

**CATALOGUE OF THE ENGRAVED
WORK OF ASHER B. DURAND,
EXHIBITED AT THE GROLIER
CLUB, APRIL MDCCCXCV**

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MDCCCXCV by C. H. Hart

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ASHER BROWN DURAND.

IT is not too much to say that the nineteenth century has seen the decadence of the engraver's art, and that with its close the work of the burin will virtually have been relegated to the domain of the "lost arts." This is a mournful reflection for those admirers of the graver who call to mind, passing in review, the superb works of such masters as Goltzius, Visscher, Bolswert, Drevet, Wille, Bervic, Morghen, Longhi, Toschi, Strange, Sharp and Durand. It is to the last of these illustrious names that we pay particular homage at this time and it is meet that this association should do so, as Asher Brown Durand is the only American engraver entitled to take his place and hold his rank with the famous ones mentioned.

Mr. Durand was of French Huguenot extraction. He was born in Jefferson Village, now called Maplewood, Essex County, New Jersey, August 21st, 1796, and death found him ninety years afterward, September 17th, 1886, on the land where he was born. His father was a mechanical genius with some ability at crude engraving, such as was in

vogue for adorning metal work during the first quarter of the century, and from him the son early imbibed a taste for the use of the tool which he was destined to employ with so much skill and success.

Shortly after entering his seventeenth year Mr. Durand was apprenticed to Peter Maverick, a well-known letter-engraver of New York, to learn all the branches of the engraver's art, and the first work entrusted to him was the lettering of a title-page for the "Pilgrim's Progress." The pupil soon outstripped the master, and when his apprenticeship ended, in 1817, he became his master's partner. During the three years of the partnership all the important work of the firm was done by the junior partner, and several specimens of Mr. Durand's engraving at this period, as also of his apprentice work, will be found in the present collection. There will be noticed also shop cards and ball tickets and diplomas, which show that he was not above following in the footsteps of Hogarth, Strange, Sharp and others in doing whatever, in those early days, came to his hand to do.

His first original work, engraved direct from the painting, was "Old Pat" (No. 144), from a picture by S. L. Waldo, now belonging to the Boston Athenæum. Its excellence brought the engraver to the notice of Colonel Trumbull, who employed him, when only twenty-four years old, to engrave the large plate from his painting representing the moment when the committee that drew up the

Declaration of Independence advanced to the table to present the report to the President. This elaborate plate (No. 234), for which Mr. Durand was paid \$3,000, occupied him more than three years, and, when published, at once established the engraver's reputation. It was not only the first important plate and the largest yet produced in this country, but it was also a remarkable production for so young a man with so little experience. It is worthy of note, in this connection, that there was no printer in this country at that time able to print the plate, and a competent plate printer had to be imported from England for the purpose. Fortunately, in those days we were too wise to enact alien labor laws.

At this period engravers seem to have been the most profitably employed of our artists, if not in the execution of works of high art, at least in the perpetuation of portraits of individuals of greater or less importance, some local and others national. The large number of clergymen whose portraits were engraved by Mr. Durand show the religious element strongly working in our midst. Among them those of Alexander McLeod (No. 61) and the eloquent John M. Mason (No. 66) are fine examples of the engraver's art, the latter comparing favorably with Sharp's Thomas Walker, considered one of the Englishman's great accomplishments in portraiture.

While this is true of these early productions, they were mere heralds of what was to come. It is both interesting and instructive to follow and

observe the steady and continued advancement of Mr. Durand, in the progression of his work, during the eighteen years he labored at it, which show how carefully he studied the works of his great predecessors, in the field he had chosen for his own. Bervic's Louis XVI., Morghen's Moncado, commonly called the White-horse, Strange's Charles I., in his robes, and Titian's Venus, Sharp's John Hunter and Doctors of the Church, were a few of his constant companions and guides. He was one of those thorough, conscientious workers who believe that whatever is worth doing is worth doing well; and therefor he was ever striving onward, upward; and if in his own modest opinion he did not attain the highest perfection of his art, in the opinion of others, more competent to judge than a man in his own case, he fully reached the pinnacle, when the Ariadne came from his hand. It was his valedictory to the burin, which he then forsook for canvas and color, and is as fine an example of line engraving as this century has produced.

It is by no means disparaging to Mr. Durand to say that his fame as an engraver overshadows his reputation as a painter, and doubtless will not only so continue, but will become more strongly accentuated by time. The reason for this is not difficult to find. As an engraver Asher Brown Durand is *facile princeps* among his countrymen and quite the peer of any of his European contemporaries; while his most earnest admirers will not claim this exalted place for him among the painters of this

land. Nor in saying this are we saying as little as some may esteem. It is true that this country has not produced many engravers who have advanced beyond the mere mechanical dexterity of their craft. But it is no insignificant position, as long as we can point to Edwin, the American Bartolozzi in method though vastly superior in manner, for I have yet to see anything by the Italian-Englishman equal to Edwin's best heads after Stuart; to John Cheney, whose exquisitely delicate plates for the Gifts and Souvenirs of our fathers were valued then, but are even more highly prized now and have been likened, by a most competent critic, to beautiful sonnets; to Burt, lately deceased; and to Schoff, still among us, but using the needle in place of the graver.

The high estimation in which Mr. Durand was held by his contemporaries as a man and as an artist, at a time when he was known only as an engraver, was shown on November 8th, 1825, when at a meeting held in the rooms of the New York Historical Society, to consider the formation of a society for improvement in drawing, which resulted in the foundation of the National Academy of Design, he was the unanimous choice of his brother artists to preside over their deliberations. And it is because Mr. Durand was such a thorough artist and such an exceptionally skillful draughtsman, that he became so eminent an engraver.

Look at the delicate treatment shown in the portrait of the old, old man, Charles Carroll of Car-

rollton (No. 18), so beautifully tender that when it was exhibited on the other side of Ocean, the quidnuncs there would not believe it had been executed on this side.

Observe the masterly strength in the patrician head of the artist John Trumbull (No. 107), and point to any head, by any engraver of any time, superior to it in all the qualities that go to make a great print. As has been said of Morghen's *Moncado*, after Van Dyke, "if either painting or engraving had to disappear, it would be better in the interests of art to lose the former"; so can be said of this head of Trumbull with even greater reason; for during the progress of the plate the venerable subject gave the engraver several sittings, with the result that the print is virtually an original portrait and far better than the painting. I have no hesitation in naming this plate as Mr. Durand's best work, and his reputation, or the reputation of any engraver, could safely rest upon it. In the eyes of some its size may render it too insignificant for such high commendation, but those persons need only to be reminded of the masterly miniatures by Malbone, and Cosway, and Humphreys, to see the error of their view.

Mr. Durand was the pioneer in artistic bank-note work, and from 1824 to 1832, was largely occupied in designing and engraving vignettes, which were of a character and style so new in this department of art, as to give it an impetus which it has never since lost. The beauty of his designs and skill in