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The Prints of Benjamin Miller

University of Dayton. Marian Library

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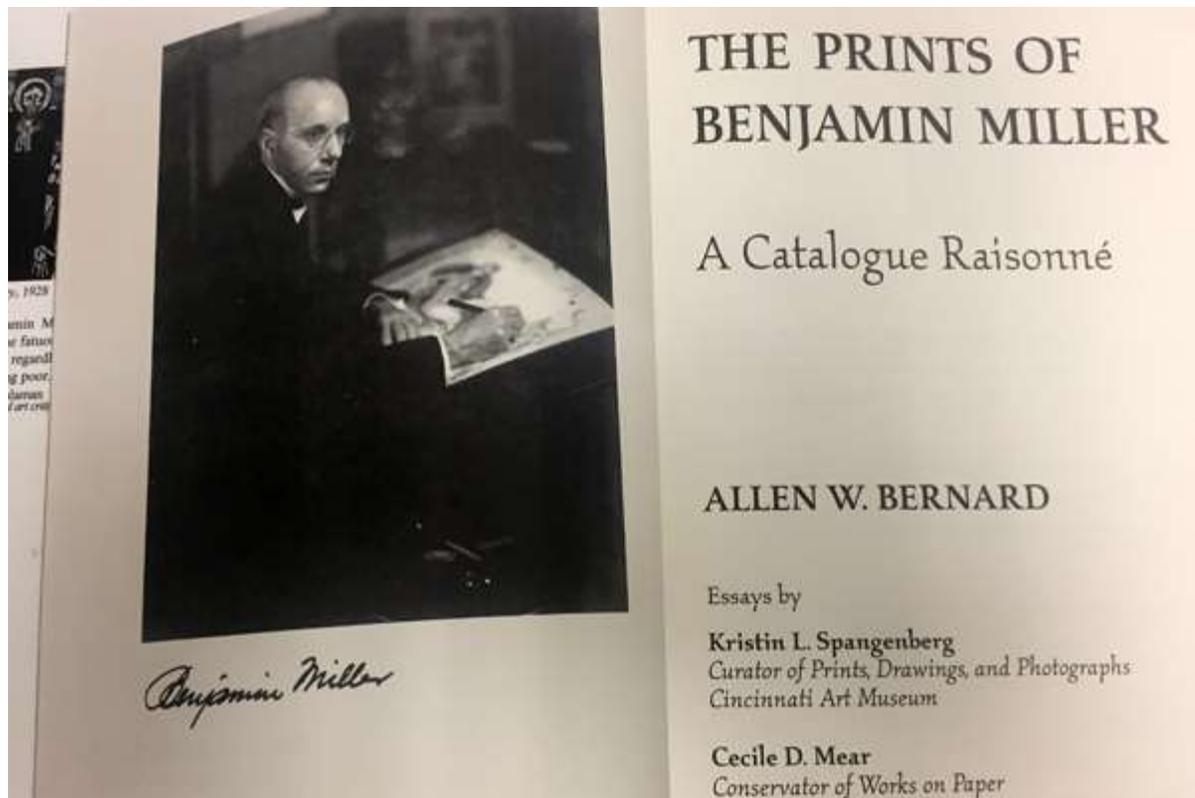
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THURSDAY MAY 10, 2018

Author, Collector, Expert and Donor

<https://udayton.edu/blogs/marianlibrary/2018-05-10-author-collector-expert-donor.php>

By Fr. Johann Roten, S.M.

"Today, Benjamin Miller (1877–1964) is recognized as a significant wood block artist who, during the period from 1924 until 1935 has developed an intense range of personal expression through command of the burin, gouge, and burnisher upon the wood grain. He is unique as an American artist in creating works with secular, mystical, and religious subject matter that show an intense passion and primal directness not found in other artists of that period. Had his artistic career not been cut short due to osteoporosis and other illnesses, his fame as an artist would surely have been profound."

These are the words of the foremost expert on the person and the art of Benjamin Miller. Allen W. Bernard published in 2003 a *Catalogue raisonné* of Miller's work. *The Prints of Benjamin Miller: A Catalogue Raisonné* with contributions by Kristin L. Spangenberg and Cecile D. Mear is a masterwork

of precision and presentation. The introductory essays on Miller's life (Bernard), art (Spangenberg), and printing technique (Mear) lead into full page reproductions of the catalogue of prints followed by samples of Miller's block print designs, silhouette drawings, and holiday cards.

Allen Bernard is not only the expert on Miller's woodcuts, he is also the proverbial *aficionado* and collector of Miller's prints. He recently donated an important part of his collection to the Smithsonian. Allen Bernard made this exhibit possible in sharing his treasures with us. Some years ago, he had already donated a number of Miller's religious prints to the art collection of the Marian Library.



MONDAY JUNE 4, 2018

Benjamin Miller and the Bible

<https://udayton.edu/blogs/marianlibrary/2018-06-04-benjamin-miller-and-the-bible.php>

By Fr. Johann Roten, S.M.

Benjamin Miller's art received considerable attention beginning in 1927. 1927 is the year of the *Salome* prints and of the *Flight into Egypt*. The latter was included in the British publication *The Woodcut of Today at Home and Abroad*. It was commended for its bold and fresh design. *The New York Times* (December 25, 1927) published a full-size reproduction of the same print and presented it as a new look at traditional religious features.

The *Flight into Egypt*, a popular representation belonging to the Christmas cycle, comprises a multi-layered thematic. It highlights poverty, expulsion, and exile of the Holy Family; it records the clash between two cultures, the new culture — the culture of love — toppling the idols of Egypt — symbol of a world yearning for salvation. The *Flight into Egypt* also describes joy and bliss of the Holy Family on the rest from the flight, but already anticipates the future Passion of Christ.

Miller's Flight is an intricate play of vertical, horizontal, and oblique lines. The Holy Family is set against the forbidding crisscross pattern of a hostile landscape. The child is blotted in the protective crucible formed by mother and donkey. Bent, but braving an uncertain future, Joseph combines the vertical and horizontal lines of Mary and the animal to symbolize resignation and determination.

The Bible has been strongly affected by 20th-century art. Contrary to 19th-century Bible illustrations à la Doré, which sought a certain catechetical and pastoral objectivity, beginning with the poetic and primitive symbolism of Gauguin (*Vision after the Sermon*, 1888), 20th-century art exploits the Book of Books as artistic quarry and source of inspiration. Events of the Bible are now translated into a second form (representation), attaining thereby a renewed presence and effectiveness. All at once, the biblical message opens itself to new interpretations and a variety of meanings. A symbiosis between artist and text develops which will give new life to the text and, to the artist, a home for his fears, phantasms, and expectations. The Bible becomes alive with a second life and breathes with two lungs: the lung of heavenly inspiration and the lung of human interpretation.



FRIDAY JULY 6, 2018

A City on the Mount

<https://udayton.edu/blogs/marianlibrary/2018-07-06-a-city-on-the-mount.php>

By Fr. Johann Roten, S.M.

A native of Cincinnati, Benjamin Miller was far from being a victim of his roots and culture. Living in Boston (1897-1901) and working toward a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering, he was exposed to what he called “my New England culture.” He will try to lose it working for a very short time as an engineer in San Francisco (1901). Eventually, he will return to California. In a fruitless attempt to find healing for his wife Ella, the couple will spend two years in Long Beach (1916-1918). To escape the grief of losing his wife, Benjamin traveled to Europe, visiting England, Holland, Italy, and France – spending the entire year of 1919 in Paris amid memories of bombed cities and desolate battlefields. He returned to Paris in 1921 and became deeply involved with expressionist art. Miller, an avid traveler, spent part of 1922 and 1923 in Assisi. In 1929, at a time when his work received recognition not only at home, but in Europe, he traveled again to Paris. The years after the Great

Depression were frequently spent traveling with a friend not only to Europe, but also to Cuba and Mexico.

Two prints, both churches, in our exhibit are reminiscent of Miller's travels. The first is Santa Maria Maggiore in Assisi (1927). The other is the Old Church of Taxco in Mexico (1927). The contrast between the two churches is memorable. Santa Maria Maggiore is broad, heavy, plunged partially in darkness. Colossal in an uninspiring way, the church looks with dark, blind eyes into the world. It is there to remain, so the message, but hardly here to attract people. The Taxco church, on the contrary, is full of southern charm. Although surrounded by an angry throng of clouds packed with rain, the mission church radiates joyful confidence, a serene and simple beauty. Was it Miller's intentions to show two faces of the *one* Church: It's sometimes forbidding permanence, but – most important – its never fading Light of peaceful hope and joy?



Santa Maria Maggiore



Old Church of Taxco

Architecture does not have an important place in Miller's work. In the exhibit we have – aside from the two churches – a beautiful print featuring Mt. Adams, Cincinnati (1927) literally reaching into heaven and transfigured by the light from above. The woodcut is reminiscent of the iconographical motif of the City on the Mount. The City on the Mount is a symbol of life. It is the origin from which creation springs; it is here that life will find fulfillment. The seer of Patmos, in the Book of Revelation saw the Holy City, a New Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God (Rev. 21:2). The City on the Mount is a symbol of redemption, of paradise retrieved.



Mt. Adams, Cincinnati



WEDNESDAY AUGUST 1, 2018

As a Farewell to Benjamin Miller – Two of His Most Significant Woodcuts

<https://udayton.edu/blogs/marianlibrary/2018-08-01-as-a-farewell-to-benjamin-miller.php>

By Fr. Johann Roten, S.M.

Benjamin Miller met some of his models and sources of inspiration in Europe, expressionists like Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner, and Heckel. He was familiar with the woodcuts of Gauguin and Munch. Two among the early expressionists, James Ensor (1860-1949) and Emil Nolde (1867-1956) left a more immediate imprint on Miller's work.

There is no doubt about the great similarity between Nolde's *The Prophet* (1912) and Miller's 1924 woodcut of the same name. Nolde, the painter, is known for his love of vivid colors (*Red Poppies*, 1920; *Sea and Light Clouds*, 1935) and a marked religious period in his work (*The Last Supper*, 1909; *The Burial*, 1915). However, it was in print making that he found the means to express intense emotions in a radically simplified form. His most celebrated wood cut is *The Prophet*. The woodcut is hailed for the

masterful combination of fluidity of form and intensity of expression. The hollowed eyes, furrowed brow, and sunken cheeks point to the ascetic, whereas the overall impression denotes a thoroughly spiritualized existence. Recovering from illness in 1909, Nolde saw in *The Prophet* a symbol of his conversion and of religiosity as such. Miller's *Prophet* is more artisanal, in form as well as in expression. Eyes and face are haunted by what the prophet sees or blindly intuits. *The Prophet* is an early example of Miller's print making. At the same time, his woodcut is typical of the suffering and critical look with which the Cincinnati artist perceived human reality and his own time.

There is a second woodcut which points in a similar direction. Hailed as his most famous work, *The City* (1928) can be understood as a "secular sermon." The 1930 publication of *The New Woodcut* commented as follows: "It is scathing satire on the fatuous frivolity and extravagance supposed to be rife in New York and presumably in other cities, regardless of the needs of the suffering poor, a crowd of inane faces of men and women of every description, laughing and giggling." (A. Bernard, 17). The grinning and leering masses are pressing forward, literally pushing the Christ figure out of the picture. Oversized, but blind and empty handed, Jesus is an image of crucified impotence, a gigantic shadow without power, an irritating obstacle on the ways of the world. Miller's secular sermon is reminiscent of James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels* (1888). Rejected in the beginning, the first public exhibit took place in 1929, the contrast and similarity with Miller's oversized Christ is easily perceived. Ensor's diminutive Jesus, sitting on a donkey, is swallowed up by the same grinning and leering masses as in Miller's woodcut. There is no singing, there are no palm branches on his way to Jerusalem. Ensor's painting has primarily political significance, and his opinion on religion at that time bordered on cynicism. Miller, on the contrary, fustigated the cynicism of the masses on behalf of the poor, the downtrodden, and the poorest of all, Jesus.