



WILLIAM STRANG (1859-1921)



Portrait of W. Strang.
Etching, 1890, *William Strang: Catalogue of His Etched Work*, 1906, p. 66.

William Strang must count among the more versatile, innovative, and intriguing artistic talents of the fin de siècle. He was born in Dumbarton, Scotland, to a family of shipbuilders – an occupation for which he appears to have had little inclination, despite a brief apprenticeship to his grandfather’s firm William Denny & Brothers in 1875. Aware that their son’s talents lay elsewhere, Strang’s parents gave him the opportunity to follow his artistic interests, and in 1876 he entered the Slade School of Art in London. He would spend the remainder of his life in the city.

Although Edward Poynter was Slade Professor upon his arrival, Strang seems to have been most inspired by his predecessor, the French-born Alphonse Legros. The dour, socially-attuned spirit of Legros’s art – and his deeply held belief that young artists should immerse themselves in the style and subject of old master works – would be integral to Strang’s career, as would Legros’s skills as a printmaker. Indeed, after leaving the Slade as a student in 1880, Strang stayed on a final year as an assistant to Legros’ etching class, confirming his proficiency in the medium that would be central to his work in the 1880s and 90s.

Despite the successful exhibition of an oil painting (*Solitude*) at the Royal Academy in 1892, printmaking – in all its forms – dominated his thinking during this period. Over the course of his career Strang would produce over 700 etchings, supplemented by technically brilliant experiments in woodcutting, mezzotint, and engraving. For instance, his 6 x 5 foot print *The Plough* (1899), made for the Art for Schools Association, was described as “one of the largest woodcuts ever executed” (Binyon, 1906, ix). Though there are great numbers of them, the experience of looking at Strang’s prints is never a boring one: the artist’s deep fascination with his medium and the wide, eclectic range of his themes and influences ensure that his work remains engaging.

Critics have nevertheless struggled to separate Strang’s creations from those of the artists who inspired him. The list of these is large, and in addition to Legros includes: Jean-François Millet, Rembrandt, Titian, Goya, Honoré Daumier, Puvis de Chavannes, and William Blake. *The extent to which Strang invoked such artists in his works led many to describe him, as D. S. MacColl would do in 1899, as a “scholarly” artist: one whose fondness for other artists eclipsed any individual style. “It is difficult to lay the finger anywhere and say certainly “This is Strang,”” argued MacColl, noting that “he is like a chameleon-scholar who comes up and takes honours in a number of schools without giving us a fixed sense of vocation in any one of them” (396). Fellow artist William Rothenstein put it thus: “[Strang] was an ardent experimenter in many materials and methods – what he admired him at once attempted to do himself” (34).*

Although questions over the individuality of many of Strang’s works remain, the majority of his compositions from the late 1880s and the 1890s are typified by a dramatic, brooding, and often uncanny intensity. Laurence Binyon, one of his closest supporters, claimed that “Strang shared with his fellow Scot, [Robert Louis] Stevenson, a relish for the grim and for tales of horror” (“Etchings” xiii). This is certainly true of his illustrated books, which represent one of his most powerful and original contributions to fin-de-siècle culture. The first of these books was *The Earth Fiend*, published in 1892 at the Bodley Head. The book consisted of a ballad, written by Strang, accompanied by eleven prints in different sizes and styles. Two years later, he followed it up with the similarly eccentric *Death and the Ploughman’s Wife*, another ballad supported by etchings, the title page of which contains a memorable image of a naked child drop-

kicking a human skull. As Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has noted, the prints in this volume are untitled and do not seem to relate to any specific moment in the text, making it “impossible to determine whether the subject was conceived first in pictures or in words – whether the subject was clothed ‘originally’ in visual images or in linguistic metaphors” (210). His 1898 *Book of Giants*— twelve poems and woodcuts— seems to have been largely directed at a younger audience, perhaps inspired by his own children (of which he had five, from his 1885 marriage to Agnes McSynon Rogerson). Strang also contributed illustrations to works by other writers, both dead and living. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress* all attracted his attention, as did the works of his contemporary Rudyard Kipling, to which he contributed thirty etchings in 1901.

Strang’s illustrated books reveal how closely his work reflected many of the central concerns or fashions of the 1890s. His 1897 print *Grotesque* – a representation of a dream in which a naked woman leans out of the mouth of a giant ram’s skull, whilst in the background a smartly dressed woman evades the clutches of a giant ribbon – seems typical in this respect, combining contemporary passions for Puvis de Chavannes and Goya with the mischievous spirit of Aubrey Beardsley. Nevertheless, Strang’s work appeared only once in *The Yellow Book*, in the form of the rather pious print *Going to Church* (vol 6). This may have had something to do with Strang’s reluctance to associate too readily with any particular group of artists and/or style. Though he would later join the *Society of Twelve* (a group of printmakers including Rothenstein, Charles Ricketts, and Charles Shannon, founded in 1904) and become an Associate Engraver of the Royal Academy in 1906, the evidence suggests that Strang was not an ambitious artist, nor an especially loquacious one. Binyon once wrote that “when asked what [his] subjects are about, the artist will laugh and reply: ‘I don’t know’” (Introduction, cxvi). The absence of any critical writing by Strang makes one suspect that he preferred his art to do the talking.

In the 1900s Strang’s work, like that of many of his contemporaries, changed tack. He took up painting more seriously and soon gained great critical recognition for a series of ten paintings illustrating Adam and Eve. These large-scale works (including *The Temptation*, now owned by the Tate) were made for the Birmingham brewer Laurence

Hodson, the man behind the 1902 Wolverhampton Exhibition of Art and Industry, where the paintings were first exhibited. In 1910 Walter Sickert described them as “works of the greatest importance[. ...] Here we have a modern painter setting to work on imaginative subjects in the grand self-respecting classic manner that made the old masters what they are[. ...] Every inch of these canvases is packed with thought and care and beauty” (239). A similarly effusive Frank Rutter pointed out the debt owed to Puvis de Chavannes and Mantegna (82). What is remarkable, nevertheless, is the lack of awkwardness with which Strang discloses his artistic influences in these works. They are confident, resolute homages rather than nostalgic pastiches.

This quality also comes out clearly in Strang’s portraits from this era. Though he never concentrated on them at the expense of other genres, portraits were a regular feature of Strang’s output. His pencil portraits are close rivals to Rothenstein’s likenesses of leading figures of the fin de siècle and share many of the same subjects, including Laurence Binyon, Robert Cunningham Graham, Francis Seymour Haden, and Rudyard Kipling. Strang tackled many of his sitters more than once and comparisons between the various images can be instructive. The contrast between his muted yet elegant 1893 oil portrait of Thomas Hardy and the glowing, Gauguinesque portrait of 1920 reminds us, once again, of the different modes in which Strang was capable of working, and of his almost frightening aptitude for each.

Following the exhibition of Post-Impressionist art held at the Grafton Galleries in 1910, Strang’s leaning towards contemporary modes became more pronounced, leading to a series of extraordinary and enigmatic canvases depicting modern life in London. Chief among these is the Tate-owned *Bank Holiday* (1912), a brightly coloured problem picture depicting an awkward young couple at a London café. The 1910 *Portrait Group*, owned by the Royal Academy of Arts, suggests the influence of Manet, whilst *The Conspirators*, owned by Kirklees Museums and Galleries, is clearly indebted to Van Gogh. In 1914 Strang visited France to make war drawings at the front, subsequently exhibited at the Leicester Galleries.

Strang died in 1921, the same year that he was elected Royal Academician Engraver (a rather belated response to the printing prowess of his earlier years). In 1918 he had been

elected President of the International Society, a position formally bestowed upon Whistler and Rodin. Despite this recognition, Strang's reputation was still out of keeping with his critical reception. The art establishment had been slow in recognizing Strang's talent and, in his early career at least, he had received far more attention on the Continent than in Britain. Collections of his prints, edited by Binyon, brought his work to a larger audience, but he proved hard to place in many of the major surveys of the period. This remains the case: a 1980 retrospective exhibition, held at Sheffield, Glasgow, and the National Portrait Gallery, and the accompanying publication (with a comprehensive essay by Philip Athill), made a convincing case for his re-evaluation, which has yet to be seriously taken up. Good collections of his prints can be found, nevertheless, in such institutions as The British Museum and the Yale Center for British Art – and there are more than 50 of his paintings in public ownership in the United Kingdom.

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Samuel Shaw's research focuses on the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century British art world, with a particular interest in the relationship between artists, critics, and the art market. He is currently writing a study of William Rothenstein.

Books by Strang (or featuring Strang's work):

The Book of Giants. London: Unicorn, 1898.

Death and the Ploughman's Wife. London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1894

The Doings of Death. London: Essex House, 1901. (woodcuts by Robert Brydon after William Strang)

The Earth Fiend. London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1892.

Lucien's True History. Illustrated by William Strang, J. B. Clark and Aubrey Beardsley. London: privately printed, 1894.

Paradise Lost by John Milton: a series of twelve illustrations etched by William Strang. London: John C. Nimmo, 1896.

The pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come, by John Bunyan; with scenes and illustration by William Strang. New York: R. F. Fenno, 1904.

A series of thirty etchings by William Strang illustrating subjects from Don Quixote. London: Macmillan, 1902.

A series of thirty etchings by illustrating subjects from the writings of Rudyard Kipling. London: Macmillan, 1901.

Sinbad the Sailor and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. Illustrated by William Strang and J.B. Clark. London: Lawrence and Buller, 1896.

Singer, Hans W., and William Strang. *Etching, Engraving and the other methods of Printing Pictures.* London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1897 (contains ten original plates by Strang, and four illustrations after his designs).

The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen. Illustrated by William Strang and J. B. Clark. London: Lawrence and Buller, 1895.

Selected Publications about William Strang

Binyon, Laurence. "The Etchings and Engravings of William Strang." *William Strang: Supplement to the Catalogue of his Etched Work 1882-1912.* Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1923.

--. Introduction. *William Strang: Catalogue of his Etched Work, with an introductory essay by Laurence Binyon.* Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1906.

Kooistra, Lorraine Janzen. *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books.* Aldershot: Scolar, 1995.

MacColl, D. S. "William Strang." *The Saturday Review.* (April 1st 1899): 396-97.

Newbolt, Francis. *Etchings of William Strang.* London: G. Newnes, 1907.

Rothenstein, William. *Men and Memories.* Vol 1. London: Faber & Faber, 1930.

Rutter, Frank. *Art in my Time.* London: R. Clay, 1933.

Sickert, Walter. *Walter Sickert, Complete Writings on Art*. Ed. Anna Gruetzner Robins.
Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

William Strang RA, 1859-1921. Sheffield: Sheffield City Art Galleries, 1981.