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The Bone Player

1856

William Sidney Mount (American, 1807–1868)

DIMENSIONS

91.76 x 73.98 cm (36 1/8 x 29 1/8 in.)

ACCESSION NUMBER

48.461

MEDIUM OR TECHNIQUE

Oil on canvas

ON VIEW

David and Stacey Goel Gallery (Gallery 239)

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William Sidney Mount's *The Bone Player* combines elements of portraiture and genre painting, both fields for which he was well known. Born on Long Island, Mount apprenticed with his brother, a portrait and sign painter, and then studied at the National Academy of Design in New York; by 1856 he was well established as one of America's leading artists. Mount painted *The Bone Player* after receiving a commission from the printers Goupil and Company for two pictures of African American musicians, to be lithographed for the European market. These became the last in a series of five life-size likenesses of musicians that Mount executed between 1849 and 1856.

Scholars have differed over whether this image, painted just five years before the Civil War when tensions over slavery were high, is a typical nineteenth-century stereotyped depiction of an African American or a sensitive portrait of an individual. On the one hand, Mount titled the picture *The Bone Player*, indicating that it was the sitter's musical skill, rather than his individual identity, that was the painting's subject. The bones [1989.132a-d]—bars of ivory, wood, or bone clicked together—were an instrument associated with African American minstrels, a type recognizable to both American and European audiences. Popular theories of evolution considered African Americans more intuitive than Caucasians and therefore more in touch with the natural musical talents. Mount knew that pictures of such African American types would sell: they appealed to Europeans because of their exoticism and to Americans because they were considered distinctly American. Moreover, Mount was not an abolitionist and so unlikely to challenge African American stereotypes.

On the other hand, Mount carefully delineated his subject's distinctive physical characteristics, such as his high cheekbones, white teeth, and neat mustache, tre-

him as an individual and not a type. Unlike the depictions of African Americans contemporary genre painting, which often employed caricature, this sitter is life making the viewer relate to him as a fellow human being. Mount himself played violin and loved music. His personal interest in the subject may explain his port of musicians, the first of which depicts a Caucasian subject and thus does not inv African American stereotypes.

In the end, the most convincing conclusion about this painting is that both interpretations have merit. Mount was walking a fine line between stereotyping ; individualism, between genre painting and portraiture. His equivocation makes sense, for he executed the work when debate over slavery was intense. Whatever political affiliations, Mount was primarily a painter trying to support himself thr his art. In *The Bone Player*, he created a work that could be interpreted in differ ways and thus appeal to buyers in both the North and the South, as well as abroa despite its ambiguity, the painting is still unprecedented in the humanity it affor African American subject.

This text was adapted from Elliot Bostwick Davis et al., *American Painting* [<http://www.mfashop.com/9020398034.html>], MFA Highlights (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003).

Inscription

Lower right, on box: Wm. S. Mount. 1856; Reverse, before relining: *The Bone Player*/Painted by Wm. S. Mount/1856

Provenance

By 1858, sold by the artist to John D. Jones for \$200; by 1942, descended in the Jc family to Edith Carpenter (Mrs. Edward H.) Floyd-Jones (1880-1952), New York Long Island. 1943, sold by C. W. Lyon, Inc., New York to Maxim Karolik, Newport R.I.; 1948, bequest of Martha C. (Mrs. Maxim) Karolik to the MFA. (Accession Da June 3, 1948)

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