

# AMERICAN PRINTMAKING

1913 - 1947

*A Retrospective Exhibition Presented by the*

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF GRAPHIC ARTS

The exhibition of American Printmaking first seen at The Brooklyn Museum, December 1947, aims at reviewing the changes that have occurred in American graphic arts during the last thirty-five years. Its starting year, 1913, recalls the aesthetic thunderbolt of the Armory Show which shattered the only accepted artistic faith and replaced it with other creeds, sapling-like, bud-hard and dynamic. Now a generation old, these in turn, have become routine.

If this retrospective collection has succeeded in being truly representative of the trends of the span involved, it should suggest the unlacing of the stays of academic tradition, the ensuing gambol in the pastures of modern art, and, on the edge of the opening era, a revulsion of younger artists against the once-young moderns, a yearning towards a recaptured collective idiom.

For a better understanding and enjoyment of prints one must take exception to the concept that parallels in the graphic field the golden legend concerning the sacredness of the "Old Masters." Far from building Chinese walls to protect fine prints from the people, the task of the expert should be to bring them together. Before writing about a collection such as this, one must penetrate to the basic truth that has been gradually obscured by a vast amount of specialized literature on prints; namely, that the essence of the graphic arts is its ability to multiply,

and thus pull down the barriers of rarity and expensiveness that stand between the everyday man and the art originals. Such a postulate in its simplicity infuriates a certain type of print lover who shares with the hoarder of postage stamps a belief in the mysterious qualities of rarity. Fineness, an imponderable that remains essential for art enjoyment, is in no way impaired by multiplication. Only the price the art object will fetch, only its collector's desirability are impaired. Meanwhile its enjoyment spreads until at last it reaches the "hoi polloi," a fate observed with mental reservations by those who hold art to be proper pursuit only for the elite, and with joy by those others who deem art as useful and beneficial as bread, not to be taxed, or negated to the many.

Before the relatively modern advent of photography and photo-engraving, all prints were technically fine prints, in the sense that a handmade design had been cut, or engraved, or drawn on wood, or metal, or stone. The topical vignette published with stop-press speed in a nineteenth century magazine barely a week after the event — siege of a town, the queen's travels, arrival of foreign ambassadors — was hand drawn and handcut, indistinguishable as concerned the impeccability of its autography, from the woodcuts of Holbein and Dürer.

Until the introduction of photography in reproductive processes, distinction could not

be made between newspaper and magazine illustrations on the one hand, and fine prints on the other. The collector of fine prints had no other valid touchstone than quality to separate the fine art sheep from the commercial art goats. It would have proved hardly safe to attempt a judgment by a simple rule of thumb, treasuring 'idle' art done with strict subjectiveness in the confinement of a studio, and rejecting that other kind of graphic art, commissioned to quench the curiosity of magazine subscribers as to how many horses dragged the queen's carriage, or how Malakoff fell. Among the hack draftsmen sent to far-flung battlefields, or grinding out cartoons week after week, and grinding also their own lithographic stones, happened to be some of the topflight artists of their epoch — Daumier, Constantin Guys in Europe; Winslow Homer and Constantino Escalante in America. The residue of art in these topical prints vies for beauty with the subjective Biblical musings of Rembrandt, and the pastime of Goya in Bordeaux, when the quasi-blind oldster, propping a lithographic stone on an easel, smudged on it with the help of a magnifying glass bulls as alive as those other favorites also smudged on stone, in the caves of Altamira.

The one graphic field where photography was bound to supplant the handmade product was that of reproductions meant to multiply facsimile of famous or salable works. Unswayed by emotion, the camera performs a job of undoubted authenticity, and yet, when genuine artists deserted the field of reproductive prints, we lost a chance at seeing the work of one master filtered through another trained eye. When the Kings of Spain commissioned Goya to engrave the masterpieces of Velasquez, they acted as Museum curators bent on procuring post-cards of exhibits as souvenirs for visitors. The result, a composite exposure of two equally great personalities, states by con-

trast the limitations of today's camera, dreamed of by some as unlimited.

It still remains true that we should exercise broadmindedness when mapping borderlines between fine and other prints, so as not to miss the Guys, and Daumiers, and Homers of our day. The graphic arts are so widespread and so widely enjoyed in the United States that they have become the indispensable daily fare for the man in the street, the subway commuter, the business man, even the child in the nursery. I refer, of course, to the American cartoons that stud dailies and weeklies, some in the Nash tradition of a single, telling, political drawing, some that display the inner workings of fantasm worlds, "funnies," the impertinent contemporary version of the strips of holy vignettes, in Italy called "predella."

Today's cartooning has all the earmarks of a living art, but is so widely consumed that it is no longer thought of as art. Its prints, left to the small mercies of children's hands, soiled, torn and thrown away as rubbish, are fated to turn into collector's items, as have the medieval woodblocks and block-books that were once much in demand and thoroughly consumed, both spiritually and physically. Only a ruling on the fact that Herriman's pen-and-ink originals were multiplied by a photo-engraving process could keep his work out of this show; for included in the definition of what constitutes a fine print is that it should be handcut. So let us raise an eyebrow at cartoons, our country's most live expression of the art of black-and-white; let us attempt to interpose the flaming sword of Fine Art between "Krazy Kat" and immortality.

Photography withered a whole generation of reproductive engravers, and sapped away the reason to be of graphic media that brought a dignity and autographic purity even to the meanest magazine of the pre-camera era. But in turn, by an automatic

shift of gravity that could be translated into an aesthetic law of compensation, photography itself became an imposing new branch of the graphic arts. In its combination of factual veracity, strict chemistry and austere palette, photography suits well the idiosyncracies of the American approach. Its few masters could hardly be omitted from this show. However, a cautious criterion allotted them only antechamber space, for they lack the doubtful blessing of being hand-drawn.

Having shoved into exterior darkness important and peculiarly modern manifestations of the graphic arts, understood in their wider sense, this show features prints hand-drawn, handcut or hand engraved. Even so delimited, the field abounds in split-hair rulings that may puzzle the intruding layman. The good technical health of a plate, that is, its potentiality to reproduce a design ad infinitum, is frowned upon by many a connoisseur. King of the portfolios remains the drypoint, its prized velvet burr good only for a very few proofs. Etching comes next, that yields its good proofs only in short pulls. It has become proverbially synonymous with other coveted things, lollypops, mink coats, and such, that may lure into danger unwary innocence.

Theoretically, all prints of museum standard should be handprinted. It is a catchy term, redolent of Ruskin's try at an artificial pumping of health into sick handicrafts. Of course, the printing of proofs from an original block does not require complex paraphernalia. Perhaps closest to true handprinting are the Chinese rubbings from stone low-reliefs, and in the Occident, the casual proofs made without benefit of a press, when the paper is laid over the block and pressed into its grooves with fingerball or thumbnail. Thus would Millet and Gauguin check a state of a work in course, often a single detail, before cutting any further. These undoubtedly handmade proofs, usually quite

deficient as to inking and pressure, could not stand on quality alone. Despite this they are precious, inasmuch as they are relics of the artists, as would be his shirt or pipe.

Most prints are made with the intromission between the artist and the artist's proof of a printer and of a press. In so far as wood blocks are concerned, it is futile to distinguish Gutenberg's archaic press, hand-manned, but worked at top speed in a most business-like fashion, the more complex plate-press that printed the engravings of "The London Illustrated News," and the artists' small presses of today. Only naive souls sighing for the fiction of the good old times could surmise a difference. Only correct inking and pressure is needed to insure a decent proof.

In lithography, delicate hand and brainwork is indispensable at the stage of etching the stone, and this is where great printers are made. All that should be expected of an ink-roller is an equalized inking, equally possible when the stone is hand rolled, or inked by a mechanically operated roller or when the hand-drawn zincograph is stretched over the drum of an offset press. Offset printing exposes the fallacies of attempted definitions of fine printing. At first it seems further removed from what is called hand printing and yet it achieves an important forward step in autography, in that the print is identical with the model instead of its mirrored image.

Intaglio printing is perforce hand done. Perhaps unjustly, Joseph Pennell represents in this show a kind of tail-end of the Whistler tradition that attempted personal artistry at every stage of printmaking and especially at that of inking and pressure. Fame hallows the Whistler proofs that he also signed as printer. The film of ink that the master's unequal wipe left on metal, and thence on paper, is revered by the collector; and in truth some of his waterscapes would vanish

in the sunlight of a clean pull. Signed, numbered, limited editions, marginal remarks, states, go with this type of approach. In the stylistic battle still current between conservatives and modern, I would check as a point in behalf of modern prints the fact that such fine and refined points, most of them collectors' bait, are more often found as a kind of fungus that thrives on conservative plates, of which modern works are relatively free.

Even the simplest press may interpose a rusty turn of its screws or the wobbliness of its plates between an inexperienced printer and the beauty of a final proof. Even the most intricate of offset presses may be made to conform to the lightest indication of a skilled printer and yield the proof supreme. As in other fields of endeavour, it is not the accessories used that guarantee fineness, but the craftsman's hand, and the brain that motors the hand. In that sense only, all fine prints are handmade. One should mention among the few fine printers of our day, George C. Miller, of New York City, Lawrence Barrett of Colorado Springs, and Lynton R. Kistler of Los Angeles. Their skilled enthusiasm has ministered at the birth of many a graphic artist.

The United States witnesses a heartening revival of the use of hand-drawn prints pulled in unlimited editions, which is where the definition of what the graphic arts should be acquires its full meaning. They are illustrations for trade books, more often children's books. In the mid-nineteenth century, when tired printer's devils snapped the jaws and pulled the levers of the press that inked the five thousand copies of the weekly "Charivari", their thoughts through the long twelve hour day were not on aesthetic pursuits. Yet it is their hack labor that made Daumier's work possible. Had it been submitted to the restraint of limited editions for collectors only, had it been cut off from contact with his "fall guy" and constant ad-

mirer, the French bourgeoisie, Daumier's opus would have withered. Today, offset presses that run without fatigue as many as 200,000 copies of one hand-drawn zinc, doubtless launch some of the more vital prints of our era.

In their democratic way of reaching the people, the graphic arts play more than an aesthetic role in the American scene. They blend well with a tradition that rebels at the exquisite and the few. With the gradual shrinking of the terra incognita that blanked the United States map, the interest for pioneering and open spaces that the works of Homer and Jackson typify thinly tapered out into the duck prints of Benson. The new wilds were in the city, and American tradition lured another generation of draftsmen trained in the tough school of newspaper graphic reporting. At its deepest, their work matches the mood, humanity-packed, of Stieglitz' great contemporaneous photograph, "The Immigrants." At its rowdiest, it is pitched as high as the rowdiness of Hogarth, another great graphic reporter.

John Sloan succeeded in capturing in a web of etched lines a whole metropolis and its motley inhabitants, a New York that is not today's New York. Already Sloan's etchings have outlived his city. Boardman Robinson jobbed as a war correspondent. His graphic reportings from the field will outlast many a studio job.

This art so close to the people, illustrates Lincoln's saying, "God must have loved the common man; he made so many of them." It could have spilled easily into the social-consciousness that marks the art of the thirties without need of, or reference to, the very different brand of art that was being done in Paris. It probably would have done so were it not for the Armory Show. While a majority of puritan laymen were shocked by Marcel Duchamps into believing in a European cultural decadence, while a mi-

nority of liberal laymen cheered modern art hobbling on its zigzag way as anarchistic, American artists understood the lesson of Europe in its purest and highest sense. They felt it as a heroic and painful reappraisal of means, a conscious restating of problems of style, a shying away from the herd thinking and the cliché solutions that had served so well so many that came before.

Max Weber comes to mind as the American paragon of the good modern, and also the saying of his friend Henri Rousseau, in a letter to Picasso, "We are the two masters of the day; I in the naturalistic manner, and you in the Egyptian one." Purest expression of that moment are Weber's early woodcuts, that paradoxically capture a symbolist's sensitiveness in planks roughly adzed with African bluntness.

A rising flux of art books and reproductions was to give the next generation of American artists a moment of drunken elation, as they surveyed world cultures and art forms from the vantage point of photogravure. Great was the temptation to feel heir to all those kingdoms. The panoramic sight strengthened measurably the range of stylistic choice open to eclectics, if not their strength.

There is a certain horse-sense that conditions American taste, and purely intellectual roots are a somewhat brittle channel for healthy sap. Soon, a group of critics and artists, with a mea culpa, confessed that, even though modern art might be dressed in gossamer-fine raiments, as far as their eyes could see it went naked. The many sighed with relief at this admission, and thus entered the American Scene. For me, Grant Wood personifies the return to Arcadia, the candid search for earth, blood and roots. A chance meeting in Cedar Rapids, a visit to his workshop, where murals on rustic themes were team-painted, impressed me with the fact that in Iowa, at the time, murals, and

land, and people were as closely interwoven as were the land, and people, and murals of Mexico. Even in Grant's lithographs his mural affinities may be felt, his patience, and a flair for architectural balance.

At the same time that Corn became the leit-motiv in the country, city-art focused on the Worker. Social-conscious artists now called themselves plastic workers, and attempts at artists' unions patterned after workers' unions were made. Perhaps here, an inspiration nurtured by the depression at home borrowed in part its ideography from the Mexico of the 1920's, where engravers had shared in the renaissance with a loud crop of illustrated posters, and broadsides cheaply printed and retailing for a few pennies. But in the States, the logical role of the graphic arts as a ready medium of art for the people never quite dovetailed with the making of an art about the people. Prints that canonize the worker were pulled somewhat paradoxically on china paper, in limited editions, and priced accordingly. Nevertheless, the new faith, or the remodeled faith, infused many a fine print with a breath and a breadth that brooding over style alone never conjured.

Within the range of time that this show encompasses, many new techniques have been tried in the graphic field, made possible by increasingly complex technological resources. Some are variations on classical themes — the use of sandpaper and gasoline in the making of a lithograph, the sandblasting of a woodcut — and others are new material departures — serigraphs, cello-cuts, etc. If progress resided in variety we should indeed rejoice. But the graphic artist should not rely on technical inventions to solve his problems, any more than the painter on his brand new synthetic pigments. No material shortcut can ease appreciably the art quest.

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