

Description of the Paintings in the Dome by the Artist, Oliver Dennett Grover, of Chicago

In the decorations of the dome it is designed to illustrate pictorially and in a decorative way the evolution of book-making. The first step in this direction is presumed to be the gathering of Egyptian papyrus with a view to providing materials for scroll inscriptions, which may be regarded as the primitive book-making of the earliest time. This first picture of the series of eight is entitled "Gathering the Papyrus."

The palm, the tall heavy reeds and the simply attired figures in the foreground show almost in silhouette against a warm sky and the reflecting surface of the river at the back, while in the distance rising from the level plain are pyramids tipped with gold by the rays of the declining sun.

"Records of the Pharaohs," the second of the series and also Egyptian, shows another phase of that civilization in the massive architecture, the emblematic ornamentation, the calm dignity and consciousness of power of the dominant race.

The picture represents an officer of the court of Pharaoh with an attendant guard by his side dictating from a papyrus roll which lies open across his knees, to a worker who is transferring the records to the base of a monument. While in this panel sufficient license has been taken to preserve the artistic harmony and decorative composition, the detail of character, costume, ornament and architecture is carefully studied and accurately rendered from correct and acknowledged authorities.

Number three, "Stories of the Iliad," carries us from the land of the lotus to the shadow of the Acropolis. In the land of the ancient Greek those legends and stories finally gathered together and preserved to us by Homer in the form of the Iliad were for ages almost sung by wandering minstrels; committed to memory and transmitted from one to another, from father to son, from generation to generation.

The incident taken to illustrate this period of literary development is that of a minstrel reciting to an interested group of listeners "Stories from the Iliad," while one of them, a Greek youth with stylus and tablet, is transcribing to enduring form the words as they fall from his lips.

In "Mediæval Illumination" is illustrated the illumination of books by white-robed monks. In the soft tones of the picture and the quiet earnestness of the three figures are suggested the infinite patience of those who, counting time as naught in living for eternity, left the world richer than they found it by the exquisite art which, in passing, paved the way for much that is best in what followed it.

In "Venetian Copper-plate Printing" is shown the beginning of the modern tendency towards mechanical reproduction. In comparison with ancient methods it was an extremely rapid and labor-saving way of working. Printing from engraved or etched plates with the clumsy hand press was very early brought to a high state of perfection and for certain kinds of work has never been superseded, nor indeed materially improved upon.

The next important point in the development of the book is taken to be the introduction of movable type, and the sixth panel "First Proof - Gutenberg Bible" supposes the instant when the German inventor, Gutenberg, inspects the first proof of the now famous Gutenberg Bible as it is handed him by his assistant. His interest and anxiety is shared by the wife who stands at his side, and who, it may be believed, was equally anxious with him for the success of the undertaking. The picturesque garb of the time and the quaint details of the interior give local color and artistic life to the composition.

The scene of the seventh picture is laid in America and supposes a printing room in which two men dressed in the costume of Colonial times are operating what is known as the "Franklin Press," an improvement on the old-time machines of Gutenberg and his contemporaries.

In front of the low broad window at the back of the room is seated a man at a table correcting proof and in the foreground lies a pile of books.

The strong daylight from the partially draped window touching only the outlines of the figures, throws them in strong relief against the warm grey of the background, and a glimpse of sunny sky and trees seen through the small panes, gives a strong note of light and color to the scene.

The eighth and last picture deals entirely with that part of book-making which may be and often does amount to a fine art in itself. But the dress of most modern books is put on amid the buzzing of wheels and the clicking of machinery. Such a bindery is here represented as far as the artistic necessities would permit realistic representation.

Shafts, pulleys and belts, steam and electricity would hardly seem hopeful materials from which to build a decorative composition, but a careful adjustment of tones and arrangement of lines, together with its pictorial illustration of the subject, "A Book Bindery – 1895," brings it into harmony with its neighbors and makes it a fitting ending to the series.