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From the Collector's Library: The First Illustrated American Book

David A. Fraser

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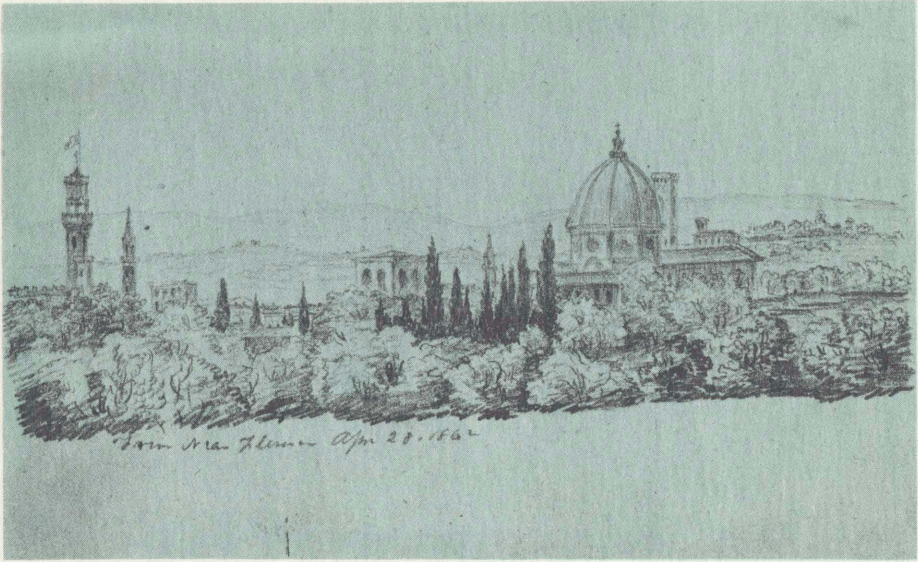


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Florence, 1862, by George Fisk Comfort. From his "Italian Tour Sketch Book" in Syracuse University Archives.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FALL 1973

	Page
George Fisk Comfort David Tatham	3
The <i>Libellus</i> of Telesphorus and the <i>Decretals</i> of Gregory IX Kenneth Pennington	17
Lord Byron at the Armenian Monastery on San Lazzaro Arpena Mesrobian	27
Edmund B. Chaffee and the Labor Temple Dugald Chaffee	38
Thomas J. Wise: A Brief Survey of His Literary Forgeries Thomas Gearty, Jr.	51
From the Collector's Library: The First Illustrated American Book David Fraser	65
News of the Library and Library Associates	71

FROM THE COLLECTOR'S LIBRARY

It is hoped that this section of the Courier may be continued as a regular feature, to be contributed by book collectors in Library Associates, sharing their interests and experiences with the membership.

The First Illustrated American Book

by David A. Fraser

One of my collecting interests is the book as an artifact, that is, the book as a work of art in its own right, a harmonious combination of the talents of the papermaker, type designer, printer, illustrator and binder. The contribution of the artist-illustrator to book production in the United States and western Europe during the past two centuries has received particular emphasis in my collecting efforts. During the past thirty years this field, together with other areas of collecting, has provided me with side benefits of (a) countless hours of pleasure with books and friends, (b) a smattering of knowledge, (c) recurring storage problems, and (d) a large variety of booksellers' invoices.

Let me give you an example of the type of problem which in the strange world of the book collector is the equivalent of stalking big game. In delving into the early illustrated books of this country, the question very naturally arises: what was the first illustrated book published in the United States? Now, admittedly, the answer to this question will not save the world, but a search for a solution will enable us to pick up some information about early American book publishing and introduce us to some of the books which made the best-seller list of our infant nation. (Generally speaking, in those times only books of proven popularity rated illustrated editions.)

Our most famous early printer, Isaiah Thomas, proclaimed that his edition of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets and other Poems* (Worcester, 1795) was printed on paper first manufactured by him in America and the accompanying plates engraved by an "artist who obtained his knowledge in this country" as distinguished from "European engravers who have settled in the United States" (Advertisement, p. xiii).

Mr. Fraser, a Syracuse attorney, is a past president of Library Associates and currently chairman of its Finance Committee.

A Library of Congress exhibit some years ago displayed this book as the first of entirely American manufacture — paper, printing, engraving of illustrations, binding, etc. Although the *Sonnets* is a formidable candidate for recognition as the first American illustrated book, its claim is somewhat diminished by the following considerations.

First of all, the subject-matter has no American significance whatsoever. The book is a reprint of the Sixth London edition (1792) of the poetic efforts of an Englishwoman. A single reference to this country occurs in Sonnet LVI entitled “The Captive Escaped in the Wilds of America.” Here are some sample lines:

If by his torturing, savage foes untrac'd,
The breathless Captive gain some trackless glade,
Yet hears the warwhoop howl along the waste,
And dreads the reptile monsters of the shade;

This is the closest that any of the 68 poems in this little volume approach to an American theme. As you can see, the English notion of life in America has been consistent over the years.

In the second place, the engravings are not original American designs at all, but rather crude copies of engravings appearing in an earlier English edition. (This was discovered by my son, David A. Fraser, while Acting Rare Book Librarian of Syracuse University.) Compare Fig. 1, the English engraving, with Fig. 2, the later American re-engraving by Seymour, which reverses the original, probably as the result of copying or tracing it directly onto the copper plate. The reversed position occurs in all the plates in the American edition.

At least the American engraver did not misrepresent his role: he signed the plates truthfully “Seymour, sc.” thus indicating he was only the engraver (see Fig. 2). However, he gave no credit to the original artist who made the drawing as in the case of the English engraving (Fig. 1) which identifies both the artist (“Corbould del.”) and the original engraver (“Heath sculp.”).

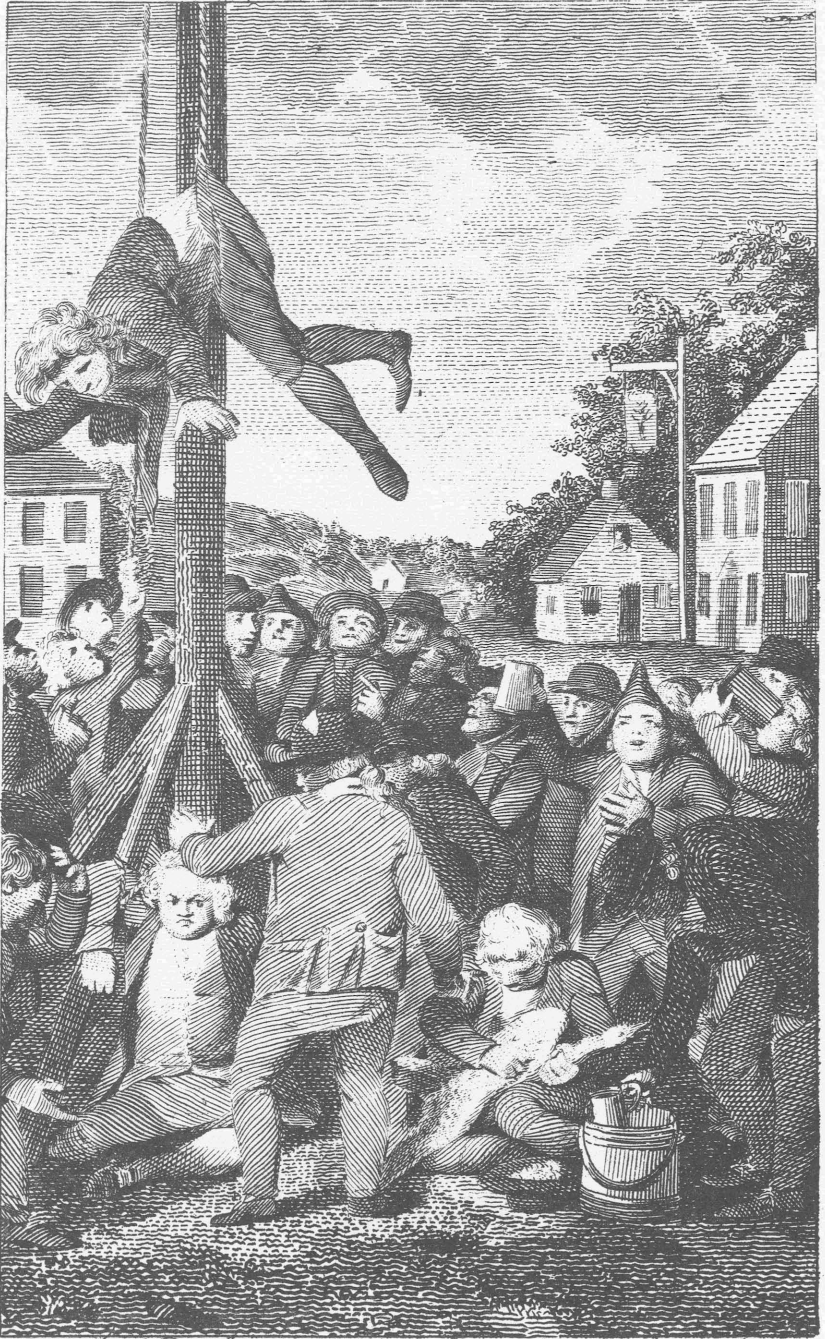
I have discovered very little about Seymour, who made the engravings for the American edition. The publisher Thomas states in his Advertisement that he had the plates engraved in his office in Worcester four years previously, which would date the actual work as 1791. The publisher is profuse in his apologies for the quality of Seymour’s plates as a product of the “infancy of engraving in this country.” It would therefore appear that Seymour was a beginner in the field in 1791. Very little more is to be found in the biographical sketch of Joseph H. Seymour in David McNeely Stauffer’s *American Engravers upon Copper and Steel* (The Grolier Club of the City of New York, 1907, vol. I, p. 244), which is silent as to where and when the engraver was born. William Dunlop’s *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York, 1834) contains only a short note about



Fig. 1. Original English engraving.



Fig. 2. American re-engraving.



E. Tisdale Del.

Fig. 3.

et sculp.

an S. Seymour of Philadelphia, who is not our man. It is therefore uncertain whether or not Seymour, the engraver of the plates of the *Sonnets*, was a native-born son of the new republic.

And, as a final demerit, the plates of the *Sonnets* fall considerably short of true illustration in the modern sense. They are “weeping willow” style decorations which do little to explain the text. They would be appropriate accompaniment to any sentimental prose or poetry of the day.

These, then, are some of the points which detract from a perfect score for the *Sonnets* as the first American illustrated book. While it may be said to have been “made in the USA” in a mechanical sense, the contents of the *Sonnets* were conceived on foreign soil by a foreign author and embellished (to use a typical 18th century expression) by compositions of a foreign artist.

As a contender for the title of “first American illustrated book,” I would like to nominate the third edition of *M’Fingal: A Modern Epic Poem in Four Cantos*, by John Trumbull, published in New York in the same year of 1795. The scene is laid in Massachusetts in 1775, and reflects the author’s intimate acquaintance with the participants in the political and military struggles of the Revolution. These are described in a lengthy, satirical poem through the eyes of M’Fingal, a representative of the Tory faction.

Judge Trumbull, the author, is described in the editors’ preface as “no friend to monarchy, nor aristocracy, nor is he a raving democrat. He is a friend of republican government, and rational liberty – that liberty which is secured by just laws, and a steady administration of justice.”

The author was a native of Connecticut and a supporter of the “revolting colonies.” One Elkaugh Tisdale was the artist-engraver of the nine plates illustrating the book. In attempting to establish Tisdale’s vital statistics, a nettled Dunlop (p. 45, *op. cit.*) wrote: “He has declined by letter giving me any dates or facts relative to himself; if, therefore, I err, he must excuse me – the world will care nothing about it.” It has since been established that Tisdale was born in Lebanon, Connecticut, about 1771 (Stauffer, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 272), and is considered to be the first American-born artist of humorous or satirical illustrations. His plates for *M’Fingal* have the merit of originality and are genuine illustrations in the modern sense. They contribute graphically to the development of the story as in Fig. 3 which shows our hero M’Fingal hoisted up the Liberty-pole in an effort to dissuade him from his Tory views while tar and feathers await him below (there was no meeting of the minds, with predictable results). Tisdale’s other plates in the volume also qualify in all respects as true book illustrations.

Of course, there are earlier American books with portrait frontispieces, almanacs and primers with small ornaments and figures and texts

containing maps or diagrams. But to this collector at least, these are readily distinguishable from an “illustrated book.”

The editors of this edition of *M’Fingal* wrote rather immodestly in the preface of the “elegance of the work” and “this specimen of American genius and industry.” As in the case of his Worcester rival, the New York publisher of *M’Fingal* was making a conscious effort to produce an early landmark in American book publishing.

M’Fingal, then, might very well be considered the first illustrated book wholly conceived, designed and manufactured in America, and a more satisfactory candidate for that honor than the *Sonnets* of Charlotte Smith.

Perhaps some of the *Courier’s* readers may have earlier or better entries to submit. Whether or not they locate any, the joy is in the chase, a fact well understood among that odd fraternity known as book collectors.

