



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

CHARLES DE SOUSY RICKETTS (1866-1931)

Charles Ricketts has been called the quintessence of the nineties. In his life as much as his work, he embodied not merely an “aesthetic” devotion to art and beauty but also many of the fin de siècle’s finest creative energies. While still a young man, Ricketts established himself as an innovator in book design, illustration, publishing, and printing, quickly earning the admiration of leading figures in the literary and art worlds. Frederick Leighton commissioned an important early pen-and-ink drawing. Samuel Bing, Camille Pissarro and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec numbered among Ricketts’s admirers on the Continent (where Ricketts’s influence upon Art Nouveau is still underrated). In London, the writers Oscar Wilde, Michael Field, John Gray, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats and Thomas Sturge-Moore were all eager for Ricketts to decorate their books or design stagings for their plays. Wilde especially was proud of Ricketts’s involvement in his own work: he once called Ricketts “the subtle and fantastic decorator” of his books. In some respects, Ricketts was Wilde’s collaborator or kindred spirit. His sympathies with Wilde were profound. His designs for Wilde’s *The Sphinx* mark one of the high points, if not the high point, of late-Victorian book design.

Ricketts was born in 1866 in Geneva to a French mother and an English father, the latter of whom harboured serious ambitions of becoming a painter of seascapes and marine subjects. From his parents, then, Ricketts inherited strong visual propensities and a discerning eye, as well as an affinity with Continental art and ideas that runs through his early work. Much of his youth was spent travelling in France and Italy, where he frequented the Louvre especially and began to formulate the taste and artistic principles that were to guide his life.

Thus, when Ricketts enrolled in 1882 at the City and Guilds Technical Art School in Lambeth to train as a professional wood-engraver, he brought with him a familiarity with the canons of European art that was rare in his chosen career. Woodcutting had been a respectable and remunerative form of artisanship for the previous three decades, and in the hands of master-engravers such as the Dalziel Brothers, it had reached a high degree of excellence. But it had chiefly been a medium of mechanical reproduction, not a medium for original “production”. Ricketts was determined to integrate the roles of artist and engraver, thereby raising the eminence of wood engraving as an artistic medium, while simultaneously exploiting the massive demand for wood engraving from publishers. There can be little debate today that Ricketts achieved the first of these goals – by 1898 he was hailed as the finest wood engraver of his day. But his entry into the field coincided with the arrival of new photoengraving techniques that ultimately eclipsed the medium he had chosen, and some of the best of Ricketts’s designs over the ensuing years – his illustrations and decorations for Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates* and *The Sphinx*, or the remarkable bindings he designed in the early 1890s for books by Wilde, Hardy, John Gray, Lord de Tabley, and John Addington Symonds – were executed in an alien medium. Even the wood-engraved borders and frontispieces for Vale Press books, from the late 1890s, bear traces revealing that Ricketts took advantage of phototransfer techniques to save himself from making a drawing on the block in reverse of his original.

So far as the 1890s are concerned, Ricketts’s reputation today rests partly, and rightly, on his contributions to the book arts: on his illustrations and bindings for commercial books, on the innovative typography of *The Sphinx*, and on the creation of a series of books privately designed, printed, and conceived from cover to cover by Ricketts, culminating – after early experiments, such as the splendid *Hero and Leander* published by Elkin Mathews and John Lane in 1894 – in the creation in 1896 of his private press the Vale Press. The forty-six books produced in the eight years of the Press’s existence constitute some of the most notable examples of the Revival of Printing of the 1890s, surpassing even William Morris’s books in certain respects. Each incorporated typefaces, frontispieces, border decorations, illuminated letters, and in

some cases wood-engraved illustrations and bindings, designed and overseen by Ricketts personally. Even the papers bore his watermarks. With some justice, A. J. A. Symons claimed in 1930 that Ricketts almost single-handedly invented the figure of the modern typographer or graphic designer.

But Ricketts was prolific and influential in other fields. Through *The Dial: An Occasional Magazine*, which he co-founded in 1889 and co-edited with his life-partner, the painter and lithographer Charles Shannon, Ricketts introduced French symbolist art and ideas into Britain, where they influenced the work of Beardsley and Wilde, among others. With the arrival of the twentieth century, Ricketts turned his considerable talents to painting, sculpture, theatre design, jewelry, art criticism – and eventually to fiction and memoir. His sculpture, jewelry, and stage designs are now regarded as among the finest produced in Britain prior to World War Two. Kenneth Clark has called Ricketts, along with Roger Fry, one of the two “leading critics of art” of his day; and Ricketts’s books on the Prado and on Titian remain among the most important and enjoyable of their kind. But long before he wrote them, Ricketts’s activities in the textual arts created significant connections between nineteenth-century movements and the emerging strains of Modernism. His advice was eagerly sought by collectors and museums: he declined the Directorship of England’s National Gallery in 1914 only to take on the role of paid advisor to Canada’s National Gallery nine years later. Together with Shannon, whom he had met at the City and Guilds in 1882, he formed one of the early twentieth century’s pre-eminent private collections, much of it later absorbed into the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge. As Jacques Emile Blanche once remarked, Ricketts seemed to live an ideal existence, sacrificing everything for art. He was a figure of “real distinction,” writes Clark in his memoirs, “and much of his work... will be ‘rediscovered’ with astonishment.”

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