

# Acquisitions

## Eragny Press books

Jacinta Fleming

The University of Melbourne's acquisition in 2007 of the complete publications of the Eragny Press (1894–1914) has major significance to the Baillieu Library's Special Collections. It is the only complete holding of this press in the southern hemisphere, as with the University's Kelmscott Press holdings. There are only three other complete Eragny collections in the world, two in the United States and one in the British Library.<sup>1</sup> The collection will also substantially increase the depth and breadth of the University's research holdings on the Arts and Crafts movement in England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The series of 32 books includes the very rare *Whym Chow*, the last book printed, of which only 27 copies were produced. Also included are two separate editions of *Areopagitica* by John Milton. The first edition is one of just 40 to have survived a fire at the bookbinders (initially all were thought to have been destroyed).

Eragny Press is considered one of the 'big six amongst modern Presses',<sup>2</sup> which greatly influenced book design and typography in Europe and the United States. Eragny books do not resemble the books produced by other private presses of the period. Elements that set them apart include their beautiful flowered covers which



combine English Arts and Crafts design with a French Impressionist interest in colour, light and sensations after nature.<sup>3</sup>

### History

Eragny Press was a joint venture between Lucien Pissarro and his wife Esther. Lucien (1863–1944), a shy, quiet and gentle man, was the son of the French Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro. He learnt to draw and paint from his father, frequently going on painting trips together to paint from nature—a practice they continued all their lives.<sup>4</sup> Lucien spent some time in England when he was 20 years of age, returning home

to the village in Normandy where his family lived, Eragny-sur-Épte, to make lithographs and sell illustrations to art and literary journals which were then popular in France. During this time he also discovered the art of Kate Greenaway and Walter Crane and designed and illustrated children's books for his younger siblings. This period was intrinsic to the later development of Eragny Press, and Lucien was able to discover his own style and expertise. Frustrated with the cost of production and the influence of publishers he set out to learn the art of wood engraving, which became his preferred medium. In 1890 his father sent him back to England to gain entry into the decorative arts movement so the family could bring these ideas back to France. Lucien felt that England, generally considered more receptive than France to decorative and graphic art, would appreciate his wood engravings. He became involved in the world of English book illustration, typography and binding.

Lucien was strongly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, in particular William Morris at Kelmscott Press (established 1891). Morris in turn looked to Gothic design for his inspiration, using special papers designed to emulate early 15th century Bolognese papers



Opposite: Margaret Rust, *The queen of the fishes: An adaptation in English of a fairy tale of Valois ... with illustrations designed on the wood, cut and printed by Lucien Pissarro*, Chelsea, London: Charles Ricketts, 1894. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Frontispiece.

Left: Lucien and Esther Pissarro, trademark of the Eragny Press.

with specially hammered gold leaf and vellum for covers. Lucien was also influenced by the work of Charles Ricketts who founded the Vale Press and became his closest friend, mentor and publisher. Ricketts looked towards earlier Renaissance books which were simpler in design. As a result his designs were less dense than those of Morris.<sup>5</sup>

Lucien met and married Esther Bensusan in 1892 in spite of both families' objections, and stayed in England, as Esther refused to live in France. The daughter of a well-to-do Jewish family, Esther was an independent and headstrong character. She showed an early interest in art and could draw with skill and ease.<sup>6</sup> Husband and wife believed in the ethos of the Arts and Crafts movement where the artist was united with the craftsman. This revolution in the industrial arts considered 'everyday objects in terms of satisfying design and careful craftsmanship'.<sup>7</sup> Lucien was the designer and principal wood engraver, while Esther became the technical skill behind the press. They did everything themselves, from making up the bindings, setting the layout and design to printing the text, wood engravings and decorated papers for the bindings. Esther usually engraved the simpler one-colour blocks, the

woodblock initials, and the ornaments. Lucien was experimenting with three-, four- and five-colour wood engravings in a book world moulded by the tradition of English black and white illustration.<sup>8</sup> Each book had a varied print run of between 150 and 230 copies.

### The Eragny Press collection

The collection now in the Baillieu Library was owned by Enid and Ernest Verity, who were personal friends and business colleagues of the Pissarros. Ernest was a surveyor and worked on the Pissarros' house 'The Brook' in Chiswick for many years. The first book, *The queen of the fishes*, numbered 142 (1894), is inscribed 'To Mr. and Mrs Verity / In remembrance of Nov. the 21st 1894 / from [monogram of Lucien Pissarro]'. The other 17 inscribed books date from 1901 to 1906. It appears that the friendship cooled, as the inscriptions stop abruptly, and the collection may have been put together by a combination of the Veritys and the next owner of the books.

The books are in their original bindings and are generally in remarkably good condition. Enclosed in *Of gardens* by Francis Bacon (1902) is a personal 'with best wishes' card from Orovida Pissarro, the Pissarros' daughter born in 1893.

In choosing his titles, Lucien appealed to a range of interests, and the books produced during the Vale association were printed in French to attract continental collectors, with their aesthetic being Pre-Raphaelite. The second half of the Eragny output was printed in English, but was French in character.<sup>9</sup>

### The books

There were two phases of the Eragny Press. The first 16 books used Ricketts' Vale type. The second type was named The Brook, after the Pissarros' house in Chiswick. The types created by these private presses helped create a distinctive personality not possible with commercial types. When Vale Press closed down for instance, the type itself was melted down, as Ricketts could not bear the thought of its being used in books over which he had no control.<sup>10</sup> Colin Franklin, in his *Private presses*, argues that the Brook type, on the white paper of the small pages of the Eragny Press books, was the most beautiful font invented in this whole period.<sup>11</sup> Esther, three years after Lucien's death, in 1947 threw the punches and matrices of the Brook type into the English Channel. The type itself survives at Cambridge University Press.

The Eragny Press was the only

Gérard de Nerval, *Histoire de la reine du matin & de Soliman prince des génies*, Hammersmith: Eragny Press, 1909. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Frontispiece.

private press of this period to use music type. Based on 16th century models, it was used in *Some old French and English ballads* edited by Robert Steele (1905) and in *Songs by Ben Jonson* (1906). A Greek type was used in John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1903).

The books became widely loved in England and France, two being commissioned by French book clubs. The books were printed in colour, printed with gold leaf and gold powder, printed on vellum and with printed music. The influence of William Morris is evident in the cover designs and the use of borders. Colour wood engravings are a hallmark, and are used mainly as the frontispiece in each book.

The first book produced by the Eragny Press was *The queen of the fishes* (1894), an old Valois fairytale, with rich illustrations, photo-engraved calligraphy for the text, and a joining of letterforms and decoration. As Urbanelli points out, it was experimental, yet well received.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of books were issued with patterned paper covers, usually botanical in nature, designed by Pissarro. Emile Verhaeren's *Les petits vieux* (1901) is typical in style. It is bound in quarter grey paper with Michallet blue paper boards showing a repeat pattern of 'Winter aconite' (ranunculus) printed in two shades of



green ink. The spine is blocked in gold.<sup>13</sup>

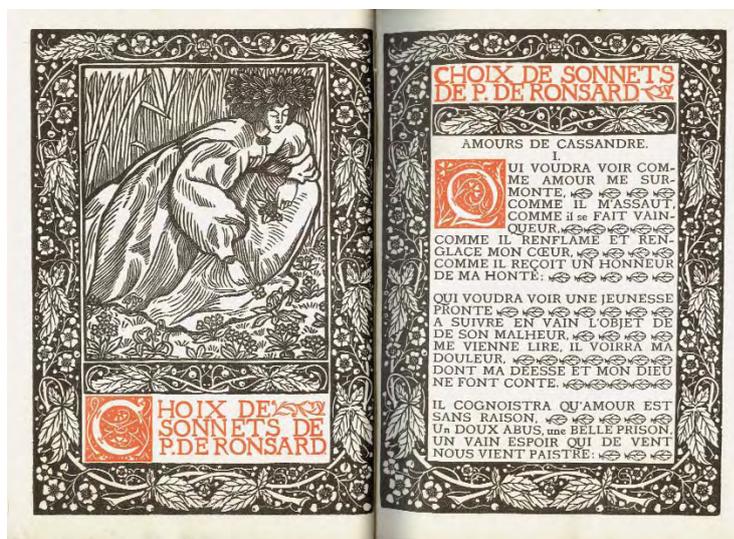
The next 15 books following *The queen of the fishes* contain little colour, consisting of complex frontispieces, a border and decorative capitals. An example is the beautiful frontispiece of Pierre de Ronsard's *Choix de sonnets* (1902), which depicts a girl picking flowers. It was not until 1903, after the death of Camille Pissarro, the closure of Vale Press, and the establishment of his own Brook typeface, that colour returned to Eragny Press publications. An unfortunate downside was the

increased cost of production, with Lucien sometimes miscalculating production time and expenses. An example is Gérard de Nerval's *Histoire de la reine du matin & de Soliman prince des génies*, commissioned in 1909 by the Société des Cent Bibliophiles. Printed in gold leaf and colours, finely detailed, it took 20 months to produce. The final composition includes more than 15 illustrations, seven border designs, and 11 historiated capitals. The leather-bound cover was decorated with gold stamped flowers (see back cover).

Although Lucien used photography to transfer his images to the woodblock, his engravings continued to develop as they were being carved. Lucien wrote:

we knew nothing about the art of printing and had to learn it as we went along ... *Queen of the fishes* was printed two pages at a time; the gold used in the book was real gold powder ... after many sheets of paper had been spoiled, the edition was achieved.<sup>14</sup>

During the ensuing years Lucien and Esther overcame many difficulties, continually making improvements to their press to create perfect register. What made Eragny Press



extraordinary—artistic integrity and complex production methods—unfortunately also resulted in small output and little to no financial profit. Artistic autonomy was placed above all else.

The Press's last book, *Whym Chow, flame of love*, was totally undertaken by Esther in 1914. Whym was the chow dog belonging to Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who commissioned a remembrance card for their beloved Whym when he died. The Pissarros were subsequently commissioned to print a book of poems devoted to Whym Chow.

Eragny Press closed in 1914.

Lucien had gone back to painting full time and World War 1 prevented the import of handmade paper from France. The Pissarros also lost touch with their collectors on the continent and worldwide.

The Pissarros helped shape, and made a unique contribution to, the private press revival in England. They are considered artist-printers.<sup>15</sup> Lucien was able to bring together the avant-garde ideas of the Parisian neo-Impressionists with those of the English Arts and Crafts movement. Lucien regarded his marriage to Esther as the ideal union. The Eragny Press became an expression of their mutual love.

Jacinta Fleming is Head of Library at Maffra Secondary College, where she teaches art, studio arts, visual communication and design and multimedia. She is also undertaking a Master of Education degree (Teacher-Librarianship) via distance education from Charles Sturt University. She wrote this article during her professional placement which she undertook with Baillieu Library Special Collections through the Cultural Collections Student Projects Program.

#### Notes

- 1 Marcella D. Genz, *A history of the Eragny Press 1894–1914*, New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 2004, p. 146.
- 2 Geoffrey S. Tomkinson, *A select bibliography of the principal modern presses public and private in Great Britain and Ireland*, London: First Edition Club, 1928.
- 3 Lora Urbanelli, *The wood engravings of Lucien Pissarro and a bibliographical list of Eragny books*, Cambridge: Silent Books; Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1994, p. 45.
- 4 Urbanelli, *The wood engravings*, pp. 9–12.
- 5 Urbanelli, *The wood engravings*, pp. 19–20.
- 6 Genz, *A history of the Eragny Press*, p. 35.
- 7 Urbanelli, *The wood engravings*, p. 13.
- 8 Ruth Lightbourne, 'Vale and Eragny Presses', *Off the Record: Magazine of the Friends of the Turnbull Library*, no. 13, 2006, p. 7.
- 9 Urbanelli, *The wood engravings*, p. 45.
- 10 Lightbourne, 'Vale and Eragny Presses', p. 7.
- 11 Colin Franklin, *The private presses*, 2nd edition, Aldershot: Gower Publishing Co.; Brookfield: Scolar Press, 1991, p. 98.
- 12 Urbanelli, *The wood engravings*, p. 26.
- 13 Lightbourne, 'Vale and Eragny Presses', p. 7.
- 14 Lucien Pissarro, edited with a supplement by Alan Fern, *Notes on the Eragny Press: And a letter to J.B. Manson*, Cambridge: privately printed (University Press), 1957, pp. 4–5.
- 15 Genz, *A history of the Eragny Press*, p. 62.

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