

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, spring 2016.

Edouard Manet, *Raven Bookplate* for Stéphane Mallarmé's "Le Corbeau," 1875. Lithograph inscribed with brown ink on white tracing paper, H.8 7/8 in x W.10 7/8 (22cm x 27cm). Gift of the Chace family, 1948.

The *Flying Raven* (1875), an inscribed lithographic print by the painter Edouard Manet [French, 1832-1883], bears multiple connections to the history and mission of the Athenaeum. The print was published in the first French translation of Edgar Allan Poe's famous 1845 poem, "The Raven," undertaken by the French poet and critic Stéphane M. Mallarmé [1842-1898] and published in 1875. Though it serves the relatively humble role of a bookplate, Manet's *Flying Raven* nevertheless constitutes an important artifact in the library's collection. It is at once a talisman of the book arts; a haunting image by an important artist; and a historic document that passed between two important nineteenth-century poets. Like the poem it once accompanied, the image supports rich and varied readings.

Manet's image originally appeared without date or signature, accompanied only by the Latin phrase *ex libris* ("from the library of") above the bird (for his consecutive prints, Manet added personal notes and his written signature.)¹ For this introductory page to Mallarmé's translation, Manet chose to emphasize the raven's predatory nature, soaring with black, outstretched wings across a creamy page. Composed with a mixture of hashed lines and pure black, the dark form of the bird is only interjected with fleeting moments of exposed, white parchment suggesting highlights on the feathers. The image corresponds with no particular passage, in the poem, but rather serves as a forceful symbol for the enveloping, sense or foreboding woven throughout the poem. The figurative and visual tone of the print is dark, yet ironically, it also evokes a sense of loftiness—emulating the style of Poe's poetry itself. Indeed the creature itself appears simultaneously predatory—as it soars through the air scouting the terrain below—and lifeless, its neck limp and its eyes shrouded in black feathers.

Not only was Poe [1809-1849] one of the most eminent poets of the United States in his time, but he also captured the attention of fellow *litterati* abroad. In 1852, fellow poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire [1821-1867] first published a volume of Poe's tales, translated into French; this volume assured Poe's stature amongst the rising generation of French Symbolist poets and artists.² An early devotee of Poe's work, Mallarmé took on the daunting task of translating the American's *magnum opus*, "The Raven," originally published in the *American Review* in February 1845.³ In May 1875 Mallarmé's "Le Corbeau" ("The Raven") was published in folio form by Richard Lesclide in Paris.⁴

¹ Jean C. Harris, *Edouard Manet Graphic Works: A Definitive Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Collectors Editions, 1970), 218.

² Joseph Chiari, *Symbolism from Poe to Mallarmé: The Growth of a Myth* (London: Rockliff Publishing Corporation, 1956), 1.

³ Eugene L. Didier, *The Life and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Haskell House Publishers LTD), 83.

⁴ Arnar, *Book as Instrument*, 127.

Today, “Le Corbeau” is celebrated as one of the period’s first *livres de peintre* (or “painter’s books”) — a contemporary text illustrated by a contemporary artist and printed in a limited edition.⁵ (The translation was originally issued in only 240 copies in folio size.)⁶ Mallarmé pioneered this modern hybrid form, seeking out the latest avant-garde artists for collaborative projects (such artists included Pierre-Auguste Renoir, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Odilon Redon) and scrupulously supervising every aspect of the books’ design.⁷

Eighteen months after moving to Paris, in 1871, Mallarmé met Manet – whose studio was conveniently located near the Parisian *lycée* where Mallarmé taught. Though immersed in the world of painters and painter’s subjects, Manet was also quite involved in book illustration, collaborating with literary figures as early as the 1860s.⁸ Manet’s earliest graphic works were the etchings that accompanied Armand Renaud’s sonnet, “Exotic Flower” (Manet and Renaud’s work appeared in Philippe Burty’s deluxe publication, *Sonnets and Etchings*, in 1868). Manet’s early images were decorative and elegant, yet by the 1870s, he had developed a bolder, more graphic style, as evidenced by his six illustrations for “Le Corbeau.”⁹

In his 1876 article devoted to Manet’s work, Mallarmé spoke of the painter’s work in these terms: Manet’s imagery, he explained, “preserve[d] ... not the material portion which already exists, superior to any mere representation of it, but the delight of having recreated nature touch by touch.”¹⁰ Manet’s “Le Corbeau” illustrations—comprising four narrative pictures, including the bookplate, and two ornamentations outside the text—capture the essence of nature in bold, graphic form; far from delicate renderings, they accompany Poe’s text as meaningful symbols communicating the mood and identity of Poe’s poetry.¹¹ To achieve his stark contrast between figure and ground, Manet executed the lithographs on simili parchment with a brush and ink, printing on sheets kept separate from the text.¹² The medium encouraged spontaneity by facilitating the suppression of detail and value gradation, creating the sinister shadows and strong contrasts that allow his *ex libris* page to soar.

In addition to the bookplates that appeared in the Lesclide folio, Manet also created additional copies of the *ex libris* pages as individual prints, to be distributed as mementoes to Poe enthusiasts. The Athenaeum’s print is one of this group. Given by Mallarmé to the American poet Sarah Helen Whitman [1803-1878], the Athenaeum print bears the French poet’s neatly penned inscription, “À Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman / respectueusement et sympathiquement / Stéphane M. Mallarmé.”

Whitman was a Providence resident and a devout patron of the Athenaeum, briefly engaged to Poe in 1848; indeed, it was their mutual interest in Poe that had brought her and Mallarmé into

⁵ Anna Sigrídur Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, The Artist Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 59.

⁶ Arnar, *Book as Instrument*, 106.

⁷ Arnar, *Book as Instrument*, 60-62.

⁸ Jean Harris, “Edouard Manet as an Illustrator,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 62, no. 293 (1967): 223.

⁹ Harris, “Edouard Manet”, 227.

¹⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, “Impressionist and Edouard Manet,” *The Art Monthly Review* I, no. 9: 121.

¹¹ Harris, “Edouard Manet”, 231.

¹² Harris, “Edouard Manet”, 229.

contact.¹³ Despite her tumultuous relationship with Poe, Whitman dedicated her later life to rehabilitating his memory, defending him in her book, *Edgar Allan Poe and His Critics* (1860).¹⁴ After learning of her efforts, Mallarmé developed a transatlantic correspondence with Whitman, exchanging many letters regarding “Le Corbeau.”¹⁵ On 13 December, 1876, soon after the publication of “Le Corbeau,” Mallarmé wrote to Whitman apologizing for not having sent a copy to her yet, stating somewhat enigmatically, “Nonetheless, I hope that the black wanderer will reach you.”¹⁶ Whitman expressed her impatience with Mallarmé’s delay in letters to her friend John Ingram, but at last she received her copy in February 1877—followed soon thereafter by Manet’s print.¹⁷

Seventy years after Whitman’s death, the Athenaeum’s 1948 *Annual Report* laconically reported the gift of an “ink wash of Poe’s Raven inscribed to Sarah Helen Whitman.”¹⁸ The print was given to the library by Louise B. Chace and her mother-in-law, Maud Daily Chace—who, along with her sister, Charlotte Field Daily, had cared for Whitman in her later years in their home at 97 Bowen Street and who served as the poet’s literary executors.¹⁹ The sisters sold the majority of Whitman’s collection to the University of Virginia, with the remaining papers given to Brown University in 1937.²⁰ The family retained the bookplate, which clearly held a certain sentimental power for them, for just over another decade.

Manet’s *Flying Raven* is a small but powerful part of the Athenaeum’s art collection, exemplifying the library’s engagement with books as instruments of learning, communication, and visual expression. However isolated from its original source, it speaks to transatlantic intellectual exchange – an interaction embedded in the earliest history of the library, whose first volumes all arrived from Europe.²¹ It is particularly fitting, moreover, that Poe’s winged creature might link a small Rhode Island library with the literary culture of avant-garde Paris.

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¹³ Rosemary Lloyd, ed., *Selected Letters of Stephane Mallarme* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 114.

¹⁴ John Carl Miller, ed., *Poe’s Helen Remembers* (Charlottesville: University of Press, Virginia, 1979), xxvii.

¹⁵ Rosemary Lloyd, ed., *Selected Letters of Stephane Mallarme* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 114.

¹⁶ Lloyd, *Selected Letters*, 116.

¹⁷ Miller, ed., *Poe’s Helen*, 471.

¹⁸ *One Hundred and Twelfth and One Hundred and Thirteenth Annual Reports of the Board of Directors of the Providence Athenaeum*, 22 September 1947- 27 September, 1948, 9.

¹⁹ Miller, ed., *Poe’s Helen*, 502.

²⁰ “Guide to Sarah Helen Whitman Papers 1816-1878,” *Brown University Library Special Collections* (Brown University Library).

²¹ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence, Rhode Island: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 12.