

Master Drawings

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A Prime Teaching Collection at Princeton: The Platt and Mather Drawings

Barbara T. Ross

The foundations of the collection of drawings in The Art Museum, Princeton University, were laid with the bequest in 1938 of Dan Fellows Platt. In 1943, Ethel Bliss Platt relinquished her lifetime rights to the majority of the drawings in her husband's collection and they came to Princeton.¹ The drawings were catalogued over the next four years and accessioned in 1948. This period coincided with World War II and its aftermath, when the aging Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., was hanging on as director until younger colleagues returned from military service. Funds were not available to mat the drawings or provide storage boxes. With Ethel Platt's permission, Mather sold about 150 sheets from which he thought a reasonable profit could be realized. These were largely what he termed "duplicates" and works of less importance for teaching. Drawings at Princeton from the Platt bequest number just over two thousand.

The year Dan Fellows Platt was born, in 1873, his family moved to Englewood, New Jersey, where he lived his entire life. Graduated magna cum laude from Princeton in 1895, with honors in classics, history, politics, and jurisprudence, he was English salutatorian of his class. He spent the year 1895-96 at the recently founded American School of Classical Studies in Rome. In fall 1896, he entered New York Law School, receiving his L.L.B. in 1898, the same year he earned a Master of Arts degree from Princeton. He practiced law in the New York City firm of James B. Dill for two years until his marriage to Ethel Appleby Bliss in 1900, when he retired to devote himself to the study of Renaissance art. With generous wedding

gifts from their parents, the couple built a splendid Italian palazzo-style home in Englewood and named it Ambercroft. Platt and his wife spent much time abroad, making nearly annual trips to Europe, the last in 1937, the year before he died.

Platt began collecting Roman glass, coins, and small archaeological works as a college student. In the first decade of the twentieth century, he developed his early enthusiasm for Italian Renaissance art, inspired in him at Princeton by Professor Allan Marquand. He began to collect paintings, primarily by Sieneese and Umbrian artists, with the advice of the collector-dealer F. Mason Perkins. Some of the finest of these are now in the collection of The Art Museum. Platt discovered that early paintings by provincial Italian artists were more readily available and their cost lower relative to Venetian and Florentine paintings. Largely on his own, through diligent and first-hand study of paintings in his and other collections, Platt developed an expertise in this area for which he was consulted by museums and scholars and invited to give lectures and college courses throughout his career. After World War I, when fewer paintings were available, Platt turned his attention to Italian drawings and shifted his collecting arena from Italy to London and Paris. Occasionally he took good advantage of the post-war dispersal of private collections. He haunted the shops of E. Parsons and Son and F. R. Meatyard in London, from whom many of his drawings were purchased, often in large lots. In the late 1920s and 1930s, he bought drawings by artists who were his contemporaries, such as Theodor Steinlen and Alphonse Legros;

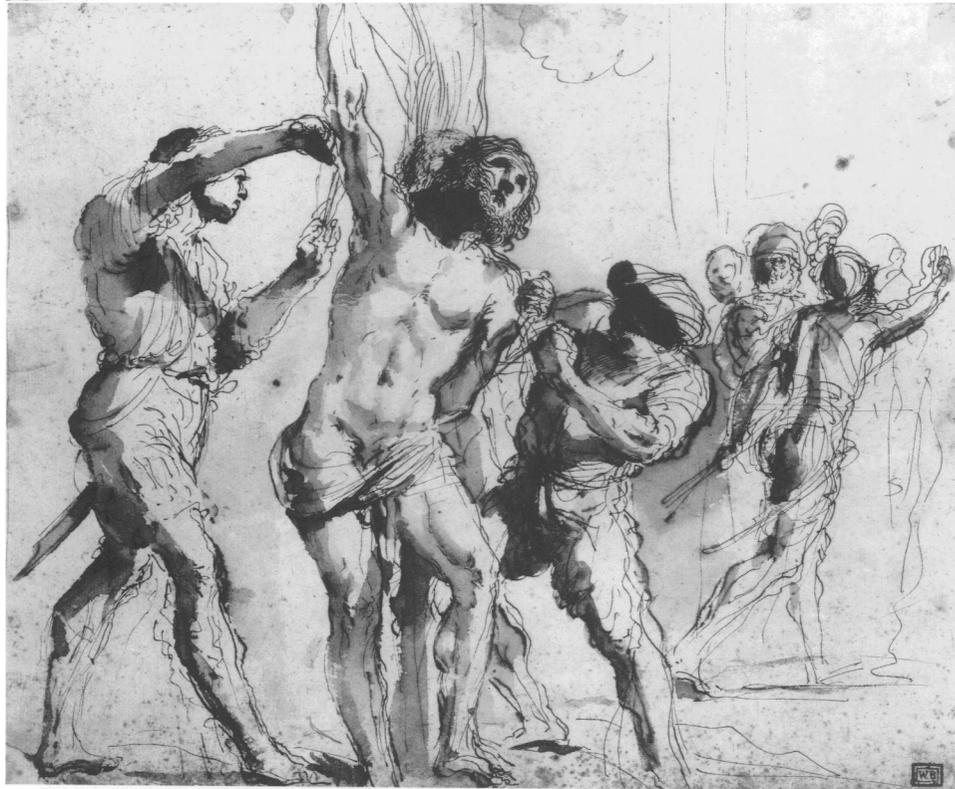


Figure 1 GIOVANNI FRANCESCO BARBIERI, called GUERCINO. Preparation for the Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew.

The Art Museum, Princeton University, Bequest of Dan Fellows Platt.



Figure 2 SALVATOR ROSA.
Six Studies of Figures for "The Angel Raphael
Leaving the House of Tobit."

The Art Museum, Princeton University, Bequest of Dan Fellows Platt.

his sheets by Amedeo Modigliani were purchased in 1934 and 1936.

The Platt Collection is particularly strong in its groups of drawings by post-Renaissance Italian artists. Platt was attracted by their availability and lower cost—the price of a single Michelangelo or Raphael, if one could be found, was far greater than that of as many as three dozen Guercinos. American private collectors, a major market for European dealers in the 1920s, tended to concentrate on superlative, finished, chalk drawings by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florentine and Venetian artists, which, thanks to the efforts of Bernard Berenson and other experts, were much more of a known quantity. Platt occasionally indulged in these: for example, three large and beautiful sheets of figure studies by Federico Barocci, two studies of heads and a compositional study by Domenico Beccafumi, and a pair of commanding black chalk drawings by Battista Naldini after Michelangelo. Some of Platt's single drawings by sixteenth-century artists, for example, Jacopo Bertola and Girolamo Macchietti, are noteworthy. But for the most part, Platt adopted a different collecting strategy, that of acquiring large groups of pen-and-wash drawings of artists of the late sixteenth to seventeenth century from Genoa (Luca Cambiaso), Bologna (Guercino; Fig. 1), and Naples (Salvator Rosa; Fig. 2), and those of the Venetian Giambattista Tiepolo, and his son Giandomenico, of the eighteenth century. These quick sketches are often unrecognizable scenes or studies of individual compositional elements. Later, Platt bought British, French, and American drawings, including works by contemporary artists. Thus significant numbers of sketches by British artists such as John Flaxman, George Romney, Alfred George Stevens (Fig. 3), and Charles Fairfax Murray,² as well as the short-lived Vorticist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska are now at Princeton. Early student exercises after ancient and baroque sculptures in Rome by the French sculptor Augustin Pajou form another significant corpus in the Platt collection, as do sketches by Puvis de Chavannes and Camille Pissarro. Other collections may have better individual sheets by these artists, but few rival Princeton in the size of the holdings of their drawings.

W.G. Constable was undeniably correct when he suggested that Platt was an enthusiastic accumulator-collector of drawings, rather than a connoisseur.³ But his characterization of the collection as “a remarkable mixture of major and minor work, with the minor predominant,”⁴ while true statistically, fails to reflect accurately its quality and extent. Platt never aspired to the level of expertise for drawings that he had for Renaissance, especially Siennese, painting. Yet the fact that his collection was somewhat indiscriminately assembled makes parts of it all the more valuable for teaching; with access only to the finest drawings by Guercino or Cambiaso, the student might never learn to differentiate between an original and a copy, an imitation or a work by a follower. Drawings by lesser-known Italian artists, who are receiving greater attention as a result of modern scholarship, are often not found at all in large public collections, but they can be seen at Princeton, where they are accessible for analysis and study.

The second founder of Princeton's drawings collection was Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. (1868–1953). From 1910, when he was appointed to the faculty of the Department of Art and Archaeology, until 1922, when he assumed the directorship of The Art Museum, he made occasional gifts, primarily of paintings or small art objects. During the next two decades, he almost single-handedly formed the nucleus of an important and representative teaching collection of prints and drawings. Mather's gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York of 118 contemporary French and German etchings in 1923 may indicate an initial conservative view concerning what mediums, schools, and periods were appropriate for Princeton's small teaching collection. A decade later, when the Junius S. Morgan Collection started Princeton on the road to becoming a repository for prints—and the curriculum included modern art—his concepts changed, although he held to the notion that museums collect only works of artists dead for at least twenty years.

Mather employed various means to accomplish his goal of building a teaching collection of original works on paper at Princeton, including buying on credit and twisting the arms of potential donors.



Figure 3 ALFRED GEORGE STEVENS. Apollo. Study for Roundel in Deysbrook Hall, Liverpool.
The Art Museum, Princeton University, Bequest of Dan Fellows Platt.

Princeton's watercolor by Cézanne, a significant early acquisition, was purchased in installments with money contributed by one of Mather's colleagues in the department who wished to remain anonymous, an unnamed donor (probably Mather), and possibly one other person. When prints or drawings that he felt were imperative for a university teaching collection came on the market, he himself would underwrite

their purchase, and he personally financed more speculative acquisitions, reserving The Art Museum's meager funds for sure bets and for the more expensive paintings and sculpture.

Throughout this time, Mather amassed his own collection of prints and drawings, with the understanding that it would go to Princeton. There is evidence that with regard to his drawings Mather thought

in terms of two collections. He most highly regarded what he designated his private collection (perhaps only those identified by his stamp⁵), numbering around 150 and consisting mainly of Italian drawings, with an emphasis on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century artists (Fig. 4): this was the group he brought out for visitors and exhibited at the Roerich Museum in New York City. Just as painstakingly and proudly, and probably because he sensed they would be useful for teaching some day, he acquired drawings by American (Fig. 5) and European-other-than-Italian artists. No matter from which collection, each sheet given by Mather has a quality that makes it, for lack of a better word, interesting, especially to a student or scholar with a background in art history and an appreciation for seeing works of art firsthand.

In 1930, the International Art Center of the Roerich Museum held an exhibition of the old master drawings in Mather's primary collection, which was nearly complete by this date. Mather stated in the foreword to the checklist for this exhibition: "I have tried to maintain a high standard of selection, but have included a few minor pieces of great associational appeal, for example, the cubistic design by Cambiaso....It should be explained that I am in intention a collector of Italian drawings, and that whatever of merit I have outside that field is the result of accident or fortunate error... some of the finest sheets here shown are anonymous and likely to remain so. They delight me none the less for that, since I have collected rather for my own pleasure than for the benefit of my heirs and assigns."⁶

In an article on the occasion of the Roerich exhibition, Mather wrote:

I began collecting when I was a sophomore picking up here and there a print. At 24, on my first trip to Europe [1892], I yielded to Japanese prints and netsukes, buying, as it turned out, mostly the wrong ones. At 30 I was now and then taking in a good Oriental rug, and a little later I made what, after my drawings, is my best collection, that of Japanese sword guards. With a little more prosperity, I gradually filled my cottage walls with Italian pictures of the Primitive and Renaissance periods. This will seem a shameless avowal of antiquarianism, but from time to time I bought something more nearly modern, a La Farge, an Inness, a Ryder, an Eakins, a Homer Martin,



Figure 4 FRANCESCO SALVIATI.
Holy Family with the Infant St. John the Baptist
and St. Elizabeth.
*The Art Museum, Princeton University, Gift of Frank
Jewett Mather, Jr.*

while adding to the prints, which were increasing steadily, the wood cuts after Winslow Homer, and to my drawings, such contemporaries as Jerome Myers, Thomas Benton, and Wanda Gag... [He then described in detail the purchase of his first drawing, a copy of Raphael's *Judgment of Paris*, in Bologna, while waiting for a trunk.] After that false start, there was a pause for nearly ten years, after which I got for five and seven francs respectively two studies by Correggio [one now attributed to Lanfranco, the other to a follower of Correggio]. I did not know they were Correggio's but followed the course I have always pursued of buying a fine drawing irre-

spective of its label. These drawings became the backbone of the collection and meanwhile, having at last settled down as a professional student of Italian painting, my collecting was guided by a central principle. For some years I was too poor to build on the backlog, but then came a windfall. A scrap book which the poet Walter Savage Landor had bought of the painter Barker of Bath and given to the talented young American authoress, Kate Field, fell into my hands. I bought it for the rarest sheet in my collection, the primitive horse, but kept also a dozen good English drawings. The remains I sold to Richard Ederheimer... for years the rejected sheets were offered to me up and down Lexington Ave.⁷

As early as 1940, Mather began donating groups of prints to Princeton; of his drawings, British and French sheets were the first to be given, in 1941. The inauguration of the university's Program of Study in American Civilization in 1942 sparked his gifts of American works. Between 1944 and 1951, he gave his best drawings in bunches by nationality. When he broke up his home in Washington Crossing in the late 1940s, he would often bring fifteen to twenty drawings or prints to The Art Museum and hand them over without fanfare. The accession book usually credits him, but he resisted official recognition, and in the *Record of The Art Museum, Princeton University*, the donor is most often listed as anonymous. The museum's ledger notes 1,064 drawings that can be positively identified with Mather, but certainly there are more among the anonymous and un-credited entries. Drawings in albums — for example, two groups of sketches by John La Farge — if enumerated separately, also would swell this figure. The drawings and watercolors by Charles H. Moore,⁸ on whom Mather was preparing a monograph when he died, and certain cherished treasures that decorated the walls of his home, including Thomas Eakin's watercolor *Seventy Years Ago* and J. Alden Weir's pastel *Moonrise*, were given by his widow. A cache of uncatalogued Italian problem drawings was discovered in The Art Museum as late as the 1970s, when they were finally accessioned.

Since no formal records exist, Mather's sources are frequently unknown. He made regular trips to Europe, especially before his retirement from teaching in 1933, and made the rounds of dealers wherever he went; most of his drawings purchases, however, were made

in this country. American Art Association auctions, Giovanni Castano in Boston, the Weyhe and Schaeffer galleries, and several other dealers in New York are documented sources for his museum purchases; presumably these are also where he found his personal acquisitions. Other sources for Mather were private sales, small antiquarian dealers, and, in the cases of the artists Thomas Cole, Homer Dodge Martin, and C.H. Moore, their descendants.

Collectively, the drawings in the Mather collection are difficult to describe. His American sheets form an important nucleus of Princeton's holdings in that area, with particular strength in drawings by Cole (including a sketchbook), La Farge, and Homer. A significant majority of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian drawings used in exhibitions at Princeton inevitably are Mather gifts. Fine condition was not a priority for Mather, nor did he seek the high-ticket items that are the exclusive domain of many collections, private and museum. In fact, he boasted he never paid more than twenty-five dollars for a single drawing. He clearly made exceptions to this rule of thumb, but his statement is perhaps not the exaggeration today's values would make it seem. Mather had an unerring eye for artistic quality and a deep understanding of a work's appropriateness for the study of the history of art. The fact that its artist could not be readily identified made a drawing all the more interesting for him. Committed to enlarging the scope of what is considered fine art, he included works by artists who were his contemporaries and drawings by academic artists and book illustrators alike. He was challenged by a "discovery"; his recognition of the works of Moore and Martin as worthy of study is a case in point. By his own admission, he possessed the instincts of a horse trader, in his personal collecting often "traded up" to attain another drawing he desired, and was delighted if he made a profit. He freely owned up to the majority — and doggedly defended a few — of his collecting mistakes.

Published catalogues and checklists of drawings in The Art Museum's collection — few in number today, but certain to increase — quickly demonstrate the versatility of the Platt and Mather collections and their inestimable value to Princeton.⁹ As in most serious



Figure 5 WILLIAM MORRIS HUNT.

Anahita: The Flight of Night. Study for Mural in the Assembly Chamber, New York State Capitol, Albany.

The Art Museum, Princeton University, Gift of Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.

collections of the period, Italian drawings predominate: to Princeton's good fortune, Mather focused on Renaissance artists, while those of the late sixteenth- to eighteenth centuries interested Platt. Good French holdings distinguish both collections. Platt accumulated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British drawings, and Mather, more American sheets. Neither collector concentrated to any degree on Netherlandish or German drawings. In these two collections, Princeton has a solid foundation upon which to build.

Barbara T. Ross was Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings at The Art Museum, Princeton University, before her retirement in 1999.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This essay is excerpted from my article, "The Prints and Drawings Collection: The Early Years," *Record of The Art Museum, Princeton University*, 55, nos. 1-2, 1996, pp. 135-55. For acquisition details and more detailed biographies on Platt and Mather, the reader is directed to that article and "The Mather Years, 1922-1946," in the same volume. I wish to express here my admiration for Charles Ryskamp, a singular scholar in English literature, whose exhibition on William Blake's engravings at Princeton in 1969-70 had a profound effect on me, and demonstrated his keen appreciation not only for a work of art's illustrative value, but also for its inspiration, historical importance, and aesthetic nature.

1. Ethel Platt retained close to 250 of the finest drawings, primarily those that had been out on loan and were framed. A few she sold or kept; most were sold in 1950 to the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk where they remain

- today. Platt tipped most of his drawings into large albums, carefully labeled with the artist, dealer, date of purchase, and price paid. A few of the old master drawings at Princeton have Platt's stamp (Lugt 2066b); these may have been those he especially treasured or those lent to exhibitions. All drawings in Platt's bequest bear the stamp (Lugt 750a) applied by Ethel Platt after her husband's death.
2. Platt acquired his sheets by these four artists in large albums. The Murray drawings, many cut down from larger sheets and with Murray's monogram erased, were sold to Platt as the works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones. John Christian first recognized their correct authorship.
 3. W.G. Constable, *Art Collecting in the United States of America. An Outline of a History*, London, 1964, pp. 63-64, 167-68. See also Agnes Mongan's review of the Platt drawings exhibition circulated by the College Art Association, "Collector of Old Master Drawings," *Boston Transcript*, 2 December 1931.
 4. Constable, 1964, p. 63.
 5. Lugt 1853a.
 6. "Exhibition of Drawings by Old Masters from the Private Collection of Prof. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.," International Art Center of Roerich Museum, 18-31 December 1930, n.p.
 7. "In Buying Great Drawings Prof. Mather Also Got Great Names," *Art Digest*, 5, 15 December 1930, p. 5.
 8. The artist's daughter gave the Moore drawings to Mather, and they are recorded as her gifts to The Art Museum.
 9. See, for instance, F. Gibbons, *Catalogue of Italian Drawings in The Art Museum, Princeton University*, Princeton, NJ, 1976; P. Morrin et al., *19th and 20th Century French Drawings from The Art Museum, Princeton University*, Princeton, NJ, 1972; B.T. Ross, *American Drawings in The Art Museum, Princeton University*, Princeton, NJ, 1976; B.T. Ross et al., "Notes on Selected French Old Master Drawings from the Permanent Collection," *Record of The Art Museum, Princeton University*, 42, no. 1, 1983.