

Untitled

August 11, 2005

Frank Martin

January 14, 1921 - July 29, 2005

Illustrator and teacher whose confident draughtsmanship graced many books and exhibitions

Most of Frank Martin's output was commercial in a purposeful way. At a time when illustrative and decorative art in Britain flourished in publishing, journalism and advertising, he proudly called himself a "jobbing artist" — and no one could deny the technical range of his accomplishments. It is a measure of his success that in the 1970s he held no fewer than 11 one-man shows. He was also one of the longest-serving illustrators for the Folio Society.

Martin's work often had a playful quality. The sidelong glances, ripped bodices and cartoonish features (sometimes practically asking for speech bubbles) were all indications that he did not want to be taken solemnly. Even his titles could be flirtatiously playful: *The Charms of Music*, for instance, shows a voluptuous girl on a chaise longue, flower in hand and a large gramophone horn behind. Naked girls were undoubtedly his favourite subjects, and he drew, painted, etched and engraved them repeatedly.

He was a confident draughtsman, using strong shapes and swaggering lines full of movement. His images are straightforward, clear and affectionate - and this goes also for his ruffians, buildings and scenery, and the many period illustrations he produced in a very long career. He found the fun in top hats and palfreys, in tall ships and minarets, but also in different artistic conventions: the cartouche, the engraved title-page, the bookplate, the zodiac.

Frank Vernon Martin was born in Dulwich in 1921. His mother was an actress, and his father, a scientist, was secretary of the Royal Institution and the biographer of Faraday.

Martin went to Uppingham, from where he won a history scholarship

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to Hertford College, Oxford, in 1939. After a short wartime degree at Oxford, he was commissioned into the Royal Artillery in 1941. He married Peg the following year.

After the war he went to St Martin's School of Art, where he studied with Gertrude Hermes and Clifford Webb.

His first commercial work was drawing fashion for The Sunday Times in 1949-50, after which he began his career as a book-illustrator. Though new to printmaking, he soon found himself secretary to the Society of Wood Engravers, through which he met the artist John Buckland-Wright, who found him a post at Camberwell School of Art, where he was to teach for 27 years. He was promoted to senior lecturer in 1965, and was head of graphic design from 1976 through the four years to his retirement.

In 1964 Martin was asked by Evelyn Waugh to design a letterhead for his new home. The following year he cut roundels of Tennyson and Browning for the covers of the volumes in the Oxford Standard Authors series. Through Buckland-Wright, Martin met the founder of the Folio Society, Charles Ede, who commissioned 11 two-colour wood-engravings for an edition of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of St Luis Rey* (1956). There were seven more major Folio Society commissions in the succeeding ten years, as well as books for Reader's Digest and smaller imprints.

In 1961 his work was shown in an exhibition at the Folio Society, but from 1966 Martin took a 15-year break from book-illustration, beginning instead a long series of prints of Hollywood actresses of the silent movie era, which were sold in London and the US. In 1964 he had made a large two-colour woodcut of five Ziegfeld Follies girls, and images of stars such as Jean Harlow and Norma Talmadge were to follow.

The series appealed to latterday celebrities, and Elton John and Michael Caine were among those who bought prints.

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By 1970 Martin had enough Hollywood subjects for an exhibition at the Roundhouse marking the 75th anniversary of cinema. Although he disliked the pretensions of some stars, he was delighted when Harold Lloyd opened the show and visited his Chiswick studio with his granddaughters, “who sat on the edge of a plan chest swinging their brown Californian legs and smiling their wide and generous American smiles”.

The Folio Society tempted Martin back to illustration in 1982, asking for 15 engravings for *The Diary of a Young Lady of Fashion*, after which the resurgent private press movement provided a number of other commissions. Notable among these were the illustrations for *The Pleasant History of Lazarillo de Tormes*, published by David Esslemont at Gwasg Gregynog in Wales in 1991, and Martin’s own *Newhaven-Dieppe*, published by the Previous Parrot Press in 1996.

Most important of all, though, was the first proper survey of Martin’s output, the Previous Parrot’s elegant folio edition of his wood-engravings — along with some woodcuts, linocuts and vinyl engravings — in 1998. This included not only a list of all of the known relief prints and books, but also a knowledgeable and comprehensive biographical introduction by the art historian Hal Bishop.

The following year Martin’s own choice of 28 engravings and woodcuts appeared in the Primrose Academy’s series *The Engraver’s Cut*, printed by Sebastian Carter at the Rampant Lions Press. An exhibition of his other work was held at the National Film Theatre.

Martin, who continued working into his eighties, was an honorary academician of the Royal Academy and a member of the *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno*, Florence.

Frank Martin, artist, was born on January 14, 1921. He died on July 29, 2005, aged 84.