

The Vignette

DON WEAVER

Engraving is a dying art, but its decline is not due solely to the technical processes that are superceding it, nor to photography, nor to lithography—the latter, an easier and more economical technique, but one which cannot replace it satisfactorily....

Engraving is an actual translation, that is to say, it is the art of transposing an idea from one art to another, as the translator of a book written in a foreign language transposes it into his own. The engraver's foreign language, and this is where he shows his skill, does not consist merely in imitating the effects of painting through the medium of his own art which is, as it were, a different language. He has, if I may so describe it, his own personal language that marks his work with its characteristic stamp, and even in a faithful translation allows his personal feeling to appear.

— *From the Journal of Eugene Delacroix, 25 January 1857*

In the summer of 1994, having slipped the leash of numerous other duties to devote my full attention to the launch of Harlan Estate, I set my sights on the thousands of “shiners” tucked away in our cellars—that is, the cache of bottles (filled, corked, but not yet labeled) that comprised the first six vintages of wine produced from Harlan Estate. In the midst of all that planting, farming, and winemaking, we had not yet determined how best to communicate graphically all that we wanted Harlan Estate to stand for: superlative attention to detail, consummate quality, and timeless authenticity. We hoped to reflect the

culture of our enterprise, the character of our land, and the relationship between our product and our customer in a single image—all within the scanty marquee offered by a wine bottle.

Our natural gravitational pull was toward vintage stamps and bank notes, both of which represented assigned worth and were artistic in nature. We were attracted to the idea that bank note engraving and intaglio printing had developed specifically to uphold the very highest standards, to guarantee confidence and trust, and to protect against the threat of counterfeiters.

Particularly drawn to the back of the “old” twenty-dollar

bill, with its intricate detail and iconic symbols, we, rather naively, contacted the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to find out more about the artist, only to discover that that twenty-dollar note was the work of not one but several master engravers—some portrait engravers, some picture and letter engravers, geometric lathe engravers, etc. — all of whom but one were long dead. “So what’s the name of that gentleman?” Bill Harlan inquired. That’s how we ended up with the telephone number of Herbert Francis Fichter, who had apprenticed at the bureau at age twenty-one in 1941.

Herb had retired and was living in Southern California. After a proper introduction and some pleading on our part, this sweet old guy flew up to see us in the hills of Oakville, visit the vineyard, and discuss developing a design for our label. While he soon disqualified himself as a likely suspect, he did become our “guiding light,” introducing us to the American Bank Note Company, a firm that traces its roots to the earliest days of our nation and that printed American currency and postage stamps up to the time of the Civil War.

After a series of inquiries, Bill and I hopped a flight to Philadelphia. Early the next morning, we followed our phone-dictated driving directions to a nondescript building on the outskirts of a small, rural Pennsylvania town. We checked our coats at reception, affixed visitor badges to our ties, and walked with our chaperone onto the floor of the plant, where very large presses were extruding traveler’s checks and colorful currencies of obscure African nations. We were then shown to a rather small room and offered a seat. An armed security guard stood sentry outside the door.

ABN had, for the occasion, resurrected from retirement its former archivist and librarian to walk us through multiple, massive volumes of tattered sample books bulging with roughly 200 years of security engraving history. Bill and I began turning the well-worn pages, each one a feast for the eyes. Fabulously rendered depictions of eagles, sailing ships, locomotives, portraits of bank presidents, and the like filled every square inch of each page. It soon occurred to us that we could easily spend weeks or months perusing this incredibly rich body of work. Then suddenly, there it was: an allegorical female figure in a pastoral setting, arms raised to a fruitful vine. Everything

we had hoped to convey about our special plot of land, our vision, and our culture already existed! It was truly love at first sight. And though it would take some tinkering to get it to press, it expressed the vision sublimely—as did another gem we later found there for our second label, *The Maiden*.

From subsequent research, we came to understand that our engraved image derived from a design by Alonzo Earl Foringer, the nonpareil banknote designer of his day. Inspired by the work of Europe’s great academic painters (as we have been by its winemakers), Foringer made it a practice to paint fairly large, entirely in monochrome, usually in shades of gray or brown. Was it possible, we pondered, that the original painting of our image still existed? Could it be hanging on the wall at the company headquarters in Manhattan? Wedged between some file cabinets in the plating department? Had it been part of a parcel of paintings sold at auction by Christie’s in 1990? Finding the original work became something of a Holy Grail for us. Unfortunately, numerous inquiries and extensive research left us empty-handed.

Some three years later – out of the blue – an envelope arrived in the mail. A lavish cluster of commemorative stamps embellished the upper-right corner and an unfamiliar New York City return address was handwritten in the left. It contained a letter from someone whose name I didn’t recognize, but who has since become a dear friend and valued associate. Its author, Mark Tomasko, is an attorney by training but a historian and collector of scripophily by avocation. A font of knowledge about all things having to do with the disappearing art of bank note engraving, he was kind enough to provide us with an informed history of our label art and offered a photocopy of the original rendering by Foringer. It had been a pencil study, he explained, and – alas – American Bank Note had destroyed the original drawing in 1961.

While Mark’s letter burst our bubble of hanging the coveted Foringer canvas over the winery fireplace, it went a long way toward reminding us of the ephemeral nature of things. It also imparted a deep satisfaction in owning a small piece of a grand tradition and an earlier sensibility, when a handshake was a bond among men and life moved at the pace of the seasons.