ELMER ADLER

22 JULY 1884 - 11 JANUARY 1962

IN 1922, POISED ON the threshold of his remarkable career as proprietor of Pynson Printers in New York City, Elmer Adler wrote to a hometown friend: "You will be interested to learn how promptly this little organization has been accepted. There seems to be a real need for an institution that can be considered as authoritative on typography." No less remarkable is the fact that Adler, at the age of thirty-eight, had abandoned a successful career in the family clothing business in Rochester, New York, to take on the challenges of an unpredictable profession.

Elmer Adler was from the beginning a collector. Already at the age of fourteen he was gathering beautiful and unusual books, as well as stamps, prints, and bookplates, paying for them from his modest earnings. Family objections to his collecting were silenced after he turned an astonishing profit on a pamphlet play by Charles Lamb that he had purchased from a secondhand shop for ten cents. By 1919, Adler confided in George Eastman that he was spending \$1,000 annually on books related to the graphic arts and the history of western New York.

Adler was less successful as a student, and, after being asked to leave by Andover, his fourth school, he was put to work by his father at L. Adler, Bros. & Co., a manufacturer of men's suits. As salesman and, later, advertising manager, Adler promoted and defined the subtle features that distinguished his firm's suits to those gentlemen "with whom correctness of clothes is a creed." He had a keen eye for design and hired T. M. Cleland, Walter Dorwin Teague, and James Montgomery Flagg, among others, to draw borders, embellishments, and illustrations for the company advertising.

Elmer Adler was also a lively participant in Rochester cultural activities. In 1915, for example, he organized a well-received Whistler exhibit at the Memorial Art Gallery, drawn largely from his own

resources. An exhibit he mounted in 1920 clearly suggests the direction of his life. *The History of the Printing Art* was noteworthy for the strength of its early material (forty-one incunabula, six of which were lent by Adler). But it was even more interesting for the amount of fine printing that it included, especially work by Bruce Rogers, for whom the distinction of a "special exhibition" within the larger exhibition was reserved. In preparing for it, Adler wrote to Rogers, asking him to select which of his books he thought should be displayed; but Rogers demurred, expressing disappointment in his own work. Despite Rogers's reservations, the exhibit received much notice, and Adler knew that his future lay in books and printing.

After a short term of study in 1921 as a special student at Harvard University, Adler moved to New York and became head of Pynson Printers. The firm was originally a partnership of four men – Adler, David Silvé, Walter Dorwin Teague, and Hubert Canfield - but there was never any doubt as to whose energy and genius animated the venture. Though the firm had a shaky start, the basic soundness of Adler's vision – to produce "printing in which quality is the first consideration" - soon began to attract clients. In 1924, Arthur Sulzberger of The New York Times leased space to Adler in his company's recently erected newspaper plant on West Forty-third Street; soon after, the Pynson Printers' new offices were transformed by the designer Lucian Bernhard into what came to be regarded as the most beautiful and welcoming quarters of any printing establishment in the city. Pynson Printers produced relatively few books during its eighteen-year span, but each was carefully made to Adler's exacting standards. Few other firms had such a stimulating influence on fine printing in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s.

During this period, Adler also developed an interest in publishing, which manifested itself in a number of ways. He was one of the founders of Random House, along with Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, and the distinction evident in a number of that firm's early books was due to design and presswork by Pynson Printers. Occasionally, Pynson also published books under its own name, issuing such important titles as *The Decorative Work of T. M. Cleland*, Dard Hunter's

A Papermaking Pilgrimage to Japan, Korea, and China, and Voltaire's Candide, illustrated by Rockwell Kent.

Elmer Adler's most enduring publishing legacy, however, was *The Colophon*. This extraordinary periodical was published in twenty parts from 1930 to 1935 and contained a wide range of articles on book collecting and bibliographical lore. *The Colophon* owed its great charm to the fact that each article was designed and produced by a different fine printer, but all under Adler's eye. Two supplementary series of *The Colophon* were issued between 1935 and 1940.

Despite a reputation for charging more than any other shop in the country (and never making a profit), Adler and Pynson successfully negotiated the worst years of the Depression. However, the difficulties of sustaining a fine-printing establishment beyond the 1930s finally led Adler to close Pynson's doors in 1940.

That same year, Elmer Adler was persuaded to become a consultant to Princeton University Press and to establish a graphic arts department for the university library. Adler situated himself and his outstanding personal collection of books and prints in a fine old house on Mercer Street in Princeton. There he began to organize a series of seminars and informal classes. A born teacher, Adler found enormous gratification in educating students about graphic processes and the history of printing, as well as introducing them to the joys of collecting. One of his proudest achievements at Princeton was the successful implementation of a print lending library for students. Adler left Princeton in 1952 at the age of sixty-five, fully expecting to enjoy a leisurely retirement.

Soon after, however, he embarked on the last of his so-called "four careers." In 1955, while on vaction in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Adler became acquainted with a number of the island's cultural authorities and was subsequently invited by the commonwealth government to establish "an institution devoted to encouraging and developing the arts of the book in Puerto Rico." Adler spent the next three years collecting books and supervising the renovation of a handsome old structure in San Juan's historic quarter. La Casa del Libro opened in 1958 and within a year was home to some 4,000 books, including 130 incunabula – all the fruits of Adler's

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energy and collecting skills. He remained in charge of the collection until his death.

At a memorial service in Rochester at Temple B'rith Kodesh, Adler's old friend John Rothwell Slater closed his eulogy with these words: "I shall always think of Elmer Adler as a generous, enlightened patron and practitioner of the graphic arts, unspoiled by affluence, untouched by envy, and unforgotten by the children of the Light."

DAVID PANKOW