



JOSEPH PENNELL (1857-1926)



Joseph Pennell. *Self-Portrait of the Artist with Pictorial Initial*. Pen and ink drawing, c. 1890-1900, Mark Samuel Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press.

Joseph Pennell, an illustrator, printmaker, and art critic, was born 4 July 1857 to Quaker parents in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Drawing from the time he was a child, Pennell became particularly adept at architectural studies. He trained nights at the Pennsylvania School of Industrial Art, working as a clerk by day. At one point, the American painter and art educator Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) was his drawing teacher. By 1880 Pennell had begun his career, selling drawings of American cities to *Scribner's Monthly*, which became *The Century Magazine* in 1881; he would work over 30 years for

this periodical. Pennell's commissions in the United States took him from Pennsylvania to Boston to New Orleans. On one of his New Orleans trips, Pennell met Oscar Wilde on the train, and their acquaintance was renewed when he moved to London with his wife Elizabeth in 1884.

Pennell met budding journalist Elizabeth Robins in 1880, through her uncles Charles Godfrey Leland, a friend of some of the London aesthetes. In 1881 the two began to collaborate on periodical publications about places in the United States, with Joseph

providing illustrations for Elizabeth's articles. Although he was known as an impatient and prickly man, the two had an amicable working relationship. When he was appointed the *Century's* European correspondent in 1884, he requested that Elizabeth write the text for his illustrations; for propriety's sake, they married before going abroad. The couple had a devoted union and remained lifelong working partners. However, they embarked for Europe with the pact that nothing, including their marriage, would get in the way of their work. "Life as [Joseph] conceived it," Elizabeth later explained, "was made for work; nothing else counted" (*Life and Letters*, vol 1, 117). When the Pennells were not travelling throughout England and the Continent on assignment, they lived in London, where they became friends with many participants in the Aesthetic Movement. Pennell was also an avid cyclist and wrote and illustrated articles on cycling, which was the couple's primary mode of transportation on their assignments abroad. Pennell also illustrated travel books and articles by other authors besides his wife, including William Dean Howells, Washington Irving, Henry James, Andrew Lang, and Vernon Lee. The Pennells also championed the New English Arts Club that formed in 1885 to recognize progressive artists developing their work in reaction to the tastes and techniques valorized by the Royal Academy. In 1888 Pennell became art critic for *The Star* under the pseudonym "A.U.," taking over from George Bernard Shaw. Pennell's work in illustration remained paramount, however, and so he relinquished the column to Elizabeth, helping to make her own reputation in London as an incisive art critic. In 1889 Pennell published his landmark book *Pen Drawing and Pen Draughtsmen*, which cemented his authority on the craft.

The couple befriended fellow American expatriate James McNeill Whistler, who entrusted Pennell with the etching of many of his finest prints, and who himself etched some of Pennell's plates. This collaboration set the groundwork for a lifelong friendship, with the Pennells ultimately becoming Whistler's champions and biographers. Over the years the Pennells also counted other artists and writers among their friends, including John Lane, many *Yellow Book* contributors, and members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. When Joseph and Elizabeth moved to Buckingham Street in London in 1892 they hosted Thursday night "at homes" where artists, writers, editors, and publishers gathered to discuss art and literature. According to Elizabeth, Aubrey Beardsley and

Henry Harland consulted Pennell about the inaugural issue of *The Yellow Book*, including the iconic colour of its bindings, and invited him to contribute to the magazine. Pennell gave them his etching “Le Puy en Valey” for reproduction in the first volume (April 1894).

Throughout his career Pennell illustrated and wrote for a number of periodicals. He contributed several articles to *The Studio*, including the piece that helped launch Beardsley’s career: “Aubrey Beardsley, A New Illustrator” (1893). In addition to the *Century*, Pennell also contributed to the *Art Journal*, *Graphic*, *London Daily Chronicle*, *London Illustrated News*, *Magazine of Art*, *Modern Illustrator*, and *Pall Mall Gazette*. During the mid 1890s Pennell became increasingly interested in lithography, believing this medium produced prints closest to his actual drawings. He became a highly regarded lithographer in his own right and in 1899 he published the self-illustrated article “The Truth About Lithography” in *The Studio*.

In 1904 Pennell traveled to the United States to be a juror for the American art entries to be shown at the St Louis Universal Exhibition. He and Elizabeth were also busy with their biography of Whistler, who had died in 1903, as well as working on the Whistler Memorial Exhibition and Rodin’s Whistler Memorial, which was to be set up on London’s Embankment. In 1907 Whistler’s executrix brought a lawsuit against the Pennells, charging that the artist had never authorized their biography. The couple won the case and their biography was published in 1908. In this year the Pennells began traveling regularly to New York so Joseph could draw his beloved New York skyscrapers. Museums began buying Pennell’s work for their collections, and he received medals for his artwork, including from the British Royal Society of Art (*Life and Letters*, vol 2, 70), sealing Pennell’s reputation as a master artist. In 1912 he sailed to Panama to draw the building of the canal, and during World War I the British government authorized him to draw England’s munitions works. Although Pennell was a pacifist owing to his Quaker upbringing, the industriousness of the munitions factories held a special appeal to him and he felt the public should see evidence of war work beyond the horrors of the front.

The Pennells returned to America in 1917, residing in Brooklyn, where Joseph's view of New York's skyscrapers was a constant inspiration. The same year, the couple presented their vast collection of Whistleriana to the Library of Congress. In 1918 Pennell became famous for his poster for the fourth Liberty Loans campaign. Pennell also traveled round the United States lecturing on American art, printmaking, Beardsley, and Whistler. Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1921, Pennell taught etching and lithography at the Art Students League in New York from 1922 to 1926. After a long life of working on his art and a short illness with pneumonia, Joseph Pennell died in New York on 23 April 1926.

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Selected Publications by Pennell

The Adventures of an Illustrator. Boston: Little, Brown 1925. Print.

"Aubrey Beardsley, A New Illustrator." *The Studio* (1893). Print.

Etchers and Etching. New York: Macmillan, 1919. Print.

Pen Drawing and Pen Draughtsmen: Their Work and Their Methods. London: Macmillan, 1889. Print.

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Selected Publications about Pennell

Pennell, Elizabeth Robbins. *The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*. 2 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, 1929. Print.

---. *Nights: Rome, Venice in the Aesthetic Eighties; London, Paris in the Fighting Nineties*. Philadelphia: J.B. Kppincott, 1916. Print.

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