



Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Mississippi River in Antebellum Visual Culture and Imagination

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This dissertation considers visual representations of the Mississippi River between 1830 and 1861, building on recent scholarship that has dealt primarily with text-based narratives and descriptions. I focus on images of the river that circulated widely, such as the landscape paintings in George Catlin's Indian Gallery, the American Art-Union subscription prints made after George Caleb Bingham's iconic river boatmen, popular tours of moving river panoramas, pictures of steamboats, urban views, and river maps. These objects helped to construct and cultivate different aspects of the river's character. Depending on the audiences they reached, the river might have appeared as a boundary line, or perhaps a connective and commercial thoroughfare, a pathway to freedom, or the route to bondage. I will study the images' exhibition histories, provenances, and receptions in different locales to situate the river in regard to several publics: in the eyes of viewers in the East, in relation to communities along the river, and to spectators both northern and southern.

Considering how the river was seen all over the country addresses its shifting place within the American cultural landscape of the Middle West, a region typically left undistinguished from the Far West in studies of nineteenth-century imagery. Indeed, during the pivotal decades considered by this project, the Mississippi River figured in discussions about the nation's economic development, increasing sectional conflicts over slavery, the settlement of immigrant populations, and the removal of Native American peoples. In the face of these issues and thanks to advances in printing and transportation technology, images of the river proliferated in a variety of media. This study posits that the abundance of representation was also due to the difficulties that artists confronted in containing the unpredictable and malleable visual and symbolic qualities of the Mississippi River.