

# The Line of Beauty: The Society of the Iconophiles and New York City, 1894–1939

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II. That the space to be covered should always be in proper relation to the means used for covering it.

III. That in etching, the means used, or instrument employed, being the finest possible point, the space to be covered should be small in proportion.

James McNeil Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890)<sup>1</sup>

IN DECEMBER 1894 William Loring Andrews “journeyed [downtown] to Wall Street and submitted the project he had in mind to a few of his bibliomaniacal friends whom he chanced to meet.”<sup>2</sup> The quaintly-named Society of Iconophiles, with Andrews as its President, was formally established at the first general meeting on January 28, 1895. Richard Hoe Lawrence took the minutes and became the Society’s Secretary, Treasurer, and historian, and, eventually, its President, after Andrews’ death in 1920. Curiously, Lawrence had been one of the amateur photographers who accompanied the reformer, Jacob Riis, and two policemen on a now-famous night-time expedition into the ghettos of the Lower East Side in the late 1880s. In his very different role as the Secretary of an elite cultural society, Lawrence summarized the Iconophiles’ objectives as “the engraving and publication from time to time of views of New York, past and present, and of portraits of prominent

1. James McNeil Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), 30, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24650/24650-h/24650-h.htm>

2. William Loring Andrews, “Introduction” to *Catalogue of the Engravings Issued by The Society of Iconophiles of the City of New York, MDCCCXCIV–MCMVIII*, comp. Richard Hoe Lawrence (New York: The Society of Iconophiles, 1908), 15.

persons connected with the City."<sup>3</sup> The Society outlasted Andrews by ten years, becoming inactive by 1930, before being wound up legally in 1939. Its archive was donated to the Grolier Club, with which it had very close relations and overlapping membership.<sup>4</sup>

In their day, the Iconophile prints were well-regarded, albeit in narrow circles, but have rarely been exhibited since. Not surprisingly, the Society's conservative commissioning and publishing activities were overtaken by the brash boosterism and iconoclastic attitude towards the city's built environment that reached a pitch in 1909 with the publication of John Van Dyke's *The New New York*, with illustrations by Joseph Pennell. The Iconophiles were overshadowed by the extravagant Hudson-Fulton Celebration of the same year, even as they devoted a book to that event in an effort to respond to the contemporary world of technology and spectacle.

From the outset, Andrews regarded the Iconophiles' project as emulating the renowned Bourne and Peabody collections of prints of earlier New York, but in an age when the delicate craft of intaglio engraving was endangered by the photographic mass reproduction of images. Accordingly, the Society dutifully attended to the minutiae of visual representation, reproduction and dissemination. Each commission was overseen by a formally constituted executive committee, which brought together an artist (from a very short list), a preferred process of reproduction, fine printing paper, a method of distribution, and, usually, an extended Note on the historical and cultural context. The eventual outcome was a signed print, acceptable to the Society. Often, the print's pre-history was an esteemed oil painting or an engraving that the Iconophiles' artist, respectively, engraved or re-engraved, thereby bringing the past materially into the visual culture of the present.

3. Richard Hoe Lawrence, assisted by Harris D. Colt and I.N. Phelps Stokes, *History of the Society of Iconophiles of the City of New York: MDCCXCV-MCMXX, and Catalogue of its Publications with Historical and Biographical Notes, Etc.* (New York: Society of Iconophiles, 1930), x.

4. I wish to thank the Grolier Club Trustees for the award of a Library Fellowship, and to acknowledge the expert assistance of Librarian, Fernando Peña, and the advice of Director, Eric Holzenberg and member Mark D. Tomasko. This research is part of a larger project on Visual Commissions, for which I am pleased to acknowledge research leave support provided by the U.K. Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Together with the artists' preparatory sketches and the selection of engravings offered to the Society for possible publication, the Grolier Club archive contains a number of cancelled copper plates (see figure 2). There would be no further impressions beyond the one hundred stipulated at an informal meeting on January 2, 1895. During its thirty-five years of scrupulous and highly selective commissioning activity, the Society of Iconophiles was

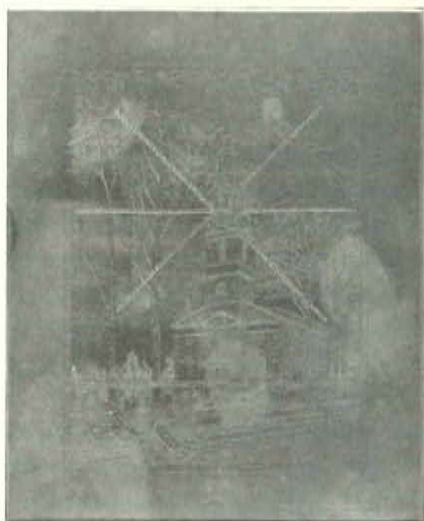


FIGURE 2: Edwin David French, *St. Paul's Chapel* [First series, no. 1], engraving on copper, 1895, 4.2 x 3 inches, cancelled plate.

responsible for a mere one hundred and nineteen individual prints of their city, New York, published in seventeen Series. Across the deliberately restricted range of print-making processes championed by the Society, the idea of the "pure line" is a constant. The pure line, the Iconophiles insisted, conveyed the continuity that engraving on copper, in particular, could achieve, compared with, for example, the dots that characterized and compromised photoreprographic halftones, which grew in popularity in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. Compared, too, with the mechanical medium of photography, the idea of the line also carried with it the sense of contact with materials when images were engraved. This "trace of the moment" implies a connection with the aura of the painted work being reproduced, though the "moment" is extended to encompass the complex process of making a print.<sup>5</sup> And, finally, the aesthetic of a pure line of engraving carries with it — as many aesthetic positions do — a latent philosophy of history, a

5. A phrase used by Anthony Gormley when opening the British Museum exhibition *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock*, London, 10 April 2008.



line through New York City's history, sometimes associated with the metaphor of a journey, and drawn and re-drawn by the Society and its select group of artists.

Neglect of the Iconophiles has meant that the prints and how they were produced and then distributed in a limited edition have received no close analysis. But if that specialized process is the basis for appreciating the Iconophiles in their own terms, their significance lies in the intersection of these professional and formalist concerns with two much more familiar histories: how New York elites sought to manage cultural capital in a period of dramatic change, and how the city was visualized during its period of most dramatic growth.<sup>6</sup> Up against the drama of secret societies with esoteric names, the importance of the Iconophiles is more low-key, resting chiefly on the light that they cast upon New York's social and cultural history, though there are two minor conundrums, if not plots, to unravel: Richard Hoe Lawrence's surprising change from potential critic to upholder of society, and the resignation in 1905 of four associate members of the Society in protest against prints commissioned from one-time Iconophile artist, Joseph Pennell.

Before considering a few of the Iconophile prints in detail, a digest of the Society's composition and concerns will help better to locate its contribution to New York's visual culture. William Loring Andrews was consistently surprised and gratified that the Society remained buoyant. He measured success in his annual presidential address to the Society by the commitment of the inner group of so-called active members, who often had business and other calls on their time, and by a sustained reputation for the quality of the prints. Additionally, he usually reported a small but recurring budget surplus, a miniature accounting that mirrored the vast sums being accumulated in the wider city. The one hundred and nine-

6. On American elites, see Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979) and Sven Beckert, *The Moneyed Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On visual culture, see Douglas Tallack, *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York* (Oxford: Berg, 2005) and Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).