

GOING TO MARKET: IMAGES OF BUYING AND SELLING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN ART

Terrence H. Witkowski, California State University, Long Beach

ABSTRACT

In the middle of the nineteenth century, American artists chronicled numerous scenes from the everyday life of their burgeoning country. Known as genre painting, some of this art depicted ordinary people engaged in typical buying and selling activities. They are shown going to or coming from a market, listening to salesmen, visiting shops, and making deals. This paper uses these oil paintings and watercolors, as well as lithographic prints, as a primary data source to investigate the social processes of marketing exchange. Secondary research was consulted to better place the artworks within their historical context. This literature provided an additional level of analysis when it contained information on the marketing history of, and first critical reactions to, the artists and their works themselves.

By visually showing what buyers, marketers, merchandise, and accoutrements actually look like, art can augment, and sometimes challenge, written records. On the other hand, art can be factually misleading since artists render subjects according to their own vision and to the expectations of their patrons. Art reveals social attitudes and, thus, documents the cultural context of marketing exchange.

This paper examines four main subject categories: rural and town markets, urban transactions, itinerant peddlers, and images of black Americans. Works analyzed in the first category include *Bargaining for a Horse* (1835) by William Sydney Mount, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (1845) by George Caleb Bingham, *Farmyard in Winter, Selling Corn* (1852) by George Henry Durrie, and *The Speculator* (1852) and *Bargaining, The Christmas Turkey* (1856) by Francis W. Edmonds. Among the urban images considered are the anonymous *Interior of a Butcher Shop* (1837), *Mrs. McCormick's General Store* (1844) by Albertus D.O. Browere, and *The Young Husband: First Marketing* (1856) by Lilly Martin Spencer. Itinerant peddlers were a common subject in genre art and some of the better portrayals include *The Peddler Displaying his Wares* (1836) by Asher Brown Durand, the anonymous *The Yankee Pedlar* (ca 1840-45), and *The Image Pedlar* (1844) by Francis W. Edmonds. Perhaps the most poignant images of blacks in the market was when they themselves were the product being sold. Two excellent paintings are Eyre Crowe's *Slave Market in Richmond* (1852-1853) and Thomas Satterwhite Noble's *The Price of Blood* (1868).

Four analytic themes -- traditionalism, emotion, morality, and social typing -- connect these subject categories. The art examined tended to celebrate the more traditional marketing activities and institutions of the time and, in some cases, images had retrospective and nostalgic overtones. The emotional content of marketing exchange was also emphasized. Some paintings depicted the wryly humorous side of negotiating, while others showed the seriousness and tension marketing transactions entailed. Through facial expressions, body language, and other artistic conventions, many of the paintings commented on the ethics of buying and selling. Indeed, one purpose of this art was to instruct the audience in consumer skills. Finally, in their portrayals of buying and selling, genre artists tapped several social types, such as the Yankee farmer, the frontiersman, the black, the domestic woman and the urban street child, that were achieving widespread recognition in the jokes and stories of the time.

Art, as a data source, potentially can contribute to our knowledge of other eras, places, and aspects of marketing history. For example, the works discussed in this paper have many European precedents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly Dutch genre paintings and the works of the English artist William Hogarth, that themselves reveal attitudes toward buying and selling. Unfortunately, American genre painting declined after the 1860s and few twentieth century artists have depicted marketing transactions.