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Unintended Consequences: The American Art-Union and the Rise of a National Landscape School

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Abstract:

At its height, the American Art-Union (1838–52) boasted nearly 19,000 members from almost every state; it distributed engravings to all members and nearly 3,000 original works of art. While the Art-Union's impact has been acknowledged, the exact nature of its influence has been difficult to discern. This article analyzes extensive data through interactive maps, timelines, and charts that show not only the institution's broad reach, but also its unexpected role in fostering the landscape school that shaped US art throughout the nineteenth century.

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by Kim Orcutt

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At its height, the American Art-Union (1838–52) boasted nearly 19,000 members from almost every state. For an annual fee of five dollars, members received an engraving after a painting by a notable US artist; their names were entered in a drawing for hundreds of paintings and sculptures displayed in its Free Gallery, attended by hundreds of thousands annually; and they received the monthly *Bulletin*, the country's first dedicated art journal. The Art-Union has been acknowledged for its impact on the antebellum art world, but the exact nature of its influence has been difficult to discern due to the overwhelming amount of archival material associated with its activities. This article uses digital tools to analyze the extensive data through interactive maps, timelines, and charts that show not only its broad reach, but also its unexpected role in fostering a school of landscape painting that went beyond the well-known artists and collectors of the East Coast to reach across the country, creating a truly national movement.

Dr. Kimberly Orcutt has served as Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art at the Brooklyn Museum; Henry Luce Foundation Curator of American Art at the New-York Historical Society; and assistant curator of American Art at Harvard Art Museums. She has organized exhibitions on American art topics from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, including the award-winning exhibition *The Armory Show at 100: Modern Art and Revolution* (New-York Historical Society, 2013–14). Her book *Power and Posterity: American Art at Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition* (2017) was published by Pennsylvania State University Press. She is a past chair of the Association of Historians of American Art.

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