

DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART

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**STORIES TO TELL:
MASTERWORKS FROM THE KELLY COLLECTION
OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION**

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Shaped by European Academic Tradition, Generations of American Illustrators Transform American Popular Culture

New York, NY—This spring, the Dahesh Museum of Art launches its second decade with *Stories to Tell: Masterworks from the Kelly Collection of American Illustration*, an exhibition that opens a bold and imaginative new avenue of exploration within its mission to reappraise the role of academic art in 19th- and early 20th-century visual culture.

Stories to Tell features 90 masterworks drawn from the Kelly Collection of American Illustration, one of the most important private holdings of original oil paintings, watercolors, and pen and ink drawings by the most sought-after illustrator-celebrities of American illustration's "golden age" (ca. 1880s-1930s). The exhibition features works by Dean Cornwell, Harvey Dunn, James Montgomery Flagg, Charles Dana Gibson, J.C. Leyendecker, Maxfield Parrish, Howard Pyle, Norman Rockwell, Mead Schaeffer, Jessie Willcox Smith, and N.C. Wyeth, as well as many other lesser-known but talented illustrators whose stylistic innovations are considered groundbreaking to this day.

Until now, no museum exhibition has investigated how these still-beloved pictures demonstrate the lingering influence of European academic subjects, styles, and compositional strategies—traditions which the Dahesh Museum of Art has examined continuously since it opened in 1995.

According to Stephen R. Edidin, the Museum's Chief Curator and exhibition organizer, "Given the advances in printing technology after 1880, books and magazines could now reproduce illustrations without losing the nuance and quality of the original paintings and drawings. These changes encouraged illustrators to create paintings of exceptional quality, powerfully informed by Europe's academic traditions of narrative-driven compositions. A few illustrators, studied in European academies, most prominently J.C. Leyendecker, who worked in Paris at the Académie Julian with Adolphe-William Bouguereau, one of the great academic masters, whose work is on view in the Museum's permanent collection gallery. Still more illustrators studied in American schools, studios, and artists leagues with academically trained

mentors. All were aware of the visual vocabulary of European luminaries through the international trade in reproductions of their work.”

THE KELLY COLLECTION

The project of recovering these canvases from obscurity has been undertaken by a few perceptive collectors, among them Richard and Mary Kelly. The Kelly Collection of American Illustration, from which this exhibition is drawn, includes some 350 works of art.

Richard J. Kelly began collecting with the purchase of a Doonesbury comic strip in the early 1970s, and then continued in the field with the acquisition of cartoon, science fiction, and fantasy art until the late 1980s, when he made his first foray into the Golden Age of American Illustration, acquiring a work by Mead Schaeffer, and within a few years, Kelly narrowed his focus to this fascinating era. Over the last 15 years, the philosophy behind the collection solidified: presenting the best works of the best artists, rather than sampling everyone active in the period. Consequently, some 20 artists are represented here by at least five works each.

Committed to educating the public about this important chapter in American cultural history, the Kellys have lent pieces to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Brandywine River Museum, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norman Rockwell Museum, Delaware Art Museum, and Gallery at the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, and have also produced half a dozen illuminating publications.

ILLUSTRATION IN ITS HEYDAY

The practice of embellishing text with pictures goes back centuries to the illuminated manuscripts of the medieval era. In the same way that the development of printing made possible far wider distribution of texts, technological advances in wood engraving led to the mass production of images. By the mid-19th century, black-and-white illustrations were fairly common in books and magazines.

The 1880s brought tremendous advances in color printing technology (the invention of halftones and the four-color process), giving publishing houses the ability to reproduce paintings and drawings accurately and inexpensively for America’s increasingly literate public, who were hungry for compelling stories and pictures. Along with other developments—rapid urbanization and an Act of Congress establishing a discounted postal rate—the new technology sparked an explosion in American periodical publishing around the turn of the century. Competition for visibility on the newsstand demanded visually arresting covers that were colorful and skillfully painted, and that showcased dramatic scenes.

As newsstands became the arena of a fierce struggle for market share, magazine publishers enlisted illustrators as their gladiators. When a nickel or a dime empowered the consumer to choose from among ranks upon ranks of inviting periodicals, the visual appeal of a cover depicting sex, sentiment, or action with bold color and skill conferred a Darwinian advantage. Small wonder that top illustrators like J.C. Leyendecker and Charles Dana Gibson commanded high fees and were accorded celebrity treatment.

The short fiction that filled magazines like *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Harper's Bazaar* favored high adventure and melodrama, much like the silent films of that era and the blockbuster films of today. Such narratives gave illustrators license to create tumultuously emotive images. There were books to be illustrated as well; advertising, just coming into its own as the engine of commerce it remains today, provided another voracious and lucrative market for the artist's wares.

For its half-century of fame, the fruit of the illustrator's brush and pencil achieved a prominence and power in mainstream American culture unmatched before or since. The images created by the likes of Howard Pyle, Harvey Dunn, and Dean Cornwell, seen by literally millions of people, gave visible form to the myths, emotions, and fantasies of a nation. We continue to see the world of modern America's youth and adolescence in the images that they made: "the Gibson Girl," that quintessentially liberated and seductive young woman of the turn of the century, was the creation of Charles Dana Gibson; and J.C. Leydendecker's "swanky" men delineated a new image of masculinity—strong, smooth, self-assured—that became absorbed into the culture. What these artists invented was a distinctive American look, the accessible aristocrat whose progeny flourish in the advertisements of Ralph Lauren and others.

They created, likewise, a distinctively American artform, characterized by pragmatism and simplicity. Illustrators of the Golden Age weren't imitating fine art, but creating a new genre that, like the cinema (whose emergence was roughly contemporaneous), had both aesthetic and commercial faces. They brought the traditional tools of academic art into a new world, in the service of a more popular if less exalted medium. As Chris Fauver writes in the catalogue, "Between the Civil War and World War II, illustration and fine art were two sides of the same coin," and "first-hand experience with illustration was common among American fine artists – Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, George Bellows, John Sloan and William Glackens."

Eventually, this tradition of illustration succumbed to the forces of change. As Modernism swept through the art world, the work of these fine artists became less and less compatible with the tastes that drove the publishing industry. The advent of photography inevitably pushed painted or drawn illustration to the periphery. And the Depression decimated the once thriving ranks of periodicals, effectively destroying much of the market that had fueled the boom in illustration.

THE EXHIBITION

The ninety works in *Stories to Tell* are arranged in roughly chronological order, indicating the successive artistic generations of Golden Age illustrators. Special sections will highlight pen and ink drawings, and the work of women illustrators. *Stories to Tell* offers the works of 35 artists but focuses visitors' attention on a handful of central figures.

Dean Cornwell (1892-1960) became a student at Harvey T. Dunn's school of illustration after a brief, unsuccessful stint as a newspaper cartoonist. In the mid-1920s, he went abroad to

study with the Royal Academician and British muralist Frank Brangwyn and returned stateside to undertake a number of major murals of his own.

Cornwell's work is possibly the best realized of many attempts to blend academic realism, impressionist energy, and the casual perfection of photography into a modern American representational painting style. To the vignette, a traditional convention of illustration, he brought elements of abstract design and a signature virtuosity and technical skill. His style was perfectly adapted to the sophisticated serialized novels so popular in the period, as is evident in such works as *Two Men in a Smokey Room* (1923) and *Peril Kelley* (1923), on exhibit here.

Harvey T. Dunn (1884-1952) began his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, but soon came east to study with Howard Pyle; the Brandywine influence is evident in his early work, which is characterized by striking juxtapositions and bold, vigorous detail.

Dunn was one of eight illustrators sent to Europe by the War Department to document the Great War, an experience reflected in later works like *Night Raid* (1928), on exhibit here. A taste for action is also evident in his illustrations of western and adventure stories, but he could also turn his hand to softer emotions, as evidenced here in *Rich and Strange* (1923), executed for *Ladies Home Journal*. A primary outlet for his work was the *Saturday Evening Post*, with which he enjoyed a fruitful relationship that spanned three decades.

Joseph Christian Leyendecker (1874-1951) is a seminal figure in American advertising illustration. He embraced commercial art as his *métier* and a worthy application of his impressive skills, but the skills themselves were nurtured in a manner worthy of a fine artist in the academic tradition: first at the Art Institute of Chicago and then at the Académie Julian in Paris. The teachers and training methods at Julian's were those of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and its original *raison d'être* was in fact preparation for the official state school. Among his instructors was Adolphe-William Bouguereau (1825-1905).

An aristocrat of the genre, Leyendecker executed illustrations with an artist's hand, applying oil paint in deft brushstrokes that exploited the density and opacity of the medium, using academic techniques of shading and modeling to create three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface.

It is no exaggeration to say that Leyendecker is best known for the American magazine cover, with such classics as *Woman Kissing Cupid* (1923) and *Beau Brummel* (1925), on display here. All together, he executed over 300 such posters-in-miniature for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Leyendecker may be best remembered, however, for his advertising illustrations that added a stalwart and stylish paragon of masculinity to the storehouse of archetypal American images created for Arrow Shirts and Kuppenheimer Clothes.

Howard Pyle (1853-1911) is widely recognized as the progenitor of the American art of illustration. Beyond his own prolific creative output—thousands of illustrations—he was an enormously influential teacher.

Pyle's limited formal training was with Francis Adolf van der Wielen, who had established his own school in Philadelphia after attending the Antwerp Academy. Van der Wielen's students

followed a traditional academic syllabus, in which they learned perspective, outline, and shading from books, and practiced drawing after plaster casts of classical sculpture.

Pyle's career evolved through the advent of half-tone and four-color printing, and works like his *Walking the Plank* (1887), on view here, show an impressive expertise with limited technology. Departing from the posed, frieze-like compositions that characterized American illustration in the 1890s, Pyle threw out accepted rules of harmonic balance to bring a dynamic narrative flow and tension to historical subject matter, his specialty, as well as iconic representations of medieval knights, pirates, and revolutionary soldiers. He composed his scenes to maximize their emotional impact.

In his classes at Philadelphia's Drexel Institute (whose other most influential instructor was Thomas Eakins), Pyle educated the next generation of dedicated, serious commercial artists, known as the "Brandywine School of Illustration." They included N.C. Wyeth, Frank Schoonover, Harvey T. Dunn, and Jessie Willcox Smith.

Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) is the illustrator whose name remains recognizable to most Americans: the most popular and highest paid practitioner of the craft, he has become something of a national icon. Rockwell's solid training included studies at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League, the twin poles of New York's academic art world.

Beyond his commercial success, Rockwell was a formidable painter who had great skill at delineating discrete elements of a scene—every detail is alive with the tension between object and ground, translucence and opacity. His strength is most evident in his *Saturday Evening Post* covers of the 20s and 30s, such as *Dreaming of Adventure* (1924), on display here.

For nearly a half century, from 1916 to 1963, Rockwell created 322 *Post* covers, predominantly the portrayals of small-town America with which he is almost automatically identified. But his prodigious output also included thousands of illustrations for other magazines, books, advertisements, calendars, and posters.

Mead Schaeffer (1898-1980), equally adept at portraying adventure and romance, is best remembered for illustrating a series of sixteen classic texts for publisher Dodd, Mead & Company in the 20s and 30s, and for his distinctive style and deft handling of light and dark, as exemplified by *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1928), painted to illustrate the book cover and text by Alexandre Dumas père. Schaeffer was trained by both Dean Cornwell and Harvey T. Dunn, and combines Cornwell's fluid compositions with Dunn's *bravura* brushstrokes. This distinctive style, together with a precise eye for detail and his use of color, served him well as one of the foremost illustrators of magazine fiction in the 1930s. In the 1940s, inspired by friend and neighbor Norman Rockwell, he executed several memorable covers for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Jessie Willcox Smith (1863-1935) was, in her lifetime, America's foremost female illustrator. Her artistic lineage includes Thomas Eakins, with whom she studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Howard Pyle. She and two other members of Pyle's Brandywine

School—Elizabeth Shippen Green (also represented in this exhibition) and Violet Oakley—were collectively known as the Red Rose Girls. (The name comes from the Red Rose Inn, the property near Philadelphia where they lived and worked for 15 years.)

Smith was America's most popular illustrator of domestic scenes, notably images of mothers, babies, and children such as *Mother's Morning* (1902) and *Watering the Hollyhocks* (undated) that, like the work of sister-Philadelphian Mary Cassatt, evoke childhood and the maternal bond tenderly but without sentimentality. Some of her best-loved illustrations were for books—*Little Women*, *Heidi*, *A Book of Old Stories*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

Although Smith's prolific output included posters, portraits, book illustrations, and advertisements, she is probably best known for her magazine work. Indeed, she was among the few women to have an exclusive contract with a major publication—*Good Housekeeping*, for which she executed nearly 200 covers between 1917 and 1934.

Newell Convers Wyeth (1882-1945), the most successful of Pyle's students, produced significant fine art as well as illustration. He was influenced by American Impressionists such as Childe Hassam, Frank Benson, and J. Alden Weir.

Like his teacher, Wyeth is well remembered for his book illustrations, in particular the covers he made for Scribner's series of classics, including *Treasure Island* and *Rip Van Winkle*, which appeared in the decade following Pyle's death in 1911. The cover to *The Boy's King Arthur* (1917), on view here, clearly manifests Wyeth's characteristically graceful melding of Brandywine illustration and impressionism in its broken color and massed, shadowed foreground figures.

He was also much in demand for advertising art, magazine story illustrations, and murals, and was one of the few major illustrators (Maxfield Parrish, also represented here, was another) who achieved success as a fine artist.

Also represented in the exhibition and not to be missed are such luminaries as **James Montgomery Flagg (1877-1960)**, the book and magazine illustrator whose "I Want You" image of Uncle Sam (first commissioned by Leslie's weekly in 1916, then adapted into a recruiting poster) gave the American call to arms a human face; **Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944)**, creator of the "Gibson Girl," whose \$100,000 contract with *Collier's* magazine made him the highest paid illustrator of his time; and **Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966)**, brilliant colorist and creator of book, magazine, and calendar illustrations, and of such wildly popular prints as "Daybreak," which graced the walls of millions of American households.

SUMMARY

As Curator Stephen R. Edidin notes in the *Stories to Tell* catalogue, "Golden Age illustration is just that, a modern experience based on academic traditions of figure and narrative. Because of this, it continues to have a profound effect on American culture through that other academic hybrid, film. In going through the exhibition, if the viewer notices direct parallels to

specific films, s/he will not have been the first. Yet this is also an exhibition of extraordinary objects, drawn and painted, that are wonderful aesthetic experiences in themselves. At the level of the Kelly Collection, these works continue to move us as illustrations of the skill that goes into making great art.”

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The Dahesh Museum of Art has published a lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogue, now available in the Museum shop, which contains a foreword by Dahesh Museum Director, Peter Trippi; an introduction by the Museum’s Chief Curator and exhibition organizer, Stephen R. Edidin; Richard J. Kelly’s overview, “The Evolution of the Collection;” a long essay entitled “The Art of the Illustrator” by Kelly Collection Curator Chris Fauver; and “Biographies and Catalogue of Works” by Richard J. Kelly and Elizabeth Alberding, Collections Manager for the Kelly Collection. A stunning color poster of *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Mead Schaeffer is also on sale in the Museum Shop.

Stories to Tell is complemented by a series of lively public programs for adults and children, including the screening of documentaries about individual illustrators, walking tours of “illustrated” Manhattan, as well as conversations with scholars, filmmakers, collectors, dealers, animators, and, of course, contemporary illustrators.

The exhibition is made possible by generous grants from The Wyeth Foundation for American Art and The Morris and Alma Schapiro Fund.

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The Museum is located at 580 Madison Avenue between 56th and 57th Streets.
Museum Hours: Tuesday – Sunday 11 am - 6 pm, and until 9 pm on the first Thursday of each month. Closed Mondays and federal holidays. Admission: Free to Museum Members and children under 12; \$10 adults; \$8 seniors (62+) with ID; \$6 students with ID; Free on *First Thursdays*, 6-9 pm. Visitor information: 212-759-0606 or daheshmuseum.org.

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