

Landmark Events of 'The Whistler Year'

The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler. An exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 14 September — 11 November 1984; and at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 24 November 1984 — 13 January 1985

Ruth E. Fine

Volume 12, numéro 1, 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073691ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073691ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fine, R. E. (1985). Compte rendu de [Landmark Events of 'The Whistler Year' / *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler. An exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 14 September — 11 November 1984; and at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 24 November 1984 — 13 January 1985*]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 12(1), 54–59.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073691ar>

Landmark Events of 'The Whistler Year'

The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler. An exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 14 September – 11 November 1984; and at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 24 November 1984 – 13 January 1985.

Catalogue: Katharine A. Lochman, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler.* New Haven/London: Yale University Press in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984. 308 pp., 297 illus., \$60.00 (cloth) and \$15.00 (paper).

Last year 1984 was dubbed 'The Whistler Year' by many enthusiasts of 19th-century art. In celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of artist James McNeill Whistler the two most important repositories of his work, the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Hunterian Art Gallery, at Glasgow University in Scotland, mounted major displays of their holdings. The exhibition at the Freer was documented by a comprehensive catalogue by David Park Curry, published in association with W.W. Norton & Co. The emphasis of the show was on the artist's paintings and drawings, the few etchings included being so extensively reworked as to be considered more drawings than prints. The Hunterian Art Gallery put on view all of the paintings in their Whistler collection as well as a selection of Whistler's personal effects including his paints, brushes and other studio paraphernalia. The Glasgow collection primarily was formed by the gifts from Rosalind Birnie Philip, the artist's sister-in-law and executrix. Especially featured was the University's unsurpassed collection of pastel drawings by Whistler, documented in a catalogue by Margaret MacDonald. Also at Glasgow, the Special Collections division of the University Library displayed a selection from its repository of photographs and other Whistleriana, organized by Nigel Thorp.

In New York the Frick Collection featured its holding of Whistler's paintings, drawings and prints; and M. Knoedler and Co. mounted a lovely exhibition of small works in all media titled *Notes, Harmonies & Nocturnes*, borrowing the title Whistler used for several exhibitions of his work during the 1880s (this exhibition too was catalogued by Margaret MacDonald). Museums throughout the United States mounted selections of Whistler's etchings and lithographs drawn from their

own collections; and two private collections of prints were featured in exhibitions that are still travelling. Starting in 1982, lithographs from the collection of Mr. Steven Block have circulated under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibitions Service (catalogue by Susan Hobbs and NESTA R. Spink), and since mid-1984 a selection of etchings from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Julius Zelman has been circulated by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (catalogue by Ruth E. Fine). Symposia were held in Washington, D.C., co-sponsored by the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art and the Freer Gallery of Art (papers forthcoming as an issue of the National Gallery's *Studies in the History of Art*), at Glasgow University and at the University of Lowell (papers also to be published). A highlight of the Lowell Symposium was a reception at Whistler's birthplace.

Whistler, then, has been a subject of considerable scholarly attention. Each exhibition, catalogue and symposium was not only anticipated by the artist's enthusiasts but was also responsible for adding to their number. Among the most eagerly awaited exhibitions (with publication) was 'The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler'. Organized by Katharine A. Lochman, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, the exhibition was shown in two cities. It premiered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where it was on view 14 September – 11 November, 1984; from 23 November – 13 January 1985 the exhibition was mounted in Toronto at Dr. Lochman's home institution. The experience of viewing the exhibition in each city stimulated such different responses that it may almost be thought of as two different shows.

First, the New York version was considerably smaller. It was edited to fit three print galleries by David W. Kiehl, the Met's Associate Curator of Prints and Photographs, working together with Dr. Lochman, and viewers in New York saw approximately 150 works. In Toronto, by contrast, more than 230 prints and drawings were seen. The Met showing, however, was not only smaller than the Toronto show: despite the fact that several works by artists other than Whistler were included, it was a more straightforward exhibition of Whistler's etchings.

In Toronto, in addition to a more extensive selection of Whistler's etchings, the eighty or so sheets on view that were not seen in New York included many addi-



FIGURE 1. James McNeill Whistler, *The Sisters*, lithograph, W 71. (Photo: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Rosenwald Collection).

tional works by other artists, both Japanese and European (for example, several more pieces by Rembrandt and by Whistler's surgeon/etcher brother-in-law, Seymour Haden). This larger component of works by these artists allowed one to grasp more fully the influences evident in Whistler's etchings and also to see how his close associations affected Whistler's art, especially in his youth, and most importantly his relationship with his brother-in-law Seymour Haden. Indeed, this was one of the main intellectual purposes of the exhibition.

The ambience created for the show was also exceedingly different in the two cities. In fact, at the Met ambience virtually was no issue. The prints were hung without atmospheric strategies imposed. The distinctive advantage of the New York showing was that in a gallery adjacent to the three rooms of etchings was a pendant

exhibition of some 75 of Whistler's lithographs, selected mainly from the collection of Paul F. Walter. Some were a recent gift to the Met and others were on loan for the occasion. The juxtaposition of the two exhibitions provided an opportunity to see a splendid selection of work from both aspects of Whistler's printed oeuvre.

The etchings and drypoints on view were made over almost half a century – from 1854 through 1901 – in several concentrated periods. The lithographs, by contrast, with fewer than half-dozen exceptions, were produced in less than a decade, between 1888 and 1896. Moving back and forth between the two exhibitions one was able to make clear connections between Whistler's work in lithography and his late etchings. Both are characterized by an increasingly fluid style of mark-making: rapidly placed, parallel strokes, often worked in broad, overlapping patches (Figs. 1 and 2). It became extremely apparent that by studying Whistler's printed art as a unit rather than divided by technique into two categories – the etchings and drypoints, and the lithographs – one is able to understand both bodies of work more clearly and to relate them directly to Whistler's paintings, watercolours, pastels and drawings. One sees concentrations of subjects, and the functional relationships between the fluidity of the lithotints, for example, and Whistler's watercolours as distinctly different from relationships one sees between the linear etchings and the pastels.

FIGURE 2. James McNeill Whistler, *Atelier de bijouterie*, n. 433, 1892-93. Etching (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Paul Walter Collection).

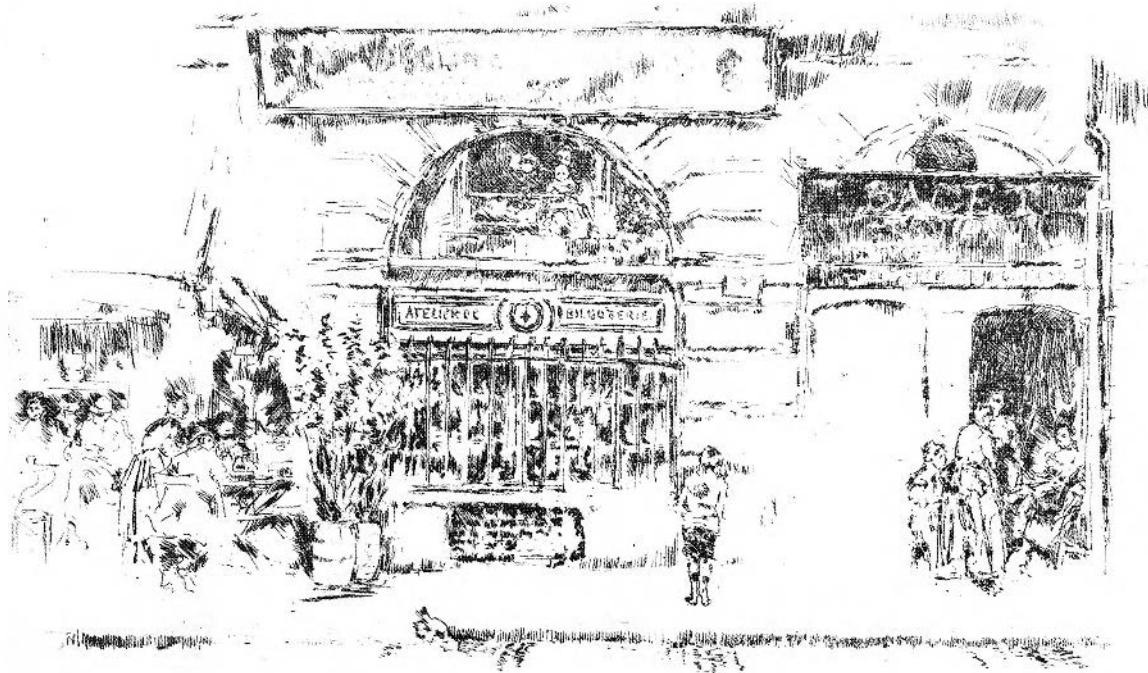




FIGURE 3. Installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario. At upper left is a photomural of Venice that introduced the Venetian etchings. At upper right is a case displaying terra-cotta Tanagra figures adjacent to prints (not visible in photo) related to them (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

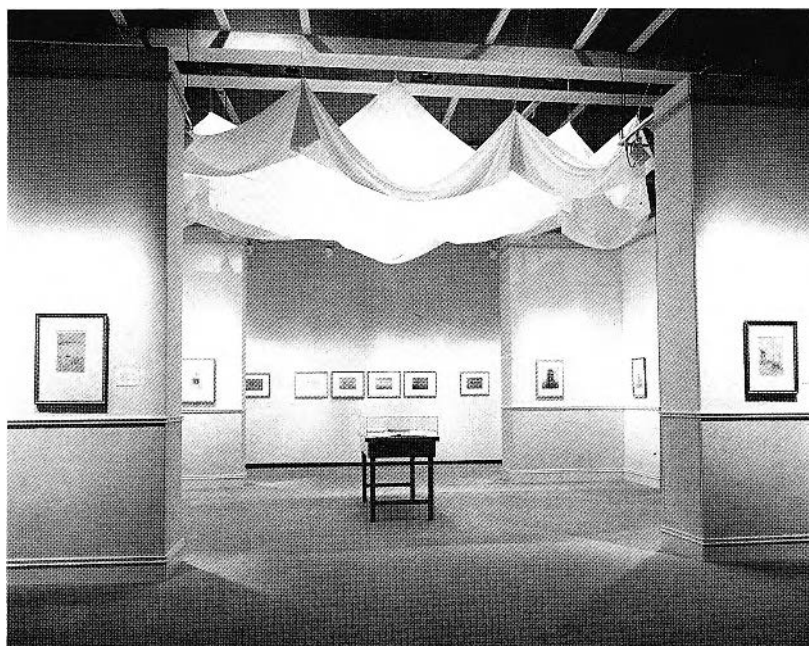
The Met showing, then, presented one kind of framework for a reconsideration of Whistler's etchings, and a very valuable framework indeed. It was in Toronto, however, that the fullness of 'The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler' as conceived by Katharine Lochnan was to be seen and where the ambience of the exhibition became part of its impact. The Sam and Avala Zacks Galleries where the Whistler show was hung form the

Art Gallery of Ontario's main temporary exhibition space. They are large and high ceilinged, scaled more comfortably for paintings and sculpture than for prints. As one aspect of the exhibition's effective and handsome design, movable walls allowed for subdivisions more appropriate to small etchings and drawings. The colours of the spaces varied from grey and black (based on the scheme used in Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and*

FIGURE 4. Etching studio installed at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Photomural shows Whistler at his printing press in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Paris, 1893 (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



FIGURE 5. Installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario, showing a selection of Venice etchings displayed beneath a velarium based on Whistler's design (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



Black, the famous portrait of his mother, Anna Mathilda) to white and yellow, the 'poached egg' colours of Whistler's own exhibition designs. The height at which the light was projected on the walls served to visually lower the ceiling, and oriental rugs were placed in a few of the galleries, adding to a more intimate sense of scale. In one area, two chairs and a table in the oriental style further referred to the taste of the time (see Fig. 3). In the last gallery, a functioning etching press with accompanying chemicals and tools was installed, and printing demonstrations were held periodically throughout the time of the exhibition (see Fig. 4). Not far from this 'studio' was an etching desk said to have been purchased from Whistler by Canadian artist Homer Watson (1855-1936).

Glazed table-cases in the middle of several galleries provided for the display of a selection of materials: Whistler's passport; photographs of the artist dating from the 1850s through the 1890s and photographs of several of his associates, among them Whistler's mother, Scymour Haden, and his sister-in-law and executrix, Rosalind Birnie Philip; several fascinating letters, including two to Marcus Huish of the Fine Art Society, one of 1880 from Venice recounting Whistler's difficulties of working in the cold and predicting – despite the trials – how superb the Venice etchings would be, and another of 1889, from Amsterdam, in which Whistler offered Huish the option to publish his most recent masterpieces (Huish declined the offer); and volumes of Whistler's published writings, among them *Mr. Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock'* and Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. Much of this material was on loan from the splendid Whistler Archive at the Glasgow University Library. The 'piece de resistance' of the installation, however, was a velarium of the sort Whistler designed to control the light in his own exhibitions and others for

which he supervised the installation (see Fig. 5). The construction was based on a drawing now at the Hunterian Art Gallery (Fig. 6).

FIGURE 6. James McNeill Whistler, *Design for a Velarium*, 1886. Pencil and watercolour (Photo: Courtesy Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow University).



The exhibition in Toronto followed closely the organization of Dr. Lochnan's accompanying book, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler*, although the volume does not document the exhibition as such and the reproductions rarely illustrate the impressions that were on view. Co-published by Yale University Press and the Art Gallery of Ontario, the elegantly-written book is based on years of archival research. A delight to read, it is crammed with biographical data and is the most thorough study of Whistler's work with the needle to date. The book touches upon aspects of social history, scientific developments, particularly in photography and optics, and other broad themes as appropriate to Whistler's art. It also contains an important appendix suggesting a chronological order for Whistler's etchings and drypoints.

In Toronto, inserted into the book was a very useful checklist of the exhibition which included the excellent texts of the wall labels. Indeed, to follow the organizational chronology of the exhibition it was important to attend closely to the numbering of the objects and to the concise and informative texts that provided excellent introductory material for each section and sub-section of the exhibition. The exhibition was organized under four umbrella titles: I. The Early Years – London, Washington, and Paris, 1848-1858; II. Whistler and Realism, 1858-1863; III. Whistler and Aestheticism, 1863-1881; IV. The Late Etchings, 1881-1901. These sections were further divided into twenty-seven sub-groupings. Some were to be anticipated, like 'The Thames Etchings of 1859,' but others were more surprising and seductive, such as: 'The PLAWD Project of 1857' – a proposed etching series, never completed, represented here by Whistler's *Au sixième* (Kennedy 3) [E.G. Kennedy, *The Etched Work of Whistler*, New York: 1910] and an untitled work by Sir Edward John Poynter: 'Atmosphere and Poetry, 1861-1863', and 'Artistic Printing and the Venice Nocturnes' (including prints by Vicomte Napoleon Lepic and Utagawa Hiroshige).

The exhibition was essentially a chronological study of Whistler's development as an etcher. Digressions were made to focus on works by other artists as they were relevant to Whistler's art. Rembrandt, Haden and Hiroshige were most prominent, but examples by Wenzel Hollar, Jacob van Ruisdael, Sulpice Guillaume Chevalier Gavarni, Charles Emile Jacque, François Bonvin, Charles Meryon and Alphonse Legros were included as well. Earlier artists' works would have been familiar to Whistler by their presence in Seymour Haden's extensive print collection; many of the prints by his contemporaries would have been seen at the workshop of printer Auguste Delâtre. Lochnan related some works directly to works by Whistler; others she connected less specifically, on the premise of affinity. The influence on Whistler's art of oriental things (prints, fabrics, porcelain and so forth) and of classical Tanagra figures was demonstrated as well.

Whistler's passions were formed early, and the exhibition made this exceedingly clear. Again and again he returned to the Thames, to domestic genre scenes, to

hidden alleyways – more often than to central squares – in cities and towns throughout Europe. Whistler's stylistic development, too, was made evident as the exhibition progressed from his bold (if sometimes ungraceful), early Thames etchings, through the most obviously experimental prints made in Venice, to his crowning achievements, drawn in Amsterdam in 1889, and the rare, lyrical Paris etchings of the early 1890s. Three splendid groupings offered viewers a clear idea of the way in which Whistler's concern with different ink colours and with various kinds of papers, and his interest in 'artistic printing,' enabled him to investigate fully the nature of his printed images. At the beginning of the show one saw a display of *A Street at Saverne* (K. 19), including the copper plate (borrowed from the Art Institute of Chicago) and four impressions on very different sorts of paper. Later, *Nocturne* (K. 184) was on view, represented by the copper plate (from the Met's collection) and five impressions; adjacent was the copper plate for *Nocturne, Palaces* (again from Chicago), displayed with seven impressions (K. 202). With these Venice pieces, even in the same state the subject might be seen as either a calm dawn, or a windy night.

The most splendid aspects of the exhibition, then, were those that attended to Whistler's sources and influences, and to his development of artistic printing. Less attention was given to Whistler's propensity to develop an image through several states although one stellar example of this (on view in Toronto only) was the display of three impressions of *The Doorway* (K. 188), an image published in Whistler's 'First Venice Set' of 1880. The print is catalogued by Kennedy in eight states, and impressions in the first state, an undocumented state between the third and fourth, and one in the fourth state offered a glimpse of the complicated methods Whistler employed in evolving his images through many, many substantive changes, as well as through modifications in detail.

Many works on view had illustrious provenances that may be traced back to Whistler's important patrons during his lifetime, among them the Winans Family, George Lucas and Howard Mansfield. A study of connoisseurship was not the prime purpose of this exhibition however, so there is little point in considering here those images for which better impressions might have been found. More important to note are those pieces representing every period of Whistler's career that were exhibited in very marvelous examples. Among these were *The Pool* (K. 43) from the collection of George Lucas. Inscribed by Lucas 'proof exposed by Whistler in Paris salon,' the impression is especially silvery, with delicate tones in a beautifully modulated sky. The figure of the young boy, in most impressions rather coarsely isolated from his surroundings, in this one is settled as a unified component of the image.

Special, too, were the drypoint *The Storm* (K. 81), from Chicago, in one of very few rich impressions taken before the plate was cancelled; the first state impression of Whistler's portrait of his patron *F.R. Leyland* (K. 122),

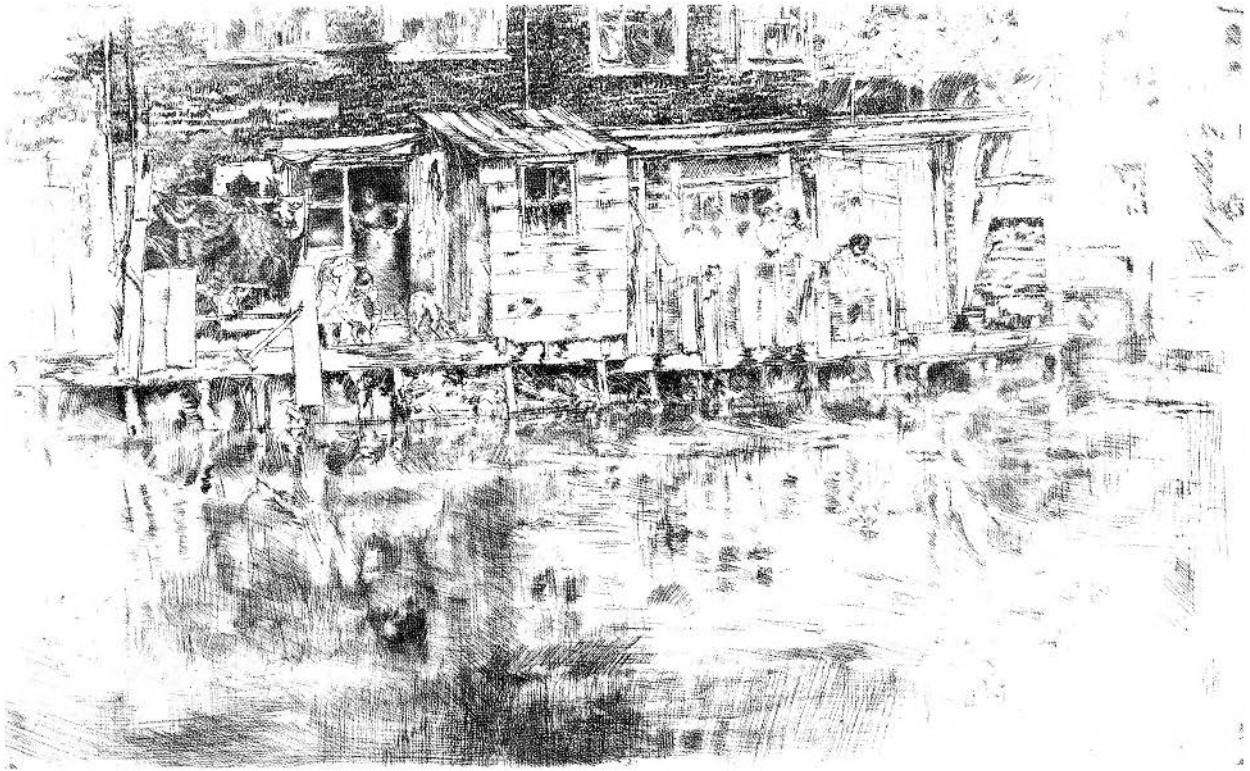


FIGURE 7. James McNeill Whistler. *Long House Dyers, Amsterdam*. K. 406 III/III. Etching and drypoint (Photo: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Rosenwald Collection).

from the National Gallery of Art, Washington: *The Dyer* (K. 216), from the Yale University Art Gallery, and *Fruit Shop, Paris* (K. 426), lent by Paul F. Walter. Also of note were several unique impressions of works by Whistler and by Haden, lent by the Trustees of the British Museum, among them Whistler's *Treize eaux-fortes d'après nature*, a rejected title page for his first published series, *Deux eaux-fortes d'après nature*, best known as 'The French Set.'

In Lochman's exhibition and in her book, considerably more attention was given the work up to and including Venice. That less fanfare was given to the late Amsterdam etchings in the exhibition was indicated, for example, by the absence at the start of this section of the show of a photomural similar to those that introduced the sections devoted to London, Paris and Venice. In the book of 274 pages of text, some 52 are devoted to the post-Venice etchings. Whistler himself, Lochman tells us, considered his Amsterdam prints (see Fig. 7) 'far finer work than anything I have hitherto produced.' He called them an amalgamation of the elaboration of the

'first stage of his work in etching (the crude and hard detail of the beginner' as seen in the 'Thames etchings) with the quality of the second stage (the 'Impressionism' of the Venice pieces). While the Amsterdam prints are fewer in number than the major sets of etchings done along the Thames or in Venice, they are remarkably beautiful and complex. So are the Paris prints of a few years later.

One hopes, then, that these aspects of Whistler's art as an etcher will also be given the careful scrutiny and critical evaluation Lochman has given the artist's earlier work. Overall, however, one must offer full praise for this exceedingly ambitious, carefully considered, and very handsome exhibition and the thoroughly researched, scholarly volume that accompanied it. Both are landmark events of 'The Whistler Year.' The reverberations of the ideas and arguments presented by them will undoubtedly be felt for years to come.

RUTH E. FINE

National Gallery of Art, Washington