

The Work of Charles Samuel Keene by Simon Houfe. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995. xi, 113 pp. ISBN 0-85967-986-1, \$85.95.

Of all Victorian black and white artists, Charles Keene has received perhaps the greatest critical attention--at least seven books, counting this one, plus numerous exhibitions, catalogues, and articles. The obvious reason for such attention is merit: he was particularly admired by his peers, including the French Impressionists--Camille Pissaro declaring him Britain's leading, indeed only, major artist. If any Victorian black and white artist is close to art historical canonization, then, it is Keene. This is a notable achievement for an artist whose almost entire work was intended for mechanical reproduction, since art history generally promotes the cult of the original which is, of course, central to the economic nexus of scholars, dealers, galleries, and collectors for whom uniqueness ensures the essential principle of scarcity value. How could one "seriously" collect works of art which exist as thousands of identical exemplars? Actually, artists themselves did. Degas had a collection of 215 Keene woodcut engravings which fetched eleven francs at his death, but presumably had an artistic value for Degas quite incommensurate with this paltry sum. A far greater irony lies in the fact that another avid collector of Victorian British woodcuts was the artist whose dazzling coloured oils would eventually command the highest prices of any modern--Vincent Van Gogh, though he exemplified the romantic capitalist mythology of artistic genius by dying penniless, seemingly deranged and unknown. As a collector, however, Van Gogh preferred the grim realism of the *Graphic* to the complacent bourgeois humour of Keene's *Punch*.

As is well known, the woodcut process literally consumed the artist's original which was usually drawn on the block itself and then cut away by the engraver. Around 1870 a process was developed which made it possible for a drawing on paper to be copied onto the block photographically, thus enabling the artist to preserve the original. Not until the late 1870s did Keene accept this process for his *Punch* work. Thereafter, his originals survived and became particularly important to collectors along with some earlier preliminary sketches for illustrations and some work not intended for publication, such as portraits and landscapes. Houfe's extensively illustrated book devotes much attention to these, being largely informed by collectors' values. A central theme in Keene literature, first enunciated by Joseph Pennell, is that his art fell victim to the engraver's knife, even though Keene was himself a trained wood engraver. It is true that he liked to use grainy and tinted papers, washes, special inks of his own devising, and odd pens. Nor is it surprising that, once freed from the polished white boxwood block and able to produce a salvageable original, he took advantage of the opportunity. But despite the heavy emphasis on the difference between the original and the *Punch* woodcut in the '80s work where such comparison can be made--Pennell's emphasis which