

The North Carolina Etchings of Louis Orr

by Elizabeth Copeland
Sheppard Memorial Library
Greenville, North Carolina

Louis Orr's etchings of North Carolina are magnificent reflections of the architecture, culture, history and social life of this state. The subjects range from the Biltmore House in Asheville to Fayetteville's Old Market, from Grandfather Mountain to the Wright Memorial. Fifty in number, they hang in libraries, public buildings, museums and private collections.

They are historical and they are beautiful. People never cease to be amazed at their intricate and delicate details. Although viewers have enjoyed and appreciated them through the years, few know how they came to be.

It was the late Robert Lee Humber who had the dream and caused it to become a reality. An extraordinary "man with a purpose" he believed that "a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a Heaven for?"

Dr. Humber was born in Greenville and received bachelor of arts and law degrees from Wake Forest. After service in World War I he went to Harvard and was awarded a graduate degree. As a Rhodes Scholar he attended New College at Ox-

ford, England and went on to the University of Paris for research in the history of law. He received honorary degrees from other universities.

For seventeen years he lived in Paris where he attained a reputation as an international lawyer and business executive. He was there when World War II came and fled Europe just fifty-five hours before Hitler invaded Paris.

Returning to his native North Carolina he began work immediately on a movement for world peace. He persuaded his friends and neighbors to support his resolution for a world federation. So great was his belief and so magic his salesmanship that he received endorsement for his theory from North Carolina's General Assembly and sixteen other states.

In 1945 Dr. Humber represented the Southern Council on International Relations at the San Francisco Conference which formulated the United Nations Charter. Although world federalism did not materialize during his lifetime he never gave up the concept and always believed that one day it would come to be.

He turned then to culture and with inspired vision and leadership he helped to found the North Carolina Museum of Art. With a bit of daring and on a hunch he suggested that the late Samuel Kress endow a proposed museum with a million dollars in art by promising to match it in North Carolina. Believing the feat impossible Mr. Kress agreed. And then Dr. Humber did a work of pure genius. Single-handedly, he persuaded Governor Greg Cherry and the North Carolina Legislature to appropriate one million dollars to purchase works of art. The North Carolina Museum is one of the few of its kind in the nation. All individuals associated with it agree that without Robert Lee Humber's incredible salesmanship it never would have materialized. As long as he lived he worked for it, traveling from one end of the country to the other urging donors to contribute to it.

As a State Senator in 1961 Dr. Humber introduced the bill which created the Governor's Award for "notable accomplish-

ments by North Carolina citizens in the fields of scholarship, research, fine arts and public leadership." Modeled after the Nobel prizes, the gold medal award is presented annually by the Governor at a dinner and reception. This program is typical of its originator who believed that "people should be reminded constantly of notable creative achievers in their midst."

Robert Lee Humber's life ended quickly in November 1970 as he sat in a local theater with his wife and watched *War and Peace*. Educated at Wake Forest, Harvard and Oxford he made his mark in the world and then came home to enrich the lives of his people. He was an inspired leader who had great dreams and was willing to work to make them come true. He never lost sight of his goals — to educate the people and improve the quality of life.

Significantly, he persuaded Mr. Orr to produce the North Carolina etchings. Here is his own story of how it happened.

History of the Etchings of North Carolina

by Robert Lee Humber

During the seventeen years I was privileged to live in Paris, I learned with deep satisfaction that the greatest living etcher of our generation was recognized to be an American, Louis Orr, who was born in Connecticut, and was a graduate of the Ecole des Beaux Arts and a resident of Paris since about 1905.

In the course of time, we met and became friends. I proposed to Mr. Orr that he undertake to do the most outstanding

work of his career on North Carolina: a series of fifty etchings, plus a large size State Capitol. Mr. Orr declined to consider this proposal at first and consistently rejected it thereafter, declaring he could not afford to concentrate so much of his time on one specific area.

It was in June, 1939 when I was with one of my clients in Texas that I received a cable from my secretary in Paris, stating that Mr. Orr was embarking on the Nor-

mandy. Louis Orr was coming to America to deliver his superb etching of the Temple of Learning of the University of Pittsburgh. I met him at the pier in New York and invited him to be my guest at the Commodore Hotel where we discussed leisurely the different aspects of this project for several days. I emphasized to him again the desirability of his doing a work of great magnitude on North Carolina: fifty etchings of uniform dimensions and a large size State Capitol.

Two problems engaged Mr. Orr: the length of time that it would require him to execute such an important commission and the nominal price of ten dollars per etching that I had proposed in order to permit their acquisition by schools, colleges, public libraries, and institutions with limited resources, as well as individuals with moderate means.

Orr's real dilemma can be appreciated, when one considers that a work by him of comparable importance to the North Carolina etchings was then selling in Paris for a price ranging from fifty to one hundred dollars. For him to consent to release the North Carolina etchings for an average price of ten dollars per etching demanded not only a formula of special financing, which I personally provided, but also a professional consideration of the current market value of his work.

Orr finally consented to do the fifty etchings plus the State Capitol, but he insisted that they be sold in albums of five etchings each. He explained that he could not afford to sell one etching for ten dollars, but that he would assemble five etchings in an album and sell one etching for fifty dollars, and because the purchaser liked his work so much he would give the remaining four etchings in the album "for nothing." It was only in this manner that he was able to reconcile himself psychologically to the proposed sale price, making this project, as I so much desired, a cultural undertaking and not a commercial enterprise.

I did not want, however, to impose upon Mr. Orr any arrangement that would work to his financial disadvantage; hence, my acceptance of the special formula for financing the project. A purchaser, I was sure, could understand readily the tremendous artistic value he was receiving for the modest sum representing the sales price of the North Carolina etchings.

The triptych of Rheims Cathedral by Orr sold originally for four hundred and fifty dollars. I do not believe that it can be purchased today for several times that figure. His etching of the Pont Neuf was released for one hundred and fifty dollars. When I tried some years later to obtain one through his Parisian dealer, I was informed that he had had a standing order for some time to try to locate one of these prints and to pay as high as five hundred dollars for it. I have never been able to acquire one, even with Orr's personal collaboration.

During the twelve years from 1939 to 1951 which Orr devoted exclusively to the etching of the North Carolina plates, I requested him to come back to the state occasionally to do additional subjects, including the Bellamy House in Wilmington. Before returning north he came by Greenville to see me, and after showing me the drawing of this edifice he requested me to remove it from the North Carolina collection and to authorize him to sell this item independently in Paris. He said that a Frenchman would pay for this etching alone the sum of one hundred and fifty dollars, buying it as a work of beauty as Americans go abroad and purchase European cathedrals and ruins of ancient monuments. Commenting rather wistfully on that occasion, he said that he wondered if the people of North Carolina realized what he was attempting to do for them.

For a period of years prior to 1939, in an effort to obtain a financial underwriting of this project, I had consulted in North Carolina with Governor Clyde Hoey in the hope that the Department of Con-

servation and Development might be interested. In Washington I conferred with the Works Projects Administration for the same purpose, but in each instance without success. Though assuring me during my visit to his office in Washington that the W.P.A. would certainly be disposed to underwriting such a project, the assistant director of this organization later wrote me in Paris that after investigation he had discovered Mr. Orr was one of the most eminent of living artists, which fact excluded any participation by the W.P.A. in the undertaking inasmuch as it was the policy of the W.P.A. to assist only artists who were struggling to be recognized.

It should be remembered also that Yale University, desiring to honor its distinguished alumnus William Howard Taft at the time of his elevation to the Chief Justiceship of the United States Supreme Court, engaged Orr to do an etching of the national capitol. It was a work of such rare excellence and extra-ordinary beauty that the State Department requested as many prints as the United States had embassies throughout the world. The French government selected Orr, from among the artists of all nations, to do the highly coveted assignment of etching the centennial portrait of Louis Pasteur. Orr was also awarded the distinction of the French Legion of Honor.

When Mr. Orr completed his commission on North Carolina in 1951, I went to the United Nations to suggest that a magnificent work on this institution be executed as a symbol of world unity. Mr. Cohen, Director of the Fine Arts Department, approved the idea, but told me that he would defer his decision until he could confer with the greatest living etcher of our time, who resided in Paris, and ascertain if he was available to accept the commission. I inquired the name of the artist that Mr. Cohen had in mind, and he replied: "It is Louis Orr." This assignment was actually given to Orr, who did a remarkable etching of the United Nations before his departure for France.

The director of a leading museum in the East recently remarked to me that the three greatest etchers of all times were Rembrandt in the seventeenth century, Piranesi in the eighteenth, and Louis Orr in the twentieth.

Prior to my leaving Paris in 1940, the works of only two Americans were in the Louvre Museum: James McNeill Whistler, represented by the portrait of his mother; and eleven plates by Louis Orr. Incidentally, Orr was the first living artist of any nation whose works were admitted to the Louvre Museum. Before that event, the French Government purchased the work of an artist, placed it in the Luxemburg Museum and, if it were subsequently adjudged worthy, admitted it to the Louvre Museum twenty-five years after the death of the artist. The Curator of the Louvre Museum declared that it was absolutely unnecessary to wait until twenty-five years after the death of the artist to accept the Pont Neuf among the art treasures of this institution, and he received it at once.

I shall never forget the keen animation and eagerness manifested by the members of the staff of the Library of Congress when I took an album of etchings to that institution to have them copyrighted. Work among all employees would cease immediately, while they gathered to scrutinize the details of each of Mr. Orr's new creations, and a dramatic interlude of glowing admiration and appreciation of the talents of this artist would ensue spontaneously.

Some years ago the University of North Carolina Press approached me to transfer to it the distribution of the Louis Orr etchings on North Carolina, and being favorably impressed by this suggestion, I went to Chapel Hill to sign a contract to give effect to this objective. I discovered, however, that it stipulated in the proposed contract that the sales price would be one hundred dollars per album. This provision I declined to accept, for it would have defeated my desire and hope to have

the etchings lodged permanently with institutions and individuals of moderate means, yet with a profound appreciation of the artistic accomplishments of our forebears.

At the conclusion of the conference in New York at the Commodore Hotel when Mr. Orr agreed to undertake this commission, he came directly to North Carolina and spent considerable time in examining approximately four or five thousand photographs in the Department of Conservation and Development. He conferred also with Dr. Christopher Crittenden, director of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History and with Dr. R. D. W. Connor, professor of North Carolina History at the University of North Carolina. I also submitted to Mr. Orr approximately seventy-five items for his consideration, following the acceptance by him of this commission.

During a period of approximately twelve months, Orr rode about six thousand miles over the state of North Carolina, visiting its diverse geographical and historical centers. Though he selected the original subjects for his freehand drawings, we agreed mutually upon the fifty etchings which were ultimately included in the North Carolina Collection. A few drawings by him of our state were not able to be incorporated in the final work.

Orr has accepted self-imposed discipline and has pursued methodical habits of work throughout his life. It has been his custom to rise regularly at six o'clock, pursue his assignments during the morning and afternoon, take some exercise (usually a walk) before dinner, and then retire promptly at nine o'clock in the evening. There was nothing Bohemian in his personal life or professional activities. Knowing how rigorously he followed the foregoing schedule, I waited on one occasion when I was in New York to call him in Hartford, Connecticut exactly at nine o'clock. My salutation to him was: "Louis, where are you?" His reply was: "In bed. I have just retired."

When Orr arrived in a community, he would study leisurely the various buildings that he wanted to consider, and after making his decision would observe what time of day the best lights and shadows were reflected. At the indicated hour, he would appear with his paper and pencil and make a freehand drawing from which he would later etch the subject on a copper plate. Frequently, passersby would stop and express curiosity in what he was doing, glance at his paper, and rivet their eyes upon the development of his drawing. Occasionally one would remark: "I wish that building was as beautiful as this drawing makes it!" As is usual under such circumstances, the trained eye of the artist could see beauty where the uninitiated could not.

When I returned to America in July, 1947 after the debacle in France, Orr met me in New York. Since the signing of our contract in June, 1939, Orr, realizing he would be unable to resume his residence in Paris due to the War, had decided to locate in the city of his birth, Hartford, Connecticut, where the former president of the Hartford Life Insurance Company who had been a friend of Mr. Orr's father extended him the facilities of a well-ap-

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pointed apartment above his garage on his lovely estate, where Mr. Orr worked during the war and for a few years thereafter on this commission. While I was visiting him on one occasion in Hartford, Orr remarked to me in a rather facetious tone: "Who knows? Maybe someday a plaque will be put on these walls: 'Here Louis Orr executed the North Carolina etchings.'"

Upon my return from France, Orr had completed approximately forty drawings. It was agreed at that time that he should start at once upon the etching of the first plate, the large size State Capitol.

One of his initial problems was to obtain in America the type of copper which could reproduce an etching of the size of the North Carolina State Capitol. He had to rework this plate twice in order for the intricate lines of its etched surface to be able to sustain the pressure of pulling the prints. This occupied him from about November, 1940 to April, 1941 and eventually led him to steel face not only this plate but all the other plates of the series.

Mr. Orr also had to seek diligently throughout the country to find a printer who possessed the technique of pulling a print in the manner which he required. More than once he remarked to me that there was almost as much art in knowing how to pull a print as there was in etching a plate.

There lived in New York at this time a Mr. White, a printer of renown who, it is said, probably did the work of almost two-thirds of the etchers of his day. Mr. White consented to undertake to pull the North Carolina prints after Mr. Orr had spent about a week acquainting him with his methods and techniques.

During the progress of this work, I visited Mr. White, who was an elderly man, and he conversed with me at great length on the unique gifts of Mr. Orr. He remarked that he had met and worked personally for most of the leading etchers of America since the beginning of the twen-

tieth century, but never had he known an artist of such extraordinary craftsmanship and versatile skill as Mr. Orr. He cited, for example, the instance when Mr. Orr informed him of his intention to remove a dogwood tree from the original plate of the large size State Capitol of North Carolina which obscured the fourth column of the eastern facade of the Capitol and to insert in lieu of the tree the suppressed column in its proper place. Mr. White told me that he did not believe that any artist of his acquaintance could ever accomplish such a feat, but Orr did it. (Mr. White was referring to the first edition of the State Capitol with the dogwood tree which was subsequently replaced by columns in the second edition.)

It required twelve years, from 1939 to 1941, for Orr to complete his commission, which gives it priority among the works of art ever executed on any state of the Union. It embraces the architectural splendor of North Carolina in all its phases, which has been neglected and underestimated through the years. Our state possesses some of the most outstanding architectural monuments in America, and Orr authenticated their credentials with the transcendancy of his genius.

There are certain remarkable qualities in Mr. Orr's work which should be noted. He is a draftsman of impeccable fidelity to the minutiae of detail, recording even the slightest deviation in the angles of roofs, the exact number of sawteeth in a pediment, and the elaborate ornamentation of a cornice.

He is a master of luminosity, pursuing lights and shadows down fluted columns, under the eaves of buildings, and around the subtle edges of shrubbery and leaves. His treatment of light often displays, like a mirror, the characteristics of its environment, as may be seen in the etching of the Playmakers Theater at Chapel Hill or the Chowan County Courthouse at Edenton.

He also possesses an unrivaled technique for interpreting texture, whether it be wood, brick, or stone, especially the

mellowed patina that comes with ageless beauty. It may be said that Orr does not make a drawing of a building, but a portrait, and endows it with personality and enduring life.

The fifty subjects which Mr. Orr etched on North Carolina comprise not only the

most important work ever executed in the history of our nation on any state of the Union, but they are also a landmark of artistic genius, reflecting the disciplined excellence of our taste in architecture, the refinement of our social life, and the cultural heritage of our people.

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