The Father of Illustration: From Boston to Boise

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The Special Collections and Archives (SCA) unit at Boise State University’s Albertsons Library houses materials specific to the history of the university and the state as a whole. Among its many documents, personal correspondence, artifacts, and ephemera, the unit also houses three large framed etchings donated by Lois Chaffee, wife of President/Chancellor Eugene B. Chaffee (1936 to 1970), in 1988. These three pieces are signed etchings from paintings done by famed 20th century American illustrator and author Howard Pyle (1853-1911).

Anyone familiar with the stories of the American West, World Wars, or the lore and fantasy of faraway lands populated by pirates, buccaneers, and ne'er-do-wells that were popular in the 1880s through the 1950s will have come across the illustrative works of artists such as N. C. Wyeth, Harvey Dunn, Violet Oakley, Jessie Willcox Smith, Frank Schoonover, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Maxfield Parrish, among others. The wondrous illustrations that accompanied such stories elevated the genre and placed these artists as masters of the visual narrative. These artists were in turn influenced, and perfected their craft, under the tutelage of artist, teacher, and author Howard Pyle. Pitz, in his The Brandywine Tradition, explains that Pyle's influence as a fellow artist and teacher was coupled with “the authority of which he spoke—the authority of one of the greatest, probably the greatest illustrator of his day” (1969, p. 138). As a student, N. C. Wyeth wrote to his home after one of Pyle’s sessions, “The composition lecture lasted two hours and it opened my eyes more than any talk I ever heard” (1969, p. 136).

Howard Pyle was born in Wilmington, Delaware on March 5th, 1853. His talent as an artist and author emerged early on in his life, and his illustrations appeared in publications such as Scribner’s Magazine, Harper’s Weekly, and St. Nicholas. By 1894 his artistic skills and natural teaching ability landed him a teaching position at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia, and two years later became the Director of the School of
Illustration. In 1900 he left Drexel to open the Howard Pyle School of Art in Wilmington. It was in Wilmington, in the historic Brandywine region, where Pyle lived and taught his more prominent dozen or so students during “three consecutive summers of 1901, 1902, and 1903, when the most brilliant company was assembled and Pyle was at his best. The span of time was short but it left an imprint (Pitz, 1969, p. 113). During that time and until his death on November 9th, 1911 in Florence, Italy, Pyle produced an astonishing number of works, such as paintings, murals, and literature (Agosta, 1987, chronology). Pyle single-handedly helped usher what many dubbed “The Golden Age of American Illustration” which flourished from the 1870s up to the 1950s (NMAI, 2015).

A giant among illustrators of his time, his books and art brought to life timeless characters into vivid detail, such as Robin Hood in The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood (1883), the four-volume Arthuriad (1903-1910), and The Story of King Arthur and his Knights. It was Pyle's masterful combination of “richly evocative illustrations with a text fully detailing sights, scents, textures, and sounds” of the Arthurian mythos that accounts for the “authenticity of Pyle's highly artificial romantic world” (Agosta, 1987, p. 55). In his two-volume set, Howard Pyle: His Life–His Work (2004), Paul Preston Davis writes that Pyle “produced about 3,300 published illustrations...half of those illustrated his own writings–19 books and nearly 200 articles and stories in magazines. At least half of those 19 books are still in print and being read today” (p. 5). He not only flourished as an artist and author, but was also an adored teacher and mentor, having instructed about “half of the official combat artists of World War I” (May, J. P., May, R. E., 2011, introduction). It is not surprising that Pyle “is rightly called the Father of American Illustration. During an age when the whole nation engaged in reading as a pastime, Pyle and his faithful followers shaped the use of illustration with creations that were at once modern, relevant, and faithful to the stories which they were used” (J. Homme & C. Homme, 2002, p. 23).

Given the extraordinary body of work Pyle left behind, his artful teaching and prodigious artistic output it is not surprising to find some of his works in unlikely places. We know little, however, of how these three etchings came to be in the possession of the Chaffee estate here in Boise. We know from various sources the etchings were commissioned by The Bibliophile Society in Boston in 1903. According to Davis, Pyle:

Completed five paintings for The Bibliophile Society which became the subjects of five etchings by W. H. W. Bicknell for a Portfolio of Etchings to be reproduced and made available exclusively to the Society's membership. No reproductions of the paintings in any form were to be distributed outside of the membership...Each
etching was signed by Howard Pyle and W. H. W. Bicknell. The portfolio was limited to 302 sets (2004, p. 279).

J. P. May and R. E. May write that “In 1904, Pyle collected $2,500 from a private dealer for his half-interest in five paintings previously made for the Bibliophile Society” (2011, p. 156). So it is safe to assume that these five paintings—the basis for these etchings—were sold to a private party and no longer part of The Bibliophile Society. Although the fate of the two missing pieces, “Friar” Bacon in his Study and “Izaak” Walton remain unknown, we are fortunate to have the remaining three in Special Collections at Boise State University. Below are some details of each piece:
Figure 1. Richard DeBury and the Young Edward III
Figure 2. Small pencil drawings by Pyle with Bicknell’s signature

Figure 4. Bicknell’s signature, with a pen drawing by Pyle
The Archives West online finding aid describes these pieces as “Three etchings made by W. H. W. Bicknell after original paintings by Howard Pyle. Boise State holds: Caxton at his press; Richard DeBury & the young Edward III; Erasmus, Colet & More.” While short, it fails to describe the mastery of line in each piece. Each etching is beautifully rendered, and is signed by Pyle on the lower left side of each piece; the red emblem of The Bibliophile Society rests at the bottom of the middle section; and W. H. W. Bicknell’s signature on the right-hand side of each piece. Each etching also contains a small ink or pen drawing drawn by Pyle himself.
These three pieces have adorned various Boise State offices since at least the 1940s. The Special Collections and Archives unit contains only one photograph of then-university
The Bicknell etchings, while limited, are by no means rare. A complete set can still be purchased online in places such as online bookseller Abebooks.com, which has a complete set for sale for $13,975.00 (as of this writing). The value of such pieces lies as much in their beautifully crafted design and artistic merit as in their 2400+ mile journey from 1903 Boston to the offices of a university president. How did they come to be in the possession of the Chaffee estate? Were these gifts given by Boston friends? Where are the other two pieces?

As someone who is enamored with classical illustration, coming across these art pieces by a luminary like Howard Pyle in my library was a magical experience. As a patron I appreciate that my library has these etchings in their collection and can gaze unabashedly at an artist’s work whose legacy shaped American illustration. Finding these kinds of gems emphasizes the inherent and important value of how libraries—regardless of size or niche collection, or even location and purpose—house within them
objects of hyperlocal uniqueness and random wonderment. No archival collection will house quite the same kinds of items or materials, and each library offers within it untold possibilities for positive engagement (and I dare say, joy) to its community. One just has to make these kinds of opportunities visible and available for the right connections to happen.

What kind of wonders can you find in your library?

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References


