

ERNEST HASKELL: HOW HE WAS TO HIS TALENTS

Collins Gallery, Mead Museum, Amherst College • Amherst, MA • www.amherst.edu/museums/mead • Through August 27, 2011

How *He Was to His Talents* reexamines the work of Ernest Haskell, a promising early twentieth century printmaker and illustrator who unexpectedly passed at age forty-nine in 1925. The exhibit traces three decades of artistic development and reveals Haskell's favorable reputation buried within history. Haskell's remarkable ability as a self-taught artist was driven by an obsession to master the techniques of lithography, drypoint, and etching.

Through meticulous draftsman-ship, Haskell delineates the smallest details in the landscapes and figurative works on view. Haskell's reverence for the landscape is characterized by windswept grass and bowed mountains. In the etching



Ernest Haskell, *The Tree of Eternal Beauty*, ca. 1900–1903, pen and ink, graphite on paper, 2¼ x 4½". Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Mass. Gift of Josephine Haskell Aldridge in memory of Richard Aldridge (class of 1952). Photo by Petegorsky/Gipe.

Mirror of Goddess, lace-like lines intertwine into shrubbery, and expansive rolling hills are delicately dotted with a freckling of marks. Created while the artist visited Monterey, California, Haskell's immaculate rendering of a placid lake and cottony oaks represent the ideal bucolic countryside.

Upon closer examination, the viewer discovers a culmination of woven marks that typify Haskell's stylized technique. In one of Haskell's

most striking etchings, titled *Arabella*, a graceful woman holds a bird on her outstretched hand. As the viewer approaches *Arabella*, the portrait gently unfolds into a layer of pointillistic dots. Illustrative quali-

ties and Byzantine forms of *Arabella* greatly contrast Haskell's liquid graphite drawing *Lady in Black*, where a woman emerges from the shadows of a dark Victorian room. The sitter's haunting profile is accentuated by her unnaturally elongated neck. This sophisticated portrait pays homage to Haskell's much admired contemporary James McNeill Whistler and juxtaposes *Lady in Black* with a small reproduction of Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, provoking both historical and artistic conversation.

Several proofing states of the same print confirm the importance of process influencing the final image. In addition, Haskell's life also demonstrates how technique can personally transform the artist. Known for writing poetry, hosting lectures, and traveling throughout the country in search of the ideal landscape, Haskell was truly motivated by the knowledge and the practice of media. Further, *How He Was to His Talents* proves how Haskell's astonishing attentiveness to detail and form convinces the viewer to believe these romantic environments were once real.

—Carand Burnett

LORI WASELCHUK: GRACE BEFORE DYING

Photographic Resource Center, at Boston University • Boston, MA • www.bu.edu/prc • Through July 10, 2011

The Mississippi River glides around three sides of Angola prison in Louisiana, and the prison itself sits on a parcel of land larger than Manhattan Island. Long regarded as one of the harshest prisons in the United States and as a place where the Deep South's racism intersects brutally with its poor African-American population, Angola, often run like a fiefdom, reminds one of a American-style gulag. It was, and likely remains, a place of enduring suffering and despair.

Over the years, reforms were enacted, and gradually small improvements have been implemented at the prison, which, ironically, sits on the site of several former plantations. One such program was a hospice for dying inmates who were serving life sentences. Typically, before the reforms, prisoners were left to die alone in the prison hospital. The hospice, staffed by a nurse and prison volunteers, affords some comfort and dignity to those who are dying. As the photographer Lori Waselchuk says, "Inmates assert and affirm their humanity in an environment designed to isolate and pun-

ish." Waselchuk, who was allowed access to the hospice at Angola, captures these small acts of kindness and compassion in *Grace Before Dying*.

The exhibition consists of five photo and text panels and two quilts made by hospice volunteers. Waselchuk captures unique acts of kindness amid the bleakness of a prison hospital. A volunteer holds the hand of a dying man or grieves with a dead inmate's family. A horse-drawn hearse adds the smallest amount of dignity to the simplest of ceremonies. Here hardened and defeated men assert their freedom—freedom to behave normally in abnormal circumstances. Waselchuk is unwavering in capturing the guileless humanity present here. It isn't staged and it

isn't pretty. It is, however, fraught with emotive power, and Waselchuk's spare documentary-style photographs both celebrate those emotions and protest against the conditions in which they occur.

This exhibition, which also travels to prisons, is important; but more to the point, it is necessary. It is a telling reminder of what we've decided to hide away, and the men who have adapted to our callousness and have risen above it.

—Robert Moeller



Lori Waselchuk, *Lloyd Bone (#73857) Drives the Funeral Hearse*, 2007, inkjet print, 14¼ x 40".