William Mills Ivins, Jr., 1881-1961

by A. HYATT MAYOR Curator of Prints

Articles should be so written that not only intelligent people but specialists in fields other than those of the writers may read them with pleasure and profit. No article, even the most learned, needs to be so written as to rebuff all readers except those strengthened in their rank by animus or malice. An author too great, or too lazy, to consider and labor for the comfort of his readers, is either too grand for the condescending, or too low for the privilege of print.

In 1916 the Museum's miscellaneous gifts of Whistler and Haden etchings and Japanese woodcuts were suddenly increased, through the bequest of the print collector and paper manufacturer Harris Brisbane Dick. This substantial legacy of prints, and the money to buy more, impelled the Trustees to act on an often discussed plan for founding a department of prints. The Board then faced the ticklish choice of a curator in a day when no American university graduated historians of art—let alone historians of prints. At their meeting of December 1916, the Trustees plunged as no museum today would dare plunge and chose an amateur—a keen young man who had been practicing law downtown for some ten years. He collected prints because he could afford to buy them out of his lawyer's pay, and studied them at home when his briefs freed him late at night. The Board's gamble launched one of the most brilliant museum careers in the Americas, for the new curator was William M. Ivins, Jr.

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Ivins, then thirty-five, had been caught in a conflict between his vocation and his avocation. He had entered Harvard at sixteen, where he majored in economics but was more fascinated by discovering Dürer’s prints in the Fogg Museum. When he went on to Munich for a year’s study at the university, he said that he spent less time on economics than on German sixteenth century woodcuts in the Munich print room. Back in New York, he tried journalism with The World’s Work and then succumbed to the profession of his father and his brother by taking a law degree at Columbia.

His voyage to Munich, however, had proved to be his road to Damascus. It brought him an experience so decisive that the shock of it still tingled many years later in reminiscence. Like a true lawyer, he described it in the third person: “He has never forgotten the wild excitement of the day when as a lad of twenty, passing through Paris, he found Goya’s Disasters of War in Rapilly’s shop on the quai; or how parting with the sum of sixty francs he took the book with him, poring over it night after night. These things were deadly serious, they were human and masculine and full of strong emotion, and he reacted to them as hitherto he never had to anything but the pistol shot from the starter’s boat.”

A more continuous impulse to study art came from his marriage in 1910 to Florence Wyman, an artist herself, whose fresh and skillful drawings Ivins often cut on woodblocks to print family Christmas cards. Her illustrations sparkle in many early numbers of our Bulletin and in books designed by Bruce Rogers. She was forever drawing anything and everything, and succeeded in making a game of the difficulties of portraiture in water color. Her quick eye and her simple, trenchant judgments on art had a great influence on her husband.

When Ivins abandoned the law for the Museum, his love for difficult analysis struggled with fresh questions. How was he to set about collecting prints for a museum whose outstanding virtue is variety, and for a city that pursues every interest in the world? What could guide him past his private likes and dislikes to a survey of all the

1. To the Graveyard, by Francisco de Goya (1746-1828), Spanish. Etching from The Disasters of War (Madrid, about 1810-1813). 5 3/8 x 7 3/4 inches. Dick Fund, 53.541

important aspects of five hundred years of printmaking? Some artists—Mantegna, Rembrandt, Goya, Daumier—convinced universally, through the authority of passion. As Ivins said, “They speak to him of things which he can neither repeat nor explain. The things they say to him are the most secret things he has.” But in order to assess the great mass of works that do not flash from Sinai, Ivins, like a good lawyer, depended upon the criterion of precedent, consulting past judges of prints whose opinions had stood the test of time. Their taste might not be today’s, but if they had perceived like true connoisseurs, it might well become tomorrow’s. So, if a print had been good enough for Pierre Jean Mariette, Adam Bartsch, or the Goncourts, it was good enough for the Metropolitan Museum.

Ivins supplemented the criterion of quality with that of utility. When he first met the assembled Trustees in January 1917, he outlined to them the plan he was to follow during the next thirty years, while putting together one of the most universally useful of print collections. “Prints,” he said, “throw open to their student with the most complete abandon the whole gamut of human life and endeavor, from the most ephemeral of courtesies to the loftiest pictorial presentation of man’s spiritual aspirations. The print collection of a museum cannot be formed solely upon Yes or No answers to the question: Is it a work of art? Rather must it be, like the library of a professor of literature, composed of a corpus of prints in themselves distinctly works of art, filled out and illustrated by many prints which have only a technical historical importance. To make a museum collection on strictly aesthetic grounds would perforce end in amassing a body of material which would reflect rather the immediate personal predilections of the group of men who formed it than anything else.”

Ivins was able to make such a collection largely because some of his former business associates—notably Felix M. Warburg and Mortimer L. Schiff—gave him substantial sums of money for purchasing at his absolute discretion. After a while the Museum also allowed him a curator’s fund for inexpensive acquisitions. He thus was able to buy many now precious prints and illustrated books for insignificant sums, because they had not yet become fashionable. He assembled most of the great illustrated books of the West and an unusually representative historical sequence of prints, excelling in the direct and spontaneous art of woodcut. He got together a collection of printed ornament fine enough to complement the wonderful ornament drawings in the Cooper Union Museum and make New York the best place for studying craftsmen’s designs.

He also analyzed what he should not buy. Thus, for example, he rarely bought Rembrandt’s etchings—much as he admired them—because he counted on the Museum’s being given prints that many local collectors own. He won the gamble, for Rembrandt’s late, best work has come here in an abundance of sumptuous impressions from the gifts of George Coe Graves, Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, and Felix M. Warburg and his family.

Ivins also took a lively interest in modern prints and bought a few early Picassos, though he never responded to the vitality of Munch or the German expressionists. By and large, however, he bet shrewdly on future swings of taste,
which he could not have done if, like curators in some other museums, he had had to beg each purchase from a donor. His acquisitions did not then look important enough to interest even the most indulgent friend of the Museum, and the individual sums that he required were often too trifling for a curator to request or a donor to give. The curator who must depend entirely upon the generosity of an individual patron for each acquisition has no choice but to restrict himself to things that impress today, but may not tomorrow.

Much as he achieved by collecting, he left his deepest mark by his writing. He never accustomed himself to the clattering of a typewriter, but wrote with an exactly cut goose quill that squeaked at the paper with the kind of historic chirping that must have made the monastic scrip-toria sound like cricket cages. While still a lawyer, he had found that his boyish round hand could not list the securities on the Paris Bourse clearly enough for American stenographers to type correctly, and so he taught himself to write his own version of the humanist script of his beloved Renaissance Italy. In this swift and legible hand the young curator began to describe his adventures in the world of prints for almost every issue of the Bulletin, always approaching pictures through the human beings who made and used them. He read art history to check facts, but got his often iconoclastic ideas by devouring books on politics, economics, and science, and by testing his hunches in lunch-time wrangles with his colleagues. This cross-fertilization of disciplines bore fruit in such provocative books as On the Rationalization of Sight, Art and Geometry, and Prints and Visual Communication.

His writing stings one to attention by a lapi-dary clarity that he labored to attain by tearing up draft after interlined draft. He thus summarized his approach to the craft that he worked so hard to master: “The best test of a curator’s intelligence and capacity, as well as of his faith in the importance of his task, is to be found in the way he writes about his subject. Writing being directed thinking: a curator who displays no sense of form in his use of words is most doubtfully a competent judge of form; a curator who writes without ease or grace is certainly no judge of either; and he who writes without cleanliness or pungency of phrase exhibits himself to the world as deficient in that sharpness of vision

which could see through the paper to the bones of the work.”

7. Yvette Guilbert, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), French. Lithograph. 13 1/2 x 8 inches. Lent by Barbara Iovins
which we are assured is necessary to true connoisseurship."

He made you look at prints with fresh eyes. "Canaletto," he wrote, "saw how the contours and bulk of buildings tremble as seen through the bright heat of an Italian summer, how textures dissolve in the glare of noon, how urban vistas group themselves in far receding and orderly lines, and especially how in the full light of day there are no dense blacks, but that everywhere shadows are full of color, translucent, and alive with light."

He was just as graphic in describing an artist’s climate of imagination. This is how he presented the sixteenth century German illustrator Hans Weiditz: "Every way he turned he found things which interested him; the nursery, the fields, the marketplaces, and all the occupations and callings held him enthralled with their kaleidoscopic business, and in each of them he saw things which no other man of his time had either the wit or the imagination to see the pictorial value of."

While a man is training for a profession he must resign himself to specialized thinking and trade slang as a way of life. He may then capitulate by turning out trade slang himself. The brilliant amateur’s astringent virtue lies in being shocked by the inhuman narrowness—not to say illiteracy—of much writing in art criticism, as in psychiatric treatises, government reports, and Ph.D. theses, whose ideas are simple enough to state accurately in standard English but are nevertheless secreted in a jargon that identifies fraternity members like a special handshake. Ivins made a better writer, as he made a better curator, because he started as an amateur. He never had to suffer forced feeding in a graduate school, where the cramming of facts leaves no moment for insight but reduces the Sistine Ceiling to a welter of iconography that must be memorized for a slide test. This glut temporarily paralyzes the faculty for astonishment, which is the motor of artists and historians of art. Ivins made discoveries because he never lost this faculty. Thanks to his study of the law, he could approach the study of art with freshness and could, moreover,
9. *The House with the Portico*, 1741, by Canaletto (1697-1768), Italian. Etching. \(11 \frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Rogers Fund, 18.65.1 (18)

enrich it with a lawyer’s wide interests, accuracy of definition and argument, scrupulous investigation of circumstance, and boldness of conclusion.

When he retired to Woodbury, Connecticut, at sixty-five, he found it harder to write, away from the stimulus of dueling with his colleagues, which had generated the friction that angered him into writing. Two years after he had settled in the country to share his life with Mrs. Ivins, she died, leaving him solitary in an unfamiliar village. It was his life’s bitterest blow. Although Yale welcomed him as warmly as though he were a faculty member, and his daughter did all that a daughter could to cheer him, familiar ways and faces had vanished when he most needed them, taking with them the zest and animus of his life. Rather than think of his closing years, it is kinder to remember him by the exuberance—the young impudence—of the last Bulletin article that he wrote as Curator of Prints: “The objects in the collections of a museum exist, not as exemplars to be followed or imitated, but as a warning that certain things have been done for good and all. They are signs that tell us which roads have dead ends—and by so doing they free us for adventure.”

Ivins wrote of his own collecting, “I came to the conclusion that I was far more interested in prints than in the possession of them.” He nevertheless bought for himself many then inexpensive works by Goya and Daumier that stirred him passionately, and woodcut illustrations removed (but not by him) from Gothic and Renaissance books that teased his erudition. Some of his prints and books are being shown in an exhibition called Tastes and Curiosities of a Curator. The show will feature the Museum’s recent purchase of things that it lacked out of the Ivins collection. Where we already owned an impression of one of his prints, we are showing ours instead of borrowing from his collection.

10. *Neighborly Helpfulness*, by Hans Weiditz (active 1518-1536), German. Woodcut, probably cut about 1520, from Cicero’s *Officia* (Augsburg, 1531). \(6\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Gift of Felix M. Warburg, 18.58.6