



# DELAWARE ART MUSEUM

## **Maxfield Parrish Illustrated Letters to Henry Bancroft, 1883-1909**

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the  
Helen Farr Sloan Library & Archives, Delaware Art Museum

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### **Acquisition Information**

Gift of Mary Bancroft, 1951

### **Extent**

3 linear feet

### **Contents**

34 letters and postcards written by Maxfield Parrish to his cousin, Henry Bancroft, between 1883 and 1909

### **Access Restrictions**

Unrestricted

### **Contact Information**

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### **Preferred Citation**

Maxfield Parrish Illustrated Letters to Henry Bancroft, 1883-1909, Helen Farr Sloan Library & Archives,  
Delaware Art Museum

## Biography of Maxfield Parrish

Maxfield Parrish was born into an old Quaker family on July 25, 1870, in Philadelphia. His parents named their son Frederick; he later adopted Maxfield, a family name, as his middle name. Parrish grew up in a cultured environment. He spent two years, 1884-86, in Europe with his parents. During the winter of 1884 he attended classes at Dr. Kornemann's school in Paris. Parrish continued his education at Haverford College and was graduated from there in 1892. That summer and the next, he spent in Annisquam, Massachusetts, where his father continued to instruct him in art. From 1892 to 1894, Parrish took classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under Robert W. Vonnoh and Thomas P. Anshutz.

Parrish also audited some classes of Howard Pyle at Drexel Institute for a short period of time. Pyle reportedly told Parrish to develop his individual style because he had already mastered the technical aspect of illustration. At Drexel, Parrish met his future wife, Lydia Austin (1872-1953), who was an instructor at the school. They married in 1895 and moved to Twelfth and Spruce streets in Philadelphia. Within the month, Parrish departed alone for a two-month trip to Europe to visit the salons and museums. In 1898, Maxfield and Lydia Parrish established a permanent home in Cornish, New Hampshire, where they built their famous house and studio at "The Oaks." Parrish was stricken with tuberculosis in 1900 and spent his convalescence at Saranac Lake, New York, and at Hot Springs, Arizona, until April 1902. During his convalescence he continued to paint and in 1903 spent three months on a working trip to Italy and France.

Parrish referred to himself as "a mechanic who paints." The vases, columns, and other props used in his paintings were made in his own machine shop and were very carefully lighted before he began to paint. He was a meticulous draftsman and paid great attention to detail. Consequently, his work has a photographic quality. His fascination with color gives his illustrations an unreal characteristic suitable to his fairytale-like themes. His mastery of the technique of glazing provided an excellent complement to his use of color.

Parrish's early works were marked by the use of gnome-like characters in medieval costumes. His compositions were densely packed, with castles and walled towers filling background areas. At the height of his popularity, he concentrated on romantic themes that combined medieval and classical elements. By 1931, he had tired of themes of young maidens surrounded by rocks, trees, and water, and from then on his works were landscapes of rural scenes used mostly for calendar and greeting card illustration.

Parrish was a prolific illustrator, whose work appeared in *Collier's*, *Scribner's*, *Book Buyer*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Life*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. He also illustrated books and advertisements as well as created posters and murals. He was *the* popular artist of post-World War I: literally millions of prints of his paintings *Daybreak* and *Garden of Allah* were manufactured. Parrish's work was neglected from the mid-thirties until the mid-sixties, when it was "rediscovered" and acclaimed; he lived to see a revival in the popularity of his paintings and drawings.

Source: Elzea, Rowland and Elizabeth H. Hawkes, eds. *A Small School of Art: The Students of Howard Pyle*. Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1980.

## Scope and Contents Note

In the summer of 1884, fourteen year old Maxfield Parrish began a two year sojourn abroad accompanying his parents to various European cities. His travels and experiences are chronicled in the letters he wrote home to his cousin Henry Bancroft. While the text is rather thin, the illustrations filling these letters make them treasures. While these illustrations may appear to be purely imaginative in fact many of the vignettes reveal Parrish's absorption of popular culture he experienced while abroad. In addition to providing a peek at life in England and Europe in the mid-1880s, these letters are an amazing precursor to Parrish's adult artistic talent and sense of humor.

On the first letter Parrish sent home to his cousin from London there are 25 scenes comprised of 47 characters of both men and animals. Some of these scenes and characters appear repeatedly decorating Parrish's letters: men and boys on bicycles; waiters or butlers; men sitting on a chair reading a newspaper; various animals kicking men sitting on a chair reading a newspaper; explosions or destruction or the devices causing explosions or destruction; men wearing sandwich boards walking the street; musicians; and always various racial and social stereotypes. On the first letter alone there are stereotypes of a school master, an organ grinder, "H'an H'english Boy," as Parrish titles him, a black man, Chinese man, and Indian man, a butler, and a waiter.

Although named Frederick at his birth, eventually Parrish took his Grandmother Parrish's family name Maxfield as his own. During the interlude of these illustrated letters Parrish signs himself Fred, Buck, Buckshires, or Buckshies. He also variously names his cousin Henry as Harry, Hen, or Buckshires, too.

## Description of the Collection

### Box 1

Series I: Illustrated letters from Maxfield Parrish to Henry Bancroft, autumn 1883 – May 1886

#### Item

- 1 Illustrated letter, no date (c. autumn 1883)
- 2 Illustrated letter, London, July 22, 1884; envelope postmarked August 4, 1884
- 3 Illustrated letter, London, August 19, 1884
- 4 Illustrated postcard, Hastings, September 13, 1884
- 5 Illustrated letter and envelope, Veulettes, France, c. October 9, 1884
- 6 Illustrated postcard, Paris, October 24, 1884
- 7 Illustrated letter and envelope, Paris, November 7, 1884
- 8 Illustrated letter and envelope, Paris, December 1, 1884
- 9 Illustrated letter and envelope, Paris, December 12, 1884
- 10 Illustrated letter, Paris, December 15, 1884
- 11 Illustrated letter, Paris, January 20, 1885
- 12 Illustrated letter and envelope, Paris, March 3, 1885
- 13 Illustrated letter and envelope, London, October 4, 1885
- 14 Illustrated letter, Saint-Raphäel, France, November 29, 1885
- 15 Illustrated postcard, Genoa, Italy, March 20, 1886
- 16 Illustrated letter, Venice, no date (c. April 1886)
- 17 Illustrated postcard, Lugano, Switzerland, May 4, 1886
- 18 Illustrated letter, London, May 24, 1886

**Box 2**

Series II: Letters from Maxfield Parrish to Henry Bancroft, 1902-1909

## Folder

- 1 Letter and envelope, Castle Creek, Hot Springs, Yavapai Co., Arizona, February 6, 1902
- 2 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, October 23, 1902
- 3 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, August 28, 1903
- 4 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, March 19, 1904
- 5 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, April 1, 1904
- 6 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, April 26, 1904
- 7 The Oaks, Cornish, New Hampshire, c. 1906
- 8 Letter, Bancroft to Parrish, January 3, 1907
- 9 Letter and envelope, The Oaks, Cornish, New Hampshire, July 14, 1907
- 10 Letter, The Oaks, Cornish, New Hampshire, December 7, 1907
- 11 Two postcards, Windsor, Vermont, postmarked January 20 and 21, 1908
- 12 Postcard, Windsor, Vermont, postmarked April 2, 1908
- 13 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, December 10, 1908
- 14 Letter and envelope, Windsor, Vermont, December 6, 1909
- 15 Drawing by Dillwyn Parrish, December 1908
- 16 Transcriptions