

# DUST AND DREAM

BY CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

Even as rust  
Hides the sword's gleam,  
So earth's dull dust  
Obscures heaven's dream.

Yet do I trust  
Death's hour supreme;  
For, being dust,  
I shall live the dream!

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## SOME MODERN AMERICAN ETCHERS

BY CLEVELAND PALMER



IN an anonymous article entitled "L'Eau-forte est à la mode," which appeared in the *Revue Anecdotique* for April, 1862, Charles Baudelaire wrote as follows:

Quite recently, a young American artist, M. Whistler, exhibited at the Martinet gallery a series of subtle etchings, as spontaneous as improvisation and inspiration, representing the banks of the Thames; marvellous confused masses of rigging, yards and cordage; a chaos of fogs, furnaces and corkscrew spirals of smoke; the poetry, profound and complicated, of a vast capital.

Although Whistler was by no means the first American etcher, and although the Thames series, executed in 1859, was not the first work from his hand, the history of American etching as a branch of the great modern art of the aqua-fortist, may be said to date from this recognition of the young man who became the master, by the print-loving French poet, the discoverer and champion of Charles Meryon.

Yet it was not until twenty years later that there was any active or widespread awakening of interest in etching on American soil. Mrs. Schuyler van

Rensselaer gave an account of this awakening in her article on "American Etchers," which appeared in *The Century Magazine* in 1883. Our representative etchers then, a generation ago, were the ten Americans who had just been elected members of the newly organised English "Society of Etchers." They were Mrs. Thomas Moran and Messrs. Thomas Moran, Farrer, Falconer, Swain Gifford, James Smillie, Bellows, Parrish, F. S. Church, and Frank Duveneck. Mr. Pennell had already attracted attention by his sketches of old Philadelphia, but Otto H. Bacher and Charles A. Platt could still be passed over with briefest mention as promising youngsters, hardly to be distinguished from a score of others, most of whom are now as completely forgotten as the obscure pioneers of the thirties and forties of the last century.

Reviewing her article only a little more than three years later, Mrs. van Rensselaer herself declared that it read like "a chapter of ancient history." Already, in that brief intervening space of time, rapid progress had been made. Several men now displayed such marked superiority that the field became narrowed, and many names on her earlier list became clearly negligible. In the exhibition held in New York in the winter of

1885-86, Parrish and Platt carried off the honours between them, according to her statement. The pairing is suggestive, because it throws into relief the contrast between old tendencies and new that was beginning to present itself. Parrish remains to-day the principal representative of the older school, with its pictorial ideals and painstaking methods. It was of him that the late Frederick Keppel used to tell how Seymour Haden, when shown one of Parrish's large and intricate plates, exclaimed: "That young man does not know what the sense of fatigue in making a picture is!"

Such a remark constitutes a serious criticism of the work of an artist. For, to be made conscious, in viewing a picture, of the effort involved in its execution, is to experience a considerable diminution of the pleasure derived from it. And this is particularly true of an etching, the very essence of which should be ease and spontaneity. Few things are finer in their way than some of Parrish's carefully wrought skies. But the fact remains that even finer skies have been created with far fewer lines—and even without any lines at all!—and so his method must be declared inferior. It is, however, the method adopted by nearly all etchers at the beginning, and we are reminded of the fine response of the young American etcher of to-day, Mr. Ernest D. Roth, who, when expostulated with for his over-elaboration and excess of detail, replied that he would begin to leave things out when he was sure that he was able to put them in. Even Whistler began in the same way, and, in fact, almost the only modern etcher who can be thought of as having displayed remarkable selective power in his first plates is the Frenchman, Lalanne.

The only trouble with Parrish, therefore, was that he never entirely "grew up" in this respect, and continued all his life making fine, imaginative, but somewhat overcharged plates. It was on this ground that Mrs. van Rensselaer awarded the palm to his younger rival, Platt, whose accomplishment in "the great *art of omitting* . . . is what gave his prints their simplicity, their harmony, their breadth and unity of effect—what made it impossible to pick flaws in them as we

could in the more poetical and fervid work of Mr. Parrish."

Yet, whatever the differences between them, these two men then stood together as equally representative of what still remained, at that period, a characteristic trait of American etching, namely, its fondness for native subjects. So far only a few, even of the younger men, had gone abroad to study with Whistler, and to emulate him in the sketching of Venetian canal scenes and palaces. Chief among these were Bacher and Duveneck, who thus became the pioneers of a whole army of American etchers since then. These have made the city on the Lagoon their Mecca and, so far as subject is concerned, our modern school might almost as well be styled the "Venetian" as the "American." Venice is indeed the etchers' paradise, their siren mistress; and so potent is her spell that it is sometimes difficult for them, on returning to their native land, not to see and interpret this in terms of her beauty. Thus Mr. Pennell's first exclamation as, sailing up the harbour, he saw New York after a long absence, during which the tall forms of her skyscraping structures had risen like the towers of a dream town, is said to have been: "It is as beautiful as Venice!" And the series of New York plates that he subsequently produced are perhaps to be regarded less as literal statements of fact than as so many gorgeous romantic fancies woven out of his golden Italian memories.

It was in 1884 that Mr. Pennell first went abroad, and that he first began fully to find himself. Since then his career as an etcher has been one unbroken series of successes. None of our other roving "knights of the needle" has travelled so extensively throughout Europe, or pictured the romantic aspects of so many old world shrines. He has thus been the most popular of our etchers, while his cleverness in recording his impressions has delighted connoisseurs and collectors of prints all the world over. The late Frederick Keppel, after Whistler's death, proclaimed Mr. Pennell the greatest living American etcher. He is the etcher *par excellence*—one, that is to say, who draws directly on the plate without preliminary studies. Mr. Keppel tells, in