The Lithographic Workshop, 1825–50

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WITH THE APPEARANCE in Boston and New York in the mid-1820s of the first viable lithographic workshops—job shops where draughtsmen drew pictorial matter to order on lithographic stone and pressmen hand-printed the images—a new means of training and nurturing artists in the United States came into being. Within a few years the medium flourished also in Philadelphia and Baltimore, and by mid-century lithographic workshops existed in nearly all of the nation's major cities. Then, in the 1850s, the part played by the workshops in the cultivation of American fine artists began to diminish rapidly as the shops themselves gave way to factory operations.[1]

The workshops of the 1820s differed from their counterparts in the older graphic arts—metal plate and wood engraving—in a number of ways, but markedly so in lithography's need for skilled

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1. For histories of individual early lithographic workshops, see Georgia Brady Bumgardner, 'George and William Endicott: Commercial Lithography in New York, 1831–51,' in David Tatham, ed., *Prints and Printmakers of New York State, 1825–1940* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 43–65; John Carbonell, 'Anthony Imbert, New York's Pioneer Lithographer,' in Tatham, *Prints and Printmakers*, 11–41; Bettina Norton, 'William Sharp, Accomplished Lithographer,' in *Art and Commerce: American Prints of the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), 50–75; David Tatham, 'The Pendleton-Moore Shop: Lithographic Artists in Boston, 1825–1840,' *Old-Time New England* 62 (Fall 1971): 29–46; Tatham, 'John Henry Bufford, American Lithographer,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 86 (April 1976): 47–73. For numerous unpublished accounts of Boston lithographic shops, see the bibliography in Sally Pierce and Catharina Slautterback, *Boston Lithography, 1825–1880* (Boston: The Boston Athenæum, 1991), 183–86. My generalizations about the early shops and the instruction in drawing given in them are drawn from these sources and study of the shops' lithographs, except as otherwise noted.

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draughtsmen capable of fluent tonal work. Because this skill was in short supply in the United States during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the lithographic shops found it necessary to assume a teaching function. Through on-the-job instruction they developed the drawing skills of talented beginners in a di- rection that would serve lithographic production. Since that pro- duction hewed closely to the conventions of European academic drawing, training in a shop not only prepared a young artist for a career as a journeyman draughtsman on stone but it also gave him (or in rare cases, her) a foundation in art roughly equivalent to that offered by academies of fine art as the first stage of prepara- tion for a career as a painter. During the thirty years between 1825 and 1855 the workshops in this way helped to launch the ca- reers of a number of distinguished American painters, including George Loring Brown, Alfred Jacob Miller, William Rimmer, Fitz Hugh Lane, and Winslow Homer.

Little archival evidence survives to say precisely how these early shops nurtured artistic talent so well. Only fragments of their business records survive. Documentation of their equip- ment, quarters, and arrangements with artists is scant. We have little accurate knowledge of how many draughtsmen any shop regularly employed and how many it called on only when needed. It is easy to suppose that a draughtsman-proprietor, a pressman, a bookkeeper, and a lad-of-all-work sufficed to constitute a viable operation in the early years, with other draughtsmen on call, but some shops were clearly much larger. The questions of who taught and who learned, how often instruction took place, and in what circumstances, can be answered only with the help of con- jecture. In memoirs written in old age a few artists recalled their beginnings in lithographer's shops decades earlier, and while these selective and often sentimental accounts tend to be either too brief or too prolix to answer many questions satisfactorily, they nevertheless illuminate a few things about the shops and the teaching and learning that occurred there (and we will hear from two of them below).

In some respects the best evidence of art instruction in early lithographic workshops resides in their products, the thousands of impressions of lithographic prints that enrich American graphic arts collections. To judge from the shops' prints, the quality of their instruction in the 1820s and '30s was not markedly inferior to that offered by American academies of art. The shops were, in a sense, a limited but reasonable substitute for at least the entry level of academy training, and they offered the added advantage of employment to those beginners who became proficient draughtsmen. Whether their proprietors viewed the instruction they sponsored, or at least encouraged, as anything more altruistic than a practical means of training graphic artists to meet a rapidly increasing demand for printed pictures, is another question for which no definitive answer seems possible.

The instruction itself broke from the older, simpler master/apprentice system that had prevailed among engravers of metal and wood. The importation of lithography from Europe in the 1820s put in place a new medium for which virtually no American masters then existed. The American entrepreneurs who first made a success of the medium, notably Anthony Imbert in New York and James Pendleton in Boston, turned not to graphic artists in other media (who could not in any event have helped them), but rather to painters, who already thought in tonal terms. A few of these painters, such as Rembrandt Peale and Charles Des Essarts, already knew the medium from European training, but others, such as Thomas Cole and perhaps Gherlando Marsiglia, that all-but-forgotten founding member of the National Academy of Design, probably acquired proficiency in the shops. While there is no evidence that Peale or Des Essarts or anyone else taught the first group of new recruits in the 1820s, they might have done so. Certainly their association as painters with the fledgling operations enhanced the status of the workshops.[2]

The circumstances of the early workshops militated against the

2. For Des Essarts, Cole, and Marsiglia, see Carbonell, 'Imbert,' 13–20.

traditional master/apprentice relationship so far as the teaching of skills was concerned. As often as not, the owner-proprietor possessed little or no artistic competence in the medium. Further, the expanding volume of business steadily required more trained draughtsmen than the indentured apprentice system could supply. While many promising young draughtsmen were called apprentices, and remunerated accordingly, their instruction came more often from only slightly more experienced colleagues than from any master. Teaching was a communal enterprise in which the more experienced informally taught the less experienced.

Some insight into the nature of the instruction and the aspirations of the young draughtsmen, comes from a few paragraphs in Benjamin Champney's reminiscences of his time in the Moore workshop, formerly Pendleton's, in Boston in the 1830s. Champney wrote in the 1890s, recalling events six decades earlier when, newly arrived from New Hampshire, he began his apprentice term at age seventeen.

> Here I was speedily worked in as a draughtsman for ordinary commercial work, the fine work, such as designs of figures and heads from life being done by [Robert] Cooke. F. H. Lane, afterwards well known as a marine painter, did most of the views, hotels, etc. He was very accurate in his drawing, understood perspective and naval architecture perfectly. . . . and was a good, all-round draughtsman. I was ambitious, however, and after a time got to be useful in a general way. Among others who came to try their hands at lithography was William Rimmer. . . . He was a green young man of eighteen or twenty when I first knew him, but one could see that he had great mental capacity. His drawing was always full of energy, but not suited for commercial purposes. I think he did not stay more than a year with us, but left an impression that he would one day make his mark in the world. He loved the Old Masters. . . . He must have studied engraving[s after] Michael Angelo and Greek statues to have done what he did. Perhaps he secretly studied the casts from antique work . . . for the Boston Athenæum possessed some, and the plaster workers on School Street had specimens, too. Cicci & Gary was the name of the firm, I believe. After my apprenticeship was over, I continued to work for the firm for another year . . . having taken a studio with my friend Cooke. We

worked on together [as painters] . . . hoarding the little that we made, that we might go to Europe for study. At this time there were few artists in Boston. Alvan Fisher and Thomas Doughty were painting landscapes; [Robert] Salmon, marines; and George L. Brown was exhibiting landscapes and marines. . . .

[Washington] Allston lived in Cambridge. . . . He was very gracious and encouraging in his criticism. He advised us by all means to go to Paris, thinking it the best place for study.[3]

About three years before he made this visit to Boston's most celebrated painter, Champney had spent hours at a retrospective exhibition of Allston's paintings at Harding's Gallery in Boston, and later had tagged along to listen when Allston conducted visitors through the Athenæum's collections.[4] Of the artists Champney mentions in this passage from his memoirs, it is worth noting that Brown had set an example by becoming a successful painter after beginning as a lithographer's apprentice in Boston, and that Salmon, a generation older and already well-established as a painter in Great Britain before his arrival in New England, had strengthened the connection between painting and lithography by drawing on stone in Boston and seeing his paintings copied onto stone by others.[5]

Champney's art instruction came from the Moore workshop's chief draughtsman, Cooke, who had himself been trained there not many years before and who was already transforming himself into a portrait painter. Through close observation and probably also discussion, Champney had learned as well from Lane and Rimmer, two artists of different styles, and doubtless from others also. He knew and probably copied from two- and three-dimensional works of art in Boston, listened to Allston's learned com-

3. Benjamin Champney, *Sixty Years' Memories of Art and Artists* (Woburn, Massachusetts: the author, 1900), 10–15.
4. Champney, *Memories*, 10–15.
5. Salmon's work on stone includes the lithograph *U.S. Navy Yard, Charleston, Mass.*, 1828, printed and published by Pendleton. A lithograph (by an unknown draughtsman), *Boston Harbor From Constitution Wharf*, 1842, printed by J. H. Bufford for the Naval Library and Institute, is copied from Salmon's painting of the same title. Both prints are reproduced in John Wilmerding, *Robert Salmon: Painter of Ship & Shore* (Boston: Boston Public Library, 1971), 56, 79–80.

mentaries at the Athenæum, and had the sage's encouraging send-off to lend confidence as he set out for study abroad. It is doubtful that the offerings of the National Academy of Design in New York or the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia around 1840 would have provided him a greatly superior experience.

Champney returned from Paris to begin a long and regionally successful career as a landscape painter. The career of Charles Hart, who began in New York's Endicott shop, took a different course. Because he remained a draughtsman on stone for decades, he experienced the changes that around mid-century altered the lithographic workshop's capacity to prepare young artists for careers in the fine arts. Like Champney he became an apprentice in the 1830s. In his unpublished memoirs of his years with the Endicott workshop in New York he reports that his early duties included graining stones and making lithographic crayons.[6] When he advanced to drawing on stone he also colored stock prints by hand after hours to make extra money and also, we may suppose, to learn more about color in a shop that, until the 1840s, printed only in black ink.[7]

Hart found life in the workshop much like family life, with many shared values. 'There was about the Endicott's establishment an artistic atmosphere. . . . There one could associate with those who, like himself, had aspirations far above commercial lithography.'[8] But there was an anxious side also that reflected how widely the young draughtsmen of the era expected to move onward and upward. He remembered that the shop's young draughtsmen feared that they might 'relinquish all . . . high artistic aspirations and settle down to the position of a lithographer, pure and simple, for the rest of [one's] life, and grind out commercial lithographs.'[9]

This is what Hart in fact did, and because of his continuing as-

6. Bumgardner, 'Endicott,' 47.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 61–63.
9. Ibid., 63.

sociation with the field he was able to bring a firsthand perspective to the decline of the lithographic workshop from its status as an unplanned and improvised agency for the cultivation of artists in Jacksonian America. In its early years, he recalled, 'A lithographic artist was expected to do anything and everything. . . . The modern system of dividing work up into many branches, and each man doing one branch, is a great advantage, I think, for the establishment, but a positive injury to the operative.'[10]

The lithographic workshop as a vital place for the development of American artists began its decline at the end of the decade of the 1840s with the influx of well-trained lithographic draughtsmen and printers from Germany and France as part of the aftermath of the political unrest of 1848 in Europe. This greatly reduced the need for the workshops to train their own artists. The newly-arrived draughtsmen possessed a greater sophistication in all matters of art than did their American colleagues, whose skills now seemed, and in fact were, provincial. At the same time, art academies in the United States had at last reached a point where the best of them offered instruction in the art of drawing at a level that no workshop could match. Soon the workshop itself would be obsolete, replaced by factories in which machines would begin to supplant hand operations and specialization would narrow the aims and aspirations of those who worked on stone.

Brief as its moment of significance was, the impact on American art of the lithographic workshop of the 1820s, '30s, and '40s extended even beyond the nurturing support that it gave to individual artists. It is possible to find in the nineteenth-century painting style that we now call Luminism echoes of the common graphic style of American lithography. The artisan draughtsmen who graduated to the art of painting carried with them some of the language of drawing on stone. The meticulously modulated tonality, ambient light, apparent stillness, sharply focused middle ground—these and other qualities of Luminist American landscape painting of the 1830s and beyond surely have part of their

10. Ibid.

origins in the practice of American lithography. Transcendentalism may have played a role in the development and acceptance of this style, as may have conventions of earlier European painting and the domesticated neoclassicism of Federal America, but the quantities of prints that issued from the lithographic workshops of the Jacksonian era trained many eyes to expect and even favor these qualities of lithography in all art. The workshops cultivated not only American artists but American taste as well.