

The Limited Editions Club

Summer 2012



Grinnell College Libraries
Department of Special Collections
Curated by Sam Dunnington, '14



Emblem from the Limited Editions Club's printing
of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, published 1954.
Illustration by Pierre Brissaud.

Introduction

Six days before the stock market crash of 1929 sent the world plunging into the Great Depression, a reprint of *The Travels of Lemuel Gulliver* was released in a short run of 1,500 copies. This was the first title printed by the Limited Editions Club, a publishing house that focused on putting small runs of beautifully designed books into the hands of those who could not afford to collect pricey first editions or rare books. The man driving the operation was the publisher George Macy, who was described by a contemporary as “[a] genius...who had a terrible temper, who continually fired most of the people that worked for him.” Macy’s vision kept the club churning out 12 titles each year, ranging from works like Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* to Ambrose Bierce’s *Devil’s Dictionary*. Although the Limited Editions Club is no longer active, it has left behind a legacy of fine publishing and truly beautiful books. With this exhibit, the Grinnell College Libraries Department of Special Collections invites you to take a look at some of the remarkable pieces produced over the club’s ninety-year history.

The Artists

Lavish illustrations are prominent in the majority of the Limited Edition Club's work. These were often completed by notable graphic designers or book illustrators, but Macy occasionally enlisted the services of much higher profile artists. The club's most valuable edition is arguably the version of *Ulysses* that was produced, complete with illustrations by Henri Matisse.

Whenever the Club released a new printing, each of the 1,500 copies was usually signed either by the designer or by the artist involved. The signings were one way that Macy sought to distinguish his volumes, and make them more than just nicely bound books.

After the Limited Editions Club was taken over by an investor named Sid Shiff in 1978, the art in the books was given an even greater emphasis. Shiff found the club in dire financial straits, and developed a new approach to the club's printing. His strategy was to reduce the number of copies in each run, and get as many high-profile artists on board as possible. These artists included Jacob Lawrence, whose stark silk screens accompany John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, and Leonard Baskin, who illustrated Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* for the Club.



Emblem from the Limited Editions Club's printing
of *Hans Christian Andersen, Maker of Fairytales*,
published 1942.

Illustration by Fritz Kredel.

The Printings

The Limited Editions Club used designers and printers from all over the world in the creation of their books. Many of the books produced by the club are not only visually striking, but also thematically consistent with the work that they contain.

Confucius' Analects, for example, was produced in Shanghai and housed in a rosewood box, with a traditional Chinese stitch binding down the right-hand side. *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's dystopian tale of book burning and censorship, has a cover and pages brushed with fire-resistant aluminum. Jack London's *Call of the Wild* is wrapped cover-to-cover in thick, bright-green flannel tartan. One of the strangest bindings completed by the club accompanied *Far Away and Long Ago*, by W.H. Hudson, which was wrapped in unfinished cowhide at a printer in Buenos Aires.

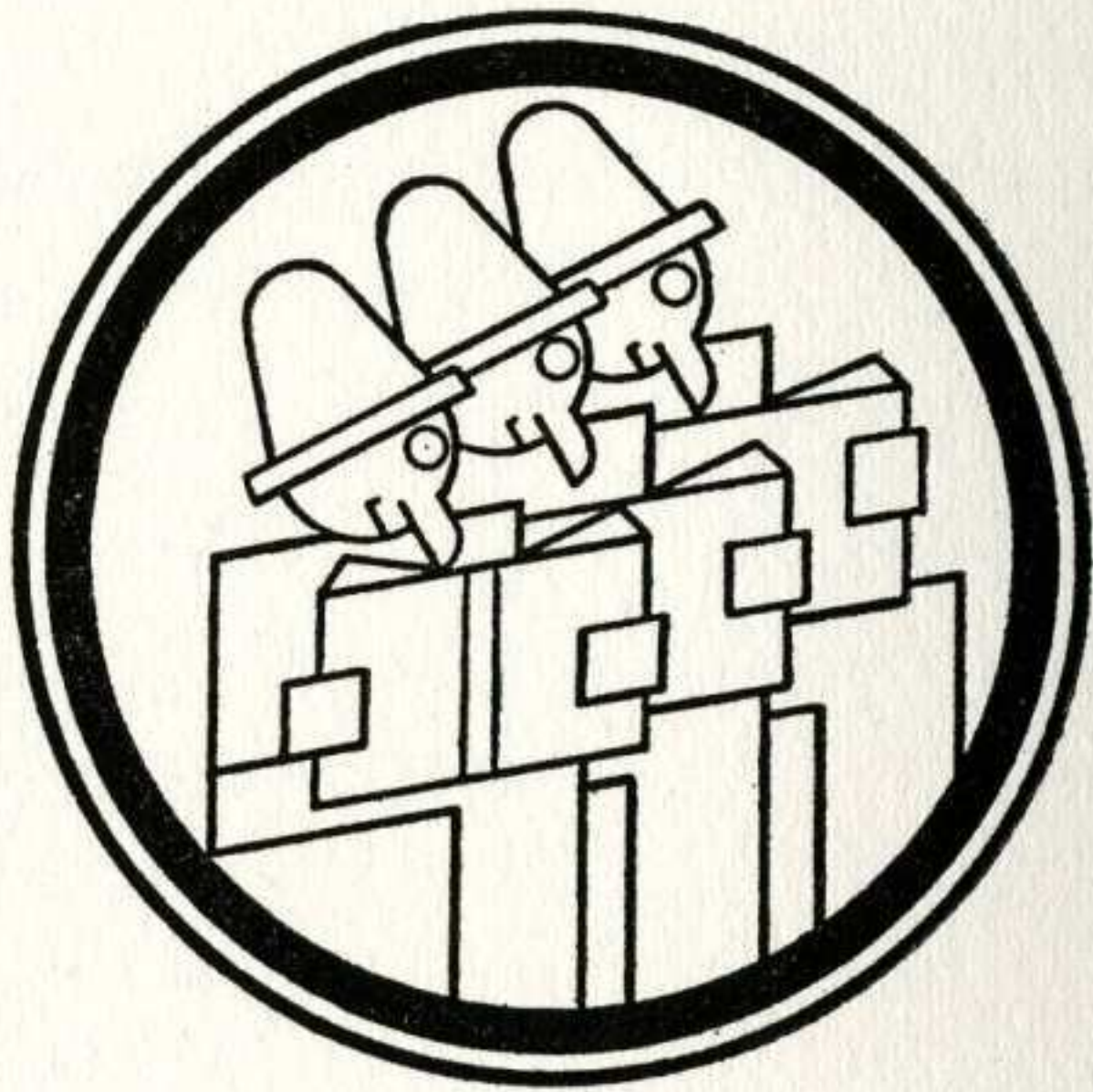
These artfully bound volumes never generated enough income to support the club on their own. Alongside the Limited Editions Club, George Macy developed the Heritage Club, which mass produced imitation limited editions for purchase by the broader public. The money earned from this larger enterprise is what allowed Macy and his staff to invest so much effort in the actual limited editions. After

Macy's death in 1956, and after his widow Helen retired from her position as president of the company in 1970, the Heritage Club and the Limited Editions Club were sold to different groups. That separation was a large factor in the club's financial hardships, prior to its resurrection by Sid Shiff in 1978.

The Originals

Looking at the first editions of some of the texts re-released by the Limited Editions Club gives a sense of what Macy, and later Shiff, was trying to accomplish. In his introduction to the club's Quarto-Millinery retrospective, released after the Club's 250th volume published, Robert L. Dothard recalls the quote that "Any classic that ever was written did not sound like a classic when you read it first." A classic also did not look like a classic upon its first printing. Macy and Shiff sought out designers and artists who would enrich the work, who would make the physical form of the books consistent with the quality of the literature.

On display are some examples of the metamorphosis experienced by classic texts under the hand of the Limited Editions Club. The illustrations in the first edition of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* have their own oddball appeal, but they tend towards the small, black-and-white and cartoon-like. Noel Sickle's enormous, colorful plates provide a much more fitting accompaniment to Twain's swaggering, sprawling tale of travel in the west. The first edition of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was a very modest paperback, containing no illustrations at the time of its publication in 1886. Edward Wilson produced shadowy, stippled images for the club's edition that cast a dark Victorian pall over the work. For the publication of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the original drawings by Sidney Paget were used, but given a larger page on which to shine.



Emblem from the Limited Editions Club's printing
of *Pinocchio*, published 1937.
Illustration by Richard Floethe.

The State of the Club Today

The Limited Editions Club published its final volume, *The Declaration of Independence*, in 2010. In his later years as the club's head, Sid Shiff decreased runs of books from Macy's standard 1,500 to as low as 500 or even 300 copies. After he passed away in 2010, his wife, Jeanne Shiff, took over the company, and has been gradually selling off what remains of the club's stock. Under Macy, the club never employed more than a dozen or so employees, and today the club is run exclusively by Jeanne Shiff. Once the remaining books are gone, the Limited Editions club will close its doors.

The legacy that the Limited Editions Club leaves behind is an inspiring one. Macy and Shiff were committed to books not merely as a means to communicate information or a story, but as affordable pieces of art that celebrated the pages within. The design of the volumes, the quality of the materials used, and the artists that were paired with the texts represent a commitment to the highest publishing standards, and the over 550 titles released by the club serve as a testament to the skill of both Shiff and Macy.

Works on Display:

Case 1:

- ❖ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-eater*. Printed for the club by the Shakespeare Head Press in Oxford, 1930. Lithographs by Zhenya Gay.
- ❖ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*. Printed in New York, 1972. Illustrated by Fritz Kredel.
- ❖ Charles Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, abridged and arranged by Edward Garnett. Printed in New York, 1953.
- ❖ *Panchatantra*, translated from the original Sanskrit by Arthur W. Porter. Printed in New York, 1972. Illustrated by Y.G. Srimati.

Case 2:

- ❖ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*. Printed in New York, 1982.
- ❖ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*. Printed for the club in Shanghai at the Commercial Press, 1933.
- ❖ William Henry Hudson, *Far Away and Long Ago*. Printed in Buenos Aires by Guillermo Kraft, 1943.
- ❖ Jack London, *Call of the Wild*. Printed for the club in Los Angeles at the Ward Ritchie Press, 1960.

Case 3:

- ❖ Eugene O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh*. Printed in New York, 1982. Lithographs by Leonard Baskin.
- ❖ John Hersey, *Hiroshima*. Printed in New York, 1983. Silk-screens by Jacob Lawrence.
- ❖ James Joyce, *Ulysses*. Printed in New York, 1935. Illustrated by Henri Matisse.

Case 4:

- ❖ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Printed in New York, 1952. Illustrated by Edward A. Wilson.

- ❖ The First Edition of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Printed by Longmans, Green in London, 1886.
- ❖ The First Edition of *Roughing It*. Printed in Chicago by F.G. Gilman & Co., 1872.
- ❖ Mark Twain, *Roughing It*. Printed in New York, 1972. Illustrated by Noel Sickles.
- ❖ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, volume two of *The Later Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Printed in New York, 1952. Illustrations by Sidney Paget, Edward Dorr Steele, and others.
- ❖ The First Edition of *Hound of the Baskervilles*. Printed in London by George Newnes, Ltd., 1902.

Reference Works Used:

- ❖ Grossman, Carol. "East Side Story." *Biblio* Mar. 1999: 30. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 13 June 2012.
- ❖ Staff Writer. "Books: De Luxe". *Time Magazine* (December 19, 1938).
- ❖ Robert L. Dothard, "Introduction," in *Quarto-Millenary:250 Publications of the Limited Editions Club*. New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1959

Special Thanks To:

Catherine Rod, Chris Jones, and Jeanne Shiff, for her knowledge and time.

Donor Information:

The books used in this exhibit were donated to the Grinnell College Libraries Department of Special Collections by George F. Pinne.

A note about the poster:

The image on the cover of this pamphlet is the first emblem created for the Limited Editions Club. This geometric interpretation of three people reading was printed in the colophon of *The Travels of Lemuel Gulliver*, the Club's first publication. For subsequent titles, if they were illustrated, the artist would often reinterpret the 3-figure design according to the themes or characters in the work. The images on the poster are a small sample of some of these alternative emblems.