George Henry Durrie
(American, 1820–1863)

*Holidays in the Country, The Cider Party*
1853
Oil on canvas
22 x 30 inches
Signed and dated, lower right, recto, “G.H. Durrie, 1853”
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Ida Belle Young Art Acquisition Fund, 2010.15

The primary theme of American painting in the mid-nineteenth century was the American landscape. Amongst the painters of that era (many trained in Europe), subjects from history were ranked as the most “inspirational” and instructive, however it was landscape painting that became overwhelmingly popular with the American audience as well as American artists. Scenes of the wilderness, and of the areas of settlement and cultivation moving westward from the east coast, were adopted as visual celebrations of the material prosperity of the new world, as well as signifiers of the spiritual beneficence of the Almighty. An entire generation of artists practiced in this tradition of The Hudson River School, painting the wilderness landscapes of the Atlantic seaboard.
George Henry Durrie (1820-1863) of New Haven, Connecticut, was an artist who aspired to success in this landscape tradition. Not academically trained, and initially working as an itinerant portraitist, he was later associated with the depiction of landscape and scenes of rural life in winter. In addition, Currier and Ives, the nineteenth-century publishers of popular chromolithographs, reproduced Durrie’s winter landscape paintings and contributed to his eventual art historical reputation. His association with the publishers of these popular prints, and his exposure to print reproductions of works by successful American genre painters, may have also inspired Durrie’s creation of a limited number of genre subjects, of which *Holidays in the Country, The Cider Party* (1853) is a fascinating example.

If landscape were the primary theme of nineteenth-century American painting, a significant secondary theme was genre painting. Genre paintings are generally defined as narrative-driven scenes of everyday life painted in a realistic style, an artistic tradition based in Northern European painting of the seventeenth century. In the United States, genre painting had a brief period of popularity in the early nineteenth century, achieved through the work of a relatively few artists. Scholar Elizabeth Johns notes, “…Artists typically produced genre paintings during times of great change, most prominently in the economic sphere, when within a broad middle class old hierarchical relationships were challenged and new ones forged.” This observation applies to the critical period prior to the American Civil War, when the dynamic nature of politics and culture fueled popular interest in genre subjects.

The most important and influential genre painter of the 1830s was William Sidney Mount (1807-1868), and several elements prominent in the composition of *Holidays in the Country, The Cider Party*, suggest that George Durrie was quite familiar with Mount’s work. Seeking to build a career as an artist in ante-bellum New York, Mount focused on depictions of the Yankee farmer, a “type” that for viewers in the 1830s carried critical political and social connotations. As the nation struggled to find a proper balance between urban and rural populations, commercial versus agrarian interests, and regional influences in national politics, seemingly innocuous scenes of daily life on the farm took on significance well beyond the simple events they appeared to record.

George Henry Durrie was not very well known outside of New Haven, Connecticut in his lifetime, and did not receive much attention from art historians prior to the mid-twentieth century. He was the second son of John and Clarissa Clark Durrie, born June 6, 1820 in New

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3 Durrie’s works were mass-produced as chromolithographs by the publishing firm of Currier and Ives. Currier and Ives were in business between 1834 and 1907, producing more than 8,000 lithographs that were sold inexpensively, to a middle class market. Ten of Durrie’s winter landscapes were reproduced and sold by the firm in the 1860s. With the renewed popularity of Currier and Ives prints in the mid-twentieth century, the source works by Durrie became increasingly sought after. The collector and historian Harry Peters left his extensive collection of Currier and Ives prints to the Museum of the City of New York, and wrote the initial authoritative source on the firm, *Currier & Ives: Printmakers to the American People*, in 1942. Julia Hollett
Haven. George Durrie’s father was associated with the New Haven book-selling firm, Durrie and Peck, for nearly thirty years. Two of his children, John, born in 1818 and George, born in 1820, became artists, and the elder John assisted his sons by allowing them the use of the store for exhibiting pictures and holding public drawings in the evenings. Both sons became students of a local artist, Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796-1881) in 1839, and George quickly became a practicing itinerant portraitist.

Durrie was able to earn a modest living as a portrait painter, often creating portraits of family members in series. Beginning in 1839, he worked in Bethany and Hartford, and then in Naugatuck and Meriden, Connecticut. He also began traveling to Freehold, New Jersey and Petersburg, Virginia to execute portrait commissions. These works are in the tradition of naïve American portraiture, with meticulous attention to decorative detail, but, especially at first, displaying an inadequate mastery of anatomy. In 1839 he met Sarah Perkins and they married in 1841. The couple set up housekeeping in New Haven, and they resided there with their family of three children.

A sense of Durrie’s life and character is ascertained by study of a surviving journal that he kept between 1845 and 1846. It describes a simple but rich life devoted to the creative arts:

Although he became a painter by profession, he was by inclination a great lover of music and devoted much of his leisure time to singing in the choir and playing the violin and bass viol. Undoubtedly it was his love of music that turned his interests toward the Church. In his diary long entries appear for each Sunday, a day entirely devoted to worship and singing.

His portrait painting practice, along with some odd jobs, allowed the artist a living, but Durrie’s passion was for the painting of landscapes.

Throughout the 1840s Durrie painted an increasing number of landscapes, and included landscape as the background for some of his portraits. He exhibited a winter landscape at the New Haven State Fair in 1844, and from that point forward he promoted his landscape practice as much as possible. Early in his painting career he primarily made views of the landscape around New Haven, and he achieved some success in selling these works locally. These were not winter scenes necessarily, but depicted local, recognizable landmarks such as East Rock and West Rock. Increasingly however, he began to find his most success with scenes of the

8 Cowdrey, n.p.
rural countryside covered in winter snow, and beginning in the 1850s, he produced large numbers of these compositions.\textsuperscript{10}

Based upon his surviving paintings, it appears that 1853 was a watershed year for the artist as he considered a direction for his subject matter, and particularly as it relates to genre scenes and genre elements. Durrie had worked his way toward establishing himself as a landscape painter, but the popularity of genre paintings with the public, and the potential relevance of this theme to American culture, manifested itself in the artist’s paintings around this time. Durrie scholar Martha Hutson writes, “As early as 1853, the question arises of how important a role genre elements will have in Durrie’s landscapes. Composing a landscape around a story definitely had a public appeal, and Durrie was a Yankee pragmatist who wanted to sell his work.”\textsuperscript{11}

An excellent example of Durrie’s “blending” of landscape and genre is \textit{Old Grist Mill}, (1853, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut). The subject of the painting is a weathered wooden building, and a wooden bridge that crosses a stream. A man drives a loaded sled, pulled by a horse and ox, across the bridge, while a second man is seen on the banks of the stream below. While there is no specific narrative, the title makes it clear that the building and activity, rather than the landscape itself, are featured. It was in that same year, that Durrie made \textit{Holidays in the Country, The Cider Party}, a work that can be firmly categorized as a genre painting in the mid-nineteenth-century tradition.

Two Durrie genre compositions, \textit{Settling a Bill} and \textit{Holidays in the Country, The Cider Party} have been interpreted by scholars as visual commentaries on the major national political debate of the early nineteenth century—the question of slave holding in the South and the movement to abolish slavery and to prevent expansion of the practice of slavery in the territories as the country expanded to the west.\textsuperscript{12} In painting these works, Durrie was most likely reacting to the slightly earlier works of William Sidney Mount, whose compositions \textit{Dance of the Haymakers} (1845, Museums at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York) and \textit{The Power of Music} (1847, The Cleveland Museum of Art) were some of the earliest sympathetic and straight-forward depictions of black figures in American painting.\textsuperscript{13} “Durrie likely knew the lithographs after both of these paintings, which were published by Goupil and Co. in 1848 and 1849. He could have

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\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{10} His earliest known and dated winter scene is \textit{Sleighs Arriving at the Inn}, 1851. Hutson, 1977, p. 49.
\bibitem{11} Hutson, 1977, p. 52.
\bibitem{12} Durrie’s surviving paintings feature a similar composition, \textit{Settling a Bill}, one version painted in 1851 (formerly titled \textit{Selling Corn}, Private Collection in 1977) and the second from about 1852 (formerly titled \textit{Selling Corn}, Shelburne Museum). These works also depict activity within and just outside an open barn door. See Hutson, 1977, p. 216.
\bibitem{13} Johns, p. 120.
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also visited New York City to see one or both of the original paintings by Mount at the National Academy of Design’s exhibitions”.\textsuperscript{14}

There are various layers of “narrative” that can be discerned in examining \textit{Holidays in the Country}. The central tableau implies that a musical performance by the fiddler has just been concluded, and the group will subsequently enjoy cider as refreshment. A secondary narrative encompasses the animals depicted here in the detail to the right: the sow ambles into the picture plane at the left, observed by the dog, his ears pricked in reaction to the pig’s approach. The horse at the right glances warily at the other two, lifting a back hoof as if preparing to bolt. There is incipient drama implied in the reactions of the animals to one another; the tension is of an innocent and humorous sort, however there is an implication of a human “drama” as well.

![Image of Holidays in the Country](image)

Clues to this larger social drama are important elements of the composition that contribute to the meaning of the work, but are less immediately evident. For example, horseshoes were traditionally nailed to doors (of houses or in this case the barn) as a protective amulet. The horseshoe, nailed with its prongs pointed downward, however, would have symbolized potential ill fortune as the luck would not fill up the shoe but would “spill out.” Also, there are inscriptions and images drawn on the barn door. The chalked tic marks, which were used on nineteenth-century farms for figuring inventories or bills, seen here on the left barn door, add up to an unlucky number thirteen. Martha Hutson-Saxon notes, “The caricature drawing on the barn door…was most likely meant to be Martin Van Buren, who had been [Andrew] Jackson’s Vice-President and followed him in the Presidency. The initials, OK, above the drawing stood for the Democratic O.K. Club that supported Martin Van Buren in 1843 for a hoped for second Presidential term… The ongoing political struggle over slave and non-slave states being accepted into the Union would eventually destroy the Whig party. With the presence of both African-American and Caucasian figures in these paintings shown in a relaxed and friendly environment and the pouring of the cider for the fiddler, local sentiment and Durrie’s feelings were plain in this debate”.\textsuperscript{15} The picture is then most likely a subtle criticism of the political settlement known as the Compromise of 1850, which in New England was seen as overly beneficial to the slave-holding states of the South, and to the commercial interests of the North that benefited from the trade in Southern cotton.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Martha Hutson-Saxon, [Catalogue Note], \textit{Sotheby’s American Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture} Sale Catalogue (New York: Sotheby’s, December 2, 2010), lot 115.

\textsuperscript{15} Hutson-Saxon, 2010, n.p. The publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} in 1851-52 was spurred by the author’s indignation at the Fugitive Slave Law that was included in the compromise legislation. The novel sold over 300,000 copies and was highly influential in convincing Americans that all citizens, not just Southerners, were responsible for the injustices of slavery. Johns, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{16} Hutson-Saxon also notes: “The initials S.B. on the barn door and on the white sack inside the barn could be a political reference to two political factions of the Democratic Party, the Free Soilers and the Barnburners, who united in 1848 (tied up in one bag) to nominate Van Buren for
the Presidency.” The initials on the sack appear to be “L.B.” rather than “S.B.”, however the reference may be applicable despite the disparity. The Free Soil Party’s leadership was made up of anti-slavery political forces, and as a single-issue third party, it was short-lived. In the Compromise of 1850, Congress agreed to the admittance of California as a free state, in exchange for an agreement to allow voter sovereignty over slavery for the territories that comprised the future states of New Mexico, Nevada, Utah and Arizona, and in which harsh fugitive slave laws were eventually enacted. While Durrie is known to have continued to paint genre scenes and other subjects after 1853, and to include genre-related imagery in his winter landscapes, he did not create many genre scenes on the scale of this painting. The figures in Holidays in the Country... are larger than those he typically painted in his landscapes, and they are depicted in much greater detail. He was not overly successful in painting very naturalistic figures, and this factor may have played a role in his decision to focus his attention on landscapes rather than figure painting. He lacked the ability to convey freedom of movement and relaxed anatomy, and his figures are often flat and stiff, creating the frozen tableau effect that is evident in Holidays in the Country....

“Lacking the European experience or its equivalent in studio training, Durrie never achieved an equal veneer of illusionary effects. The American farm had by 1860 become a symbol of the sturdy optimism, independence, and good humor that were considered keynotes of Yankee virtue. Durrie’s farm scenes are clearly in this vein, idealized and romanticized but based on a Connecticut reality”. Durrie died prematurely in 1863, his work not sophisticated enough to have earned him national recognition in his own day. However, with the advent of antiquarian interest in nineteenth-century American life in the mid-twentieth century, Durrie was quickly recognized for the clarity, sincerity and national pride conveyed in his paintings of rural life.

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