Some influences on the color woodcuts of Arthur Wesley Dow

Some Influences on the Color Woodcuts of Arthur Wesley Dow

Nancy Finlay

Among the seventy-six items in the 1985 Houghton Library exhibition, *Artists of the Book in Boston, 1890–1910*, was an unpretentious small volume entitled *By Salt Marshes: Pictures and Poems of Old Ipswich (1908)*.[1] The illustrations, exquisite compositions in muted tones of gray, green, tan, and blue measuring a mere two by three inches, represent the culmination of the color woodcut technique of Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922),[2] one of the most progressive and influential Boston artists of the turn of the century. A careful study of the individual prints in this little book reveals much about the influences on Dow's work and confirms much that Dow himself suggested in his theoretical writings.[3] An examination of these writings will, in turn, uncover much that prefigures the style of the woodcuts of *By Salt Marshes*. "Painting with Wooden Blocks," an early article by Dow, appeared in the July 1896 issue of the Boston periodical *Modern Art*. It is of special interest as it contains one of the earliest and most radical statements of his art theory and

This essay is adapted from a talk delivered in the Houghton Library, 30 October 1985, at a symposium on Artists of the Book in Boston.

[1] *By Salt Marshes* (Ipswich, 1908), with poems by Everett Stanley Hubbard and pictures by Arthur Wesley Dow, was purchased by the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts in 1981 with income from the P. D. Howe Fund. This copy is numbered in pencil "No. 63." The exhibition Artists of the Book in Boston, 1890–1910 was on view in the Houghton Library from 15 October through 13 December 1985.

[2] The basic reference on Dow's life and work is Frederick C. Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922)* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press of the National Collection of Fine Arts, 1977). See also Arthur Warren Johnson, *Arthur Wesley Dow, Historian, Artist, Teacher*, Publications of the Ipswich Historical Society, 28 (Ipswich, Mass., 1934).

[3] In addition to "Painting with Wooden Blocks," *Modern Art*, 4 (1896), 85-90, Dow also published "A Note on Japanese Art and What the American Artist May Learn Therefrom," *The Knight Errant*, 1 (1893), 114-116, and "The Responsibility of the Artist as an Educator," *The Lotos*, 9 (1896), 609-612. His major theoretical work was the instruction manual, *Composition* (Boston: J. M. Bowles, 1899).

Houghton Library

FIGURE 1 *Along Ipswich River.*
Chromolithographic facsimile of a color woodcut by Arthur Wesley Dow, reproduced in *Modern Art*, 4 (July 1896)

provides valuable insights into the origins of those ideas that would later be developed more fully in the prints of *By Salt Marshes*. In "Painting with Wooden Blocks," Dow describes *Along Ipswich River* (figure 1), an earlier suite of ten color woodcuts:

My intention was to make it purely a picture book, not to represent any place or any time of day or season very realistically but rather in an imaginative manner: to use some beautiful groups of lines and shapes chosen from the scenery of the old New England town, as a groundwork for different color schemes, a pattern, so to speak, for a mosaic of hues and shades. The method of printing permits this mosaic to be varied indefinitely in the same design during successive inkings of the blocks, hence no two books need be, or in fact can be, alike either in color or sequence of illustrations.

The strength of this method of expression lies in free interpretation, in a playing with color, so to speak, rather than a forced realism. . . . It lends itself readily to a suggestive rendering of the effects of nature . . . but it as easily permits a departure into a purely imaginative treatment as brilliant and unreal as stained glass. If you tire of printing a river blue, you can, in the next proof, change it to purple or yellow. But this, of course, entails a new color-composition, a new scheme in the arrangement of dark-and-light masses and hues.[4]

The origins Dow ascribes to these ideas are interesting and a bit ingenuous:

The origin of the ideas which culminated in these prints can be traced to the observations and fancies of childhood. Ipswich sailors had a habit of painting their boats in different colors from year to year. A yellow boat with a dark green stripe is likely to appear next season as a bright emerald green with a blue stripe, or a pure white, or lavender and gray. The flash of these colors on the blue river or purple mudflats or in the faded salt grass of the shore, in ever-varying groups, impressed me peculiarly as a child. But more fascinating and more closely related to the work under discussion, were two copies of a spelling book, "embellished with cuts" illustrating Aesop's Fables engraved in an antique fashion — one set colored, the other plain. The unreality of the color — an old farmer in yellow, throwing stones at a green boy in a blue tree — added an imaginative charm to these pictures. The uncolored copy seen side by side with the other emphasized its effect and suggested new combinations. A few other old hand-colored books were unearthed from chests in the garret, and the contemplation of this rude and primitive art afforded me a special kind of enjoyment, more fully satisfied in later years by Japanese prints.[5]

The illustration that Dow described appears, with slight variations, in numerous nineteenth-century editions of Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* (figure 7). The crude and arbitrary hand-coloring Dow admired may well have been added, in many cases, by the original youthful owners. By relating his theories on the one hand to a native woodcut tradition, which he perceived as a popular, primitive form of art, and on the other hand to his recollections of childhood, Dow

[4] Arthur Wesley Dow, "Painting with Wooden Blocks" (note 3), p. 86.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

was evidently trying to present himself as a naive, almost untutored artist. In fact, this was not the case. Furthermore, despite Dow's claim that he initially discovered Japanese art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts around 1890 under the guidance of Ernest Fenollosa,[6] he undoubtedly first encountered Japanese prints much earlier, perhaps as early as 1884 or 1885, under dramatically different circumstances.

A photograph taken during the summer of 1886 shows a group of artists gathered in front of the Pension Gloanec in Pont Aven, Brittany. One of the figures in the photograph has been identified as Arthur Wesley Dow, another as Paul Gauguin.[7] Dow first went to Paris to study art in the fall of 1884. There, like many another aspiring American artist, he entered the Académie Julian. He spent the summer of 1885 in Brittany, a popular resort for the often impoverished students of the Académie Julian.[8] The next summer, when Dow was photographed with the group including Gauguin, was the first that Gauguin spent at Pont Aven. At this point, early in his career, Gauguin was by no means a famous artist, but he was already a controversial figure. "My painting arouses much discussion," he wrote to his wife from Pont Aven, "and I must say [it] finds a pretty favorable welcome among the Americans."[9] During this period Gauguin began to formulate his theory of synthesism — the idea that art should represent a synthesis of drawing, composition, and color, combined with an effort to simplify these means of expression as far as possible. It was at Pont Aven, in 1888, that Gauguin gave his famous painting lesson to Paul Sérusier, urging him to simplify the forms and colors in his landscape of the Bois d'Amour. Gauguin and his followers would later be known as the School of Pont Aven; Dow

[6] See Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow* (note 2), pp. 48-50, and Johnson, *Arthur Wesley Dow* (note 2), p. 54-58.

[7] Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow* (note 2), pp. 29 and 31.

[8] Adolphe Guillaume Bougereau, one of the teachers at the Académie Julian, was summering in Brittany as early as 1866. Henry Blackburn and Randolph Caldecott, in *Breton Folk* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1880), extolled the advantages of Pont Aven as a resort for artists. An American edition of *Breton Folk* was published in 1881.

[9] Paul Gauguin to Mette Gauguin, Pont Aven, June 1886, in *Paul Gauguin: Letters to his Wife and Friends* (London: Saturn Press, 1946), p. 68. For further information on this period of Gauguin's career, see Władysława Jaworska, *Paul Gauguin et l'école de Pont-Aven* (Neuchâtel: Editions Ides et Calendes, 1971), and Charles Chassé, *Gauguin et le groupe de Pont-Aven: Documents inédits* (Paris: H. Floury, 1921).

would later refer to his own art theory as "Synthesis."[10] Apart from a visit home in 1887, Dow remained in France until 1889.

In addition to the work of Gauguin, Dow must also have encountered examples of the French woodcut revival during his studies in Paris. Gauguin and his followers, especially Emile Bernard and Maurice Denis, were producing woodcuts, some with crude, hand-cut lettering, by about 1884. A print by August Lepère entitled *The Palais de Justice Seen from the Pont Notre Dame* (1889), closely resembles Dow's work. The manner in which the ink is applied, in thinly graded washes, is similar to the technique Dow employed a few years later in the prints of *Along Ipswich River* (figure 1). Like Dow, Lepère was strongly influenced by the technique of Japanese woodcut artists, and his print *The Palais de Justice Seen from the Pont Notre Dame* has been considered the first successful imitation of a Japanese woodcut by a French artist.[11] Later, another French artist, Henri Guérard, experimented with printing his landscape designs in different colors to suggest different times of the day. Thus Dow's experiments in the woodcut medium and his belief that a painting or a print should be a purely imaginative color composition rather than a realistic representation of an actual place closely parallel contemporary French thinking. The atmosphere of the time is suggested by a letter from another Boston artist, Hermann Dudley Murphy, to the publisher Fred Holland Day. Murphy wrote: "There is a new movement in Paris and it is in just the direction that will interest you. They are paying more attention to design and arrangement — and to tone — and the result is that pictures are becoming what they should be — a spot or thing to decorate a wall rather than tell a story or describe a place. . . . I am sure it is the best and most healthy movement for a long time."[12] Although Murphy was writing as late as 1895, it appears that Dow had already perceived these tendencies in French art several years earlier, probably as a result of his contacts with avant-garde artists such as Gauguin.

[10] See Clay Lancaster, "Synthesis: The Artistic Theory of Fenollosa and Dow," *Art Journal*, 28 (1969), 286-287, in addition to the above-mentioned sources.

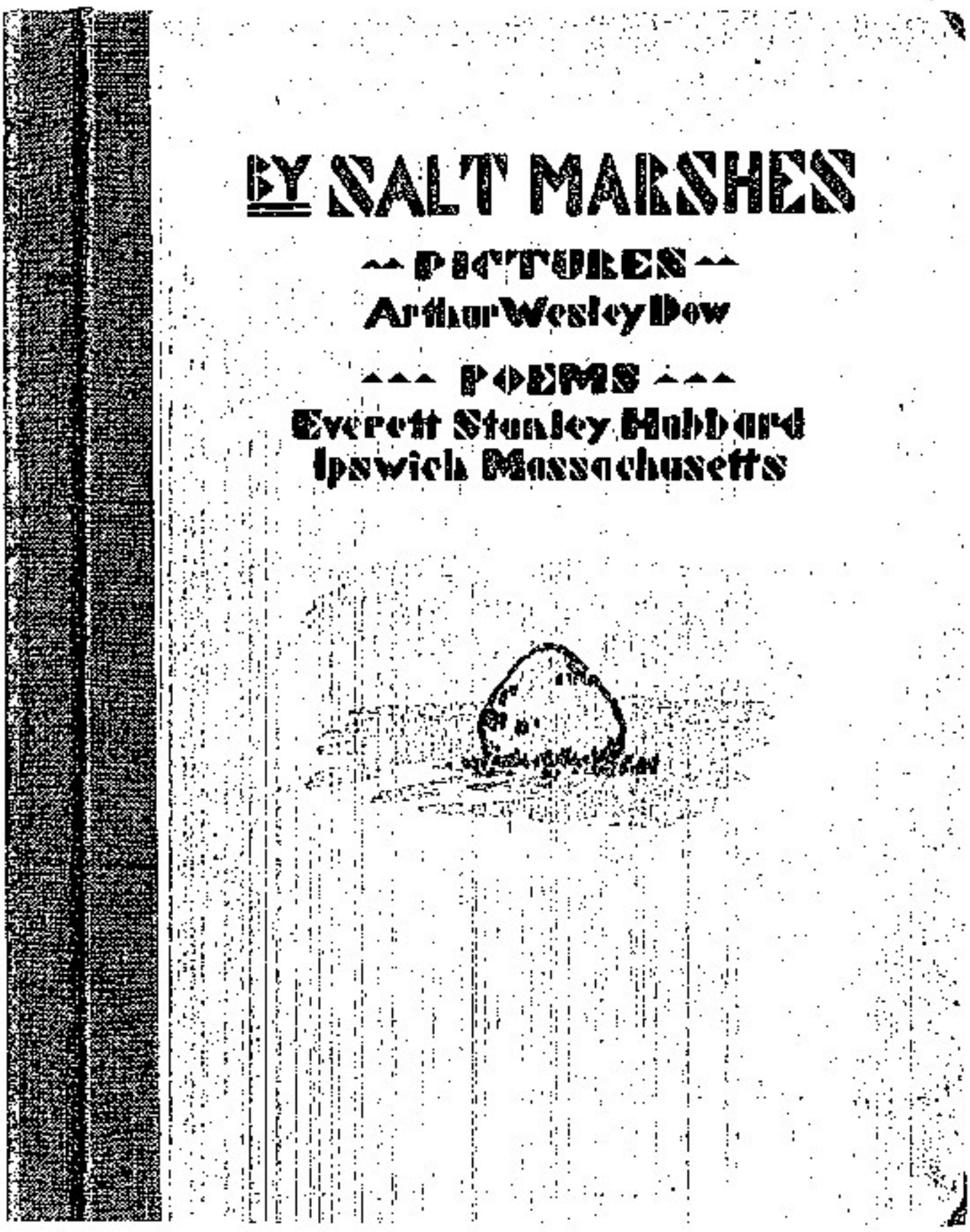
[11] See Jacquelynn Baas and Richard S. Field, *The Artistic Revival of the Woodcut in France 1850–1900* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1984).

[12] Hermann Dudley Murphy to Fred Holland Day, 26 February 1895. Norwood Historical Society.

The culmination of these early studies is to be found in *By Salt Marshes*. Although the book itself was not published until 1908, proofs in the Ipswich Historical Society are dated as early as 1895. It thus represents the direct continuation of Dow's experiments in *Along Ipswich River*. Unlike the earlier project, however, *By Salt Marshes* includes a text, a series of short poems by Ipswich resident Everett Stanley Hubbard. These poems describe the same marsh landscapes as Dow's prints, and poems and pictures are so closely interrelated that it is difficult to decide whether Dow's woodcuts illustrate Hubbard's verses or the other way around. This choice of a poetic text and the close collaboration between artist and author suggest an awareness on Dow's part of the developing tradition of the French *livre d'artiste*. Maurice Denis and other artists in the circle of Paul Gauguin were interested in book illustration as early as the 1890s.

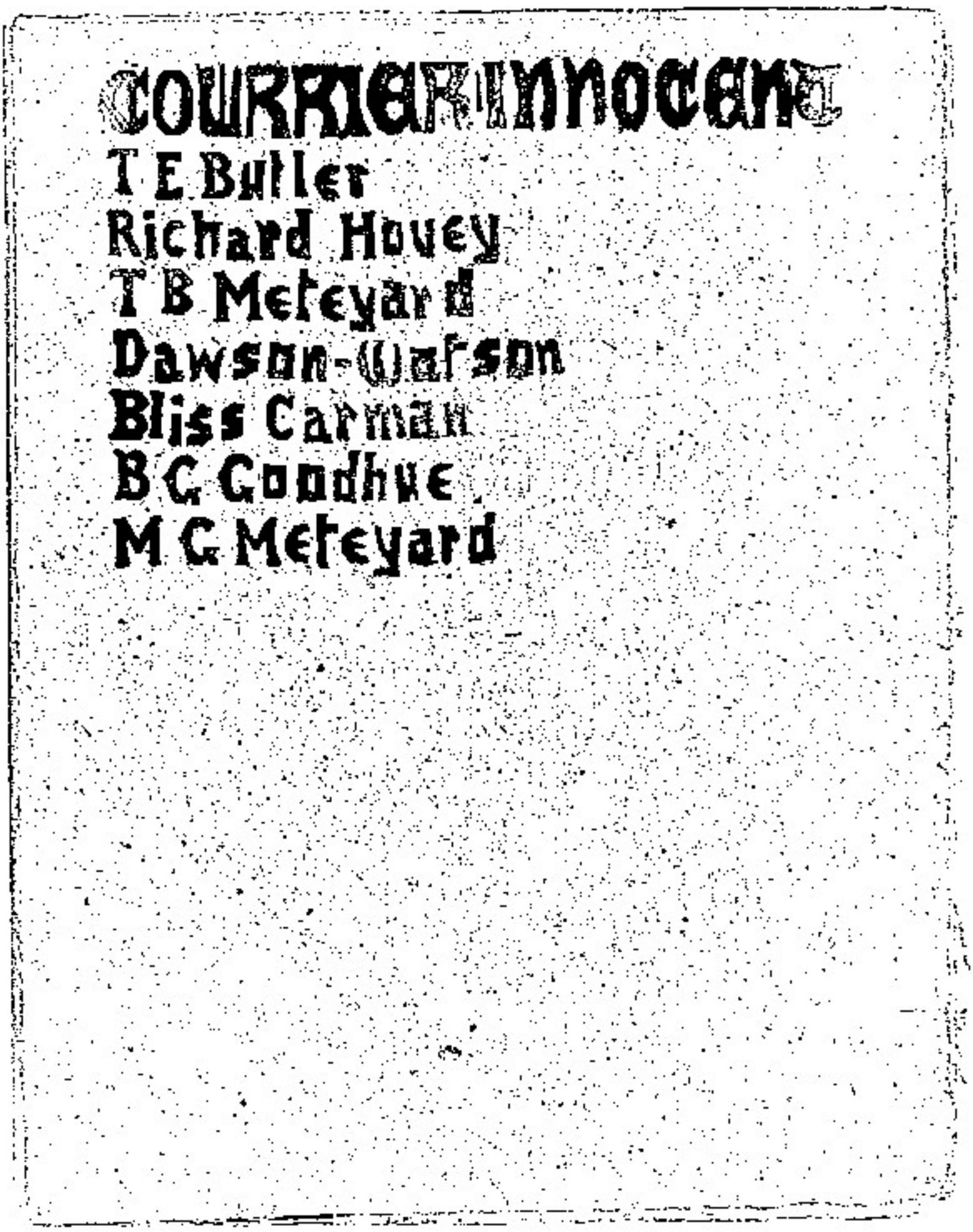
In *By Salt Marshes* the various influences on Dow's art have been successfully assimilated, so that the book appears as a stylistic whole. Nevertheless, it is possible, by examining the book page by page, to identify some of these influences. The crude, hand-cut lettering of the cover (figure 2) and the title page, which emphasizes the book's handmade character, resembles the lettering that appeared on the title page of *The Courrier Innocent* in 1897 (figure 3). The production of another group of Boston artists and poets, including Thomas Buford Meteyard, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, Dawson Dawson-Watson, Bliss Carman, and Richard Hovey, *The Courrier Innocent* was related to the contemporary group of small ephemeral French periodicals such as *Le Bois*, a woodcut magazine projected by Bernard, and *Le Sourire*, written, illustrated, and printed by Gauguin. Meteyard, Dawson-Watson, Carman, and Hovey all spent time in France in the company of the *artistes impressionistes et symbolistes*, as they called them; the first five issues of *The Courrier Innocent* were printed and published in Giverny.[13] Although in comparison much more refined, the cover and title page of *By Salt Marshes* clearly belong to this same tradition. Like *The Courrier Innocent*, *By Salt Marshes* is a highly personal publication, the result of a close collaboration between artist and poet.

[13] For a discussion of *The Courrier Innocent*, see the catalogue of *Artists of the Book in Boston, 1890–1910* (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, 1985), p. 47.



Houghton Library, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts

FIGURE 2 *By Salt Marshes* (Ipswich, 1908): Cover design by Arthur Wesley Dow

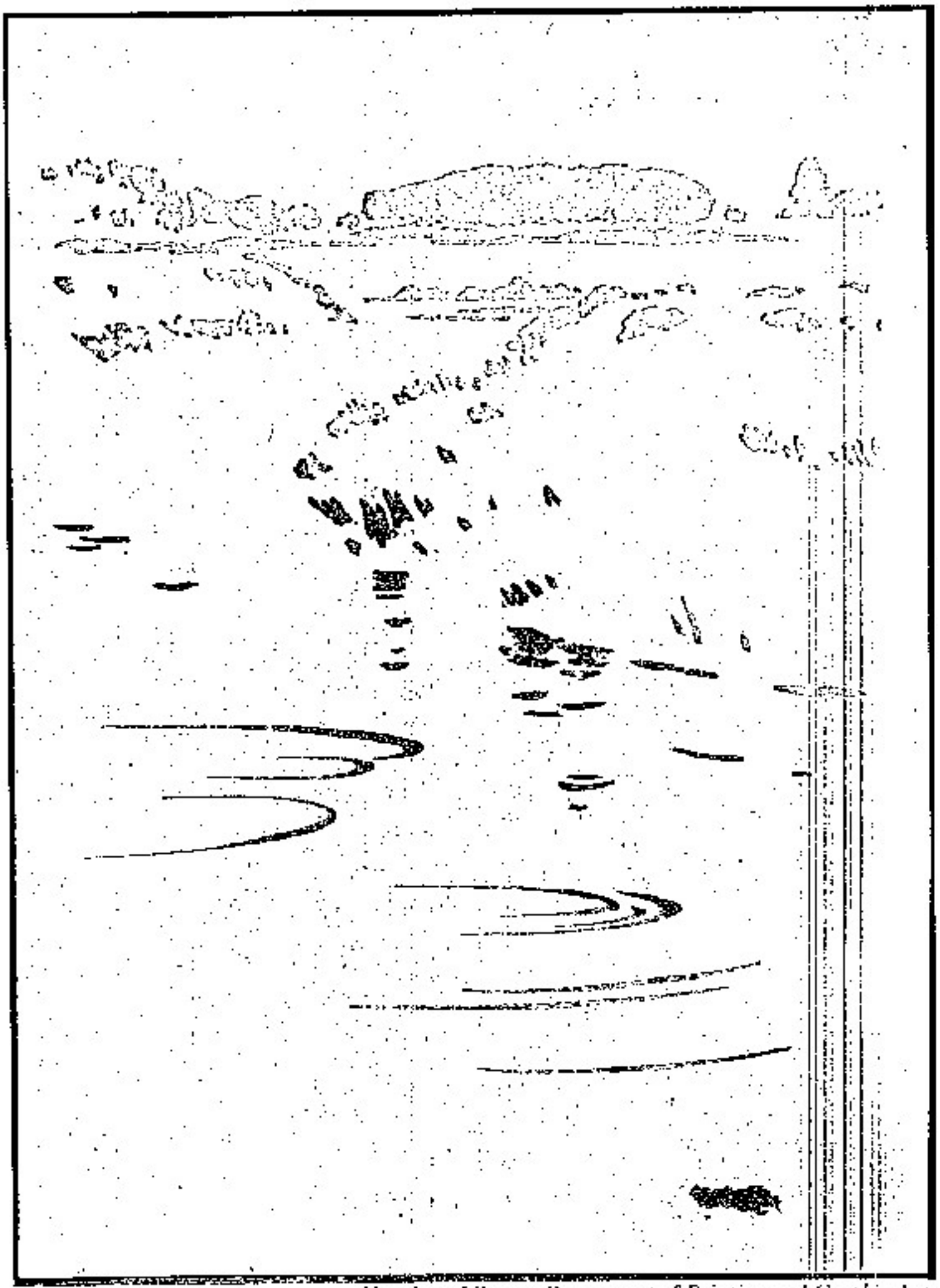


Houghton Library

FIGURE 3 *The Courrier Innocent* (Scituate, 1897): Woodcut title page by Dawson Dawson-Watson

If the French influence on *By Salt Marshes* is evident in the cover and title page, Dow's long-standing interest in Japanese art is suggested by the endpapers (figure 4). None of Dow's early work, however, was so simple, so self-assured. Dow's mastery of this shorthand form of notation, closely related in style to Japanese brush painting, is surely a result of his 1903 visit to Japan, where he studied with masters of the modern Kano School.[14] Some of the study prints published by Dow for the use of art students are reproductions of works of the Kano School (figure 5) and reveal an economy of line and form similar to that of the endpapers of *By Salt Marshes*. The endpapers carry this economy of means to its extreme, but all of the prints of *By Salt Marshes* are much simpler and subtler than those of *Along Ipswich River*. The thin gradations of wash, imitated from Japanese woodcuts, that characterize the prints in *Along Ipswich River* are absent, and the color harmonies are also much more subdued. There are no longer any violent contrasts; the overall effect is almost gray. Furthermore, Dow had consciously varied the color and arrangement of the plates in *Along Ipswich River*; copies of *By Salt Marshes* tend to be more consistent. Although, as one would expect, proofs in both the Ipswich Historical Society and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities reveal a certain amount of experimentation with different color compositions, once Dow found a color scheme he liked, he seems, in *By Salt Marshes*, to have kept to it. This means that any one copy of the book is essentially the same as any other copy. Although in practice there are slight variations, the free "playing with color" that had characterized *Along Ipswich River* has been eliminated. Nevertheless two prints in *By Salt Marshes* confirm that Dow had not lost all interest in using different color schemes to suggest different seasons or different times of the year. The compositions of *The Marshes from Bayberry Hill*, *Effect of Rain* and *Winter Landscape* (figure 8) are so similar that the two prints are essentially color variations on the same theme. In *The Marshes from Bayberry Hill*, *Effect of Rain*, shades of green and pink are used to suggest a damp May day; in *Winter Landscape*, a muted range of grays evokes the effect of ice on the marshes. Such experiments with different color combinations are related not only to the work of printmakers such as

[14] Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow* (note 3), pp. 101-102.



Houghton Library, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts

FIGURE 4 *By Salt Marshes*: Endpaper. Woodcut by Arthur Wesley Dow

Houghton Library, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts

FIGURE 5 *Iris*. Woodcut reproduction by Arthur Wesley Dow of an ink drawing of the Kano School.
Ipswich Prints, Second Set (Ipswich, 1902)

Guérard, already cited above, but also to the well-known series paintings of Claude Monet, including the *Haystacks*, *Poplars on the Epte*, and *Mornings on the Seine*. Like Dow's subtle woodcuts, these paintings also demonstrate the application of different color schemes to similar — and in some cases nearly identical — compositions, creating the effect of different times of the day or year.

Although the French and Japanese influences on *By Salt Marshes* are undoubtedly the most significant, other influences may be discerned. The heavy borders of the illustrations, their dimensions, and their placement on the page (figure 6) may reflect the format of the early American spelling book that Dow cited as a formative influence on his color theory (figure 7). Dow must have known many examples of early American books illustrated with woodcuts, and surely such a model would have seemed particularly appropriate for a book of pictures and poems of an old New England town. Perhaps more immediately relevant than Webster's *American Spelling Book* are publications such as John Warner Barber's *Historical Collections of . . . Massachusetts* (Worcester, 1839) or *The Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Vol. 8: Boston, 1802), with their woodcuts of towns along the North Shore.

A further source is suggested by a comparison between *Winter Landscape* (figure 8) and a photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn of essentially the same view (figure 9). Coburn attended Dow's summer school in 1903, and his photograph, *The Dragon*, is taken from near Dow's studio on the summit of Bayberry Hill in Ipswich. The Dragon was the name given by Dow and his students to the watercourse meandering through the salt meadows. Although Coburn's viewpoint is a little farther to the left than Dow's, the same features appear in both views: the slope in the foreground, the broad stretch of salt marshes, the small rounded hill (in the center of Dow's composition, cut off by the right edge of Coburn's), and the hummock on the horizon. Although Dow's print appears firmly centralized and deliberately composed in comparison with Coburn's less focused image, Dow's treatment of forms clearly derives from their actual appearance. It is even possible that the overall gray tonality of *Winter Landscape*, totally unnaturalistic despite its subtlety and charm, may reflect the influence of the photographic medium. Dow's brother was

The Pictures

Salt marshes set about with round-topped hills, barberry hedges along old stone walls that climb over the upland pastures, grassy spaces patterned with savin and bayberry, wild apple trees in the thickets, wide fields of daisies and frost flowers, shore lines of goldenrod and scarlet lilies, dark marsh islands, far and near, reflected in creek and salt pond, haystacks crowding into the horizon's perspective, a blue line of sea beyond the distant sand hills; such is the familiar Ipswich landscape, varied by season and sky and tide.

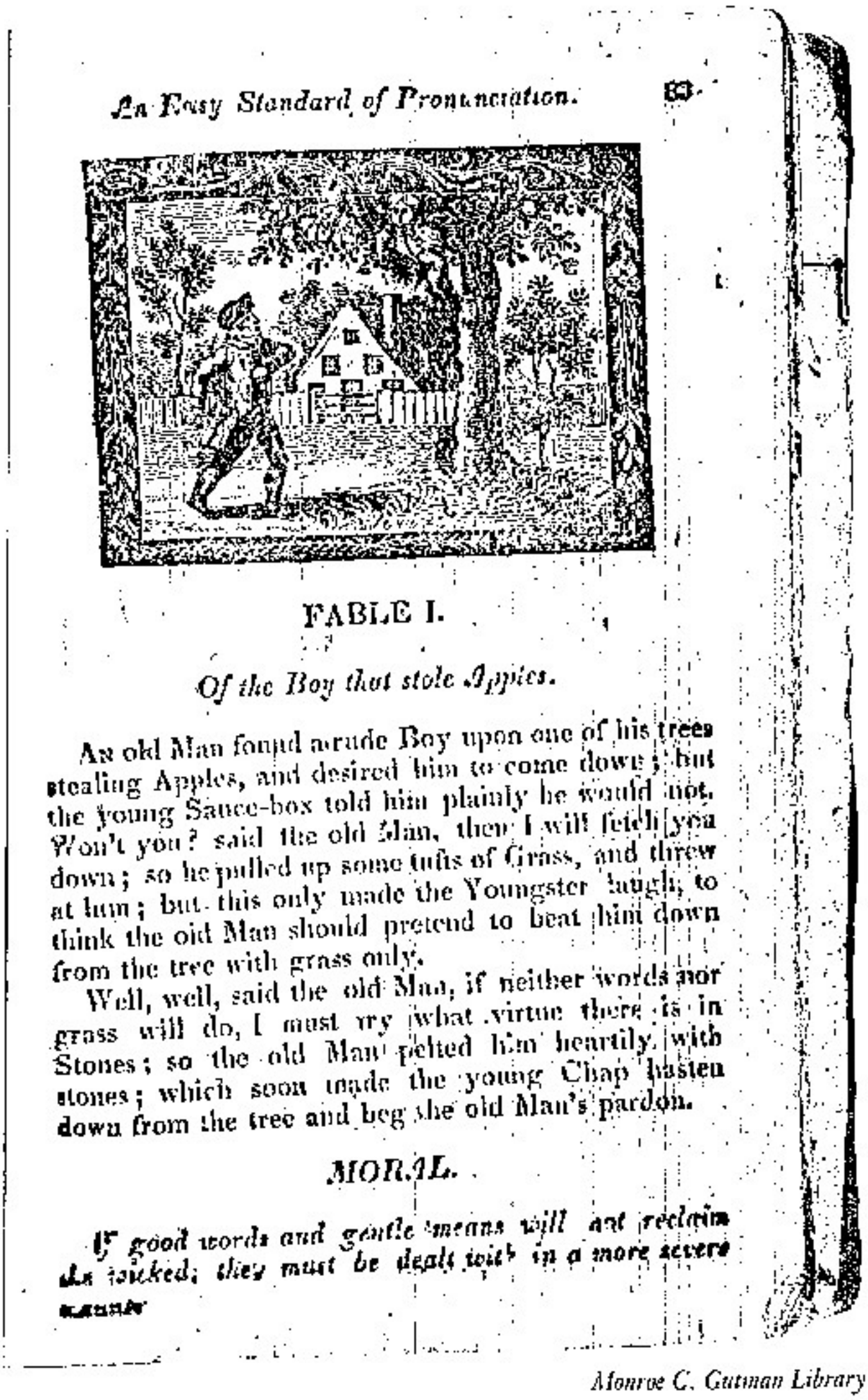
Mr. Hubbard and I were boys together in this country of the marshes, and here we have studied and painted. For this reason I find a special pleasure in making these color prints to accompany his songs.

The pictures, designs, and lettering of titles are frankly the imprint of the knife-engraved wood block.

Arthur Wesley Dow

Houghton Library, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts

FIGURE 6 *By Salt Marshes*: "The Pictures." Color woodcut by Arthur Wesley Dow



An Easy Standard of Pronunciation.

FABLE I.

Of the Boy that stole Apples.

An old Man found a rude Boy upon one of his trees stealing Apples, and desired him to come down; but the young Sauce-box told him plainly he would not. Won't you? said the old Man, then I will fetch you down; so he pulled up some tufts of Grass, and threw at him; but this only made the Youngster laugh, to think the old Man should pretend to beat him down from the tree with grass only.

Well, well, said the old Man, if neither words nor grass will do, I must try what virtue there is in Stones; so the old Man pelted him heartily with stones; which soon made the young Chap hasten down from the tree and beg the old Man's pardon.

MORAL.

If good words and gentle means will not reclaim the wicked; they must be dealt with in a more severe manner

Monroe C. Gutman Library

FIGURE 7 Noah Webster, *The American Spelling Book* (Concord, N. H., 1828): Woodcut illustration

Houghton Library, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts

FIGURE 8 *By Salt Marshes*: "Winter Landscape."
Color Woodcut by Arthur Wesley Dow

an amateur photographer, and the contents of Dow's studio at his death included many photographs of Ipswich.

The final stages of the making of *By Salt Marshes* are documented in a series of letters from Dow to the poet Everett Stanley Hubbard, preserved in the Ipswich Historical Society. All date from the beginning of 1908, when *By Salt Marshes* was exhibited for the first time at the Montross Gallery in New York. Dow had by this time left Ipswich to accept a teaching position at Teachers College, Columbia University, but in his letters he kept his collaborator well informed on the reception of their "beloved book." Hubbard, though no relation to Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora, New York, was, like him, a printer. He was responsible for printing his poems in small gothic type; Dow presumably printed the woodcuts. When the exhibition at the Montross Gallery opened at the end of January 1908, only thirty-five complete copies of *By Salt Marshes* existed — and only one

Houghton Library

FIGURE 9 *The Dragon*. Photograph (gum platinotype) by Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1903.
Reproduced in *Camera Work* (1904)

had been bound. Some pages for a total of seventy-five copies existed, and Dow recommended completing as many as two hundred copies as quickly as possible. Exactly how many copies were produced — and when — is not clear. Copy No. 97, in the Ipswich Historical Society, is dated "1909" in pencil, suggesting that Dow and Hubbard did continue to produce additional copies, although not immediately. Copies numbered as high as 126 are known. The loose pages, with Hubbard's text and Dow's illustrations, were taken by the artist to New York, where they were bound by a professional bookbinder. This was the only step of production not carried out by the artist and author themselves, and the binder's criticism is an indication of their rather amateur approach to bookmaking. It was necessary for the binder to advise them to "print all the sheets exactly the same

size with the pictures and poems in exactly the same place."[15] Presumably the earliest copies of *By Salt Marshes* were not so regular in appearance as the later ones.

Reactions to the exhibition of *By Salt Marshes* were somewhat mixed. After pronouncing the book "a unique and beautiful thing for which any price can be asked," the dealer, Mr. Montross, decided that $5 would be "about right."[16] Frank Howard Dodd, of Dodd, Mead, and Company, was extremely interested in the details of production.[17] To some, however, Dow's work appeared incomprehensible. The *New York Times* of 6 February 1908 carried a review of Dow's exhibition directly beneath a notice of the first group show of "The Eight," the association of American realist painters that included the Bostonian Maurice Prendergast and Davies, Glackens, Henri, Lawson, Luks, Shinn, and Sloan. Of Dow, the *Times* critic wrote: "There have been those, as doubtless there still are, who have wondered whether or not Mr. Dow could paint. All now have the opportunity of knowing by visiting the Montross Galllery. While his craftsmanship is not of the greatest, it seems quite adequate to the demands made upon it, revealing a man of great culture, combined with modesty. The woodcuts are less interesting than the paintings, appearing quite lifeless in color and treatment. They are for the most part a repetition or re-rendering of certain aspects of his marsh land paintings."[18]

This total lack of appreciation on the part of a conservative critic is an excellent measure of how controversial Dow's work appeared to his contemporaries. In the light of subsequent art historical developments, these lovely landscapes hardly appear radical, but it is clear from his art theories, especially his staunch opposition to strict realism, that Arthur Wesley Dow should be considered one of the true pioneers of modern art.

[15] Arthur Wesley Dow to Everett Stanley Hubbard, 9 February 1908. Ipswich Historical Society. The observations in the preceding paragraph are entirely based on correspondence in the Ipswich Historical Society.

[16] Arthur Wesley Dow to Everett Stanley Hubbard, 26 January 1908. Ipswich Historical Society.

[17] Arthur Wesley Dow to Everett Stanley Hubbard, 9 February 1908. Ipswich Historical Society.

[18] *New York Times*, 6 February 1908, p. 6.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Panagiotis A. Agapitos is a doctoral candidate in the Department of the Classics, Harvard University.

Helen R. Deese is Associate Professor of English at Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville, Tennessee.

Nancy Finlay is Assistant Curator in the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

James F. O'Gorman is Grace Slack McNeil Professor of American Art, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Ruth Perry is Professor of Literature and Women's Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Merton M. Sealts, Jr., is Henry A. Pochmann Professor of English, *Emeritus*, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Jan Ziolkowski is Professor of Medieval Latin and Comparative Literature, Harvard University.