Picturing Pittsburgh:

THE CATHARINE R. MILLER COLLECTION AT CHATHAM COLLEGE

By Elisabeth Roark
**PICTURE PITTSBURGH IN 1843.**

From the base of Coal Hill (now Mount Washington), our vista framed by lush foliage, we see commercial, industrial, and domestic buildings crowding the Point. Steamships rub shoulders along the Monongahela River wharf, delivering goods and passengers who ascend a wide, unpaved street. The spire of Third Presbyterian Church and the majestic dome of the Allegheny County Courthouse atop Grant's Hill dominate the modest skyline, and covered wooden bridges connect Pittsburgh with the separate cities of Birmingham and Allegheny.

Such is the city as represented in a rare and superlative engraving titled "Pittsburg" that was published in Nuremberg, Bavaria (now Germany), in the early 1840s. It is one of 40 images of 18th- and 19th-century Pittsburgh recently discovered in a basement cabinet at the Jennie King Mellon Library at Chatham College. The quality of "Pittsburg," exquisitely engraved and printed on thick, cream-colored paper, and its value for the study of antebellum Pittsburgh, is a testament to the importance of this finding.

In addition to "Pittsburg," the collection includes 10 other prints depicting the downtown area between about 1840 and 1878. Two of those were also published abroad, others in Philadelphia and New York City — evidence of both national and international curiosity about the nascent yet thriving industrial center.

Other gems in the collection are maps of General Braddock's ill-fated trek across the Allegheny Mountains in 1755, and General Bouquet's voyage across "le Pays des Indiens" in 1766; a lithograph by Nathaniel Currier of the city's "Great Conflagration" of 1845; and more than a dozen images of Pittsburgh's lost architectural wonders, including a wood engraving of the grand Exposition Buildings erected in 1875 (on the future site of Three Rivers Stadium) and a watercolor of Benjamin Latrobe's Allegheny Arsenal in Lawrenceville, c. 1825.

Chatham's slim file on the collection names Catharine R. Miller, a former Sewickley resident, as the original collector, and indicates that many of the prints were last exhibited publicly in 1949 at the Carnegie Museum of Art. In the 1940s, the prints were considered primarily illustrative or decorative. Today, the growing appreciation of popular art forms has led to an increased understanding of the value of commercial printmaking as a vehicle for the study of social history, demanding recognition of this significant resource.
Catharine Miller was the daughter of Mary Bell Robbins Miller, a Chatham alumna. In her teens, Catharine attended Dilworth Hall, a preparatory school at Chatham College (then Pennsylvania College for Women). In 1937, she designed her own home and gardens on Beaver Road in Sewickley, which became a mainstay of village house and garden tours.

Catharine Miller had a passion for the city of Pittsburgh. In addition to the prints, which compose the bulk of the collection, she donated to the college two paintings by Russell Smith, dozens of early books on the city, and a set of 19th-century Pittsburgh glassware. She was an active volunteer at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and helped coordinate the illustrations for Stefan Lorant's seminal study, *Pittsburgh: Story of an American City* (1964), which contained several works from her collection.

A faded carbon in college files reveals that in 1963, when she composed her will, her intent was "to bequeath a collection of pictures and maps and books on the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania ... in loving memory of my mother, Mary Bell Robbins Miller, who was graduated with the class of 1877 and was the first woman Trustee of the College, serving twenty-five years." When Catharine Miller died in 1965, her collection came to Chatham with no instructions on how it should be displayed or utilized.
Miller’s central impetus as an art collector had only one criterion: that the image have something to do with Pittsburgh. Quality, provenance, and media were lesser concerns, as the images range from inexpensive wood engravings used in illustrated magazines to large-scale chromolithographs one could frame for a home or office.

The earliest prints in the collection, created up to the mid-19th century, are metal plate engravings like “Pittsburg,” a laborious and costly medium that involves hand-carving the image to be printed on a copper or steel plate. By the 1830s, wood engraving and lithography began to supercede metal plate engraving; these cheaper media played a key role in the development of illustrated mass-circulation popular literature. The Miller Collection includes three views of the Point that demonstrate the range of mid-century print technologies. Portrayed from nearly identical locations on the Ohio River and all dated between 1845 and 1855, one is a metal plate engraving (probably stationery letterhead); another is a wood engraving nearly identical to the first used as an illustration for Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion in 1853, and the last is a lithograph, created for The Western Literary Magazine.

Lithography, a much less laborious technique than engraving because it involves simply drawing on a prepared stone, flourished in mid-19th century Pittsburgh as German immigrants settled here and opened print shops. Some of the better-known local lithographers have representative works in the Miller Collection, including William Schuchman (who opened the first lithography studio at Third and Market streets in 1849), Otto Krebs, and William Armor.

Further evidence of Miller’s willingness to preserve what was originally the most prosaic of printed matter is the striking broadside “For Pittsburgh, The Fast Passenger Steamer Oriental,” signed by W. Gillespie. A broadside functioned much like a billboard advertisement does today; its bold letters were intended to attract attention to a steamboat that traveled the Ohio and Mississippi rivers from Pittsburgh to New Orleans beginning in 1848. A wood engraving printed on the thinnest of papers, it was never intended to last 150-odd years. Yet it is such common and ephemeral visual remains that offer compelling evidence about any period culture.

Using graphic conventions and social stereotypes, “For Pittsburgh” illustrates not only a modern steamship, but also the class, gender, and racial distinctions of the period. Top-hatted men occupy the top front deck of the ship, with families and women at

Although not published until 1826, this map shows the city as it was in 1796, with its many fortifications and few developed lots.


This map depicts the Ohio River in 1796, when French officer Victor Collot was ordered by the French minister to the United States to document the region. Navigation marks appear on the river, and Native American settlements are noted on both banks.

The back. The upper decks hold the elegantly dressed, while the lowest deck houses white and African American laborers at work and play.

Some of the most informative works in the Miller Collection are maps of the region, including two exceptional maps from a rare source, French officer Victor Collot's "Voyage dans l'Amérique Septentrionale." Although published in 1826, the maps chart the region in 1796, when the French minister to the United States sent Collot to create "a minute detail of the political, commercial, and military state" of the American mid-west. Collot wrote of Pittsburgh at the time:

Placed at the source of one of the noblest rivers in the world ... this town, when the Indian frontier is thrown back and the roads are rendered practicable, will certainly become one of the foremost inland cities of the United States. The general aspect of the country is delightful.

Another map, "A General Map of the River Ohio," indicates the strategic and economic significance of the Ohio in 1796. Exceptional in both the clarity of the engraving and the sensitive hand-coloring, the map provides fascinating clues of late 18th-century development, such as "M. Kees Port" on the Monongahela south of Pittsburgh, and on the Ohio "Mingo-Town" where, according to an inscription, "The most dangerous parts of the Navigation down the Ohio finish."

Although some would argue that local roads have yet to be "rendered practicable," the prints in the Miller Collection bear out Collot's optimistic prediction. Yet in returning to our view of Pittsburgh in 1843, one must keep in mind that it is not an unmediated record of the site's exact appearance. It also demonstrates the impact of traditional aesthetic formulae then used to create views of modern cities. It is unlikely that the base of Coal Hill sported such handsome plant life, or that the city was so compactly nestled beneath hills that move in an orderly fashion toward the horizon beneath a vast and serene sky. Instead, the artist was influenced by the conventions of the "picturesque" style of landscape composition, stressing the integration of man and nature, and framing human accomplishment within nature's abundance, at the time considered evidence of God's beneficence.

So to understand a visual record of the city as rich as the Miller Collection, one must evaluate not only how the prints embody historical circumstances and the impact of new printmaking techniques, but also explore the artistic conventions of the day and the complex dialogue between 19th-century history, aesthetics, and technology.
The Catharine R. Miller Collection will be on view at the Chatham College Art Gallery in Woodland Hall, January 10 – 27, 2002. Gallery hours are noon – 5 p.m. daily, or by appointment. For more information, call (412) 365-1106.

Chatham College staff welcome inquiries about the prints. As part of the process of cataloging the collection, they also seek information about the subjects of the prints, Catharine R. Miller, and commercial printmaking in Pittsburgh. Contact Elisabeth Roark at roark@chatham.edu.

1 Although “Pittsburg” is undated, the appearance of the second county courthouse, erected in 1841, and the covered wooden bridge at right, which burned in the Great Fire of 1845, suggest a date of c. 1843.

2 Miller Collection File, Chatham College Archives. Mary Bell Robbins Miller was a founding member of the College’s Alumnae Association, a co-editor of the Alumnae Recorder, and an active trustee later honored with a memorial scholarship in her name at her death in 1924. She figures prominently in the early history of the college. See Laberta Dyser, Chatham College: The First Ninety Years (Pittsburgh: Chatham College, 1960). The following students of the Chatham College course “American Art to 1900” conducted the initial research on the prints: Julie Allen, Emily Busse, Jessica Freilino, Ruth Jackson, Kristin Niceswanger, Natalie Palmer, Jacyrin Roman, Midge Soderbergh, and Jenna Trunzo. Thanks are due as well to Irma Smith and Bob Smith of the Jennie King Mellon Library at Chatham College, B. G. Shields of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, and Harley Trice III.

3 Both the stationary letterhead and the wood engraving for Gleason’s appear to be based on a painting of the city created by John Frankenstein of Cincinnati in 1844, with minor changes in the bridges, the boats on the river, and the figures on the path. See the exhibition catalogue The Artist Looks at Industrial Pittsburgh, 1836–1993 (University Art Gallery, University of Pittsburgh, 1993) 1, 4.

4 Georges Victor Collot, Voyage dans l’Amérique Septentrionale, vol. 2 (Paris, 1826) 58–59. Collot’s account of his journey was published in a French edition of 300 copies and an English translation (the source of the maps in the Miller Collection) of only 100 copies.