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**Monday, Sep. 07, 1998**

**Art: Down-Home Populist**

**By ROBERT HUGHES**

It's doubtful whether anyone is ever going to look back on William Sidney Mount (1807-68) as a great American painter; the charm of his work is too modest, its range of feeling too circumscribed, for that. And yet, as the show of his paintings, drawings and prints at the New York Historical Society in Manhattan (before traveling to Pittsburgh, Pa., and Fort Worth, Texas) makes clear, there were reasons for his popularity, and he has a special place, very much his own, in the making of American art. Why? Because, with the slightly younger George Caleb Bingham, he was the first real genre painter the country had.

Genre means, broadly speaking, the depiction of manners, work, morals--of men and women as social creatures. It's inherently a modest art, unlike the other model to which painters aspired when Mount was growing up: the Grand Manner, the elevated form of historical or mythic narrative, full of heroes and demigods, pagan or biblical. The trouble was that the Grand Manner was scarcely attainable in 1830s America. Not even Thomas Cole, a considerably more gifted artist than Mount, had managed to do it without bathos. Benjamin West, the prodigy from Philadelphia, had brought it off--but by going to London and soaking himself in its prototypes. In America would-be artists had to rely on an erratic supply of prints for their clues to elevated diction, but there was hardly any local market for history painting. John Trumbull, president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, whose lifelong ambition was to commemorate the American Revolution in paint on an official scale, died a bitterly disappointed man.

So it isn't surprising that Mount, whose art education began when he apprenticed himself to his brother, a sign painter, should have made a few early stabs at the Grand Manner; and even less so that he was wholly inept at it. Greece, Rome and Israel were very far from bustling, nouveau-riche young America. Mount, a farmer's boy from Setauket, Long Island (a suburb today, deep country then), was very much part of that America, a country inventor who made his own boats and believed that a "hollow-backed" violin he had designed was better than anything from Cremona. Sensibly, he set out to record (and idealize) what he knew: the everyday rural life that was the protein of Jacksonian democracy at the dawn of the Age of the Common Man. He got an assist from Hogarth, whose prints he had seen, and from 17th century Dutch genre painting, with its flirtatious girls and grinning yokels. His first public success came in 1830, with Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride, plagiarized from a German genre painter named John Krimmel, who had worked briefly in America. Its stock types, from the grinning black fiddler to the bucolic suitors, chimed exactly with American taste in popular writing and theater.

Mount's preferred tone was down-home and nationalist: he was the first artist to paint the Yankee as a type. He painted barn dances, parlor courtships, farmers husking corn, truant children and jolly drunks. "Never paint for the few but for the many," he reminded himself in one of the numerous notebooks he kept, and the manifesto of this belief (not, alas, in this show) is The Painter's Triumph, 1838. It depicts Mount himself in a mood of exaltation, flourishing his palette and brushes and pointing out a detail of a painting to his ideal viewer--not a New York "conosher" but a farmer in a straw hat who still holds the buggy whip with which he has, presumably, driven in from Long Island. On the wall behind, a drawing of the head of Apollo is looking haughtily away from this populist scene.

What his clients liked best was amusing anecdote with moral overtones, but Mount liked to go a little further than that, embedding political messages in his work. These, naturally, have become catnip to recent American scholars striving to excavate social issues from art. It may be, as art historian Elizabeth Johns argues in the catalog, that Mount's best-known picture--Farmers Nooning, 1836, with its strongly, even nobly, realized figure of a black laborer taking his siesta on a pile of hay while a boy in a tam-o'-shanter mischievously tickles his ear with a grass stalk--is an allegory of the delusive promises made by abolitionists to slaves. Or it may not; little is known about Mount's racial views. It is clear, though, that the life of children--mainly small boys--was his core image of America, and that it provided the subject for many of his best paintings.

Of these, the most intriguing is Eel Spearing at Setauket, 1845. It is a painting not of Mount's own childhood memory but of someone else's. A New York attorney named Strong commissioned it from him; the little boy in the back of the boat is Strong, and the imposing black woman wielding her eel gig in the bow was his father's servant, Rachel Hart. With its strong diagonals of paddle and spear shaft, and the magical stillness of the water in which the figures, the landscape and the boat are doubled, this is the most resolved picture of Mount's career. Though Winslow Homer probably didn't know Mount's work, it seems to anticipate by 30 years two of that great artist's central themes: the dignity and autonomy of black Americans, and the child--white or black--as promise of the American future.

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