

Basic Detail Report



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Title: At the Well

Date: 1848

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@28d28

Medium: Oil on card mounted on wood panel

Description: Mount's paintings of the 1840s display an increasing interest in landscape as the setting for his figures as well as a more nostalgic bent in his choice of subject. (1) In his best-known paintings of that decade, such as "Eel Spearing at Setauket" (1845; New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown,), "Dance of the Haymakers" (1845; Museums at Stony Brook, N.Y.), and "A Farmer Whetting his Scythe" (1848; private collection). Mount created vignettes of a passing way of life, giving them significance and focus and emphasizing the values he placed on the past. In the 1840s Mount returned repeatedly to the image of an old well. At least two drawings of the subject, "Drawing the Water" (private collection) and "Boy at the Well Sweep" (Museums at Stony Brook, N.Y.), exist, and there may be as many as four painted versions. He exhibited a painting entitled "The Sportsman at the Well" (whereabouts unknown) at the Apollo Association in 1840; he notes a large undated painting entitled The Well by the Wayside (whereabouts unknown) in his personal catalogue of paintings; (2) and a painting known as "The Sportsman at the Well" (ca. 1848; private collection) has been exhibited several times since the 1840s. Recent examinations by scholars suggest that this last painting is a larger copy of the New Britain work. (3) The New Britain painting is probably the work known as "Well by the Wayside", which Mount withdrew in late 1848 from the American Art-Union because of lack of interest and exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1849. (4) In "At the Well", a mustached man in black pants, white shirt, and broad-brimmed black hat trimmed in red has just drawn up a bucket of cold water suspended from a slanting well sweep supported on a stout forked post. A scrubby wooded hillside rises beyond him to the right. Within the dappled sun and shade, a complicated pattern of diagonals is created by the lines of the well, the sweep, the wooden drainpipes, and the man's rifle. The flowing lines of the man stand in contrast to the brown geometry around him, and the sun on his hand as he raises the bucket serves as the focal point of the painting. Late in his career, Mount instructed: "Paint pictures that will take with the public; never paint for the few, but the many." (5) His desire to be popular may hold the key to his fascination with images of wayside wells during the 1840s. In 1826 the American poet Samuel Woodworth's poem "The Old Oaken Bucket" was popularized as a song. Throughout the nineteenth century it was part of the standard repertoire of American poetry and memorialized an increasingly venerated object of the rural past for the growing ranks of urban

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Americans. "How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood / When fond recollection presents them to view!" Woodworth begins, recalling his father's farm as old-fashioned, even in the 1820s. His fondest memory is reserved for the old well: "That moss-covered vessel I hailed as a treasure; / For often at noon, when returned from the field / I found it the source of an exquisite pleasure / The purest and sweetest that nature can yield." Woodworth even imputes moral force to the bucket and its contents: "Then soon, with the emblem of truth overflowing, / And dripping with coolness, it rose from the well." (6) By drinking from the well of truth, even in memory, the author improves his moral stature in the present. Mount, who loved music and popular American culture, probably knew "The Old Oaken Bucket," at least in song form. The possible link between poem and painting supports his call for art that can be appreciated by the many. Other artists followed Mount's lead in using an old well as a subject. His friend William Tylee Ranney, for example, painted *The Old Oaken Bucket* (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh) just a few years later, in 1851, though his version is more obviously sentimental. While Mount's painting is less anecdotal than Ranney's and more a study of the figure outdoors, it appears that neither Mount's intrepid sportsman nor the general, mid-nineteenth-century art public could resist the lure of "The old oaken bucket, the iron-bound bucket, / The moss-covered bucket that hangs in the well." LW Bibliography: Mary Bartlett Cowdrey and Hermann Warner Williams Jr., "William Sidney Mount, 1807-1868: An American Painter" (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1944); Alfred Frankenstein, "Painter of Rural America: William Sidney Mount, 1807-1868" (Stony Brook, N.Y.: Suffolk Museum at Stony Brook, 1968); Alfred Frankenstein, "William Sidney Mount" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975); David Cassedy and Gail Shrott, "William Sidney Mount: Annotated Bibliography and Listings of Archival Holdings of the Museums at Stony Brook" (Stony Brook, N.Y.: Museums at Stony Brook, 1983); David Cassedy and Gail Shrott, "William Sidney Mount: Works in the Collection of the Museums at Stony Brook" (Stony Brook, N.Y.: Museums at Stony Brook, 1983). NOTES: 1. Cowdrey and Williams Jr., "William Sidney Mount", p. 6. 2. "Catalogue of Portraits and Pictures Painted by William Sidney Mount," in Frankenstein, "William Sidney Mount", p. 472; listed as oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in. 3. Charles B. Ferguson, Director, NBMAA, notes, October 9, 1974, NBMAA files, regarding examination of the two pictures by Alfred Frankenstein, Rudolph Wunderlich, Lawrence Fleischman, and John Wilmerding. 4. Frankenstein made the connection between "At the Well", the painting offered to the American Art-Union, and "Sportsman at the Well", lot 167 in "Pictures of the estate of Wm. S. Mount, sold and unsold by Robert Somerville, New York, April 10th and 11th, 1871 (William Sydney Mount, pp. 462, 477). On Mount's withdrawal of the painting, see Mount to George Pope Morris, December 3, 1848, *ibid.*, p. 234. 5. Cowdrey and Williams Jr., "William Sidney Mount", p. 11. 6. See Francis F. Browne, ed., "The Golden Treasury of Poetry and Prose" (New York and Saint Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1883), p. 55, which includes the poem along with an engraving of an old wooden well and a cocked well

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sweep similar to that in Mount's painting.

Dimensions: Image Size: $20 \frac{7}{8} \times 15 \frac{3}{8}$ in. (53×39.1 cm) $21 \times 15 \frac{3}{4}$ in. (53.3×40 cm) Frame Dimension: $27 \times 21 \frac{1}{2} \times 2 \frac{3}{8}$ in. ($68.6 \times 54.6 \times 6$ cm)