

Mister Currier & Mister Ives & Mister Tait

“Publishers of Cheap and Popular Pictures” of, among other interesting subjects, Victorian sportfishing.

by Brooke Chilvers

If you were alive before Joe DiMaggio first laid eyes on Marilyn Monroe, chances are your grandparents grew up with a Currier & Ives lithograph in the house. For 50 years (1857 to 1907) the “Publishers of Cheap and Popular Pictures”—a firm built by the tall, politically liberal, and melancholy Nathaniel Currier and the short, plump, and jovial James Merritt Ives—averaged three new titles every week, totaling some 7,500 individual works and perhaps a million prints.

In that age of few printed images, Currier & Ives provided an unpretentious pictorial history of the events and spirit of mid-19th-century America—its gold rush, bloody Civil War, and newsworthy disasters; its Victorian view of the industrial revolution and family life. In addition to 500 portraits of important people and 600 famous horses, Currier & Ives also produced several hundred sporting prints, including about 30 on angling, from still lifes of pickerel to fly fishing for salmon.

The print process called lithography was invented in Germany around 1795 by Bavarian author Alois Senefelder. It reached the States in 1820 when Bostonian John Pendleton brought the first lithographic pressman to America, a Frenchman named

Dubois. In 1828, 15-year-old Nathaniel Currier (1813–1888) went to work for Pendleton to support his widowed mother and numerous siblings, and eventually struck out on his own.

Currier followed Senefelder’s method of making a printing block from a soft calcareous stone (*lithos* is Greek for stone) imported from Bavaria by the pound. The stone was cut into flat rectangular blocks several inches thick, and the surface burnished by circularly grinding with a thin layer of sand. Then, using hydrophobic (water-repelling) oil-based crayons of varying widths or brushes dipped in *tusche* (a greasy black fluid), the lithographer meticulously copied the original onto the stone. This was then bathed in gum arabic and



BROOK TROUT FISHING.

nitric acid to fix the drawing and dissolve the areas not protected by crayon, leaving a slightly raised, print-ready plate to be covered with C&I's secret-formula ink, made from beef suet, goose grease, white wax, castile soap, gum mastic, and shellac. A half-dozen steps later, stone and paper met in the press, and the print was pulled.

The stones of successful prints were kept or occasionally redrawn, which accounts for some variations between prints of the same name. The stones from unsuccessful prints were simply re-ground for new ones.

Currier was a "job printer" when on January 13, 1840, the steamboat *Lexington* burned in the frigid waters of Long Island Sound, claiming more than 100 lives. Overnight he became an "independent print publisher" when his dramatic lithograph of the conflagration turned into a streetside best seller and ran as a special one-page edition of the *New York Sun*, making it the first illustrated newspaper ever printed.

In 1852 James Merritt Ives (1824–1895), an art-loving 28-year-old New Yorker and brother-in-law of "Nat's" brother, Charles, joined him as bookkeeper. Five years later the two became partners, with Ives streamlining production and managing the inventory and finances.

They hired gifted lithographers like Otto Knirsch, Napoleon Sarony, and Charles Parsons, and staff artists like Thomas Worth, Louis Maurer, and Mrs. Fanny Palmer, a frail and educated Brit known for her detailed atmospheric Hudson River backgrounds in many of the sporting prints. Her ne'er-do-well husband and son are pictured in *The Trout Stream*.

They also commissioned outside artists like British-born Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819–1905), who in a dozen years produced 42 works for C & I, most famously of hunting, camping, wingshooting, and fishing. In fact, it was Tait's still life of a brook trout that first attracted Ives's attention; he then commissioned a more elaborate version, the



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BASS FISHING.

American Speckled Brook Trout, whose colorful marvels, alas, one never sees reprinted in books.

Most artists were paid \$1 to \$10 for their original works and received no royalties. The well-known Tait probably received more, and may have sold only reproduction rights and not the canvas itself. C & I never pretended it was producing “art,” and thus artists’ names never appeared on small prints and only rarely on large folios. Also, many works came from several hands. For example, *Trolling for Blue Fish* is signed both Palmer and Worth; and Charles Parsons may have done some of the boats in the “boat-fishing” prints like *Black Bass Spear- ing on the Restigouche* or *Bass Fishing*. Palmer and Tait each did fish still lifes, like her *American Game Fish*, but she also did the backgrounds in some of Tait’s works, and many others. In collaboration with renowned sharpshooter Louis Maurer, Tait produced a number of Western works without ever traveling farther west than Chicago.

Tait was born in Liverpool but moved to a

family farm in Lancaster when his father, a maritime merchant, faced financial ruin. There he developed his interest in animals, hunting, and fishing. He worked as an art dealer while learning lithography and taught himself to paint at the Royal Institute in Manchester by copying the works of Queen Victoria’s favorite animal artist, Sir Edwin Landseer. Tait also produced architectural prints, which explains the expert attention to detail that translates so well in his lithographs.

After meeting American frontier artist George Catlin while his Indian Gallery toured Paris and London, Tait was inspired to move to America, and he arrived in New York City in 1850 with his wife, Marian. Tait’s style and anecdotal treatment of sport suited mid-Victorian America, and he was quickly accepted by the National Academy of Design, where he eventually exhibited over 200 paintings and was elected a full member after only eight years.

In those days, the smallest C & I prints (2.8 by

4.8 inches) sold for 5 to 25 cents, and the largest (18 by 27 inches) colored folios for \$1.50 to \$3.00. Today, Tait's *Brook Trout Fishing, An Anxious Moment*, of a Victorian gentleman, complete with gold watch and bow tie, fly fishing on the Raquette River, lists for up to \$24,500. His *Trout Fishing on Chateaugay Lake*, showing Tait watching his friend Thomas Barbour "pull one out," lists for \$14,500; and the now politically incorrect *Catching a Trout*. "We hab you now, sar!", portraying an influential Tammany Hall politico, goes for \$8,500. Incredibly, the original oil painting of Tait's frontier scene, *The Check—Keep Your Distance*, that C & I famously printed but perhaps never actually owned, sold at Christie's in November 2007 for \$2,841,000!

For some 30 years, Tait, a first-class sportsman, kept a summer studio in the Adirondacks near Long, Raquette, and Chateauga Lakes, where fellow sportsman-artists came to hunt, fish, drink, and talk art. James McDougall Hart supposedly influenced Tait's treatment of foliage and backgrounds, and from William Ranney's example he learned the compositional strength of placing the horizon just below a work's centerline.

Tait's association with C & I ended abruptly in 1865. For years he had complained that their prints harmed the sales of his originals, that they made poor knock-offs of his works without his permission, and that on the lithographs their name was printed the same size as his.

Later, Tait owned a farm in Westchester and began painting medium-size, moderately priced, slightly sentimental barnyard and animal paintings—200 of deer alone, never reaching for the sublime grandeur of Hudson River School contemporaries like Frederic Church. Still, lucky is the collector who owns a string of Tait's Currier & Ives lithographs.

Over the years, the conservative firm stuck to its single-color hand-press printing process. Some prints were sold uncolored for school pupils to fill in, and have occasionally surfaced as originals. The rest were hand-colored after a master model, with high-quality, non-fading Austrian watercolors, by a dozen ladies of mostly German extraction.

Each colorist applied a single, rarely subtle color—red for fire, green for grass, blue for the sea—and passed it to the next until it reached the "finisher" for final touch-ups.

From 1838 to 1872, Currier & Ives prints reached the masses from their Manhattan storefront at 152 Nassau Street, with cheaper and remaindered prints sold on tables outside, and more expensive ones, organized by subject matter, sold inside piled on long tables. The original oils of many prints hung on the walls.



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Hundreds of thousands of prints were also sold by pushcart peddlers; by traveling agents in Europe—comics and clipper ships were popular in France, while England preferred the frontier; and over the counters of countless country stores by shopkeepers who ordered them by number from published catalogs, themselves collector's items today.

In the early 20th century, offset printing, photo-engraving, and color printing rendered Currier & Ives's appeal obsolete. Because they were inexpensive, the prints were not cherished and often discarded. Currier's son, Edward, ill with tuberculosis, ran the company for 22 years before selling his share to Ives's son, Chauncey, in 1902. Five years later he sold it—stones and all—for pennies on the dollar.

The only complete file of proof prints (until 1880) ever assembled was stored in a damp cellar by Nat's less organized, more dissolute brother (and collaborator), Charles. Few survived, and a colossal, priceless collection was forever lost. We may never know for sure how many titles there were and how many were printed of each. ■

Brooke grew up detesting the Currier & Ives lithograph, Childhood, that hung in her girlhood bedroom.



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JUST CAUGHT.

TROUT AND PICKEREL.