



George Elbert Burr is not remembered as a great artist. In fact, with the exception of an article by A. Reynolds Morse in April, 1946,¹ and a catalogue raisonné published in 1971 by his distant cousin, Loise C. Seeber, a search of the standard periodical indexes reveals that Burr has not been remembered in print at all since his death. This is not due, however, to a lack of ability on the artist's part, nor is it for a lack of prolificacy. It is, perhaps, self-indulgent reverie to speculate on how different the life of any particular artist might have been under other circumstances, but the temptation to do so is strong when examining the work of this widely collected printmaker and watercolorist, George E. Burr.² If the prints found in Arizona State University's Art Museum collection are truly indicative of the stature of the artist's work in general, then clearly the majority of his work is of a rather pedestrian quality – the type of print one might expect to find in a regionally oriented commercial gallery – while a few others are true masterworks, both as pictorial interpretations and as examples of the printmaker's craft.

Figure 1. George Elbert Burr, *Desert Twilight*, etching, Arizona State University Art Museum.

Within the highly varied collection of prints owned by Arizona State University, is contained a group of one hundred eighty-seven works by Burr. All but a few of these are intaglio prints executed as etchings, drypoints and engravings as well as mixtures of these with aquatint and soft-ground etching techniques. This collection of Burr's work is interesting for its unusually large size, for the range of quality in the prints and for the rare beauty of at least a few examples.

The heights to which Burr's technique and insight into his subject could rise are amply demonstrated in the print, *Desert Twilight*, (Figure 1).³ Compared to the other prints in the group, this print seems small, measuring only about five by seven inches. In spite of diminutive size, its value-range, its variety of texture, and the subtlety with which he modulates the shadow-values and describes the vegetation on the desert floor suggest more than just a passing interest in this plate on the part of the artist.

It is difficult to say precisely when Burr made this impression, since he did not keep detailed records of shop production,⁴ but a version of it seems to have first been released in his famous *Desert Series* as the print titled *Twilight, Laguna, New Mexico*.⁵ In this initial version, the plate measured about an inch wider than in *Desert Twilight*. Burr started *Desert Series*, a group of thirty-five plates, between 1916-17 and finished it within five years, having copyrighted the last of the impressions from the set in May of 1921.⁶ Since *Twilight, Laguna, New Mexico* appeared about midway through the series, it is reasonable to place the year of its inception at about 1919. This plate resurfaces as *Desert Twilight* among what has been termed Burr's "late work," a body of prints which is comprised primarily of desert subjects.⁷ This so-called late work was executed after the artist had moved from Denver, Colorado to Phoenix, Arizona in September of 1924 and this particular print must have been published before 1931. In that year, a later etching, *Superstition Mountain, Apache Trail*, (Figure 2) was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum.⁸

If it is ironic that Burr would have depicted the vast expanses of the desert regions within a frame measuring only five by seven inches, it nonetheless works. At a close viewing distance and in an intimate environment, *Desert Twilight* is a remarkably effective and memorable image of the desert. The artist describes a fleeting moment when, after the sun has descended below the horizon, casting the ground in deep shadow, a cloud-filled sky captures the last, late light of the swiftly disappearing day. The cumulus clouds, piled high above the earth's surface, seem to glow with a light of their own. Though to urbanites not familiar with the Arizona landscape this seems a bit melodramatic, such moments, in fact, do occur when clouds throw an eerie, reflected light into otherwise deep shadows. In the desert, where an increase in elevation of only a hundred feet can extend a viewer's horizon by miles, one may also obtain the kind of high, strangely floating perspective which is found in this and in other of Burr's prints. Through *Desert Twilight*, the viewer can sense the mystery of this unusual moment and perhaps even some small portion of the awesomeness of the desert's sometime fleeting-fired skies.

Questions about what Burr's pictures might have looked like if the circumstances of his life had been different, arise when viewing prints such as *Evening in the Painted Desert*, (Figure 3).⁹ The title of his print and its compositional emphasis on the cloudy sky both suggest that the artist's concept here is closely allied to that of *Desert Twilight*. However, its execution is thoroughly



Figure 2. George Elbert Burr, *Superstition Mountains, Apache Trail*, etching, Arizona State University Art Museum.

pedantic – flat and lifeless to the point of unrecognizability as an “evening” scene. The steep contrast range of this impression of the plate – a result of the artist having filled deeply bitten lines with a stiff, cold-black ink and wiping the reserve areas virtually clean – suggests, if anything, the broad, hot light of mid-day! What reasons could there be for such variation in quality in the artist’s work?

An investigation into the provenance of each of the various prints in the Burr holdings might support certain hypotheses which could explain, to some extent, the spotty quality of the prints in this collection. In the case of one image, a direct comparison of two versions of the same state of the same plate is possible. *Summer Cloud, Apache Trail, Arizona*¹⁰ is represented in the Arizona State University collection by two prints (Figures 4 and 5) which appear to be on two different types of paper and with two different inks – one a stiff, cool black, the other a black tinted with the same blue-green ink as that used in *Desert Twilight*. The problem with contrast range found in *Evening in the Painted Desert* arises in the “black” version of this print. In the “blue-green” print, on the other hand, the reserve areas retain some of the ink’s hue and the lines are softened by a “shadow” of ink along side of the bitten lines. Ms Lucinda Gedeon, Curator of the collection, speculates that this is due to the mechanical buffing of any finer, drypointed



Figure 3. George Elbert Burr, *Evening in the Painted Desert*, dry point, Arizona State University Art Museum.

lines on plates which occurs during printing and that the "black" print – the contrastier print – is simply a later printing of the plate. It is more likely, however, that the main drawing on this plate was not drypointed to achieve the ink shadow which softens etched lines but was simply not wiped as completely as the perhaps, oilier "blue-green" ink. In this event, the colder, "black" print might actually be a shop print or working proof which was not intended for release to the public, while the other, slightly richer print was one of the published version, or they actually represent two separate "editions" of the same plate, one of a substantially higher quality. Since Burr did not indicate on the prints whether they were part of a particular edition or not (and rarely did he do this) it is difficult to defend Burr and say with certainty that the inferior print was, in fact, a working print that found its way into circulation. Adding to this confusion is the fact that they are signed and titled in a like manner. Why would Burr have knowingly released prints of such a wide range of quality? There are two plausible explanations for this: the nature of his training; and the fact that he took the time and energy to do all of his own printing.



Figure 4. George Elbert Burr, *Summer Cloud, Apache Trail*, dry point, Arizona State University Art Museum.

Burr was an essentially self-taught artist. He noted on a print, *My First Etching*, (not illustrated) in the New York Public Library Collection, how he had made the etching sometime in 1872, at the age of twelve or thirteen, on "tin-shop" scrap copper and had printed it by running the plate and paper through the steel bending rollers in the tin-shop of his father's store.¹¹ At the time he had already been painting and drawing for at least two years. In spite of his early interest, Burr never pursued formal academic training, with the exception of about three months at the Chicago Academy of Design (now the Art Institute). Nor did Burr apprentice himself to any artist which often stimulates a pupil to develop good technical habits and a sound understanding of the visual effects of particular techniques. His neglect in not keeping detailed publication records and the appearance of what might be considered technical flaws such as failure to carefully finish and wipe the edges of his plates, arise from his having avoided traditional forms of education. The considerable skill he possessed, most evident in but a small number of prints, resulted from practice, observation and through his association with other "amateur" artists.

Another aspect of Burr's life which may have contributed to the unevenness of his prints was the fact that he spent valuable time, which he might have spent developing and refining his prints, printing his many plates. He produced with his own hands, close to twenty-five thousand impressions.¹² This was a tremendous work load to impose upon himself, especially since his attention was not focused exclusively on making prints but also included watercolors and extensive travel. The resulting time-shortage certainly helped to preclude substantial reworking of his plates. It is probable then, that the lack of a commercial publisher who could have reduced the demands on Burr's time, coupled with a narrow background of instruction reduced the opportunities for frequent re-working and prevented him from developing a proper critical attitude about his work.

There were few external pressures on Burr to edit and rework his prints. If anything, the market discouraged long effort on any single plate. Since his dealers were able to sell his prints rapidly at moderate prices Burr needed to keep production high to maintain his modest living.¹³ The list of museums which acquired Burr's work during the late twenties and the thirties is impressive both for its length and for the quality of the institutions named, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Fogg Art Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the British Museum. Burr seemed, nonetheless, not to be a particularly ambitious artist, who sought fame and greatness, rather he was quite content simply to work hard and be paid for living and traveling. He even referred to his life as an "Alice in Wonderland kind of experience," in a letter written in 1934, perhaps because he and his wife had escaped serious financial difficulty during the depression years.¹⁴

The unanswerable question, posed implicitly earlier, still remains, as it always must: what if Burr's life had been different, how much better could his work have been? In a sense, it is folly to even consider this question, but perhaps students of the printmaker's crafts may look upon Burr's life as an object lesson and avoid the pitfalls of bad business and of complacency. As viewers of Burr's work, it is pointless to consider this question at great length because we can never know the answer, but more importantly, its consideration dulls our appreciation of Burr's accomplishments.

The prints by George Elbert Burr in the University Museum show an undeniable inconsistency of quality in terms of their execution and conception, yet contained within this group of about 185 prints are some exquisite examples of the intaglio printmaker's craft.



Figure 5. George Elbert Burr,
*Summer Cloud, Apache
Trail*, dry point, Arizona
State University Art
Museum.