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### *The Prints of Benjamin Miller: A Catalogue Raisonné*

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#### **Exhibit and new catalogue showcase Cincinnati artist Benjamin Miller**

*On view at the Main Library, Nov. 15, 2003-Jan. 30, 2004*

(CINCINNATI, Ohio) A new exhibit, *Benjamin Miller: Master Printmaker of the 1920s*, tracing the life and work of one of the most acclaimed woodblock printmakers working in America during the first half of the twentieth century, will be on display at the Main Library of the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County (800 Vine Street) from November 15 through January 30 in the Art & Music Department (third floor, south building).

The exhibit will feature original woodcut prints by the artist along with his “private” sketchbook, all of which were acquired through a gift from Miller’s estate in 1964 and are part of the Library’s collection.

A new catalogue of Miller’s work, *The Prints of Benjamin Miller: A Catalogue Raisonné* will accompany the exhibit, and was written by Cincinnati author and collector, Allen W. Bernard, Ph.D. Kristin Spangenberg, curator of prints, drawings and photographs and Cecile Mear, paper conservator, both of the Cincinnati Art Museum, also contributed to the catalogue.

Dr. Bernard will present a discussion on the artist on Saturday, November 29 at 2 p.m. in the Huenefeld Tower Room (3<sup>rd</sup> floor, south downtown building).

Miller is best known for his innovative and sometimes controversial works attributed to an influence of the European expressionism movement--from 1924 to 1935--when his woodblock prints were published and exhibited widely in Europe and America. A master

printmaker, he perfected the use of black and white lines with carefully chosen Japanese papers and blocks cut from cherry wood. The paper Miller used was consistently fine quality, with the majority of his prints on Japanese *Kozo* paper.

A battle with osteoporosis forced him to retire from printmaking although he continued living at his Third Street studio. After his death in 1964, Miller was buried beside his wife in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and donated his entire \$1.7 million estate to charity along with his extensive collection of books to the Cincinnati Public Library and his art collection and tools to the Cincinnati Art Museum. This donation surprised many of his acquaintances since he had led a life of little means.

“In little more than a decade, he mastered a difficult medium – the woodcut – and forged a distinctive style that reflected a subtle understanding of and deep sympathy for advanced trends in modern art, especially the work of contemporary German artists such as [Käthe Kollwitz](#) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff,” said Timothy Rub, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. “The lovely linear woodcuts and abstract images Miller created in the early 1930s rank among the finest prints of this type produced in the United States at that time.”

Miller’s works are housed in collections around the world including the Cincinnati Art Museum, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Minneapolis Institute of Art, New York Public Library, British Museum in London and Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.

One of Miller’s prints, *Blanche*, was recently included in an exhibition at Grolier Club in New York City. Joseph G. Goddu, director of prints at Hirschl and Adler Galleries in New York City commented, “Miller’s work can stand with the very best graphic art being produced in Paris, Berlin, or New York in the first quarter of the twentieth century.”

According to Dr. Bernard, “Their [Miller’s works] sculptural character, combined with the use of powerful black and white ‘expressionistic’ qualities of passion, vision, confusion and struggle categorized them more in harmony with printmaking artists in Europe rather than those in the United States.”

During the height of his career, his designs depicted references against injustice drawing from religious and mythological themes in addition to human emotions. He produced some of the earliest abstract prints in America. Later in his career, he subjects changed to a focus on female nudes reflecting the European style of Henri Matisse.

According to Kristin Spangenberg, Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at the Cincinnati Art Museum, who wrote the introduction to the catalogue, “Unfortunately, Miller’s interest [in European Modern movements] did not coincide with national sentiment for prints on the American scene.”

Miller received more attention abroad than he did in the United States for a number of reasons: lack of major illustrative projects, the 1920s economy, and inconsistent New

York gallery representation. He did, however, manage to successfully present his work in various European exhibition and publications.

Born in 1877, Miller and his family of three siblings lived a privileged life because his father was a noted physician. The family home was located on Eighth Street in downtown Cincinnati.

“Because he was a quiet and introverted man who tended to keep to himself, there is limited historical information about Miller,” notes Dr. Bernard.

“The Cincinnati of Miller’s youth had been considered an art center, especially for sculpture and painting,” writes Dr. Bernard. “[Also during this time,] the Cincinnati Art Museum opened followed by the Art Academy.”

He left Cincinnati to attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. In 1901, he earned a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering and moved to San Francisco to begin his career. It is unknown whether he lacked an interest in engineering but that same year, he left California returning to Cincinnati where he enrolled at the Art Academy of Cincinnati studying with notable artists such as Frank Duveneck, Lewis Henry Meakin and Vincent Nowotny.

As a young man, he married Ella G. McCullough (b. 1882), a fellow student from Fort Wayne, Indiana at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, on September 29, 1914. After his marriage, he moved his studio to 131 East Third Street, downtown Cincinnati and now a highway, then a Mecca for artists, students and teachers at the Art Academy.

Four years later in 1918, Miller’s wife died after a long battle with spinal meningitis, and was buried in her family burial plot in Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

Upon the loss of his wife, Miller traveled extensively throughout Europe for the next five years visiting England, Holland, Italy and France, and studying the work of European masters, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse in addition to German expressionists Emil Nolde and Christian Rohlf. Returning to Cincinnati, he began experimenting with black and white color schemes which would later become the foundation of his woodcuts.

“The European Modernist and the philosophy of Expressionism which he saw in war-torn France and Germany would have ready-appeal to him,” said Dr. Bernard.

Two of Miller’s woodcuts received extraordinary critical interest and represent significant periods in his career. *Flight into Egypt*, finished in 1924, was included in the British publication, *The Woodcut of Today at Home and Abroad*. *The New York Times* also ran a large illustration of the woodcut and described Miller as “one of the young artists who are using modern design in the support of traditional religious features.”

Arguably his most famous work, *The City*, was completed in 1928, and earned Miller the first prize by the Tri-State Art Association and inclusion in a large illustration in the 1930 publication of *The New Woodcut*.

A *Cincinnati Post* article published in October 1934 begins “Comparatively few Cincinnatians have heard of their fellow-townsmen, Benjamin Miller. But in faraway places, wherever art is, he is known.” The feature continues, “Miller is a quiet gray-haired man, who prefers to let his works find their own clientele. His woodcuts... were purchased by the French government for the Paris Museum.” *The Cincinnati Enquirer* in an October 1941 article continues, “Benjamin Miller is more celebrated as a woodcutter away from than in Cincinnati.”

### ***About the Catalogue***

*The Prints of Benjamin Miller, A Catalogue Raisonné* published by Cincinnati print collector Dr. Allen W. Bernard, also includes essays by Kristin L. Spangenberg, Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, and Cecile D. Mear, Associate Conservator, Paper, both of the Cincinnati Art Museum.

The 233-page black and white catalogue raisonné comprises 89 black and white woodcuts and etchings with accompanying block print designs, silhouette drawings, illustrations and data regarding his prints. His work spans many subjects from religious, social and nudes to mythology, geography, literary and abstract. It is being primarily distributed by the Museum Shop at the Cincinnati Art Museum and is available for a suggested retail price of \$55. The catalogue will also be available at the Friends Shop at the Main Library (mezzanine level).

### **Benjamin Miller Timeline**

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|------|---|
| 1877 | Benjamin Miller is born in Cincinnati on July 24, 1877.   |
| 1886 | Cincinnati Art Museum opens as first general art museum established west of the Allegheny Mountains.  |
| 1897 | Miller enrolls at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston and earns a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering in 1901.  |
| 1901 | Miller works briefly as an engineer in San Francisco but, later that year, he returns to Cincinnati to pursue a career in art. He enrolls in the September 1901 classes at the Art Academy of Cincinnati that was, at the time, under the direction of artist Frank Duveneck. |
| 1911 | Miller’s paintings are exhibited in Cincinnati, Detroit, Indianapolis, Chicago, St. Louis and Des Moines as part of the Society of Western Artists exhibition.  |

- 1914 Miller marries Ella G. McCullough (b. 1882), a fellow student at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, on September 29, 1914. It is the first marriage for both.
- 1915 Miller exhibits his first painting, *Jonquils*, in the prestigious *Annual Exhibition of American Art* at the Cincinnati Art Museum.
- 1916 Miller and his wife, Ella, move to Long Beach, California, to seek respite for Ella's diagnosed spinal meningitis.
- 1918 Ella Miller dies on June 6, 1918 and she is buried in her family burial plot in Ft. Wayne, Indiana.
- 1919 Miller travels throughout Europe visiting England, Holland, Italy and France, spending the entire year abroad.
- 1921 Miller returns to France to study the work of European masters, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse in addition to Emil Nolde and Christian Rohlf.
- 1922-23 Miller visited Assisi, Italy . He also began experimenting with black and white color schemes which would become the foundation of his later work.
- 1924 Miller begins to exhibit a new oeuvre using silhouettes with linear qualities with themes ranging from biblical, mythological and environmental differing from his previous work. His exhibition of 56 silhouettes in the Duveneck Society sold only three designs, with critics claiming his work was too radical or modern.
- In the same year, he expands his reach working with woodcuts, the medium he would be best remembered.
- 1925 Miller's woodcuts are included for the first time in the prestigious publication, *The Woodcut Annual of 1925* edited by Arthur Fowler. He also exhibits 11 of religious expressionist woodcuts in the 1925 Annual Spring Exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum.
- 1926 The Weyhe Gallery and the Kennedy Gallery, both of New York begin representing Miller. Exhibitions of his work are held that same year at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.
- 1927 Miller earns national critical attention for his woodcuts; most notably, when *The New York Times* featured his work, *Flight into Egypt*, in the December 25, 1927 as a full page reproduction calling Miller, "one of the

young artists who are using modern design in the support of traditional religious features.”

Miller exhibits his woodblock prints in solo exhibitions at The Artists Inn, Cincinnati, and at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

- 1928 Miller completes *The City*, most significant work—a woodcut--and receives the first prize money by the Tri-State Art Association. This work also earned him the title of an American Expressionist from critics because of the theme of the social commentary.

Miller exhibits work in *Contemporary American Prints* at the Bibliotheque in Paris.

- 1929 Miller travels to Paris and continues to receive recognition in several major publications on woodblock prints including a mention as one of four American artists in *La Gravure Sur Bois Moderne de L'Occident (Flight into Egypt* was the selected illustration).

Miller exhibits his woodblock prints in solo exhibitions at Closson's Gallery, Cincinnati and group exhibitions at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Print Club of Philadelphia and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

- 1930 Miller exhibits in a group exhibition, *Second International Exhibition of Lithography and Wood Engraving* at the Art Institute of Chicago.

- 1933 Miller presents his work in a group exhibition, *First National Exhibition of Prints*, Philadelphia.

- 1934 Miller's work was highly noted for technical competence at the National Exhibition of Prints in Philadelphia.

- 1935 Miller produces his last two woodcuts, *Abstraction No. 1* and *Abstraction No. 2*. Semi-retired from his woodcut work due to physical ailments, Miller continues to make prints and lecture at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

- 1937 Miller's woodcut, *Judith in the Tent of Holofernes*, earns three major accolades: honorable mention at the Philadelphia Print Club, selection into the *International Exhibition of Prints* in Stockholm and a presentation in the *National Exhibit of Contemporary American Prints* sponsored by the Society of American Etchers.

- 1943 Miller's work is presented in the exhibition, *Cincinnati Artists and Craftsman*.

- 1954 Miller moves from his Fourth Street Studio in Cincinnati to the Sinton Hotel on Fourth Street for two years; finally moving to North Avondale where he lived until his death.
- 1964 Miller dies on September 5, 1964 from bronchial pneumonia, and is buried in Ft. Wayne, Indiana beside his wife, Ella.
- 1968 A solo exhibition *Works of Benjamin Miller* is presented at Mr. Williams Shop, Cincinnati.
- 1983 A solo exhibition *Woodcuts by Benjamin Miller* is presented at Michael Lowe Gallery.

√**Information about events at the Main Library and 41 branch libraries is available on the Internet site: [www.CincinnatiLibrary.org](http://www.CincinnatiLibrary.org).**

√**Interpreter available upon request for the hearing impaired. Please call 369-6944 (TDD 369-6946) at least one week before program.**