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The New School of Wood Engraving

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NUMBER ONE

SPRING 1990

- Intentional Omissions from the Published Civil War Diaries
of Admiral John A. Dahlgren
By Robert J. Schneller, Jr., Ph.D. Candidate in History, Duke University 3
- Stephen Crane's Father and the Holiness Movement
By Christopher Benfey, Assistant Professor of English, Mt. Holyoke College 27
- "I Want to Do This Job": More Margaret Bourke-White
Letters to Erskine Caldwell
By William L. Howard, Assistant Professor of English, Chicago State University 37
- The New School of Wood Engraving
By Edward A. Gokey, Advanced Graduate Student of Fine Arts, Syracuse University 53
- The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Four)
By Gwen G. Robinson, Editor, *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 85
- News of the Syracuse University Library and the
Library Associates 127

The New School of Wood Engraving

BY EDWARD A. GOKEY

In the spring of 1878, John LaFarge (1835–1910) appealed to the committee on American art at the Paris Exposition to include wood engravings among their selections. He presented his view in a series of open letters published in several New York newspapers. Here is an excerpt from his letter to the *New York World*:

I believe that, overweighted with the cares of business and the representation of great public interests, and unaccustomed and inexpert at deciding this more recondite and technical art, they did not realize the injury they inflicted upon the standing of a meritorious though less well-known class of artists, nor the harm they were doing to art and its culture in America. Your own experience and knowledge of life will have shown you how difficult it is in a country of commerce and manufacture to lift a trade into high art. It is difficult in any part of the world; to have it happen here is a thing of which we should be proud, nor should we, it seems to me, lose any chance of letting it be known. I hope that through such a public statement our American committee will take the matter into consideration, unwilling as they must be to pass over lightly an American success which has had the praise of every principal artist and critic I have met—and it has been my good fortune to know a good many both here and across the Atlantic.¹

Undoubtedly, readers of the *World* understood less about the “recondite and technical art” of wood engraving than did the committee members, yet all within reach of printed materials had surely

1. John LaFarge, “American Wood Engraving at Paris”, Letter to the Editor, *New York World*, 16 March 1878, p. 5.

come in contact with wood-engraved images.² They could be found most everywhere: in books, magazines, advertisements—in newspapers like the *World*. Often, such images were crude, and LaFarge was not referring to commonplace engraving churned out on a daily basis. That was the craft. Rather, he had in mind works created by a dozen or so gifted engravers (mostly reproductive engravers), that could be readily distinguished from their crafted counterparts by the artistic sensibilities they embraced.

At first, the committee did not move, claiming that their instructions were to choose oil paintings and watercolors.³ But a handful of engravings were eventually selected, including three works after LaFarge designs, so that the champion of the so-called minor arts would feel some satisfaction.⁴ However, a much more immediate response to the *World* letter, and one certainly less to LaFarge's liking, came from the painter George Inness (1825–1894), who wrote in an open letter to the *New York Evening Post*:

Wood-engravers, properly speaking, are not artists, nor do artists, as a rule, recognize them as such. The duty of an engraver always is to follow his copy, to imitate the form and spirit of the picture he is attempting to reproduce. Sometimes, to be sure, he engraves one of his own pictures. In that case if the picture is artistic, he is both an artist and an engraver . . . but his ability to engrave did not make him

2. According to the *Official Catalogue of the United States Exhibitors*, exhibition catalogue for the Paris Universal Exposition (London: Chiswick Press, 1878), 241, the committee in charge of selecting paintings, and presumably all works of art, included Parke Godwin, who was on the staff of the *New York World* from 1837 to 1881, and became editor-in-chief following the death of William Cullen Bryant in June 1878; J. Taylor Johnston, railroad executive and first president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and H. G. Marquand, an organizer, benefactor, and later president of the Metropolitan Museum. These men, along with E. D. Morgan, J. W. Pinchot, N. M. Beckwith, Robert G. Dun, John H. Sherwood, and Charles S. Smith, worked from New York, while the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, D. Maitland Armstrong, and C. E. Detmold served on the international committee in Paris. I am grateful to James Yarnall for bringing this catalogue to my attention.

3. "Wood Engravings as Works of Art", *Nation* 26 (March 1878): 218.

4. "World's Fair of 1878", exhibition catalogue reproduced in *Modern Art in Paris*, selected and organized by Theodore Reff (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), 206.

an artist. The engraver is little if not an imitator and a plodder; and nobody feels this more keenly than himself.⁵

Within a few days, LaFarge strengthened his position in another letter, this time stressing the creative powers of the engraver. “To translate faithfully the work of another artist into a different art”, LaFarge stated, “requires a high degree of many of the qualities that are rarest in art, and that are identically the same through which the artist who paints or carves, copies and imitates nature”.⁶ Inness rebutted, adjusting his viewpoint to include the engraver among the highest rank of artists, but only if the engraver created original work, exercised those elements of pictorial construction (such as perspective) that are demanded of original work, and worked with color, the last of which, Inness said, is “the most difficult thing in the world”.⁷ This statement did little in the way of reconciling the two men, for the engravers whom LaFarge admired did not, for the most part, meet Inness’s requirements.

Neither LaFarge nor Inness persuaded the other to renounce his stance. The dipolar nature of the argument disallowed any chance of that. Perhaps the only indisputable fact that emerges from the LaFarge-Inness letters is that the state of wood engraving in America was shifting. LaFarge recognized it, critics wrote about it—even Inness acknowledged it, although he did not believe the changes would amount to anything:

Our best wood-engravers—Mr. Linton, Mr. Henry Marsh and Mr. Cole, for example—try hard to be something more than mere copyists, and the occasional slight successes which they achieve in this direction have for us a mournful and tender interest. Their trade has clipped the wings of their spirits, and when they would soar they can only flutter.⁸

5. George Inness, “Artists and Engravers”, Letter to the Editor, *New York Evening Post*, 16 March 1878, editorial page.

6. LaFarge, “A Plea for the Engravers”, Letter to the Editor, *New York Evening Post*, 20 March 1878, p. 3.

7. Inness, “A Plea for the Painters”, Letter to the Editor, *New York Evening Post*, 21 March 1878, p. 2.

8. Inness, “Artists and Engravers”, editorial page.

To understand the nature of the change and the background of the LaFarge-Inness dispute, we need to look to the practice of wood engraving in the years just previous. Wood engraving is not, as its name seems to imply, an intaglio process. Rather, like wood cutting, it is a relief process—the areas of the wood block left uncut will take ink and print, while the areas cut away will not. It differs from wood cutting, however, in the tools and materials used. As the process was practised during the nineteenth century, the wood cutter primarily relied on a knife; the wood engraver commonly used a graver (or burin), a metal-shanked instrument with either a square or lozenge-shaped tip. To produce lines of even widths, instruments with slightly flattened tips, called tint tools, were used (the width of lines made by a graver varied according to the amount of pressure exerted). Scoopers, with U-shaped tips, and chisels were helpful when clearing away large areas from the block.⁹

Box was the preferred wood for engraving, owing to its hardness, close grain, and toxicity to woodworms. The slenderness of box boles, however, presented certain limitations. Engravers worked on the end grain, rather than the plank side like wood cutters, and the rounds (or slices) of box, which were uniformly seven-eighths of an inch in height, never exceeded one foot across.¹⁰ The relatively soft heart had to be avoided, as did knots, and cracks that developed during seasoning. After the rounds were dry, they were cut into small squared sections, usually no more than a few inches in either dimension.

To provide enough surface for illustration, a composite wood block often had to be made from the small individual blocks. At first, the blocks were glued together, with long bolts running right through, but the glue tended to melt in the steam presses.¹¹ A tongue-and-groove method followed, but the problem was not sufficiently solved

9. Eric De Maré, *The Victorian Woodblock Illustrators* (New York: Sandstone Press, 1981), 44. All of the tools were held in essentially the same manner. One cupped the rounded wooden handle in the palm and guided the shank by pressing its sides with the fingers and thumb. Cutting proceeded by rotating the block towards the point of the tool. Some engravers rested the block on a small leather pad or sandbag and looked through a magnifying glass, either affixed to a stand or attached to a visor. Sometimes, glass globes were filled with blue water and placed near an adjustable gas or oil lamp to direct light onto the block so that work could continue well into the night (De Maré, 44).

10. Experiments were made cutting boles on the skew, but the change in grain proved disadvantageous (De Maré, 43).

11. De Maré, *Victorian*, 43.

until the late 1850s, when a system of recessed short nuts and bolts was introduced, locking each block to its neighbor.¹² This invention also meant that the individual blocks could be handed out to various assistants, a practice described by one of the most important American wood engravers, Timothy Cole (1852–1931), in his *Considerations on Engraving* (1921):

Engraving was properly a trade; some apprentices succeeded as sky and foliage cutters (they were called pruners); others as coat or drapery cutters (they were the tailors); the more advanced did flesh cutting (they were styled the butchers). I myself succeeded in cutting machinery and the sides of houses. I was a mechanic.

In those days the popular illustrated weeklies brought out large page engravings and sometimes double-page illustrations. On these large blocks the subject to be engraved was drawn by a draughtsman in India-ink washes reinforced by lead-pencil hatching. The blocks, being made in sections bolted together, were unbolted when the drawing was completed, and the parts divided among several engravers, who, sometimes, when a rush was on, would work all night and have their several parts finished by the morning. The parts were then rebolted together and a master engraver finished the joining of the several parts, uniting the work in one whole. There was no art in it, the engraver was but an artisan. A hardness characterized the work. Such a quality as the softness of painting was never met with in the best work of the masters of that time.¹³

The illustrated magazines' preference for wood engravings over metal engravings, etchings, or lithographs was dictated by time and expense. Because wood blocks could be cut type high, block and type could easily lock up and print form together. Images created by in-

12. Ibid. This invention is credited to Charles Wells, a cabinet maker and later an importer of boxwood. It should be noted that this system was not completely successful. When reassembling the blocks, it was particularly difficult to keep the joints perfectly tight, and that is why one often finds thin white lines marking the borders of each block in some printed wood engravings created in this manner.

13. Timothy Cole, *Considerations on Engraving* (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1921), 11.

taglio or planographic processes required different presses than those used for printing letterpress, so that in order to have a non-relief image appear on the same page as large amounts of text (limited amounts of text, of course, could be drawn in reverse on the metal plate or stone), either the paper had to go through two presses, or the image had to be sewn or glued into place.

Not all engraving was done in the manner that Cole described. Indeed, certain technical advances had made it possible for wood engraving to compare favorably with all other printmaking processes. With large press runs, stereotypes and electrotypes took the place of original engravings, eliminating the risk of having wood blocks crack or break during printing.¹⁴ Printing presses changed too. The once preferred platen press gave way to the stronger, faster cylinder press, which could print between six hundred and one thousand impressions per hour.¹⁵ Consistent first-rate work, however, required the patience and know-how of a gifted master printer. One of the most talented of these was Theodore Low DeVinne, printer for *Scribner's Monthly* (founded in 1870), later *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. A very deliberate man, who learned French, German, Italian, and Latin to master the literature of his field, DeVinne often spent hours, and sometimes days, carefully cutting and pasting small pieces of paper, called overlays, and then attaching them precisely to the surface of the cylinder. By this means he controlled the pressure exerted on every part of an electrotype.¹⁶ In an article titled "The Growth of Wood-Cut Printing" (1880), DeVinne explains the process:

14. Stereotypes, which were in use by the 1830s, were made by taking a mold of the engraving with plaster of Paris, and then casting its duplicate with type metal. Electrotypes, introduced around 1850, provided a process better suited for taking many thousands of impressions, as it substituted a veneer of copper, which in turn was faced with steel, for the comparatively soft type-metal face of the stereotype. Electrotypes were, therefore, more durable than stereotypes, and they were also cheaper, quicker, and more accurate. (For a brief description of the steel facing process as it applied to stereotype and electrotype plates curved to fit on the cylinder, see Stephen D. Tucker, "History of R. Hoe & Company, 1834–1885", edited with an introduction by Rollo G. Silver, *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 82 [1972]: 416.)

15. Theodore Low DeVinne, "The Printing of Wood-Engravings", *The Print Collector's Quarterly* 1 (July 1911): 375.

16. Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929), 109.

The object sought in overlaying is to do mechanically what the engraver does intelligently in proving, and to do it by a similar method—by graduating or making uneven the impression on different parts of the cut. The most skillful pressmen try to do their work with the least overlays. Too many defeat the purpose. If more than six thicknesses of paper are used, the overlay so made will increase the circumference of the cylinder so much that it will not strike exactly in the right place on the cut at the point of the impression. Nor is the overlay of any value if the machine be shakly or inaccurate in movement. Bed and cylinder must travel together, at any rate of speed, and under other difficult conditions, so exactly that every line in the overlay shall fairly meet its corresponding line in the electrotype plate.¹⁷

In addition to the use of overlays, which moved towards tonal printing, DeVinne adopted a method of printing with dry, smooth paper against a hard, inelastic surface.¹⁸ The former method of printing on damp paper was tricky; too often presswork was damaged when the paper held the wrong amount of moisture. Smooth paper, required for clean impressions, had already been in use. DeVinne, however, employed a cold rolling, or calendering, process, which brought effective results at a lesser cost than the European method of hot pressing.¹⁹ And for the pressing surface, DeVinne replaced the soft woolen blanket and India rubber cloth (carryovers from days when the pressed and the pressing surfaces could not be kept in true parallel) with mill-glazed pressboard, a thin, tough card that was as smooth as glass and harder than wood. After this method proved successful, harder substances, such as brass and iron, were tried with even better results.²⁰ These innovations contributed significantly to the quality of *Scribner's* pictures, and also to the success of the magazine. Curiously, during the magazine's prepublication stage, cofounder and editor Dr. Josiah Gilbert Holland had felt indifferently

17. DeVinne, "The Growth of Wood-Cut Printing. II: The Modern Method by Machines", *Scribner's Monthly* 20 (May 1880): 42.

18. *Ibid.*, 38, 39.

19. *Ibid.*, 38. The European process involved putting the sheets through heated plates. The American process, which DeVinne adopted, involved putting the sheets between iron cylinders and hardened paper pulp.

20. *Ibid.*, 39.

towards illustrations, and had put much greater emphasis on the high quality of the magazine's cover, type, and paper.²¹ But before the printing of the first issue, Holland adjusted his view. When advertisements announced *Scribner's*, they promised that the magazine would be "profusely illustrated".²²

During its first five years, *Scribner's* printed more than 2700 engravings at a cost of nearly \$100,000.²³ The art director at that time, and for some forty years afterward, was Alexander W. Drake, who, along with DeVinne and Holland, deserves much credit for *Scribner's* handsome appearance. Drake demanded the highest standards from all who worked for him, a fact well illustrated by his dismissal of three printing firms before finally settling with DeVinne in 1876.²⁴

Of at least equal significance, Drake taught his engravers the technique of engraving from photographs on sensitized wood.²⁵ Before 1870, the common practice had been to have an artist either draw or transfer the original image onto the block, which the engraver would then cut. The photographic process allowed the artist to work in any medium and in any size, since the photograph of the work could be reduced; and the artist did not need to work in reverse, as had been the case, for the photograph could easily be reversed on the block. Also, the original was preserved, and could be kept close by, if desired, to serve as a guide.

Photography on wood marked an important stage in the history of wood engraving. Perhaps more than anything else, it gave rise to a

21. Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner's Monthly, and Century Magazine, 1870-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 16.

22. Advertisement for *Scribner's* on back cover of *The Book Buyer*, o.s. 3, as cited in John, *Best Years*, 16. The main rivals of *Scribner's*, among them *Harper's Monthly* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, already controlled the market for writing of high quality, and Holland realized that it would take some time before he could match his competitors in that area. No doubt, that is why he insisted on producing a visually striking magazine. But in a genre that gained much of its great popularity with standbys like the serial novel, Holland must have believed that appearance counted just so much. He relied more heavily on his own reputation as a popular author (loyal readers of his works knew him by the pseudonym "Timothy Titcomb") than he did on impressive looks for the magazine's initial appeal (John, 16).

23. *Index to Scribner's Monthly, Volumes I to X* (New York, 1876), preface, as cited in John, 77.

24. John, *Best Years*, 80.

25. *Ibid.*, 77.

dramatically new conception of the engraver's purpose. No longer subject to the strictures of line and wash drawings (however loose those strictures may have been), one group of engravers began exploring the hitherto untouched world of surface texture. Their primary goal was fidelity to the original, often at the expense of the linear quality prevalent in traditional wood engraved images. Of course, exact replication was impossible, but they did achieve close approximations, and they sought acknowledgment as creative artists in doing so, claiming much inventiveness was called upon in their methods. Collectively, these engravers were labeled the New School, and one of the first realizations of their style can be seen in Cole's engraving of James Edward Kelly's *The Gillie-Boy* (Scribner's, August 1877; fig. 1).²⁶ Everything in this work is subordinate to Cole's attempt to capture the tactile qualities of paint. The sky in the background, depicted with alternating areas of parallel lines and cross-hatching, streaking and swirling in imitation of cloud movement, serves the primary purpose of feigning brushwork. The treatment of the boy's left hand and parts of his legs, which seems awkward at first, is meant to express a fluid surface of impasto. In looking at this work, one is forced to set aside all preconceptions of how a wood engraving should look—that is, if one is to call the work a success.

Some did not. The most vocal opponent of the New School was the British expatriate engraver and author William James Linton (1812–1897). A passionate man by nature, Linton expressed his views on wood engraving with the same intensity that characterizes his many writings on political and social topics, most notably those from *The English Republic*, a periodical he edited from 1851 to 1855.

Before coming to America at the end of 1866, Linton established himself as England's preeminent engraver on wood. Upon his arrival, he taught intermittently at William Rimmer's School of Design for Women (alternatively known as the Ladies' School of Design), at the Cooper Union in New York, and soon thereafter began working

26. George Howes Whittle, "Wood Engraving in America", *The American Magazine of Art* 10 (November 1918): 10. Whittle states that one of the earliest examples of the photographic transfer is an engraving by John G. Smithwick after a work by E. A. Abbey, illustrated on p. 313 of the January 1876 *Scribner's. Drumming out a Tory*, also by Smithwick, after a work by C. S. Reinhart (*Harper's Weekly*, 3 February 1877), had been designated, Whittle adds, by Sylvester Rosa Koehler as the first distinctive New School engraving.

as “artistic director” for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*.²⁷ In 1868, he was nominated by the sculptor Rimmer and Peter Cooper, founder of the Cooper Union, for membership in the Century Club, a congenial association of artists and writers.²⁸ All the while, Linton received many commissions and continued to write whenever the spirit moved him. His first article of importance to the subject at hand, “The Engraver: His Function and Status”, published by *Scribner’s* in June 1878, was a reaction to the aforementioned Inness letters. It introduced Linton to American readers as a persuasive writer who thought seriously about his vocation:

What has this “copyist” to do? Does his master, Raffaele, do all the designing for him? He gives a “Madonna,” or his “Planets,” to be copied, only copied, by a Marc-Antonio or a Dorigny. This mere copying clerk has to draw an outline which (be pleased to observe this though the remark be new) is not in the picture; he has to invent, to design, the lines, the regulated strength and order of which shall not only most faithfully, but also most beautifully round the forms and place at proper distance, and in perspective, the hollows of face and figure. . . .

He who works in Art, artfully, artistically, is an Artist, whatever his subject, whatever his material, whatever his tools. The relative grandeur and importance of this or that branch of Art is altogether beside the question.²⁹

One year later, Linton turned his attention to the New School engravers. In his “Art in Engraving on Wood” (*Atlantic Monthly*, June 1879), he strongly denounced their aims and methods:

27. F. B. Smith, *Radical Artisan: William James Linton 1817–97* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 160. In the summer of 1867 Linton returned to England. While abroad, Linton visited that year’s Paris Exposition, which led him to conclude, after viewing the wood engravings on display, that the medium “was dead in Europe” (*Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 9 February 1867, pp. 322 and 325, as cited in Smith, 160, 161).

28. Smith, *Radical Artisan*, 165.

29. William James Linton, “The Engraver: His Function and Status”, *Scribner’s* 16 (June 1878): 239.

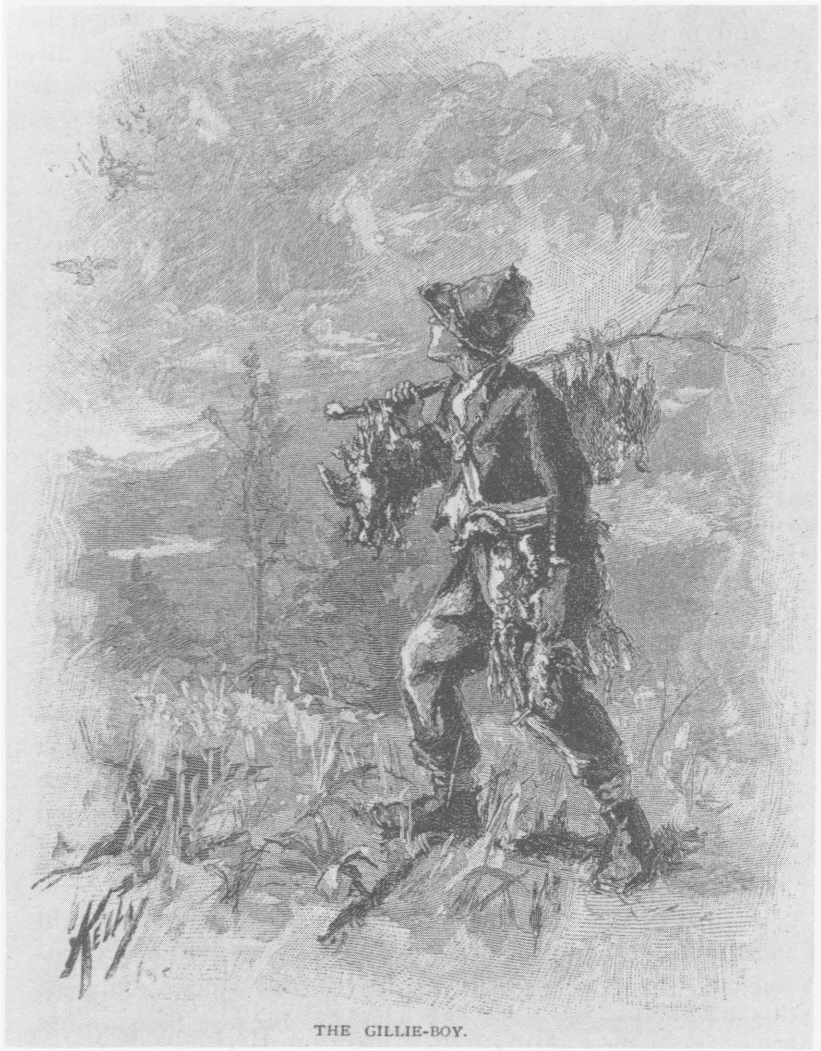


Fig. 1. Timothy Cole, *The Gillie-Boy*. After James Edward Kelly. Scribner's, August 1877.

My attention to the new phenomenon was first attracted by a portrait, one of a series, engraved by Mr. Cole after a picture or from a drawing by Mr. Wyatt Eaton [fig. 2]. It is always a pleasure to see conscientious and careful work. Yet

even at the first glance I could not but ask the exhibitor, Why waste so much of pains on the unimportant parts of the engraving? Why give the same value to the background, which is nothing, a formless void without intention, as to the features? Why no difference between the texture of the coat and the texture of the cheek? At first it looked like the earnest but ill-considered performance of a very young man, ambitious, very painstaking, timid as a young man might be under the eyes of the master painter, afraid to be careless even of the minutest portions of the great work entrusted to him, and which he was resolved to render faithfully, however ineffectively. I praised—could not help praising—the endeavor, and the young endeavorer albeit ill advised or mistaking. But looking at the series,—there are the same faults, not mere shortcomings but shameful faults, throughout: the faces badly modeled (I may be blaming the engraver when I should blame the painter, but I speak also of such modeling as even good direction of lines will give); the heads looking as if carved out of wood, or patted into shape in butter (perhaps for the Philadelphia Exhibition); no drawing fairly made out, but all indistinct, hidden under a minuteness of weakest line that muddies everything; coats and neckties (of the same material, of course) and eyes and hair and background of one uniform texture; an unmeaning scribble in the background defined most carefully, while markings on the brows (of Emerson or Longfellow) were indefinite and slurred,—all thought of the ambitious, timid, careful student was lost in disgust at the manifest conceit of such pretentious impotence, in sorrow for the false direction in which such pains had been bestowed. I speak severely, because these things have been lauded to the skies as fine art, when indeed they are only marvels of microscopic mechanism; not works of art at all, but bad, altogether bad, in all that an artist cares or ought to care for.³⁰

Linton particularly disdained the use of photography on wood. Because it encouraged pure imitation, he believed that photography hindered the artistic input of the engraver. He preferred instead the

30. Linton, "Art in Engraving on Wood", *Atlantic Monthly* 43 (June 1879): 708.

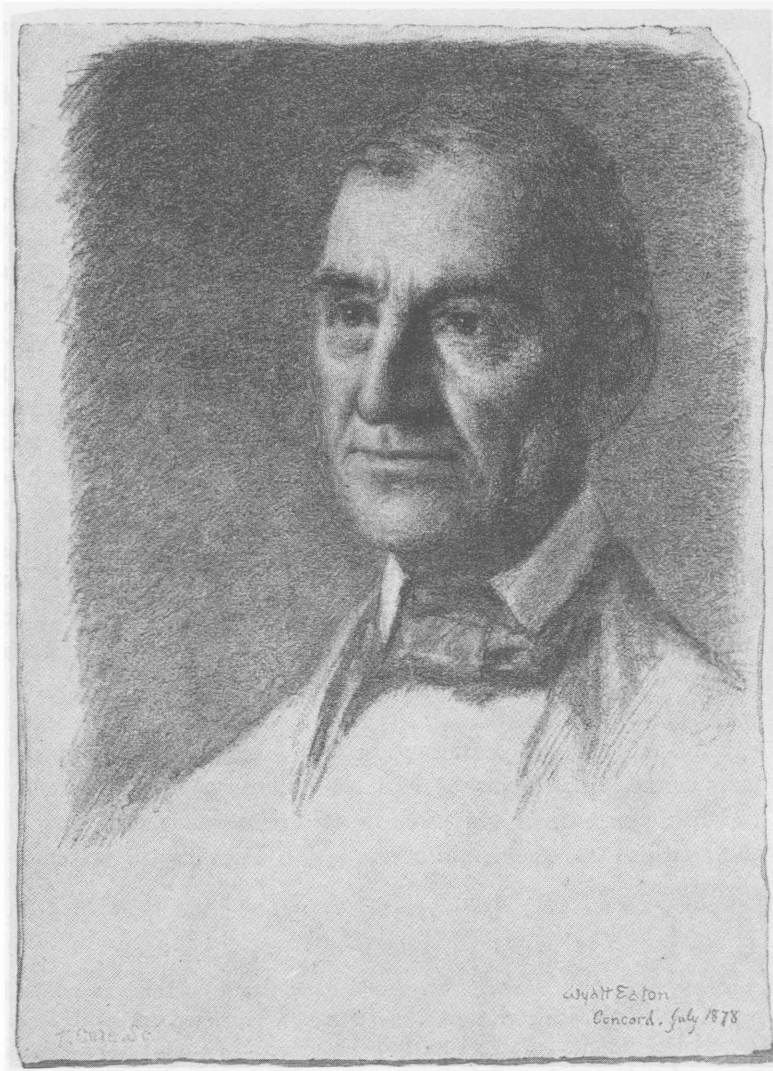


Fig. 2. Timothy Cole, *Emerson*. After Wyatt Eaton. *Scribner's*, February 1879.

traditional method of working from line and wash drawings on the block, which allowed, indeed necessitated, the engraving of lines not drawn beforehand by the artist of the original.³¹ When working from

31. Engraving from drawings on the block was sometimes problematic. Many artists relied too heavily on suggestive washes, leaving large areas for the engraver to

drawings, Linton said, the engraver “is an artist in exactly the same degree in which the translator of poetry is a poet”.³²

Linton frequently worked in the white-line style of engraving (fig. 3), that is, he conceived many of his images in terms of the areas cut away by the graver. Almost always, these areas were accompanied by a certain amount of facsimile work (the stylistic counterpart of white-line engraving, which imitates copperplate engraving). An example of the two styles combined can be seen in Linton’s engraving after a W. J. Hennessy illustration to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Lady Geraldine’s Courtship* (1870; fig. 4). Here, the crossed white lines that model the woman’s face are surrounded by foliage cut, for the most part, in the facsimile manner. Linton favored white-line work, but above all he believed that “every line of an engraving ought to have a meaning, should be cut in the plate or in the block *with design*”.³³ Often, as in portions of the sky in Cole’s *Gillie-Boy* and in the whole upper left-hand section of Frederick Juengling’s (1846–1889) *Engineer Crossing the Chasm over the Rimac* (fig. 5; after Kelly, and from the same issue of *Scribner’s* as the Cole), New School engravers utilized white-line cross-hatching, but without, according to Linton, a proper sense of design, or purpose:

Cross-white-lined backgrounds, and wooden or cadaverous faces worked in cross-stitch, skies, mountains, walls, and water, in white worsted, we are asked to admire as *fine engraving*. In the words of our greatest engraver [John Thompson], *It is not engraving at all.*

work up with something definite. Winslow Homer was a notable exception. He understood the limits facing engravers, and generally restricted washes to areas of shadow, keeping outlines firm. This method left little to the engraver’s imagination, which was what Homer intended, because it gave him control over the way the image would look in print.

32. Linton, “Art in Engraving”, 713. Linton also believed that working from drawings was, in essence, more truthful than working from photographs, which, he believed, were never true and often put the same emphasis on the unessentials as on the essentials (Linton, *The History of Wood-Engraving in America* [Boston: Estes and Lauriar, 1882, 71], as cited in *American Wood Engraving: A Victorian History* [Watkins Glen, N.Y.: Published for the Athenaeum Library of Nineteenth Century America by the American Life Foundation & Study Institute, 1976], 71).

33. Linton, “Art in Engraving”, 713.



Fig. 3. William James Linton, Illustration to *The Flood of Years* (1878),
by William Cullen Bryant.



Fig. 4. William James Linton, Illustration to *Lady Geraldine's Courtship* (1870), by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. After W. J. Hennessy.

The purpose of engraving is expression, which necessitates some attention to differences. . . .

Surely I am not objecting to the employment of cross-white-line. I myself have used it more than any other engraver of past times; may claim indeed to have brought it into vogue,

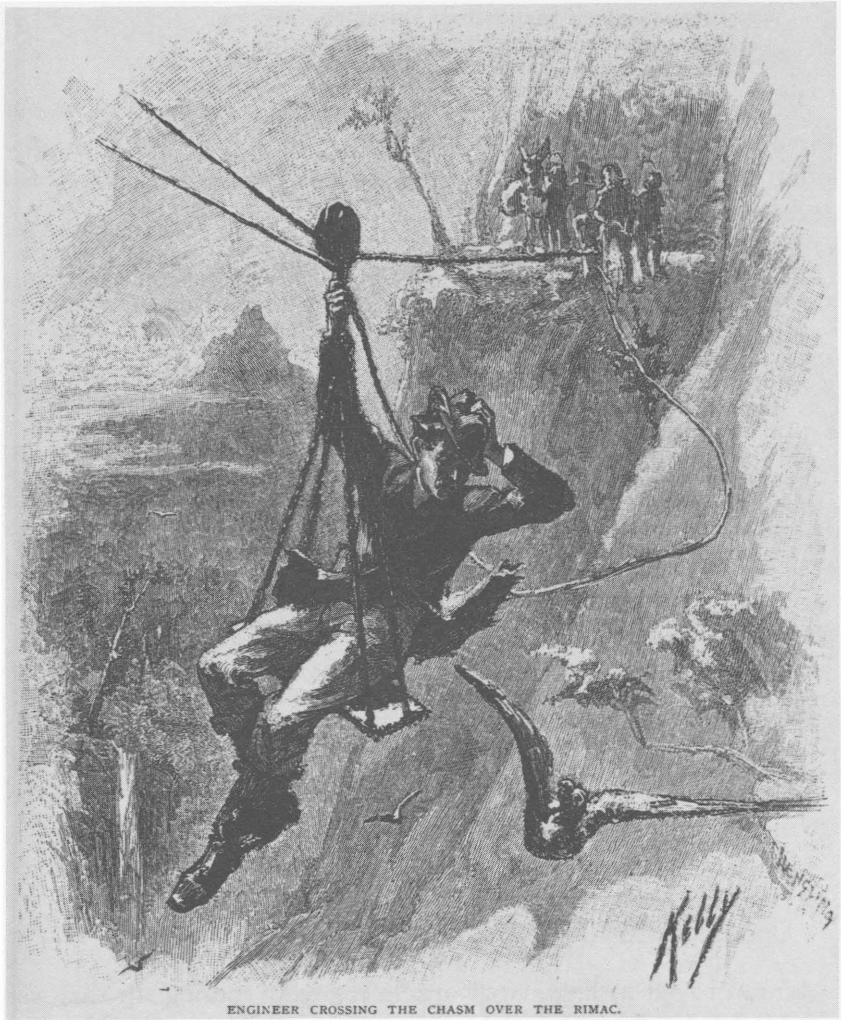


Fig. 5. Frederick Juengling, *Engineer Crossing the Chasm over the Rimac*. After James Edward Kelly. *Scribner's*, August 1877.

though I have never been able to equal the work of Charlton Nesbitt, which first taught me of what value it might be made. It is indeed of especial value in flesh, the texture and roundness of which can hardly be rendered on wood with sufficient

sweetness in cross black lines, after the manner of copper or steel.³⁴

To round out his list, Linton objects to excessive fineness, exemplified by short white lines and dots (achieved by pricking or stippling the block), which, along with unnecessary cross-hatching, disregards

the bold carelessness characteristic of the painting as to give you in niggling minuteness every brush and trowel mark, in order that, or so that, you may forget the real worth of the picture, despite the painter's slovenliness and absolute disdain or dislike of finish, in your admiration of the engraver's most delicate and neatest handling[.]³⁵

Linton is especially harsh when discussing the multiple graver, what he calls "the six-toothed annihilator of meaning".³⁶ This device, of which Juengling was probably the sole user from the New School (and he seems to have abandoned it shortly after engraving the *Engineer*),³⁷ is condemned for the lack of creativity it invited:

After a few operations on the face of the block in various directions (perpendicular is generally preferred, but you can have it all ways), you may call the part so improved whatever pleases you—a rice field, or a torrent, or a street pavement. It is as much like one as another. It can be dust or chickens, a snow storm or prairie grass, or distant mountains; the only requisite is that after due examination you shall be uncertain which.³⁸

Linton's "Art in Engraving" article created a rousing stir that was quickly labeled "the New School controversy". Engravers and critics alike suddenly felt compelled to put their own thoughts on the issues

34. Linton, "Art in Engraving", 710.

35. *Ibid.*, 711.

36. *Ibid.*, 709.

37. Linton, *Some Practical Hints on Wood-Engraving for the Instruction of Reviewers and the Public* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1879), 12; and Timothy Cole from George William Sheldon, "A Symposium of Wood-Engravers", *Harper's Monthly* 60 (February 1880): 446.

38. Linton, "Art in Engraving", 709, 710.

in print, with the result that dozens of letters and articles were published (many of which repeat the earlier comments of others). One can get a taste of the sometimes bitter debate by browsing through the editorial pages of many of the magazines of the period. Of them all, the magazines that employed New School engravers, like *Scribner's*, defended Cole and his colleagues the most forcefully:

We believe it is pretty well understood among publishers that Mr. Linton's work is not what it used to be. . . . We do not know of an artist who would not choose to have Cole cut his blocks rather than Linton, yet Cole is the man whom Linton has "sat down on," if we may use the slang of the time. It is the conservative old man, who has arrived at the end of his development, and sits petulantly enshrined within his conventional methods, who assumes to be god and arbiter of wood-engraving, passing judgement upon a young genius, all alive with the spirit of discovery and progress.³⁹

"A Symposium of Wood-Engravers" (*Harper's Monthly*, February 1880) provides an important source for New School reaction to the "Art in Engraving" article. In this forum, Cole expresses his personal indebtedness to Linton and agrees that "there is no propriety in picking, stippling, and cross-lining where there is no sense in it". Cole adds:

But when engraving the Wyatt Eaton portrait of Emerson, to which objection has been made by Mr. Linton, I exactly reproduced the crayon effects by the use of mechanical means—simply by picking with the "square" tool. Mr. Linton notes a deficiency of texture; the nose, he says, is the same as the background in quality. But he forgets that he often indulges in the same fault himself. The fault, if it was a fault, could have been avoided easily enough; but then I should have lost the crayon effect which I intended to keep. The background is in pure line, very slight and varied, and extremely laborious.⁴⁰

39. "Engraving on Wood", *Scribner's* 18 (July 1879): 456.

40. Cole from Sheldon's "Symposium", 445.

Juengling, who also clung to exact reproduction as the paramount objective of the engraver, says in the "Symposium":

The method of the old school is to adapt the original to the means; the method of the new school is to adapt the means to the original.⁴¹

A bit further on, Juengling outlines the advantages of the New School over the Old School as follows:

First, latitude of reproduction. Second, absence of exclusive method, of conventionalism, of formalism; no set way for producing an effect. For each work in hand special ideas are originated, special means are invented. Third, the use of photography on wood, which inaugurated the existence of the new school, and the advantages of which I have just mentioned. Fourth, faithfulness of reproduction, not only to the beauties, but down to the manner and defects, of the original. Mr. Linton thinks that such an aim is an unworthy one. The answer is that it is no more unworthy than for Wilhelmj, when playing a composition of Mozart's, to stick to it, and give it as it is. The able executant of the composition of another is not necessarily a smaller artist in his own sphere.⁴²

In Europe, admiration for the New School was almost unanimous. Juengling and William B. Closson (1848–1926), later a painter of some note, were the first Americans to have their engravings exhibited at the Paris Salon; in 1881, Juengling received *mention honorable* for *The Professor* (fig. 6; after a portrait by Frank Duveneck).⁴³ In 1882, Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer informed readers of the *Century*:

41. Frederick Juengling from Sheldon's "Symposium", 448.

42. *Ibid.*, 449.

43. James Watrous, *American Printmaking: A Century of American Printmaking 1880–1980* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 21.

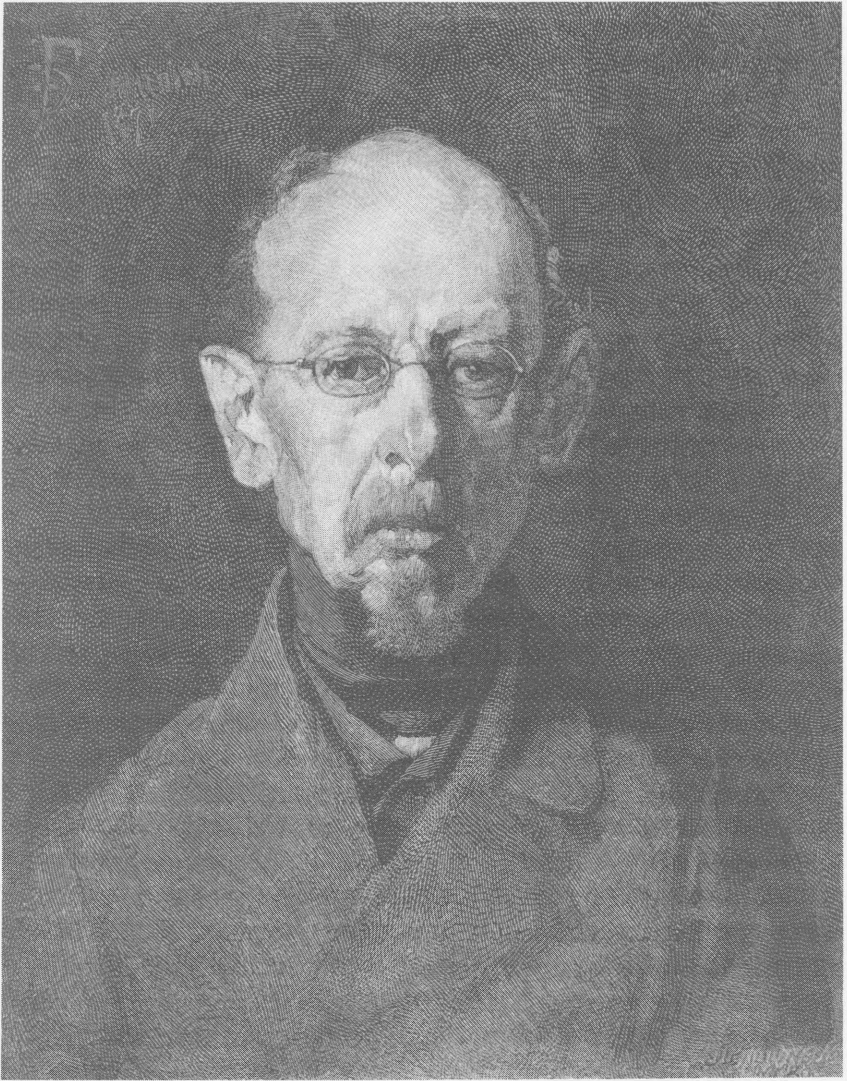


Fig. 6. Frederick Juengling, *The Professor*. After Frank Duveneck.
American Art Review, vol. 2, 1881.

Every reader knows, most probably, that, for the past two or three years, a rather sharp controversy has been going on with reference to the "new school" of American wood-engraving. Every reader ought to know, in addition, that whatever strictures may have been passed upon it at home, it has been almost universally praised abroad. In England as in France critics have been lavish of their commendation. When we find, for example, "L'Art" reprinting a series of cuts from the "Scribner Portfolio," and even the "Saturday Review" ranking American work above all that is done in other countries, we cannot be blamed for feeling a responsive glow of self-approval.⁴⁴

In the same report, van Rensselaer quotes the critic Philip Gilbert Hamerton from his *The Graphic Arts* (1882):

The development of delicate and versatile wood-engraving in America is due to the managers of *Scribner's Magazine*, who worked resolutely with this definite end in view, and gradually reached perfection by paying for many cuts which were never published, and by forming a school of wood-engravers animated by the same spirit. Now, whatever may be the differences of opinion about the desirableness of this imitative art, there can be no question that the Americans have far surpassed all other nations in delicacy of execution. The manual skill displayed in their wood-cuts is a continual marvel, and it is accompanied by so much intelligence—I mean by so much critical understanding of different graphic arts—that a portfolio of their best woodcuts is most interesting. Not only do they understand engraving thoroughly, but they are the best printers in the world, and they give an amount of care and thought to their printing which would be considered uncommercial elsewhere.

The two superiorities in American wood-engraving are in tone and texture—two qualities very popular in modern times in all the graphic arts which can attain them.⁴⁵

44. Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer, "Wood-Engraving and the Century Prizes", *Century Magazine* 24 (June 1882): 230.

45. *Ibid.*

Unquestionably, *Scribner's* exerted considerable influence on the state of American wood engraving after 1870. Drake and DeVinne, as already noted, contributed their expertise in technical matters, while Richard Watson Gilder, who had assumed most of Holland's editorial responsibilities around 1875, guided the magazine (renamed the *Century* in 1881) in its overall artistic sensibilities. Also, by employing America's best engravers, the magazine attracted works by some of America's most gifted painters, including Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, and William Merritt Chase, all presumably confident that their works would not suffer in reproduction.⁴⁶

Scribner's was not, however, the only publication that took a step up in pictorial quality. In fact, there began, in the 1870s, a healthy competition among several of the leading illustrated magazines, most notably with *Harper's*, under the very capable direction of their art editor Charles Parsons. *Scribner's* may be credited with initiating the competition, but not with all of the good that came of it.

As the reputation of the New School grew, the controversy did not die; rather, it was rekindled with new fuel, which came in one instance in the form of a small volume by Linton wryly titled *Some Practical Hints on Wood Engraving for the Instruction of Reviewers and the Public* (1879). For the most part, this book serves as a vehicle for Linton's reassertion of his earlier remarks in "Art in Engraving", but now in a more humorous, if still sharp, tone. In *Hints*, Linton addresses facsimile and white-line engraving, mechanism and art, and photography on wood in a clearer fashion than he had previously; and he includes many perceptive comments that give insight into the actual application of technical procedures, which, he believed, escaped his critics. For example, Linton explains how photographic reduction led to inaccurate, muddied images on the block, a claim soon to be substantiated in a letter to Sylvester Rosa Koehler, editor of the short-lived *American Art Review*, from Cole, who, while proclaiming his strong preference for photography on wood, also says that he liked Koehler's work especially "because it is large".⁴⁷

46. John, *Best Years*, 79.

47. Timothy Cole, Letter to Sylvester Rosa Koehler, 12 October 1880, Sylvester Rosa Koehler Letters, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University. Also, in Sheldon's "Symposium", p. 446, Cole states: "The secret of so many recent failures of engravers to do justice to the artist lies in the fact that artists make their

Reaction to *Hints* was mild compared to the furor started by “Art in Engraving”. Koehler, who was later responsible for a display of American wood engravings (1882), felt that Linton was perfectly justified in staging a second attack, especially since he targeted much of his vituperation on anonymous reviewing (and there were several harsh unsigned letters that condemned “Art in Engraving”, including the *Scribner’s* editorial already cited), which Koehler saw as “a fruitful source of recklessness, and a reckless teacher is by no means desirable”.⁴⁸ He also said, in an editorial from the *American Art Review*:

It is a pity that Mr. Linton’s valuable and timely *Hints* should be burdened with so much personal matter, and those who esteem him most highly will be most grieved thereat. That he has had ample provocation, there is no room to doubt. . . . Nevertheless, one cannot help thinking that a little less wrath would have been better.⁴⁹

More words on the controversial issues were published when Linton finished his *History of Wood-Engraving in America* (1880), which first appeared as a series of eight articles in the *American Art Review*. The same text, with an additional chapter, came out in book form in 1882. The first three chapters retrace the development of the medium in America; chapter 4 focuses on the rise of illustrated magazines; and chapters 5 through 8 are largely devoted to critical commentary, with Cole, Juengling, and Gustav Kruell receiving the most attention. The final chapter in the book sums up Linton’s general attitude towards the New School.

As he had done in his earlier writings, Linton carefully analyzes the details of many specific works, and, it should be noted, he does not always write hostilely. Sometimes he offers sincere praise, as when he discusses Cole’s engraving of Polish actress Helena Modjeska (fig. 7):

drawings too large, and when these are reduced by photography, and put on the block very small, the engraver is put to a great task in striving to reproduce the original effects; and he fails in the endeavor because, through the reduction in size, the effect has already been lost”.

48. Koehler, “Wood-Engraving”, *American Art Review* 1 (1880): 124.

49. *Ibid.*, 123.



Fig. 7. Timothy Cole, *Modjeska as Juliet*. After a photograph. *Scribner's*, March 1879.

Modjeska as Juliet (*Scribner's Monthly*, vol. XVII, p. 665.), engraved from a photograph, is very perfect: extremely fine, but not unnecessarily so: the line on the face firm and yet delicate, the details of the white dress admirably preserved, the line nowhere offensive, but helping to express both form and material. Some want of clearness in the shadows is evidently owing to the printer; but on the whole it is a beautiful piece of engraving (I would call it Mr. Cole's best), one worthy of any engraver of the old time.⁵⁰

As early as the "Art in Engraving" article, Linton had expressed his belief that the leading New School engravers had potential, and he consistently claimed that he only sought to provide constructive criticism. Yet, in retrospect, one might have to agree with Koehler—a little less wrath would have been better—if only to avoid speculation as to whether he was equally interested in securing his own position in the annals of wood engraving.

Certain inconsistencies and ambiguities emerge from the writings surrounding the New School controversy. On occasion, as with his praise of Cole's *Modjeska*, Linton approves of what he generally denounces, in this instance, photography on wood. He did not ignore the contradiction, but when he defends himself in *Hints*, he weakly proposes that "from a drawing it would have been better cut, and might have escaped the faults it now has", leading one to question why he spoke with such admiration in the first place.⁵¹ And Cole states in the "Symposium", in reference to the reproduction of a painter's brush marks, "I don't like it myself. Is it right to make a surface look as if it were patched?"⁵² One cannot, of course, wholly disregard his *Gillie-Boy*, which seems to have been cut with that purpose foremost in the engraver's mind; but, especially later in his career, Cole did develop a more linear style. Such inconsistencies do not discount the main premises to which each school subscribed, but they do indicate that a middle ground existed during the whole of the controversy, although it received very little attention.

50. Linton, *History*, 50. The original image of *Modjeska* was a photograph, not a photograph of another work.

51. Linton, *Hints*, 81.

52. Cole from Sheldon's "Symposium", 445.

When the air cleared later in the decade, a new departure in American wood engraving came forth. A group of engravers, led by Elbridge Kingsley (1841–1918), began taking their blocks and gravers out into the woods, to work directly from nature. During one such outing, they spotted a woodpecker in a nearby tree, and as engraver Frank French later recounted, “his presence in camp was looked upon as a good omen. It was decided hereafter to place his likeness with the initials O.W.W. (“Original workers on Wood”) on our original cuts.”⁵³

Kingsley believed that the wood engraving medium perfectly suited original composition, and that “wood, under the graver, is capable of the finest artistic expression”.⁵⁴ Following the lead of American etchers, he sometimes limited the editions of his works, and he always made it known that his conceptions were original.⁵⁵ In one such statement, Kingsley discusses his *View in New England Woods* (fig. 8) and sheds some light on his method:

Camping alone in a New England wood, from the window of a car fitted up with every convenience for painting in oils, engraving on wood, and photographing whatever appealed to the fancy, I overlooked the scene before me and wrought it on my block. This was my first attempt to engrave direct from nature. The subject was photographed on the block in the beginning, but the photographic copy was of no assistance in getting the true values of tone and color. Most engravers use a strong magnifying-glass, resting the block upon a sand-bag, and also using many gravers,—one kind for tints, one kind for figures, and another for ground, foliage, etc. This engraving was produced almost entirely with one graver, the block being held in the hand. For a part of the time I left the car, and, going out upon the scene itself, worked with the sunlight upon the block. This tends to force the mind away from finish in mere execution; but there is sure to be a compensation in the greater breadth of the masses by

53. Frank French, “Wood-Engravers in Camp”, *Century* 38 (August 1889): 574.

54. Elbridge Kingsley, “Wood-Engraving Direct from Nature”, *Century* 25 (November 1882): 48.

55. Watrous, *American Printmaking*, 25.



Fig. 8. Elbridge Kingsley, *View in New England Woods*. *Century*, November 1882.

the keeping of the whole under the eye at once, and, by a careful study of the refined portions of the scene at hand, a greater delicacy can be reached than can be found in a shining line under a magnifying-glass. There was necessarily much preparatory material belonging to the work, but nothing as a whole was photographed, nothing that would be recognized as such, and much was cut away of that which was traced at the outset, and other forms were drawn in with the graver as the work progressed. The leading thought was, to be faithful to the great masses and values, simplifying the form as much as possible. To hold the mind up to its first impressions required constant effort, and all the ordinary means employed in getting form and material were of no use whatever. It was a matter of simple feeling and nerve-power held up to their best level till the work was completed.⁵⁶

Kingsley's words, of course, echo the sentiment of contemporary European artists. But stylistically, his *View in New England Woods* looks tame compared to the works of the Impressionists, and it is even further from the radical relief prints by artists like Gauguin and Munch.⁵⁷ Still, O.W.W. members did produce some impressive works. A particularly fine example, *Night Moths* (*Century*, August 1889; fig. 9), created by Closson, is very effective in capturing the fluttering motion of the thin beating wings passing through subtle slants of moonlight. *Night Moths* reveals a complete mastery of the medium, in conception, execution, and in printing; and it serves well as an example of what many critics had called, since the late 1870s, the unequalled delicacy of American wood engraving.

Originality must have appeared as the logical path for engravers to follow. As photomechanical processes improved over the last two decades of the nineteenth century, there was less and less call for the skills that reproductive engravers had acquired. In 1911, Henry Wolf, who had worked in the New School style and created numerous original prints, lamented the invention of the halftone:

56. Kingsley, "Wood-Engraving", 48.

57. Watrous, *American Printmaking*, 26.

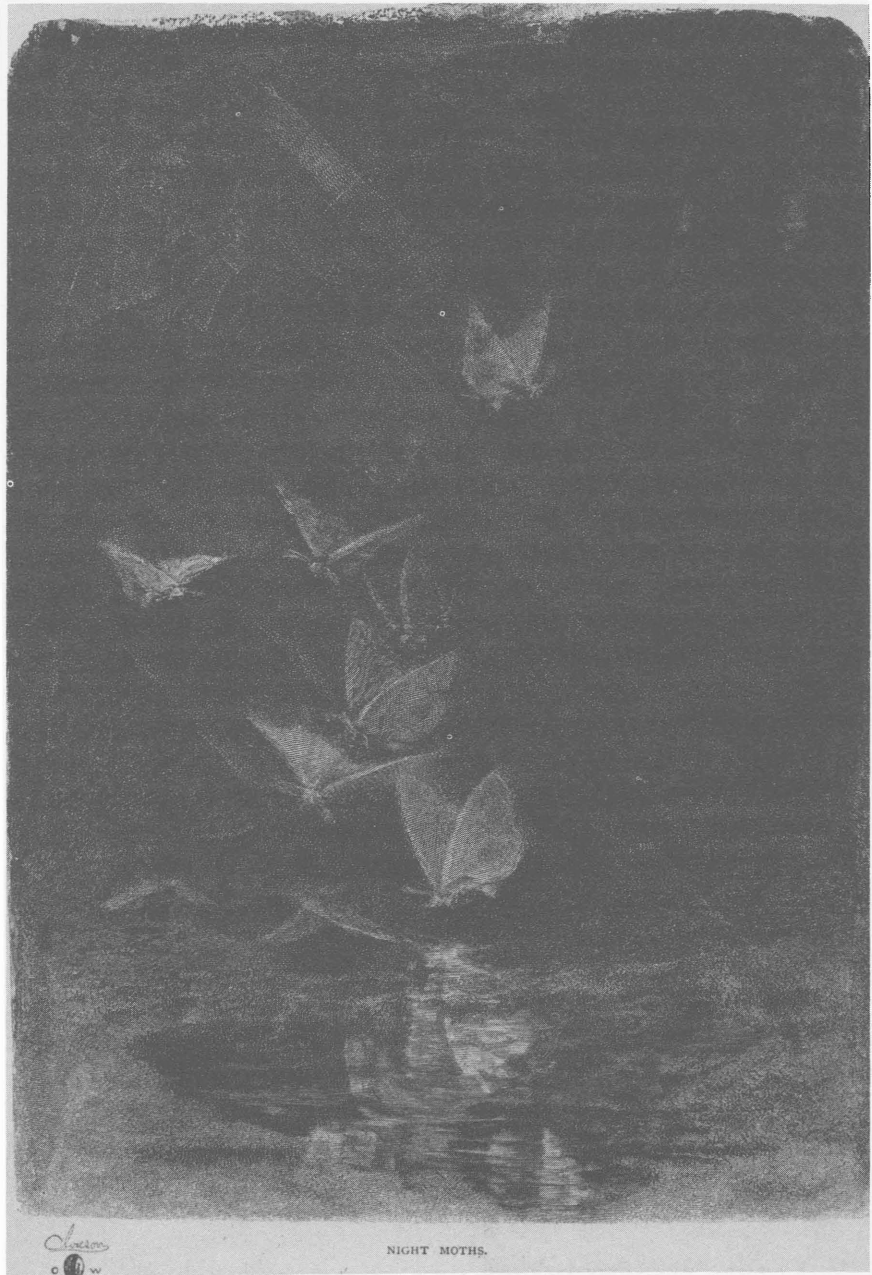


Fig. 9. William B. Closson, *Night Moths*. *Century*, August 1889.

This discovery sounded the death knell of wood-engraving. One by one the experienced engravers were given up by the publishers and since the beginning of this century only two engravers have been kept busy,—one for *Harper's* and another for *The Century Magazine*. . . .

Artistic wood-engraving is bound to become a dead art; in a few years it will have ceased to exist. There are no more apprentices or students because there is no encouragement.⁵⁸

Wolf's prophecy was not wholly accurate. Reproductive engraving did die out, but twentieth-century artists have, on occasion, breathed new life into the medium, perhaps most notably Rockwell Kent and Fritz Eichenberg. However, it was during the late nineteenth century when American wood engraving can be said to have reached its golden age. It was then that innovative engravers withstood the repercussions of controversy before ironically falling victim to advances in the technology that had triggered their existence.

58. Henry Wolf, "Concerning Wood-Engraving", *The Print Collector's Quarterly* 1 (July 1911): 354, 357. The two reproductive engravers that continued working after 1900 were Cole (*Scribner's*) and Wolf (*Harper's*).