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# Thereby Hangs *A Mouse's Tale*: Gillett Griffin and the Graphic Arts

REBECCA WARREN DAVIDSON

The title of this essay refers most directly to a book Gillett Good Griffin wrote, illustrated, and printed while he was at the Yale School of Fine Arts (fig. 1). For many of his wide circle of students, colleagues, and friends, however, the phrase could also characterize Gillett himself. Like a character in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, from which the famous line "and thereby hangs a tale" is taken,<sup>1</sup> Gillett appears in the guise of an ordinary, amiable fellow, but also inhabits another world, one rich in fantasy, art, and theatrical good humor, all of which—even more remarkably—he is willing to share with everyone he meets. An encounter with Gillett always increases one's knowledge and understanding of one of the many topics on which he is an expert. At the same time, it is also an "occasion" and a reminder that serious subjects may be leavened with a dash of lightheartedness, and liberally spiced with the puns and other wordplay for which Gillett is legendary.

What makes a person care about graphic arts? How is a love of fine printing instilled and nurtured? In Gillett's case, his youthful interest in collecting and the visual sensitivity he developed as a painter were undoubtedly two determining factors. While a student at Deerfield Academy, which he entered in 1942 at the age of fourteen, he began to collect early New England children's books. Within a decade, he had amassed a library of more than eight hundred volumes written for children and published before 1846.<sup>2</sup> Gillett also began other collections during his student days, among them a group of artifacts of early American culture. (His purchase, for one dollar, of a pair of candlesnuffers marked with the initials "T.R." that ultimately turned out to have been made by Paul Revere's brother Thomas has also become legendary.) Another influence was the town of Deerfield's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture, at that time in various states of preservation, but an especially favorable environment for the development of his taste and knowledge.

Gillett is not merely a collector, notwithstanding his remarkable collections. He is himself an artist and source of creative inspiration for others. He began painting seriously at the age of twelve, and in 1947 entered the Yale School of Fine Arts to study painting and graphic design. A course in typography taught by Alvin Eisenman, the designer for Yale University Press, was a turning point in his developing

interest in letterpress printing and book design, and at his graduation with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1951, Gillett styled himself Yale's "first student of typography and graphic arts." While at Yale, Gillett also purchased his first Japanese prints, thus beginning another lifelong collecting interest, and—intimations of things to come—a bronze Ordos mule deer from the dealer Mathias Komor. Yale was also the scene of Gillett's first adventures in publishing, for it was in the typography studio there that he hand set and printed a book he had written and illustrated, based on a story his mother had told him as a child.<sup>3</sup> *A Mouse's Tale* was subsequently designated by the American Institute of Graphic Arts as one of their "Fifty Books of the Year" for 1951, a singular honor for Gillett's youthful achievement.<sup>4</sup>

The perfect career opportunity followed immediately upon this early success. Gillett learned from Alvin Eisenman that Elmer Adler, Princeton's first curator of Graphic Arts, was planning to retire in 1952. Adler had been recruited to Princeton by the Friends of the Library in 1940, with a mandate to create a department focusing on the history of the book, fine printing, and the graphic arts. Adler's remarkable success in carrying out this task was a direct result of his own lifelong interest in the subjects, his experience during the 1920s and 1930s in the revival of the book arts by founding the Pynson Printers and *The Colophon*, and his wide circle of friends and acquaintances in artistic and publishing circles. At Princeton, Adler taught courses for undergraduates in collecting and connoisseurship, the history of the book, and book illustration. He created what would become one of the great university collections in graphic arts and the history of the book, using his personal assemblage of books and prints as the nucleus. Adler also began the Princeton Print Club, whose members had the privilege of borrowing original prints from the Graphic Arts Collection, as well as the opportunity to purchase each year a specially commissioned print of a Princeton scene, and to participate in the extensive program of lectures, demonstrations, and master classes with the many visiting artists he invited to campus each year.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that Adler had already handpicked his successor, Alvin Eisenman encouraged Gillett to apply for the job. He came down from New Haven for an interview, was acknowledged the perfect candidate, and thus began his remarkable career at Princeton.

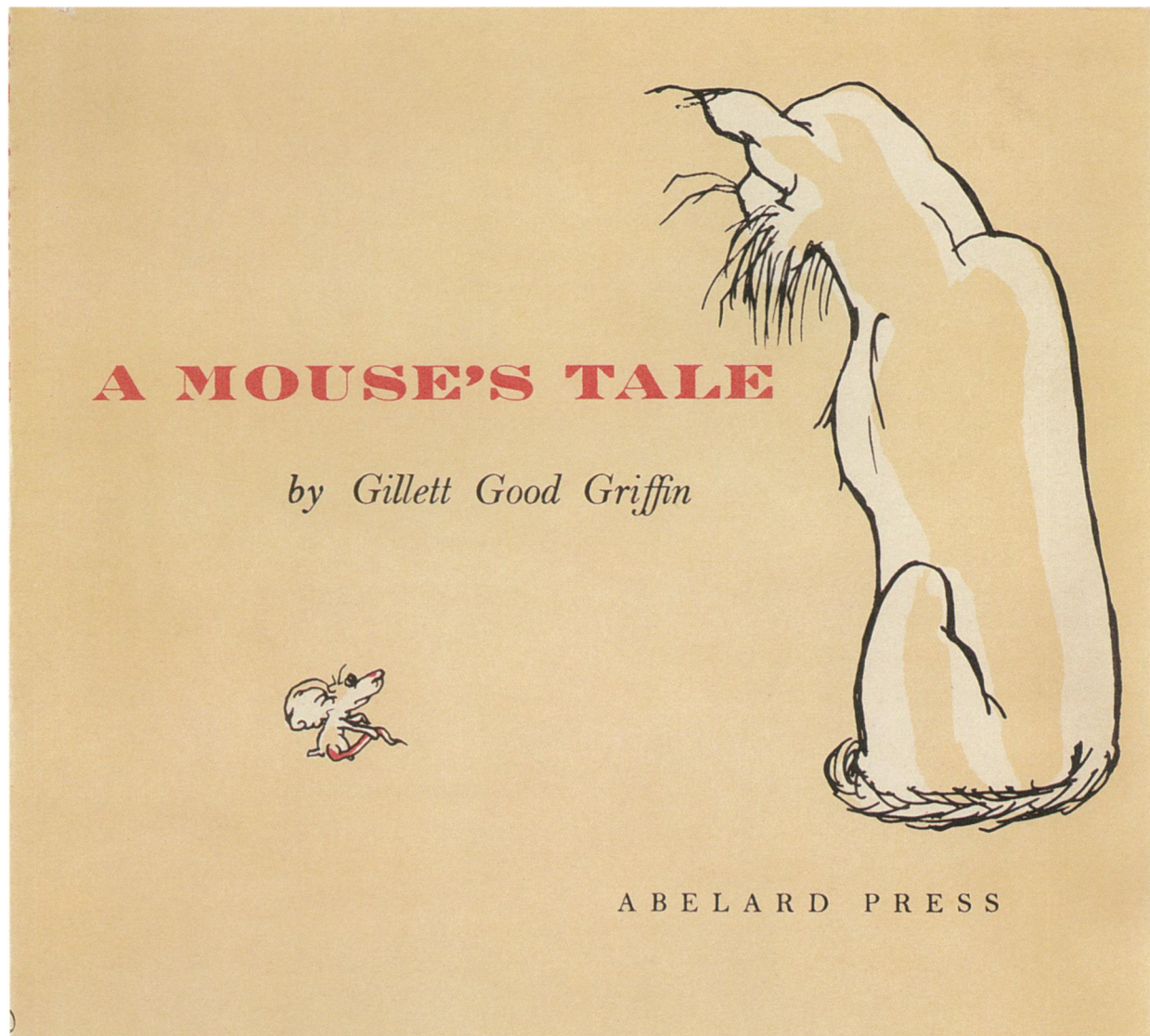


Figure 1. Gillett Good Griffin, *A Mouse's Tale*, 1951. Cover illustration and letterpress printing by Gillett Griffin. Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library (photograph: John Blazewski).

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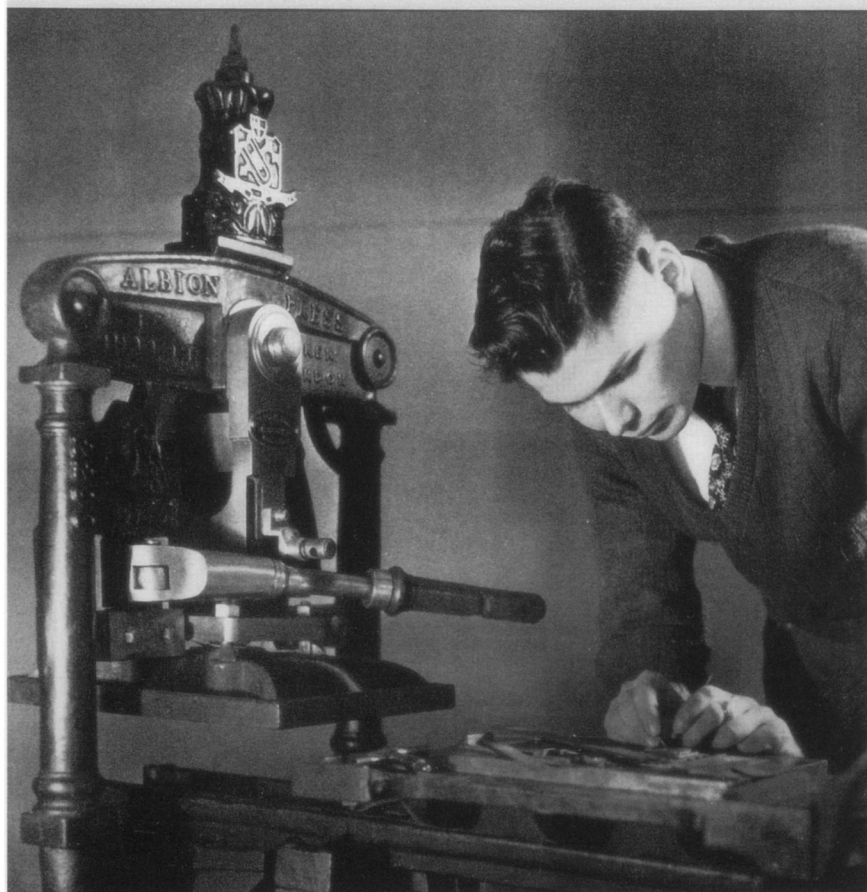


Figure 2. Gillett Griffin making up a page of type on the Albion iron handpress. Cover of the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 1952. Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library (photograph: John Blazejewski).

Gillett initiated his curatorship of Graphic Arts in the summer of 1952 by moving the collection from its home at 36 University Place into spacious new quarters in Firestone Library.<sup>6</sup> His acquisitions budget that first year—and for several subsequent years—was \$1,000, making collection-building a challenge, to say the least. One of his first notable purchases, a copy of the catalogue for an exhibition of the

German Expressionist group *Die Brücke*, is now one of the treasures of the collection for its original prints by Erich Heckel, Ernst Kirchner, Max Pechstein, and others.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, Gillett's acquisitions budget was supplemented by generous gifts from Princeton alumni, Friends of the Library, and others. A short list of the most significant items acquired during Gillett's tenure as gifts, or with the help of

outside funding, includes the first published book to be illustrated with photographs, *The Pencil of Nature*; mint copies of Alfred Stieglitz's classic portfolios *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work*; *The Handmade Papers of Japan*, a definitive work including samples of plants used to make paper; and a complete set of Whistler's etchings of Venice.<sup>8</sup>

Gillett was also busy during these years continuing Adler's program of lectures, informal courses, and print lending. Thanks to his efforts, the Graphic Arts Collection remained a hospitable venue for visiting printmakers and book artists, and a resource where students and faculty could take classes in book and printing history, printmaking, bookbinding, and calligraphy (including Gillett's popular "History of the Alphabet"), ask questions, and engage in lively discussion. Graphic Arts exhibitions during these years were a thought-provoking mix of material from the collection and the work of both promising new artists and established names such as printmaker and book illustrator Joseph Low. Exhibitions of ephemera ranged from cigar-box art as a demonstration of the development of color lithography, to "modern" record album covers showing contemporary methods of popular illustration. Photography was a perennial interest, particularly the first photo-illustrated books, and the work of Princeton students such as Robert McCabe, Class of 1956, whose studies of Greece were on view in 1955. Gillett's own artistic abilities also contributed to exhibitions in the library's main gallery. His talent for arranging and displaying materials, selecting background colors, and creating posters and invitations was often acknowledged over the years. In the case of the *Americans in Paris* exhibition held in 1956, Gillett's line drawings also graced the catalogue.<sup>9</sup>

The Graphic Arts typography studio had found a home on the C Floor of Firestone Library in 1954, and its teaching capabilities had been enriched by the gift of a large serigraph press in 1955, as well as a complete set of hand binding equipment. Another gift funded the purchase of a lithograph press. Also in 1955, Dale Roylance came from California to join the staff as Gillett's capable assistant.<sup>10</sup> Together, they continued to teach letterpress printing on the Albion iron handpress, which had been given to the library in honor of Adler's retirement. Gillett (figs. 2 and 3), Dale, and their students, as well as other library staff and a few Princeton faculty, hand set and printed invitations,



Figure 3. Gillett Griffin, *Self-Portrait at the Typecase*, ca. 1952. Graphite on paper. Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library (photograph: John Blazejewski).

announcements, and posters for library-sponsored events. By 1960, the talented printer Carol Stoddard was opening the typography studio every Wednesday evening for Princeton students who wanted to learn to set type, and many of them took advantage of this opportunity to design and print a unique title page for their senior theses. Gillett's printing experiments, however, were not limited to type on paper. He recalls discovering a collection of ancient seals in the library, and having his students print them on clay,



continuing a tradition he had begun at Yale with a group of Babylonian cylinder seals and at the Pierpont Morgan Library with examples from their collections.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most significant enterprises undertaken while Gillett was curator of Graphic Arts was the compilation and publication of the catalogue of the Sinclair Hamilton Collection, *Early American Book Illustrators and Wood Engravers, 1670–1870*.<sup>12</sup> Hamilton, Class of 1906, assembled a definitive collection of early American printing, not only of books but also broadsides, currency, and stock certificates, as well as newspapers and periodical literature of particular significance for their illustrations. Because letterpress printing is a relief process, the simplest way to illustrate a hand-printed work is with woodcuts or wood engravings, which are also executed in type-high relief. Thus Hamilton's collection is by default one of the most complete assemblages in existence of early American woodcuts and wood engravings. It includes many rare items, one of which is the first known print made in America, John Foster's woodcut portrait of Richard Mather, ca. 1670.<sup>13</sup> Gillett made a particular study of this print, and developed the theory, based on his observations of the two blocks of which it is composed, that Princeton's impression is actually the second state of the work.<sup>14</sup>

Hamilton gave his collection to Graphic Arts in 1945, and he continued to supplement it with additional finds every year until his death in 1978.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent purchases of appropriate material by Gillett and other curators of the Graphic Arts Collection have continued to enrich Hamilton's original gift, which is an essential resource not only for the study of American illustration before 1870 but also, since its subject matter was never limited, of American social life, customs, technology, landscape, religion, and a myriad of other topics. In addition to his scholarly research on the Mather portrait and other items in the collection, Gillett worked closely with Sinclair Hamilton and with P. J. Conkwright, the catalogue's designer, in the selection and arrangement of the book's many illustrations.<sup>16</sup>

In 1957 Gillett took a leave of absence from Graphic Arts in order to design books for Princeton University Press. His work on Frank Jewett Mather Jr.'s critical study, *Charles Herbert Moore, Landscape Painter*, won for Gillett another award from the American Institute of Graphic Arts when

they judged his effort one of the fifty best-designed books of that year. He had not lost his touch.<sup>17</sup> By the mid-1960s, though, Gillett decided it was time for a change. Throughout his tenure as Curator of Graphic Arts, Gillett had taken an active role in lobbying for an increased presence for the fine arts in Princeton's curriculum. The university, for example, had never allowed credit for the courses given in graphic arts; nor was there any formal means for Princeton students to pursue training in any of the fine arts. His advocacy ultimately resulted in the university's allocating space for a program in creative arts at 185 Nassau Street, still its home today. Even so, Gillett decided to resign his position as curator of Graphic Arts in 1966. He immediately headed for Mexico to begin the next chapter of his life. The happy results—his discoveries, collections, writings, teaching, mentoring, and curating in the arts of ancient America—are detailed in the other articles in this volume.

Gillett's legacy to the world of fine printing and graphic arts is multifaceted. Specifically at Princeton, he brought the Graphic Arts Collection to its present and, we hope, permanent, home in the library, and has continued ever since as its staunch advocate. He solidified its reputation as a haven of scholarship in the history of the book and printing through his program of exhibitions, lectures, and classes. His skill as an artist and teacher—the fluidity of his pen and his brain—has left us with remarkable and beautiful examples of his drawings and letterpress printing.<sup>18</sup> He has inspired and taught many students, scholars, and collectors in the fields of children's literature, Japanese prints, and book and printing history. His personal gifts to the Graphic Arts Collection, both past and promised, enrich its holdings. To many of us, however, Gillett's most valuable legacy is his ability to bring people together and to foster the resulting happy alliances. This is particularly true of his position as a liaison between the worlds of the museum and the library, both of which he inhabits and informs with grace, joy, wisdom, and good humor. Meanwhile, in the Graphic Arts Collection, the materials relating to Gillett—his collecting, teaching, and original art—are now, by a happy coincidence, numbered "GCOOI," that is, "first among the collections" in Graphic Arts. Given his legacy as curator, teacher, scholar, and friend to the collection, such a designation seems most appropriate.

## NOTES

1. *As You Like It*, act II, scene vii, line 28.
2. Since 1970, Gillett Griffin's children's books have been part of the collections of the Pierpont Morgan Library Department of Printed Books.
3. Gillett Good Griffin, *A Mouse's Tale* (New York, 1952). Gillett originally handprinted 80 copies on a press at Yale in 1951. Abelard published the trade edition the following year. Long out of print, *A Mouse's Tale* was reissued in a limited letterpress edition, with a new introduction by Gillett Griffin, by the Wells College Press of Aurora, New York, in December 2003.
4. *50 Books of the Year 1951, 30th Annual Exhibition of American Bookmaking* (New York, 1951), unpagged (cat. no. 12). Gillett also illustrated a number of other books during these years, among them *Alexander Hamilton, Nation Builder*, by Nathan Schachner (New York, 1952); *Children of Deerfield*, by Kelsey Flower (Deerfield, Mass., 1952); and *Pets, A Complete Handbook on the Care, Understanding, and Appreciation of all Kinds of Animal Pets*, by Frances N. Chrystie (Boston, 1953). The latter title is so popular that it is now in its fourth edition.
5. For more information about Elmer Adler and the early years of the Graphic Arts Collection at Princeton, see *Elmer Adler in the World of Books* (Princeton, 1964).
6. Adler had resisted moving into the library, preferring the relative freedom of town to what he perceived as the strictures of gown, specifically those of being part of the library bureaucracy. Thus, the first home of the Graphic Arts Collection was at 40 Mercer Street in Princeton, which was also Adler's personal residence. This house was sold in 1945, necessitating the move to 36 University Place.
7. *Ausstellung von Künstlergruppe Brücke im Kunstsalon Fritz Gurlitt* (Berlin, 1912).
8. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London, 1844); *Camera Notes* (New York, 1897–1903); *Camera Work* (New York, 1903–17); *The Handmade Papers of Japan* (Rutland, Vt., and Tokyo, 1952); James Abbott McNeill Whistler Collection, Graphic Arts Visual Collection GC045.
9. "Americans in Paris: Catalogue of an Exhibition," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* [hereafter *PULC*] 17 (summer 1956): 191–259.
10. Dale Roylance became Gillett's assistant in graphic arts in 1955. In 1960, he became Curator of the Arts of the Book at Yale, returning to Princeton in 1979 as the new Curator of Graphic Arts. Subsequent to his retirement in 1995, he continued to serve as half-time Curator of the Sinclair Hamilton Collection until 2001.
11. Gillett recalls that Frederick Adams, at that time director of the Pierpoint Morgan Library, wrote that library staff were "delighted that our seals have had offspring at Yale." Letter from Gillett Griffin to the author, June 25, 2005.
12. *Early American Book Illustrators and Wood Engravers, 1670–1870* (Princeton, 1958). A second, supplementary volume was published by Princeton University Press in 1968.
13. John Foster's portrait of Richard Mather was actually presented to Princeton University Library in memory of Frank Jewett Mather Jr. by his wife, son, and daughter, but was later deemed an appropriate addition to the Hamilton Collection.
14. For more on this, see *Early American Book Illustrators*, 2 (cat. no. 1), and Gillett Good Griffin, "John Foster's Woodcut of Richard Mather," *Printing and Graphic Arts* 7 (Feb. 1959): 1–19. On the general topic of the woodcuts in the collection, see Gillett G. Griffin, "The Development of Woodcut Printing in America," *PULC* 20 (autumn 1958): 7–17.
15. In 1954, Hamilton also established a fund to help maintain the collection; *PULC* 15 (winter 1954): 110.
16. The original volume of *Early American Book Illustrators and Wood Engravers* also received a "Fifty Books" award from the American Institute of Graphic Arts as one of the best-designed books of 1958. The talented P. J. Conkwright was a perennial winner for his designs for Princeton University Press and other publishers.
17. *Fifty Books of the Year 1957, Catalog of the Annual Exhibition* (New York, 1958), unpagged (cat. no. 10).
18. A selection of the delightful vignettes with which Gillett illustrates his letters was published as Gillett Good Griffin, *Drawn from His Letters: A Collection of One Hundred Fifty-Four Drawings Drawn for Friends* (Bryn Mawr, Penn., 1994).