



The OLD PRINT SHOP^{INC.}

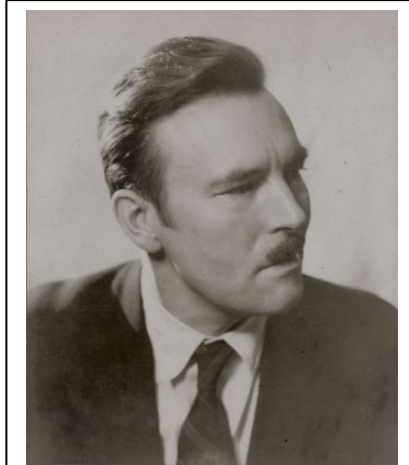
FINE PRINTS, ANTIQUE MAPS *and* ART BOOKS

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Martin Lewis (1880-1962)

Martin Lewis was born on June 7, 1880 in Castlemaine, Australia. He was the son of a gold-mining engineer who had emigrated from Pembrokeshire, Wales, to Australia during the Australian gold rush. His mother was Victoria Caroline Spice from Melbourne. Lewis was the second of eight children. It was while he was attending the local technical school that he first studied drawing with Thomas Fisher Leveck. At the age of fifteen he left home and traveled in New South Wales and New Zealand, working as a posthole digger and a merchant seaman before settling into a Bohemian community outside of Sydney. Two of his drawings were published in a radical Sydney newspaper, the *Bulletin*. He also studied with Julian Ashton at the Art Society's School in Sydney. Ashton, a famous painter, was also one of the first Australian artists to take up printmaking. Lewis visited his family in Castlemaine for the last time in 1900 and then left for the United States. His first known job after arriving in the United States was painting stage decorations for the McKinley Presidential Campaign of 1900.



Martin Lewis, c.1928.

Little is known of his early years in this country; however, by 1909 he was living and working in New York City. In 1910 he traveled to London and visited his brother, Llewellyn, and an uncle in Wales. While there he met Esta Varez, an amateur photographer and singer. She returned with him to New York City where they were involved with a circle of friends that included artists and writers. In 1920 Esta and Martin separated. Esta would later marry one of Martin's good friends, Dudley Nichols, who would become a famous movie director. Because of his breakup with Esta, his dissatisfaction with commercial art, and his interest in Japanese art and culture, he left New York and moved to Japan in 1920. His intentions were to move there permanently; however, he was unable to master the Japanese language or to make a living, so after a few years he returned to New York City.

The trip to Japan was an important milestone in the artist's career. Prior to his stay in Japan, the majority of his images were pictorially based, marine and city landscapes. After his return, he resumed work as a commercial artist. He did not like the work, but it paid the bills. The next several years allowed the more mature artist to take his expanded knowledge of Japanese art and culture and create work that was



Showers on the Bay, Japan.

uniquely his own image. He worked extensively on his compositions, drawing and redrawing the figures until every position was to his liking. He would then often do a finished drawing putting all the working sketches into one image. Once the finished drawing was completed he would work on the copper plate to make the print. In studying his drawings, it is not unusual to find ten to fifteen study drawings for the prints. One image, *Dock Workers under the Brooklyn Bridge*, had over thirty study drawings.

Martin Lewis is considered one of the great chroniclers of urban life. His ability to capture adverse weather conditions and obscure light sources, coupled with a keen sense of composition and technical skill, made him one of America's greatest printmakers of the twentieth century. His earliest etchings date from 1915; however, these prints show a technical ability above that of most beginner printmakers. He was known for destroying prints and plates that he found objectionable; therefore, it is possible that he made prints earlier and discarded them. He produced over 147 drypoints, etchings, mezzotints, aquatints and lithographs between 1915 and 1953. His first success was as a watercolorist, but he also worked in oil.

Lewis' sophisticated compositions enabled him to move to the next level in his artistic career. Kennedy Galleries gave him his first one artist show in 1927 featuring his watercolors. The first show was a great success and the gallery invited him to have a second show in 1928 which featured his prints. The prints were an immediate success. He sold out many editions within short periods of time. One print, *Relics*, was so popular that the edition was sold out in four months at \$28 each. A month later the gallery sold a trial proof of *Relics* for \$100, almost four times the original price.

Lewis did not want to be associated with any art movement of the period, but that is not to say he did not know and socialize with other artists. One close friend, Edward Hopper, asked him for technical advice on etching. He along with two other artist friends, Armin Landeck and George Miller, founded a printmaking school in the early 1930's. Because of the depression, the school failed soon after opening. Lewis continued to have success with his prints until the beginning of WWII. After the war, the American art market changed with the importing of many European avant-garde artists. Most American artists of the 1920's and 1930's found it difficult to make a living with their work during this time. In 1944 he began teaching printmaking at the Art Students League where he remained until 1952 when health related issues forced him to resign. His work at the league and a commission in 1947 to paint portraits for the Dudley Nichols film, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, were his primary sources of income during the last twenty years of his life. He worked regularly in his in the studio until his death in 1962; however, his last print was produced in 1953.

The Old Print Shop has represented the Estate of Martin Lewis since 1987. We have an extensive collection of his drawings, prints, and an occasional oil painting.



Martin Lewis in a Subway Kiosk.
Photograph by Alfred Gescheidt, 1951.



Late Traveler.
Drypoint by Martin Lewis, 1949.