



Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Art of *The Gift*: Mount, Sully, Huntington, and the Antebellum Gift Book Industry

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In 1836 Philadelphia publisher Carey and Hart released *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present*, a publication that would become one of the most successful gift book annuals of its kind during its ten-year run. Elaborately bound and filled with engravings, poetry, and prose by artists of the day, *The Gift* had gained such acclaim for both its literary and artistic contributions that in 1842 *Graham's Magazine* declared it to be “the dial by which to learn the progress of the arts in America.” Published primarily with a female audience in mind, *The Gift* was widely consumed, becoming an undeniable force on the antebellum art scene.

This project considers *The Gift* (and the gift book industry more generally) within the broader framework of antebellum visual culture, assessing the position of women among the predominantly male audience of the art world. By investigating the work of the three most significant contributors to *The Gift*—Thomas Sully, William Sidney Mount, and Daniel Huntington—I will show how the context of the gift book influenced artistic production and directed the interpretive possibilities of their work. Because women rarely participated directly as patrons in the antebellum art market, their influence upon the development of the arts has been largely overlooked. Through their consumption of such media as illustrated gift book annuals, however, women played an under-recognized and vital role in the reception, interpretation, and circulation of art in the first half of the nineteenth century. This dissertation will provide a needed corrective to include women as a body of consumers and analyze the impact they had upon the direction of the arts in antebellum America. The pivotal intersections between art production, collecting, and the publishing industry discussed in this study will lend greater insight into the workings of the early-nineteenth-century art market.