KATHARINE MARTINEZ

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A Portrait of the Sartain Family and Their Home

JOHN SARTAIN was a man of boundless energy and enthusiasm (Fig. 1). Although he earned his living primarily as a pictorial engraver, he also painted in watercolors and oils, published an art magazine bearing his name, served on numerous boards of directors of art institutions and schools, actively supported social reform movements, and designed monuments and furniture. A master of self-promotion, Sartain's go-ahead approach to life and keen nose for publicity opportunities matched P. T. Barnum's. Like an earlier Philadelphian, Charles Willson Peale, Sartain taught his children to be artists, and passed on to some of them his instincts for the grand, public role that he himself enjoyed in Philadelphia's art community. His aesthetic judgment, technical expertise, productivity, and cheerful optimism gained him the respect of his colleagues in the art community and attracted honors even outside it.

Sartain's specialty was reproductive engravings—engravings that reproduced paintings or drawings. Such reproductions and their makers were held in high esteem, although commercial printmaking and ultimately photography came to dominate the image world during Sartain's lifetime.[1] He chose to align himself with the American fine arts community at a time when printmakers were increasingly forced to produce anonymous illustrations and advertisements for their livelihood.[2] His success derived from his ability to retain the respect of painters and their patrons while adopting modern printmaking techniques and taking advantage of business opportunities.

Sartain's career coincided with an era of breathless urgency in the American art world. A taste for the fine arts was believed to be the "acme of a nation's civilization," and American artists and tastemakers promoted the arts with serious intensity.[3] "May we exhort such of our readers as have no pictures hanging in their rooms, to put one up immediately? No matter how costly, or the reverse, provided they *see something in it* [emphasis in original], and it gives them a profitable or pleasant thought."[4] Mid-nineteenth-century Americans witnessed an explosion of visual images. Artists and cultural leaders in major cities regularly organized exhibitions of paintings, sculpture, prints, and watercolors. The public flocked to see pictures made of hair or dried flowers, and statues carved of soap, butter, or ice. Lithographers such as Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives sold thousands of "Cheap and Popular Pictures." Art lotteries were wildly successful. Portrait photographers welcomed the public into well-appointed studios in cities, or lugged their equipment from town to town, setting up tent studios that attracted

FIG 1. [Photographer unknown (Osler?)] *John Sartain in Masonic robes*, n.d. Archives, Moore College of Art and Design.

people from miles around. Consumers of these visual images were spurred on by books and popular magazines on household decoration that enthusiastically promoted the hanging of tasteful pictures throughout the house. Sartain flourished in this highly competitive and active visual marketplace.

Training

Born in London in 1808, Sartain began his working life early. His father, a shoemaker, died before the boy was eight years old, and soon afterward he began working for a theatrical scene painter and pyrotechnist. An inheritance from his grandmother enabled the fourteen-year-old to apprentice himself to John Swaine, an engraver.[5] The British printmaking trade at that time was highly specialized and competitive, driven by an enormously successful domestic and international market for images. Sartain entered a community of painters and pictorial printmakers working in close partnerships. Successful painters such as Reynolds, Lawrence, and Turner sought out the best engravers to reproduce their work, and the results of such collaborative efforts faced a highly critical audience. Sartain was enormously fortunate in his choice of masters. His skill soon came to the attention of one of his master's clients, William Young Ottley, a wealthy art connoisseur and dealer, art publisher, and amateur artist. Ottley subcontracted Sartain from Swain to finish engraving the plates for his book, *The Most Eminent Masters of the Early Florentine School*, which Ottley published in 1826. Ottley was among the first to appreciate and promote the work of early Renaissance artists like Giotto. For twenty-two months Sartain worked in Ottley's home, where he was allowed to study the outstanding collection of drawings, prints, paintings, and illustrated books that the publisher had acquired during ten years of travel in Italy. Equally important was the impact of Ottley's acquaintances. While he was engraving plates, Sartain could eavesdrop on conversations between Ottley and Sir Thomas Lawrence, among others.

Observing the community of artists and connoisseurs who passed through Ottley's richly decorated home made an enormous impression on Sartain, and stimulated his ambitions. After buying back the remainder of his apprenticeship, he began to attract commissions for work (Fig. 2), but he was impatient. At twenty-two, he decided

FACING PAGE: FIG 2. John Sartain, *The Evening Hour*, 1830. Engraving using line, aquatint, and stipple. 10⅛ × 7⅞ inches. The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. This print was done in England two months prior to the twenty-two-year-old Sartain's emigration to the United States. While a conventional piece, it shows the young man's promise as an artist as well as an engraver.

to emigrate to America. Armed with his engraving tools, letters of introduction, and a portfolio of prints, he left London in 1830 on a ship bound for Philadelphia, accompanied by Susannah Longmate Swaine, his new wife and the daughter of his former master. Susannah was pregnant with their first child, but the optimistic and self-confident young man would not postpone their departure.

Early Portrait Print Commissions in America

When John and Susannah Sartain stepped ashore two months later in late August 1830, they entered the second-largest city in the United States, the nation's banking capital, and a leading center for its technological, industrial, and intellectual advances. Guidebooks of the period noted the predominance of attractive redbrick houses laid out in a neat gridiron pattern that gave the city's streets a calm, rational character. In the 1830s and 1840s, the city's finest homes, churches, cultural institutions, and shops lined the streets surrounding Independence Hall and the adjacent Bank of the United States, a short walk from the Delaware River, where ships from London docked. The Sartains were to spend the next fifty years in that area of the city. John Sartain's influence would help to build many of the cultural institutions that began in that neighborhood, and as the city grew, so did his role in its art community.

Philadelphia was a national center for printing and bookmaking. There were many pictorial engravers whose work ranged from prints suitable for framing or illustrations to banknote vignettes and membership certificates. The arrival of an experienced mezzotint engraver from London aroused a great deal of interest among Philadelphia's connoisseurs and painters. English mezzotints were considered to be the finest examples of that technique in the world, and American collectors and artists purchased them in great number. Few American engravers before 1830 had attempted to work in mezzotint. To secure a prominent position in the Philadelphia art community, Sartain immediately set out to obtain commissions from such well-known portrait painters as Thomas Sully, John Neagle, and Henry Inman, and from such representatives of the city's wealthy upper class as Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States.[6] Sully and Neagle were well aware of the rich effects possible when paintings were copied in mezzotint, so they were eager to engage a talented mezzotint engraver to promote their paintings. An engraver should capture the "feelings of the painter," Neagle told an interviewer years after Sartain's arrival. "Engraving is not a copy, but a translation from color to black and white, and in order to make it successful, the engraver should enter into the spirit and feeling of the painter."[7] By associating himself with painters rather than with commercial printmakers, Sartain strove to establish his high status in the cultural community of producers and consumers of such images. This was strategically a wise career choice, as it established his reputation early in the century. Throughout his career Sartain's name was consistently associated with high-quality reproductions of works of art. His choice of sitters and subjects and his involvement in organizations consisting largely of painters and not printmakers garnered both respect and good publicity.

The Sartain Family on Sansom Street

In 1838 Sartain was successful enough to move his growing family from their first home in Philadelphia, on Race Street, to a handsome rowhouse on Sansom Street between Seventh Street and Independence Square. Sartain's new home was part of Sansom's Row, designed by the architect Benjamin Latrobe and located between Chestnut and Walnut Streets in the city's richest ward (South Ward) and most fashionable neighborhood. The Sartains remained in the house on Sansom Street for almost fifty years, raising a family of eight children: Samuel, born in 1830, followed by Henry (1833), Emma (1836), who died one year after her birth, Helen (1838), Emily (1841), William (1843), Charles (1846), and Edward (1849), who died in early childhood. Of the four sons and two daughters who reached adulthood, three sons, Samuel, William, and Henry, and one daughter, Emily, chose artistic occupations. (See Sartain family tree, p. xx.)

By the 1850s John Sartain was a successful self-employed businessman, having added a pressroom to the back of his house. Two servant girls lived in the house, according to the 1860 census, and so did the artists Stephen J. Ferris and Thomas Moran, whom Sartain taught to etch.[8] He trained most of his children in printmaking, and until they were adults, they were likely to be actively