melville

William Sidney Mount was born November 26, 1807, in the village of Setauket, New York. After his father died in 1814, he was sent to stay with an uncle in New York City where he was introduced to music, theater, and city life. Mount was reunited a year later with his mother in Stony Brook, New York, where he worked on the family farm for the rest of his adolescence. Once he turned eighteen, Mount was sent back to New York City to work as an apprentice at his older brother Henry's sign and ornamental painting business.

Mount learned how to paint signs quickly, and Henry encouraged him to pursue art more seriously. In 1825 he visited an exhibition in New York City where he saw paintings by Benjamin West (1738–1820), an American expatriate best known for his massive history paintings in the "Grand Manner" tradition, which advocated the study and replication of techniques and subjects found in classical and Renaissance art. Inspired to create his own history paintings, Mount enrolled in the newly formed National Academy of Design where he copied European works of art and engravings. He produced a few of his own paintings with biblical and historical subjects, such as *Saul and the Witch of Endor* which depicts a scene from the Old Testament. After he was unable to sell these paintings, he turned to other subjects.

In 1830 Mount produced his first genre painting, *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride*, which was met with rave reviews from critics after it was exhibited at the National Academy of Design. No American artist had previously created pictures of everyday American life, and audiences loved the humor, novelty, and realism of the image. Although Mount is best known for his genre painting he continued to produce portraits, which provided a regular source of income.

Mount honed his artistic skills in New York City until 1836, when he moved back to Long Island permanently. He found that he was able to observe rustic scenes that were more appealing to the American public when he was out of the city. People saw a correlation between the accuracy of the rural subject matter and realism, which helped Mount's reputation as an authentic painter. Mount was so proud of his American identity that he declined offers to study abroad. He said that studying abroad, or even traveling to Europe, would detract from his ability to paint scenes that spoke directly to his fellow

Americans. He wrote, "I might be induced by the splendor of European art to tarry too long, and thus lose my nationality."

Following the deaths of both his mother and brother in 1841, Mount took a break from painting to grieve. After a year of unproductivity, he visited with Thomas Cole (1801–1848), a famous landscape painter, who lived in Catskill at the time. The two artists discussed art, and Mount sketched and painted landscapes, which provided the push that he needed to begin painting again.

In 1844 Mount returned to genre scenes and portraits, and soon afterward he was approached by publishing companies and his images were distributed to hundreds of Americans. Even though he often exhibited his most successful works in New York City, he rarely left his home on Long Island, preferring to observe his surroundings from a portable studio of his own invention that could be pulled from place to place. It had a small stove and a large window that allowed him to paint from nature in any weather.

After many years of commissions for wealthy patrons, who requested both genre paintings and portraits, Mount began to fall out of favor with the public. His genre paintings were no longer seen as novelties as new subjects in painting became popular. Eventually his vision began to fail, and his canvases became less realistic. Despite these challenges, Mount painted until his death on November 19, 1868.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): William Sidney Mount, *Saul and the Witch of Endor*, 1828, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 1/8 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of International Business Machines Corporation, 1966.48.1; William Sidney Mount, *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride*, 1830, oil on canvas, 22 1/8 x 27 1/8 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 48.458

William Sidney Mount featured children in some of his famous genre paintings. Patrons were interested in the subject because images of young people represented an optimistic outlook for America's agrarian future. After the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861, people were drawn to images of children, especially in the countryside, because it reminded them of a time that they thought was pure and innocent.

From the 1830s to 1860s Mount painted many children and engaged in the highly profitable business of painting death portraits. The child mortality rate was extremely high, and parents wanted a way to preserve the memories of their loved ones. Death portraits were in high demand, but they were not easy to execute. Corpses smelled awful, and Mount felt uncomfortable around a lifeless body, so he charged twice the amount that he would have for a portrait of a live model. He wrote that the extra money was not even worth "the anxiety of mind I have to undergo to make my efforts satisfactory to the bereaved."

These long hours spent with dead bodies and a 19th-century preoccupation with death may have led to Mount's interest in spiritualism, which is the belief that spirits of the dead can communicate with the living. Mount frequently attended séances and claimed that he was in contact with the spirit of Rembrandt van Rijn, (1606–1669), one of the most famous Dutch painters from the 17th-century. Through a medium called "automatic writing" Mount believed that Rembrandt was passing on knowledge and advice to him. "You are the best national painter of your country," reads one letter.

Mount's interest in earlier Dutch artworks extended beyond séances, and his paintings show that he studied Dutch paintings carefully, pulling different elements into his own work. *The Blackberry Girls* shares qualities with paintings from the Netherlands that Mount may have seen in prints, such as the sharp contrast between the highly detailed focus of the foreground and the idyllic pastoral landscape behind it. Mount may have borrowed the idea of placing the horizon line lower on the picture plane, which makes the sky seem huge and awe-inspiring. This idealized background reflects national pride and agrarian optimism, qualities that are also present in landscapes by artists like Rembrandt.

Discussion Questions

How would you describe a genre painting? Why was it considered unusual during Mount's time?

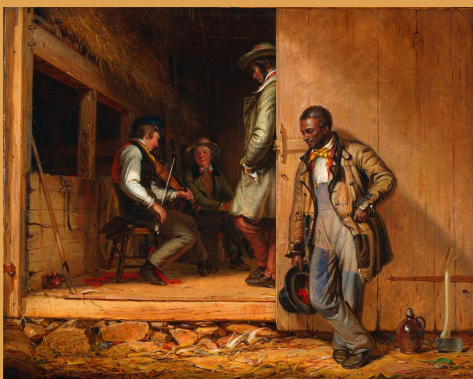
Why did Mount choose to stay in the United States and not travel to Europe?

Why was it important for an artist's work to be reproduced and distributed to the general public?

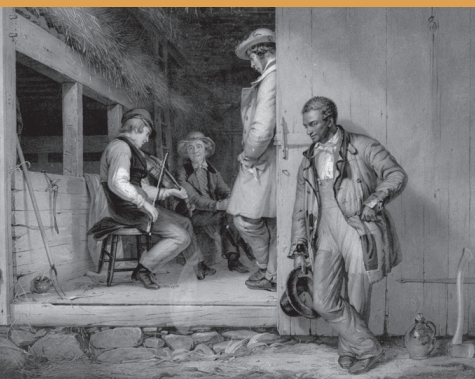
Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.

Dissemination of Prints

Artistic success is often measured by how well society is familiar with an artist's work, and before the proliferation of photography, a variety of distribution methods allowed the public to see copies. Often, publishing companies, magazines, and newspapers would pay for the right to reproduce an image or would pay another artist to make a lithographic copy of a work. Lithography, a method of printing involving drawing on a stone or metal plate using oil and water, was a cheap way to produce thousands of copies of an image. *The Power of Music* is the first painting by William Sidney Mount to be reproduced as a lithograph. It was copied by Alphonse-Leon Noel who worked for the French print publishing firm



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): William Sidney Mount, *The Power of Music*, 1847, oil on canvas, 17 1/16 x 21 1/16 in., The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund 1991.110; *The Power of Music*, After William Sidney Mount, 1848, Lithograph by Alphonse Leon Noel, 14 1/2 x 18 1/2 in., Joslyn Art Museum, 1992.20



Goupil, Vibert & Co. and created lithographs of several other canvases by Mount.

Mount also worked on commissions for genre scenes that were engraved and then put into annual gift books called *The Gift*. These small books, which also included literary contributions, were widely distributed in the United States and Europe. Both the lithographs and gift books were sold at relatively low prices, allowing people who could not afford to purchase a full painting to at least access and own a piece of art. These distribution methods allowed Mount to become one of the most successful artists in his time and one of the few American artists whose work was popular overseas and in the United States.

Timeline

1800

1807 William Sidney Mount is born on November 26 in Setauket, New York



William Sidney Mount, *Farmers Nooning*, 1836, oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 24 1/4 in., The Museums at Stony Brook, The Image of the Black in Western Art Project and Photo Archive W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, Harvard University.

1810

1814 Spends a year in New York City after his father's death

1815 Moves back to Long Island

1820

1824 Becomes his brother's apprentice at a New Your City sign shop

1826 Attends classes at the National Academy of Design

1829 Starts a portraiture business in New York City

1830

1830 Paints his first genre scene, *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride*

1834 Mount's paintings are reproduced as prints for the first time



William Sidney Mount, *The Raffle (Raffling for the Goose)*, 1837, oil on mahogany, 17 x 23 1/8 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Crimmins, (1897) 97.36 Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art;

1840

1841 Takes a break from painting after the deaths of his brother and mother

1843 Travels to the Catskill Mountains and draws landscapes with Thomas Cole

1848 Goupil, Vibert & Company publishes a lithograph after Mount's *The Power of Music*

1850

1852 Patents the "Cradle of Harmony" – a novel type of violin; documents his ideas for a portable studio



William Sidney Mount, *The Bone Player*, 1856, oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 29 1/8 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Martha C. Karolik for the M. & M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 48.461

1860

1861 American Civil War begins

1863 Emancipation Proclamation issued

1865 American Civil War ends

1868 Mount dies on November 19 in Setauket, New York

BACKGROUND DETAIL: William Sidney Mount, *The Bone Player*, 1856, oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 29 1/8 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Martha C. Karolik for the M. & M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 48.461

Mount's Musicality

William Sidney Mount was drawn to music at eight years old, when he was sent to New York live with his uncle Micah Hawkins, who passed on a love for theater and music to his nephew. Mount learned to play a variety of instruments and was a talented violinist and flutist. He often played jigs, waltzes, and other tunes at parties and dances and dedicated himself to learning different musical styles. He kept notebooks full of the tunes that he learned in day-to-day life, and these volumes are seen today as some of the most important and earliest documents of the American music vernacular.

Music found its way into many of Mount's paintings, which capture barn dances, impromptu practice sessions, and the musicians themselves. Many of these paintings also include African Americans, which has sparked discussion among many art historians. Some say that Mount must have been sympathetic to African Americans because he portrays them in a respectful manner as free men who are musically talented. Many images of African Americans, contemporary to Mount, depicted drastically exaggerated features, which turned them into comical stock characters. He avoids this stereotyping by painting realistic faces, which can be perceived as respect for his subjects as talented musicians and capable individuals. Despite this, Mount created these compositions knowing that they would appeal to the growing American taste for minstrel entertainment, in which white performers wore blackface to parody African American musicians and dancers. Portraits meant to capitalize on white and Western stereotypes perpetuated the systematic racism and cultural appropriation that has continued long after Mount created his paintings.



William Sidney Mount, *The Banjo Player*, 1856, oil on canvas, 36 x 29 in., The Museums at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY, X55.5.1



William Sidney Mount, *Bargaining for a Horse*, 1835, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in., New-York Historical Society, Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, 1858.59

people they could relate to found Mount's pieces unusual, entertaining, and easier to understand than the grand historical or religious paintings that were commonly taught in art schools. Genre scenes appealed to a new class of patrons with recently acquired fortunes, who were not as educated in European art, and had different tastes from well-traveled collectors.

Every genre painting had visual cues that viewers could "read" and interpret. They told a story that could be read in different ways, and Mount intended his paintings to be a stimulus for debate over social and political topics. Some scholars see the paintings as reflections of Mount's own political views, while others see them as starting points for discussion.

For example, in *Bargaining for a Horse*, Mount shows two well-dressed Yankee men negotiating the price of a high quality horse. "Horse trading" also was used to describe the transaction of material

Genre Painting

goods in exchange for political support. Both men are engaged in whittling, prepared to wait the other one out. Viewers would have seen that the younger man had just made an offer, based on the position of his whittling knife. The deal seems to be going well, but there is a consequence to the drawn-out process: in the background one can see that the barn is falling apart. Viewers would have understood that Yankees could sometimes be too shrewd for their own good.

In *The Power of Music* there is an obvious separation between the African American man, who stands outside the barn door, and the white men who sit inside. Mount was convinced that music was powerful enough to overcome racial divisions, but he also left the composition intentionally ambiguous which allowed viewers to form their own meaning. Was the black man lazy because he was ignoring his work and had been seduced by the music, or was he perhaps the music teacher of the young boy playing the fiddle? Viewers were left to interpret the painting for themselves, but the division of race is central to the meaning.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): William Sidney Mount, *Cider Making*, 1840-41, oil on canvas, 27 x 34 1/8 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Bequest of Charles Allen Munn, by exchange, 1966 (66.126). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art; William Sidney Mount, *Painter's Triumph*, 1838, oil on wood, 23 9/16 x 19 1/2 in., Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Bequest of Henry C. Carey (The Carey Collection), 1879.8.18



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WILLIAM SIDNEY MOUNT
American, 1807–1868

THE BLACKBERRY GIRLS
1840, OIL ON PANEL

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