Patterns of Silence

The Prints of Lowell S. Bobleter

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From the early 1940s onward, Lowell Stanley Bobleter (1902–73) was a significant figure in Minnesota’s arts community: a director of the St. Paul School and Gallery of Art, superintendent of the Minnesota State Fair’s fine arts department, professor and chairman of the fine arts department at Hamline University, and founder and president of the School of Associated Arts (later renamed the College of Visual Arts). During this time he was also a prolific and widely exhibited painter. Less well known is his early—and successful—career as a printmaker. How Bobleter entered the rarified world of fine arts printmaking and established his own unique vision of Minnesota is a story involving a superb teacher, the support of Minnesota businesses, and a special printing press.¹

Bobleter’s family background was rooted in Minnesota business and public service. His grandfather Joseph Bobleter was born in Austria in 1846, emigrated to Iowa in 1858, and served in the Second Iowa Cavalry in the Civil War. After moving to New Ulm in 1868, he gained success in the pharmacy business, served as postmaster from 1873 to 1886, was instrumental in founding the Minnesota
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National Guard, and established the New Ulm Journal (today the New Ulm Review). He was a representative in the state legislature (1883–84) and served as state treasurer from 1887 to 1895. Lowell’s father, John Edward Bobleter, was one of Joseph’s eight children. He also served in state government as an accountant and official in the Land Office from 1908 until his death in 1944. Lowell was born in New Ulm but, along with two siblings, grew up in St. Paul.

No diaries, letters, or other documents have come to light that record Lowell Bobleter’s youthful aspirations. But St. Paul city directories indicate that, like many boys of his era, he was sent out to work at an early age. He began as a messenger, then served as a clerk at several St. Paul businesses. By 1919, at the age of 17, he settled in as a clerk at the Minnesota By-Product Company (later, Koppers Coke Company), which processed coke, a fuel refined from coal. He would work there for years while building a career in art.

At some point, while recovering from surgery, Bobleter became interested in drawing. From 1923 to 1925 he took evening or weekend classes at the St. Paul School of Fine Arts. Subsequently, he studied etching with George E. Resler (1882–1954), a St. Paul artist who made his living as a commercial illustrator but was known in Minnesota and beyond for his etchings of city scenes and rural landscapes. Etching is a form of intaglio printmaking that involves coating a copper or zinc plate with a thin, waxy surface resistant to acid and drawing on that surface with an etching needle. The plate is then dipped into an acid bath. The acid bites through the drawn lines and eats into the plate. Etchings are distinguished by their delicate linear effects and have fine, spontaneous-looking lines, which can be wiry and sensitive or melded into tonal areas to achieve a mood and atmosphere.

Etching was particularly fashionable in early-twentieth-century America, appealing to connoisseurs for its exacting techniques and subtle effects. During two revivals in the United States—the first in the 1880s, the second from about 1910 to 1930—a fervent market developed, driven by dealers such as M. Knoedler & Company of New York and printmaking collectives such as the Chicago Society of Etchers. Minnesota had a small but accomplished cadre of these artists, including George Plowman, author of several etching manuals, and Gustav Goetsch.

Resler’s etchings fit into the prevailing fashion in America for prints in the European tradition of such masters as Rembrandt, Charles Meryon, and the expatriate James McNeill Whistler. Even modernist innovators such as Edward Hopper and Minnesotans Clara Mairs and Clement Haupers studied in Europe and sometimes used European subjects. Like Whistler, Resler focused on city scenes and rural landscapes and showed particular sympathy for the humble and poor. His etchings, too, were realistic but also infused with mood and atmosphere. St. Paul, with its Mississippi River docks and crowded immigrant communities, offered many scenes analogous to those depicted by earlier etchers in Amsterdam, London, and Paris.

By the time Bobleter studied with...
him, Resler had gained membership in America’s main exhibiting societies in Chicago, New York, and California and his prints were handled by prestigious American dealers. He was not a good record-keeper or self-promoter but had champions, including businessmen such as Harvey B. Fuller Jr. of the H. B. Fuller Company. Fuller, also an art critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, took etching instruction from Resler and helped him print. Resler stopped making prints in 1930, as did many other artists faced with a sharply reduced market after the financial crash of 1929. It is interesting to note that Bobleter made his first recorded print that same year; his career began just as the medium’s popularity was waning.

It is probable that Bobleter began his prodigious output of prints because he acquired the press that Resler no longer wanted. Made by the Sturges Manufacturing Company of Chicago, it is cast iron and much heavier than most presses today, which are usually aluminum. Yet it can be disassembled and moved by four strong men. This “personal-sized” press, patented in 1916, constituted a real advance in printmaking because artists could print their own work, even at home. Beautifully made, it is still in use.

A habitué of print exhibitions, Bobleter traveled often to New York during his adult years. His library attests to his familiarity with the world of fine arts prints, as it includes catalogs—mostly from the early 1930s—from Knoedler and other dealers. Designed to educate collectors about prints and printmakers, these catalogs contain informative articles as well as lists and images of works for sale. Bobleter also had issues of The Print Collector’s Quarterly included in Print Collectors Quarterly until a feature called “Prints of Today” began in 1936.

Bobleter’s earliest prints were etchings in the manner of Resler, although, unlike his teacher, he made careful plate notes that recorded title, date, technique, who acquired the print, where it was exhibited, and prizes won. Many of these early prints have been lost, but titles such as Algerian Market and The Castle suggest that Bobleter was using standard pic-

George E. Resler, Brickyard Workers, etching, about 1912
turesque subjects to learn the exacting techniques.¹¹

Soon, however, he was drawing his subject matter from his own surroundings. Carpenter’s Shop (May 1930) is the sort of workshop scene familiar from seventeenth-century Dutch art, but the plate note reveals that it was a view of the shop at the coke plant, Bobleter’s place of employment. The first of his prints to be exhibited, Carpenter’s Shop appeared in the fine arts exhibition at the 1930 Minnesota State Fair. He gradually began to sell his prints, first to friends and family, then to local dealers such as the Stevens Gallery in St. Paul.

Bobleter’s city scenes include the St. Paul riverfront. Yet Docks (November 1930) departs from portraying atmosphere, as Whistler and Resler did, to emphasize the scene’s structure and geometry. Here, new influences can be observed, particularly that of Muirhead Bone (1876–1953), a Scottish artist admired for his balanced designs. Docks resembles Bone’s Strandvagen Stockholm, reproduced in a 1932 Print Collector’s Bulletin that Bobleter owned. Docks even echoes Bone’s observing figure in the lower right.

Moreover, Bobleter was by now using a printmaking technique of which Bone was an acknowledged master: drypoint, which differs from etching in that the artist does not coat the metal plate with an acid-resistant substance but draws directly on it. In earlier prints, Bobleter had begun to integrate drypoint with etching (a common practice); he abandoned etching altogether after July 1930. Drypoint, which has the advantage of not using toxic chemicals, has a different character from etching: the line incised by the drypoint tool (often held in the fist rather than in the fingers like a pencil) raises a distinct edge, or burr. The burr creates a stronger and more variable line and, with hatching and cross-hatching, yields firmly patterned tonal areas, resulting in an image that can be more expressive and bold than etching, with its wiggly lines. The disadvantage is that the burr wears down quickly. Only ten to twelve good impressions can be made from a plate unless it is faced with chrome or steel.¹²

The Coke Plant (January 1931) exemplifies how Bobleter began to exploit the drypoint technique to create
strong lines and patterns. Again, the subject is related to his workplace (Koppers News, a company publication, received one of the prints). But this was more than local homage. It also reflected a trend in the larger art world. After World War I, artists such as Charles Sheeler and the Precisionists and photographers such as Edward Weston had begun portraying American plants and factories as beautiful images of progress. At the same time, the Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus in Germany developed an international trend emphasizing an industrial aesthetic. Bobleter’s image of this modern-day cathedral to progress has a pleasing composition, the foursquare lines of the factory contrasting with the diagonal lines of the railroad and the romantically billowing clouds. He quickly achieved success with such subjects. Coal Tipples (August 1931) was named one of the Fifty Prints of the Year by the American Society of Etchers. Bobleter was establishing his own artistic identity. At least one print from this era includes a monogram analogous to Whistler’s famous butterfly: the letter B conjoined with a tiny bee.13

Meanwhile, the St. Paul artist also made images that were folksier in character. These prints deal more directly with peoples’ lives in the manner of Resler. Old Foundry (March 1931) depicts a site on the St. Paul riverfront; the two figures could be scavenging for materials. It won Bobleter his first award: First Print Prize at the Minnesota State Fair. The Threshers (August 1934) shows six workers, a horse-drawn wagon filled with grain, and a threshing machine. As is common in Bobleter’s prints, these men are seen from the rear. Indeed, his people are rudimentary, looking more like figures in a diorama than individuals. But a draw-
ing of The Threshers adds two large figures in the foreground, suggesting that the artist considered a closer focus on the human element.14

Bobleter also began to explore rural landscapes, particularly the hilly area south of St. Paul. In Near Hastings (November 1933, also known as Rolling), lines of reeds and trees mark the recession of space. Here, Bobleter has left behind the influence of Rembrandt, Whistler, and Bone; this is a new style, with strong outlines of simplified forms and little or no shading. Sky, hills, and vegetation make a decorative pattern. Like many other Western artists from the mid-nineteenth century on, the St. Paulite was inspired by Japanese prints to break away from illusionism (the use of linear perspective and chiaroscuro to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface) and move toward a more independent vision. This Japanese influence was first manifested in Approaching Storm (July 1933), based on Bobleter’s observations at Grey Cloud Island in the Mississippi River. Trees, hills, and river are depicted with strong outlines and sparingly placed tonal areas in a modern, flat style comparable to that of Bertha Lum, the Iowa-born artist who championed Japanese and Chinese prints.15 Oblique viewpoints and dramatic cropping are the only aspects of Japonisme that Bobleter did not adopt; instead he tended to use a mid-level bird’s-eye view, giving a head-on view of his subject.

The composition of snow-covered rolling hills in Near Hastings reappears in Silence (March 1936), which in many ways typifies Bobleter’s best mature work. Unlike Near Hastings, Silence has a dark and dramatic nighttime sky (Bobleter’s “dark manner”). Drypoint technique contributes to this drama with strong diagonal hatchmarks that stop short of the hills, leaving a nimbus of light. The farm looks small in the distance, but the soft, blurry vegetation, its lushness made possible by the burr, suggests a measure of protective warmth. Silence creates an unforgettable image of Minnesota’s long winter nights, framing the artist’s vision in an ordered pattern of texture and line. This work was central to Bobleter’s vision as an artist, establishing a template of snow-covered geometry he would use in some 40 prints to come.

Silence constituted yet another major success. It was exhibited at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA, where it won a first prize and was purchased for the permanent collection), the Washington Water Color Club, the Philadelphia Society of Etchers, the Annual Midwestern Artists show in Kansas City, and other major venues. It was also listed in Fine Prints of the Year. In 1937 the MIA included Silence (continued on page 243)

Lowell Bobleter, Old Foundry, drypoint, March 1931
Lowell Bobleter, The Threshers, drypoint, August 1934, and the undated drawing with figures in the foreground
Lowell Bobleter, Near Hastings (or Rolling), drypoint, November 1933

Lowell Bobleter, Approaching Storm, drypoint, July 1933
Bobleter returned to Silence in 1941; here, he pulls a presentation print of the second version at the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art, of which he was director. The star press is different from Bobleter’s geared Sturges press.
in its *Five Centuries of Etching*, which put Bobleter in the company of Rembrandt, Goya, Legros, Meryon, and Whistler.16

Yet not all of his prints conform to Japanese-like simplicity. A few relate more explicitly to the social and economic conditions of the 1930s. Depression-era prints are strongly associated with the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, which began sponsoring and teaching printmaking in 1935. But that agency focused on lithography and silkscreen, not etching or drypoint. Bobleter never worked for the WPA, which was primarily a relief program, as he was steadily employed as an accountant and, by 1938, a credit manager at Koppers.17 Even so, he did produce a few WPA-like prints. *How About the Mortgage?* (August 1935) depicts two men before a barn, discussing the critical need for cash. Its homespun quality echoes the WPA directive to depict the American scene. Another feather in his cap, it won first prize at the MIA, second prize at the state fair, and a spot in various national exhibitions—a regular occurrence for Bobleter by this time. *Idle* (May 1939) depicts an Anoka mill that has closed, its dark manner in keeping with the depression-era business climate. *Obsolescence* (June 1939), showing an abandoned farm with equipment scattered about, was Bobleter’s diploma print for admission to the Chicago Society of Etchers, the most prestigious of the print collectives. He had arrived.

Bobleter’s mature work was thoroughly American in orientation. Unlike many Minnesota artists such as Elsa Laubach Jemne, Clement Haupers, Clara Mairs, and Cameron Booth, he never went to Europe. However, he and his wife, Mabel, did travel around the United States. An August 1931 print, *Rushmore*, depicts Gutzon Borglum’s massive memorial when only the face of George Washington was complete. About 25 prints portray the West and Southwest, particularly the ghost towns of Colorado. Perhaps because of his long connection with the mining industry, Bobleter was drawn to Black Hawk and Central City, Colorado towns abandoned after the 1860s gold rush but later popular with tourists as ghost towns.18 *Black Hawk* (September 1939) shows a group of buildings, including the picturesque Presbyterian church, against a mountainous background.
His skill with diagonal mark-making shows up in the distinctive pattern and texture. Dramatic light and dark help create the old town’s eerie ambience.

Unlike his teacher George Resler, Bobleter was a vigorous entrepreneur. From the beginning, he sold his prints for use as cards and took commercial commissions. Early in his career, for example, the Reslers acquired Winter (December 1930) for their annual Christmas card. The print has not been discovered, but the plate note suggests that Bobleter drew from imagination: “old buildings along a snow-covered street, a sleigh is standing before the door of the inn.” Other prints with subjects not overtly associated with Christmas also became seasonal cards. Titles such as Old Tide Mill or Jolly Post Boy Tavern indicate that the images were meant to be nostalgic, a popular quality for greeting cards. Brown & Bigelow and the Buzzza Company, two Minnesota publishers with national distribution, commissioned Bobleter etchings, with the cards to be used by sales departments and sold in bulk to client companies. These commercial plates were faced with steel or chrome to allow for large editions. According to Bobleter’s plate notes, 964 impressions were made of Winter Evening (May 1940), 550 of Winter Brook (May 1940), and 662 of Jolly Post Boy Tavern (June 1940).

Commissions for prints from prominent Minnesota businesses and organizations attest to Bobleter’s stature as an artist. Examples are Foundation Room (or The Great Hall, 1941), done for the Mayo Foundation in Rochester, and a print of St. James Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, made for the dedication of a new church building in 1943. Bobleter illustrated at least one book, Karl Ekman’s Jean Sibelius (1936), which was exhibited in New York at the Joseph Luyber Galleries in 1947 with other volumes illustrated by prominent artists. He also designed at least one stained glass window and might have painted some murals, although these works have not been located.

Some of Bobleter’s last prints seem to be strictly commercial in nature, perhaps even derivative. His ducks, geese, and other wildfowl, such as Morning Flight (December 1941) and Coming In (1941) closely resemble Frank W. Benson’s well-known water birds, prints based on lifelong observation in his native Massachusetts and praised as highly original.
from the time of his first exhibition in 1915. Like Benson, the St. Paul artist used broad, painterly strokes, capitalizing on the burr of drypoint. Bobleter made large editions of other prints that probably involved more direct observation; these, too, center on popular picturesque elements such as boathouses and fishing. Rasmussen’s Cove (April 1942) was done in two versions, both editions of 42. Likewise, Erickson’s Landing (ca. 1941) was treated in two versions with large editions. Both are comparatively simple, with broad lines and more shading than in his earlier, more stylized work. These later prints also use techniques such as soft-ground etching and aquatint to achieve more subtle tonal effects.

Traditionally, painters have made prints of their paintings for mass distribution. In the 1940s Bobleter did the opposite, turning from printmaking, an exacting and time-consuming process, to the much freer and more expressive medium of painting in oils. He redid some of his drypoint subjects as oils, and the painterly freedom seen in the later prints bursts forth with slashing brushstrokes and bright color. Metal shortages during World War II might partially explain the switch. Indeed, many printing presses similar to Bobleter’s Sturges were melted down to help with the war effort; it is fortunate that his survives. In any case, the second craze in America for etchings was over. A “comprehensive” exhibition of Minnesota etchers at the 1942 state fair presented the work of only five: George Resler, Paul H. Winchell, Lowell Bobleter, Clara Mairs, and S. Chatwood Burton.

Bobleter’s career as a painter is better documented than his work as a printmaker, probably because by the 1940s he had become a public figure. Although he continued to work as an accountant, at least sporadically, until 1950, he served as director of the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art from 1940 to 1942 and superintendent of the fine arts department at the state fair from 1942 to 1948. He also figured prominently in the State Arts Society.

But it was as an educator that the artist made his most important contribution to Minnesota’s cultural life. He is remembered as an innovative and inspiring instructor in the nascent fine arts program at Hamline University, St. Paul, from 1942
to 1948. In 1948 Bobleter decided to open his own school. He bought the Mills Academy of Art, a small commercial art school in downtown St. Paul, founded in 1924, and renamed it the School of Associated Arts. In 1961 he acquired a mansion at 344 Summit Avenue. It became the main building of a thriving school of art and design that developed into a four-year college with a full range of liberal arts and studio courses. Even in the school’s early days, Bobleter taught art history and used his extensive knowledge of contemporary art and artists to enrich the program. Graduates remember with affection his elegance, genial urbanity, and his dedication to their education. An example of his personal touch was his beautiful hand-lettering of students’ names on their diplomas.25

A dual background in business and art qualified Bobleter well to run a school of art. He also continued his entrepreneurial activities in surprising ways. With help from his wife, Mabel, and a nephew, Jerry Wolfe, he made crafts for children in the 1950s: plaster of Paris train sets to be painted and paint-by-numbers projects that the three assembled in the family garage.26

The prints of Lowell Bobleter are housed in many leading institutions across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, and California State Library. The Minnesota Historical Society owns about 140 different prints by him, and the College of Visual Arts, before it closed in 2013, had approximately 170, plus a number of duplicates. In addition, the college held two notebooks with 66 etchings, presumably artist’s proofs—that is, Bobleter’s choice of the best impression of an edition. In 1999, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of CVA’s beginnings, Maria Santiago, professor of printmaking, curated an exhibition, Architectural Landscape in Print, to honor his memory.27 These prints are now in the collection of CVA Action, an association of the friends and alumni of the college, and were exhibited at the Bailey House on the state fairgrounds in St. Paul during the 2014 fair. Some prints in the CVA collection have been donated to Hamline University, the Minnesota Museum of American Art, the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, and the Minnesota State Fair Foundation. The bulk of the collection has been placed at the Brown County Historical Society in New Ulm, the artist’s birthplace. Bobleter’s legacy as an outstanding printmaker will continue to be honored and preserved. ■
Notes

The author thanks Maria Santiago, long-time professor of printmaking at the College of Visual Arts, who preserved the Bobleter prints in the CVA collection and was my partner in their final inventory and distribution. Her help in this project is deeply appreciated.

1. For Bobleter, see Robert Crump’s landmark Minnesota Prints and Printmakers 1900–1945 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009), 62–63 and passim; see xi–xiii for an excellent introduction to printmaking techniques and history. Crump also played a significant role in documenting Bobleter’s work by creating a preliminary checklist (1988) of the prints on Bobleter’s plate notes. Copies of these plate notes and Crump’s checklist are in the Lowell Stanley Bobleter Papers and Bobleter’s artist file, respectively, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

2. Joseph Bobleter rose to the rank of brigadier general; Camp Bobleter at Fort Snelling was named for him. “Joseph Bobleter,” in Marion Daniel Shutter, Progressive Men of Minnesota (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Journal, 1897), 232–33; New Ulm Journal, July 10, 1909 (Joseph Bobleter obituary), and Mar. 20, 1944 (John Bobleter obituary).

3. Volumes of the St. Paul City Directory, 1883–1951, have been consulted for this article.

4. Virginia Rahja, former vice president and president of the School of Associated Arts, telephone interview with author, Nov. 12, 2013.


9. The press was purchased by artist Kurt Nordwall in the 1980s and then acquired by Robert Crump. The current owner is Minneapolis artist James Boyd Brent; Virginia Rahja to the author, Dec. 11, 2013, and author’s interviews with Kurt Nordwall, June 18, 2014, and James Boyd Brent, July 1, 2014.

10. Author interviews with Virginia Rahja, Dec. 9, 2013, and John Lenertz, graduate of the School of Associated Arts and later instructor, trustee, and president of CVA, Dec. 6, 2013. Again I thank Maria Santiago, who preserved these catalogs and periodicals at CVA and made them available; for the importance of these and other publications to art in Minnesota, see Crump, Minnesota Prints, 18–20.

11. Here and below, plate notes, Bobleter papers, MHS.

12. Martin, Encyclopedia of Printmaking, 76–79. Drypoint, loosely called etching, is often considered a subset of etching. Because the artist draws directly on the plate, it is more properly called engraving. The author thanks Maria Santiago, Karl Bethke (conversation, Mar. 6, 2014), and James Boyd Brent (interview, July 1, 2014) for their insights into drypoint.


14. In contrast, see Arthur C. Hanson’s lifelike 1932 etching, Resting (a farmer, seen from behind, at his horse-drawn plow); Crump, Minnesota Prints, 101. Portraiture was not Bobleter’s strong suit; the few portraits he made are stiff and lack real personality. The figures in Bobleter’s drawing seem to reference those in Whistler’s 1860 etching Rotherhithe; see www.metmuseum.org /collection/the-collection-online/search?ft=
=Whistler+%2b+Rotherhithe.


16. Plate notes, Bobleter papers.


19. Bobleter’s plate notes attest to his vigor in sending prints to exhibitions. He was also prolific. According to his records, he made 27 prints in 1930, 13 in 1931, 6 in 1932, 14 in 1933, 10 in 1934, 9 in 1935, 17 in 1936, 26 in 1937, 14 in 1938, 13 in 1939, 18 in 1940, 22 in 1941, and 4 in 1942. In addition to these 193, he made others for which there are no known plate notes.


22. Samuel Chamberlain, “Frank W. Benson—the Etcher,” Print Collector’s Quarterly, Apr. 1938, 167–83. Bobleter owned at least three other publications that included Benson prints, and Bobleter’s titles—Geese Alighting, Pintails Passing, Mallards at Evening—even echo the master’s. Other artists were no doubt influenced by Benson as well; see, for example, Hans Klieber, Mallards Coming In, Print Collectors’ Quarterly, Apr. 1941.

23. Crump, Minnesota Prints, 28; Brent interview.

24. The Bobleter papers contain numerous newspaper clippings and other documents on his work as a painter. A high point was the 1947 show at Joseph Luyber Galleries in New York.


26. According to Jerry Wolfe, the garage projects ended because Bobleter was a perfectionist and production costs ate up the profits; Jerry Wolfe to Maria Santiago, email, July 27, 2003.

27. The notebooks are in the Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul; 1999 catalog, College of Visual Arts Records, MHS.

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