

The American National Game of Base Ball.

Grand match for the championship at the Elysian Fields, Hoboken, NJ

by Currier and Ives

Print Facts

- Medium: 2 stone lithograph, hand colored
- Date: 1866
- Size:
- Period: Bauhaus
- Genre: American Landscape
- Currier and Ives were two partners who owned a printing business in New York City. They employed many artists; this painting was created by their company.
- This print was produced when the game was on the verge of becoming a professional sport rather than an amateur's social game.
- The setting is the Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey, which is the site where tradition holds that baseball, as we know it, sprang forth from Alexander Joy Cartwright. In 1845, the Knickerbocker Club of New York City began using Elysian Fields in Hoboken to play baseball. The Knickerbockers, Cartwright's club, played a game at that field in 1846 because they could not play that day in Manhattan, and as Cartwright is purported to have written down rules that could be common among teams, this spot is the mythical birthplace of baseball.
- In 1865 Elysian Fields hosted a championship match between the Mutual Club of New York and the Atlantic Club of Brooklyn that was attended by an estimated 20,000 fans and captured in this Currier & Ives lithograph "The American National Game of Base Ball."
- At the time the print was first produced, baseball was taking the country by storm. Amateur teams played one version or another in cities and towns across a good portion of the country, with a heavy concentration in the northeast.
- This image is important as a historical document not only because it commemorates the origin of the game, but because it captures the specifics of the game as it was played then. The path from home to pitcher's spot, the dirt paths between bases, no infield dirt we take for granted, no outfield wall. Spectators form the outer reaches of the field of play. The players play barehanded, the catcher stands some distance back of home base and does not crouch, the lone umpire takes his position off to the side. The pitcher throws not overhand but underhand. The team at bat lounges off to the side, no bench, no dugout. They hadn't changed the spelling yet from base ball to baseball.
- Prior to photography, images were captured by hand. The drawing was engraved or etched on a metal plate, which was inked in a solid color (black), then pressed onto large sheets of paper. The resulting prints were colored by hand in an assembly line factory where each person applied a single color. Since reprints were produced at different times, various versions of the image exist, from simple black and white to highly colored.

Artist Facts

- 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.)
- 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 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. Several of their prints were of important local and national events (like fires or ships sinking) and were published in newspapers.
- Many people hung Currier & Ives prints in their homes because the artwork was inexpensive and popular at that time.
- Currier and Ives prints are now highly prized as collectibles.
- 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 Element of Design to Teach

- **Line** is a mark on a surface that defines a shape or outline. Lines may be drawn or implied. They may be straight or curvilinear. They can create texture and be made thick or thin. Lines are often used to wrap around objects to make shapes. They can be horizontal, vertical and diagonal. Lines are usually used to take the viewer's eye around and through a composition.

Possible Questions to Teach Line

- What lines do you see in this painting? (diagonal lines going around the bases, horizontal line at the back of the field.)
- The lines in this painting help take you around the painting. (Like you were running around the bases, you always end up back where you started.)
- The trees have lines in them that give them texture. The grass also has small lines for texture.

Keywords

- Line, Texture, Cool Colors

Other Possible Questions

- Take in a baseball, glove, hat and bat. Talk about the history of baseball and how it has changed (gloves, hats, uniforms, dugout, stands for people, etc) and how it is the same (people watching, diamond shaped bases, pitcher, catcher, etc).
- Look at the spectators. Do we dress this way to go watch a baseball game today?
- Cover the bottom portion of the painting. Have students guess what the people are looking at.
- This painting has a great story. Share it with the students.
- What colors do you see? Are they mostly warm or cool colors? (cool)