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 Portobello 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. Instead, 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. 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 Legacies 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 Margareta 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 Swedishborgian religion, and the rhetoric of masculinity. Essays by Joyce K. Schiller and Virginia 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; those are denoted as 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 remained in New York for less than three years, studying at the Academy of Fine Arts. The League accommodated life students’ interests. In particular, the League hosted important art classes and exhibitions, allowing students to meet and get 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.7 Progressive New York–based artists, including Frederick Delmian, Wyatt Eaton, and Shirlaw, produced 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 silhouetted technique: solely through outline did he communicate the actions, emotions, and personalities of his characters. With delicate line drawing, he indicated diamond-pane 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.

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 directors, and professional engravers to figure out how best to 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 AMERICAN 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 directors, and his work was in demand. He could thus work from afar on commissions. Saving money 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 38) and St. Nicholas, appeared in 1885 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. 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 unequalled 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 Marvelous 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 (1888)—supported Pyle and his own growing family in the 1880s. Pyle had married Anne Poole in 1888, 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 frontal 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.