

Library News

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DREXEL'S "ILLUSTRIOUS" BEGINNING - The Contributions of Howard Pyle

The original name of Drexel University was the "Drexel Institute of Art, Science, and Industry." As the name implies, the arts were an important element of A. J. Drexel's vision for his institution.

The Art Department at Drexel began in 1892 with some 380 students. Course offered were in freehand and model drawing, perspective, painting in oil and watercolor, decoration, architectural drawing, and history of art. The Drexel family strongly supported the Art Department by sponsoring competitions with cash prizes as well as scholarships. For the first decade of Drexel's operation, the Department of Fine Arts was its most successful and acclaimed department.

Howard Pyle began teaching at the Drexel Institute in 1894. He was a native of Wilmington, DE and a Quaker. After receiving preliminary artistic training in Philadelphia, Pyle moved to New York City in 1876 where he pursued a career as a freelance writer and illustrator for the flourishing magazine industry. Scribner's and Harpers were frequent sponsors of his work.

In 1879, Pyle returned to Wilmington and married (1881). Pyle and his wife, Anne Poole, had seven children. In the late 19th century, Pyle expanded the scope of his work to include children's literature, such as an edition of Robin Hood which he illustrated in 1883 as well as many other famous children's titles.

Two of Pyle's favorite themes were knights (chivalry) and pirates (adventure). In 1897, he had one-person shows in Philadelphia and Boston, and in 1903, he had another one-person show at the Chicago Art Institute.

Pyle taught illustration at Drexel from 1894 to 1900. Originally, his teaching consisted of a series of lectures offered on Saturdays. However, after the first year, he decided to have classes every day. His students included N.C. Wyeth, Violet Oakely, and Maxfield Parrish.

The decision to offer training in illustration at Drexel was prescient. The Institute was one of the first schools in the country, if not the first, to offer training specifically in illustration. Therefore, it immediately attracted many talented

individuals. Graduates of the program were in a good position to obtain employment as illustrators because they were in great demand at the time.

Mr. Pyle left Drexel in 1900 to teach at his own small school in Wilmington, DE and also at his studio in Chadds Ford. Unfortunately, the Art Department's demise was nearly as sudden as its success. Owing to a severe lack of space in the Main Building as well as a loss of cohesion among faculty and students, the Art Department was closed in 1905. Howard Pyle died in 1911.

The Drexel University Archives has material relating to Howard Pyle. In addition to several books on or by the artist (including *Howard Pyle: a chronicle*, *Howard Pyle's works*, *Howard Pyle: a teacher*, *Howard Pyle: His art and personality*), holdings include catalogues of student exhibitions and papers concerning the School of Illustration (reference numbers: 11-A-1, Boxes -- 3, 6, 13).

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