

Howard Pyle (1853-1911)

American artist, illustrator, author and teacher

Today, Howard Pyle is not nearly as well known as his images. However, he was one of America's most popular and famous illustrators and storytellers at a time when top illustrators were celebrities. At his death, he was designated by the *New York Times* "the father of American magazine illustration as it is known to-day." His illustrations appeared in magazines like *Harper's Monthly*, *Collier's Weekly*, *St. Nicholas*, and *Scribner's Magazine*, gaining him national and international exposure. And because magazines so influenced the nation's visual culture, Pyle's images and stories—including American history and tales of pirates and medieval adventurers—reached millions of people, helping to shape the American imagination.

He also authored more than 20 books, several of which are still in print today. And he was a master teacher, who helped to form and influence more than half of America's popular illustrators of the early- and mid-20th century. He began his teaching career as the first instructor of illustration art at the Drexel Institute in Philadelphia and then founded the Howard Pyle School of Art in Wilmington, Delaware. Students flocked to his classes from across the United States, and some of the greatest illustration artists of the day were his pupils: N. C. Wyeth, Jessie Willcox Smith, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Violet Oakley. Maxfield Parrish sat in on a few of Pyle's classes and said of Pyle's powerful personality, "Somehow after a talk with him you felt inspired to go out and do great things. "

Pyle's influence and images continue to inform popular culture. Norman Rockwell described him as his "hero," and contemporary illustrator James Gurney (the *Dinotopia* series) is an unabashed Pyle fan. Many cinematographers and filmmakers revere Pyle's art, reflected in Hollywood images of medieval heroes and Caribbean pirates. Early filmmakers were influenced by Pyle's techniques of storytelling, and costume designers and actors (like Errol Flynn) referenced Pyle's depictions of pirates and Robin Hood. This legacy continues in later 20th- and early- 21st-century film, illustration, and animation, where artists continue to use his work as both a source and an inspiration. Some examples include Hal Foster's comic strip *Prince Valiant*; producer Roy Conli's *Treasure Planet* for Disney Enterprises; Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*; and Charley Parker's *Argon Zark*, the first long-form webcomic.

Pyle's experiences as an artist, writer, illustrator, and celebrity brought him in contact with fascinating figures in American history. He illustrated fiction by Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Dean Howells, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as history by Henry Cabot Lodge and Woodrow Wilson. Many students' visions of American history were shaped by Pyle's vivid illustrations.

As part of the mainstream artist community in New York, he belonged to the Tile Club, the Salmagundi Club, the Century Club, and the Players Club, where he socialized with the nation's most famous artists, including Winslow Homer, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and William Merritt Chase, among others.

Later in his life, his correspondence included thoughtful exchanges with such American luminaries as Twain, William Dean Howells, President Theodore Roosevelt and his family, and illustrators Frederick Remington and A. B. Frost. His exchanges with writers demonstrated the fruitful collaboration of authors and illustrators at this time, as well as the bonds between them. For example, Pyle's correspondence with William Dean Howells regarding death and life culminated in Howells' poetry *Monochromes* (1893) and *Stops of Various Quills* (1894), which Pyle illustrated. These illustrations

crystallize the poems' themes of mortality and relate to the shifting American religious landscape as well as both artists' personal experiences. Similarly, Pyle's illustration for Edwin Markham's *The Man with the Hoe* (1900) distilled the poet's sympathy for exploited workers.

Here at the Delaware Art Museum, we are fortunate to have a remarkable collection of the works and personal papers of Howard Pyle in our collections and archives. His legacy is a treasure not only for the Brandywine Valley but for the nation and the world. In a letter to his brother, Vincent Van Gogh wrote, "Do you know an American magazine *Harpers Monthly*? There are wonderful sketches in it ... which strike me dumb with admiration ... by Howard Pyle."

We are still struck by the force and vivacity of Pyle's work today. As we approach the centennial of his death, we hope you will discover, or re-discover, the incredible work of this American Master.