

# **The Life of a Fireman. The Metropolitan System. by Currier and Ives (John Cameron)**

## **Print Facts**

- Medium: 2 stone lithograph, hand colored
- Date: 1866
- Size: 16 7/8 x 26 1/8 "
- Location:
- Period:
- Style:
- Genre:
- Currier and Ives were two partners who owned a printing business in New York City. They employed many artists; this painting was by John Cameron.
- This was published in 1866 as part of the "Life of a Fireman" series.
- The water pumps depicted are steam powered, which represented a huge leap in technology over the bucket brigades.
- Fire was a constant threat in American nineteenth-century cities, which were at that time still illuminated and heated by open flame. In New York, the task of fire fighting was placed in the hands of volunteer fire departments, whose members included many of the city's most prominent citizens; Nathaniel Currier and James Ives were among them.
- In 1865, the conversion from hand pump to steam engine was complete, and New York's volunteer fire companies were replaced by a citywide professional fire department. The next year, Currier & Ives issued a sixth and final print to its Life of a Fireman series to acknowledge this development.
- It is interesting to note that Nathaniel Currier and James M. Ives were volunteer firemen in New York City.

## **Artist Facts**

- John Cameron was the chief lithographer for the firm, and he frequently altered the compositions to fit them to the lithograph stone.
- John Cameron was a regular Currier & Ives employee over a long period of years. He was a hunchback and a fondness for drink, but his work was of very high quality and his output very large. Even after ill health confined him to his home on Long Island, stones were sent out to him to work on there. His name appears as artist of some of the jointly designed prints. He was a lithographer or a chromist for the Currier & Ives firm. His job was to create on stone a reproduction of an artist's (or a collaboration of artists') original work.
- Currier and Ives was a very successful printmaking firm that operated from 1834-1907 in NYC. Nathaniel Currier founded the business in 1834 and in 1852 he brought his brother-in-law, James Ives, into the business and renamed the firm Currier & Ives five years later. (Some say in 1834 he went in on a partnership with Stodart, but it only lasted one year. Then in 1835 he established his own business.)
- Currier & Ives prints were hand-colored. They were neither lithographed in color nor printed in

color, but lithographed and printed in just one color of ink and then colored by hand afterward.

- In the Currier & Ives shop the stock prints were colored by a staff of about twelve young women, all trained colorists and mostly of German descent. They worked at long tables from a model set up in the middle of the table, where it was visible to all. The models, many of which were colored by Louis Maurer and Fanny Palmer, were all first approved by one of the partners. Each colorist applied only one color and, when she had finished, passed the print on to the next worker, and so on until it was fully colored. The print would then go to the woman in charge, known as the "finisher," who would touch it up where necessary. The colors used were imported from Austria and were the finest available, especially valued because they did not fade in the light.
- When large numbers of the rush stock prints were needed, extra help was called in. Then stencils would be cut for the various colors and the extras would wash in the colors. The prints could then be touched up by the regular girls. The larger folios were sent out in lots with models to regular colorists who worked outside the shop. Usually twelve prints from one of the large folio plates were sent out at a time. These outside colorists were often indigent young artists who earned a modest living at this kind of work while awaiting the recognition of their own work. It is said that Currier & Ives paid one cent apiece to colorist for the small prints, and one dollar for coloring twelve of the large folios. Other reports say \$6.00 for each 100 prints.
- Later technology made it possible to produce colored lithographs, which had a more "painted" effect.
- Currier and Ives used the drawings of many celebrated artists of the day.
- Currier and Ives was the most successful lithograph company and covered every area of American life—hunting, fishing, winter scenes, the Mississippi, still lifes, politics, rail roads, etc.
- Currier and Ives prints were among the most popular wall hangings of their day.
- Currier and Ives prints are now highly prized as collectibles.
- A lithograph (from the Greek for "stone drawing") is a print produced from a design drawn onto a limestone surface. The lithographic process relies on the principle that water and grease do not mix. The design is drawn, in mirror image, onto the surface of the limestone with a grease pencil or crayon. The surface of the drawing is covered with water and then with greasy ink, which adheres to the lines of the drawing. A damp sheet of paper is placed on top of the stone and placed in a special press. The pressure of the press transfers the drawing onto the piece of paper, but in reverse of the original design.
- Currier & Ives printed 2 to 3 images every week for 64 years and is believed to have produced more than 7500 different lithographic prints.
- For more info on lithography and Currier & Ives visit <http://www.ifpda.org/content/node/581>
- Currier (1813-88) was left to support his mother and four children at the age of 8 (along with his older brother, 11) when his father unexpectedly died.
- Currier worked odd jobs and then apprenticed with a lithographer at the age of 15.
- James Merritt Ives was initially hired as a bookkeeper in 1852. Five years later he became Currier's partner because he showed himself to be unusually adept at combining features from various sketches into a well-designed composition. This was important because so many of the prints came from the work of more than one artist.
- The company was eventually liquidated in 1907 when other methods of producing art (including photography) made lithographs less in demand.

- **Key Principle of Design to Teach**
- **Movement** creates the look and feel of action to guide the viewer's eye through the work.

### **Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Movement**

- What are the horses doing in this picture? Are they moving fast or slow?
- What are the people doing? Do they seem to be in a hurry? Why?
- Do you think the wind is blowing? Why? (The smoke is blowing.) Which way? (From the left to the right)
- Movement takes the viewers through this lithograph. The horses and fire fighters are running left along the bottom portion, but the smoke moves to the right along the top. This creates a circular motion that keeps the eye moving around and around the picture.

### **Keywords**

- Movement, perspective, warm colors, contrast

### **Other Possible Questions**

- What time do you think it is? (Middle of the night) How do you know? (It is dark, but none of the windows have lights in them so most of the people must have been sleeping.)
- What colors did the artist use to create the fire? (red, orange, yellow) Are these warm or cool colors? (warm)
- What is a vanishing point? (It is the point on the artwork that all the lines begin at, meet, end, or vanish at.)
- Where is the vanishing point in this painting? (It is just off of the artwork on the far left side.)
- Place paper strips or strings on the paper to help students see the lines and how they all meet at the vanishing point. (Roofs, windows, lines on buildings all point toward the vanishing point.)
- Talk about how the buildings on the right of the picture are bigger than those on the left of the picture, but in real life they are of course the same size.
- What shapes do you see? (Circles for the wheels, rectangles for the buildings and windows.)