Looking at Life as a Series of Lines

Minnesota Etchers 1890s-1930s

Thomas O'Sullivan

AT THE TURN of the 20th century, a varied lot of Minnesota artists outfitted themselves with gear that lent their studios the air of laboratories and printing shops. Etching needles, copper plates, acid baths, and printing presses all served an artistic vision that was marked by the artists' choice of the etching medium as well as by their personal styles of composing and drawing pictures. A group of several hundred prints in the Minnesota Historical Society art collection represents this phenomenon in considerable depth and affords a case study of how artists in one state participated in an international art movement.

The term etching is often erroneously used to refer to a print in any one of several techniques. It is in fact a very specific process, the complexities of which are summarized in a 1914 handbook by Minnesota-born etcher George T. Plowman: "Etching (from the Dutch 'etsen,' to eat) is a form of engraving in which the design [drawn with a needle on a prepared metal plate] has been bitten with acid. Usage includes drypoint with etching, although no acid is employed, the design being cut into the plate with sharp steel needles." The plate thus prepared was spread with ink, then wiped clean; ink remaining in the etched lines was transferred to paper as the plate and paper passed through a press. The process had been valued since the 16th century as an inexpensive means of producing multiple copies (or "impressions") of an image. Etching took on a special attraction for American artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, as they "made enthusiastic commitments to the arts of original etching and wood-engraving and, with equal fervor, sought to join the mainstream of printmaking as it was exemplified by the fine art of European peintre-graveur (artist as printmaker)."

1 William M. Ivins, Jr., How Prints Look (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) is an excellent introduction to the printmaking processes, written and illustrated for the layperson; George T. Plowman, Etching and Other Graphic Arts: An Illustrated Treatise (New York: John Lane Company, 1914), 53; James Watrous, A Century of American Printmaking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), x.

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Artists from Paris to Mankato pursued the elusive skills described by Plowman: “To tell as much in as few lines as possible is the ideal of etching.” There emerged a veritable subculture of connoisseurship made up of etchers and collectors and based on elegancies of line, subtle modulations of tone, mastery of chemical and mechanical processes, and the refined presentation of etchings in exhibits and portfolios. Artists and critics maintained that technical proficiency was not in itself a guarantee of success in this demanding medium. Rather, an all-encompassing devotion was required: “The etcher must look at life as a series of lines.”

AN EARLY MINNESOTA EXAMPLE of this international revival of the medium was a series entitled “Twin City Etchings.” This was a set of prints “etched from Nature and the original paintings” in the early 1890s by Charles W. Post of St. Paul, in which each picture was paired with a descriptive commentary either by Post’s copublisher Henry Wellington Wack or by local notables. The series included pleasant riverside vistas; etched reproductions of historic images (such as Henry Lewis’s view of St. Paul in 1844, with commentary by historian J. Fletcher Williams); and views of the homes of prominent citizens, such as industrialist and United States Senator William D. Washburn and transportation and trade magnate Norman W. Kittson. Post and Wack planned a collection of 50 etchings, to be sold by subscription to a group limited to 500 collectors. Their venture reveals a telling blend of commercial and aesthetic interests. The presentation of local subjects with didactic texts was an ambitious attempt to reach a market of art lovers, antiquarians, and loyal citizens who could appreciate their cities’ pictorial appeal. “It is to be regretted,” noted the prospectus, “that too many of our people have the erroneous idea that nothing possesses real merit in the way of Art Production unless it savors of a foreign air, and apparently lose sight of the fact that there is much of beauty and excellence all around them; and surely St. Paul and Minneapolis are not without their wealth of enchanting scenes and picturesque surroundings—spots endeared by pleasant recollections and local associations.” The goal of 50 etchings was probably never met, but 14 prints from “Twin City Etchings” have been located for the MHS collection.

The fondness for art that “savors of a foreign air” has been a lasting preference of Minnesota artists and collectors. While early 20th-century Minnesota etchers did find local subjects attractive for their work, they also readily seized opportunities for travel and work abroad. The medium lent itself to on-the-spot responses to the stimulation of exotic places. Artists carried copper etching plates into the field, the better to capture their spontaneous reactions to shifting light and new scenery. Cadwallader Washburn (1866-1965) was lionized as much for his adventures abroad as for his ability to express in line the spirit of a place’s people, architecture, and landscape: “He is a veritable globe-trotter and had traveled to nooks and corners of the old world for material for his etching needle.” The son of Senator W. D. Washburn, he grew up in Minneapolis, studied architecture briefly, and began his artistic career under the guidance of H. Siddons Mowbray and William Merritt Chase. Washburn took up etching in 1903. His early fame and present reputation rest on a large body of work done during travels to Mexico, Japan, Morocco, and Europe, and on several suites of drypoints known as the “Norlands series.” Named for a family farm in Maine, these landscapes constitute Washburn’s meditation on nature in a place of lifelong importance to him: “In the Norlands dry-points, of which the fourth series was completed this summer [1911], it was my desire to record the varying phases under which Nature has shown herself to me, with such keen appreciation as is possible only to one who has lived in close intimacy with her from childhood.”

Washburn’s contemporary George Plowman (1869-1932) was a native of LeSueur, a graduate of the University of Minnesota, and an architect by profession. In the 1890s he worked for Daniel H. Burnham on the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and he toured Europe with fellow Minnesotans Alexis Jean Fournier and Alexander Grinager. Plowman studied etching with the English master Sir Frank Short, and by 1914 was not only an accomplished etcher of Europe’s cathedrals, but author of the handbook Etching and Other Graphic Arts: An Illustrated Treatise. His writings helped to codify the importance of an artist’s mastery of the entire etching process: “The artist who draws on the copper and does not himself bite the plate with the acid is not an etcher. This should also be true to a less degree with regard to printing. The true etcher draws, bites and prints the plate himself.”

While MINNESOTA ETCHERS sought picturesque effects in faraway settings, they also brought to local
ARCHITECTURE was a favored subject of the etching revival. The peripatetic Cadwallader Washburn etched Portada de la Iglesia, Santo Domingo in Havana in 1904. Washburn’s lifelong affection for a family farm in Maine inspired several series of drypoints (1906-10), including Fuller Hill Road.

GEORGE T. PLOWMAN’S untitled landscape, about 1900, exemplifies the etcher’s effort to “tell as much in as few lines as possible.” Bare paper suggests open space; sharp, etched lines and darker, blurred marks of drypoint fill in the riverbank, trees, and distant hills.
GILBERT FLETCHER etched notable buildings in Mankato before establishing a career as a maker of block prints and fine, printed textiles in New York City. This view of the Blue Earth County Courthouse and Mankato High School was made in 1912. (Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Berquist.)

CLARA MAIRS utilized soft-ground etching to depict The Picnic (ca. 1925) in grainy lines and textured masses. In this technique the artist draws on a tissue laid on the plate, adhering the etching ground to the underside of the tissue. Lifting away the tissue reveals the image on the plate, which is then etched and printed.

ST. PAUL artist Clement Haupers reinterpreted the classical theme of The Three Graces by the light of a burlesque stage for this 1928 soft-ground etching.
George Resler is known for his etchings of St. Paul's skyline and Swede Hollow, which show his interest in the city's picturesque scenery. Born in Waseca, Resler was a commercial printer by trade. His etchings of the city's skylines and shops, of Italian scenes, and of quiet streams and marshes were award-winning prints in the 1910s and 1920s. Of the Minnesota etchers, Resler was most deeply in thrall to the American expatriate etcher James McNeill Whistler. Resler's asymmetrical compositions, broad expanses of bare paper denoting sky and water, and use of lightly inked "tones" for shadow and light effects all reflect Whistler's treatment of London and Venice in the late 19th century. Resler and others, like S. Chatwood Burton (1881-1947), explored the immigrant neighborhoods of the Twin Cities "where the humble live and move and have their being and where many an interesting character study may be found." Resler's etchings depict the people of St. Paul's Swede Hollow; Burton, a University of Minnesota art teacher, etched in brittle line the residents and houses of Minneapolis's Bohemian Flats. While Twin Cities subjects are the most common local themes of Minnesota etchers, a few brought the medium's lyrical approach to other parts of the state. Gilbert Fletcher (1883-1933), for example, made a series of etchings depicting public buildings in his hometown of Mankato about 1915.

In addition to landscape and architecture, sporting subjects were popular with etchers and their patrons. Levon West (1900-68) was Minnesota's best-known devotee of this theme—though his first widespread recognition was tied to the exploits of another Minnesotan, Charles A. Lindbergh. A businessman and aviator before he settled on etching as his particular calling, West had sketched the Spirit of St. Louis in a New York airport. On the night of Lindbergh's transatlantic flight in 1927, West combined these sketches with his own knowledge of flying and a dose of imagination to create an etching of the Spirit of St. Louis in flight. Printed and on sale by the time news of Lindbergh's success reached New York, the etching made West's reputation: "America, in her hero-worshipping mood, was generously quick to allow Levon West a tiny share in this mood, to recognise in him the vision of an etcher she had been looking for, to interpret aspects of her own life to herself." West also enjoyed great success with etchings of the outdoor life: hunters and their dogs, fishermen, cowboys, and prospectors of the Yukon gold rush. Like Plowman, he wrote a "how-to" book on his chosen medium. Making an Etching (1932)

LEVON WEST'S popularity rested in large measure on his choice of decidedly masculine themes: hunting dogs, sportsmen, cowboys, and prospectors. Waterton Lakes, Glacier Park (etching and drypoint, 1927) is one of his scenes from the northwestern United States and western Canada. West’s etchings of Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight, such as Newfoundland (1927), were an instant success among fans of the aviator and the artist.

S. CHATWOOD BURTON found the ethnic flavor of Minneapolis’s Bohemian Flats so appealing that he moved his studio to the river community. First Snow, Flats (ca. 1920) captures a winter washday in the fine lines characteristic of the etching medium.
explained the process through step-by-step photographs of the drawing, biting, and printing of one etching.'

WHILE THE PRIME of the etching revival had long passed by 1930, the medium retained its adherents. Some perpetuated what a recent historian has called "the Whistlerian charade" of misty cityscapes. West's continued devotion to lucrative outdoor subjects led a younger (and perhaps envious) artist to jeer him as "the doggie etcher." Other artists turned their etching skills to modes of expression more in keeping with the artistic tenor of the times. Clement Haupers (1900-82) and Clara Mairs (1878-1963), for instance, used etching and associated techniques on a variety of people-oriented themes: children, the circus, and family groups by Mairs, and an equally urban but more diverse population of shoppers, showgirls, and boxers by Haupers. Both artists had studied in the Twin Cities and in Paris. And both exploited a range of textural effects by combining etching and drypoint with soft-ground etching and aquatint, techniques that create grainy lines and masses in the finished print. Mairs and Haupers skillfully played a range of responses to contemporary life, from whimsy to gentle satire. In an action that might be seen as a token of etching's diminished stature at the time, Haupers scrapped his etching press during the metal-collecting drives of World War II.

American printmakers of the 1930s and 1940s generally adopted lithography as their favorite medium. By the mid-1940s, however, etching and associated techniques were enjoying yet another international revival. Printmaking workshops like Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17 in New York City and Mauricio Lasansky's Iowa Print Group at the University of Iowa were focal points in America for freewheeling experiments in the use of etching, engraving, and other processes. Imbued with the postwar penchant for artistic freedom, artists like Minnesota's Malcolm Myers combined various printmaking techniques in ways their predecessors would have found heretical. Etching and engraving, for example, commonly appeared in one print; silk-screen might be used to add an element of color. A similarly open-ended approach to the art and crafts of printmaking animates the products of Vermilion Editions, a fine-print workshop established in Minneapolis in 1978.9

To the artists and collectors who made Minnesota's etching revival, craft was equally exalted with art. "A good etcher must be, above everything else, a good craftsman," wrote Levon West. "He must not only have a flair for line and perfect touch, but he must have a feeling for the materials peculiar to his craft." The medium imposed limitations—of size and color, for example—but it also had its own heroes, its network of artists and collectors, its support system of exhibits, galleries, collections, and publications. Its heroes were the acknowledged masters: internationally respected artists like Charles Meryon of France, Sir Francis Brangwyn of England, and the American Joseph Pennell, all of whose works could be seen at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts print room. Minnesota's own artists were known through exhibits sponsored by the Minnesota State Art Society, the St. Paul Institute of Arts and Science, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and private galleries. Twin Cities connoisseurs could see and buy etchings at the Beard Art Galleries or Mabel Urich's bookshop in Minneapolis, or at the Stevens Art Gallery in St. Paul.

Newspaper and magazine articles explained the techniques and the mystique of etching and its status as an art that transcended mere picture-making. A St. Paul paper, for example, hastened to emphasize the gulf of intent and achievement between George Resler's commercial printing and his artistic etching: "In not one of the pictures he has made for the love of making it is there the faintest suggestion of the limitations of commercial design. His art standards and technique have not been sacrificed in the least degree to the practical demands which business makes on an artist's brush and pencil." The identification of artists with their preferred medium sparked a minor cult of personality. Washburn, to one critic, "is precisely and sanely economic, hoarding lines as the miser does money; spending them only upon the absolute necessities." West was characterized by another step of the etching process: "The quick biting of the nitric acid suits his temperamental manner."10

At their best, Minnesota's early 20th-century etchings have subtlety and delicacy, a pleasing marriage of imagery and technique. At the other end of the spectrum, some etchings betray a self-conscious artfulness that can sink to vapid artifice. The adoption of the etching medium was a significant choice for these artists, for it allied them, in spirit, to an artistic tradition reaching back past Whistler to Rembrandt—heady company for artists in a state busy earning its cultural credentials.

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