

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

Washington, D. C. November 19, 1968. An exhibition of paintings and drawings by the American realist William Sidney Mount (1807-1868), who died 100 years ago this month, will open Sunday (November 24) at the National Gallery of Art. Mount was the originator of the American school of "genre," or pictures of everyday scenes.

More than half of the 45 paintings to be shown and all 16 drawings are from the Melville Collection of the Suffolk Museum and Carriage House, Stony Brook, Long Island, chief repository of the artist's work.

The centennial exhibition was chosen by Mrs. Jane des Grange, Director of the Suffolk Museum, and Alfred V. Frankenstein, the distinguished art historian and critic. During 1969 it will be shown at museums in St. Louis, New York, and San Francisco under the auspices of the International Exhibitions Foundation.

Youngest of three artist brothers, Mount was raised on a farm in Setauket, Long Island, where he gained a lasting appreciation of country life. After a brief apprenticeship with the portrait painter Henry Inman in New York City, and three years of study at the National Academy of Design, he returned

to Long Island where he remained until his death at 61. As a student in the late 1820s he had concentrated on portraits and biblical subjects in the classical tradition of Europe, including Saul and the Witch of Endor, lent to the exhibition by the National Collection of Fine Arts, and Christ Raising the Daughter of Jairus, from the Suffolk Museum. By 1830, in Stony Brook, the maturing artist looked increasingly to his own surroundings for such "designs" (his term for genre) as Rustic Dance after a Sleigh Ride, from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The popularity of his lively new scenes reached a peak in the following two decades with such pictures as Farmers' Noonning, 1836, the recently discovered Cider Making, 1841, lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Eel Spearing at Setauket, 1845, from the New York State Historical Association, and California News, 1850. The last was commissioned by the publisher of the New York Tribune to publicize that newspaper's reporting of gold strikes in California.

Acclaimed in his own lifetime, Mount was virtually forgotten in the fifty years after his death as history tended to forget the accomplishments of many of America's 19th-century artists. In 1845, at the height of his career, he was described by Charles Lanman in "Letters from a Landscape Painter" as the "...incomparable genius of Stony Brook." Nevertheless, by 1941, a major survey of American painters credited a younger artist, George Caleb Bingham, with originating genre painting in this country. It was not until an awareness of our national painting traditions asserted itself in the present century that Mount was reappraised as an important and innovative artist.

Mr. Frankenstein, who is the author of a forthcoming biography of Mount, compiled the fully illustrated catalogue for the exhibition (price \$2.75) from four thousand pages of Mount documents. For both publications, he employs the first-person narrative style, relating activities and attitudes in the artist's own words and the words of those with whom he was closely associated.

Throughout his life, Mount was a dedicated collector of popular tunes, which he played on a concave violin of his own contrivance. At Stony Brook there is a large collection of music copied in the treble clef, in Mount's own hand. At the Saturday invitational opening of the exhibition in Washington, the National Gallery Strings, directed by Richard Bales, will present a first performance of the Stony Brook Suite, arranged by Mr. Bales from six of Mount's favorite tunes. One of these, "'Possum Up a Gum Stump" inspired the painting Catching the Tune which is in the exhibition. It shows a fiddler leaning forward to "catch" a tune whistled by a companion.

In the 1860s, as Mount's health began to fail, he built a two-horse studio on wheels to protect him from the weather as he continued to roam his beloved countryside. Thus, he was able to continue painting until his final year. Landscape, lent by the Berkshire Museum, may have been his last picture.

Catalogues, black-and-white photographs and color transparencies on loan for purposes of publication are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. 20565, Area Code 202, 737-4215, ext. 225.