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## The Drawings and Papers of Alan Dunn and Mary Petty at Syracuse University

Elisabeth Kaltenbrunner Melczer

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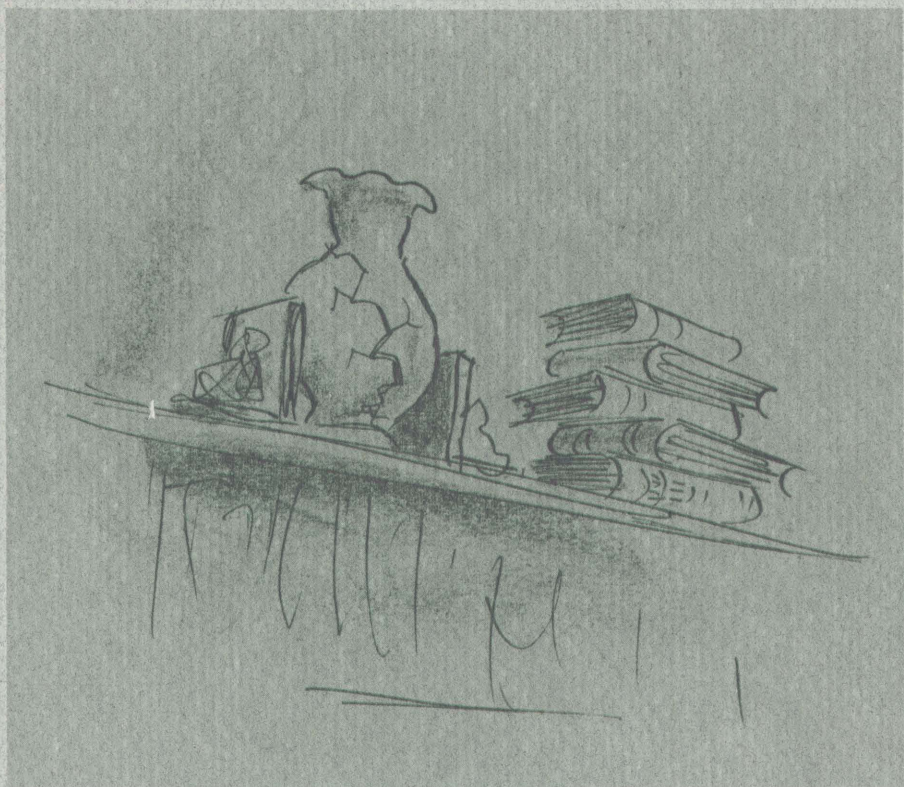
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# The Drawings and Papers of Alan Dunn and Mary Petty at Syracuse University

BY ELISABETH KALTENBRUNNER MELCZER

*Alan Dunn and Mary Petty were cartoonists whose wit and humor enlivened the pages of The New Yorker from 1926 to 1974. Though they were man and wife as well as teacher and student, their output was distinctively separate in style, mood, and content. Their work has been recognized internationally as providing incisive commentary on the social conventions, the values, and the arts of their New York contemporaries. The bulk of their roughs and finished cartoons are held in the Syracuse University Art Collections and their papers, including correspondence and diaries, are in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University.\* Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to materials held at Syracuse University.*

“I accept the Syracuse offer only because, unlike the Library of Congress and other places that want only drawings, they want everything but old clothes—letters, unfinished mss, almost anything”, wrote Alan Dunn in October 1966.<sup>1</sup> He was elated by the fact that Syracuse University wanted not only drawings. To his mind, a drawing was merely a single facet of the total *idea* behind the making of a cartoon; also to be considered were sketches, roughs, notes, diary entries, manuscripts, letters, idea-books, caption files—all of them aspects of the *itinerarium mentis* of the artist.

At the time, Dunn was greatly impressed by the considerable collections of American art and literature assembled at Syracuse Uni-

\* Other examples of their work which are not at Syracuse University are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, The Museum of the City of New York, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica (New York), the Wichita (Kansas) Art Museum, and the Library of Congress, as well as in privately held collections throughout the world.

1. Letter to Jeanne Davern, at the time managing editor of the *Architectural Record*, 22 Oct. 1966.

versity. In the same paragraph he wrote: “Now I find, to my surprise, that they have a noteworthy collection of Americana, not only the Sinclair Lewis papers but the bulk of Marcel Breuer’s work as well.” Dunn was eager to see his own collection of originals and papers, as well as that of Mary Petty, integrated into a comprehensive repository of twentieth-century American art<sup>2</sup> (fig. 1). No doubt, he had a clear sense of the historical value of their work. In a letter of 1967 to Martin Bush, who was at the time Assistant Dean of Academic Resources at Syracuse University, Dunn set down his thoughts on the matter: “The work of one’s time is never very popular for the first fifty or more years after its completion, but whoever will hold on to a comprehensive collection of this fabulous century will, in time, have an extraordinary incunabula [sic] and I deeply hope that Syracuse will be such a repository.”<sup>3</sup> The pertinent legal matters were handled by David Prager, a Madison Avenue attorney and, at the date of this writing, one of a few still-surviving friends of the couple. By late 1966 the Dunns were ready to ship a substantial part of their drawings and papers to Syracuse. From that year on, the Dunn and Petty art material and personal papers kept arriving at the newly refurbished facilities of the Syracuse University Art Collections and at the manuscripts department of the George Arents Research Library. After their deaths, the final remnant of their donation—several boxes of letters and memorabilia—was brought to Syracuse in 1978 by Richard S. Petty, a younger brother of Mary.

Soon after making this decision to give their work to Syracuse University, the Dunns entered into a period of declining health, which was exacerbated by Mary’s unfortunate accident and subsequent deteriorating years. Alan saw himself condemned to struggle with many difficulties, not the least of which was that of having to elicit laughter with his work while he himself was often in despair.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in

2. Letter from Alan Dunn to Martin Bush, 20 Feb. 1969: “Mary Petty was not invited to have a ms. collection at Syracuse and I think she deserves it more than I do in spite of the lesser amount of her output. The Library of Congress was after her work for years but she didn’t answer their letters.” To date there is no biography of Alan Dunn. For a biography of Mary Petty and a catalogue of her work at Syracuse University Art Collections, see Cheryl A. Saunders’ masters thesis (1983): “The Life and Art of Mary Petty: Cartoonist and Illustrator”.

3. Letter from A. Dunn to M. Bush, 19 Jan. 1967.

4. Peggy Bacon and Isabel Bishop were long-standing friends of the Dunns. In a letter of Peggy Bacon to A. Dunn (28 Dec. 1971) she writes: “Alan dear! Isabel [Bishop] telephoned me shortly before Christmas to tell me the horrifying news of



Fig. 1. Photograph of Alan Dunn and Mary Petty, ca. 1927, courtesy of Richard S. Petty.

1974, Dunn suffered a fatal heart attack and two years later Mary herself, long an invalid, passed away quietly in a nursing home.

Prager proceeded to dispose of the remainder of the estate. According to the instructions of the couple, an important endowment

what happened to Mary—and to you! . . . And still the delicious drawings keep pouring out of you—the gay, lighthearted, witty pictures! I give you my profound homage.”

was bestowed upon Syracuse University, the objectives of which were to augment the already existing collection of American twentieth-century cartoon art at Syracuse and to found a center for the study of cartoon art. In 1978 the Petty-Dunn Center for Social Cartooning was officially established at the Syracuse University Art Collections in fitting tribute to the two artist benefactors. Alfred T. Collette, director of the University Art Collections, and David Tatham, chairman of the Fine Arts Department, have from its inception vigorously supported the project. Much of the actual curatorial work fell upon the shoulders of Domenic Iacono, curator of the Collections, and his assistants. The cataloguing of letters and papers was handled by Carolyn A. Davis, manuscripts librarian in the George Arents Research Library. Hundreds of cartoons and thousands of roughs, letters, and documents had to be processed. Furthermore, exhibitions, lectures, and symposia had to be organized. As a result, Mary Petty's "mood" covers and Alan Dunn's "graphic comment art" have not been allowed to vanish into the oblivion of storage drawers.

Leafing through this bewilderingly rich world of cartoons and roughs, one cannot escape the impression that fifty years of the story of New York City—and, by implication, of America—are parading by. We say *story* and not *history*, because Mary's interests were purely feminine and psychological; and Dunn, though an avid reader of newspapers, studiously eschewed short-tempered political comments in favor of the slower-paced but, to his mind, deeper-running social critique.<sup>5</sup> Within the broad spectrum of that nearly half a century of metropolitan life, Dunn, whose work comprises the vast bulk of the collection, registered in his cartoons the social evolution as well as the physical alterations of the cityscape. By juxtaposing incongruent elements of the traditional past with samplings of the restless, often fatuous, innovations of the contemporary, he was able to comment with telling insight on the scenes of city life and, occasionally, of the hinterland beyond the Hudson.

5. ". . . the work of the Social Cartoonist, whose pen is no sword but a titillating feather that reminds us constantly that we do not act as we speak or think. Since, by its very objectivity, it reaches more people and raises fewer hackles, its gentle approach tends to soften and ameliorate the aggravations of one's times and thereby to enlighten." Alan Dunn, "Graphic Comment Art" in: *Alan Dunn: A Social Cartoonist Comments on His Times*, p. [4]. Exhibition catalogue, The Edward W. Root Art Center, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, 1968.



Fig. 2. "But I only want to prune it." *The New Yorker*, 26 May 1956, p. 27.  
© 1956, 1984 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

In 1935 Lewis Mumford, in the foreword to *The Seventh New Yorker Album*,<sup>6</sup> had levelled an incisive criticism on *New Yorker* cartoonists, reproaching them for not treating adequately the multifarious topical subjects of the city. If such criticism had indeed a measure of validity in the case of some of the cartoon artists (Wolcott Gibbs, answering Mumford on the same pages, thought it had none), it could hardly be applied to Dunn. Over the years, Dunn had again and again returned to the theme of the city, both in explicit references to some of its well-known buildings, squares, or streets, and in generic yet unmistakable allusions to problems or situations indigenous to the city. A cartoon such as Central Park of 1956 (fig. 2) squarely refers to a topical event of the city.

6. *The Seventh New Yorker Album* (New York: Random House, 1935), pp. [1–2].



To an even greater extent Dunn was sensitive to the architectural problems of New York's skyline. Issues relating to the preservation of landmarks were among his foremost concerns, and he did not miss a chance to comment upon them with his usual wit.<sup>7</sup> In this group belong the drawings and roughs of the early sixties, as well as the four published cartoons in *The New Yorker* and the *Architectural Record* on the subject of the Pennsylvania Railroad station demolition. One such cartoon (*The New Yorker*, 26 May 1956, p. 27) shows a heavy demolition truck filled with debris pulling into a city dumpyard. "Where do you want Penn Station?" says the driver to the lot attendant. The notion of demolishing the old and constructing the new went, of course, hand in hand. A 1962 cartoon (*The New Yorker*, 10 Nov. 1962, p. 47) takes a bold axial view of a street in which, alongside half-finished apartment and office highrises, huge cranes convey the sense of febrile change. "At this rate," exclaims one fretted dowager to her friend, "pretty soon there won't be anything left of New York." Apartment houses generated a fund of inspiration (fig. 3). Dunn turns them into hanging gardens (*The New Yorker*, 1 June 1963, p. 100, caption: "You'd never know you were in New York, would you?") or invites from them a view of collapsing civilization (*The New Yorker*, 14 Aug. 1971, p. 27, caption: "From this floor, you'll have a splendid view of the collapse of civilization—if and when.").

Dunn suffered from a number of phobias. Particularly, he was afraid of being trapped by fire in the dense, uncaring warren of New York buildings. Brendan Gill in *Here at The New Yorker* wrote: "On a few occasions, when he [Dunn] planned to visit a friend in an apartment building new to him, he went so far as to secure copies of the blueprints of the building and ascertain the position of its fire escapes."<sup>8</sup> The Syracuse collection contains many roughs on the subject of fire departments (fig. 4). Dunn uses the zealous, no-nonsense New York Fire Department in interplay with aristocracy to expose the foibles of the upperclass, a theme dear to both his and Mary Petty's hearts. In a bustling fire station (*The New Yorker*, 8 Aug. 1959, p. 33), an of-

7. *The New York Times*, 18 April 1956, p. 33, carried an article on Central Park mothers vanquishing a bulldozer set to raze a play area in the park. A photograph accompanying the article shows mothers with children and baby carriages busily picketing on the site.

8. Brendan Gill, *Here at The New Yorker* (New York: Random House, 1975), 242.



Fig. 3. “And in summer you won’t have to go away—” Unpublished rough, ca. 1963.

ficer takes the call and reports: “Park Avenue at Eighty-sixth. We’re to come as we are.”

Dunn’s deftly satirical pen was also aimed at matters pertaining to the eccentricities of contemporary art on the New York scene. In a rough which later grew into one of the cartoons of *Is There Intelligent Life on Earth?*<sup>9</sup> there is a profusion of Alexander Calder’s mobiles turning in the background of an art gallery. With his hand on the shoulder of a floridly classicized marble bust, the dealer comments to

9. Alan Dunn, *Is There Intelligent Life on Earth?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 69. Dunn’s book has two subtitles: on the dust jacket, “A Story in Words and Pictures”, and on the title page, “A Report to the Congress of Mars”. After his name, Dunn added: “Translated into English by the Author”.

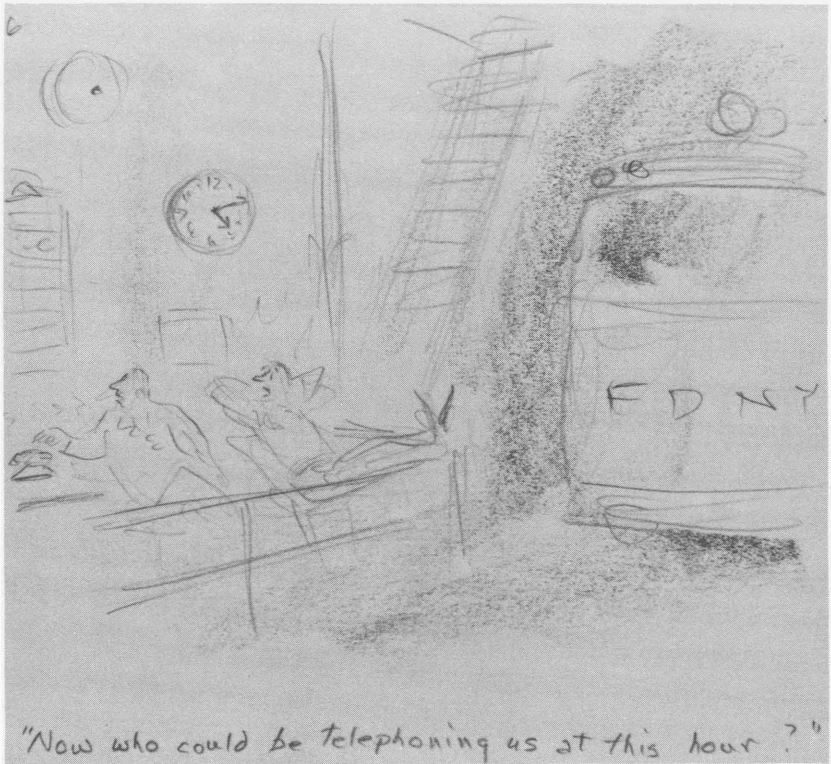


Fig. 4. "Now who could be telephoning us at this hour?" Unpublished rough, ca. 1959.

his customer: "And no moving parts to get out of order." A famous 1966 cartoon that made its way into an art exhibit in London shows an apartment dweller screaming to his neighbor in the dead of the night: "Turn down that damn sculpture."<sup>10</sup> But the most well-known piece in this series is the 1964 cartoon showing the Guggenheim Museum at the time of the exhibition of Calder's sculptures (fig. 5).

From the time that it was built, Dunn did not miss an opportunity to comment incisively on Frank Lloyd Wright's latest masterpiece. Indeed, everybody had climbed aboard that bandwagon, so it seemed, and *Vogue* was claiming that cartoonists made small fortunes, so willing was the public to laugh at the Guggenheim Museum. Dunn himself dealt with it in large numbers of roughs and cartoons. The art

10. Alan Dunn, *A Child of Six Could Do It! Cartoons about Modern Art*, (London: The Tate Gallery, 1973), 82.

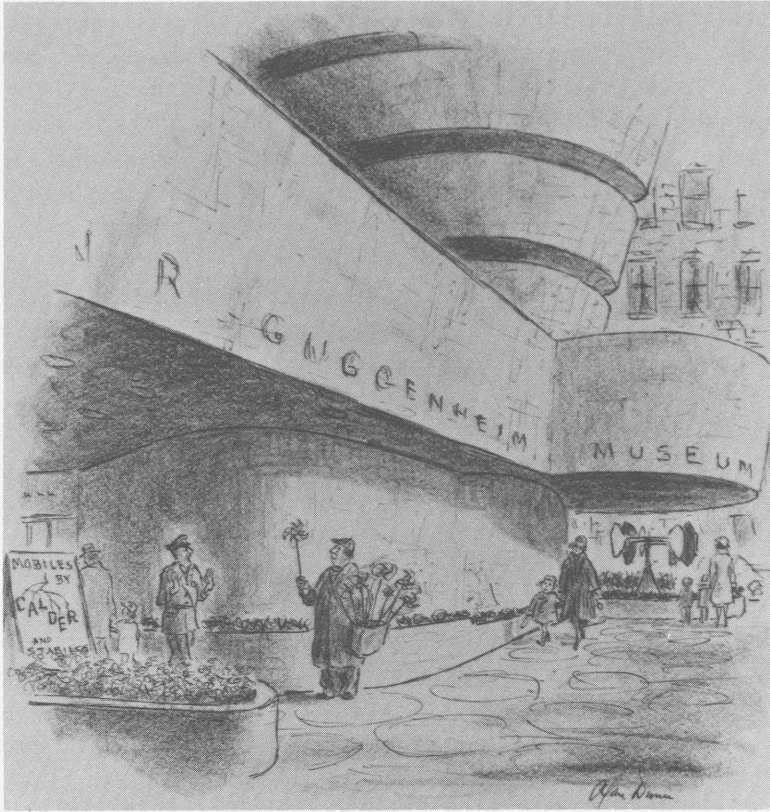


Fig. 5. "Beat it!" *The New Yorker*, 28 November 1964, p. 63. © 1964 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

editors of *The New Yorker* were as enthusiastic as the rest to poke fun, for the 28 November 1959 issue carried no less than four full pages of Dunn's Guggenheim material. He was as much concerned with the architectural structure, layout, and lines of the building—mainly the prodigious spiral stairway—as with the now-astonished, now-bemused reactions of the visitors. The needed adjustment of the feet to the sloping stairway, the clockwise or counterclockwise progression, and the sense of acrophobia one got on the stairs (Dunn himself had suffered that phobia too) gave ample stimulus to his imaginative pencil. And, of course, there were also a colorful variety of silly remarks such as "This is going to be hard to tear down", "Let's come again and really look at the pictures", "Reminds me of the old

Wanamaker's"—all these invariably voiced by aghast female visitors, for Dunn, reflecting the society of the fifties and sixties, was confident of his superior male wisdom. His portrayals of the Guggenheim Museum played heavily on the ice-cream-cone look of the building as well as its resemblance to an ocean liner. "Ah, terra firma", sigh a bewildered-looking couple as they emerge onto the sidewalk in one of Dunn's more famous cartoons (*The New Yorker*, 28 Nov. 1959, p. 51).

Dunn had always been greatly interested in architecture. In his undated "Autobiography in the third person" he confessed to having noted early in life "that architects were more balanced than artists. The former lived in both a structural and an imaginative world."<sup>11</sup> From 1937, when O. C. Anderson, the managing editor of the *Architectural Record*, invited him to submit a monthly cartoon,<sup>12</sup> Dunn was a regular contributor to that leading publication of the New York architectural establishment, a group known for its nervous sensitivities. The readers of the *Record* were not known for inviting humorous comments about themselves, particularly from critics outside their field. However, the magazine over the years came not merely to accept the honesty that lay beneath Dunn's insightful commentary but to honor him by promoting him to the position of leading editorial cartoonist. By 1971, a few years before Dunn was to die, the *Architectural Record* was assembling a second collection of Dunn cartoons to be published as a book. A first such collection had already been published by the *Record* in 1947 under the title *The Last Lath*. Working on the title for the second one, *Architecture Observed*, Hugh S. Dunlan, at the time manager of Architectural Books, a division of the *Record*, proposed an advertising blurb that would have heralded Dunn as "America's foremost cartoon critic of the architectural scene."<sup>13</sup> Though the statement finally agreed upon drastically toned down Dunlan's original suggestion, the fact remains that Dunn was indeed

11. Unpublished manuscript, p. 1.

12. Letter of O. C. Anderson to A. Dunn, 12 April 1937. On the verso of the above letter Dunn answers: ". . . and I am pleased that my libido towards architecture and construction has come to notice. This subject has always been a major interest with me and I am afraid I have deluged the New Yorker with ideas on that line, the result being that I have many left over. I would be delighted if some of them were worthy of publication in the Record."

13. Letter to Dunn, 2 March 1971.

considered America's number one architectural cartoonist. He had for thirty-eight years contributed a monthly cartoon for the *Architectural Record* and, in 1973, received from the American Institute of Architects the Architecture Critic's Citation for his book *Architecture Observed*. Because Alan Dunn was by that time already in fragile health, Walter F. Wagner, the new chief-editor of the *Architectural Record*, went to San Francisco to receive the award for him. Dunn died in 1974 knowing that his reputation was firmly established.

Born in 1900 in his parents' summer home in Belmar, New Jersey, Alan nevertheless considered himself a thorough New Yorker. Although they did not know each other as children, Mary's and Alan's early years were spent in very similar circumstances. Both attended school in the city and lived during the winter months in Manhattan brownstones, secure in multi-layered networks of family connections. Alan was one of three children; Mary the third of seven. Alan's father was a lawyer. Mary's father, the dean of the old New York Law School, was a prominent figure in the city's law establishment as well as the Democratic party. While Alan enjoyed the benefits of a formal art education (fig. 6) at both Columbia University and the National Academy of Design, Mary (perhaps because she was 'only a girl') never went beyond the Horace Mann School. Painfully shy and conscious of not having been understood in her own family, she relied on Alan for guidance both in practical affairs and in her art. They were married in December 1927 and, due to Alan's terrible fear of fire, resided from 1938 onwards in a ground-floor apartment on East 88th Street. In their friendships they were exclusive and intensely loyal. Many late afternoons were spent (exit well in view) at the Century Association or at the Cosmopolitan Club. Alan, who liked to play chess, often sat for a game or two with Hawley Truax, chairman of the board of *The New Yorker* and something like its 'godfather'. Alethea Truax was for many years a particular friend of Mary. Never in robust health, Dunn—slim and dapper, meticulous, worrying—suffered a severe heart attack in the winter of 1968–69. Although he recovered and continued an active and busy life, the experience left him with a raw anxiety about the future.

But more devastating yet was the brutal mugging to which Mary Petty fell victim on the night of 2 December 1971. She never fully recovered her memory or her health after that terrible evening, and it became necessary not long after to commit her to a nursing home.



Fig. 6. Page from Alan Dunn's sketch book, dated "October 1920 to May 1, 1921".

In their three-room apartment and with his own health declining, Dunn was no longer able to provide the round-the-clock nursing care she now needed. Mary's condition and the inordinate financial burden deriving from it added excruciating grief and hardship to Dunn's own last years. But always, he kept working. "Working is the only therapy of value I know", he wrote to the artist Peggy Bacon for the

New Year of 1974,<sup>14</sup> pouring out (in Peggy Bacon's words) "gay, lighthearted, witty pictures", as if nothing had happened, as if Mary and he had just come back, arm in arm, from an opening at the Guggenheim around the corner from their home. In those waning years he must have drawn frequently from the abundance of early experiences and ideas.

Indeed, throughout his artistic career Dunn's interest would return to certain topical areas, and he would refine or revise a play of ideas already dealt with. A case in point is a 1960 cartoon on wages (*The New Yorker*, 13 Feb. 1960, p. 31). Seated comfortably in the library of a plush clubhouse, one patron says to another: "And then another wage boost, followed by another rate hike, and so on, ad infinitum. What more could one ask?" Eight years later the same theme emerges in updated form. The caption is singularly reminiscent of the earlier cartoon, though the drawing now shows a girl skipping rope against a working-class row of houses (fig. 7). Her "wage boosts" are followed by "price hikes", a term which elicits working class anxieties rather than investors' interests. We do not know to what extent Dunn relied on the first cartoon when he conceived the second one; but we do know that he worked strenuously on the little skipping girl, for no less than four variant roughs of the same are preserved.

At other times, Dunn conceived philosophically profound ideas and set them forth in captionless drawings—statements on the condition and destiny of mankind. In these works humor is strongly understated and, if it appears at all, it is a bitter-sweet humor à la Chaplin, which leads us along a tight-rope between tears and laughter. Of such temper is the famous "Unemployed Apples 15¢" spot drawing that the art editors of *The New Yorker* bought up without hesitation. In this drawing, which was published in 1949, a man, flat-capped, collar turned up against the cold, stares bleakly into space over his box of apples for sale. No customers are in sight. The mood is one of piercing desolation. An earlier cartoon (*The New Yorker*, 1 Oct. 1938, p. 74) had already treated the theme of unemployment: "Here's your

14. See also Dunn's letter to Peggy Bacon of 25 Sept. 1972. "My beloved Mary is now in a nursing home on 79th Str. . . . When Mary first went to the nursing home it cost me \$52,000 a year, which I could just manage. When the night nurse was discharged she only cost 42,000 which, paradoxically, made me feel v. rich! And she's not insured." Cf., also, Dunn's letter to Martin Bush of 2 July 1972. Copy, courtesy of Mr. Bush, in Elisabeth Melczer's possession.





Fig. 7. "A wage boost followed by a price hike, followed by a wage boost followed by a price hike, followed by a . . ." *The New Yorker*, 9 November 1968, p. 66.

© 1968 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

pin", says the boss, who stands in front of a field salesmen's wall map that bristles with pins marking the locations of sales. The salesman looks down at the offering with sagging shoulders and disconsolate expression. In a similar vein is the austere and bespectacled WAC with the neckties (*The New Yorker*, 27 Dec. 1947, p. 57), again a captionless drawing. She is dressed in military uniform and sits next to the Christmas tree amid wrappings from which neckties have been extracted and laid out over the armrest and back of the sofa. From

the box on her knee she holds forth yet another tie. The humor in all these examples hinges on the plight of victims trapped in a situation about which they can find nothing to say. In the cases of the pin and the tie, both objects constitute the graphic centers of their respective pictures and they become the visual embodiment of the sadness that pervades their recipients. We are made aware of a somewhat different psychological reaction in the case of a cleaning woman (*The New Yorker*, 25 Dec. 1954, p. 17). It is Christmas time. She stands, feather duster at her hip like a sword, in the doorway of the drawing room that she is to dust and glares aggressively about her. The piano top, table tops, mantel—every available surface—is crowded with Christmas cards. How can she dust? There is no caption, for though the reaction is no longer passive, there is again nothing to say. Her position is untenable. In all of these captionless cartoons the protagonists have been trapped in an area of hopelessness for which there is no viable remedy. They view their comic and often heart-rending fates in stunned silence.

Dunn repeatedly enlarged on themes inspired by the New York financial establishment. We see money at work—in corporation board rooms, executive offices, and banks. In a cartoon of 1937 (*The New Yorker*, 3 July 1937, p. 15), Dunn presented the interior of a bank, drawing it in the style of Brunelleschi's Santo Spirito, and lined the aisles between the pillars with bankers' desks. There is an atmosphere of grandeur and reverence. A client, having just concluded his business transaction, asks of the banker: "Could I wash my hands while you compound my interest?" In a cartoon of some thirty years later, Dunn is still at work with money. We see the Super Conglomerate Corporation's shapely receptionist seated pertly at a round desk, in a round office, and under a globe-like light fixture. "You name it, we own it!" she parrots into the telephone (*The New Yorker*, 27 April 1968, p. 46).

Another aspect of the financial theme which Dunn exuberantly dealt with over the years was the effect on the individual of owning too much money. We are treated to views of the wealthy, who are caught in the boredom of their plush clubs or in their panelled and brocaded residences, where gloomy dynastic portraits decorate the walls and massive chandeliers hang glittering from ornate ceilings. In almost every case where Dunn treats this second typology, it is a woman, usually long-gowned, bejeweled, and rigidly patrician, who makes an

incongruous, silly, often plainly ignorant remark to her husband over some piece of news she has just read in the papers. These cartoons all come from Dunn's later period. In one, the lady is apprehensive that, with the cracking of the genetic code, "everyone will want to be Peabodys" (*The New Yorker*, 28 Jan. 1967, p. 27). In a rough, a variation of the same idea, the lady wants to know whether the guaranteed annual income applies also to them (fig. 8). In yet another, from the Lyndon Johnson era, she notes that people *they* know "wouldn't want to belong to the Great Society" (*The New Yorker*, 26 Dec. 1964, p. 36). Dunn's published drawings in all of these cases were detailed and elaborate, with a great deal of attention devoted to space apportionment and to description of interiors.<sup>15</sup>

Back in the twenties, when Dunn set out on his career, New York City was, of course, a fertile terrain for an aspiring cartoon artist. One had only to look around, it seemed. But it was not as easy as that, for many who were talented and clever tried without success. Dunn's sparkle, his ability to concentrate upon a central idea were indeed rare gifts. For Dunn, a comic idea consisted of a perfectly normal, everyday situation, into which a single disturbing element was introduced by means of a turn of phrase or a gesture to throw the expected standard off balance. The smaller the off-setting component, the funnier the resolution. All of a sudden we are made to view the commonplace in a surprising new light.

It is no wonder that these ideas, sketched in rough (always on 20×21 cm. sheets), were jealously guarded secrets traveling back and forth between 12 East 88th Street, the Dunns' residence, and the twentieth floor of 23 West 43rd Street, where the much-dreaded art meetings of *The New Yorker* took place. Of these famous roughs—the tentative, preliminary drawings on which Dunn's miracle of comic creativity first took tangible form—Syracuse University Art Collections has several thousands, a corpus in itself precious beyond say, for it allows us to follow the process of his thinking: the development of a single idea from germination to maturation. Often a central idea, such as that of the woman who hangs on to the phone for a gossip session but who is unwilling to miss the afternoon soap-opera on

15. Such training in naturalistic drawing Dunn had acquired early in life, at the time of his various periods of residency at the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation in Oyster Bay, Long Island, at the American Academy in Rome, and at the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts in France.



Fig. 8. "Does the guaranteed annual income apply to us?" Unpublished rough, ca. 1971. The reference is to one of Presidential Candidate George McGovern's campaign promises.

television, had to be redone a number of times in order to try out various angles and points of view<sup>16</sup> (fig. 9).

Alan Dunn was a fifty-cartoon-a-year man. He had annual contractual agreements with *The New Yorker* to supply that number of cartoons.<sup>17</sup> For the feverish imagination of Dunn it was indeed no

16. Syracuse University Art Collections does not own any roughs for this cartoon. However, two long editorial notes from J. Geraghty to A. Dunn, dated 11/22 and 11/29/1950, are here relevant: ". . . except that the woman instead of leaning easily against the wall, should be standing in the doorway, the phone wire stretched as far as it will go, with the phone dangling from the wire as you had it. Ross would like it to appear that the woman can just barely manage to see the television screen. And he thinks the little chair ought to be beside the phone table."

17. See Dunn's undated letter to Geraghty. It is quarrelsome and revealing in other respects too. The George Arents Research Library has a large collection of Dunn's and Petty's financial documents.

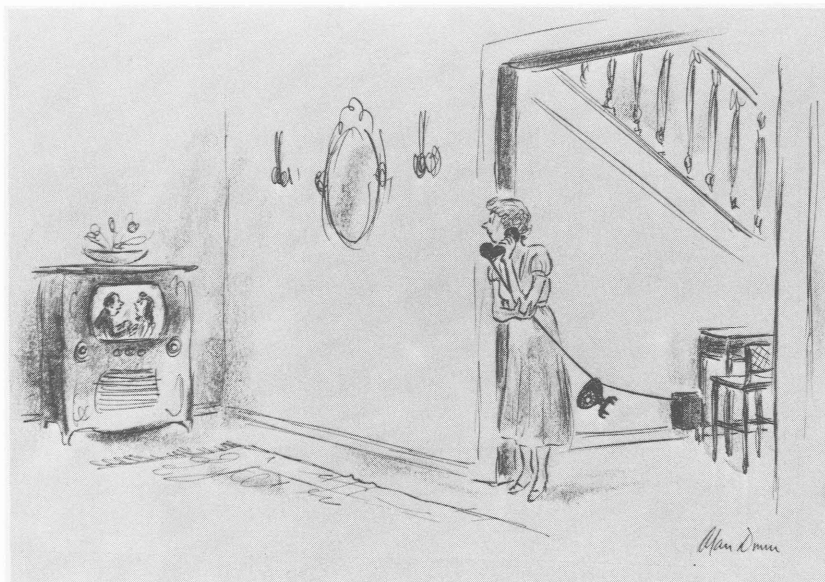


Fig. 9. No caption. *The New Yorker*, 10 March 1951, p. 37. © 1951, 1979  
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

problem to turn out the required number of cartoons. The problem was that between a submitted rough and a published cartoon on the pages of *The New Yorker* was Harold Ross.

Ross was the mighty boss of *The New Yorker*. He had come to New York City from the West with a modest record in journalism and a library of two books, Webster's dictionary and Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. In the city, with little money but good connections, he established in 1925 his *New Yorker* publishing enterprise. The magazine was his brainchild. It was to be the embodiment of an idea catering to the cultivated taste of the upper- and upper-middle-class New Yorkers and whatever aspiring cosmopolitans might be perceived along the Eastern Seaboard. In the words of Ross, it would definitely not be "edited for the old lady in Dubuque". The journal was to be sophisticated, understated, stylish, and to have a careless sense of

gracefulness. Most importantly, *The New Yorker* was to carry cartoons, some twenty-odd per issue, a formula which has been kept alive to this day. The magazine, however, in the cheerful formula of Alan Fern, would not “explain its inside jokes to outsiders”.<sup>18</sup> Those who know will understand; and those who do not hardly count.

Ross had not merely conceived the idea of *The New Yorker*, he was its first editor. Year in and year out, until his death in December 1951, Ross attended the weekly meetings of the editorial group—the famous art meetings—to which cartoonists presented their proposals in the form of roughs.

For Alan Dunn these roughs, the editorial meetings, and, in particular, Ross himself were a source of constant concern, at times irritation, and occasionally, despair. Of course, like any of the other *New Yorker* cartoonists, Dunn had no direct access to Ross or to the editorial meetings where roughs were discussed and their fate decided. But Dunn felt all along—and Mary confirmed him in this—that Ross appreciated him and valued his work in a very special way.<sup>19</sup> Their relationship must have developed from the time of Dunn’s early contacts with Ross in the late twenties, when no middleman of stature was yet around. But with the success and the consolidation of the magazine things changed, and J. M. Geraghty took on for thirty-four years the job of speaking for Ross and the art editors. *Malgré lui*, his was the middle ground between the cartoonist and the printed pages of *The New Yorker*.<sup>20</sup> In many ways a key figure on *The New Yorker* staff, Geraghty was, after the magazine itself, one of Ross’s best inventions. A spirited mind with a consummate professional skill tem-

18. “Foreword” by Alan Fern, director of the National Portrait Gallery, in the exhibition catalogue *Miguel Covarrubias Caricatures*, Washington, D.C., National Portrait Gallery, 1985, p. 11.

19. “In a rare display of appreciation”—according to the obituary of Alan Dunn (*The New York Times*, 22 May 1974)—Mr. Ross climbed into a taxi and delivered to Alan Dunn a gold watch for the artist’s 1000th cartoon. See also in the Arents Library two letters of Ross: one dated “Monday” only, the second, 14 Nov. 1945; and Dunn’s unpublished autobiographical manuscript, p. 2.

20. Art editor of *The New Yorker* from 1939 to his retirement in 1973, Geraghty had been hired by Ross on the recommendation of Peter Arno. Like Ross, James Geraghty was a westerner and largely self-educated. William Shawn, executive editor of *The New Yorker*, wrote in the obituary for Geraghty, *The New York Times*, 20 Jan. 1983: “Geraghty set the magazine’s comic art on its course and he helped determine the direction in which the comic art would go and is still going.”

pered by a great sense of humanity, Geraghty was time and again at pains to proclaim his faithfulness to a constantly difficult, occasionally paranoid Dunn. “If one person in this world were as well disposed toward me, as I am toward you, I would consider myself fortunate”, he wrote to Dunn in October 1951, after a particularly strained exchange between the two.<sup>21</sup> Dunn, on his part, had plenty of reason to look at the outcome of the dreaded art meetings with suspicion and consternation. From 1926, the year he began to collaborate with *The New Yorker*, until 1974, the year of his death, he had 2,032 cartoons<sup>22</sup> and nine cover illustrations published in the magazine. That is an imposing figure indeed. Yet, judging from Dunn’s roughs in the Syracuse University Art Collections and from his correspondence with Geraghty, it may be safely assumed that Dunn had prepared, during those forty-eight years, some ten thousand cartoon roughs. The majority of these, in one form or another, ended their careers on the table of the art meetings. Thus, even such a formidable publication record as his leaves some eight thousand, and probably many more, roughs among the rejects. Not that many of these were of lesser artistic or comic quality: witness the superb rough of Thomas Aquinas (fig. 10). But for one reason or another—sheer quantity might have been a consideration—they were not accepted. These rejects traveled back from West 43rd to East 88th Street in properly sealed brown envelopes in order to be amended, reworked, filed away, or forgotten. And they were always accompanied by short, occasionally page-long, but invariably type-written notes by Jim Geraghty to “Dear Alan”. Many of these notes start out with a brief, uneasy, disappointing comment: “No nibbles in this batch I’m sorry to say”, or “None of these went over. Sorry.”

Of course, there were also glorious victories; for hundreds, with or without amendments, were accepted. But what agony the failures brought! The chagrin, the anguish, not to mention the intimation of failing abilities that these rejections induced in Dunn’s susceptible mind are prominently evident throughout his papers. In part Dunn was uneasy about who was actually judging the roughs. Frequently, we find

21. Letter from Geraghty to Alan Dunn, 10 Oct. 1951. The passage quoted in the text follows a laconic opening: “These three ideas were turned down, I’m sorry to say.”

22. This figure was given to Elisabeth Melczer in a letter dated 8 Feb. 1985 from Elizabeth Hughes at the editorial offices of *The New Yorker*.

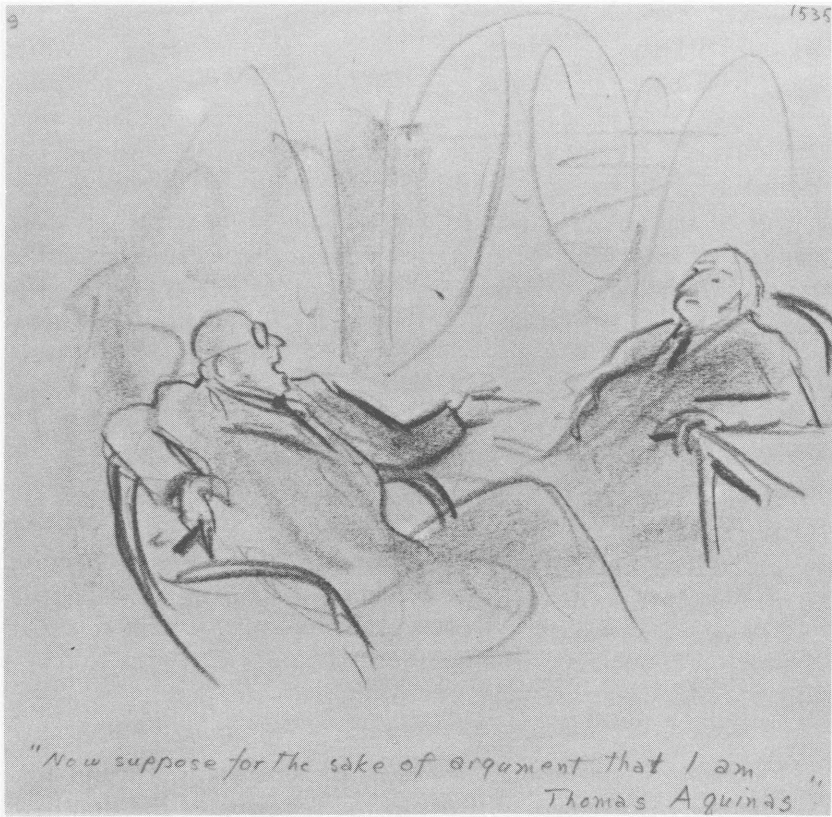


Fig. 10. "Now suppose for the sake of argument that I am Thomas Aquinas."  
Unpublished rough, no date.

him suggesting that they were being evaluated by the editorial staff only, or by Jim Geraghty, and that they never really reached the desk of Ross. Without fail Geraghty would reassure him: "Hawley [Truax] told me that you and Mary seem seriously to doubt whether Mr. Ross looks at all your ideas. I assure you that he does and always has"; or, ". . . and Alan, Mr. Ross looks at *all* your sketches, always".<sup>23</sup>

Geraghty's efforts were unavailing. Deep in his heart Dunn was

23. Notes from Geraghty to Dunn. The first one is dated 21 Nov. 1951; the second is undated. In the already quoted letter of 10 Oct. 1951 from Geraghty to Dunn, he is again at pains explaining the intricacies of the editorial triangle: "If Ross doesn't like something that I have faith in, I help the artist to alter it so Ross will like it. I have the feeling that you consider me as a block between you and Ross. Nothing could be further from the truth."



convinced that if Ross had seen all his roughs—which he apparently did though Dunn thought he did not—even more of his drawings would have ended up on the pages of *The New Yorker*. Reading excerpts from what must have been Dunn’s dense correspondence with Geraghty, one cannot escape the impression that Dunn worried unreasonably about the judgment of the art editors of *The New Yorker*. It must be said to Geraghty’s credit that he did all he could—in tones that ranged from fraternal to stern but were always patient, tactful, and understanding—to assuage Dunn’s fears. At one point, in a letter of 7 February 1946, Geraghty, apparently on the edge of exasperation, exclaimed in upper case:

DEAR ALAN AND MARY:

I HOPE YOU PEOPLE HAVEN’T GOT THE IDEA THAT I ENJOY SITTING DOWN TO THE TYPEWRITER AND POUNDING OUT THESE NOTES TRYING ALWAYS TO HIT THE RIGHT KEYS, TRYING TO BE CLEAR AND HELPFUL AND GRAMMATICAL AND NOT FLIPPANT, AND TACTFUL ALWAYS, AND HONEST WHILE BEING TACTFUL, BECAUSE I DON’T.

JIM GERAGHTY  
ART HANDLER

Now, apart from the one overriding preoccupation of Dunn concerning the involvement of Ross in the selection of the drawings, there were three more specific areas of turbulence in Dunn’s working relation with *The New Yorker*. All three had to do with the fundamental fact that he was a man of ideas, a compulsive thinker and evaluator. Geraghty himself once aptly said that in Dunn’s cartoons even a truckdriver looked like a Harvard or Groton graduate. Dunn produced *whole* ideas, which in terms of cartooning meant both picture and caption. A difficult problem arose from an old practice of Ross to leave any final consideration on the gaglines to the very last and actually to rearrange them all. As Geraghty once explained benevolently to Dunn, “Practically no caption anyone submits is ok with Ross. . . . Mr. Ross has his caption time, once a week, when he puts his mind on the problem. . . .”<sup>24</sup> Dunn, for his part, relied on an old deal he had struck with Ross—or so he thought—long before Ger-

24. Note from Geraghty to Dunn, 18 Nov. 1948.

aghty had appeared on the scene.<sup>25</sup> According to Dunn's understanding of the deal, he was to enjoy some special author's rights, included in which was the restriction against editorial tampering with his work. Nobody, except himself, was to be allowed to change anything, or at least not much, in the captions that he submitted, for they were integral to the essence of his cartoon idea. If the minutest element was to be changed in a caption, he, Dunn, was to approve it before printing.<sup>26</sup> This procedure, however, was too demanding to be carried out without the frequent slip-up, particularly since no other cartoonist was allowed such generous provision, and the changing of captions went on routinely until the very last hour before printing. The caption quarrel blazed from time to time as long as Dunn was around. Though it was never wholly resolved, tempers were contained somehow by deadline compromises contrived by the unerring tactfulness of Geraghty.

Another area of difficulty lay in the over-abundance of ideas. From the art editor's perspective, Dunn's immense creativity presented a problem. Dunn would be told, always adroitly, that a certain idea of his was indeed good, but that it was thought unsuitable to his drawing style. At that point some alternate artist would be suggested. Thus, in February 1949, Geraghty wrote Dunn a note proposing that Helen Hokinson should draw the picture to one of his ideas. In this particular case, the point in the argument was that Dunn was incapable of drawing sufficiently stupid figures, an observation that might well have pleased him, but which, in fact, upset him. Another such instance, remarkable because of its outcome, was generated by Dunn's rough of a young lady unpacking sea shells, a mood-illustration rather than a cartoon, for which Mary Petty was suggested. In Mary's hands, the subject evoked sufficient interest and end-of-summer nostalgia for an entire cover (figs. 11, 12, 13).

A third problem, predictable with one of Dunn's suspicious nature, had to do with the fate of those precisely conceived and rendered roughs. They were the cull of his genius and he allowed them

25. "In 1927 Ross gave me 'Writer's Rights' in view of the fact that I wrote all my own lines. . . ." Letter from Dunn to Geraghty, 5 Sept. 1967.

26. In the letter quoted in note 25 above, Dunn impatiently exclaims: "NOW, your Mr. F. forgot to inform me of *somebody's* change in the Reagan caption so I have no choice but to *protest—demonstrate—rebel—indulge in insurrection and bottle-throwing RIOTING* lest I lose my valued author's franchise. . . ."



Fig. 11. "After Labor Day." Unpublished rough, ca. 1953. A 'spot' drawing is a small, sometimes even tiny, captionless drawing which is used to embellish a page. A 'spot +' is presumably slightly larger.

out of his ken under special circumstances only, that is, for the benefit of the art meetings, and for them alone. If a rough were deemed promising, subsequent development followed in the standard way. If, however, a rough was rejected, which was the rule rather than the exception, then it was returned, often with others, in bunches within a sealed envelope. We have the amusing story of one such envelope which, due to accidental circumstances, was not properly closed and, presumably, reached Dunn's hands open. Apparently, in a letter we cannot trace, Dunn raised the roof. We have Geraghty's charming reply in which he tried to tease away Dunn's serious concern, a hard task, for Dunn considered his roughs to be his most important pos-

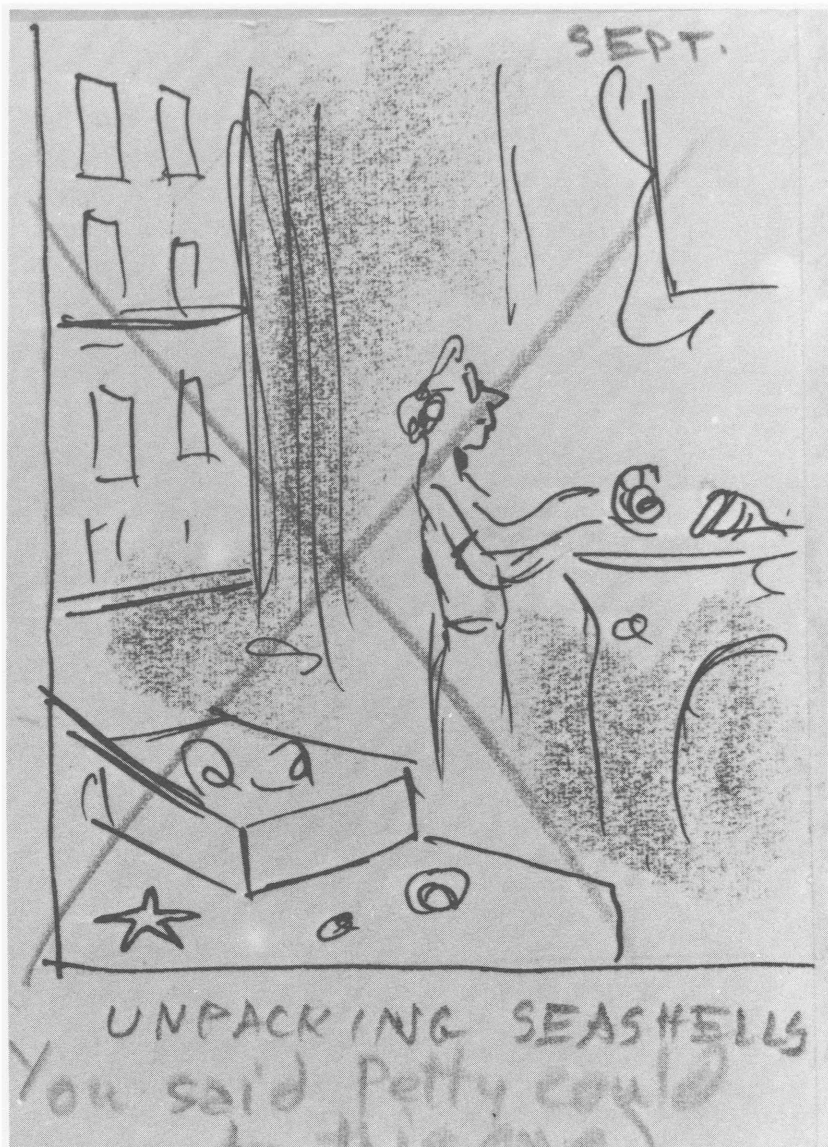


Fig. 12. "Unpacking seashells." Beneath, Dunn wrote: "You did say Petty could do this one." Unpublished sketch, ca. 1953.

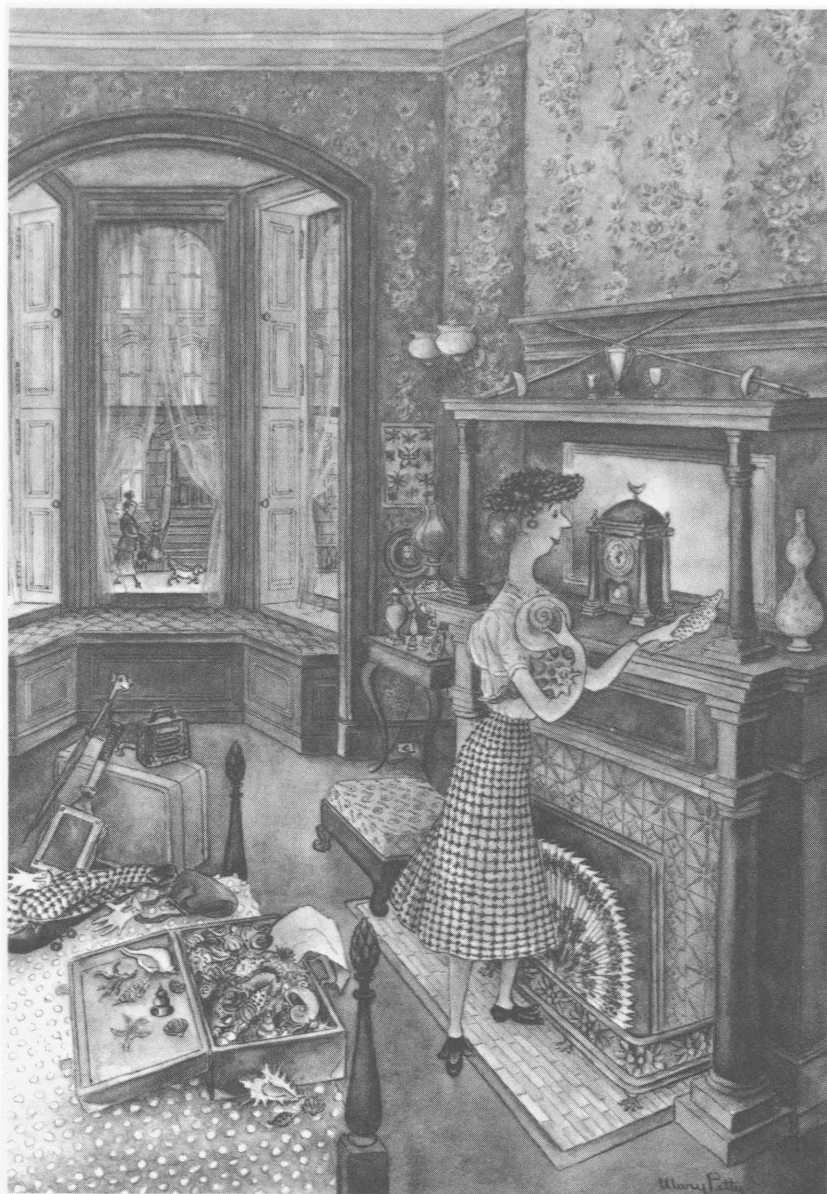


Fig. 13. *Seashells*. Cover, *The New Yorker*, 12 September 1953. © 1953, 1981 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

sessions—"my only real capital", he wrote in 1953 in a despondent letter to Geraghty. But the conviction that his ideas were being stolen or even ignored persisted despite the gentlemanly reassurances of Geraghty. In an undated letter to Geraghty we read: "I can demonstrate that the mag continually prints ideas submitted by others that I have had rejected in prior years. It's not that the board even remembers that I entered the idea previously." Dunn tortured himself with the fear that his ideas might fall into the hands of competing colleagues. A rejection to him was alarming on two counts: because of the rejected idea itself; and again, because—so he felt—the same idea might appear later within the pages of *The New Yorker* over the signature of another.

Though her husband's battles with *The New Yorker* smouldered more or less continuously on the center stage of their life together, Mary Petty too had her sessions of hurt and disagreement with the art editors. Indeed, in the end it was their criticisms that drove her into an early, self-imposed retirement. Unlike Alan or the majority of the cartoonists for *The New Yorker*, Mary had never presented her work in roughs for adjustment or correction. Withdrawn and sensitive, she labored in privacy to refine the finished drawing before other eyes could view it. Mary Petty was less expansive in her interests than her husband. Newspapers, finances, architecture, the common man's plight did not figure for the most part in her work. Unlike Alan Dunn, Mary was in the main instinctive and spontaneous in her conceptions; and, in the terms of the era in which she lived, she was feminine. Her mind was not compartmentalized by the rigors of intellectual training, but moved freely between the complex and the simple without reverence for delineating boundaries. Her exuberance is disarming. Where Dunn's aristocratic household interiors emerge as analytically representative, hers abound in a Henry Jamesian extravagance of nostalgic minutiae. Her immensely rich homes are filled with objets d'art, Victorian bric-a-brac, fringed lampshades, brocade drapes, and abundant and detailed floral arrangements—every particular lovingly elicited. At least half a dozen of Mary's letters contain passages describing flowers and flower arrangements. "To me it is always strange & wondrous how flowers can bring a wholly new atmosphere to a room—any room—be it splendid or mean. . . . roses with their grace and beauty performed this very magic on the wear & tear of our sur-

roundings.”<sup>27</sup> One senses in her work the deep pleasure that flowers—as well as carpet patterns, wallpaper designs, ruffles, bow ties, and cuff links—brought to her. Delighting in them herself, she rendered them meticulously, as though to share the visual joke of their variety and their profusion. Against the complexity of these backgrounds of detail, resound the intellectual inanities of her heroes—starched and tuxedoed, sunk without comfort into the upholstered depths of their armchairs—and her chinless, bosomy heroines. She was aware “of a vanished world”<sup>28</sup> and spoke of her pencil that it seemed “to have drifted into a clearly nostalgic vein”.<sup>29</sup> Her characters are imbued with a disconcerting irrelevance to the current scene. “We ought to do *something*—we can’t leave everything to the Red Army, you know”, advocates the grande dame in a cartoon of 1942 (*The New Yorker*, 8 Aug. 1942, p. 12). This is a World War II picture, evoking some of the national concerns regarding the Soviets. The most subtle and at the same time eloquently understated piece in this series is the 1940 cartoon in which one effete gentleman says to another over after-dinner coffee, “After all, Roderick, I figure we’re put here on earth for some very good reason.” (*The New Yorker*, 20 Jan. 1940, p. 18).

Within a much reduced compass of interest—if compared to that of her husband—Mary Petty had her own cherished subjects that dealt with the feminine upper-bourgeois and old-money habits of New Yorkers. Memorable in this regard are Mary’s fashion cartoons, which poke fun in sundry combinations at poses, styles, and the general array of female vanities. Not surprisingly, seamstresses play a significant role in such cartoons. Often they provide a sense of the norm against which something incongruous is set. One remembers the famous “Say when” cartoon of 1939 (*The New Yorker*, 13 May 1939, p. 24), in which the seamstress, with scissors already inserted into her extravagantly bosomed customer’s neckline, asks matter-of-factly how plunging the décolletage should be.

Hats were a particular object of Mary’s critical attention since she herself liked to wear them and was acquainted with the doings of milliner shops and hat salons. For years, at the West 43rd Street Wednesday art meetings, Mary appeared wearing a floppy hat and

27. Draft of letter from Mary Petty to L[ee Pierson], 24 Jan. 1965.

28. Answer, 23 March 1959, to a fan letter from Sheila Hibben.

29. Answer, 29 March 1956, to a fan letter from Mrs. Monroe.

carrying a portfolio of her husband's drawings. Hats in those days were crucial to feminine apparel. Ladies of fashion paid inordinate attention to the gear they perched on the tops of their heads. In 1937, inspired perhaps by the pages of *Vogue*, Mary did an exquisite drawing of a fashion-conscious socialite trying on hats. Swathed in silver fox, she is shown leaning into the milliner's mirror to scrutinize the stupendous, pagoda-like creation on her head (*The New Yorker*, 27 Nov. 1937, p. 20). Behind her the saleslady dithers: "There's supposed to be a secret drawer in it somewhere." There are no less than fourteen of these hat-inspired cartoons in the Syracuse University Art Collections.

Mary did most of her work on a drawing board, which she shifted back and forth between bedroom and kitchen as the occasion required. As the official breadwinner and man of the family, Alan had a fixed niche in the living room. Though it is likely that he taught Mary a good bit of what she knew about drafting and though they worked for a lifetime in close proximity to each other, the style of their art greatly differed. Dunn's cartoons are by and large imagined situations on the fringe of verisimilitude. However, one must not assume that observation had no place in their making. It had. But those bits and pieces of closely observed material were collected over long periods of time and only subsequently at the moment of creation recalled, sifted through, selected, and recombined so as to create a wholly fresh perception, a novel situation. Mary's cartoons, on the other hand, particularly those we might call everyday genre scenes, result directly from observation. A moment with the seamstress—a moment shopping, or at Schrafft's, or at a cocktail party in Gramercy Park—is caught in the instantaneous freshness of its happening. Features become *charged*—in the original, etymological sense of caricature, as Gombrich reminds us—so as to elicit their idiosyncratic peculiarity; the setting perhaps is slightly rearranged. As well as a number of the cartoons just discussed, this group of intimate situation drawings includes some of Mary's most delightful and inimitable gossip sketches, most of them early ones, and all of them—as Alan would probably have expected—with exclusively female protagonists.

The setting of one such gossip session is an elegant restaurant. Two young women are having lunch. One says to the other: "Then his father paid me ten thousand dollars never to see him again. It sort of gives you back your faith in men, don't it?" (*The New Yorker*, 28





Fig. 14. "It's her third husband and fifth baby, or maybe it's her fifth husband and third baby. Anyway, she's in the hospital." *The New Yorker*, 27 May 1933, p. 38.  
© 1933, 1961 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Nov. 1931, p. 18). In another, the scene is set on a rooftop New York apartment house, made private by a wooden palisade which rises behind. In the distance can be seen the New York skyline. The subjects here are two obviously privileged girls of college age. "I've finally decided to go to college", says one of them. "All you lose is four years." (*The New Yorker*, 12 Sept. 1936, p. 11). In these cartoons there is an appropriate correspondence, a *decorum*, between drawing and caption. One never has the feeling—prevalent with so many other cartoonists—that a felicitous gagline has been forcibly married to a not altogether appropriate picture. A superb instance of this series is Mary's 1933 cartoon of three middle-aged ladies bent over a small tea table exchanging gossip (fig. 14).

At the same time that she was producing cartoons of this genre with such admirable adroitness, Mary began to move into yet another direction. In a number of large-size drawings whose first examples we see already in the mid-thirties, she enters into a contemplative and, in a way, even nostalgic world of outstanding poetic beauty. The spirited 1936 "hitting out at life" (fig. 15) and the 1935 cartoon of the amorous chase in the woods (*The New Yorker*, 17 Aug. 1935, p. 12) with its caption: "Can't I kiss you without going through all this red tape?" certainly belong to this group, as do (though in a somewhat different vein) perhaps even the "Great-Aunt Fanny" (fig. 16) and the "mad Peabody" (fig. 17) cartoons. The mood of all of these drawings is "lyrical" in that a subdued romanticism and dream-like yearning spills into the otherwise staid immobility of background and character. In this category of cartoon we are again and again delighted by the fresh and invigorating breeze that pervades both the underlying ideas and their pictorial realization. The female protagonists of the gently amusing "red tape" and "hitting out at life" are imbued with a remarkable zest for life, with a sense of firm yet wholly unaggressive assertiveness, as they discover the mysterious loveliness of an ever-renewing world and their own, perhaps unexpected, powers in it. Is it Mary Petty, the artist herself, who is sensing at last the energy of her own talent?

Such drawings anticipate the pinnacle of Mary Petty's art: her *New Yorker* covers. It was James Geraghty who recognized her particular talent in that area. In June 1979 he wrote of Mary's first *New Yorker* cover. "It's a delightful, delicate, amusing thing. Mary had been doing her wonderful black-and-white drawings for almost fifteen years before she started on covers (and stopped doing black-and-whites). It all came about when one day it struck me that a captionless black-and-white that we had bought from Mary would make an excellent cover, and I suggested she try it, not knowing if she had ever worked in water color. She did it beautifully."<sup>30</sup> From 29 June 1940, when her first cover was published, until 19 March 1966, the date of her last one, no less than thirty-six Petty watercolors saw the light on the covers of *The New Yorker*.<sup>31</sup> There was of course a great diversity in the temper of the covers of the magazine in general, and Brendan Gill is wholly justified in claiming that "one cannot say that there is

30. Letter from J. Geraghty, 23 June 1979, to Elisabeth Melczer.

31. Of the total, Syracuse University Art Collections owns twenty-eight.

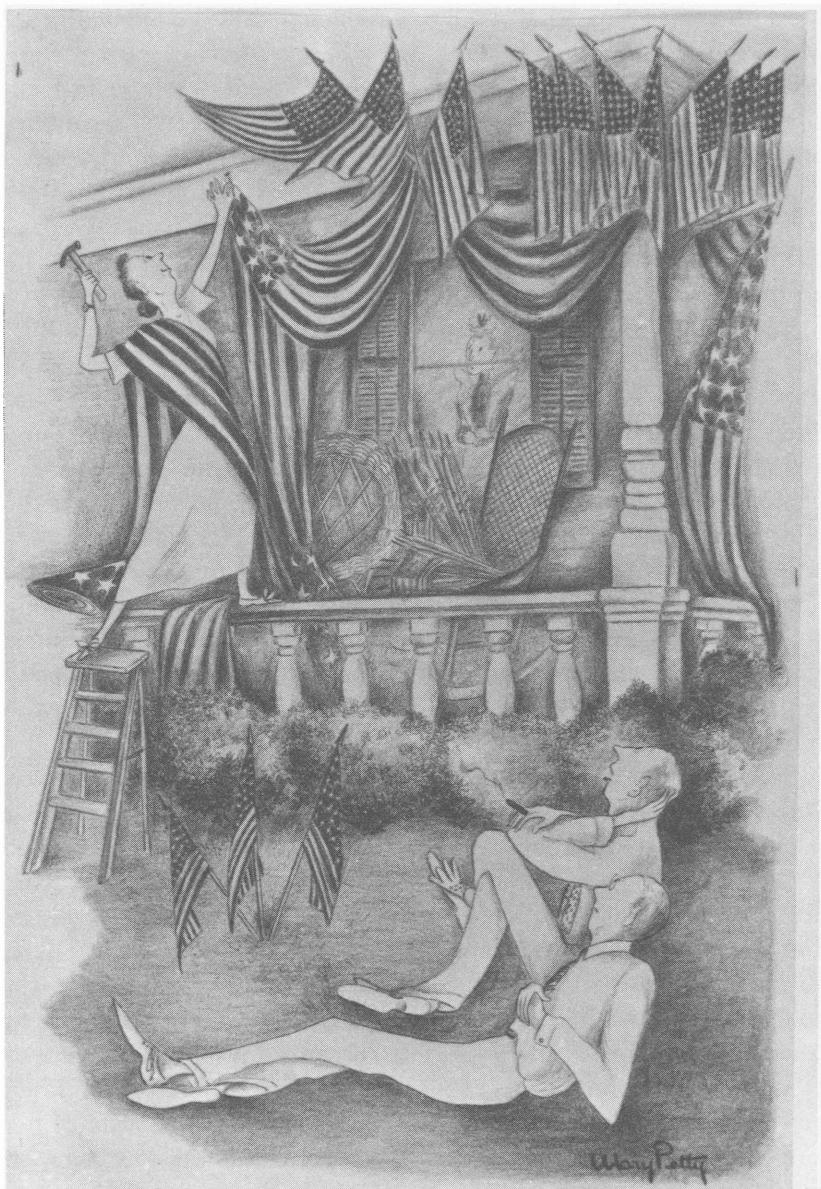


Fig. 15. "That's what I first liked about her—the way she hit out at life." *The New Yorker*, 4 July 1936, p. 11. © 1936, 1964 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

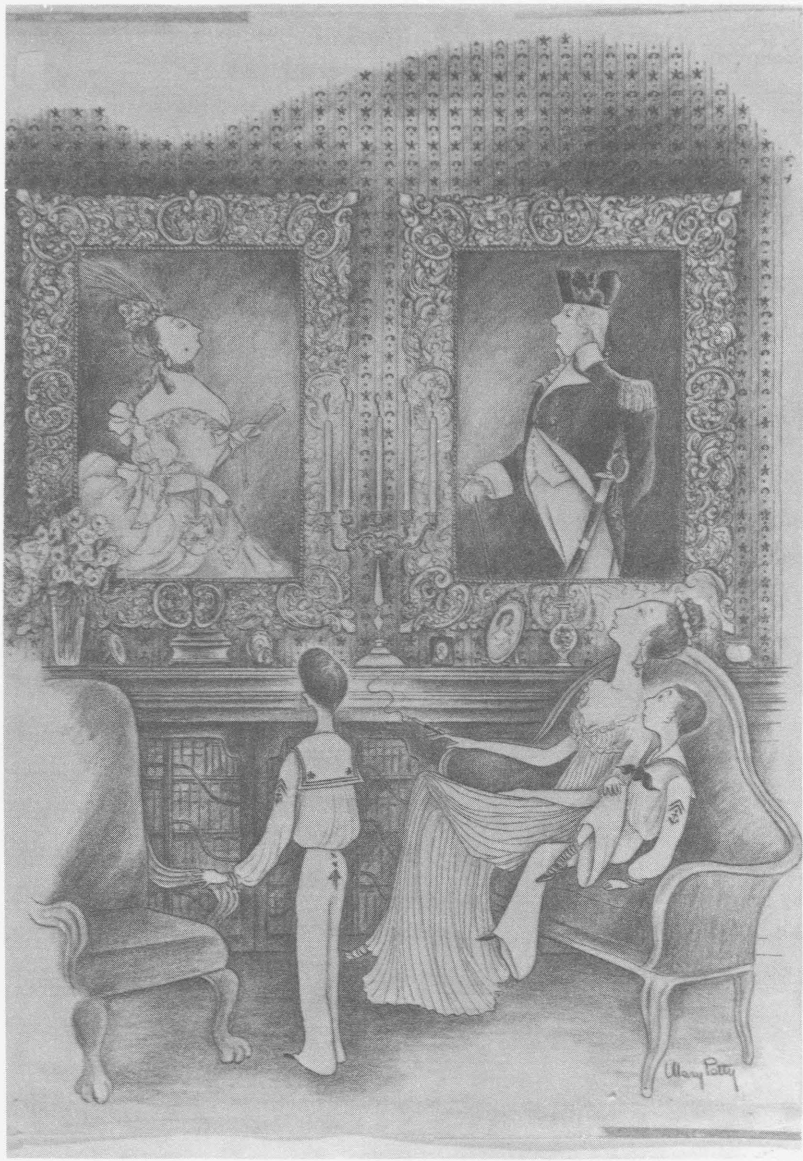


Fig. 16. "The Indians had him completely at bay. He saved his last shot for your Great-Great-Great Aunt Fanny." *The New Yorker*, 8 June 1940, p. 14. © 1940, 1968 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

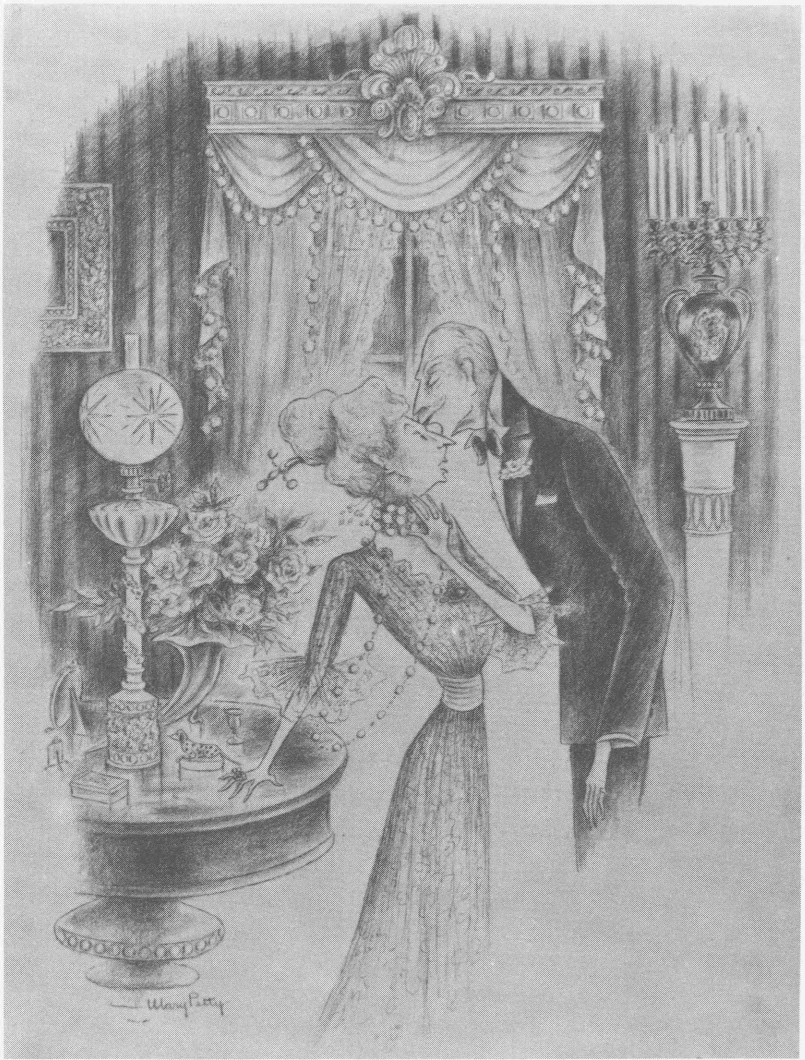


Fig. 17. "Peabody! Are you completely mad!" *The New Yorker*, 10 March 1945, p. 31. © 1945, 1973 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

such a thing as a *New Yorker* cover",<sup>32</sup> that is to say, a single typology valid for all. The close to three thousand covers have not only presented a great variety of subject matter and style but demonstrated

32. Exhibition catalogue: *Seasons at The New Yorker: Six Decades of Cover Art* (New York: National Academy of Design, 1984), p. xi. Three covers of Mary Petty from Syracuse University were included in the exhibition.

the artistic sensitivities and ironic perceptions of its more than one hundred contributing artists. However, in the case of Mary Petty's art, we find some constants that make her work, without repetitiveness or tedious uniformity, immediately recognizable. On her covers a quiet, satiric humor is bathing in soft light. A finely-shaded palette is as much the essence of the whole as are the lavish mansion, the brownstone interiors, or lucid garden scenes—as are, too, the dignified and complacent inhabitants of her depicted world, a world that is forced to a standstill by the opposing pulls of wealth, inertia, and boredom. The domineering, stiff, yet not altogether unsympathetic Dowager Peabody is one of these inhabitants, along with the three generations (not including dogs) of her entourage, of whom we catch a fleeting glimpse as they pose with cups of tea for a family portrait in the garden of their Victorian mansion (*The New Yorker*, 31 July 1948).

Compared to Mrs. Peabody, Fay, that most enchanting of Mary's creations, springs to life airily—a fragile, yet firm, adroit, and commonsensical creature. “She has snap”, Mary was known to claim proudly. As Fay goes about her duties in that household of luxury, without criticism or question, serving water for the limousine radiator from a polished silver pitcher (*The New Yorker*, 16 May 1953) or changing the electric bulbs of a crystal chandelier (fig. 18), she provides a sense of trust and warmth of feeling against which the pretensions of her upper-crust employers are measured. Throughout it all, she stays level and human, even in her most enchanted flights of imagination: as, for example, when we see her dressed as always in her wing-shaped pinafore ruffles and ribboned maid's cap, break into spirited dance at the sound of her mistress's piano (fig. 19).

The same lyricism we perceived in some of Mary Petty's cartoons is strongly evident on her covers for *The New Yorker*. The difference lies in the softening on the covers of the social satire in favor of the pervasive mood, be it boredom, excitement, hope, or nostalgia. In fact, by far the majority of the Mary Petty covers are mood illustrations, combining a mild, satiric swipe with a feel for place or season.

Moved by a perhaps unconscious romantic yearning for the turn-of-the-century, upper-class life, Mary created in her art subtle ambiances and only by inference turned them into gentle social satire. Alan, on the other hand, was deeply involved in the contemporary human and architectural cityscape of New York, and was single-



Fig. 18. *Fay cleaning the chandelier*. Cover, *The New Yorker*, 24 September 1955.  
© 1955, 1983 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.



Fig. 19. *Mrs. Peabody at the piano*. Cover, *The New Yorker*, 21 October 1961.  
© 1961 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.



mindedly committed to social-comment art. It is wonderful to think that these two distinctively different artists did indeed flourish for over forty years within the walls of a small ground-floor apartment. But the point is, precisely, that the two modes of creativity did not merely coexist side by side; rather, they sustained and supported each other in countless ways during a long period of time. Seldom does one find in the history of art a marriage in which each of the partners succeeds in maintaining his or her own artistic individuality while at the same time giving so much to the other. Alan, in the early days of their marriage, had literally taught Mary the art of drawing; and then, for the rest of their life, he tirelessly, without ever overwhelming her, encouraged her to pursue her own art. Mary, for her part, had spent much of her time “trying to pick thorns out of his [Alan’s] path, & [to] strew it with anything that looks faintly like a rose”.<sup>33</sup> She had been carrying his portfolio, searching for endless references, looking up quotations and dates, and cooking “at #12 [East 88th Street]; spaghetti cass.; string beans; rice and egg, etc.”, as Dunn remembers faithfully in his charming and nostalgic “Eternal Moments”.<sup>34</sup> It is hard to escape the overall impression that, though at variance in their artistic sensitivities, the two suited and complemented each other remarkably well.

In the final years, while Mary was quietly fading away in the nursing home, Dunn’s mind was still working feverishly. In fact, he was determined to die nothing short of a soldier, his critical-cartoon arms, so to speak, in hand. On a 3 × 4-inch card dated only days before his death, ideas poured forth from his pen with the freshness of a youthful mind: Penn Central is here again to be melted down for scrap; Croesus, Rex Lydiae, is busy figuring out his net worth; the perils of atomic generating plants loom ominously. There is no end to it. The pulsating life of the big city punctuated by ridiculous incongruities kept surging. “We do not exist merely to survive but to prevail”, so Brendan Gill once paraphrased Faulkner’s visionary dictum.<sup>35</sup> That is

33. So writes Mary Petty, 14 Dec. 1957, to her friends Lee and Hunter Pierson in Alexandria, Louisiana.

34. Cf. p. 6. This is a six-page autobiographic document in which Dunn registers under eight general headings particularly happy moments in his life. The list was compiled during the last few years of his life.

35. Invitation card for a cocktail party celebrating the 78th anniversary of the Municipal Art Society, June 1970.

what Dunn too must have felt all his life, what must have kept him going to the very end.

The cartoons of Mary Petty and Alan Dunn have summed up for future generations something of the vibrancy of New York. That they loved the city goes without saying; it was their home, their way of life. It was the source of the benevolent satirical vein of their art as well as the reason for the more frankly bitter tone of their letters. Women in New York no longer wear floppy hats, and old Penn Station is no longer standing. Nevertheless, those years of transition with all the human comedy inherent in them live on, captured with insight and grace in the cartoons of Petty and Dunn.