The Prolific Mr. Charles Keene

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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.¹ Lindsay’s own work was profoundly influenced by Keene and he penned the aptly-titled Charles Keene, the Artists’ Artist, published in 1934.²

¹ 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/
² 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.
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. 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 Whympers in 1845, he found regular work as an illustrator, appearing in the Illustrated London News, other magazines, and newspapers, and he was best appreciated by artists and that only the revered Adolf Menzel (1815-1905) was his equal as a draughtsman.

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.

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.


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.

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). 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.

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

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6 Houfe, op. cit., p. 8.
7 Houfe, ibid, pp. 17-35.
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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.”

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.9 He was a realist, with a Pre-Raphaelite sensibility regarding accuracy.10

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8 Layard, op. cit., p. 144.
9 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.
10 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. Rossetti also lamented that Keene was not a painter, almost demanding he immediately take up brush and oils. 

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. 

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

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**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](#).

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. 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.](image)

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