

The New York Etching Club Minutes

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C O N N E X I O N S

Rice University, Houston, Texas

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Chapter 1

Acknowledgments¹

External Image

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1.1 Acknowledgments

In 1998, Ms. Roberta Waddell, Curator of the New York Public Library Print Collection, started me on my journey with the New York Etching Club. Her passion for prints, printmakers, art history, and discovery is a continuing source of inspiration, and I am grateful for her support and guidance through my years of research at the library. I also would like to thank the library's unique staff of associates in the microfilm division, whose patience and creative approach contributed broadly to this effort.

I owe a great deal of appreciation to historian, writer, and print dealer Ms. Rona Schneider for alerting me to the existence of the New York Etching Club minutes, and pointing me in the direction of the National Academy of Design. Rona's patience, curiosity, sense of humor, and generosity were a constant source of motivation. Her professional perspective and personal influence can be found throughout this book.

I am deeply indebted to the National Academy of Design for providing me a photocopy of the minutes; to Ms. Annette Blaugrund, then Executive Director of the National Academy, for allowing me permission to proceed with the publishing project; and to Mr. Marshall Price for his assistance with several technical matters.

Mr. and Mrs. Dave Williams provided me virtually unrestricted access to their world-class nineteenth-century print collection at the Print Research Foundation in Stamford, Connecticut. This made it possible for me to bring the minutes alive with reproductions of period etchings. I cannot thank them enough for their support and generosity. Their excellent staff, including Emily Hall, deserves mention for its always professional and cheerful assistance.

Martin Hopkinson, former archivist of the Royal Society of Painter Printmakers, who graciously conducted critical research in London for this project, also deserves acknowledgment. I remain indebted to him for to his generosity and enthusiasm.

Marilyn Kushner, PhD, another professional role model of mine, gracefully provided publishing advice, editorial perspective, and a preface to this book. It has been a privilege to share the development of this project with her.

Editor Bernard Rittersporn warrants special mention for the commitment and long hours he dedicated to this project. Another outstanding editor, Pat Kirkham, contributed greatly to the structure of my introduction. Both served repeatedly as a source of encouragement.

¹This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m19784/1.2/>>.

Graphic designer Lou Netter's work on the overall layout and design of this book, coupled with his lively artistic touch, has made for a timely and personal approach to the project. I am most thankful for his patience and commitment. Close friend and graphic designer Rina Drucker Root also deserves recognition for her early contributions to the format of the book and many later recommendations.

Mentor Will Barnet and I spent many afternoons over the last ten years discussing early American artist etching during our visits to Gramercy Park. Having crossed the path of more than one of the New York Etching Club members during his early career, he added unparalleled life to this book.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Fred Moody, Editor-in-Chief of Rice University Press. It was Fred who first embraced my vision for a digital and traditional approach to publishing this book. His skillful guidance of our working relationship has continuously been a great source of inspiration and excitement. I will remain most grateful for the seeing through of this project with him, and creating in the process one of the most unique print world references available.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Anne-Rose van den Bossche, for her enduring patience during the years when great portions of this project were laid out on our dining-room table. Without her support, love, and remarkable gift for listening, this project would never have been completed.

Chapter 2

Preface¹

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2.1 Preface

It all began in 1877, when thirteen artists “gathered together in the studio of a brother artist, ‘to assist’ in the production of a print.”² Such was the founding of the New York Etching Club, later to be called the Society of American Etchers.³ The timing was ripe: New York galleries were showing etchings; collectors were amassing print collections; and there was an active group of American etchers working in Venice.⁴

While the etching renaissance that occurred in Europe in the 1860s and in the United States in the 1870s and 1880s is well known, the documented activities of the New York Etching Club have not been broadly available to scholars, collectors and other interested parties until now. The publication of this volume offers us an invaluable gaze into the world of late-nineteenth century American printmaking, and indeed American art in general.

Quite obviously, the history of the etching club and its exhibitions as placed into a broader art historical context by Stephen Fredericks will become a seminal document in the study of this etching renaissance. Not only does it note salient events of the group, but it also references other graphic exhibitions in the 1870s and 1880s. On a broader scale, one will now be able to glean data regarding chronologies of the artists involved, when they were in New York, where they lived, and what they were doing during this period. We can learn which members, at certain times, were not in New York (and at times why they were not present). The minutes also give us a glimpse into the finances of the print world and, indeed, the art world in general. Similarly, seemingly mundane activities are accounted (for example, the impending visit of “Dr. Seymour Hayden of London” is recorded in the minutes of 16 October 1882). Such notations can lead scholars down heretofore unknown roads.

In short, this volume will become vital to anyone who seeks to broaden the window into late nineteenth-century American art and to help explicate issues of American art and culture at that time. American printmaking studies owes a note of thanks to Stephen Fredericks for making a contribution that will serve the field for years to come.

Marilyn S. Kushner, PhD, Curator and Head, Department of Prints, Photographs, and Architectural Collections, New-York Historical Society

¹This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m19782/1.2/>>.

²Catalogue of the New York Etching Club Exhibition (1882), n.p.

³The decision to rename the club was made in 1882. “Minutes of the Society of American Etchers,” 31 March 1882, n.p.

⁴For a good overview of the entire period see James Watrous, **A Century of American Printmaking, 1880-1980** (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

Chapter 3

About This Book¹

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3.1 About This Book

The primary reason for publishing this book is to make the minutes of the New York Etching Club accessible to other researchers and scholars. To that end, our edition is as true a "typewritten" copy of the handwritten original as possible. That is, the minutes are presented precisely as they were written down in the minutes' book. I have made virtually no corrections of spelling, grammar or punctuation errors. Without exception, every word, notation, abbreviation, hyphenation, and space is recorded as entered in the original. Misspellings of artists' names, in particular, occur constantly throughout the minutes, and two different spellings of an artist's surname in a single entry are common. These are left uncorrected, and everyday nineteenth-century English and abbreviations in use at the time are also preserved. Thus everything about the original appears as authentically as possible without interpretation or editing.

The original minutes were recorded in a tablet-like notebook measuring approximately 5 x 7 inches and covered with a black-and-white marbled paper familiar to all grade-school children. The pages in the notebook are lined. All of the minutes were recorded with pen and mostly in black ink. They were written largely in a beautiful, even elegant, nineteenth-century script that at times is also nearly indecipherable. There are no illustrations of any kind. The New York Etching Club secretaries responsible for the minutes began with James D. Smillie, the club's principal founder. Smillie was followed, in order, by James Craig Nicoll, William H. Shelton, Alexander Schilling, Charles Frederick William Mielatz, Henry Farrer, and Frederick Dielman. There is clear evidence that James D. Smillie filled in over the years—often anonymously—as secretary.

The first six pages of the original minutes book were left intentionally blank. Hand-numbered pages and text begin on the seventh page, which is numbered "7," and end on the page numbered 23, after which the pages are unnumbered. Because these first seventeen pages look more finished in appearance than the following pages, and are somewhat more grammatically consistent, it is likely that Smillie recorded them elsewhere, then copied them into the minutes book sometime between February and December 1879. This conclusion is supported by a reference in the February 10, 1879, minutes to 85 cents being spent on a "Book for minutes."

The minutes tend to err on the side of discretion, the secretaries taking care to protect reputations and honor friendships. There is little emotion and rarely is there direct mention of controversy among the members. The minutes also fail to provide a comprehensive record of the members' exhibitions, catalogue and portfolio publications, as well as most public-relations efforts.

¹This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m19785/1.2/>>.

Exactly how and under what circumstances the minute-taking came to an end is unknown. When the extant records abruptly stop in December 1893, the mood seems optimistic and forward-looking.

The minutes as presented in this book are illustrated with prints culled mainly from the extraordinary collection of Mr. and Mrs. Dave Williams, held at The Print Research Foundation in Stamford, Connecticut. Use of the foundation's archival research records made it possible in most instances to place the reproductions in the minutes for the year in which they were shown in New York Etching Club exhibitions. Most of the remaining reproductions were made from originals that appeared as illustrations in exhibition catalogues published by the New York Etching Club or other period publications.

Stephen A. Fredericks

October 29, 2008

Chapter 4

Introduction: The Birth of American Artist Printmaking¹

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In the 1882 catalogue for the New York Etching Club's first independent exhibition at the National Academy of Design, club founder James David Smillie published a colorful, highly romanticized account² of the group's first meeting, held five years before:

About twenty interested artists had gathered one evening, by invitation, in the studio of a brother artist, "to assist." The scene was no doubt fittingly picturesque. Let us imagine a central light, properly shaded, above a table upon which are the simple appliances of etching. Aloft, a great sky-light is filled with dusky gloom; remote corners recede into profound shadow; easels loom up bearing vaguely defined work in progress; screens and rugs, bric-a-brac, all the aesthetic properties that we may believe to be the correct furniture of such a place, assume proper and subordinate relations. Our imaginations having furnished the background, let us go on with the history.

*Those twenty interested artists formed an impatient circle and hurried through the forms of organization, anxious for the commencement of the real work of the evening. Copper **plates** were displayed; **grounds** were laid (that is, delicate coatings of resinous wax were spread upon the plates); etchings were made (that is, designs scratched with fine points or needles through such grounds upon the copper); trays of **mordant** bubbled (that is, the acid corroded the metal exposed by the scratched lines, the surface elsewhere being protected from such action by the wax ground), to the discomfort of noses, the eager wearers of which were crowding and craning to see the work in progress.*

This process being completed, in cleansing the wax grounds and varnish from the plates the fumes of turpentine succeeded those of acid. Then an elegant brother who had dined out early in the evening, laid aside his broadcloth, rolled up the spotless linen of his sleeves, and became for the

¹This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m19783/1.4/>>.

²The New York Etching Club Exhibition Catalogue, 1882. This account was reprinted a few years later in J.R.W. Hitchcock's *Etching in America* (New York: White, Stokes & Allen, 1886), a telling indication of the late-nineteenth-century public's growing interest in the new art of etching. Each copy of the book was illustrated with an impression from the etching plate created during the technical demonstration at the first meeting.

time an enthusiastic printer. The smear of thick, pasty ink was deftly rubbed into the lines just corroded, and as deftly cleaned from the polished surface; the damped sheet of thin, silky Japan paper was spread upon the gently warmed plate; the heavy steel roller of the printing press, with its triple facing of thick, soft blanket, was slowly rolled over it, and in another moment, finding scant room, the first-born of the New York Etching Club was being tenderly passed from hand to hand."

Smillie's catalog copy notwithstanding, the meeting was both a gathering of artists and a business initiative. Smillie and his constituents were intent on creating and serving a potentially lucrative market in the emerging American art world, which was characterized at the time by a gold rush of artist organization. American industries of all kinds were expanding, and New York's youthful native art world, following suit, saw talented and ambitious artists claiming newly created niches. Smillie himself had worked towards forming an etching club for years.

In 1877, the year the New York Etching Club was founded, there was no recognized arts capital in the United States. But within a relatively short time, building on the strength of established cultural institutions, enormous population growth, the Industrial Revolution, and a post- Civil War economic expansion, there was an explosion of artist organization locally that would eventually see New York City take center stage on the national art scene, with graphic arts at the center of the action.

New York was replete with well-known artists' studio buildings in the late 1870s. Most of the artists at the first meeting of the club lived or worked in one of three—including Smillie's studio building, where that first meeting was held. The attendees knew each other from other associations, including the National Academy of Design, the Salmagundi Sketch Club, and the American Water Color Society. (In reality, the New York Etching Club was an offshoot of the American Water Color Society.)

The Industrial Revolution brought along with it a rapid expansion of the graphic arts. Men and women all over New York were filling—and endeavoring to control—all manner of newly created markets. When the New York Etching Club was formed, there were already models for such societies in New York, and Smillie was also well aware of organizational activities among etchers in France and Great Britain, and the staging for such in Philadelphia and Boston. Exclusive artists' clubs could offer many benefits, from the sharing of technical expertise to promoting artists and their genres. Smillie was eager to promote etching and see it develop into a viable business endeavor. By 1882, his work was producing dividends: The public embraced the New York Etching Club's first stand-alone exhibition, and members' works sold well.

The original twenty-one members of the New York Etching Club were all established and even important artists in other genres. Most were experienced painters; others were photographers, architects, designers, or recognized for their commercial trade work in engraving, lithography and mezzotint. There were a few experienced etchers among them, but none was a practicing "artist-printmaker" by today's standards. With a few exceptions—most notably, Robert Swain Gifford and Henry Farrer—etching as a medium for artistic expression was new to most of the club's first members.

Smillie's ambitions aside, many of the etching novices appear to have been motivated to learn etching more out of aesthetic interest than business interest at first. There was, after all, no real market for "artist prints" in the club's early years.³ At the club's founding, no one foresaw the boom in the collecting of etchings that lay just ahead. Prior to late 1881, the New York Etching Club functioned as much as a social club organized around a growing interest among artists in "free hand" or "painter etching" as it was a group interested in becoming serious printmakers of saleable works.

In 1883, for example, the noted critic M. G. van Rensselaer reflected⁴ upon the New York Etching Club

³The etchers did not create the market for print sales in America. On the contrary, there had existed for decades a well-developed market for decorative engravings, lithographs, wood engravings, mezzotints and reproductive etchings. The new "artist etchings," or "painter etchings," however, were a departure from mass-produced prints. Lithographic artists largely shared a common graphic art style, as was the case with wood and metal plate engraving. Broadly standardized graphic arts styles rendered these media predictable in appearance and somewhat commonplace in the eyes of the public. The evolution of the "painter etcher" provided many of those already working in the printing trades an artistic outlet and untapped market for their "free hand etchings."

⁴M.G. van Rensselaer in *The Century Magazine*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, February 1883, page 486. (<<http://cnx.org/content/m19783/latest/Rensselaer.pdf>>)

as:

an association formed by a few earnest students of the art to incite activity by brotherly reunions and to spread its results by annual exhibitions. The young society went through that struggle for existence which seems ordained for babes of every sort—even for those which, like this artistic infant, are well fathered and tenderly watched over. The public was indifferent, and some of the club's own members were too much absorbed in other work even to heed that condition of membership which prescribed that each should produce at least two plates every year. But though its survival was due to the pains and sacrifices of a few men who deserve well of the republic, the Etching Club is more potent than any other influence in aiding the progress of the art among us and in winning the public to its love.

Early on, many of the practitioners of etching were fascinated by the process, including the accidents that could occur while the plate was submerged in mordant. Chance atmospheric accents and the plates that produced them were prized by the American artists. They quickly found means and techniques for controlling their “accidents,” and the employment of these new techniques enhanced the general feeling of creative freedom associated with etching. Artistically derived special effects differentiated the etchings from the highly standardized prints associated with engraving and lithography—arts dominated by schools of technique. The more artists experimented with the etching process, the more they shared their technical discoveries at club meetings, in private studios, and in books and articles they wrote. This widespread sharing of technological discoveries set the stage for a practice and code of conduct that is at the core of American artist printmaking today.

During the earlier years of the New York Etching Club, the color and quality of printing papers took on great importance to the printmakers. They perfected *Chine collé*, a paper laminating process, and began experimenting with alternate print matrixes, such as silk. Soon the atmospheric effects of palm-wiping plates (a signature of many early club member prints) gave way to new methods of carrying tone. Larger and larger plates were being worked by important artists, and by the late 1880s color inks began appearing regularly in prints. Soft ground, a technique that could impart elements of drawing and some of the qualities of lithography, was widely introduced in artist studios and used to superb effect. The end result of all of this technical development and aesthetic specialization was the division of artists into roughly defined competitive schools of practice.

The burgeoning popularity of the new free hand etchings during the mid-1880s coincided with a post-Civil War boom that helped create an expansive American market for art. The boom stimulated advances in graphic arts printing and the development of new reproduction technologies in mechanical engraving, photography, photogravure, and color lithography. These events helped usher in the establishment of new fine art print publishers, dealers and collectors, along with a consumer market for new magazines and books full of art criticism and articles—illustrated with original etchings. The merger and success of these efforts formed a new paradigm of sorts as artists' clubs and societies for nearly every aspect of fine art appeared in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati, among other large American cities. And at the hub of much of the excitement for most of the 1880s was the etching needle.

It is important to note that the rise of etching in the late nineteenth century was not a movement unto itself. Labeling the period's activities in etching as an isolated movement discounts the extraordinary activity in related graphic arts—and their importance to the artists. What began in 1877 with the formation of the New York Etching Club can best be placed as part of a golden age in the arts generally and the already flourishing graphic arts movement in America at the end of the nineteenth century. A great deal of the appeal of free hand etching to both artists and their public was rooted in an already well-established taste for drawing—the most fundamental of the graphic arts. Interest in etching was supported by a broader movement that included work in graphite, charcoals, pastel, crayon, and innumerable forms of commercial illustration work.



Figure 4.1: Stephen Parrish, **An Etcher's Studio**, 1884. Etching. (Courtesy of Ms. Rona Schneider.)

Available for free at Connexions <<http://cnx.org/content/col10663/1.1>>

Our public libraries and private institutions hold a staggering amount of material and supporting documentation on this graphic arts movement. Such publications as **American Art Review**, **The Art Review**, **The Art Journal**, **The Magazine of Art**, **The Critic**, **The Quarterly Illustrator**, **Scribner's**, **The Century Magazine**, and **The Art Amateur** contained innumerable announcements, reviews and criticism of graphic art exhibitions, and reproductions of individual prints. Countless other illustrated publications were designed around and focused upon their graphic art content.

In the years just prior to the founding of the New York Etching Club, both the Salmagundi Sketch Club and the Art Students League of New York (both still active today) were organized around drawing and sketching classes. As early as 1876, the American Water Color Society was setting aside separate space—the “Black & White Room”—for the exhibition and sale of drawings, charcoals, and etchings. Shortly after Smillie launched the New York Etching Club, the Tile Club and Scratcher's Club were established, as were numerous similar groups in related graphic art media, including woodcut and lithography.

The minutes reproduced in this volume highlight many of the roles played by the New York Etching Club in this larger movement. They also highlight the club's influence: In 1880, for example, in a sequence of events that began with the November 1880 minutes entry, the etchers were invited to exhibit both at the February 1881 exhibit of the American Water Color Society, to be held at the American Academy of Design, and at the Salmagundi Sketch Club exhibit, to be held in the same venue in December 1880. Opting enthusiastically for the latter, etching club members accounted for thirty-four of the 130 etchings by nearly fifty artists exhibited at the “The Third Annual Exhibit of Black & White Art.” Numerous the other etchings were contributed by such future club members as Thomas Moran and Stephen Parrish. No etchings were exhibited at the American Water Color Society's February 1881 exhibition.⁵

It would have surprised no one then familiar with the prevailing art world that the New York Etching Club artists jumped at the chance to exhibit in the Salmagundi Club exhibition rather than the American Water Color Society's. The significance of this decision has been widely overlooked, however. Not only were the early Salmagundi Sketch Club exhibitions quite popular with both artists and the viewing public, but the New York Etching Club members also wanted to be aligned with other active graphic artists, and have their new etchings seen alongside other widely practiced forms of graphic art. When their members were granted the autonomy they apparently sought, the New York Etching Club returned to the watercolorists' fold in February 1882,⁶ with a triumphant showing of works by notable artists of the day, including Frederick S. Church, Samuel Colman, Stephen J. Ferris, Seymour Haden (founder of the Royal Society of Painter Etchers, London), Thomas Moran, Stephen Parrish (Maxfield's father), Joseph Pennell, Charles A. Platt, R. Gifford Swain, J. A. McNeil Whistler, and James D. Smillie.

By the mid-1880s, members of the New York Etching Club could be forgiven for being a little heady about their success and the popularity of their work. New books about etching and printmaking, including S. R. Koehler's **Etching: An Outline of its Technical Processes and its History** (1885), and J. R. W. Hitchcock's **Etching in America** (1886), were appearing with increasingly frequency. Commercial production of new print editions and group portfolios abounded, and exhibition opportunities for artist printmakers were expanding exponentially. But just below the surface, subtle cracks in the club's foundation were beginning to appear.

In August 1886, two short, rather enthusiastic notices referencing the New York Etching Club appeared

⁵See The American Water Color Society's 1881 exhibition catalog. See also **The Salmagundi Sketch Club's Third Annual Exhibition of Black & White Art**, catalogue documenting the December 18, 1880, to January 1, 1881, show at the National Academy of Design, New York City.

⁶The American Water Color Society had enormous influence on the development, support, and organizational structure of the New York Etching Club. James D. Smillie was the watercolor society's president in 1877, the year he founded the etching club. Throughout the etching club's active exhibiting years, their elected and appointed officers were often interchangeable, by name if not title, with those of the watercolorists' society. At times the organizational ties between the New York Etching Club and the American Water Color Society made for a virtual identity crisis. For example, the February 11, 1881 minutes record the unanimous decision by members for a resolution “applying to The Water Color Society for space in their next exhibition.” The minutes also note that “the President [R. Swain Gifford] and Secretary [Henry Farrer] were directed to bring the matter before the Water Color Society at its next meeting.” The officers of the AWCS for the 1880/1881 season included Henry Farrer (Secretary), and a Board of Control made up of New York Etching Club members J. C. Nicoll, R. Swain Gifford, and Frederick S. Church.

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