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For Those at Home: The Romantic Nature of Civil War Lithography

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For Those at Home: The Romantic Nature of Civil War Lithography

Abstract

Lithography, the art of drawing on stone, was an important part of American Victorian culture during the Civil War. Not only did lithography provide news in pictorial form, but it also was widely displayed in the home. With the economic move from home to factory during the early 19th century, the home became more of a “sanctuary” in which women could decorate and display. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

For Those at Home: The romantic nature of Civil War lithography

February 17, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

Lithography, the art of drawing on stone, was an important part of American Victorian culture during the Civil War. Not only did lithography provide news in pictorial form, but it also was widely displayed in the home. With the economic move from home to factory during the early 19th century, the home became more of a “sanctuary” in which women could decorate and display.

Lithography became a cheap and popular way to express a certain family sentiment; these lithographs were normally hung in the parlor where the family entertained guests. As Peter Marzio noted, this artwork was a sign of “a fondness for home and a desire to cultivate virtues, which made home peaceful and happy.” It also became a kind of media in which news and popular opinion reached the masses. Lithography is very important to historians today, because it gives great insight into the culture, home, news, and popular opinion of the Civil War era.

Currier and Ives is one particular lithography press, which can arguably be considered the most important, if not the vastest collection of prints from the Civil War era. Nathaniel Currier got his start as an apprentice in the first lithography shop, which opened in Boston in the 1820s. In 1834, Currier left the business to begin his own firm. While his brother Charles was a close colleague, Currier’s true partner was John Merrit Ives, who just happened to marry Charles’ sister-in-law. Ives joined the business in 1852. Their firm set sail and they began to print “the best, cheapest, and most popular prints in the world,” or so their catalogue claimed. Currier and Ives’ lithography became a product of consumer culture; it was an example of the new technology of the time that remained popular as long as Currier and Ives advertised to the interests of the masses.

Gettysburg College’s Special Collections has a collection of Currier and Ives prints that includes two hand-colored prints as well as two cartoon prints from the Civil War era. The first hand-colored print is entitled “Off to the War.” It is dated from 1861 and depicts a Union soldier saying goodbye to his wife and son as his military unit waits for him in the background. His wife’s dress is pink here, but there are other versions of this print that show her dress in different colors, including red. This was because after the drawing had been printed it was passed down an



assembly line of women who hand painted the prints the way they wanted. Some of the drawings of “Off to the War” were mirrored and then printed so the woman’s dress goes out to the left. The house in the background also appears on the left. One can tell that the image was hand-painted because it is not painted perfectly. Part of the soldier’s hand, as well as the boy’s hand, is pink. The belt around the soldier’s waist is not exact, either. The drawing itself shows that it was hand drawn by one of Currier and Ive’s many lithographers. You cannot actually see the soldier’s left leg, which makes him look like he is standing in an awkward position.

“Off to the War” is a great example of the Romantic style of art used during the 19th century. While Romanticism began in Britain and France, it had influences on American Civil War era art. The Romantic style was a response to the disappointment of

the Enlightenment ideals after the French Revolution. Nature, imagination, and emotion were important aspects to Romanticism. In this print, there is obvious emotion that just sticks out at you when you look at it. The intimacy between the soldier and his wife is not only displayed by their embrace but by the way they’re looking at each other. They seem to ignore the little boy tugging at his parent’s clothes. The fact that the soldiers in the background are blurred was probably intentional because it draws attention to the three figures in the front of the picture. This was a highly romanticized view of a couple saying goodbye; the woman may be thinking that this could be the last time she sees her husband.

Another lithograph in Special Collections is titled “The Soldier’s Dream of Home.” Underneath the print is a poem by an anonymous poet. An additional lithograph that is very similar to this one called “The American Patriot’s Dream.” It also contains the same eight lines of poetry:

Stretched on the ground the war worn soldier sleeps,
Beside the lurid watch fire’s fitful glare;
And dreams that on the field of fame he reaps;
Renown and honors, which he haste’s to share

With those beloved ones who gathering come,
To bid their hero husband father “wellcome (sic) home”;
Found dreamer may thy blissful vision be;
A true fore shadowing of the fates to thee.

This half-colored lithograph shows a Union soldier lying outside his unit’s camp dreaming of home. Above him is a “dream bubble” in which his wife and child are welcoming him home. Meanwhile, back at the camp he is lying on his mat with his bayonet in his right hand and his left arm behind his head. There is a drum lying next to him. Maybe he is a drummer boy? A letter with its torn envelope lies next to him. Did it contain a letter from home? A whole range of

questions popped into my head when I looked at this print. First of all, why is he away from the camp? Where is his tent? There are tents in the background with men sitting outside, potentially by a fire. Three men stand guard by a cannon talking. Yet this soldier is separate. He has his own fire and he's resting in a wood. It would seem the camp is in a field and the soldier is lying in the woods next to the field. Another question arises as to why the soldier has been colored in, yet the camp in the background, minus the flag, is not colored. Even his dream remains black and white. What does this symbolize?

"The Soldier's Dream of Home" is another lithograph that displays Romantic ideals. The image would have been sold to wives, mothers, daughters, and other loved ones. It provided a comforting image of their soldier lying peacefully next to a warm fire in a deep sleep: a sleep that was even deep enough to dream of home. In reality, it was very unlikely that a soldier would have been lying peacefully somewhere and that these men actually got a good night's sleep. They definitely were not sleeping deeply enough with cannon fire, gunshots, and the potential moaning and screams of dying men around them. The fear and apprehension of battle loomed over their heads and most likely kept them up at night. However, what this lithograph does depict is that the soldier is not only fighting for the Union, but he is fighting for his family, as well.

Stay tuned for more about Currier and Ives and their Civil War political cartoons!

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Image:

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