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Gems of Art on Paper: Illustrated American Fiction and Poetry, 1785–1885

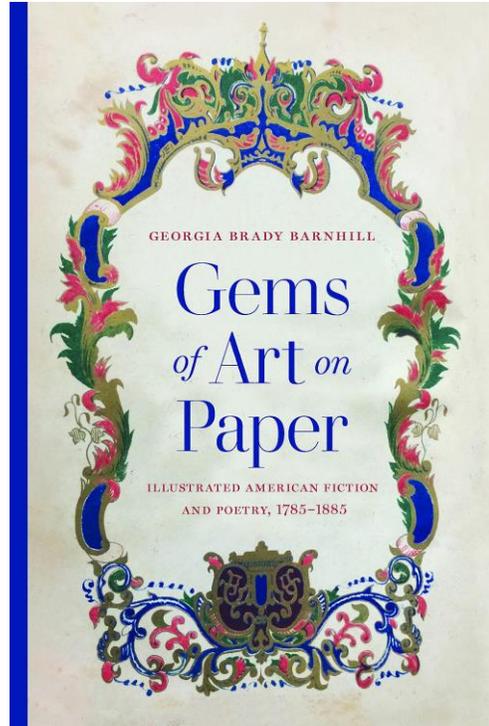
By Georgia Brady Barnhill

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Gems of Art on Paper: Illustrated American Fiction and Poetry, 1785–1885 by Georgia Brady Barnhill is the fifty-third volume in the University of Massachusetts Press series *Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book*. More than forty years in development, this long-awaited study is the product of Barnhill's expert research, first as the Andrew W. Mellon Curator of Graphic Arts at the American Antiquarian Society and, in recent years, as the director of the society's Center for Historical American Visual Culture (CHAViC). We, the readers, benefit enormously from Barnhill's extended scholarship, which provides a deep dive into areas previously marginalized or completely disregarded by existing surveys of the period and medium. The result is a book ripe with facts and figures drawn from countless hours spent scouring through archives and record books. Barnhill asks: Who was responsible for the selection and production of an individual illustration? What came first, the plates or the text? What was the cost associated with production? And who benefitted from the sale? These questions and more are answered with specificity and intriguing personal stories, which follow the production of an illustrated book from conception to critical response.

While the spotlight is on publications based in the United States, Barnhill demonstrates that these works were, in fact, international, as the pool of American artists, authors, and readers needed time and teamwork to develop. One case study focuses on the thirty-five American editions of *The Seasons* by the British author James Thomson, published between 1764 and 1820, many illustrated by British artists, whose drawings or paintings were engraved by amateur American artists. This intermixing of Old and New World talents was a necessary



part of building an American market that would eventually produce its own artists and writers, as well as an audience to support it.

Tackling one hundred years of publishing history requires a tight focus, and Barnhill pursues the task in four loosely chronological chapters, charting publishing genres as they developed out of technological innovations and public reception. Beginning with chapter 1, “Ways and Means for Publishing Illustrated Poetry, 1785–1820,” she explores the wide circle of individuals necessary for the production of works on paper, including publishers, designers, engravers, printers, binders, distributors, and readers. Many early practitioners remain unknown, even to Barnhill, while other publishers, such as Isaiah Thomas and Mathew Carey, left extensive archives that she has mined with a connoisseur’s eye for detail.

Records highlight the financial risks of printing and publishing in the years following the American Revolutionary War, both with and without the added expense of illustrations. At that time readership of fiction and poetry was primarily limited to wealthy white women, referred to in advertising as the “genteel readers.” Once Ebenezer Andrews joined Thomas in 1788, the firm instituted a division of labor that made profitability possible, even for illustrated publications, and engraved plates began to appear. Barnhill has uncovered a surprising cast of characters that includes a number of women authors involved in American publications, such as Sarah Wentworth Morton, who wrote *Ouabi: Or the Virtues of Nature*, the first illustrated book of verse by an American author published by Thomas and Andrews in 1790.

Gems of Art on Paper is a study of materiality rather than sociology or theory, which is immediately apparent in the way the book’s own seventy-six illustrations are captioned: each begins with the medium of the print, followed by the artist and engraver, and last the book’s title and author. It is the print processes, argues Barnhill, and the technologies making them possible, that shaped the development of American book illustration. It is not, for example, until the rise of steel engraving (the only truly American innovation in reproductive printmaking) and then wood engraving that plates within text make more than a rare appearance. As a result of this emphasis on technology, we are persuaded that each existing plate, no matter how humble, is worthy of study.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American engravers came from a wide variety of backgrounds and exhibited disparate abilities, as there was no European-style apprenticeship system available to them. Their earnings were limited, as the publishers claimed ownership of the physical metal plates and reprinted them in subsequent publications without payment or acknowledgment. A few talented engravers were able to forge more prestigious careers as designers of plates or even painters. One example is the New Jersey artist Asher B. Durand, who learned both to draw and to engrave his copperplates while apprenticing with the engraver Peter Maverick. He went on to create oils on canvas as well as engravings that influenced a new generation of American artists. To her credit, Barnhill concedes that few contemporaneous engravings of this early period rise to the beauty of Durand’s artistry, but they were first steps toward the creation of an American visual culture. The future would bring better writers, artists, and critics, as well as an expanded readership willing to pay for their work.

Chapter 2, “Gems of Art for the Parlor Table” focuses on the popular nineteenth-century genre of illustrated literary annuals. The audience for these books was enormous, the equivalent of a viral phenomenon today, and competition for the market was intense. Newly

introduced technologies of steel engraving and lithography allowed for larger print runs and multiple contributors to a single volume. In general, these books contained between six and twelve illustrations and dozens of poems, stories, and essays, which necessitated a complex web of editors, designers, plate and text printers, publicity agents, and distributors. The record keeping coordinating these myriad efforts alone must have been exhausting, evident in Barnhill's example of William Cullen Bryant, who was invited to compose a poem to match an engraving by George Hatch, after a drawing by Henry Inman. Extended correspondence followed as to whether the image could be matched with a verse, and in the end Bryant declined the commission, forcing the publishers to start over with another author.

The marvel of Barnhill's study is the detailed analysis of both artistic and financial aspects of individual projects. She gives us the cost of publishing 4,500 copies of the *Atlantic Souvenir* in 1827 as \$5,040.00, noting this figure does not take into account the cost of books (\$1.67 each) given to the authors in lieu of cash. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, for example, received ten dollars for a single poem, supplemented with copies of James Fenimore Cooper's novels. Thomas Doughty received thirty dollars for two landscapes; William Guy Wall earned twenty-six dollars for one design; and seven anonymous engravers received between sixty and one hundred dollars each, for a total of \$762. Barnhill's inclusion of these particulars, rather than slowing the narrative, answers long-standing questions regarding the specifics of early publications and provides the seeds for future scholarship.

Both technically difficult and time consuming, mezzotints were rarely used in early American poetry and fiction illustration, which is Barnhill's focus. The mezzotints of John Sartain are one exception. His work first appeared in an 1831 literary annual, and over the next thirty years he embellished more than sixty volumes, bringing Sartain both a lucrative career and significant public acclaim. Along with the development of colored lithographs and, later, chromolithography, the few publications with these processes had limited runs and remained outside the reach of all but a few wealthy readers.

In the United States, the copying of designs or paintings without acknowledgment or payment was common, since the professional status for artists was still developing. Change in this practice is noted in chapter 3, "The Rise of the Illustrator," in which Barnhill highlights the flourishing careers of a new generation of American artists and printmakers. She spotlights five artists: David Claypoole Johnston, Hammatt Billings, F. O. C. Darley, Augustus Hoppin, and Thomas Nast. In addition, this chapter chronicles the rise of the American novel, side by side with the demand for illustrations. Even for well-documented publications, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Barnhill uncovers new facts, leading to a deeper understanding of the publication's history. First serialized in the *National Era* newspaper without illustrations, Stowe's popular book was published in an edition of five thousand with six full-page wood engravings by Billings in 1852, when publisher John P. Jewett made the bold decision to invest in embellishments for the book. Due to its wild success, a second American edition was assembled that same year, containing a total of 116 illustrations and requiring a massive effort to design, engrave, print, and distribute into the hands of the anxious public lining up to purchase it.

While Stowe's success represents a significant moment in the history of American illustrated books, it was not unique, and Barnhill offers fascinating narratives for each of the other four artists. In 1848, for example, Darley provided two sets of outline drawings for the influential American Art-Union's *Illustrations of Rip Van Winkle* and *Illustrations of the Legend of*

Sleepy Hollow, publications that were sent to each of the organization's 1,475 members. Approximately eighteen thousand plates were lithographed by Napoleon Sarony and Henry B. Major in New York City, providing a substantial income to the printers and significant acclaim for the artist.

Of course, not all careers were equally successful, as Barnhill discovers in her research of D. C. Johnston, who (we are surprised to learn) made his living largely on the production of dog collars and name plates. Nast, best known as a political caricaturist whose graphic satires appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, had a somewhat neglected career in children's books and illustrated fiction. His popularity eventually led to a demand for reproductions of his drawings as engravings, lithographs, and photomechanical book plates, demonstrating the myriad printmaking mediums available by the mid-nineteenth century. Nast also serves as an example of the volatility of his profession, which ultimately left him penniless and his family destitute.

By the mid-nineteenth century, publishers no longer had to look to Europe for competent artists and printers, as a talented and trained American workforce emerged. Artists and engravers could have full-time, successful careers in New York, Boston, or Philadelphia. Combing through the personal diaries and cost books of these five artists, Barnhill chronicles the full production of works on paper, including the time necessary to design and engrave them, the editing process that accepted or rejected work, and the cost of various printing techniques. It is a surprise to find that this period was the first time that the artist who conceived and drew an illustration received payment equal to the engraver who prepared the matrix for the printer.

Saving the best for last, chapter 4, "Artists and the Gift Book, 1840–1885," introduces us to the luxury publication, offering the finest of American poetry and fiction, along with the highest level of artistic imagery. Organized by printing processes, the chapter follows the shift from copper to steel to wood engraving, then to stone lithography, and finally to the photomechanical revolution. The layout, size, and placement of images, along with the texture of the papers, colors, inks, and added necessary handwork, all contributed to the hefty financial considerations of these limited editions. Barnhill notes the significant development of image vignetting within the text, requiring specific layout and printing, rather than the conventional rectangular plate that could be easily printed separately and bound into the volume later. The informality of the vignette gives a new immediacy to the page, breaking down the separation of the artist, the author, and the reader, in step with the development of the modern American novel.

Gems of Art on Paper brings the reader into the 1880s, when photomechanical technology displaced wood engraving, engraving on metal, and lithography, and Barnhill wisely ends her study there. Although original photographs are rarely found in large editions, Barnhill briefly highlights the transfer of the photographic negative to a permanent-ink print with the illustrated editions of Boston publisher James Osgood. By this time, images were ubiquitous in all genres of publishing, although not every writer was enthusiastic about having pictures side by side with their text. Writing to James Fields, of Ticknor and Fields, Longfellow griped, "I should be better pleased if there were to be no engravings. . . . I fear and tremble. Bad Pictures are so bad. Can you not possibly do without?" And then, as if resigned to the inevitable, he wrote, "I suppose wherever there is a blank space you will hang up a picture" (241). These charming anecdotes, enriching her unparalleled scholarship, make Barnhill's book a delight.

There are multiple barriers to the study of early American book illustrations. Painting and sculpture reign over other art media; modern and contemporary periods dominate most doctoral studies; and even within scholarship of works on paper, book illustration is consigned to the lowest rung of artistic production. Yet Barnhill succeeds in challenging this hierarchy with a sparkling narrative filled with facts and figures, uncovering stories that have been previously ignored or unknown. She brings us the portable art museums of the period, whose illustrations introduced thousands of readers to a national cultural heritage, just as it was being invented. The book is a page-turner as well as a reference source, which fills a yawning gap in the history of American art and literature.