Asher B. Durand, long famous as the foremost American engraver and one of the founders of the American school of landscape painting, had the enterprise and versatility typical of the printmakers of this new country where circumstances prevented the formal academic routine of Europe. Although he was not a professional silversmith like Paul Revere, Durand, like many other American engravers, first learned the mechanics of his trade from tinkering with metals. His father was an all-around artisan, a watch repairer and gunsmit, who lived in a village in New Jersey and who mended Washington’s field glass during the Revolution. Durand wrote that as a boy he helped his father in “the manufacture of various metal and other trinkets, such as sleeve-buttons, arrow-heads, powder-horns, bows and cross-guns, and finally, the most absorbing one—engraving on copper plates—... which fixed my destiny.” He learned from his father and elder brothers to engrave “monograms and other devices.” “I was not content with this,” he said, “having shown some skill in drawing animals as well as the human figure, excited to do so by my admiration for the woodcuts in school books, and by the copper-plate engravings that fell in my way, especially by the tickets or cards of watchmakers placed in watch-cases, designed with one or two emblematical figures, and again by the simple vignettes on bank-notes. On examining these with a strong magnifier I could not refrain from imitating their, to me, wonderful mechanism.”

Manufacturing his own tools, Durand was so successful in his attempts at engraving that he was apprenticed in 1812 to Peter Maverick, “the most prominent writing engraver in the country,” at a charge of $100 a year. During the five years of apprenticeship, which ended in 1817 by his becoming Maverick’s partner, Durand was employed in copying English illustrations, vignettes for bank notes, and miscellaneous hack plates. He spent his evenings drawing from prints, the only models at hand, and studied the technique of engravings by Bartolozzi, Morghen, and Sharp. About 1817 he also attended the school of the antique at the Academy of Fine Arts in New York, which was open only before breakfast, from six to eight
in the morning. There he drew from the collection of casts which had been purchased abroad by Robert Livingstone, the first president of the Academy, when he was minister to France. Dunlap, who was keeper at the time, says that Durand was an artist before he came there to study, that his "skill in drawing far surpassed the keeper's," and that, "becoming intimate with Mr. Samuel Waldo, he received advice and instruction from that gentle- man respecting portraiture, which led to his execution of his first engraving in that department, where he now stands pre-eminent." Durand's head of a beggar after Waldo, his first independent engraving made directly from a painting, attracted the interest of Trumbull, who was looking for an engraver for his painting of the Declaration of Independence for the rotunda of the Capitol. Considering the price of $6,000 asked by the London engraver James Heath too high, Trumbull engaged Durand in 1820 to make the plate for him for $3,000. Because of this Durand's partnership with Maverick was dissolved. The big plate was finished in 1823, and printed by an Englishman named Neale. Although it was not a financial success, it pleased Trumbull greatly and ensured Durand's reputation as an engraver.

Established on his own in New York, Durand set to work on the different kinds of subjects by which engravers of the period were able to support themselves. Portraits had been the bread and butter of American artists since early colonial days. Durand engraved a series of divines which he called the most humiliating work he ever did. "I used to get them up in conjunction with the painter," he said. "The general public would not buy them, so we had to appeal to the ministers and the congregations; and hawking them about in this way, by personal appeals, I barely made a living by engraving them." These were followed by physicians, actors, and famous Americans for Herring's National Portrait Gallery, after Sully, Trumbull, Inman, and others, and some from Durand's own paintings. Both artist and engraver had a chance for more varied and sentimental work in popular illustrated annuals like The Atlantic Souvenir and The Talis-
The most far-reaching improvement in bank-note engraving, however, was the invention of Jacob Perkins of Newburyport, who was, among other things, a diesinker, employed for a time in making dies for coinage. In 1806 he wrote a paper explaining his invention, on which he had been working for five years, and for some time he continued to perfect his process. Perkins substituted steel for copper, which had previously been the standard material for engraved plates. The small bank-note designs were engraved on separate plates of soft steel, which were then hardened by a process he invented. These intaglio designs were transferred, under heavy pressure, in a transfer press to a soft steel cylinder, from one half to three inches wide, on which the designs then appeared in relief. The cylinders, or transfer rolls, were in turn hardened and served as dies from which a complete intaglio plate for a bank note could be rolled out in the press by combining a number of vignettes, portraits, or decorative and denominational designs in any variety desired. As may be seen in the Durand bank notes, the same design could be repeated on the notes of different banks. Perkins possibly got the idea of the transfer roll from the machine already in use for rolling the metal strips for coins. As pointed out by Henry Meier in “The Origin of the Printing and Roller Press” (Print Collector’s Quarterly, 1941), designs on coins had been printed from cylindrical intaglio dies as far back as the sixteenth century but the process was superseded. Perkins’ process became the accepted method of making bank notes, stock certificates, and bonds in this country. In 1816 he joined the Philadelphia bank-note firm of Murray, Draper, Fairman & Co. Because Perkins’ “stereotype plates” were thought to be impossible to
imitate, the firm was urged by the British minister to go to London to submit its process to the Bank of England, whose notes had recently been counterfeited. One of the visiting members of the firm described their reception: “Social hospitalities were extended to them, and their establishment was visited by throngs, from the royal Duke to the humble artisan. . . . For a time it was one of the lions of the metropolis.” But their services were not accepted by the Bank of England, which preferred its own simpler type of note. Sir William Congreve, the inventor, wrote a paper refuting all the firm’s arguments for their process as a means of preventing forgery and had the wood-engraver Branston copy part of an American note with a fidelity which seemed, to Congreve at least, devastating. Perkins stayed on in England, nevertheless, and with Charles Heath as partner produced much of the paper currency and, in 1840, the first British adhesive penny postage stamps. The superior workmanship of American bank-note engraving continued to supply a wide foreign market for many years.

About 1824 Asher Durand went into bank-note engraving in partnership with his brother Cyrus, the most ingenious of the mechanically minded Durand brothers. There seems to be disagreement as to whether Cyrus Durand or Asa Spencer was the first to invent the geometric lathe for engraving the intricate designs on bank notes. Probably each worked independently, improving on machines already in use. Cyrus also invented, among other things, a transferring machine. “Cyrus Durand,” Asher is said to have observed, “had things in his fingers that I do not have. I can engrave a portrait or picture but could not do with exactness the fine work that Cyrus can do.” Asher’s active part in bank-note engraving lasted until 1833, with several changes in the name of the firm—A. B. & C. Durand, Wright & Co., Durand, Perkins & Co., and so forth. Cyrus continued in the business many years longer, still using some of his brother’s vignettes. One of these is dated 1839, several years after Asher had officially given up engraving altogether.

Asher Durand’s personal contribution to bank-note engraving was the designing of vignettes of such originality and charm that they were extensively admired and imitated. Their style influenced the remarkably high standard of American bank-note design for many years afterwards. His training in drawing from casts was useful in devising graceful little classical allegorical figures which he set in contemporary scenes showing harbors, bridges, canal locks, and farms, with Indians and American eagles of “ferocious, spirited aspect, the real steel-trap look” desired by bank presidents. (Some of the drawings for his vignettes are now in the New York Public Library.) These fanciful little designs, in which, as in most of the “engravings” of the period, there is as much etching as line engraving, were particularly adapted to Durand’s training in delicate work and were at the same time an engaging expression of his artistic taste and that of his time. Of European academic derivation, their small size saved them from pretentiousness, and their literal domestic backgrounds from insipidity.

Durand was meanwhile working as steadily as he could at painting. His painstaking habits of study are recorded in his notebooks, which are filled with careful drawings—“Anatomical Notes collected while attending the Lectures of Dr. Post, 1824,” a book of physiognomies, and another of antique costume. He was one of the group of artists who broke away from the old Academy in 1825 and formed a Drawing Association, with Morse as president, which became the National Academy of Design in 1826. Durand was elected one of the charter members as an engraver, but he showed his paintings at the Academy exhibitions in the years that followed. On Sundays and holidays he went on expeditions to the Elysian Fields in Hoboken to paint from nature. In 1830 he engraved six plates for William Cullen Bryant’s American Landscape, “the first number of a series of views intended to embrace some of the most prominent and interesting features of our varied scenery.” The project fell through and no more numbers were published. Two of the landscapes, the Catskill Mountains and the Delaware Wa-
Ariadne, an engraving by Asher B. Durand after Vanderlyn, made in 1835

fter Gap, were engraved from Durand's own paintings. The others were after Weir, Bennett, and Durand's friend Cole. These rather tight and unassuming little plates were the predecessors of a succession of more lavish publications of American landscape prints, and an indication of Durand's subsequent career as a landscape painter.

In 1835, before giving up engraving in favor of painting, Durand produced his masterpiece in line, the famous Ariadne after Vanderlyn. Ten years earlier his reading of English poetry had prompted him to engrave from his own design his only other nude print, Musidora, to illustrate lines in Thomson's Seasons. Ambitious in size as well as subject, the earlier engraving is rather tentative, though quite sentimentally charming, with a pleasant landscape background. Vanderlyn's Ariadne, painted in Paris in 1812, was much admired there, but was exhibited unsuccessfully in New York after his return to this country in 1815. The subject matter of the first American nude painting of any importance is said to have outraged public taste. Durand, however, had independence enough to admire it. His son John wrote: "The painter, after exhibiting 'Ariadne' in New York, where no purchaser presented himself, and in need of money, disposed of it to my father for the sum of six hundred dollars. Only a recognition of the superior artistic merits of the work can explain an expenditure like that at this stage of the engraver's career! The picture, always a 'white elephant' subject above all other mishaps to that of fire, and on that account kept stored for years in

169
the Historical Society building, fireproof, was ultimately sold at auction for five thousand dollars, after more than thirty years' possession." (It is now in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.) Buying a huge painting he could ill afford and engraving two nude prints seem aberrations from Durand's long career of rather literal industry, but in his youth he wrote poetry. As a model for the engraving he painted a small copy of the Ariadne, which is now owned by this Museum. The print was not a financial success, but it popularized the most notorious and probably most famous American nude and culminated Durand's august reputation as an engraver. The printing of so large a plate proved difficult through lack of skilled printers in this country. "More than one-half of the impressions taken from the plate had to be destroyed on account of imperfections, while the greater part remained undisposed of even at the end of his career." One hundred and sixty impressions were ordered from London, however, according to Dunlap. An ecstatic notice of the print appeared in the New York Mirror for October 10, 1835. "A more noble and exquisite production has never grown into life and beauty from the burin of any artist, whether native or foreign. . . . Connoisseurs who have examined the Ariadne speak of it in unmeasured terms of gratification, and Sir Charles Vaughan, the British minister, and the Russian Envoy, both accomplished judges of such productions, no sooner saw it, than they pronounced it a chef d'oeuvre and immediately possessed themselves of copies." In April of the next year there is a note in the same magazine: "Mr. Durand has almost relinquished the graver. Perhaps he thinks he cannot go beyond his Ariadne. No one else can."