Digesting Subject, Intent, and Market in *Long Island Kitchen* Katie Bonanno



Figure 1. *Long Island Kitchen*, William Miller after a painting by Henry Muhrman, Boston, Massachusetts: Dana Estes & Charles E. Lauriat, ca. 1880. Wood engraving on wove Japanese paper. 1982.0083 Museum purchase

William "Willy" Miller's wood engraving on Japanese paper, Long Island Kitchen, circa 1880 (Figure 1), is a translation of an 1879 watercolor painting by Henry Muhrman (1854-1916). It depicts a stove-room almost exactly as Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe specified in their popular 1869 household manual, The American Woman's Home: "The sides of the stove-room must be lined with shelves...Boxes with lids, to receive stove utensils, must be placed near the stove." Yet, the Beecher sisters, who later in The American Woman's Home praised a well-trained servant's ability to transform a "slatternly and littered kitchen" into one of "neat, orderly appearance," would not be pleased with the overt disorder in Long Island Kitchen: while the housekeeper crouches behind her cast-iron cookstove, kitchen wares clutter every surface, a cat dozes on the shelf, the window covering is sloppily askew, and just one scrappy log remains as fuel. This study explores this disorderly image by tracing the transformation of Long Island Kitchen from a watercolor painting to a magazine illustration to a fine-art print between 1879 and 1881, to elucidate the print's layered meanings.\(^1\)

As a fine-art print, *Long Island Kitchen* is the end-product of a process of reproduction and transformation that began with Henry Muhrman's 1879 watercolor painting of the same title. Muhrman's work linked international

artistic training with American artistic practice. Educated at the Cincinnati School of Design, Muhrman began his career in lithography. In 1876, he relocated to Germany to begin studies in drawing and watercolor painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, intending to use these new skills to improve his work in lithography. Instead, his Academy teachers encouraged him to pursue watercolor painting professionally. In 1878, he returned to Cincinnati, seeking a painting career. Unable to acquire sufficient patronage there, he moved to New York City. Muhrman introduced himself to the fine art market in 1879, when his first works were accepted and exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition, and the Annual Exhibition of the American Water Color Society in New York City.²

Much like other watercolorists such as Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent were working in the late nineteenth century, Muhrman painted from his surroundings with more of a focus on capturing mood than naturalism in his works. His art thus provided coded social commentary on the places and people he encountered as he traveled. *Long Island Kitchen* is a good example. Painted in watercolor in 1879 while Muhrman was living in New York City, the painting reflected not only Muhrman's international training and recent American work, but also broader social currents and tensions on both sides of the Atlantic.³

Muhrman was one of nearly 400 other American artists educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich between 1850 and 1920, a popularity perhaps attributable to the relatively low cost of tuition, Munich's growing reputation as an "art city" or *Kunststadt* at this time, and students' ethnic German heritage. Whatever their motivation, budding artists like Muhrman began their studies in a newly unified Germany recovering from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Germany's 1871 unification ushered in a push for nationalism that exposed tensions among the diverse social groups living under the new umbrella of the German Reich. At the same time, social tensions in Germany, and throughout Europe and the United States, were mounting over urban unrest, social stratification, and continued industrial growth. Art created in Germany and by German-trained artists during this period reflected these changes, capturing isolation and anxiety through dark and unadorned representation, as in Muhrman's depictions of dark shadows, disorder, and a submissive housekeeper in *Long Island Kitchen*.⁴

But, Muhrman created this painting in 1879, when he was living in New York and painting from life as he explored the city and its surrounding environs. Contemporary American artistic schools, especially those active in New York, also shaped Muhrman's style and subject matter. Namely, Muhrman's Long Island Kitchen linked American Tonalism with the emerging urban realism. Most often associated with landscape painting but certainly not restricted to it, American Tonalism was an aesthetic movement that flourished between 1880 and 1915 in the United States. Tonalist artists used a predominant color in their fragmentary depictions, typically grays and blues. The Tonalists sought to evoke reverence and nostalgia in their paintings, as seen in George Inness' 1893 The Home of the Heron (Figure 2). Muhrman painted Long Island Kitchen just before the pinnacle of American Tonalism, but the painting incorporated Tonalist elements with its dark cast and nostalgic evocation of a rural world being lost.⁵



Figure 2. *The Home of the Heron*, George Inness, 1893. Oil on canvas, Image courtesy of Creative Commons



Figure 3. *McSorley's Bar*, John Sloan, New York, New York: 1912. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of Creative Commons

Like the Tonalists, the urban realists worked in dark palettes. But while the Tonalists overwhelmingly sought to lend a spiritual quality to their paintings, the artists of what critics later called the Ashcan School created gritty representations of everyday life as it was rather than depicting idealized beauty. The Ashcan School artists, mostly working from the turn of the twentieth century onward, created sketch-like compositions that featured urban subject matter, particularly in New York City. John Sloan's 1912 *McSorley's Bar* was an example of this genre (Figure 3). Murhman's *Long Island Kitchen* preceded the Ashcan School, but as a genre painting depicting a rural world on the brink of stagnation, it shared the realism and sketchy technique of the Ashcan artists.⁶

Muhrman's depiction of a kitchen, and particularly a cookstove, has layered meanings. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, images and exhibitions of colonial revival kitchens, prominently featuring open hearths, were popular tools for expressing social and political agendas around American identity. On Long Island at this time, artist John Mackie Falconer was creating oil paintings of extant Long Island colonial kitchen hearths, celebrating Long Island's rural heritage. *Long Island Kitchen*, in contrast, featured a contemporary nineteenth-century cookstove. Cookstoves appeared in the northeastern United States around 1810 and had become popular by the mid 1840s. Although many women were reluctant to welcome the cookstove into their homes in the early nineteenth century, most households had acquired and embraced them by the time Muhrman painted *Long Island Kitchen* in 1879.⁷

As contemporary advice books, like the Beechers' popular *The American Woman's Home*, suggested, the midlate nineteenth-century woman was responsible for much of the care and maintenance of the cookstove in addition to preparing food, cleaning, caring for children, doing laundry, repairing clothing, and gardening, among other numerous tasks. *Long Island Kitchen* depicts a woman caring for her cookstove while her other duties overwhelm her: several kettles are heating on the stovetop, the firewood has dwindled to just one log, and the room itself is in disarray, signaled most explicitly by the skewed window covering. This busy, disorderly kitchen reflected larger social tensions, not only in Long Island where rural life was slowly vanishing, but throughout the United States and beyond. In this way, *Long Island Kitchen* materialized the uncertainty of many people as nineteenth-century industrialization progressed, immigration expanded, and social stratification increased.

Contemporary viewers would have experienced and interpreted these meanings in a public exhibition of *Long Island Kitchen*, such as the Annual Exhibitions of the American Water Color Society, to which Muhrman was a regular contributor throughout his career. As a singular expression, the audience for the original watercolor, would have been restricted to those living nearby or able to afford the cost of attending the exhibition. However, Muhrman may never have exhibited the original watercolor. *Long Island Kitchen* was not listed in contemporary exhibition catalogues and its present location is not known. Due to the high volume of documentary paintings Muhrman was creating at this time, *Long Island Kitchen* may no longer be extant, especially if it was neither exhibited nor sold. The art market in New York and elsewhere was at times unkind to American artists in the nineteenth century, prompting many aspiring American artists to become expatriates and relocate to Europe, particularly to Paris. After leaving New York for Cincinnati in 1880, Muhrman had relocated to London by 1882, Paris in 1899, and finally Meissen, Germany, at the turn of the twentieth century, where we would spend the rest of his life.

While the painting communicated many of the tensions underlying late nineteenth-century life, the market for the original watercolor was probably limited. It lacked the historicized romanticism that attracted many patrons of the colonial revival. The implied social commentary and lack of market appeal likely made this painting a bargain for reproduction via wood engraving in 1880, when Muhrman's Long Island Kitchen began a process of reproduction and transformation that led to its publication as a fine-art print. The transformation of Long Island Kitchen from a watercolor painting to a magazine illustration in The American Art Review expanded its market and fundamentally altered the relationship of the artist to his work.

In 1880, Sylvester Rosa Koehler, editor of *The American Art Review*, commissioned Willy Miller (1850-1923) to engrave Muhrman's painting for publication in the periodical's December 1880 number. Dana Estes and Charles E. Lauriat published a scholarly art magazine, *The American Art Review*, in Boston in monthly installments from November 1879 to October 1881. It was available to subscribers for \$12 annually, a substantial sum beyond the reach of most working-class consumers with families. Through *The American Art Review*, Koehler intended to promote original prints, especially etchings, of contemporary American painters. As he wrote in the introduction to the periodical's first number in November 1879, Koehler hoped to "succeed in advancing the cause of art more especially in our own country." Although *The American Art Review* was a short-lived venture, contemporary art critics and twentieth-century scholars alike lauded the magazine's success in its thorough and critical discussions of both American and foreign art as well as its inclusion of fine engravings and etchings. ¹⁰

Long Island Kitchen was one of these particularly fine engravings. As correspondence between Koehler and Willy Miller documented, Koehler commissioned Miller to engrave Long Island Kitchen for the periodical's December 1880 number, presumably due to Miller's skill in interpretive wood engraving. Miller, born in New York and educated in Germany like Muhrman, first gained experience in wood engraving at Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper in New York. There, he met Frederick Juengling, a master nineteenth-century American wood engraver, who would eventually take Miller on as his associate and later partner. Both Miller and Juengling belonged to the New School of American Wood-Engraving. The high quality of their engravings captured rich tones, textures, and subtleties. Engravers working in this style also placed great emphasis on capturing the feeling of an original artwork, rather than on precisely replicating the original's exact details, an important consideration for investigating Miller's agency in altering Muhrman's subject in Long Island Kitchen.

Miller engraved Long Island Kitchen to illustrate Henry Muhrman's work for George McLaughlin's December 1880 article, "Cincinnati Artists of the Munich School: Second and Concluding Article." The essay highlighted Muhrman among other Cincinnati artists trained in Munich. After the print's publication in the December 1880 number, a columnist for the Boston Daily Advertiser reviewed, ". . . the illustrations, which are numerous, show on the whole a more than common average of merit. We would instance especially Mr. W. Miller's engraving from Muhrman's "Long Island Kitchen" in the first article "12"

This brief review emphasized Miller's skill in translating Long Island Kitchen from a watercolor painting to a magazine illustration. Although the form and content of Long Island Kitchen remained Muhrman's creation, the image's details were interpreted and recreated through Miller's own artistic training and practice. Long Island Kitchen had become a hybrid image, combining Muhrman's vision with Miller's translation into a different media. Despite Miller's skilled interpretation, the intention of the illustration was to permit readers of The American Art Review to understand Muhrman's artistic style as they read McLaughlin's article on the Munich School. Whatever the visual cues Muhrman embedded in Long Island Kitchen might have been, readers could only view them via Miller's representation. Thus, the painting's reproduction via wood engraving stripped Long Island Kitchen of some of its potency as a charged social object by changing the context of its reception; rather than a singular watercolor viewed by a select few, it had become a mass-produced image open to wider inspection and interpretation.

The engraving spread Muhrman's reputation by changing the market for *Long Island Kitchen*. Advertisements and reviews of *The American Art Review* were published monthly in contemporary newspapers, from New York and Boston, to Chicago and San Francisco. The diverse geographic scope of these advertisements and reviews suggests that subscribers to *The American Art Review*, and thus recipients of *Long Island Kitchen* in its December 1880 number, spanned coast to coast. In this way, *The American Art Review* democratized art, and specifically *Long Island Kitchen*, by providing art experiences to a broader public via subscription or public libraries.¹³

In this vein, the transformation of *Long Island Kitchen* from a watercolor painting to an illustration changed the consumers' experiences with fine art. The diverse audience receiving the illustration as part of their December 1880 subscription to *The American Art Review* would have interacted with the image differently than those who may have experienced the original watercolor, whether in a commercial gallery, the artist's studio, or public exhibition. The monthly distribution of *The American Art Review* signaled to consumers that the engraving was ephemeral: subscribers likely discarded their December 1880 number after reading it as few are extant. The distribution of *Long*

Island Kitchen as a print illustration to a wide audience challenges assumptions regarding what art is and how it should be consumed and preserved.

Ultimately, *The American Art Review* failed and ceased publication after October 1881, when the final publication included a sorrowful "Valedictory." Perhaps as an effort to recover from the failed venture, Estes and Lauriat subsequently offered two additional publications of *The American Art Review* for purchase: two gilt-edged, leather-bound books containing *The American Art Review's* Volume I and Volume II (Figure 4) and *The American Art Review's Portfolio of Extra Proofs* (Figure 5). These began to circulate through 1880, 1881, and beyond. Miller's engraved *Long Island Kitchen* was included in both of these additional publications, with the latter housing the fine-art print that became the object of this study (Figure 1). The subject, intent, and market for *Long Island Kitchen* was impacted by the form, distribution, and consumption of each of these two additional publications. ¹⁴

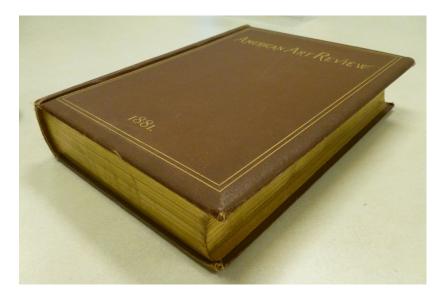


Figure 4. The American Art Review, Volume II, Sylvester Rosa Koehler, editor, Boston, Massachusetts: Dana Este & Charles E. Lauriat, 1881. N1 A51 F Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library

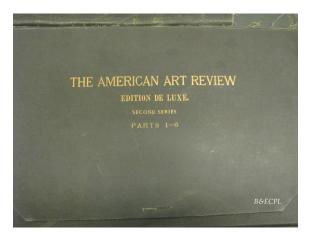


Figure 5. The American Art Review's Portfolio of Extra Proofs, Sylvester Rosa Koehler, editor, Boston, Massachusetts: Dana Estes & Charles E. Lauriat, 1881. Reproduction by Permission of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, New York

On one hand, the nearly 300-page, leather-bound, Volume II of *The American Art Review* included the journal's twelve numbers from November 1880 to October 1881. It was a massive tome that was designed for display on a library table as it was too heavy for casual use. *Long Island Kitchen* appeared as a plate illustration to George

McLaughlin's "Cincinnati Artists of the Munich School: Second and Concluding Article" (Figure 6). In this form, the subject and intent of *Long Island Kitchen* was largely the same as that of *Long Island Kitchen* in the ephemeral December 1880 number; printed from the same woodblock or electrotyped metal plate, the image maintained Miller's agency as interpreter of Muhrman's painting, and as an illustration the Munich-School qualities of Muhrman's work as a reference for readers. ¹⁵

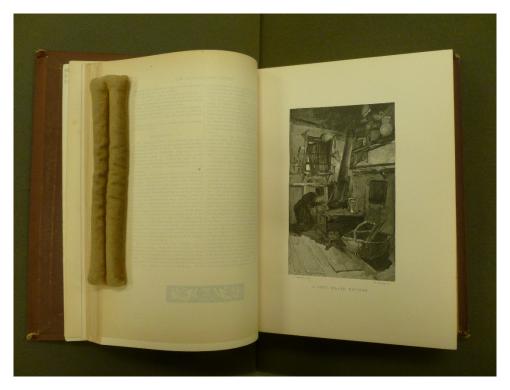


Figure 6. Long Island Kitchen in The American Art Review, Volume II, Sylvester Rosa Koehler, editor, Boston, Massachusetts: Dana Estes & Charles E. Lauriat, 1881. NI A51 F Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library

But in contrast to the ephemeral form of the monthly periodical, the leather-bound, gilt-edged books required significant financial investment and were intended for private collections and libraries. The editor of *American Art Directory, 1898* listed the set of bound volumes for a price of \$27, restricting the market. Thus, *Long Island Kitchen* as part of the bound Volume II, experienced another transformation: unlike the disposable monthly periodical, the bound volumes signaled collectability, permanence, and potential scholarly use for consumers with an academic interest in American art, even as the print was engulfed and overshadowed by the volume's enormous text block. This change illustrated the ways the distribution and consumption of art shaped an understanding of what constituted art and how people should experience it.¹⁶

In addition, the publication of *Long Island Kitchen* in *The American Art Review's Portfolio of Extra Proofs* prompted further transformation of the print. On June 3, 1881, *The Springfield Republican* published Estes and Lauriat's announcement of the availability of *The American Art Review's* "edition de luxe," the *Portfolio of Extra Proofs:*

Estes & Lauriat announce an edition de luxe of the American Art Review, to be limited to 500 copies, each copy numbered and signed by the editor. It will be issued at \$7.50 per part, each comprising from 36 to 48 pages of letterpress, with two sets of proofs of etchings and engravings, one on India, the other on Japan paper, and two sets of the full page wood-cuts one on India, the other on superfine tinted paper; the extra proofs being included in separate portfolios, one with each part...¹⁷

Long Island Kitchen, printed on Japanese paper, was published as the third print in Part 2 of the Second Series (Figure 7). The new proofs corresponded to the original print publication in the December 1880 issue; a side-by-side comparison between this fine-art print Long Island Kitchen and the Long Island Kitchen illustration included in the bound Volume II indicates that these images were printed from the same woodblock or electrotyped metal plate. Muhrman's creation had become a commodity.

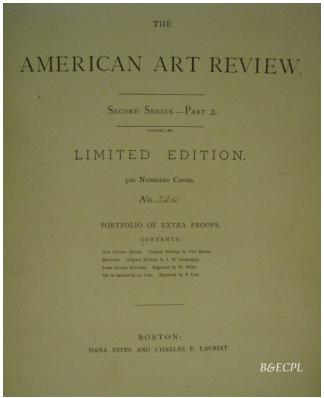


Figure 7. Second Series – Part 2; The American Art Review's Portfolio of Extra Proofs, Sylvester Rosa Koehler, editor, Boston, Massachusetts: Dana Estes & Charles E. Lauriat, 1881. Reproduction by Permission of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, New York

However, the intent and market for this edition of Long Island Kitchen were different. In the Portfolio of Extra Proofs, Long Island Kitchen was published in a folio separate from the letterpress text of McLaughlin's article. Detaching from its role as an illustration of a scholarly study, the folio run forced consumers to interpret the illustration of Muhrman's original work as they wished. The Portfolio of Extra Proofs presumeably appealed to those consumers who merely wished to obtain fine-art prints. Unlike the prior print iterations of Long Island Kitchen, which were valued for their depiction of Muhrman's watercolor technique, this edition of Long Island Kitchen shifted the focus to Miller's wood engraving technique. Miller, not Muhrman, was credited as the artist on the exterior of the folio (Figure 7). Or was the real artist Sylvester Koehler who assembled, edited and marketed the iterations of these art works? The nature of the collecting market for this Long Island Kitchen is elusive: would collectors have been interested in the print as an example of exceptional wood engraving, or for its meaningful imagery? What would collectors have done with their copy? Some of these portfolios remain intact in library collections, but as this copy of Long Island Kitchen at Winterthur shows, other portfolios were dismantled, perhaps for display or reasons of inheritance. These questions address the interwoven processes of creating, distributing, and consuming art in late nineteenth-century America. The meanings of art works are elusive because the objects are always entangled in narratives of creation, layers of hopeful exchange, moments of disappointment, and human effort.

¹ George McLaughlin, "Cincinnati Artists of the Munich School: Second and Concluding Article," *The American Art Review* 2(2): 48; Jeffrey Weidman, *Artists in Ohio* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2000): 623; William H. Brandt, *Interpretive Wood-Engraving: The Story of the Society of American Wood-Engravers* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2009), 134-135; Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York, New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869), 32, 312.

² McLaughlin, "Cincinnati Artists of the Munich School: Second and Concluding Article," 48; Weidman, *Artists in Ohio*, 623.

³ American Water Color Society, *Illustrated Catalogue of the Twelfth Annual Exhibition of the American Water*

Color Society (New York, New York: E. Wells Sackett & Bro., 1879), 20-25; American Water Color Society, Illustrated Catalogue of the Fourteenth Annual Exhibition of the American Water Color Society (New York, New York: E. Wells Sackett & Rankin, 1881), 6-34; Donelson F. Hoopes, "The Emergence of an American Medium," in American Traditions in Watercolor, ed. Susan E. Strickler (New York, New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 28-33.

4 "03310 Henry Muhrmann," Akademie der Bildenden Künste München, accessed August 21, 2014,

- http://matrikel.adbk.de/05ordner/mb_1841-1884/jahr_1876/matrikel-03310; Susanne Böller, "American Artists at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich 1850-1920," in *American Artists in Munich: Artistic Migration and Cultural Exchange Processes*, eds. Christian Fuhrmeister, Hubertus Kohle, Veerle Thielemans (Berlin München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009), 43-46; Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1-34, 213-223; Eric Rosenberg, "J. Frank Currier, Munich and the Anxious State of American Art," in *American Artists in Munich: Artistic Migration and Cultural Exchange Processes*, eds. Christian Fuhrmeister, Hubertus Kohle, Veerle Thielemans (Berlin München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009), 99-106.
- ⁵ William H. Gerdts, "American Tonalism: An Artistic Overview," in *The Poetic Vision: American Tonalism* (New York, New York: Spanierman Gallery, LLC, 2005), 14-28.
- ⁶ Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006), 1-23.
- Abigail Carroll, "Of Kettles and Cranes: Colonial Revival Kitchens and the Performance of National Identity," Winterthur Portfolio 43(4): 335-364; Russell Bastedo, "Introduction," in Brooklyn Before the Bridge: American Paintings from the Long Island Historical Society (Brooklyn, New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 7; Linda S. Ferber, "Our Mr. John M. Falconer," in Brooklyn Before the Bridge: American Paintings from the Long Island Historical Society (Brooklyn, New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 52-53, 64-65; Nancy Carlisle and Melinda Talbot Nasardinov with Jennifer Pustz, America's Kitchens (Boston, Massachusetts: Historic New England, 2008), 71-74; Priscilla Joan Brewer, "Home Fires: Cultural Responses to the Introduction of the Cookstove, 1815-1900" (PhD diss., Brown University, 1987), 4.
- ⁸ Carlisle and Nasardinov, *America's Kitchens*, 82-87; Beecher and Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, *i-xii*; Rosenberg, "J. Frank Currier, Munich and the Anxious State of American Art," 99-106; Gerdts, "American Tonalism," 14-28; Zurier, *Picturing the City*, 1-23.
- ⁹ Hollis Clayson, "Voluntary Exile and Cosmopolitanism in the Transatlantic Arts Community, 1870-1914," in *American Artists in Munich: Artistic Migration and Cultural Exchange Processes*, eds. Christian Fuhrmeister, Hubertus Kohle, Veerle Thielemans (Berlin München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009), 15-26; Weidman, *Artists in Ohio*, 623.
- ¹⁰ "Literary Notes," *The New York Tribune,* June 2, 1879, 6; Clifford S. Ackley, "Sylvester Rosa Koehler and the American Etching Revival," in *Art & Commerce: American Prints of the Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1978), 145; Sylvester Rosa Koehler, "Introduction," *The American Art Review* 1(1): 1-2; Helene Emylou Roberts, *American Art Periodicals of the Nineteenth Century* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press for the Association of College and Research Libraries, 1964), 35-36, 42-43; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume III: 1865-1885* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 185-186.
- ¹¹ Sylvester Rosa Koehler papers, 1833-1904 (bulk 1870-1890), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Brandt, *Interpretive Wood-Engraving*, 134-135; "American Wood-Engravers William Miller," *Scribner's Magazine*, Volume 18 (1895), 525.
- 12 "New Publications," Boston Daily Advertiser, January 3, 1881, 2.
- ¹³ "Literary Notes," *The New York Tribune*, June 2, 1879, 6; "Current Literature," *The Springfield Daily Republican*, June 11, 1879, 8; "New Magazines," *The Inter Ocean*, June 14, 1879, 12; "Now Ready: No. 1 of The American Art Review," *Boston Evening Journal*, November 19, 1879, 3; "The American Art Review," *San Francisco Bulletin*, November 22, 1879, 1; "Letter from Boston," *Worcester Daily Spy*, December 3, 1879, 2.
- ¹⁴ "Valedictory," The American Art Review 2(12): 270.
- ¹⁵ Sylvester Rosa Koehler, ed. *The American Art Review: Volume II* (Boston, Massachusetts: Dana Estes and Charles E. Lauriat, 1881), 45.
- ¹⁶ Florence N. Levy, ed. *American Art Annual, 1898* (New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899), 80; Roberts, *American Art Periodicals of the Nineteenth Century,* 35-36, 42-43.
- ¹⁷ "Literary Notes," The Springfield Republican, June 3, 1881, 8.

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