

Doesn't it ever rain in Alabama?: The Prints of Mary Wallace Kirk.

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Doesn't it ever rain in Alabama?": The Prints of Mary Wallace Kirk

by Stephen Goldfarb

Except for four years in college and little more than a year of art training in New York City in the 1930s, Mary Wallace Kirk (1889-1978) lived in the small north Alabama city of Tuscumbia. When she was four years old, she and her parents moved from a smaller adjacent cottage to Locust Hill, a sprawling, two-story house that was her home for the next eight decades.^[1] As an only child, Kirk was the center of attention of both adoring parents and grandparents -- her grandfather took her to and from school each day in his carriage. Kirk seems to have avoided the difficulties of only children, perhaps due to having numerous "boy cousins," who made extended visits every summer (see opposite image). Her happy childhood was followed by an adulthood free from either regular employment or financial woes.

Kirk's financial independence allowed her to travel in North America, South America, and Europe, including a crossing on the luxury liner the *Queen Elizabeth*.^[2] In the early 1950s, while taking a train from Florence to Naples, Italy, Kirk made the acquaintance of the artist Derek Hill, beginning a close friendship that would last until her death.^[3] They went to

see one another frequently, starting in 1962, when Kirk visited Hill at his home St. Columb's Rectory, in County Donegal, Ireland, and corresponded often. Through Hill, Kirk met and stayed with the art historian/connoisseur Bernard Berenson at his home, Villa I Tatti.^[4]

Kirk's formal education included attendance at the now defunct Deshler Female Institute in Tusculum, from which she graduated in 1906 with an "Honorable Mention" for scholarship.^[5] She then attended Agnes Scott College (in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur, Georgia), graduating in 1911. Her connection with Agnes Scott did not end there; in 1917 she was elected to the college's Board of Trustees, on which she served for six decades.^[6] Not only was Kirk one of the first women elected as a trustee of a southern college, but she may well have been the longest serving trustee of any college.

Kirk took her responsibilities as a trustee very seriously; it was her habit to show up several days before trustee meetings to speak informally to faculty and students about their concerns.^[7] A letter to Hill indicates that she favored accepting African American students even before the passage of the civil rights acts of the 1960s.^[8] She also quietly but effectively fought to keep the college from falling under what the writer of her obituary for the alumnae magazine called "anti-intellectual control."^[9]

Kirk's art training began at home, as her mother showed her "how to draw and paint" when she was still a child.^[10] Her first drawing book, left among her papers, dates from the first four months of 1900, when Kirk was only eleven years old; a note in this book indicates that she was taking private art lessons.^[11] Unfortunately, student records do not exist for the Deshler Institute, and, according to the Office of the Registrar at Agnes Scott College, Kirk appears to have taken no courses in studio art, although she did take several in art history.

In her forties, Kirk studied etching with Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League in New York City on two separate occasions: from the middle of October 1935 to early April 1936 and from the middle of April to the beginning of October 1938.^[12] Kirk commented in her memoirs that her etching instructor (very likely Sternberg) "once asked with impatience, 'Doesn't it ever rain in Alabama?' " While she admitted that her prints "were always filled with sunshine," she further commented that her instructor's "favorite themes were mines and subways and dark factories;

[and] my little cabins in a sun-filled landscape offended him."^[13]

Kirk's style derives from two art movements that were active during her life. First was the etching revival, which began in Europe during the 1880s and came to the United States in the early twentieth century. The decaying architectural treasures of Charleston and New Orleans were being recorded in etchings, and Kirk's younger contemporary Marian Acker Macpherson (1906-1993) was doing the same thing in Mobile.^[14] Etching was a particularly suitable medium for capturing the intricate architectural details of historic buildings. Also influential for Kirk was the American Scene movement, a reaction to the beginnings of modernism. After and because of World War I, Americans retreated both politically and artistically from Europe. American artists looked to their own country and its individual regions for subject matter. Regionalism (as the American Scene movement is sometimes termed) is usually associated with the American Midwest, home to its three best-known exemplars: Thomas Hart Benton (Missouri), Grant Wood (Iowa), and John Steuart Curry (Kansas). Southern Regionalists focused on the poorest and most rural area of the country.^[15] Almost all of Kirk's prints were distinctly southern.

Kirk's prints number around eighty, with more than seventy etchings, five linocuts, and two lithographs, and her lateral descendants own three watercolors by her, one of which she used as a study for a subsequent print.^[16] Most of her etchings show the humble dwellings of the local rural poor, mostly African Americans. The reason for her interest in these structures can be found in her book *Cabins and Characters*: "Cabins, especially log cabins, are rapidly disappearing from the Southern landscape. Before these relics of an older day completely pass from the scene it seems fitting to make a pictorial record of them, and to try to capture some of the lowly charm that surrounded them."^[17] Kirk seems to have found the middle ground between picturing these structures as signs of grinding poverty (as in the photographs of Walker Evans) and a romantic view of the humble poor (as in some of Alfred Hutty's etchings of the rural Carolina Low Country).

Except for what has already been quoted here, Kirk is not known to have written anything in which she discussed her art. Although there is no way of being certain, it seems likely that she did not make etchings for much more than a decade, after she learned the technique, in the middle of the 1930s. In her extensive correspondence with Hill, of about a hundred

letters, there is no mention of her art, either prints or paintings. This dearth suggests that, by the time their correspondence started, in the early 1950s, Kirk had given up etching and perhaps painting as well. Also, by 1950 she was in her sixties, and the visual acuity etching required may have been a thing of the past.^[18]

Another reason Kirk may have given up etching was American artists' turn away from the American Scene toward a more international style that in a few short years became abstract expressionism. Not only was there an influx of artists from war-torn Europe, but New York galleries also focused on the new movements. In addition, the American Scene was associated with social realism, a distinctly left-wing movement in art, which was under attack by Joseph McCarthy and his allies in the early 1950s. Abstract art, on the other hand, was safer, as it had little to no obvious political content.

For the most part, Kirk's etchings picture these cabins much as they must have appeared. In what may be her most finely textured etching of a cabin, *Noon Hour*, the viewer is brought up so close that the structure fills most of the image. The cabin is a dogtrot, with a central hallway (or breezeway) that connects two rooms with a single roof. On the right, a third room (likely a kitchen) has been built out. On the left, several plants grow, including what appears to be a hollyhock.^[19] Strong sunlight highlights the texture of the wood in this almost photographically realistic rendering of the scene. As in many of Kirk's etchings, the contents of the cabin seem to spill out into the yard; the interiors of the cabins were dark, the climate was for the most part mild, and much of the life of the cabin's inhabitants took place either in the yard or on the porch. No human figures are visible, suggesting a hot day, with the cabin's inhabitants inside escaping the sun.

Not all of Kirk's etchings of cabins are so finely detailed, and some show their buildings at a distance. Many etchings picture cabins with some interesting feature beyond the merely architectural. A good example is *The Whig Rose*, which shows a humble, one-room cabin in the background and, on a fence in the foreground, two quilts: the "Whig Rose" pattern on the left and an unidentified quilt on the right.^[20] *Fence with Tin Cans* pictures another humble dwelling, in this case a two-story "I" house with two outbuildings. A young child sits on the porch, and, in the foreground, a fence has posts capped with tin cans. According to prints scholar Lynn

Williams, this display may derive "from the southern 'bottle trees,' a remnant of African culture whereby bottles on stripped trees provided housing for spirits."^[21]

Kirk made etchings of cabins of people she knew -- *Aunt Frankie's Cabin*, *Jacob's House*, *Willis' Cabin* -- very likely tenants on her ancestral land. Still other etchings picture several cabins, and Kirk did a few etchings of objects associated with her rural life, including *Old Well*; *R.F.D.* (or "rural free delivery"), a "still-life" of four mailboxes; and *Tools*, which shows items used by her gardener Isaiah.

Kirk also rendered three significant buildings in prints. The Old Synodical College stood in Florence until it was razed ca. 1909 for the post office that now occupies the site.^[22] The timeline means Kirk did not make her print of this structure from life, but from a photograph or a now-lost sketch, as she did not learn etching until the 1930s. The Forks (or Forks of Cypress) was in rural Lauderdale County, not far from the county seat of Florence. Built around 1830 and probably designed by William Nichols, it was struck by lightning and burned to the ground on June 6, 1966 -- a tragic loss as it was the sole "example in Alabama of [a] dwelling with peristyle colonnade and unique in America in such use of [the] Ionic order."^[23] Kirk's lovely etching focuses on the columns to good effect.

Fortunately, the third significant building Kirk rendered as a print (in this case, a lithograph) is still extant. Originally the Decatur branch of the State Bank of Alabama, it stands on corner of Bank Street and Wilson Avenue. Built in 1834-36, it has been modified (both additions and subtractions) several times over the years, including the building in the 1930s and removal in 1975 of the serpentine fence pictured on the right in Kirk's print. Now a museum, it is only one of five buildings in Decatur to survive the Civil War.^[24]

Kirk's images of cabins take the viewer back to the Great Depression. The labor shortages caused by World War II accelerated the mechanization of cotton production, especially the introduction of the cotton picker, which obviated the need for manual labor. Within a generation, many agricultural workers had left, mostly for northern cities, and abandoned their humble homes.^[25] Two generations later, the southern landscape is largely denuded of these once common structures, victims of both neglect and purposeful destruction. In many cases, only the chimney remains.^[26]

At Hill's urging and with his encouragement, Kirk wrote *Cabins and Characters* (1969) and *Locust Hill* (1975), both of which are illustrated in part with reproductions of her etchings. The first is a short work and includes images of fourteen of her etchings; sadly, they do not do justice to the fineness of her art. In the prose, as Kirk explains in the introduction, she gives "character sketches [that] are based on my encounters with the people who lived in the cabins that I have etched. I hope that these sketches will suggest lives rich in pathos and humor."^[27]

The longer *Locust Hill* is really three books in one: a history of the house Locust Hill, from its construction in the 1820s to its purchase by Kirk's great-grandfather just after the Civil War through her stewardship in the twentieth century; a family history; and a remembrance of a happy childhood that takes the reader back to the New South of the late nineteenth century.^[28] The world Kirk described is one of good manners and prosperity without extravagance at a time when the South was going through the difficult transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial society.^[29] Taken together, these two books, along with her numerous prints, are a permanent legacy of Kirk's life and career as an artist and a writer.^[30]

Kirk actively exhibited her art, especially her prints, during her life.^[31] Since her death, there have been no known exhibitions of her works and little interest in her etchings by art historians.^[32] This situation is unfortunate, as Kirk's etchings show a mastery of the medium, and her subject matter (mostly humble, vernacular domestic architecture) is of not just artistic but also historic interest.

Notes

1. So enchanted was Kirk of her longtime residence that she named her memoir/family history after it. See note 10.
2. Not the QE2 but the earlier ship, launched in 1938.
3. Hill (1916-2000), largely self-taught, became a distinguished portrait and landscape painter and a scholar of Islamic architecture. Born in England, he lived most of his adult life in Ireland. Hill is the subject of a full-length biography (Bruce Arnold, *Derek Hill* [London: Quartet, 2010]), which unfortunately does not mention Kirk.

4. Writing after her death, Hill said that Berenson "was as enchanted with her as I had been and described her as the sort of American who appealed to him, who must by now be one of the last survivors of the intellectual 'Edith Wharton' era." "Mary Wallace Kirk," typed manuscript, Derek Hill papers, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, D4400/C/14/6.

5. Deshler Female Institute, "an undenominational college for the education of white females," located in Tusculumbia, was founded in the fall of 1874 and graduated its last class in the spring of 1918. Colbert County Heritage Book Committee, *The Heritage of Colbert County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Pub. Consultants, 1999), 51. The article in this volume on the Deshler Institute was submitted by Cindy Elkins and based on Richard Sheridan, *Deshler Female Institute: An Example of Female Education in Alabama 1874-1918* (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Print. & Pub. Co., 1986). I would like to thank Betty B. Dyar (volunteer, Alfred H. Moses Local History Room, Sheffield Public Library, Sheffield, Alabama) for bringing these books to my attention and for other help that she has provided me on the life of Mary Wallace Kirk.

6. She was also president of the alumnae association for two terms (1921-24), during which time she spearheaded the establishment of the first alumnae house on the campus of a southern college. *Atlanta Constitution*, May 17, 1977.

7. Eleanor Hutchens, "Remembering Mary Wallace Kirk, 1889-1978," *Agnes Scott Alumnae Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1978): 1.

8. "I find the atmosphere here at the College one of exhilaration once the integration policy was adopted. Out of the 32 members of the Board only 4 were opposed. When the announcement was made the faculty (100 in no.) all spontaneously applauded and no protest ever[?] came from the student body [of] 650." Letter from Kirk to Hill, March 13, 1962, Hill papers, D4400/C/14/6/48. See also Walter Edward McNair, *Lest We Forget: An Account of Agnes Scott College* (Decatur, GA: Agnes Scott College, 1983), 173-74; and Christine S. Cozzens and M. Lee Sayrs, *A Full and Rich Measure: 100 Years of Educating Women at Agnes Scott College, 1889-1989* (Atlanta: Susan Hunter, 1990), 31.

9. "It was Mary Wallace Kirk, with the very few other alumnae on the board at that time, who saved the identity of Agnes Scott. The struggle was tense at times, at times desperate, and went on for months. Mary Wallace was deeply alarmed, but she never lost her head or even her temper. Patiently talking away in that beautifully modulated voice of hers, she made the rounds of her uncommitted fellow trustees again and again, explaining the nature of the peril and gradually convincing them of its reality." Hutchens (14) addresses an incident in the spring of 1956, when two trustees, along with twenty-three elders of the Decatur Presbyterian Church and an assortment of alumnae, urged the board of trustees to rescind an invitation to Nels F. S. Ferré (of the divinity school of Vanderbilt University) to give the baccalaureate address to the graduating class. The board

refused by a vote of 20 to 2 to rescind the invitation to Dr. Ferré (McNair, 151-55). I would like to thank Elizabeth Leslie Bagley (director of library services, Agnes Scott College) for bringing this information and the book *Lest We Forget* to my attention.

10. Mary Wallace Kirk, *Locust Hill* (University: University of Alabama, 1975), 89. In a rare document, which Kirk published a year before her death, she tells about an autumn day (no year is indicated) in which "Mother and I went sketching this morning and had a good time. It was a 'seeing morning' for me. The world was full of pictures everywhere I looked. I could not sketch them fast enough. The shadows were beautiful and such clear, brilliant sunshine." Mary Wallace Kirk, *Of Days and Seasons at Locust Hill: From a Journal by Mary Wallace Kirk* (Boulder Creek, CA: Triton Press, 1977), 15.

11. On the inside of the back cover, the following is written in an unknown hand (apparently that of her art teacher): "The girlie has taken lessons -- three months & four days -- I thinky she does very fine! I am proud of her. Teacher." The drawing book is in the possession of Kirk's lateral descendant Dan Rather.

12. Registration card for Mary Wallace Kirk, 1935, Registration Records, Archive of the Art Students League of New York. Sternberg (1904-2001) taught at the league from 1933 to 1966. Kirk apparently also studied with fellow Alabamian Lucille Douglass (1878-1935), who lived in New York City in the early 1930s. Peter H. Falk et al., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1999), 339. Kirk does not mention Alice Goldthwaite (1869-1944), who taught at the Art Students League for many years, though she was a popular teacher, a fellow Alabamian, and taught etching.

13. Kirk, *Locust Hill*, 69.

14. For Charleston and New Orleans, see Lynn Barstis Williams, *Imprinting the South: Southern Printmakers and Their Images of the Region, 1920s-1940s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 3-9; for Macpherson, see *Marian Acker Macpherson: Etcher of Old Mobile*, exh. cat. (Mobile, AL: Mobile Museum of Art, 2010).

15. For an overview of the American Scene movement in the South, see Patricia Phagan, ed., *The American Scene and the South: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1930-1946* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 1996). The chapter on Alabama ("Picturing the Unvictorious: The Southern Scene in Alabama, 1930-1946," by William U. Eiland) does not mention Kirk.

16. This number is based on a three-page document that Kirk left among her papers (now in possession of Dan Rather), titled "List of etchings that I am keeping"; there are also two single-page documents, one titled "List of etchings to keep" and one "Reserve supply of etchings." The figure of eighty prints is an

educated guess based on a collation of these three documents.

17. Mary Wallace Kirk, *Cabins and Characters* (Birmingham, AL: Southern University Press, 1969), ii. For a discussion of other southern printmakers capturing images of a disappearing architectural legacy, see Williams, 23-30.

18. Kirk continued to sell her etchings from her home for at least a couple more decades. A friend described purchasing some etchings from Kirk in 1969: "One day in 1969 I drove to Tusculumbia by myself to Locust Hill. I had called ahead and made an appointment with Miss Kirk. It was a beautiful sunny day and when I drove up to the house[;] here was a lovely typical southern home set up on a slight bank. When I rang the doorbell I was greeted by Miss Kirk. She was petite and gracious with the manners of a soft spoken genteel southern little lady. She welcomed me into one of the many rooms and personally showed me all of her etchings that were for sale. I picked 4 that represented, to me, southern icons that have disappeared. Each one that I picked was a scene of something that I had remembered from early childhood. . . . I grew up in a small town with lots of farms and lots of African American people. I used to hear the wagons rattle down the street by my house before daylight taking cotton to the gin in town, thus the scene called 'tools' with a cotton basket and rake was something that I knew about. I had seen many cellars on farms . . . sometimes it was a storm shelter and sometimes a root cellar. . . . The memory of meeting Mary Wallace and the experience of being in her home with her personally showing me her work was a treat I think of each time I look at one of the etchings. She was just a precious little lady." Email from Martha M. Kracke to the author, August 20, 2013.

19. Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalog: Historic American Building Survey; A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 24-29.

20. When I first considered adding this etching to the exhibition, I thought that naming the unnamed quilt on the right would only require locating a "quilt expert." (The quilt on the left is apparently "Whig Rose," the title Mary Wallace Kirk gave to the etching.) I was mistaken. I did locate an expert, Judy Schwender (curator of collections/registrar, National Quilt Museum, Paducah, Kentucky), but she suggested nearly a dozen possibilities as to the name of the quilt and concluded that "I do not think there is a name for the pattern on the right" (email Judy Schwender to the author, May 12, 2014). She then went on to suggest that the quilt on the left is "Democrat Rose," though quilt makers were free to name their quilts what they liked; see Barbara Brackman, *Encyclopedia of Appliqué: An Illustrated, Numerical Index to Traditional and Modern Patterns* (McLean, VA: EPM Publications, 1993), #18.24.

21. Williams, 92.

22. Lee Freeman, "The Florence Female Synodical College." This three-page history

was prepared by Mr. Freeman of the Local History/Genealogy Department, Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, Florence, Alabama.

23. Gamble, 251.

24. Ibid., 330.

25. Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 239-55.

26. For a relevant image, see my *The South in Black and White: The Graphic Works of James E. Routh, Jr., 1939-1946*, exh. cat. (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 2009), 17.

27. Kirk, *Cabins and Characters*, ii.

28. I agree with the British historian Eric Hobsbawn (in *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* [New York: Vintage Books, 1996]) that the nineteenth century did not really end until the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, three years after Kirk graduated from college.

29. While writing *Locust Hill*, Kirk made the following comment to Hill: "I might indicate the family's way of life for the past 100 years -- 1865 the year they moved here, to 1965. But since we have no ghosts, no murders, no degenerates it may not be interesting." Letter from Kirk to Hill, March 26, 1965, Hill papers, D4400/C/14/6.

30. Kirk also wrote poetry, which was collected in *Sum of Living* (first published at an unknown date and then in an enlarged edition in 1977). Every Christmas, Kirk sent Hill a card, which contained "a little improvised verse to commemorate some memory" of a visit to St. Columb; for example, "Matches long so as not to tire/Gracie when she lights your evening fire./Fire of fagots and fragrant peat/To cheer your spirits and warm your feet!" "Mary Wallace Kirk" manuscript.

31. An incomplete list of exhibitions during her life includes: Second National Print Show, Buffalo, New York (1938); Laguna Beach, California, Art Association's First National Prize Print Show (Honorable Mention, 1938); Southern Print Makers Rotary Exhibit (1938, 1939, 1940); the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th Circuit Exhibition of the Southern States Art League (1937-40); the 17th annual Exhibition of American Prints, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Friends of American Art, First National Exhibit, Grand Rapids, Michigan; State Art Gallery, Shreveport, Louisiana (First Prize); Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts, Hartford, Connecticut (1949); Delgado Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana; Huntingdon College, Montgomery, Alabama; Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia; Alabama Art League annuals; and Milch Art Gallery, New York City. *Personalities of the South: Outstanding Distinguished* (Raleigh, NC: American Biographical Institute, 1974), 354.

32. An exception to this generalization is Williams (92-93), who includes a reproduction of one of her etchings.

About the author

Stephen J. Goldfarb is an independent scholar. He served as curator for the exhibition "The Prints of Mary Wallace Kirk."

About the related exhibition

The Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia is bringing to light the works of a virtually unknown female artist in its exhibition "The Prints of Mary Wallace Kirk," on display July 19 - October 12, 2014. Independent scholar Stephen J. Goldfarb served as curator, researching Kirk's life and work extensively.

Kirk, who was born and lived most of her life in Tuscumbia, Ala., produced finely detailed renderings of the countryside for about a decade, between the 1930s and 1940s. She studied etching with Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League in New York, who complained, in regard to her reliably sun-filled work, "Doesn't it ever rain in southern Alabama?" The exhibition features approximately 30 of her works, including watercolors, etched plates and drawings as well as printed etchings.

Kirk was influenced by the etching revival that made its way to the United States in the early 20th century as well as by the American Scene movement, a period after World War I when Americans moved away from European influences. Artists focused on their own country and regions for subject matter, and Kirk took the South as her topic. She wrote, "Cabins, especially log cabins, are rapidly disappearing from the Southern landscape. Before these relics of an older day completely pass from the scene it seems fitting to make a pictorial record of them, and to try to capture some of the lowly charm that surrounded them."

By the 1950s, Kirk focused on her duties as a trustee of her alma mater Agnes Scott College, in Decatur, Ga., and on two memoirs illustrated with reproductions of her prints.

Hillary Brown, director of communications at the Georgia Museum of Art, said, "This exhibition, like many before it at the museum, highlights the work of a lesser-known southern printmaker, which has not been shown since her death. As an academic museum, fostering research is one of our most important missions, and Dr. Goldfarb's efforts in tracking down information on Kirk have been formidable. In addition, visitors will be able to see the delicacy of her line in these tiny etchings."

The exhibition is accompanied by an issue of the *Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin* that includes images of Kirk's etchings and an essay on her life and career written by Goldfarb. *The Bulletin* is an intermittently published venue for scholarship and research on the museum's collection.

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