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INTRODUCTION: PERSPECTIVES ON PYLE

In 1891 Howard Pyle wrote to the author Edmund Stedman, describing his own life as “hermit-like” and “very secluded.” This seems an overstatement. Judging from Pyle’s copious correspondence, he was very much in contact with friends and associates and, through his astounding output of illustrations that year, was also connected more loosely to much of the nation. Yet Pyle stayed primarily in Wilmington, Delaware, as he would for most of his life, shipping his sought-after pictures to publishers in New York. Born in Wilmington in 1853 into an old Quaker family, Pyle had roots in the area that ran deep. While in personality he was a homebody, Pyle’s imagination ranged over distant times and places, transporting him and thousands of American readers to ancient Rome, Arthurian England, colonial Massachusetts, and Porto Bello in the Golden Age of Piracy.

One hundred years after his death, Pyle’s reputation remains strongest in the Delaware Valley, where more than a thousand of his pictures are in the collections of the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington and the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Although important works by Pyle are scattered around the nation, in both public

institutions and private collections, and several of his murals remain in situ, Howard Pyle is not a household name—unlike Norman Rockwell, who admired him greatly. Famous among practicing illustrators, as well as collectors, scholars, and enthusiasts of American illustration, Pyle is absent from surveys of American art.

During his lifetime Pyle was an influential teacher and a well-known illustrator whose name sold books and magazines. In almost any given month between 1877 and 1911, hundreds of thousands of Americans saw his published pictures, making Pyle a major contributor to the nation’s visual culture. Several of the essays in this book seek to reinsert Pyle into the conversation about turn-of-the-century art and culture—analyzing his pictures, examining his influences, and exploring the context of his images and writing—that is, to treat him like a significant American artist. This volume of essays does not particularly dwell on Pyle’s biography, which has been recently treated by Robert May and Jill May.² It concentrates on neither the tradition of American illustration nor the publication and advertising industries that provided the focus for Michele H. Bogart’s excellent studies.³ Instead this book aims to provide a variety of recent perspectives



on Pyle, situating his images, writing, and instruction within the story of American art.

This introduction provides a brief outline of Pyle's career, presented through close readings of a selection of his lesser-known works. In the book's first essay the author and illustrator James Gurney explores Pyle's picture-making strategies, analyzing the visual operations of specific works and pairing his observations with Pyle's instructions to his students. The next three essays examine three of Pyle's main areas of interest: the Lupacks discuss Pyle's version of the Arthurian legends; Anne M. Loechle explores the cultural context of his pirate tales; and I analyze his images of American history. Then Margaretta S. Frederick, Mary F. Holahan, and Eric J. Segal place Pyle's work in broad cultural contexts, examining the influence exerted on Pyle by, respectively, the transatlantic print trade, the Swedenborgian religion, and the rhetoric of masculinity. Essays by Joyce K. Schiller and Virginia O'Hara explore Pyle's work as a teacher, and, rounding out the catalogue, Stephanie Haboush Plunkett and David M. Lubin consider his legacy in popular illustration and film.

Readers should note that images in this book have been taken from original paintings and drawings whenever possible; these are denoted in the captions as illustrations *for* specific works. Images taken directly from published books or magazines are designated as illustrations *from* these sources. Most dates assigned to Pyle's illustrations, in the text and in the captions, denote when the illustrations were first published.

PYLE'S BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS

Pyle proudly traced his heritage back to English settlers who received a land grant from William Penn, and the Pyle family did not stray far. His father was a leather dealer in Wilmington. A lackluster student, Pyle found himself interested in art.

Around 1869 his parents agreed to fund his training, sending him to study with a private instructor in Philadelphia. Had it been a few years earlier or later, he probably would have enrolled in the city's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, but the Academy was closing for renovations and would not reopen in permanent quarters until

1876. (Pyle would explore the Academy's offerings briefly in 1870 and 1871.⁴) Like many art teachers in the United States, Pyle's instructor, the Dutch painter Francis Van der Wielen, was academically trained, having studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. His European background and education provided him the pedigree to find work as an art teacher in Philadelphia, despite the fact that his deteriorating eyesight made it impossible for him to produce ambitious paintings. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, American art schools remained ill equipped compared to their European counterparts, and, like Pyle, many art students chose to study privately with painters trained in Europe. The most ambitious aspiring artists hoped to travel abroad to complete their education.

NEW YORK, 1876–79

Only in his youth and at the end of his life would Pyle venture long from his home. After his training in Philadelphia, Pyle spent a few years working in the family business and began to submit writings and illustrations to publishers. Meeting with some success, in 1876 he moved to New York to launch a career in the nation's center of publishing and art. Pyle quickly became acquainted with important figures in both arenas. Roswell Smith, the business manager of the publishing house Charles Scribner's Sons, befriended him. Richard Watson Gilder, an editor at *Scribner's Monthly*, recommended that Pyle attend the Art Students League in New York to improve his figure drawing. The League had been formed the previous year by ambitious young artists, including Gilder's wife, Helena DeKay Gilder, who were influenced by European methods and styles. Frustrated with the conservatism of the National Academy of Design, also in the city, the group founded the new school on a cooperative basis to better represent what they believed would be its students' interests. In particular, the League accommodated life study (that is, working from nude models), the centerpiece of French academic training and the area in which Pyle needed improvement.

The circle around the League encompassed up-and-coming artists and illustrators, including many recently



Figure 1. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *The Sailor Is Saved*. For R. C. V. Meyers, "Papa Hoorn's Tulip," *Scribner's Monthly*, January 1877. Ink on illustration board, 5½ × 10½ inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Willard S. Morse, 1923

returned from study in Europe, as well as the Gilders and Helena's brother Charles DeKay, art critic for the *New York Times*. The New York art world was still fairly small in the 1870s. Through the League and his publishing contacts, Pyle befriended some of the leaders of the younger generation of American painters, including Edwin Austin Abbey, William Merritt Chase, Walter Shirlaw, and Julian Alden Weir. Pyle remained in New York for less than three years, studying at the League, socializing with internationally trained artists, and getting to know many of the most influential illustrators and editors in the United States.

With Richard Watson Gilder on staff, *Scribner's* regularly published engravings of paintings by his sophisticated friends, as well as significant articles about art in the United States and Europe.⁵ Progressive New York-based artists, including Frederick Dielman, Wyatt Eaton, and Shirlaw, pro-

duced images for the magazine, which also showcased the work of leading illustrators like Charles S. Reinhart. Beginning to receive regular commissions from *Scribner's* and the rival *Harper's Monthly*, where Abbey was a featured illustrator, Pyle was in excellent company. Among his first assignments for *Scribner's*, Pyle's illustrations for the story "Papa Hoorn's Tulip" (1877, fig. 1) provide a good sense of his early approach and are a harbinger of his mature practices and interests. For this project Pyle adopted an elegant silhouette technique: solely through outline did he communicate the actions, emotions, and personalities of his characters. With delicate line drawing, he indicated diamond-paned windows and wainscoting to signal a Dutch seventeenth-century interior. The illustrations display Pyle's interest in historical detail and the strongly decorative sensibility that would characterize his children's books, from *Yankee Doodle*:

An Old Friend in a New Dress (1881, see fig. 74) to his Arthurian volumes (1903–10, fig. 13).

Unusual in Pyle's oeuvre, the silhouette style appears to have reflected then current fashion rather than the illustrator's personal vision. Pyle was likely inspired by the publication in spring 1876 of a series of silhouette drawings by Livingston Hopkins in *St. Nicholas*, another Scribner's periodical.⁶ Of Hopkins's drawings, the *New York Times* observed: "Nothing better than some of these has appeared even in *St. Nicholas*."⁷ In the illustrations for "Papa Hoorn's Tulip," the exaggerated gestures and physiognomies, as well as the backgrounds rendered through line drawing, resemble Hopkins's examples. New to the field and eager to please, Pyle adopted an appropriate model for his assignment: the clean lines and flat shapes of his drawings accommodated both the tastes and technologies of the publishing industry of 1877, and he would reprise the same manner for two assignments that appeared the following year.⁸

Early in his career Pyle experimented with different styles, trying to discern what his publishers wanted. In New York in the late 1870s Pyle spent time meeting with editors, art editors, and professional engravers to figure out how to best adjust his style for magazine reproduction. Throughout his career Pyle's letters reveal regular negotiations with authors and editors, and, as essays in this book confirm, he would continue to adapt his work to meet the changing technological and aesthetic challenges of illustration.

THE 1880s: BEAUTIFUL BOOKS FOR AMERICA'S YOUTH

In 1879 Pyle returned to Wilmington as a successful illustrator. During his time in New York he had formed strong contacts with publishers and art editors, and his work was in demand. He could thus work from afar on commissions. Saving money by living with his family and saving time by leaving the social whirl of an artist's life in New York, Pyle settled in to work on ambitious book projects. He began planning his own books almost immediately after his return to Wilmington. His first independent publications, an edition of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* (see figs. 37 and



Figure 2. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *Peterkin Makes Off with the Giant's Goose*. For Howard Pyle, "Peterkin and the Little Gray Hare." *Harper's Young People*, March 23, 1886. Published subsequently in *The Wonder Clock, or Four and Twenty Marvellous Tales, Being One for Each Hour of the Day*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887. Ink on bristol board, 9 3/4 × 6 1/4 inches. Delaware Art Museum, Museum Purchase, 1919

38) and *Yankee Doodle*, appeared in 1881 under the imprint of Dodd, Mead and Company. In published form these early attempts at color illustration feature garish hues. *The Lady of Shalott* was skewered by a reviewer in the *New York Times* for its poor color quality, and Pyle's illustrations for *Yankee Doodle* appear in bright, primary colors in comparison to the delicate watercolors on which they are based.⁹ Color-printing technology was far from perfect, and Pyle would struggle with its limitations throughout his career.

Although his first experiments with color printing did not satisfy the illustrator or his critics, Pyle's black-and-white books for children and youth were unqualified successes. Artistically and financially, the books he both wrote and illustrated—*Pepper and Salt, or Seasoning for Young Folk*

(1885); *The Wonder Clock, or Four and Twenty Marvellous Tales, Being One for Each Hour of the Day* (1887); *Otto of the Silver Hand* (1888); and *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown, in Nottinghamshire* (1883)—supported Pyle and his own growing family in the 1880s. Pyle had married Anne Poole in 1881, and their first child was born the next year. Within the decade two additional children would be born, and in the 1890s the Pyles had four more.

Delightful books for young children like Pyle's own, *Pepper and Salt* and *The Wonder Clock* combine gentle humor, imaginative composition, and delicate line drawings. Although he maintained some of the exaggerated physiques and expressions, as well as the decorative sensibility and fine delineation of his early work, in illustrations such as *Peterkin Makes Off with the Giant's Goose* (1886, fig. 2), Pyle moved well past the derivative style of his "Papa Hoorn's Tulip" images. *Pepper and Salt* and *The Wonder Clock* brought together illustrated tales and verses originally published in *Harper's Young People* in a manner typical of the late nineteenth century, when magazines like *Harper's Monthly* and *Scribner's* existed in part to launch serialized versions of books forthcoming from their publishing houses.

In his illustrations for *Otto of the Silver Hand*, set in medieval Germany, Pyle adopted a woodcut style influenced by German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. Similar in graphic appeal to *The Wonder Clock*, the images have a more static character, appropriate to their setting in and around a monastery. In *Poor Brother John Came Forward and Took the Boy's Hand* (1888, fig. 3), among others, the figures are often depicted either frontally or in precise profile and are arranged parallel to the picture plane, creating a stable and decorative composition.

In these books from the 1880s Pyle produced classic examples of children's illustration. His pictures tell a story convincingly, while demonstrating a strong sense of pattern and an obvious pleasure in drawing. Solidifying his appeal to the youth audience, in 1887 Pyle began to write and illustrate tales of pirate adventures, a subject that would engage him through the rest of his career. As Loechle and Lubin discuss, Pyle would render buccaneers and marauders with motion

and drama, and, eventually, with bright, saturated color, creating an enduring vision of pirate life. Throughout the 1880s Pyle refined his ability to set the proper tone—in his images and text—for his subject and audience. By the close of the decade Pyle had established himself as a leading author and artist of books for American youth, with fine editions released each fall to capture the holiday gift market.



Figure 3. Howard Pyle (1853–1911). *Poor Brother John Came Forward and Took the Boy's Hand*. For Howard Pyle, *Otto of the Silver Hand*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888. Ink on bristol board, 7 1/4 × 5 1/4 inches. Delaware Art Museum, Museum Purchase, 1915