

# The Prolific Mr. Charles Keene

Laurie Benson



Charles Keene, *Interior of a boat builders shed*, c. 1860. Pen and brown ink on blue paper, National Gallery of Victoria. See Fig. 5 below for full details.

One may be surprised to find that the international artist who is represented in the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) with the most works is not Rembrandt, Dürer, or Van Dyck, but the prolific English nineteenth-century illustrator Charles Samuel Keene (1823–91), of *Punch* magazine fame.

The NGV holds no fewer than 804 single sheet drawings and watercolours by Keene, many of which are double-sided. It is by many hundreds the largest collection of drawings by Keene held in any museum. The collection was largely formed by the Australian artist Lionel Lindsay (1874–1961) who became obsessed with Keene's work and, over sixty years of consistent collecting, amassed around eight hundred drawings, of which 783 came to the NGV.<sup>1</sup> Lindsay's own work was profoundly influenced by Keene and he penned the aptly-titled *Charles Keene, the Artists' Artist*, published in 1934.<sup>2</sup>

---

This paper was first presented at *Prints, Printmaking and Philanthropy: A Symposium Celebrating 50 years of The Harold Wright and The Sarah and Holmes Scholarships*, The University of Melbourne, 30 September–2 October 2019.

<sup>1</sup> More than 700 drawings by Keene in Lindsay's collection were purchased for the NGV through the Felton Bequest in 1951. Melbourne, NGV, *Annual Report*, 1951. The large digitised collection of Keene works and studies may be found at <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/artist/3621/>

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Lindsay, *Charles Keene, the Artists' Artist*, London, P. & D. Colnaghi's, 1934. The publisher is the renowned art dealers from whom Lindsay acquired many of his drawings by Keene, particularly through the efforts of the remarkable Harold Wright. Colnaghi's also exhibited Lindsay's work.

Sadly, Keene is largely forgotten today, yet in his lifetime he had a strong following and in terms of skill, talent, artistry, and technique he is considered the finest illustrator of his era, the time when graphic illustration in Britain reached its zenith. Keene worked solely as an illustrator over a career spanning just shy of fifty years, creating thousands of images which were printed as wood engravings in illustrated books, newspapers, and magazines. The vast majority of his work appeared in the London weekly *Punch*, for whom he worked for almost 40 years following his first appearance in its pages in 1851. These publications were disseminated all over Britain and beyond; piquing the childhood imagination of Lionel Lindsay and his brother Norman (1879-1969) in Australia. So strong was Keene's fame and popularity in nineteenth-century Australia that no fewer than forty-two of his drawings were included in the prestigious Royal Anglo-Australian Society of Artists exhibition held in Melbourne's Exhibition Building in 1892.<sup>3</sup> That far outnumbered works shown by any other artist in this wide-ranging exhibition comprising over five hundred exhibits.

As Lionel Lindsay's title implied, Keene's work was much admired by other artists, and the prints were collected by contemporaries as diverse as Walter Sickert (1860-1942), James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Édouard Manet (1832-83), Alfred Sisley (1839-99), Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), and Vincent van Gogh (1853-90), whose early work was profoundly influenced by British illustrators. Degas considered Keene to be Britain's finest artist and owned 215 of his illustrations.<sup>4</sup>

Keene was largely self-taught, yet his mother admired his talent and she arranged for him to work in an architectural firm as a draughtsman.<sup>5</sup> In 1840 he gained an apprenticeship as an engraver at the printing firm Whymper Brothers, who were among the top firms of their kind in England. For five years he learned his craft as an engraver and illustrator there, which gave him a unique capacity to understand the technicalities of wood-engraving, allowing him to push the medium to its limit. After leaving Whymper's in 1845, he found regular work as an illustrator, appearing in the *Illustrated London News*, other magazines, and



Fig. 1. Charles Keene. *Langham Study for an Indian man*. (c. 1855). Pen and brown ink on cream paper, 20.1 x 11.0 cm (image and sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest 1951 (2435-4). [Web link.](#)

<sup>3</sup> The catalogue included a long essay by the artist James Webb, "The Art Staff of *Punch*," in which Keene was praised as the finest artist of the group. Webb repeated the consistent mantra that Keene was best appreciated by artists and that only the revered Adolf Menzel (1815-1905) was his equal as a draughtsman. Mr. J. Lake (Exhibition Manager and editor) *Exhibition of the British Art Gallery by the Royal Anglo-Australian Society of Artists, with which is associated the German art gallery and a selection of pictures by Australian artists 1892, Exhibition Building, Melbourne: illustrated catalogue*, Melbourne, 1892, pp. 71-73.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Houfe, *The Work of Charles Samuel Keene*, Aldershot and Melbourne, Scolar Press, 1995, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> George S. Layard, *The Life and Letters of Charles Samuel Keene*, London, Sampson Low, Marsten and Co., 1892, pp. 9-11. Published a year after his death, it is the first biography and study of Keene.

books. He established his first studio in London, whereupon he started to network in the vibrant London art scene.



Fig. 2. Attributed to Charles Keene, *Two sketches of James McNeill Whistler*. The drawing is inscribed by a later hand "by Poynter." Pen and brush in brown ink on cream paper, 9.0 x 13.7 cm (irreg.) (image); 10.5 x 14.9 cm (sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest 1951 (2535B-4). ©National Gallery of Victoria. [Web link](#).

In 1848 he joined the Langham Artists Society where he met many artists and attended life drawing classes for the next fourteen years (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> Among those he met in the London art world were James McNeill Whistler (Fig. 2), Edward Poynter (1836-1919) and Frederic Leighton (1830-96), the latter two having both worked as illustrators before rising to their Olympian heights.



However, Keene was yet to make enough of a name for himself to stand out in a crowded market of outstanding illustrators. Before he was accepted at *Punch*, most of his early illustrations, which are admittedly quite pedestrian, were left unsigned (Fig. 3). Making the acquaintance of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was an artistic turning point for Keene, after which his style and approach became recognisably distinctive.<sup>7</sup> Through Keene's friend, George Price Boyce (1826-97), who was on the periphery of the PRB, he met all the Pre-Raphaelites and their

Fig. 3. Charles Keene, *The escape*, 1853. Squared drawing for an illustration for *The Giants of Patagonia*. Pen and brown ink over pencil on cream paper, 9.0 x 7.4 cm (image); 10.5 x 8.3 cm (sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest 1951 (2378.1-4). ©National Gallery of Victoria. [Web link](#).

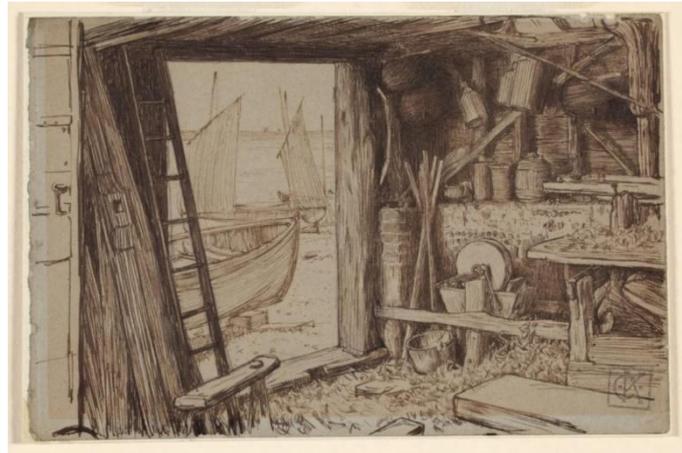
<sup>6</sup> Houfe, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Houfe, *ibid*, pp. 17-35.



Fig. 4 (above). Charles Keene, *Portrait of Mme Zambaco drawing*, c. 1864. Etching on cream paper, 16.5 x 10.6 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest 1951 (2879A.14-4). [Web link](#).

Fig. 5 (right). Charles Keene, *Interior of a boat builders shed*, c. 1860. Pen and brown ink on blue paper, 12.0 x 17.8 cm (image and sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, purchased 1898. ©National Gallery of Victoria. [Web link](#).



circle. He drew them, and they drew him; one of his few etchings depicts Madame Maria Zambaco (1843-1914) working at her easel (Fig. 4). Keene was greatly admired by the PRB and maintained his friendship with Hunt and Millais for the rest of his life. From the early 1850s onwards, Keene adopted the PRB approach to the study of nature, and employed elements of their style, as seen in his meticulous pen-and-ink depiction of an *Interior of a boat builders shed*, c. 1860 (Fig. 5).

Most importantly, from then until the end of his life, he constantly drew from models and from close observation of the world around him. According to his first biographer, George S. Layard, when pressed to talk about his art the most he would offer was “Draw a thing as you see it.”<sup>8</sup> His niche was focusing on the social mores of the time, mostly those of the middle and working classes.

Quirky detail and a fine yet energetic line became the distinguishing features of his work. The images are strikingly original, and his technique is at times quite dazzling in its intricacy and lighting effects, which would have stretched the abilities of many engravers (Fig. 6). Keene rarely if ever drew from memory, and did not rely on a stock of frequently used images, poses, characters or, particularly, faces. His thousands of illustrations were populated with distinct individuals, each a portrait, which took incredible discipline and was a unique quality among the plethora of illustrators working at the time.<sup>9</sup> He was a realist, with a Pre-Raphaelite sensibility regarding accuracy.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Layard, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> The individualising of his figures was noted in a review of Keene’s posthumous exhibition at the Fine Art Society. Anon., “Charles Keene’s Drawings,” *Spectator*, 21 March 1891, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Keene perhaps took such authenticity to the extreme with one remarkable watercolour of an army marksman which he painted on paper torn from the wrapping of a packet of cartridges. *Study for “Skirmishing in perspective”* (Fig. 8). <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/41718/>.

In September 1861, William Michael Rossetti wrote in the *Spectator* that while the principal artist for *Punch*, James Leech, would draw what vaguely resembled a wheel, Keene would render its portrait.<sup>11</sup> Rossetti also lamented that Keene was not a painter, almost demanding he immediately take up brush and oils.<sup>12</sup>

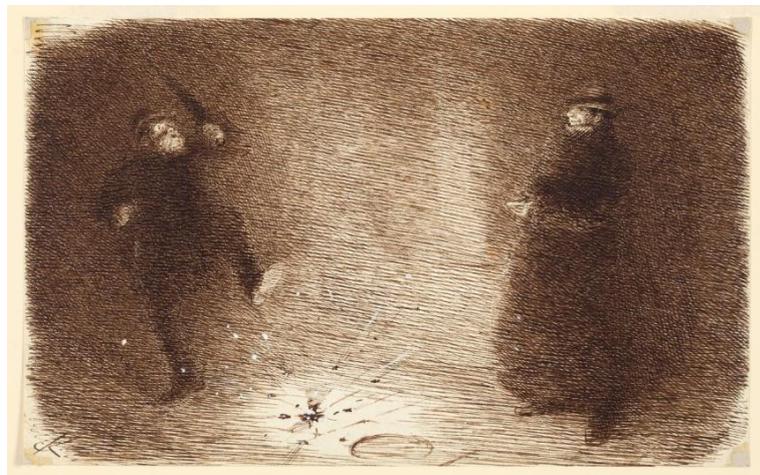


Fig. 6. Charles Keene, finished drawing for “A Signal Success” (1876). Pen, brush, brown ink and gouache on cream paper, 19.2 x 31.0 cm (image and sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest 1951 (2693-4). ©National Gallery of Victoria. [Web link](#).



Fig. 7. James McNeill Whistler, *Charles Keene sketching*, before 1891. Pencil on paper, 24.8 x 17.8 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest 1953 (3019-4). [Web link](#).

Despite that flattering appraisal, Keene remained a committed illustrator. He had a pen, ink and a notebook with him always and would draw whatever caught his eye. This habit is captured in Whistler’s vivid pencil study of his friend, *Charles Keene Sketching* (Fig. 7).

Keene was an avid perambulator, and his Chelsea studio was some distance from his home. His daily walks, observing all that he encountered, must have been crucial to his practice. He rarely wasted a drawing, probably due to the pressure to produce three or four illustrations a week. He crafted his own reed pens of various sizes, and made his own sepia and black ink which he carried in a portable ink bottle.<sup>13</sup>

After his encounter with the Pre-Raphaelites and Whistler, and with fifteen years of experience behind him, by the late 1850s Keene had found his style. He was becoming a constant presence in *Punch*; the published images were often of his own invention or based on an anecdote told him by a friend, a very rare achievement in an industry where the artists were largely told what to draw. He found his professional niche in 1864, sadly with the death of Leech. Shortly after, the mantle of principal artist was duly passed to

<sup>11</sup> William Michael Rossetti (writing under the pseudonym “Dry Point”), “The Art of *Punch* [second notice]” *Spectator*, 21 September 1861, p. 1036.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1036.

<sup>13</sup> Layard, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

Keene and for the next twenty-five years he produced around three or four illustrations a week for *Punch*, amounting to well over three and a half thousand works.

The NGV's collection comprises the full range of his *oeuvre* from doodles on envelopes (figures and objects later incorporated into illustrations), to the final squared and retouched drawing to be sent to the wood engravers. Nearly all the drawings now in the NGV can be traced to a published image, most are annotated by Lionel Lindsay with the date and page number from the publication, and many have the related wood engraving glued to the back of the mount. Lindsay amassed over a thousand of Keene's illustrations, which also came to the NGV. Being a friend of Whistler's, Keene was part of the etching revival in the 1860s and the NGV has strikes of the few etchings he produced, such as that of *Madame Zambaco drawing* (Fig. 5). The NGV also has a few very beautiful small watercolours, mostly personal works that Keene did on holidays or in his limited spare time, such as *View of a cliff*, which was probably drawn in Dorset (NGV no. 2870-4, yet to be digitised) or his *Study for "Skirmishing in perspective"* (Fig. 8) that probably gives a glimpse of another important interest in his life, the Artists' Rifles Volunteer Corps, of which he was a founding member.<sup>14</sup> Currently around 800 of Keene's drawings can be viewed at the NGV *Collections On Line* website, with more to follow as the NGV's Digitisation Program continues. Seen *en masse* and considering the pressure of producing four new drawings a week, the diversity in Keene's huge body of work is staggering.



Fig. 8. Charles Keene, study for "Skirmishing in perspective" (1873). Charcoal, pen, ink and watercolour on brown paper, 15.8 x 19.5 cm (image and sheet). NGV, Felton Bequest, 1951 (2662-4). [Web link](#).

**Laurie Benson** is Curator of International Art at the National Gallery of Victoria. He completed a BA Honours in Art History at La Trobe University, and postgraduate studies in Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne before joining the National Gallery of Victoria. He has curated numerous exhibitions, including, more recently, *Medieval Moderns: The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (2015), *The Horse* (2015, with Ted Gott), and was the coordinating curator of the Winter Masterpiece exhibition for 2014, *Italian Masterpieces from Spain's Royal Court, Museo del Prado*.

<sup>14</sup> The 38<sup>th</sup> Middlesex (Artists') Rifle Volunteer Corps was formed on 26 May 1860. See: <http://artistsriflesassociation.org/regiment-artists-rifles.htm>

## Works Cited

“Charles Keene’s Drawings.” *Spectator*, 21 March 1891: 13.

“Dry Point” [William Michael Rossetti]. “The Art of *Punch* [second notice].” *Spectator*, 21 Sept. 1861: 1036.

Houfe, Simon. *The Work of Charles Samuel Keene*. Aldershot & Melbourne: Scolar P, 1995.

Lake, J., ed. *Exhibition of the British Art Gallery by the Royal Anglo-Australian Society of Artists, with which is associated the German art gallery and a selection of pictures by Australian artists 1892, Exhibition Building, Melbourne: illustrated catalogue*. Melbourne, 1892.

Layard, G. S. *The Life and Letters of Charles Samuel Keene*. London: Sampson Low, Marsten and Co., 1892.

Lindsay, Lionel. *Charles Keene, the Artists’ Artist*. London: P. & D. Colnaghi’s, 1934.

NGV website for Charles Keene. Digitisation project headed by Laurie Benson, Curator of International Art, NGV, funded by the Joe White Bequest, and supported by the NGV: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/artist/3621/>