

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Craig Houser

## Disharmony and Discontent: Reviving the American Art-Union and the Market for United States Art in the Gilded Age

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2012)

---

Citation: Craig Houser, "Disharmony and Discontent: Reviving the American Art-Union and the Market for United States Art in the Gilded Age," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2012), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer12/craig-houser-disharmony-and-discontent>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License Creative Commons License](#).

Abstract:

In the 1880s many US artists, who had enjoyed a rich patronage in the past, were distressed that so many wealthy collectors were choosing to purchase the work of European artists, so they revived the old American Art-Union. Rarely discussed in the scholarly literature, the organization and its failure help to illuminate the cultural politics of the rapidly growing art scene during the Gilded Age, specifically the divisiveness among the various artist groups and the contentious relationships between artists and dealers. The brevity of the AAU's existence raises significant questions about who should manage which aspects of the visual arts, and to what degree national pride should play a role in the production and patronage of US art.

## Disharmony and Discontent: Reviving the American Art-Union and the Market for United States Art in the Gilded Age

by Craig Houser

“American art no longer ruled in America.”

—The American Art Union, 1884<sup>[1]</sup>

With the rise of industrialization after the Civil War, the United States experienced unforeseen wealth, and many affluent industrialists spent vast sums of money patronizing the arts. While collectors had acquired the work of US artists at the beginning of this period of mass consumption, by the mid-1870s most collectors chose to focus their attention exclusively on the art of Europe.<sup>[2]</sup> The artistic refinement of the old world, in keeping with the spirit of the Gilded Age, provided the necessary means by which nouveau riche Americans were able to elevate their social status and establish their so-called cultural legacy.<sup>[3]</sup> Such a shift in the art market troubled many US artists, especially those with established reputations, and in order to increase the sale of their work, these artists founded the American Art Union (AAU) in the 1880s. Unfortunately, this association was short lived, lasting approximately three years, and failed to achieve its basic goal. This largely forgotten art union has, therefore, rarely been discussed in the scholarly literature to date.<sup>[4]</sup> Yet the organization and its failure are useful to consider because they help to illuminate the cultural politics of the rapidly growing art scene during the Gilded Age, specifically the divisiveness among the various artist groups and the contentious relationships between artists and dealers. Ultimately, the brevity of the AAU's existence raised significant questions about who should manage which aspects of the visual arts, and to what degree national pride should play in the production and patronage of US art.

The founding of the AAU grew out of lengthy conversations among artists associated with the National Academy of Design. The artist-run institution had been a strong force in the New York art scene since 1826, providing, primarily, art instruction and an annual juried exhibition of contemporary art.<sup>[5]</sup> While these academicians had controlled the visual arts in the city to a large degree and enjoyed a rich patronage in the past, they felt frustrated that their work was being ignored by collectors and dealers in the ever-escalating art market. Bemoaning the situation, Jervis McEntee, a well-respected landscape painter who had been an academician for many years, wrote in his diary in 1879: “I think the way American artists are treated is a shame to our people. I am sure that in almost any other country with my position I should be spared all this.”<sup>[6]</sup> Although these artists were able to attract would-be buyers through exhibitions of their work held at the National Academy, artist's societies, and gentlemen's clubs, as well as their own studios, none of these venues were truly commercial enterprises.<sup>[7]</sup> These artists, therefore, felt they needed to empower themselves in the art market by creating additional outlets for the sale of their work.

From the late 1870s through the early 1880s, the academicians considered various commercial models, one of which was the old American Art-Union of 1838–52.<sup>[8]</sup> The antebellum union had been managed by shrewd business people, who had transformed the visual arts in the United States. The old union's leaders attracted the general public by selling annual subscriptions at five dollars apiece, for which subscribers received a print based on a painting and a copy of the union's journal. In addition, the money left over after expenses was used to

purchase original works of art that were placed on view in its art gallery and distributed to subscribers at the end of each year through a lottery. Individuals with winning numbers received a free work of art. Such a program was popular, especially among the middle class, and created a nationwide art market in the United States.<sup>[9]</sup> The business managers also thought of themselves as socially minded connoisseurs and proposed that artistic taste be cultivated so that a national school of art would develop in the United States.<sup>[10]</sup> Although the old art union had typically promoted subject matter depicting US history, moral genre scenes, and classical allegories, by the late 1840s and early 1850s it was touting and distributing American landscape paintings by such artists as Frederic Edwin Church, Jasper Francis Cropsey, and John F. Kensett, whose finely detailed, idyllic scenes were revered for their sense of nostalgia and patriotism.<sup>[11]</sup> Such an advanced economic and artistic program distressed the National Academy at that time, as the two organizations' shows competed for attendance, and artists became more attracted to the union's purchasing and promotional power.<sup>[12]</sup> When a New York State court shut down that union in 1852 because lotteries were illegal, the academy was able to breathe a sigh of relief.<sup>[13]</sup> Despite the competitive relationship between the academy and the old American Art-Union, many academicians in the 1880s saw their work as an extension of the very American artistic tradition that the old union had promoted, and landscape painting was prominent in the academy's annual exhibitions.<sup>[14]</sup> In order to take charge of the US art market and combat the growing number of dealers' promoting European art, these academicians decided that the best way to revitalize the market for US art would be to revive the old American Art-Union, albeit with some necessary changes.

On April 7, 1883, the new American Art Union was formed—this time without a hyphen in its name—and a flyer was distributed to various well-known US artists asking for their cooperation in the enterprise. The AAU was established “[f]or the general advancement of the Fine Arts, and for promoting and facilitating a greater knowledge and love thereof on the part of the public.”<sup>[15]</sup> Despite the educational and emotional nature of this mission, the new AAU would focus primarily on enhancing the public exposure of US artists' work, and increasing their sales. In many respects, the program of the AAU was modeled after the old one. For the same annual fee of five dollars, subscribers would receive a print and a copy of a monthly journal titled the *Art Union*.<sup>[16]</sup> The AAU also promised that half the proceeds from the subscriptions were to be used for the purchase of original works of art by the AAU's artist members.<sup>[17]</sup> Like the old union, these works were to be distributed to various subscribers at the end of each year. However, the lottery system, which was still illegal in the 1880s, had to be changed. The AAU tried to work through a loophole in the anti-lottery law that allowed subscribers of an organization to vote on its own method of distribution.<sup>[18]</sup> While the AAU offered a number of options, the majority of its subscribers inevitably would select a lottery because it provided an enticing means by which they might win a work of art.<sup>[19]</sup>

The AAU also attempted to create additional opportunities for sales. Its leaders stated that their gallery would show art that would be available for acquisition, not works that had already been purchased, as had generally been the case in the old union's gallery.<sup>[20]</sup> Amid the growing market for European art in the 1880s, the AAU claimed that its gallery would be the only well-managed gallery in New York devoted exclusively to US art.<sup>[21]</sup> In addition, the AAU proposed to create various traveling exhibitions that would stop at prominent cities around the country, thus creating new venues for the purchase of art.<sup>[22]</sup>

All of these tactics were designed to expand the art market, and the leaders of the AAU took what they believed would be further steps to improve upon the ideas of the old one. One major distinction was the management. While the old union had been run by businessmen, the new one proudly stated in its journal that it would be governed by artists, which

commends it not only to the art-loving people of the country, but to the artists themselves. The subscribers to the Union may feel better assured that true artistic principles will be kept in view and good art works will be published and disseminated; and the artists may feel that it will be genuine merit which will be rewarded, and that the benefits and profits accruing to the society through the exhibition and sale of their works will not pass into the hands of outside parties, but will be shared by themselves in being devoted to the upbuilding, strengthening and popularizing of the art by which they live.<sup>[23]</sup>

Such claims indicated that artists, not businessmen, were the most adept at managing artistic affairs. By virtue of their training, artists would be “better qualified to present the claims of art intelligently and to discriminate wisely in the purchase of pictures.”<sup>[24]</sup> The officers, board of control, and active membership, all of whom were artists, would be in charge of the AAU’s operations.<sup>[25]</sup> Another significant difference between the old and the new art unions was that the new one would not presume to tout a singular national school of art, but said it wished to champion the general “advancement of the claims of American art, irrespective of schools or methods.”<sup>[26]</sup> Only artists whose work demonstrated a “distinguished professional merit” would be elected to active membership.<sup>[27]</sup>

These changes demonstrated that the founders had thought carefully about their newly formed coalition. They had intended to capitalize on the successes of the old union, but made distinct modifications to improve its overall structure and program. In many respects all roads seemed to point toward success for the new AAU. With artists in charge and the election of members based on professional merit, the structure of the AAU recalled in part the medieval guild system and resembled the modern craft unions that had been growing in number during the nineteenth century. Like these other organizations, the AAU was designed to promote and protect visual artists in their trade.<sup>[28]</sup> However, the AAU’s artist management and its presumed openness to aesthetic differences may have, inadvertently, doomed it from the beginning. With artists running the AAU, any sign of favoritism toward either a certain type of aesthetic or “distinguished professional merit” would be glaringly apparent.

Although the press was generally positive about the new AAU,<sup>[29]</sup> critics readily questioned its bias toward the National Academy of Design because the first elected officers, Daniel Huntington as president and Thomas W. Wood as vice-president, held the exact same positions within the academy. E. Wood Perry, who served on the council of the academy, was voted secretary of the AAU, while Frederick Dielman served as treasurer.<sup>[30]</sup> The AAU’s board of control was comprised of many well-respected artists including McEntee, Albert Bierstadt, J. H. Bristol, Frederick Stuart Church, William Hart, and Eastman Johnson.<sup>[31]</sup> While the election of Huntington as president made sense, given that he was a strong leader in the visual arts and was old enough that he had been involved with the old union, the rest of the board members, except for Dielman and Church, were all academicians.<sup>[32]</sup> Such a large number of academicians on the governing board prompted one reporter to ask if the “union was a strictly

Academy organization, which would ignore *modern work* in the endeavor to *bring the old Academicians to the front*” [my emphasis].<sup>[33]</sup> In defense of the AAU, Perry, as secretary, explained that the large number of academicians was due only to the fact that the organization had been initiated by several members of the academy, and added that the board of control would rotate in its membership, so that others would have an opportunity to govern in the future.<sup>[34]</sup> However, such a large number of academicians on the board, whether it was intended or not, threatened the integrity of the AAU and its presumably broad mission to include all schools of art.

Establishing unity, which is crucial to the formation of any union, was clearly at stake. The art world in the post-Civil War era in New York had been diversifying, and a variety of new artists’ organizations were being established on a regular basis.<sup>[35]</sup> While this diversification allowed artists to explore their particular interests, it also produced divisiveness at times, and the AAU might have encountered trouble no matter how the officers and board were configured. Only one week after the AAU had publicly announced itself, Dielman explained that it had been condemned with “shouts of derision” by “a certain party of artists.”<sup>[36]</sup> Such “shouts of derision” demonstrated the magnitude of the division that had infected the visual arts in New York. While no group was named specifically, the “certain party of artists” to which Dielman was referring was likely the Society of American Artists, given that he himself was affiliated with that organization. Among the various art organizations in existence during the mid-1880s, the society, by far, had the most contentious relationship with the academy.

A comparison between the Society of American Artists and the National Academy is useful because it helps to illuminate the specific nature of their controversial relationship, and the issues at stake for the AAU. The differences between members of the society and those of the academy were apparent on a number of levels, including age, training, and artistic mindset, as well as their choice of subject matter and style. The society was comprised primarily of younger artists who had received their schooling in Europe.<sup>[37]</sup> As a result, its artists tended to follow the recent trends in European painting, depending on where and with whom they had studied.<sup>[38]</sup> In contrast to the American-inspired imagery of the academicians, the society’s artists favored figurative subjects that frequently reflected European, Middle Eastern, or Asian themes, and often executed their work with a painterly finesse and sometimes a decorative aesthetic.<sup>[39]</sup> The Society of American Artists had been formed in 1877 largely in protest of the hanging policies of the National Academy. The society had claimed that the academy’s exhibitions too often showcased the paintings of the older academicians, particularly their landscapes, and that within the salon-style hanging system of the shows, the younger artists’ works were not always exhibited in the prime spots for viewing.<sup>[40]</sup> While the society explained that its objective was to “encourage art in general, not hurt the Academy,” the society nevertheless chose to mount its own annual shows, thus creating a sense of competition with the academy.<sup>[41]</sup> Despite these differences, the one thing that the academicians and the society’s artists had in common was that neither group was selling their work well within the very weak market for US art.<sup>[42]</sup> At a time when visual artists were dividing into factions, with frictions between them evident, the AAU desperately needed to establish a strong sense of unity not only among its members, but also with the visual arts community at large, especially when “shouts of derision” and the criticism from the press posed potential threats to its survival.



In response to the initial criticism of bias, the AAU took steps to demonstrate a stronger sense of inclusiveness. When the AAU was officially incorporated on May 11, 1883, the leaders reconfigured their existing board slightly and strategically chose to add Walter Shirlaw.<sup>[43]</sup> He had served as the first president of the Society of American Artists and had defiantly rejected his election as an associate academician to the National Academy in 1879.<sup>[44]</sup> Shirlaw had also been instrumental in obtaining the support of several older academicians by encouraging them to join, and therefore endorse, the Society of American Artists.<sup>[45]</sup> Given his significant leadership in the society's secession from the academy, Shirlaw's new position on the board of control of the AAU might have been interpreted as a gesture of good will on the part of the AAU toward the society's artists.<sup>[46]</sup> Furthermore, Shirlaw was an active participant in the AAU. He produced the first etching that was given to each subscriber upon joining the AAU. Based on Eastman Johnson's painting *The Reprimand* (ca. 1883), Shirlaw's print (fig. 1) features a seated elderly man looking sternly at a girl who turns away from him indignantly. The choice of such a figurative image by Johnson for the AAU's first etching was significant because he was one of the few artists who was both an academician and a member of the society, and thus the use of his work, and the execution of the print by Shirlaw, might also have been interpreted as an act of openness on the part of the AAU to unite with the "derisive" artists. *The Reprimand* has also been interpreted by the art historian Patricia Hills as a metaphor for the turmoil in the visual arts at the time, with the old man representing the conservative academy and the rebellious girl the society.<sup>[47]</sup> In the context of the AAU, one might extend Hills's metaphor to suggest that these two conflicting forces within the visual arts were nevertheless bound to each other because they lived in the same dreary interior, or operated in the same mediocre market for US art.



Fig. 1, Walter Shirlaw (copy after Eastman Johnson), *The Reprimand*, ca. 1883. Etching and chine-collé on paper. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. [\[larger image\]](#)

Despite the overtures on the part of the AAU, the criticism from the press and the shouts from the society's artists had some validity. In the early stages of the AAU's development, McEntee wrote in his diary that he had read "a sharp but just criticism" of a show of the Society of the American Artists. He then confessed: "I think our strictly American art will grow into favor if we get an Art Union fairly going. The people are getting tired of mere decoration and are beginning to look for something different, if not better."<sup>[48]</sup> His words "strictly American art" referred to the traditional art promoted by the National Academy, and his bias against a decorative aesthetic, which had been promoted in the society's exhibition, revealed that he did

indeed hope that the AAU “would bring the old Academicians to the front,” as the reporter had questioned.<sup>[49]</sup>

Although McEntee’s words were private and represented his own opinion, they help one understand the antagonistic response that the AAU received from some members of the press and the society’s artists. In fact, by January 1884, approximately eight months after the AAU had made its first public announcement, the AAU still demonstrated favoritism toward the academy: among its 143 artist members, 52 percent were academicians or associate academicians, and only 14 percent were members of the Society of American Artists, while a mere 5 percent were members of both groups.<sup>[50]</sup> This disparity suggests that the AAU might have continued to privilege the work of its members who were academicians or the society’s derisive artists might have chosen simply not to join. Either way an imbalance was still present, despite the fact that the cause of the AAU was essential to all US artists at the time: to promote their work and obtain a greater measure of financial reward.

While the AAU was attempting to navigate among the different personalities of the US art world at the time, its first order of business was to expand the market for US artists, which it did by creating a number of exhibitions of members’ works in various cities around the country. Advancements in rail transport made it easy for the AAU to ship entire exhibitions to different locations. Charles M. Kurtz, who had made a living writing for newspapers and producing the catalogues for the National Academy’s annual shows, was chosen to manage the AAU’s touring exhibitions. The first show, which included 135 works, was held in Buffalo at the Fine Arts Academy in June and July of 1883. While attendance was fair and only two paintings sold, the AAU was still able to pay its expenses with its commissions and admission fees.<sup>[51]</sup>

The show then traveled to Louisville, where it was exhibited in conjunction with the Southern Exposition. A world’s fair, this type of venue was advantageous because officials were often willing to spend large sums of money to ensure success, and such events typically drew enormous crowds. The AAU struck a lucrative deal with the exposition’s managers, which required that the latter had to guarantee sales of \$10,000 or otherwise pay \$2,500 as a forfeit. The exhibition was covered extensively in the press throughout the South, and attendance surpassed one million viewers. By the close of the show, thirty-five paintings had been sold, garnering over \$17,000. In addition, the exhibition had stimulated enough interest in Louisville that the citizens decided to establish a public art gallery for US art. The AAU proudly claimed its victory, stating that “the influence of the first public gallery established in the South . . . will make art more popular in the South, and will thus open to the artists a much more extended market than they have enjoyed hitherto.”<sup>[52]</sup> This triumph in Louisville helped the AAU send other traveling shows to such cities as San Francisco, Sacramento, and St. Louis, although sales in these locations were much more limited.<sup>[53]</sup>

While the AAU demonstrated that it was capable of originating new commercial venues for US art, the press was quick to criticize the AAU on a number of issues. The need to create exhibition contracts that required a guarantee of sales was considered suspect. Although a loan fee of some sort might have been acknowledged as a worthy initiative on the part of the AAU to benefit its artists for participating in the Southern Exposition, the need for the guarantee was thought to be a cheap way “of forcing sales of native work.”<sup>[54]</sup> The truth was that sales from the Southern Exposition had only amounted to \$5,000 toward the end of the show, and

the officials had to purchase several works themselves at the last minute to avoid paying the loan fee. [55] One critic chided that “this does not look like selling pictures on their merits.” [56] Such words likely wounded the AAU, which had proudly stated that it had been selecting and selling work based on “distinguished professional merit.” Another criticism was that the AAU’s shows represented only its artist members, most of whom were living in the Northeast, thus excluding the work of local artists. [57] Such an oversight demonstrated one more time that the AAU had been careless in its lack of inclusiveness. Despite all these criticisms, the out-of-town shows were by far the AAU’s most productive and lucrative projects.

While the AAU was succeeding, albeit to varying degrees, with its traveling exhibitions, the situation was not so favorable for the permanent gallery in New York. The AAU had rented a room on the fourth floor of the Wheeler and Wilson building on 14th Street in what would have been considered New York’s art district in the 1880s. [58] Over the course of six months, the gallery space was properly renovated, and opened to the public on December 19, 1883, with the AAU proudly advertising that its state-of-the-art facility was accessible during the evening because it was lit with electric light. [59] According to an article in the AAU’S journal, the 173 paintings, watercolors, and etchings on display were hung “fairly illustrating the distinctive characteristics of the various schools, as well as the individuality of the artists.” [60]

Although the AAU’s gallery might have looked impressive and its hanging policy deemed acceptable to the various artists included in the show, the major problem was that no one was visiting. [61] On the opening night, a snowstorm prevented many people from attending, but by mid-January, McEntee was reporting, “No one there.” [62] Critics blamed the poor attendance on the fact that the space on the fourth floor was not noticeable or easily accessible from the street level. [63] Also, while the AAU had prided itself on the fact that artists were “better qualified” to select “good art works,” the overall quality of the pictures on view was also questioned. One critic noted that “the exhibition is weak; it has the appearance of unsalable goods,” and that everyone appeared too eager to sell. [64] In addition, visitors might have been confused by the fact that they could either buy a painting on view or purchase a subscription and possibly win one of the works via the lottery much more cheaply. Perhaps the AAU’s lottery scheme itself, which circumvented the law, put off some would-be subscribers, or the admission fee to the gallery discouraged some people from entering. [65] Later, the AAU itself tried to blame the poor economy. [66] Whatever the reasons, the harsh truth was that the public interest in a permanent gallery devoted exclusively to the display and sale of US art was simply not strong enough to generate crowds.

As a result, many members of the board of control were beginning to feel apprehensive, and by the end of the month, Perry announced that the AAU was \$3,000 in debt, which added to their fears. [67] He approached the more well-heeled board members to donate funds. While Johnson was initially reluctant, he, Bierstadt, and Huntington would each eventually give money. [68] Although more subscriptions began to come in early February, the business venture continued to show signs of distress, and some of the board members tried to resign or stayed away altogether. [69] On February 12, 1884, the board officially voted to close its permanent exhibition space, less than two months after it had opened, and unless the journal was able to produce more subscriptions, the board thought that it, too, should be terminated. [70]



Given that the board members had taken so much time and thought to plan the AAU's general programming and renovate its gallery space, their decision to close the gallery so soon seemed abrupt. During the planning stages for the gallery, McEntee had noted that "we think we are running no risk even if we do nothing more than to make a sales room for American artists. Now everything depends on our good management."<sup>[71]</sup> Unfortunately, the board had seemingly not considered the amount of time, energy, and money that would be required initially to promote the gallery properly and had naively expected more immediately gratifying results. Rather than think of ways to remedy the crisis, the leaders chose to dissolve, quite prematurely, one of the AAU's most important initiatives.<sup>[72]</sup> One reason might have been that their pride was likely wounded by the dismally poor attendance; another might have been that leaving the gallery open would only be a money-losing venture and an embarrassing reminder of their disgrace. In less than one year's time, the AAU seemed to be falling apart, and McEntee wondered if they might have to abandon the project entirely. In his diary, he grumbled: "If we do I will never again enter into any plan in which the cooperation of the artists is essential to success. As a body they seem selfish and indifferent."<sup>[73]</sup> While the AAU's journal had initially praised its artist leaders for their savvy in artistic affairs, it was clear that in this instance they were lacking in sound business management skills. When the gallery officially closed in June 1884, and only three or four works had been sold, an article in the *New York News* prophesied "a decadence that bodes no good" for the AAU's future.<sup>[74]</sup>

Although the closing of the gallery was a disturbing event, the *Art Union* was able to generate more subscriptions and was published, albeit sometimes sporadically, from January 1884 to December 1885.<sup>[75]</sup> If nothing else, the periodical served as a useful propagandistic tool for the AAU. Possessing a journal of their own, the artists were able to express publicly their concerns about the state of affairs in the art market, and Kurtz's background in the newspaper business must have proved useful.<sup>[76]</sup> While he had produced quality journalism before, he had also written many "puffery pieces," as they were called, to support himself.<sup>[77]</sup> Although he signed a couple of articles for the *Art Union* in his own name, many texts remained unsigned, and several peculiar signatures, such as "A Friend of American Art," Indian Red, and X. Y. Z., suggested that he and the board had to produce much of the content themselves, as letters exchanged between Perry and Kurtz implied.<sup>[78]</sup> The journal can therefore serve as a useful record in understanding the AAU leader's often transparent agenda, especially when one considers the repetition of certain ideas throughout the periodical. While the *Art Union* reported on a variety of topics including art education and artists' organizations, the journal was often used as a weapon to attack the foreign art market and promote a strong sense of nationalism. In several of these discussions, the friction between the National Academy of Design and the Society of American Artists was apparent, as the journal frequently promoted the agenda of the former and dismissed that of the latter.

Widespread forgeries in the art market were mentioned repeatedly in the *Art Union* to deter American collectors from purchasing so much foreign art. Naïve American collectors were warned that they served as easy prey for dealers of European art. At least ten articles, editorials, and letters over the course of two years condemned the ongoing threat of fraud, namely that of French art, which had been dominating the US market. Only one of these texts also considered the possibility that US art could be forged as well, although a significant case in Chicago had been reported in the *New York Times* in 1883.<sup>[79]</sup>

While raising the specter of fraud in the market was an obvious and useful method to discourage the purchase of foreign art and rally the support of the AAU's artist members, the editors were somewhat more diplomatic regarding a recent change in the tariff law. In 1883 the duty on foreign art had been raised to 30 percent, and not all artists were agreed on whether the increase was a good thing. Put simply, the Society of American Artists, which had strong ties to Europe, wanted to abolish any tariff, while most of the academicians, who were nationalist minded, supported some sort of tariff.<sup>[80]</sup> Although the AAU did not take an official stand on the tariff, somewhat cryptic references disparaging the society and its free-trade policy and touting the academicians' position and its pro-tariff stance were detectable in the rhetoric of the *Art Union*. One article titled "Tariff Agitation" described the society as "a number of the younger artists of this city, who are in the habit of exhibiting pictures abroad, and who, it was whispered, were not averse to embracing an opportunity to curry favor with foreign artists and American dealers, presented a memorial to the Tariff Commission, asking an abolition of all duties on imported pictures." In reference to the position of the academicians, the same article continued: "Persons, however, who felt that *they understood the matter rather better than these interested young men*, explained to the Commission that the duty should not be removed, if the Government felt any interest at all in American art" [my emphasis].<sup>[81]</sup> Such wording, as subtle as it might have been, demonstrated a bias in favor of the academy and revealed the AAU's ongoing lobbying efforts to promote a tariff.<sup>[82]</sup> In numerous letters and articles, the *Art Union* repeatedly promoted a "specific instead of either an *ad valorem* or no duty at all," while only two letters favored the notion of free trade.<sup>[83]</sup>

Although it stood to reason that the AAU might support a tariff of some sort, as the association's purpose was to support and protect US artists, some statements regarding the duty addressed the topic of nationalism, and they are useful to consider because they demonstrate another kind of bias. With a massive increase in immigration in the late nineteenth century, nationalism became a critical issue, and xenophobia more prominent. While many labor unions adopted policies that favored US-born citizens as opposed to immigrants, the AAU defined "American" somewhat differently from mere birth origin in its distinctions among artists.<sup>[84]</sup> Artists were considered "American" not because they were born in the United States, but "because they work here, because they find inspiration for their art here, and because their labors have aided in building up the art of our country."<sup>[85]</sup> Such a definition was in keeping with the art promoted by the National Academy of Design, and several academicians including Bierstadt had been foreign born. In contrast, American artists who drew inspiration from foreign cultures, including those who were affiliated with the Society of American Artists, were criticized.<sup>[86]</sup> "To call Mr. [John Singer] Sargent, [or] Mr. [James Abbott McNeill] Whistler . . . an American artist is to travesty the title. They are European by education, by feeling and tastes."<sup>[87]</sup> In general, expatriate-American artists were condemned as "un-American" and perceived as a burden to US culture. One article even stated that "[t]hey would destroy or hinder the growth of American art, were their efforts of any importance."<sup>[88]</sup> Several texts in the *Art Union* demanded that these expatriates, who live in Europe and are "American only in name," should pay the same duty on their own work as that of any foreign artist, and "[i]f he don't [*sic*] like it, let him come home and identify himself with the Art of his own country."<sup>[89]</sup> The issues of nationalism and what constituted "American art" were critical topics for the AAU because they were perceived to play a role in the ever-growing dominance of foreign art in the US art market that had been sabotaging the careers of many US artists.

The *Art Union* was also quite antagonistic to the US art dealers. Indeed, one of the major reasons for the revival of the old American Art-Union had been that many US artists felt betrayed by the US dealers. In the pages of the journal, an editorial explained that after the old union had collapsed, “the dealers in foreign pictures saw their opportunity and began to manipulate the market, and they were successful. . . . After a while the average American picture buyer was more willing to pay a high price for an unauthenticated foreign picture of indifferent merit, than to pay any price for an American production.”<sup>[90]</sup> The artists clearly blamed the conniving dealers for their current economic plight. As a means to seize control of their own art market, the AAU proudly explained: “Through the Art Union the artist deals directly with the patron, instead of dealing with him through an art dealer, and thus, by avoiding the payment of heavy commissions, can not only offer his work at a much lower price, but at this lower price has a much better opportunity to sell.”<sup>[91]</sup>

In response to this argument, the press criticized the AAU for its “desire to get the better of the picture-dealers.” Put bluntly, dealers would not have been able to create a successful market for European art in the United States, if a substantial community of collectors was not willing to support it.<sup>[92]</sup> As the art market grew in the nineteenth century, collectors relied on the dealers when it came to making purchases. In the 1888 book *Art: A Commodity*, Sheridan Ford explained that collectors were “willing to accept the word and blindly abide in the judgment of dealers.”<sup>[93]</sup> The artists also rarely questioned how they themselves might be to blame for their current situation—only one article in the AAU’s journal defended art dealers<sup>[94]</sup>—and never seemed to consider that they might benefit from trying to work with dealers in some way to promote their work.<sup>[95]</sup> Ultimately, the AAU’s arguments against the dealers were not wholly convincing to the art public in the radically changing art market of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

What seemed to be at the core of the AAU’s reasoning was the importance of patriotism. Given the emphasis on nationalism in the journal, the US artists expected collectors to purchase their work simply because it was American. However, national pride was no longer as essential in the patronage and production of the visual arts as it had been in the past. US consumer culture had become much more international in scope, especially the high-end markets for wealthy patrons, and dealers, in keeping with their professional concerns, were naturally willing to cater to the global interests of their clientele. Many artists themselves, including those affiliated with the society, had also become internationally aware, and their desire “to curry favor with foreign artists and American dealers” was simply that they were interested in playing a role in the new international market. The resulting factionalism between the National Academy and the Society of American Artists made it difficult, if not impossible, for one union to cater to the disparate needs of a growing number of artists, even though the AAU’s mission was, ironically, to promote the work and sales not only of its members, but of US art in general.

Although much of the AAU’s campaign was to compete with US art dealers, its most direct competition, in turn, came from the American Art Association, which, like the AAU, had established itself in 1883.<sup>[96]</sup> The name alone was confusing.<sup>[97]</sup> People readily mistook the association for the AAU, and vice versa. Ironically, the American Art Association, which was founded “to promote and encourage American art,” did not deal exclusively in US art, but also sold Asian decorative art. To add to the confusion, the Society of American Artists had originally called itself the American Art Association, and the society had previously held its

annual exhibitions in the same location as that of the association in the late 1870s and early 1880s.<sup>[98]</sup> The American Art Association also billed itself as an art gallery, an auction house, and an educational institution, although the latter was a somewhat suspect claim. What largely differentiated the association from other standard art retail operations at the time was that it organized an annual Prize Fund Exhibition beginning in 1885. The plan was to have US artists submit works for consideration, and a jury then choose the six best works, awarding prizes of \$2,500 for each. The winning works would then be raffled off as promised gifts to selected museums around the country, and a show of these works, along with the other entries, would tour to the cities where the museums were located. Afterward, each work would be placed in its museum. The Prize Fund was somewhat comparable to the AAU's lottery and out-of-town exhibitions, although the awarding of prizes and the donating of the works to museums were much more ambitious and culturally germane. The Prize Fund, which encouraged and rewarded "distinguished professional merit," was therefore able to stimulate greater critical attention from the press and the public than the AAU's projects.<sup>[99]</sup>

While the Prize Fund was popular, many older academicians were bothered by the presence of these prizes, and refused to have their works judged by the American Art Association's jury of "laymen," as they were called in the AAU's journal.<sup>[100]</sup> Comprised of dealers and collectors, these "laymen" threatened the authority of the artists who considered themselves to be the foremost judges of aesthetic quality. In his diary McEntee explained that he had no interest in such competitions: "I received a circular from the American Art Gallery, the second appeal, asking me to contribute to a prize exhibition in March, the money for the prizes having been subscribed by such generous patrons of American Art as, W. T. Walters, Avery, Knoedler, W. H. Vanderbilt, John Taylor Johnston, H. G. Marquand etc."<sup>[101]</sup> Ironically, these influential dealers and collectors had also supported the very European market that had been damaging the careers of US artists.<sup>[102]</sup> McEntee added: "I don't want any such encouragement from men who despise our art and our artists and shall have nothing whatever to do with it."<sup>[103]</sup> As McEntee and other academicians chose not to participate in the Prize Fund Exhibitions, they inadvertently passed up a chance to enhance their careers, and in the process allowed the young "Paris-Americans," several of whom were members of the Society of American Artists, to seize the opportunity and promote themselves.<sup>[104]</sup> Again, a rift in the art market, between the older academicians and the younger artists who identified with the society, was apparent. The Prize Fund Exhibition in New York also threatened the National Academy of Design directly because it coincided with the academy's annual show, and competed for visitors. Worse, many artists chose to exhibit their best work in the Prize Fund, leaving the academy with only their second-best objects.<sup>[105]</sup>

The Prize Fund Exhibition replaced the AAU's most successful endeavor: the annual show at the Louisville Southern Exposition. Although the AAU had sent Kurtz to Louisville a second time in the fall of 1884, it could no longer support him as its exhibition manager and editor after the show ended. As a result, the AAU's out-of-town exhibition programs and its program of purchasing and distributing art objects were discontinued, leaving the journal as its primary project throughout 1885.<sup>[106]</sup> That year, Kurtz joined the staff of the American Art Association and was placed in charge of its Prize Fund Exhibition when it toured to the Southern Exposition<sup>[107]</sup> because he had previously developed close connections with the exposition's officials.<sup>[108]</sup> Despite the AAU's best efforts to seize control of the art market and promote US art, the American Art Association had succeeded in co-opting, and perhaps even improving upon, the general programming of the AAU. Although the frailty of the AAU had easily allowed

the American Art Association to take over its projects, that dealer had also, in some respects, simply outfoxed the AAU with its Prize Fund Exhibition. In the end, however, the latter was nothing more than a trendy project that was difficult to manage and unnecessarily expensive, losing its popularity by the late 1880s and leaving US artists in their original predicament of being ignored in the art market.[\[109\]](#)

While one might have logically expected that the American Art Association would have concentrated more on US art, given that it had succeeded in dominating that niche of the market after the AAU expired in 1885, the association began to show French Impressionist paintings as early as 1886, and its so-called educational status allowed it to import the works tariff free.[\[110\]](#) Although a protest from US artists and critics to such a blatant change in the gallery's policy seemed quite warranted, the art historian Gerald D. Bolas states that "there seems to have been silence on the issue."[\[111\]](#) What seemed even stranger was that the Impressionist exhibition, upon its completion at the American Art Association, was moved to the National Academy of Design, where the show received a catalogue and its status as an educational project was protected further.[\[112\]](#) Such a twist of fate seems surprising, given that the academy was governed by many of the same artists who had been running the AAU, and these leaders, who had desperately tried to promote US art, were allowing their National Academy of Design to be infiltrated by the very European art market that had been threatening them and their careers all along.

Although the leaders of the AAU had begun their project with good intentions, and their general plan made good sense, the tragic fate of the AAU might have been inevitable. The project, as it experienced conflicts with artists, the press, and dealers, seemed doomed from the beginning. The AAU also suffered from problems in its basic management, and its sales strategy, which offered works for sale either at full price or via the lottery, was likely confusing for the astute collector who wished to buy art as a sound investment. In the changing art world of the 1880s, the AAU simply could not survive. The last issue of the journal was published December 1885, and a brief notice appeared about a new initiative for artists to protect themselves with written contracts when they lent their works to out-of-town exhibitions, because too often their works were returned damaged or sometimes were lost. The last sentence stated:

This project, it will be noted, has substantially the same purpose as the Art Union projected, and which would be now in successful operation but for the application to it of the lottery law, created to put an end to a lawless and criminal traffic, and made so wide reaching as to apply to a perfectly legitimate and useful movement, too.[\[113\]](#)

The statement indicated that the AAU was being shut down for its lottery system, much like the old one almost thirty years before. Although the new AAU had tried to work through a loophole in the lottery law, its distribution system was presumably still considered illegal. Yet the situation was somewhat strange because the AAU had not purchased any work for distribution that year, and nothing else was mentioned about any possible termination of the AAU. In the very same issue of the journal, the "Business Department" indicated that subscriptions were still for sale, and the critics, even those who had sometimes disparaged the AAU, did not announce that the AAU was closing its business.[\[114\]](#) In fact, the situation was so



peculiar that some members of the board of control were not even aware that the AAU's operations had halted. As late as 1887, McEntee reported a heated discussion on the topic:

Went to the Century [Club]. . . Eastman [Johnson] sat with me most of the evening. He got upon the subject of the Art Union and seemed to grow more and more savage as he thought of it. He lent it \$500. He called Perry to him and almost ordered him to make a statement of its affairs and call a meeting of all the members to see what they want to do about it. I couldn't help a feeling that in some way he held me accountable for his having been roped into it, when the fact is I counseled not making him a trustee, not that I was not glad to have his aid, but because I knew it would be distasteful to him. With my other anxieties this sudden calling up [of] this almost forgotten subject, seemed ill timed and most distasteful.[\[115\]](#)

Although the revival of the American Art-Union could be regarded by some as a bitter failure, one positive outcome that might have resulted from the AAU—or that occurred in tandem with its existence and shortly after its demise—was that tensions between the artist groups began to diminish. In 1884, the Society of American Artists held its annual exhibition at the National Academy. Although the show created confusion and turmoil among the artists and the press, it suggested that a sense of unity between the two organizations was beginning to develop.[\[116\]](#) By 1886, more of the society's artists were beginning to be elected as academicians to the National Academy of Design, and the latter began to treat European-inspired and European art much more favorably, as can be attested by the display of the Impressionist show.[\[117\]](#)

Ultimately, the death of the AAU signified a turning of the tide within the US art scene: an older generation that promoted an American aesthetic sensibility was obviously on the wane, and a newer one that favored an international mindset was on the rise. Because the older generation was so tied to the National Academy of Design, the end of the AAU might also have signified the diminishing importance of the academy itself. While the academy had largely dominated the New York art scene for decades, that artist-run institution was beginning to face competition from not only the international art market, but also a growing number of museums and art schools that were being established in the late nineteenth century. These institutions contributed to the diversification and specialization of the various professional roles that would develop within the visual arts, and the power of the academicians and their artist-run academy would largely be usurped in the process.[\[118\]](#) The formation of these institutions also compounded the difficulties for US artists, who were being treated as second-rate in their own country. When wealthy collectors seeking to establish their cultural legacy donated their impressive collections of European art to US museums, these public institutions, in due course, promoted European art and inevitably further displaced US artists. Although the AAU had merely wanted to promote the art of its country within its own country, the AAU's efforts were unfortunately not successful, and US art would continue to be alienated within the US art market, to varying degrees, throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, as "American art no longer ruled in America."

museum studies at the City College of New York. Previously, he was an assistant curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and completed the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in curatorial studies. In addition, he was the in-house editor for College Art Association. Houser recently published a chapter in *The Eye, the Hand, the Mind: 100 Years of the College Art Association* (Rutgers University Press, 2010) and an interview with Rachel Whitered in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2012).

Email the author at [chouser\[at\]ccny.cuny.edu](mailto:chouser[at]ccny.cuny.edu)

---

## Notes

I became interested in writing this chronicle of the American Art Union when I discovered that the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art had collaborated with JSTOR to digitize many of their old and fragile US periodicals from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See “Arts and Sciences VIII Collection,” JSTOR, September 17, 2010, accessed March 16, 2012, <http://about.jstor.org/sites/default/files/aboutASVIII.pdf>. However, not all the issues of the *Art Union* were made available on JSTOR because none of the museums seemed to hold a complete set. I worked with Vincenzo Rutigliano, a librarian in the Art and Architecture Collection, and Kenneth Springle, the head of Preservation, Reformatting and Collections Care, in the New York Public Library, and after several months, they recovered the library’s missing microfiche of the *Art Union*, and JSTOR will soon have all the missing issues available on its database.

[1] “The Old Art Union and the New One,” *Art Union* 1, no. 3 (March 1884): 62.

[2] Lois Marie Fink, “American Renaissance: 1870–1917,” in *Academy: The Academic Tradition in American Art; An Exhibition Organized on the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the National Academy of Design: 1825–1975*, ed. Lois Marie Fink and Joshua C. Taylor (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975), 48; and Linda Henefeld Skalet, “The Market for American Painting in New York: 1870–1915” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1980), 1–2.

[3] Gabriel P. Weisberg, “From Paris to Pittsburgh: Visual Culture and American Taste, 1880–1910,” in *Collecting in the Gilded Age: Art Patronage in Pittsburgh, 1890–1910*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg, DeCourcy McIntosh, and Alison McQueen (Pittsburgh: Frick Art and Historical Center, 1997), 179.

[4] See, e.g., Lois Marie Fink, “American Departures: 1825–1869,” in Fink and Taylor, *Academy*, 71–72; Skalet, “Market for American Painting,” 42–50; and Arleen Pancza Graham, “Charles M. Kurtz (1885–1909): Aspects and Issues of a Cosmopolitan Career” (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2002), 30–33.

[5] Fink, “American Departures,” 29–49.

[6] Jervis McEntee Diaries, May 15, 1879, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, Washington, DC, accessed March 13, 2012, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/diaries/mcentee>. All subsequent notes refer to the online version of the diaries. Although the online version can be searched by date and name of person or organization, the American Art Union is not available among the organizations listed as search terms, despite the fact that McEntee referred to it often.

[7] For a study of the various options for US artists to sell their work, see Skalet, “Market for American Painting.”

[8] Jervis McEntee wrote that the artists often met at the Century Club in New York to plan the American Art Union. See, e.g., McEntee Diaries, April 27, 1878; December 21, 1879; February 28, 1883; April 4, 1883.

[9] The organization was first called the Apollo Gallery and incorporated as the American Art-Union in 1844. Rachel N. Klein, “Art and Authority in Antebellum New York City: The Rise and Fall of the American Art-Union,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 4 (1995): 1535, 1537; and Joy Sperling, “‘Art, Cheap and Good’: The Art Union in England and the United States, 1840–60,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2002), accessed March 12, 2012, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring02/qart-cheap-and-goodq-the-art-union-in-england-and-the-united-states-184060>. The old American Art-Union has been discussed extensively in the scholarly literature. Books include Maybelle Mann, *The American Art-Union* (Otisville, NY: ALM

Associates, 1977); Mary Batlett Cowdery, *American Academy of Fine Arts and the American Art-Union, 1816–1852*, 2 vols. (New York: New-York historical Society, 1953); and Amanda Lett and others, *Perfectly American: The Art-Union and Its Artists* (Tulsa, OK: Gilbrease Museum, 2011).

[10] Klein, “Art and Authority,” 1539–41.

[11] Carol Troyen, “Retreat to Arcadia: American Landscape and the American Art-Union,” *American Art Journal* 23, no. 1 (1991): 30–31, 35. In 1847, the old American Art-Union described its operations as “fast becoming one of those great institutions which influence the character and manners of the whole nation . . . [which] will best enable it to elevate and sustain American Art.”; “Proceedings at the Annual Meeting, 1847,” *Transactions of the American Art-Union* (1847): 25. Fink states that the National Academy’s catalogues before the Civil War do not reveal the type of subject matter that was favored in the annual exhibitions. However, in the 1860s portraiture and landscape were most prominent. Fink, “American Departures,” 39. According to Klein, the biggest distinction between old American Art-Union and the academy in terms of subject matter was that the old union would not have shown portraiture. The old union officials thought that portraiture did not have a broad enough appeal to the general public. See Klein, “Art and Authority,” 1541.

[12] To compete with the American Art-Union, the National Academy of Design considered establishing its own art union in 1849. Fink, “American Departures,” 46. In addition, another group of artists who felt left outside both the National Academy and the American Art-Union established the short-lived American Artists’ Association in 1850. Klein “Art and Authority,” 1555–56.

[13] Klein, “Art and Authority,” 1559.

[14] Fink, “American Departures,” 39–40.

[15] “The American Art Union,” *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 1.

[16] E. Wood Perry, “The American Art Union,” *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 23.

[17] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 63.

[18] *Ibid.*; and Skalet, “Market for American Painting,” 47.

[19] The options included selling the works at auction or private sale, distributing them to individual states, where the works might form the basis of a collection for a public gallery, or dispensing the works by lot. See Perry, “American Art Union,” 23; and “The Art Union Distribution,” *Art Union* 2, no. 3 (September 1885): 61.

[20] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 63. While the leaders of the AAU’s claim was generally true, the Apollo Association had offered works for sale in its gallery. See, e.g., “Notice,” *Transactions of the Apollo Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in the United States* (1841): 21; and Eliot Clark, *History of the National Academy of Design 1825–1953* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 60.

[21] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 63.

[22] *Ibid.* The traveling exhibition model might have stemmed from John Kensett Fisher, who helped establish the American Artists’ Association in 1850 and had discussed such an idea. J. K. Fisher, “Fine Arts, Galleries, Exhibitions, Etc.,” *Literary World* 6, no. 160 (February 23, 1850): 182; and Klein, “Art and Authority,” 1555.

[23] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 62–63. Some of the moral-sounding prose in this statement relates to the alleged corruption of the old American Art-Union. See Klein, “Art and Authority,” 1534–61.

[24] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 62–63.

[25] “American Art Union,” 3. The American Art Union had an impressive list of honorary members including President Chester A. Arthur and General Ulysses S. Grant, but they had no function in terms of the governance of the organization. “American Art Union,” *Art Union*, 3.

[26] *Ibid.*, 1.

[27] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 63.

[28] Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 235–64.

[29] See “The American Art Union,” *New York Tribune*, April 12, 1883, 5; and editorial, *New York Tribune*, April 12, 1883, 4.

[30] “The New Art Union,” *New York Tribune*, April 28, 1883, 5.

[31] McEntee Diaries, April 4, 1883.

- [32] “The National Academy of Design,” *National Academy Notes Including the Complete Catalogue of the Spring Exhibition, National Academy of Design*, no. 4 (1884): 138. Frederic Stuart Church was already an associate academician, and Dielman would become an academician later in 1883. Clark, *History of the National Academy of Design*, 245–75.
- [33] “New Art Union,” 5.
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] The organizations included the American Watercolor Society, Salmagundi Sketch Club, Society of American Artists, and the Society of American Etchers. Fink, “American Renaissance,” 69–70, 72.
- [36] McEntee Diaries, April 18, 1883.
- [37] Jennifer A. Martin Bienenstock, “The Formation and Early Years of the Society of American Artists: 1877–1884” (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 1983), 10; Fink, “American Renaissance,” 80; and Saul E. Zalesch, “Competition and Conflict in the New York Art World, 1874–1879,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 29, no. 2/3 (Summer–Autumn 1994): 104.
- [38] Bienenstock, “Society of American Artists,” 10–16; and Fink, “American Renaissance,” 81–82.
- [39] Bienenstock, “Society of American Artists,” 10–11, 28, 149–58; Fink, “American Renaissance,” 84–85; and Zalesch, “Competition and Conflict,” 105, 115.
- [40] Bienenstock, “Society of American Artists,” 11, 27–28; Fink, “American Renaissance,” 78–80; and Zalesch, “Competition and Conflict,” 108, 110–11. All these authors address many controversial policies established by the National Academy of Design including the famous eight-foot rule, which entitled academicians to take up to eight feet of prime viewing space “on the line,” or at eye level, to show their work. Although the rule was quickly rescinded, it empowered the cause and provided an impetus for the formation of Society of American Artists.
- [41] Fink, “American Renaissance,” 81; and Zalesch, “Competition and Conflict,” 114.
- [42] Fink, “American Renaissance,” 72.
- [43] “New-York City,” *New York Tribune*, May 18, 1883, 8; and “American Art Union,” 1.
- [44] Zalesch, “Competition and Conflict,” 115.
- [45] The academicians included George Inness, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Alexander Wyant. See Bienenstock, “Society of American Artists,” 34.
- [46] “The American Art Union,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1883, 2. Henry Farrer was also added to the American Art Union’s board, likely for the same reasons as Shirlaw. Farrer was a member of the Society for the Advancement of Truth, which represented the pre-Raphaelites in the United States, and also showed with the American Water Color Society. However, these organizations did not necessarily have a contentious relationship with the Academy. “North America 1700–1900,” *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 57, no. 2 (Autumn 1999): 53.
- [47] “The Etching, ‘The Reprimand,’” *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 10; and Patricia Hills, “Afterword/Afterwards: Eastman Johnson’s Transitions to Portrait Painting in the Early 1880s,” in *Eastman Johnson: The Cranberry Harvest, Island of Nantucket* (San Diego: Timken Gallery, 1990), 79–80. Henry Farrer also produced an etching titled *Off Quarantine, New York*. “Mr. Farrer’s Etching Supplement,” *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 13.
- [48] McEntee Diaries, April 13, 1883.
- [49] “New Art Union,” 5. See also Fink, “American Renaissance,” 71.
- [50] See “American Art Union,” 3.
- [51] Ibid., 1–3.
- [52] Ibid.
- [53] “Art Union Matters,” *Art Union* 1, no. 5 (May 1884): 113.
- [54] *Art Interchange* 12, no. 1 (January 3, 1884): 1.
- [55] Ibid.; and Montezuma, “My Date Book,” *Art Amateur: A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household* 14, no. 3, February 1886, 54.
- [56] *Art Interchange* 1, no. 1 (January 3, 1884): 1.
- [57] “Indignant Artists,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 26, 1884, 2.
- [58] “Local Miscellany,” *New York Tribune*, May 21, 1883, 8.
- [59] “Recent, Present and Future Art Exhibition,” *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 24. According to McEntee, the gallery was leased starting June 17, 1883. McEntee Diaries, May 19, 1883.
- [60] “The Present Art Union Exhibition,” *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 4.



[61] As one entered the gallery, Perry's *What's That You Say?* and Shirlaw's *Tuning Up* were hung side by side "on the line," which was considered the prime location in the salon-style hanging system, and would likely have signified a sense of harmony between the academicians and the society. Ibid.

[62] McEntee Diaries, December 19, 1883; and January 14, 1884.

[63] "Art Babble," *New York News*, June 15, 1884; Thomas Benedict Clarke Scrapbooks, reel N599, frame 265, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; "Art News and Comments: The Week in Art Circles," *New York Tribune*, April 13, 1884, 3; and Skalet, "Market for American Painting," 49.

[64] *Art Interchange* 12, no. 1 (January 3, 1884): 1.

[65] In the 1880s, several articles were still discussing the pros and cons of the anti-lottery law and mentioned the closing of the old American Art-Union. See, e.g., Frank Norton, "Lotteries: Their History, Ancient and Modern," *Frank Leslie's Monthly* 10, no. 6 (December 1880): 74; "Evading Lottery Prohibition," *New York Times*, May 29, 1881, 6; and "Against Lotteries," *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1882, 4. The AAU charged an admission fee of 25 cents to enter, unless one was a subscriber or member. Each visitor received a copy of the exhibition catalogue and a copy of the *Art Union*. "Recent, Present and Future Art Exhibitions," *Art Union* 1, no. 2 (February 1884): 50. The old union had initially charged admission to its gallery and then allowed visitors to enter for free, which dramatically increased its attendance and popularity. See Klein, "Art and Authority," 1547.

[66] E. Wood Perry, "Editorial," *Art Union* 1, no. 12 (December 1884): 194.

[67] McEntee Diaries, January 14, 25, 30, 1884.

[68] Ibid., January 31 and February 26, 1884.

[69] Ibid., February 1, 12, and 26, 1884.

[70] Ibid., February 12, 1884.

[71] Ibid., May 19, 1883.

[72] Skalet, "Market for American Painting," 49.

[73] McEntee Diaries, January 30, 1884.

[74] "Art Babble," *New York News*, June 15, 1884. The number of works sold is based on an estimate from "Art News and Comments: The Week in Art Circles," *New York Tribune*, April 13, 1884, 3.

[75] In 1884, volume 1 of the *Art Union* was published monthly from January to May, and then bimonthly from June to November, with the addition of a December monthly issue. In 1885, volume 2 of the *Art Union* was published quarterly from January through September, and then monthly from September to December. The issue numbers are slightly off because the April-June issue and the July-September issue have the same issue number 2, and a separate monthly issue for September 1885 is numbered 3.

[76] Kurtz served as editor in 1884, and Alfred Trumble in 1885.

[77] Graham, "Charles M. Kurtz," 26–27.

[78] See E. Wood Perry to Charles M. Kurtz, August 19 and September 5, 1884, Charles M. Kurtz Papers, 1843–1990, reel 4806, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

[79] "Frauds in Art: Second Paper," *Art Union* 1, no. 3 (March 1884): 52, 54–56; and "Notes on Art and Artists," *New York Times*, May 13, 1883, 12.

[80] Kimberly Orcutt, "Buy American? The Debate over the Art Tariff," *American Art* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 82–86. Not all academicians supported a tariff. Bierstadt, for one, did not, but his status as an academician made him the victim of criticism that was directed against the National Academy for its "illiberal and narrow views on the tariff." "Notes on Art and Artists," *New York Times*, April 8, 1883, 12.

[81] A Friend of American Art, "The Tariff Agitation," *Art Union* 1, no. 1 (January 1884): 15–16.

[82] Fink, "American Renaissance," 48.

[83] See, e.g., A Friend of American Art, "Tariff Agitation"; and "Editorial," *Art Union* 1, no. 6/7 (June-July 1884): 137. The letters promoting free trade were Roma, "A Letter from Italy," *Art Union* 2, no. 1 (January-March, 1885), 17–18; and L. Prang, "Communications," *Art Union* 1, no. 4 (April 1884): 87. Prang's letter refuted the arguments in a pro-tariff article in the March 1884 issue, and then Prang's was refuted in same issue by an artist-member or editor called W. The idea for a specific duty had likely originated from Kurtz, who as early as 1880 had published an article advocating a flat-fee tax on imported art. Charles M. Kurtz, "A Curious Protectionist," *New York Times*, January 5 1880, 3; and Graham, "Charles M. Kurtz," 17, 94–118.

[84] Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age*, 94–117.



- [85] “Un-American American Artists,” *Art Union* 2, no. 2 (April-June 1885): 13.
- [86] “A Talk by Henry Blackburn,” *Art Union* 1, no. 2 (February 1884): 46.
- [87] “Un-American American Artists,” 13.
- [88] Frank A. Silva, “American versus Foreign-American Art,” *Art Union* 1, no. 6/7 (June-July 1884): 130.
- [89] Artist, “The Art Tariff,” *Art Union* 1, no. 4 (April 1884): 88; and A Resident Artist, “A Chance for Loyal Paris Americans,” *Art Union* 1, no. 5 (May 1884): 112.
- [90] “Old Art Union and the New One,” 62.
- [91] *Ibid.*, 63.
- [92] *American Architect and Building News* 13, no. 382 (April 21, 1883): 182; and *ArtInterchange* 10, no. 10 (May 10, 1883): 111.
- [93] Sheridan Ford, *Art: A Commodity* (New York, 1888), 13, Google Books, accessed September 1, 2011, <http://books.google.com/books?id=4hgLAAAAMAAJ>.
- [94] X. Y. Z., “A Defence of Foreign Art Dealers,” *Art Union* 1, no. 3 (March 1884): 70–71.
- [95] Gerald Douglas Bolas, “The Early Years of the American Art Association, 1879–1900” (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 1998), 115.
- [96] *Ibid.*, iv.
- [97] See “Art Notes,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1885, 4.
- [98] The Society of American Artists—which called itself the American Art Association in 1877 and changed its name the following year to Society of American Artists—held its annual exhibitions in New York at the Kurtz Gallery in the late 1870s and in the American Art Gallery, which had taken over the Kurtz Galley space, in the early 1880s. The Kurtz Gallery was run by William Kurtz, who was no relation to Charles Kurtz. The American Art Gallery was run by Rufus E. Moore and James Fountain Sutton, and that partnership was reconfigured in 1882 to include Sutton, R. Austin Robertson, and the auctioneer Thomas Kirby; the company was renamed the American Art Association in 1883. Exhibitions were held in the American Art Gallery (or the American Art Galleries), but they were managed by the American Art Association. All these names were used interchangeably. The Society of American Artists held its 1883 show in the gallery when it was run by the American Art Association. According to Bienenstock, the Society of American Artists stopped showing at the American Art Galleries after 1883 because the society and the gallery were too often confused with each other, and because the society wanted to establish a sense of independence from the commercial enterprise. Bienenstock, “Society of American Artists,” 166; Bolas, “American Art Association,” 135–36; and Fink, “American Renaissance,” 80.
- [99] Bolas, “American Art Association,” 1, 136, 177–95.
- [100] “Spring Exhibitions,” *Art Union* 2, no. 1 (January-March 1885): 13.
- [101] McEntee Diaries, August 29, 1884.
- [102] Bolas, “American Art Association,” 180–81.
- [103] McEntee Diaries, August 29, 1884.
- [104] C. M. K., “The Louisville Exhibition,” *Art Union* 2, no. 3 (September 1885): 58.
- [105] Bolas, “American Art Association,” 181.
- [106] “The Art Union for 1885,” *Art Union* 1, no. 12 (December 1884): 1.
- [107] Bolas, “American Art Association,” 170–73.
- [108] By early 1886 Kurtz had left the American Art Association. When the Southern Exposition had difficulties negotiating with the association for another Prize Fund show that year, Kurtz was asked create his own exhibition with the exposition officials. *Ibid.*, 186–87.
- [109] *Ibid.*, 188.
- [110] *Ibid.*, 198–99.
- [111] *Ibid.*, 205–6.
- [112] *Ibid.*, 199–200. While the artists did not seem to complain, many art dealers were quite upset about the situation. In the end, Paul Durand-Ruel had to pay duty only on works that were actually sold.
- [113] “Co-operation in Art,” *Art Union* 2, no. 6 (December 1885): 125.
- [114] “Business Department,” *Art Union* 2, no. 6 (December 1885): 134. The last article addressing the distribution of works purchased in 1884 was published in the September 1885 issue of the *Art*

*Union*. The article discussed how the majority of subscribers had voted for a lottery distribution, and a list of the purchased works was included. "The Art Union Distribution," *Art Union* 2, no. 3 (September 1885): 61. The new initiative regarding contracts for the loan of works to out-of-town exhibitions was mentioned in Montezuma, "My Date Book," 54, which appeared in February 1886. The author stated that the initiative was "partly covered in the plans of the Art Union" and suggests that the AAU might have survived some time beyond December 1885, although references to the AAU in the press diminished. Thereafter, any press related to art unions referred to the old union or other art unions in cities outside New York or in foreign countries.

[115] McEntee Diaries, November 19, 1887.

[116] Bienenstock, "Society of American Artists," 163–66; and Fink, "American Renaissance," 84.

[117] Bienenstock, "Society of American Artists," 4. The National Academy and the Society of American Artists merged in 1906. Fink, "American Renaissance," 84–85.

[118] See Joshua C. Taylor, "The Persistence of Tradition," in Fink and Taylor, *Academy*, 90.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Walter Shirlaw (copy after Eastman Johnson), *The Reprimand*, ca. 1883. Etching and chine-collé on paper. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)