Collections and collectibles

Into the Wood

Vanderbilt's Fine Arts Gallery boasts an incredible range of prints made from images cut into wood. By Bonnie Arant Ertelt, BS'81

Ever since the Chinese invented paper about 2,000 years ago, someone has been trying to print on it. The practice of making multiple copies of a single image through relief printing—the oldest print medium and another process first perfected by the Chinese—has spread around the globe in the path of the papermaking trail. The evidence of this one-two graphic punch is clear in the collection of the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery: Prints abound.

Anna C. Hoyt, who founded the collection more than 50 years ago with a gift of 105 Old Master and modern prints, would be impressed. From her initial gift—born of her friendship with Walter Sharp, an art history professor at Vanderbilt whose tenure predates the formation of the art history department, and her expertise as a print curator at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts—the collection has grown to include a broad range of historical periods and styles ranging from 15th-century wood engravings to works by contemporary artists who combine media and techniques.

Of major significance within the print collection is the number of relief prints, the vast majority of which are woodcuts. Relief prints are made by cutting into either wood or linoleum in such a way that the areas of the block that are not cut away form the image. The block is then inked and pressed onto paper.

As papermaking made its way to the West, spurred by the invention of the printing press, woodcuts became the primary mode for book illustration as well as the production of such

"Connecticut Pastoral" (1936) by Thomas Nason

mundane items as playing cards or mementos of saints for citizens making pilgrimages. Originally, woodcuts were associated with the common people. The anonymous artists making these blocks belonged to craft guilds reserved for woodworkers and cabinet makers.

The 1500s saw the introduction of higher-quality serial prints, each edition containing only a defined number of prints. Among the major artists working at the time was Albrecht Dürer, who not only designed but also cut the blocks for his prints. Vanderbilt owns several Dürer prints. "The Lamentation" (1511), from the collection given by Anna Hoyt, was on exhibit this fall in *Views from the Collection I,* the Gallery's first show since undergoing renovations.

A number of Old Master prints by German artists, likewise donated by Hoyt, also were shown, including woodcuts by Albrecht Altdorfer, Lucas Cranach the Elder and Hans Baldung Grien, all done in the early 1500s and picturing Christ's Passion or other scenes from the Bible.

"To this day, they're really some of the better things we have in our print collection, as far as historic importance is concerned," says Joseph Mella, art curator and director of the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery. "They start early; I think our earliest print is from 1491. The Hoyt Collection goes into the 20th century, but its real strength is in the Old Master prints and those from the 16th through 19th centuries."

A number of Japanese woodblock prints also were shown this fall, the majority from the Fine Arts Gallery's extensive Asian Art Collection.

"Milan Mihal [professor of fine arts, emeritus], when he began teaching in 1968, gave a few prints to the collection, some 18th-century woodblock prints," says Mella, "and then that aspect of the collection slowly grew over time. Now we have more than 170 that are Japanese color woodblock prints. We established a fund some time ago for Japanese art, and with that money we have bought some really fine woodblock prints."

On view this fall were prints by Yoshitoshi, Hiroshige and Hokusai, all three well known in the pantheon of Japanese woodblock artists.

"Man with Spring Plants" (1922) by Leonard Baskin

"Ichikawa Kondanji V as Torii Matasuke" (1860) by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi

Yoshitoshi's "Ichikawa Kodanji V as Torii Matasuke" (1860) is in the vein of earlier *Ukiyo-e* prints that captured the interests of Japanese citizens at that time, particularly those prints that featured Kabuki actors dramatically posed in their most famous roles.

Both Hiroshige and Hokusai were landscape artists famous for their numerous series of views. Hiroshige's "Tokaido Road" from *Pictures of Famous Places Near the Fifty-Three Stations* (1855) and Hokusai's "The Kazusa Sea Route" from *The Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji* (1830–32) both exhibit the finely toned color that makes the Japanese print look more like a watercolor painting than a print cut from multiple blocks of wood (each color printed from a separate block).

No matter how popular individual series of prints became, woodcuts continued to find a place in book illustration, and wood engravings in particular became the standard. While woodcuts were cut along the grain of the plank, wood engravings were cut using the end grain, which is much harder. As a result, much finer detail and quality of line could be chiseled, with the additional advantage that the harder end-grain blocks could withstand the pressure of the printing press much better than the less sturdy plank-grain blocks. Wood engravings were the preferred method for illustration in virtually all print media, including newspapers, until the advent of photographic reproduction.

Within the Fine Arts Gallery collection are numerous woodcuts and engravings that were used to illustrate great works of literature. One set by Salvador Dali, the famous surrealist, illustrates Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The largest set of engravings, by far, was given to the Fine Arts Gallery in return for its help in mounting the exhibition *Witness to Our Century: An Artistic Biography of Fritz Eichenberg* in 1997. Eichenberg, a well-known printmaker who provided illustrations for Dorothy Day's *The Catholic Worker*, also illustrated many great works of literature by Poe, Brontë, Dostoevsky and others.

"We have several portfolios by Fritz Eichenberg," says Mella, "including what's called in the trade 'the 248,' which means there are 248 prints in it. They were given to us by the Fritz Eichenberg Trust as payment-in-kind for helping organize the traveling exhibit. It's a series of volumes for which Eichenberg pulled prints from the original woodblocks of illustrations of great works of literature that he illustrated for Random House and publishers of that nature. There are portfolios of prints from *Crime and Punishment*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Idiot* and others."

These prints are distinguished by the movement of fine white lines within the rich black of the uncut block and the expressions on the faces of his figures.

continued on page 83

"In Praise of Folly: Portrait of Erasmus" (1972) by Fritz Eichenberg

VJournal *continued from page 9*

Center arrived at work one Monday morning to discover a pig's head on our patio. What first appeared to be an act of anti-Semitism turned out, apparently, to be done out of ignorance rather than malicious intent: Sigma Chi fraternity, whose house is across the street from the Schulman Center, had held a pig roast the previous weekend, and somebody got the bright idea that it would be a great prank to leave a pig's head outside the vegetarian restaurant, without any appreciation for how that might be perceived by Jews.

That event and the ensuing publicity showed me something I hadn't really considered before. Here was this fraternity right across the street from the Schulman Center. Every day, they walk in and out of their fraternity, we walk in and out of our building, and we aren't even the kind of neighbors who wave from across the street or greet one another as we're driving past.

Given a situation in which you're not communicating with your neighbors, eventually something unfortunate happens—whether it's a miscommunication, whether it's mischievous, whether it's malicious, a problem will inevitably arise, and when it does, you don't have a relationship you can fall back on to help resolve problems.

Before I came to Vanderbilt, I was director of the Freeman Center for Jewish Life at Duke University. While I was at Duke, there was an anti-Israel conference that a student group brought to campus, not something the university endorsed. That could have been a terrible experience for the Jewish students on campus, and it was, in fact, a very difficult one. But we had put a lot of time into developing relationships across all faiths, and when it became clear that the conference was coming to campus, I was able to pick up the phone with various groups on campus representing different viewpoints, people with whom I was on a first-name basis, to say, "Let's talk about this." It made a huge difference in the way the campus experienced it.

Part of Hillel's goal at Vanderbilt is to have activities and dialogues with Christians and Muslims and whatever denominations are on campus. The idea that Hillel might be involved in bringing a Christian conservative or a staunch Republican speaker or group to campus, for example, can be uncomfortable for liberal Jewish students, but we try to provide programs that touch all our Jewish students. Some Christian groups on campus use the Schulman Center for their weekly meetings, and we try to open up our experience to different faiths. And it's not just interfaith; it's also intercultural. It's Latino, it's gay, it's any kind of group on campus.

Although the number of Jewish undergraduate students has grown dramatically at Vanderbilt, our graduate student population is only now beginning to see significant growth. This may be because Jewish students who didn't consider Vanderbilt when they were choosing an undergraduate school are unlikely to consider Vanderbilt when they're looking at graduate schools, and based on the growth of this year's graduate student population, this does appear to be happening. My hope is that, as we move forward, the people who thought about Vanderbilt for undergraduate school will also consider it for graduate school.

In a short time Vanderbilt has put itself on the map in the eyes of the national Jewish community, and now Jews all over the country are looking at Vanderbilt as an option. It's an exciting time to be here.

Over the last year I've met many people in the Jewish community who have told me, "I love Vanderbilt, and it always made me sad when friends and family around the country would call me and say, 'We're looking at Vanderbilt. Is it a good place to send our kids?'" These people have told me how unhappy it made them to have to answer no. Now these same people tell me how gratifying it is to be able to recommend Vanderbilt to others. The excitement on their faces and the comfort it gives them are gratifying to me, too. **V**

Sports *continued from page 18*

freshmen who were all very experienced bowlers," says Williamson, "but Michelle had never bowled on a team. Anytime you do anything that's team oriented, it's a different atmosphere. This year I'm expecting a lot more from them because they've experienced those things. It should no longer be new to them."

The players now count on the coach and each other to keep things in perspective and in focus. There are times, Peloquin says, when in the middle of a game, "you think what might be happening on the lane is not actually what's happening. It's nice to have extra sets of eyes behind you. It's not really an authoritative type of system. It's an exchange, and being able to talk it out helps a lot.

"I went to the Junior Gold Championships this summer, and they're completely individual," she says. "So that was the first event I had attended by myself since being here. The first shot of the tournament—I'm pretty sure I struck the first shot—I walked back thinking, 'Where are my high fives? Where is everybody?' You get used to that. It's so supportive. For the first time not to have it, I definitely missed it." **V**

Vanderbilt Holdings *continued from page 23*

Other German woodcut artists represented in the collection include Erich Heckel, the Expressionist, whose print of a young girl was reproduced in the first issue of the magazine *Genius* in 1920, and Gerhard Marcks, the Bauhaus artist. Of contemporary living artists, the most arresting work is by former East German Christiane Baumgartner, whose series of prints, *1 Sekunde*, represents one second of video shot during a road trip on the Autobahn translated into 25 individual wood engravings.

Taking the woodcut medium one step further in the direction of film, during February and March the Fine Arts Gallery will exhibit the work of American renaissance man Jay Bolotin, a writer, composer, performer, stage and set designer, choreographer and visual artist whose latest work is an animated film made entirely of woodcut prints. In a collaborative programming effort, the Fine Arts Gallery will exhibit the prints, while Sarratt Gallery and Cinema on campus will screen the film and exhibit studies and precursors to the completed portfolio.

All of which proves that even with the oldest print medium known, there are always new paths on which to collaborate and explore. **V**