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AMERICAN ART-UNION, 1839-1851: THE RISE OF AMERICAN ART LITERACY



This collection consists of 109 volumes and 1 box of records from 1838 to 1860. Volumes include minutes of annual meetings, executive committee, committee of management, and purchasing committee; register of works of art in the American Art-Union, including title of the painting submitted, the artist, price asked, cost of frame and whether or not a picture was purchased or rejected; letters addressed to the American Art-Union, including many from agents around the country, and pertaining to the sale of subscriptions; letters from artists to the American Art-Union with index; letterpress books containing copies of letters sent by the American Art-Union; and newspaper clippings.

Date Range: 1839-1851

Content: 49,793 images

Source Library: New-York Historical Society Museum and Library

Detailed Description:

Source finding aid: [American Art-Union](#)

"The aristocracy had previously been the patrons of the artists, and favored the few to the neglect of the many. The million are now the patrons of artists..." So the American Art-Union chose to paint its role in democratizing and promoting the fine arts in the antebellum United States. In fact, the "million" was not in charge. In reality, the American Art-Union was the effort of a Committee of Management composed of the most successful businessmen, railroad men, shipping magnates, newspapermen, and bankers to foster a national character and culture—indeed, an American art—that pictured a vision of prosperity in tune with their own financial interest in westward expansion and a calming of sectional divisions over slavery. To create such a culture in the visual arts, they patronized upcoming American artists, and urged them to paint landscapes and frontier scenes that celebrated the nation's Manifest Destiny, works referring to the U.S. victory over Mexico in 1848, genre pictures of daily life that could be embraced by both northerners and southerners, and celebrations of America's revolutionary fight against the British. These criteria led them to promote such iconic American paintings as Emmanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

(1851), William Sidney Mount's *Farmers Nooning* (1843), George Caleb Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1847), and Richard Caton Woodville's *War News from Mexico* (1850) by producing engravings that were distributed to American Art-Union subscribers, a group that numbered nearly 20,000 in 1849, and sponsoring a "Free Gallery" in New York City. The effort of these businessmen to become the stewards of a unified national visual culture, in the way that the European aristocracy done for previous eras and countries, was cut short when sectional differences over slavery made them vulnerable to attacks by the anti-abolitionist penny press.

The Records of the American Art-Union, the originals of which are held by the New York Historical Society, are made up of clippings in which competing arbiters of culture and men of finance debate the meaning of the AAU effort, letters from artists struggling to find the subjects and form that will win them AAU support, letters from subscribers anxious to receive their engravings, regional reports from Art-Union secretaries on the potential for support in the hinterlands, and letterpress responses to all from AAU staff. Indices to the letters to and from artists are included.

Only the conclusion of the Civil War and the subsequent establishment of the hegemony of northern business interests would finally create the conditions in which the American middle classes elevated by the industrial revolution would establish lasting and authoritative institutions of high culture. The American Art-Union, however, was one of the most interesting of the pre-war efforts and its history continues to be explored by scholars in American Studies, American History, Art History, Cultural Studies, and the History of Capitalism.