



Richard Caton Woodville

FOR YOUR CLASSROOM



Richard Caton Woodville (b. 1825 – d. 1855) grew up in Baltimore, MD. Like many aspiring artists, he studied and copied prints by works of European artists. After briefly studying medicine, he decided to pursue an art career and studied abroad, predominantly in Düsseldorf, Germany. Although his paintings were “genre” scenes reflecting the political and social climate of America during the 1840s, the majority of his works were produced in Europe. Many of his works were enjoyed by the masses through prints. Upon its publication in 1848, Woodville’s *War News from Mexico* became very popular, selling over 14,000 prints.

Between 1830 and the Civil War, “genre paintings,” depictions of ordinary people engaged in everyday activities and occupations, flourished throughout America. Richard Caton Woodville’s *War News from Mexico* is a genre painting depicting Americans’ thirst for news related to the Mexican-American War [1846–1848].

In the portico of the generically named “American Hotel,” seven men listen with mixed reactions as a central character reads aloud from a newspaper. The only figures centrally located on the portico are Anglo men. The white men who enjoy the protection of the American Hotel portico are also afforded the ability to vote and fully participate in American political life. Woodville also included images of people who were marginalized in nineteenth-century American society and who lacked rights as

citizens. Off to the right side a woman cranes her torso out a window, interested in the news, but pushed to the margins. Below the porch are two African-American figures [possibly slaves]: a man and young girl, dressed in tattered clothing, ironically in the colors of red, white, and blue. He listens but looks off in the distance. The young girl, with bucket at her side, looks up with great intent and a face weighted with concern. Unlike many genre paintings of the time depicting humorous or derogatory scenes of African-Americans, Woodville was among some artists who rendered African-Americans realistically.

The Mexican-American War and potential expansion of slavery into the new territories deeply divided the country. Woodville visually conveys that contention in the sign above the portico where the eagle, symbolic of America, as well as the word “American” itself, are divided. Under the guise of Manifest Destiny, a newspaper columnist for the *Democratic Review* wrote that the United States had a self-evident right “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” The movement of Americans westward would eventually result in the movement of one million slaves with them.

In *War News from Mexico*, the seated older man wears the fashion of the revolution, juxtaposed with the younger men dressed in contemporary fashion. This contrast in fashion symbolized a generational divide. Slavery was never resolved with the founding of the country and was an issue that continually crept into the American politic with arguments for abolition, re-colonization, and the preservation of slavery.

Abolitionists demanded immediate freedom for African slaves. This movement began in Europe and spread to America, growing in the mid-1800s. The movement was led by social reformers such as William Lloyd Garrison, former slaves including Frederick Douglas, free-blacks Charles Henry Langston and John Mercer Langston, and artists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe.