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## 5. CATALYSTS AND CONCEPTS: EXPLORING PYLE'S REFERENCES TO CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE

*Not long ago a group of young English artists in one of the London clubs were discussing the merits of contemporary American illustrators. The general opinion was that Howard Pyle was the best of them all, original in conception, skillful and ingenious in execution.*

—NEW YORK TIMES

The vibrant exchange of visual information during the second half of the nineteenth century, made possible by new innovations in print technology and production, as well as in transportation, fueled a new transcontinental appreciation and understanding of global stylistic developments. Howard Pyle's unique approach to the art of illustration was honed through his intensive study of the art of his time, including a range of both American and European styles. In addition to viewing original works of art in Wilmington, Philadelphia, and New York, Pyle accessed contemporary imagery through illustrated periodicals and books, reproductive prints, and photomechanical reproductions of fine art, all of which were available to him via the new, expanding, international trade in prints and other pub-

lications. Emerging from a culture of transatlantic artistic exchange, Pyle's success was abetted by his audience's appreciation of his adaptation of American and European sources.

Pyle was born and educated in an age in which the possibilities for the training of a budding illustrator were limited, yet the demand for illustrations was high. In addition, reproductive technology was changing rapidly, requiring a high degree of adaptability on the part of even the most seasoned practitioners. Since he chose not to go abroad to study, unlike many of his colleagues, Pyle did not view firsthand international artistic trends but seems to have relied instead on developing his own in-depth knowledge of both past and contemporary styles in the fine arts. His personal visual repertoire was then transformed to serve the specific needs of illustration art.

Pyle acknowledged the unique requirements of illustration that partitioned it from mainstream fine arts. He wrote, for instance:

There is one exceptional branch of art, which, directed perhaps by the force of circumstances, has been

compelled to seek its inspiration from a broader field than that of academic traditions. The illustrator must image Nature in his art, or else his art is of no avail. His people must look like living people, and his mimic world must represent a living world, or else he labors in vain to gain an audience.<sup>1</sup>

An original work needed to translate legibly to the printed page by way of the specific technical process utilized for reproduction. Its composition had to be readable, allowing the viewer a quick visual synopsis of the accompanying text. These prerequisites required a delicate balance between narrative detail and clear, simplified composition. Pyle's borrowings from recognizable sources accelerated audience comprehension of the story being told. His understanding of this mechanism of stimulating visual memory among his public is a significant factor in his work's ultimate popularity within his lifetime and continuing to the present day.

Pyle's style was described by a contemporary critic as "varied" and occupying "new ground."<sup>2</sup> I would suggest that at least in part it was Pyle's ability to draw strategically from diverse aspects of the fine and graphic arts, tailoring the appropriated elements to the specific demands of his subject and the medium at hand, that facilitated audience appreciation. Pyle's sources lay in Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Japonisme,<sup>3</sup> Symbolism, and American realist painting. In addition to enhancing the images' visual connections to the accompanying text, these "high art" references surreptitiously guided his reading and viewing public to a higher level of art-literate sophistication. The recognition of Pyle's sources undoubtedly contributed to viewers' enjoyment of the imagery, as they would have had some satisfaction in acknowledging their own visual awareness.<sup>4</sup>

Born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1853, Pyle was raised amid a vibrant world of popular printed imagery. Internationally, the Industrial Revolution was helping to create an expanding middle class that had the luxury of leisure time unknown in generations past. Access to education steadily improved for most of the nineteenth century, resulting in

a more literate population. As the demand for books and periodicals grew, industrial advances provided the means with which to meet this demand. Mechanized innovations, including steam-powered printing presses and machine-produced paper, greatly increased the capacity to produce periodicals.<sup>5</sup> New and faster modes of transportation aided in the circulation of periodicals and books across the United States and the Atlantic Ocean. Like most middle-class Americans, Pyle was introduced to art and illustration through the printed materials in his home. His recollections of his early childhood substantiate an immersion in the new print culture:

My mother was very fond of pictures; but especially was she fond of pictures in books. A number of prints hung on the walls of our house: there were engravings of Landseer and Holman Hunt's pictures, and there was a colored engraving of Murillo's Madonna standing balanced on the crescent moon, and there was a pretty smiling Beatrice Cenci, and several others that were thought to be good pictures in those days. But we—my mother and I—liked the pictures in books the best of all. I may say to you in confidence that even to this very day I still like the pictures you find in books better than wall pictures.

As for our picture-books: not only did we have the old illustrated Thackeray and Dickens novels, and Bewick's Fables, and Darley's outline drawings to Washington Irving's stories, and others of that sort, but the *London Punch* (and there were very great artists who drew pictures for the *London Punch* in those days) and the *Illustrated London News* came into our house every week. I can remember many and many an hour in which I lay stretched out before the fire upon the rug . . . Turning over leaf after leaf of those English papers, or of that dear old volume of *The Newcomes* (the one with the fables on the title page), or of *The Old Curiosity Shop* where you may see the picture of Master Humphrey with the dream people flying about his head.<sup>6</sup>

As a young man, Pyle trained privately in Philadelphia with Francis Van der Wielen beginning in 1869. Van der Wielen was an academically trained artist of Dutch-Flemish descent. Much of what we know of his training program is found in the autobiography of the artist Cecilia Beaux, who studied with Van der Wielen after Pyle's departure. Van der Wielen's program appears to have followed classic academic methods—including drawing from plaster casts and completing drills in perspective. Beaux describes her first task upon arriving at the school as having to transpose an image from a small-scale lithograph into a larger format.<sup>7</sup> This age-old exercise of copying the work of established artists would have echoes in Pyle's later practice, when he adapted imagery for use in his illustrations.

Pyle's earliest work shows the results of various nascent visual influences. A group of Pyle's early pencil sketches reveals his efforts to encapsulate character development in a single figure in the absence of any defining physical attributes—relying solely on costume, pose, and facial expression to convey information to the viewer.<sup>8</sup> The communication of visual data within an abbreviated linear language was a hallmark of the work of English Pre-Raphaelite illustrators of the 1860s, like William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Frederic Shields.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Millais's illustration for Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Edward Gray," published in his *Poems* (1857), in which a young man turns away from a female figure in obvious distress—an emotion conveyed deftly by the droop of the man's shoulder, his right hip defensively braced and his head tilted downward—is accomplished with an economy of line and limited accessories.<sup>10</sup> A similar attempt to convey inner feelings, albeit tentatively in this early stage of his stylistic development, can be discerned in Pyle's drawing of a woman in a maid's cap and apron thoughtfully gazing down into the teacup she holds in her hands (n.d., fig. 71).

In 1876 Pyle had two illustrations accepted for publication in *Scribner's Monthly*, initiating his professional career and setting him on the path that would lead him to relocate to New York, where he could be closer to the large publishing houses.<sup>11</sup> There he enrolled at the Art Students League



Figure 71. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *Untitled*, no date. Pencil on paper, 8½ × 6½ inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Willard S. Morse, 1925

at the suggestion of *Scribner's* editor Richard Watson Gilder. Pyle attended life classes, where he met a group of ambitious young artists. The League, formed in response to the rumored termination of the life class at the school of the National Academy of Design, also in New York, was particularly sensitive to the importance of "the cultivation of a spirit of fraternity among art students."<sup>12</sup> Pyle developed collegial relationships there with Edwin Austin Abbey, William Merritt Chase, and Julian Alden Weir.



Figure 72. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *Wreck in the Offing!*, 1878. For “Wreck in the Offing!—Scene in a Life-Saving Station.” *Harper’s Weekly*, March 9, 1878. Gouache on paper, 14¼ × 21½ inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gayle and Alene Hoskins Endowment Fund, 1984

In addition to the opportunity to draw from the live model, an Art Students League membership offered the privilege of sketching at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and access to its growing collection of “photographs, etchings and engravings of the work of old masters, and of the different modern painters who have won distinction.”<sup>13</sup> As his education progressed, Pyle seems to have looked more and more to the fine arts for inspiration.

That said, the division between fine art and illustration that is so clearly demarcated in the present day was less relevant in the New York art scene of the 1870s. The blurring of boundaries between disciplines carried over to less formal sketch clubs, including the Salmagundi Club, with which Pyle had become associated by 1878. There he spent weekly evening critiques with such diversely positioned artists as Chase, Arthur Burdett Frost, and George Inness, Jr.

In March 1878 the publication of *Wreck in the Offing!* (1878, fig. 72) in *Harper’s Weekly* commenced Pyle’s professional career. This early yet well-developed example of Pyle’s work presents a group of men huddled around a table, faces lit by candlelight, just as they are interrupted with news of a shipwreck. In its composition and dramatic lighting, Pyle’s picture recalls Dutch old master paintings of card games, examples of which would have been on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The work of such painters as Adriaen Brouwer (see, for instance, Brouwer’s *The Smokers* [probably c. 1636], Metropolitan Museum of Art) would also have been readily available as reproductive prints. The monochromatic tonality of these prints would have served as a useful source for a young illustrator who was producing images to be published in black and white. Pyle could also have gained inspiration from sources closer to home, like his friends Chase

and Walter Shirlaw, both of whom had trained in Munich and were imitating the darker tonalities of European academic schools.

Pyle was clearly keeping abreast of developments in English illustration, as is apparent in his early work employing newly developed color-printing processes. In 1881 he had two books published simultaneously, a retelling for children of Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1881, fig. 73), and *Yankee Doodle: An Old Friend in a New Dress* (1881, fig. 74), whose story derived from the traditional American folk song. Both

are technically and stylistically based on the productions of the English painter and illustrator Walter Crane.<sup>14</sup> Crane was one of the first to benefit from chromoxylography, a color-printing method developed by the English printer and engraver Edmund Evans. Crane issued a series of illustrated children’s “Toy Books” (1873, see fig. 75) with Evans beginning in 1865, which were extremely popular and to which Pyle would have had easy access. In a manner similar to Crane’s use of bright color encased in strong, dark outlines, Pyle drew the illustrations for both his books in ink outline



Figure 73. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *Untitled*. From Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1881. Printed matter. Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum



Figure 74. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *Untitled*. For Howard Pyle, *Yankee Doodle: An Old Friend in a New Dress*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1881. Watercolor on illustration board, 8¼ × 7¾ inches. Delaware Art Museum, Bequest of Joseph Bancroft, 1942