

FRANCIS UNWIN

ETCHER AND DRAUGHTSMAN

With a Memoir

by

CAMPBELL DODGSON, C.B.E.

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Seventeen Collotype Plates

EDITED BY JOHN NASH

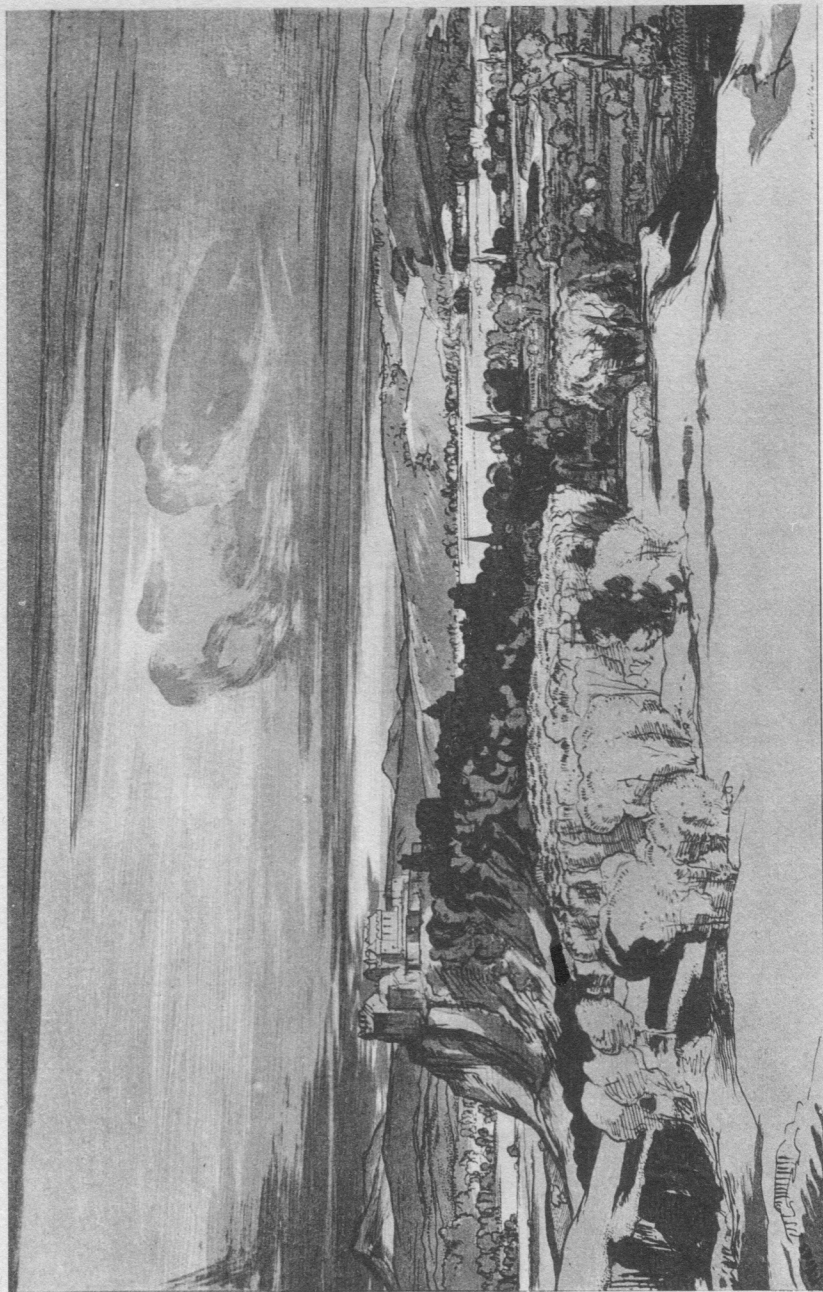
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STIRLING CASTLE

FRANCIS UNWIN

A MEMOIR

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CAMPBELL DODGSON, C.B.E.

FRANCIS SYDNEY, youngest son of the Rev. C. E. Unwin, was born at Stalbridge, Dorset, on February 11th, 1885. His childhood was spent in Somersetshire. He was educated at Dean Close, Cheltenham, and the Winchester School of Art, and was at the Slade from 1902 to 1905. In 1907 he visited Holland; in 1908 Rome, Florence, and Venice. The winter of that year was spent in Egypt, where he drew interiors of tombs for an American publication. In 1909 he took rooms in Great Ormond Street, where he was living when I first knew him; some years later he moved to more airy quarters in Hampstead. In 1912 he visited Venice, Florence, and Avignon, in 1913 Florence again, Sicily and Rome. From all these journeys he brought back drawings and material for etchings, several of which bear the date 1914. In 1916 consumption first declared itself: he had to stay at the Mundesley Sanatorium for five months. In 1917, during a period of convalescence at a farm near Midhurst, he produced some etchings of rustic subjects in an entirely new style. In 1918 he went to Stirling, where he made studies for an elaborate lithograph, printed in colours, of Stirling Castle, connected with an

ill-starred scheme for the issue of lithographs to decorate the London County Council schools: very few of these, and Unwin's not among them, ever saw the light. His is no mere poster, but a carefully-thought-out and beautifully-wrought design. It is reproduced for the first time as the frontispiece to this book. A wash drawing, in the British Museum, of the Ochill Hills from Stirling, dates from the same time. After the war he went twice to the High Alps, in 1920 to the Engadine, and in 1921 to the Schynige Platte. He lived chiefly, after this, in his cottage at Whiteleaf, near Princes Risborough. In 1923 he made etchings and drawings at Cromer and King's Lynn. In February, 1924, an exhibition of his later work was held at St. George's Gallery, but during the summer he was able to produce only one etching and one drawing. That was the end: a little more than a year later, on November 26th, 1925, he died.

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Of the etchings reproduced in this book there are two which show the work of his student days, 'The Ambulatory, Westminster' (1), and 'On The Thames' (2a). Both bear the date 1904, when he was still working at the Slade. The only other early work is the drawing of Dordrecht Church (11), the result of his visit to Holland in 1907. His travels in Italy in 1908 to 1913 produced the numerous drawings and etchings by which one knew and judged the pre-war Unwin. It was elaborate and careful work, never rashly undertaken, but deliberately studied and carried through with the conscientiousness of a thorough crafts-

man. The Venetian studies of 1911 are somewhat heavy in handling: he was happier, I think, in the more delicate style that he had evolved when, in 1914, he did his Florentine subjects, the 'Ponte Sta. Trinita' (5) and the 'Municipio' (6). The former of these is one of the most elaborate plates he ever etched, but the detail never becomes wearisome, the line is light and sensitive. The 'Municipio' is, I should say, the masterpiece of this period. The delicate but firmly etched lines, the clean white surface of the walls, the transparent shadows and the delicate and sensitive drawing of the less rigid accessories of the building, such as blinds and awnings, are among the many merits of this plate. 'The Tabularium, Rome', is an archaizing experiment in the manner of Piranesi's smaller plates, rather than that of Canaletto, with whose etchings Unwin at that time was much in love.

In 1917, during a period of convalescence at Verdley Farm, he produced some remarkable etchings of rustic subjects, which show that he had made a break with the past. The finest of this 1917 group, and in my opinion one of the best English etchings of its period, is 'Reaping and Binding' (7a). In economy of line, in vigour of action, in the simplicity and directness of the execution, it is unrivalled.

The next event in his career as an etcher is the production, in 1921, of the 'Maloja' set. They are mostly studies of mountain forms pure and simple, firmly drawn and deeply bitten; one of them is a study of old houses near Sils, while the last, and in my opinion the most attractive, the 'Boulder', represents a great isolated rock drawn at close quarters. The one chosen from this

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graphs drawn with the brush. Then follow, in 1920-21, three Alpine subjects, and later, in 1923, the very attractive pen lithographs, 'Whiteleaf', 'The Potting Shed', and 'Beeston Church', near Cromer. The drawing, 'Cromer from the Pier' (16), also bears the date 1923, but was never exhibited during Unwin's lifetime, and after this year he had scarcely a chance of completing any work.

Thanks to his generosity during his lifetime, and to a clause in his will of which advantage has been gratefully taken, the Print Room of the British Museum possesses a nearly complete collection of Unwin's etchings, including some rare first states, and all his lithographs. The Maloja portfolio was presented to the same collection some years ago by the Contemporary Art Society, which is still the owner of 'Wilderswil Bridge'.

At forty, when many artists are at the height of their power and can look forward to a long career, Unwin was beaten in his long and plucky fight. A lover of music, of prints and books, of country walks, generous in praising the art of his friends, serious in his devotion to his own, he deserved more success than he was able to achieve. Though far from indifferent to the opinion of other artists and friends whose judgement he trusted, he had little regard for popular success. He worked steadily in the face of many obstacles, experimenting and rejecting, and achieving perhaps more than he expected. He has left work behind him which will not soon be forgotten.

LIST OF PLATES

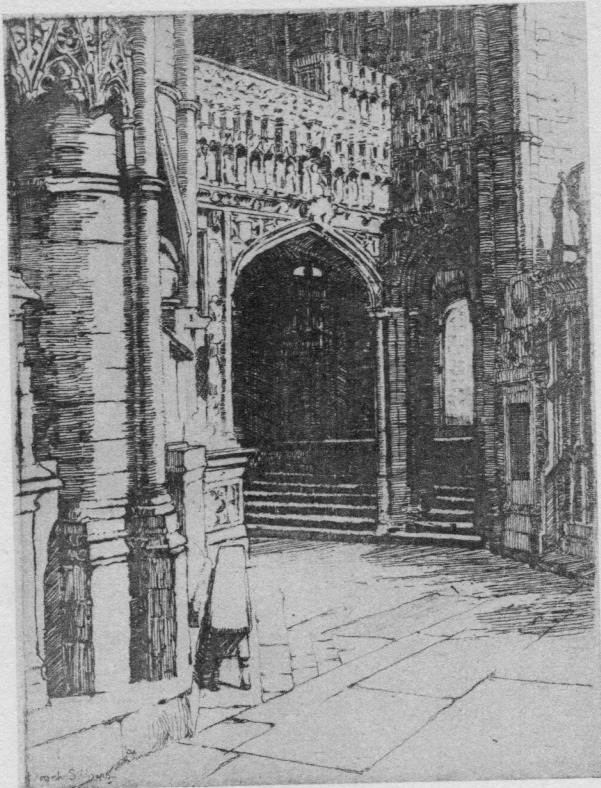
STIRLING CASTLE (Lithograph). Frontispiece Date 1918

ETCHINGS

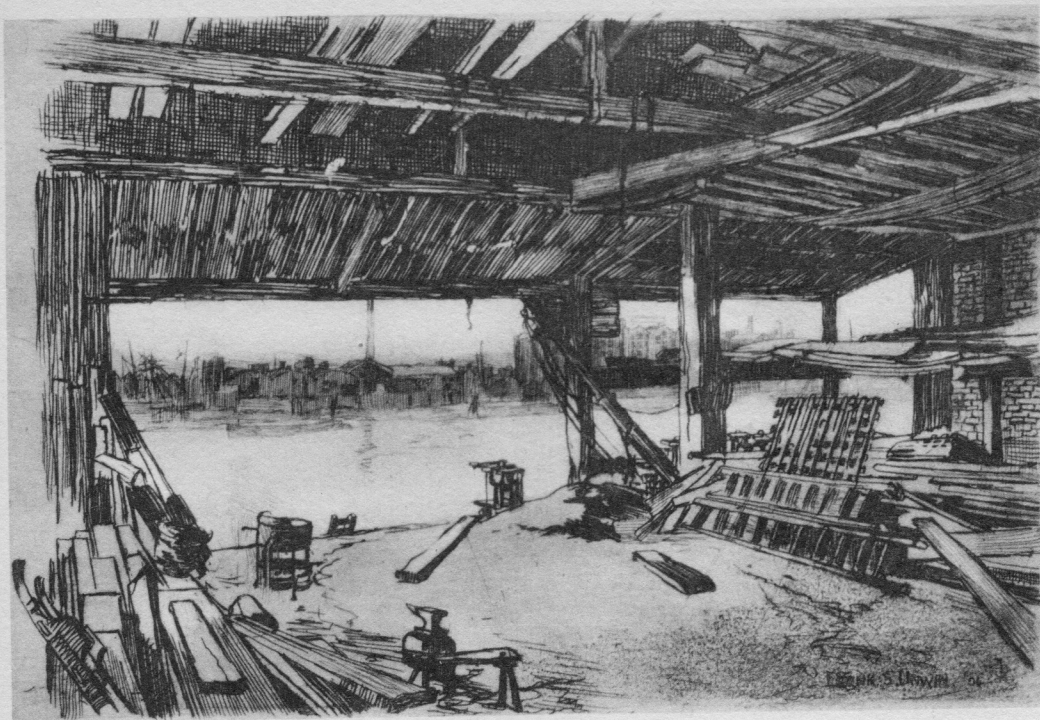
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|----------------------------------|------|
| 1. WESTMINSTER AMBULATORY | 1904 |
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| 2b. ON THE ARNO | 1915 |
| 3. CAMPO S. APOSTOLI, VENICE | 1911 |
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| 7a. REAPING AND BINDING | 1917 |
| 7b. VERDLEY FARM | " |
| 8. HAMPSTEAD (Lithograph) | 1919 |
| 9. MONTE DEL FORNO | 1920 |
| 10. THE SEVEN SISTERS | " |

DRAWINGS

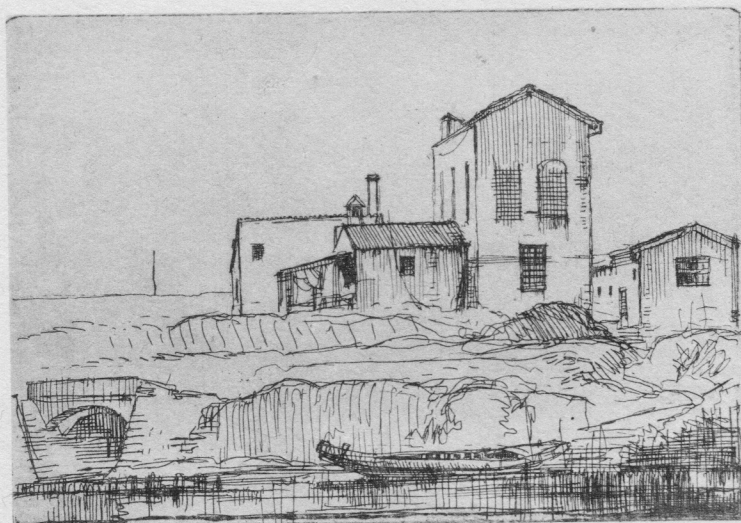
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| 11. DORDRECHT CHURCH. Tate Gallery | 1907 |
| 12. THE WINDOW. Private Collection | 1914 |
| 13. LANE AND TREES. The Print Room, British Museum | 1920 |
| 14. WILDERSWIL BRIDGE. Contemporary Art Society | " |
| 15. THE SCHRECKHORN AND THE FINSTERAARHORN | 1921 |
| 16. CROMER FROM THE PIER. Private Collection | 1923 |



1. WESTMINSTER AMBULATORY



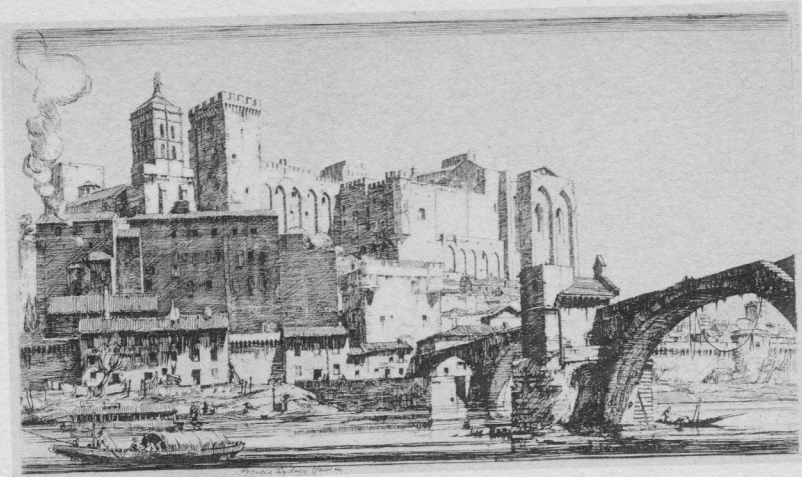
2a. ON THE THAMES



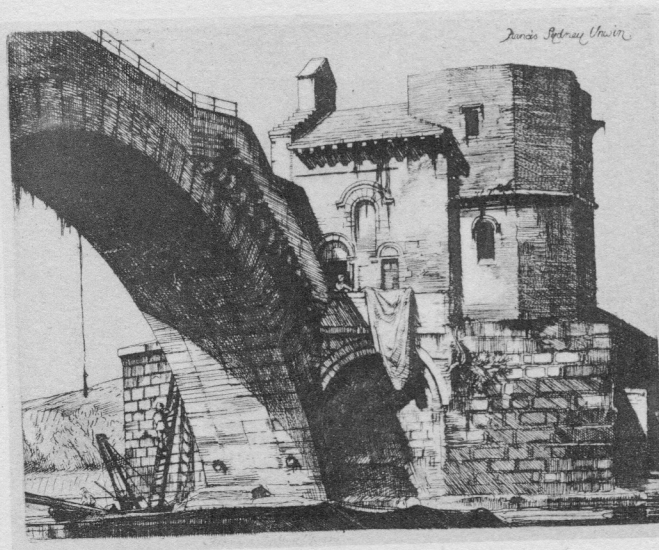
2b. ON THE ARNO



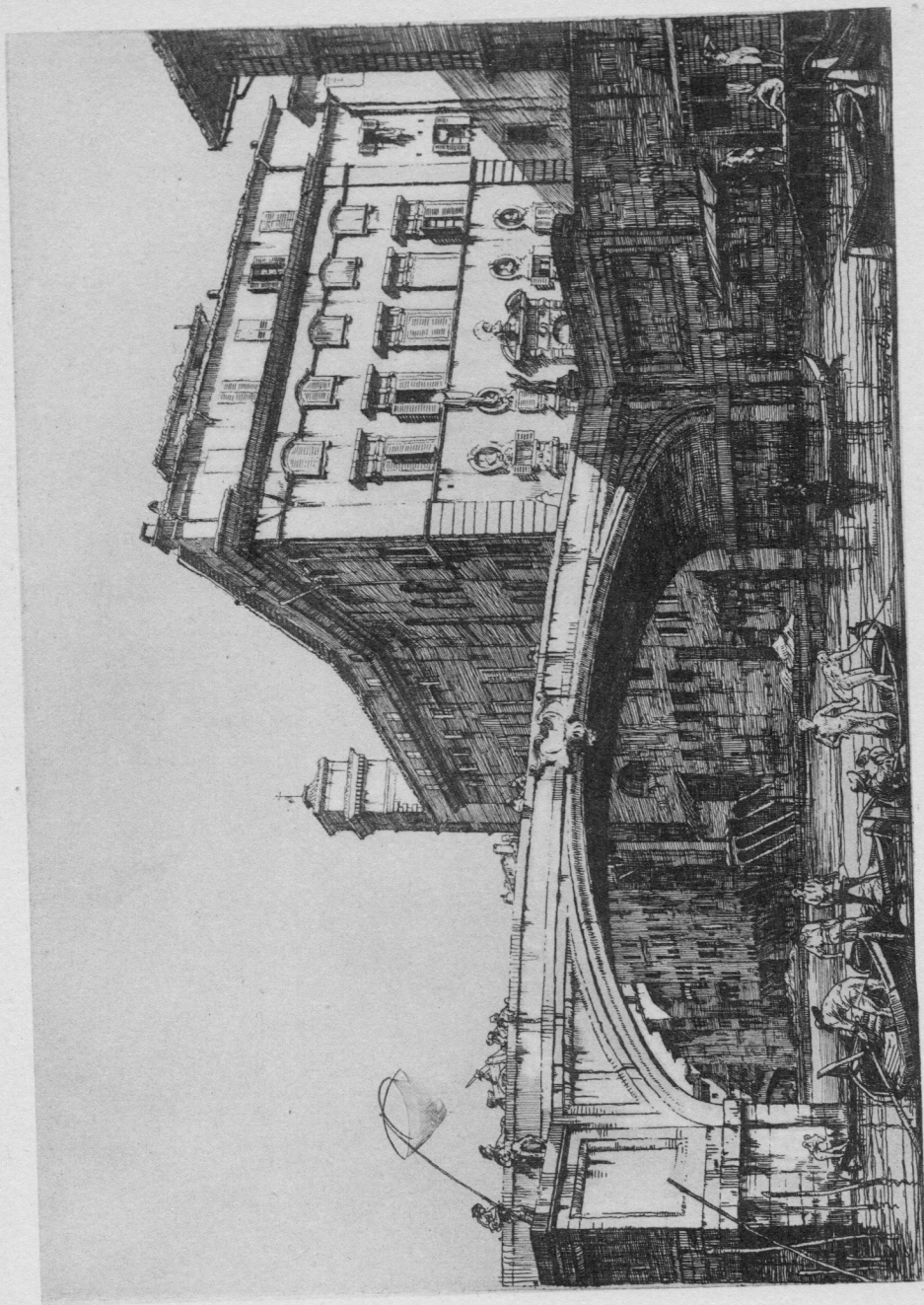
3. CAMPO S. APOSTOLI, VENICE



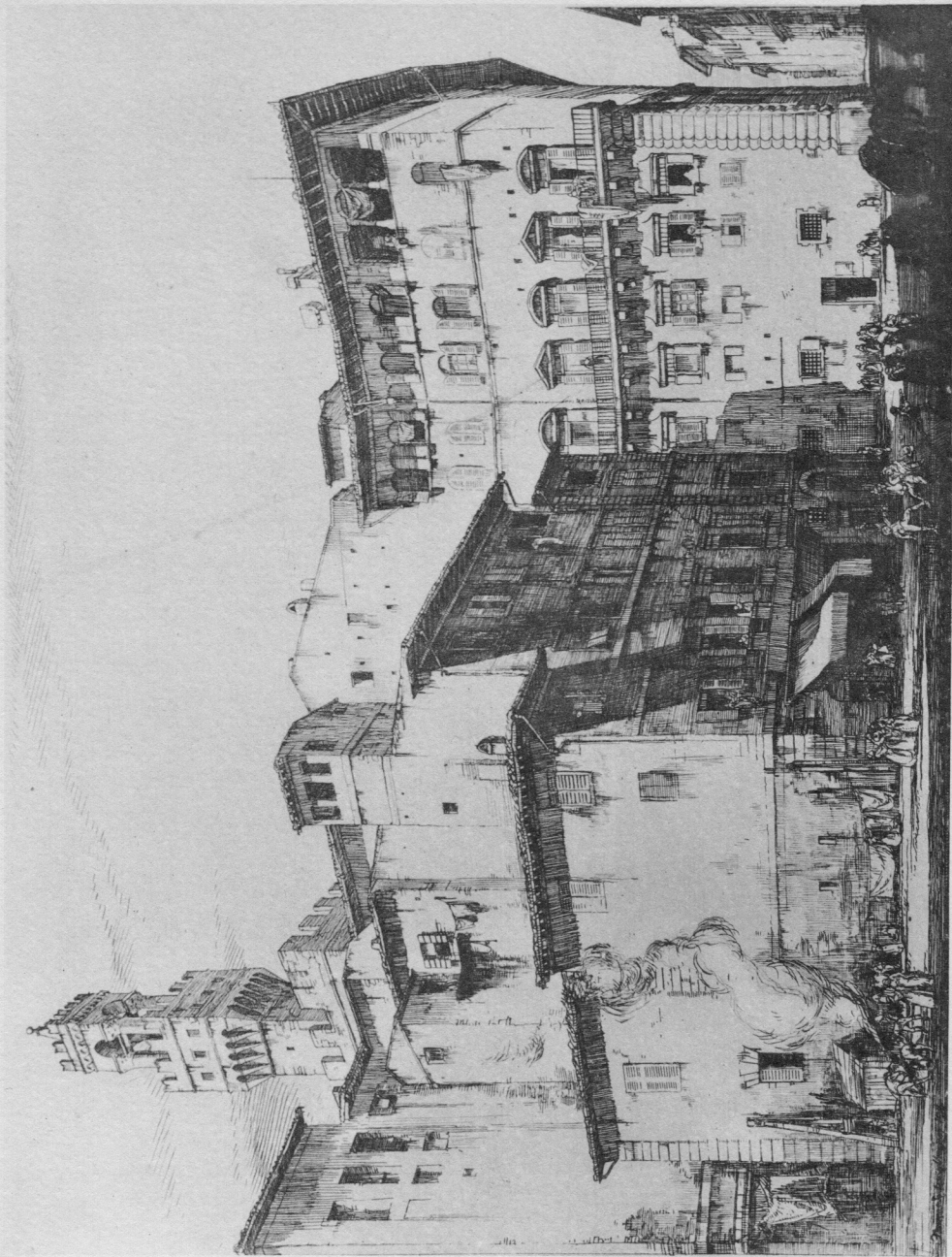
4a. AVIGNON, PALACE OF THE POPES



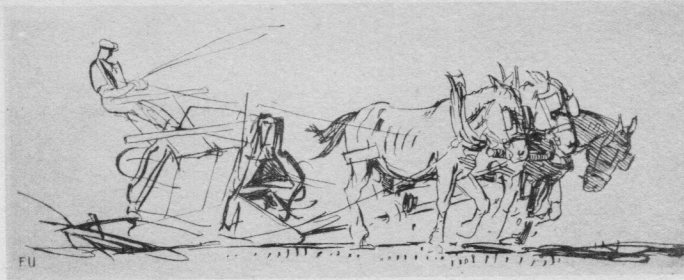
4b. PONT D'AVIGNON



5. PONTE S. TRINITA, FLORENCE



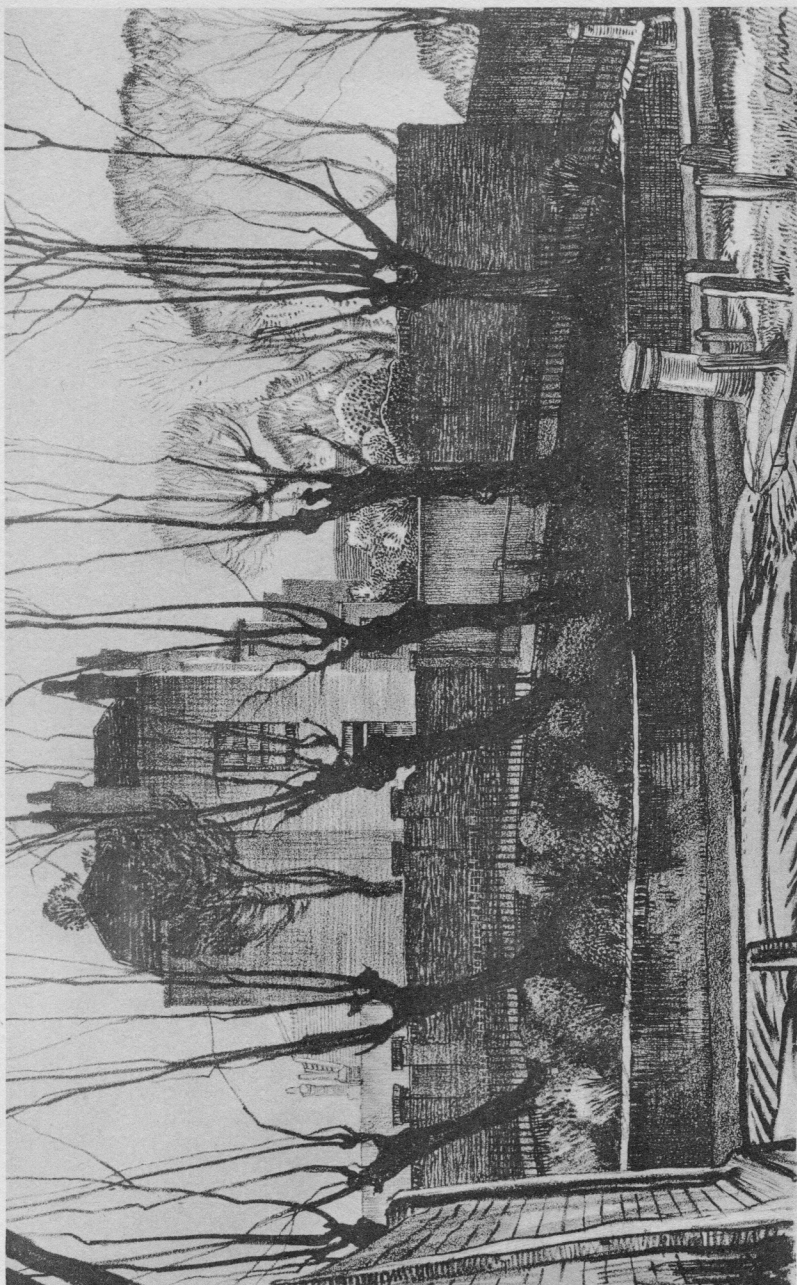
6. THE MUNICIPIO, FLORENCE



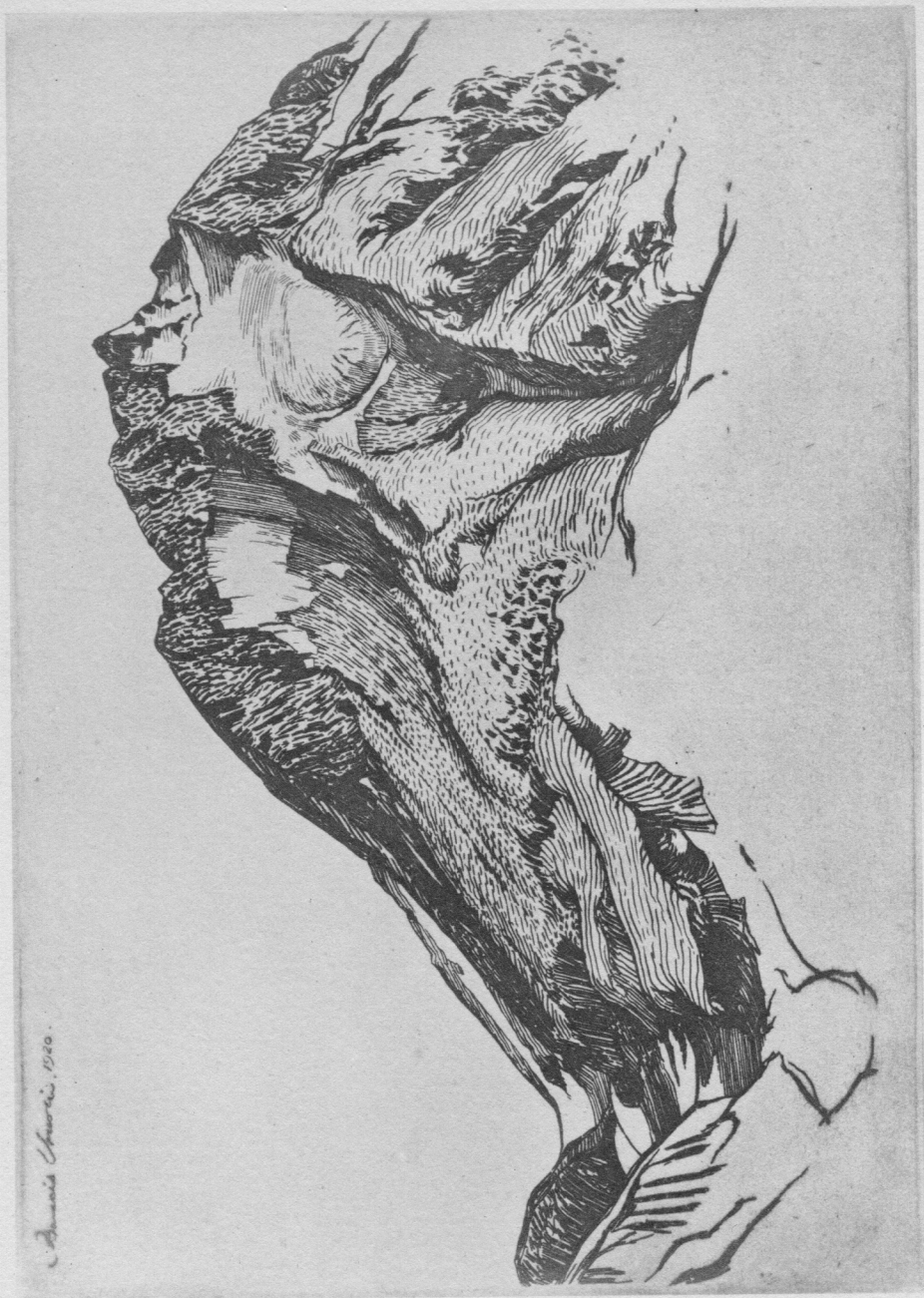
7a. REAPING AND BINDING



7b. VERDLEY FARM

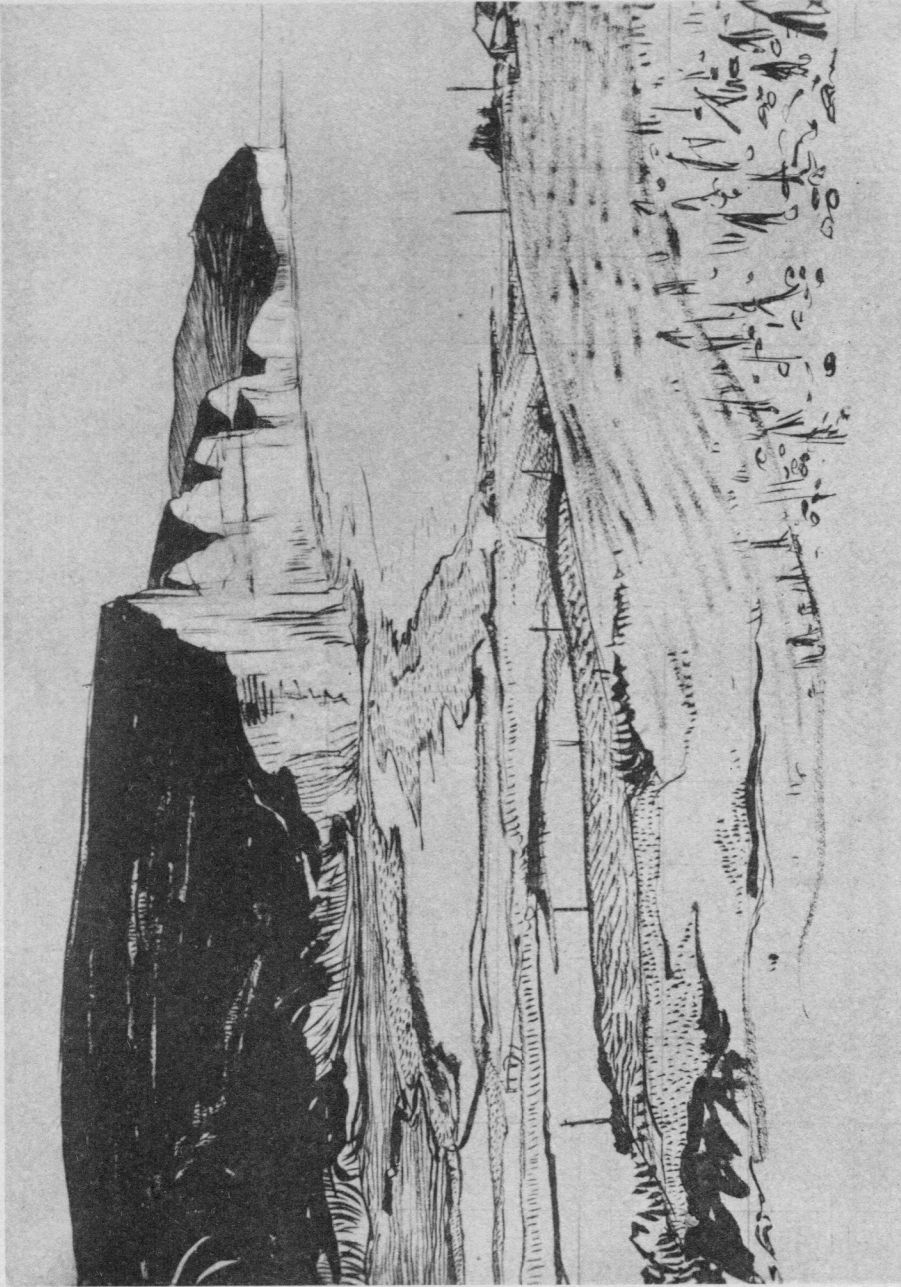


8. HAMPSTEAD

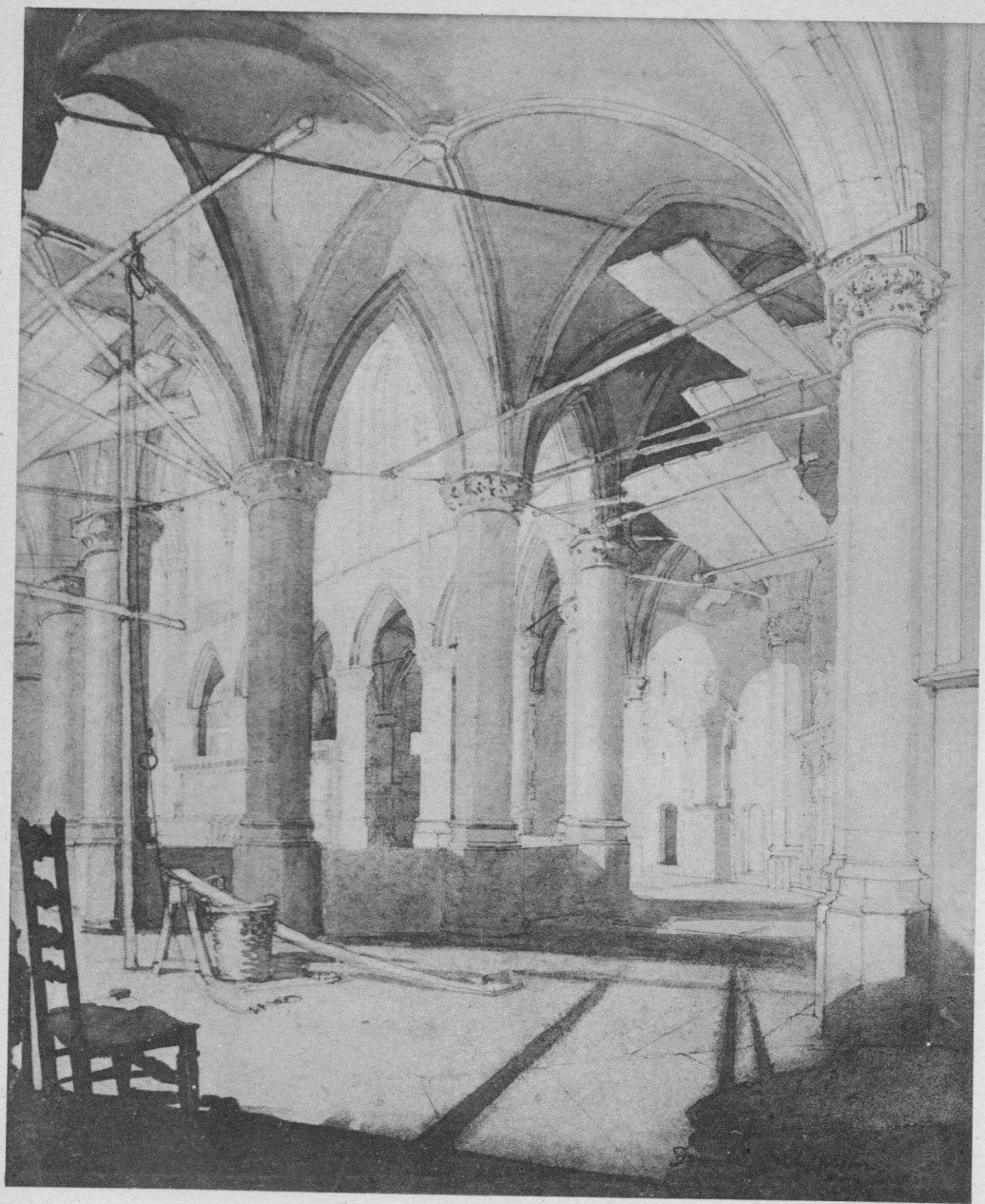


Amos Chorti, 1900.

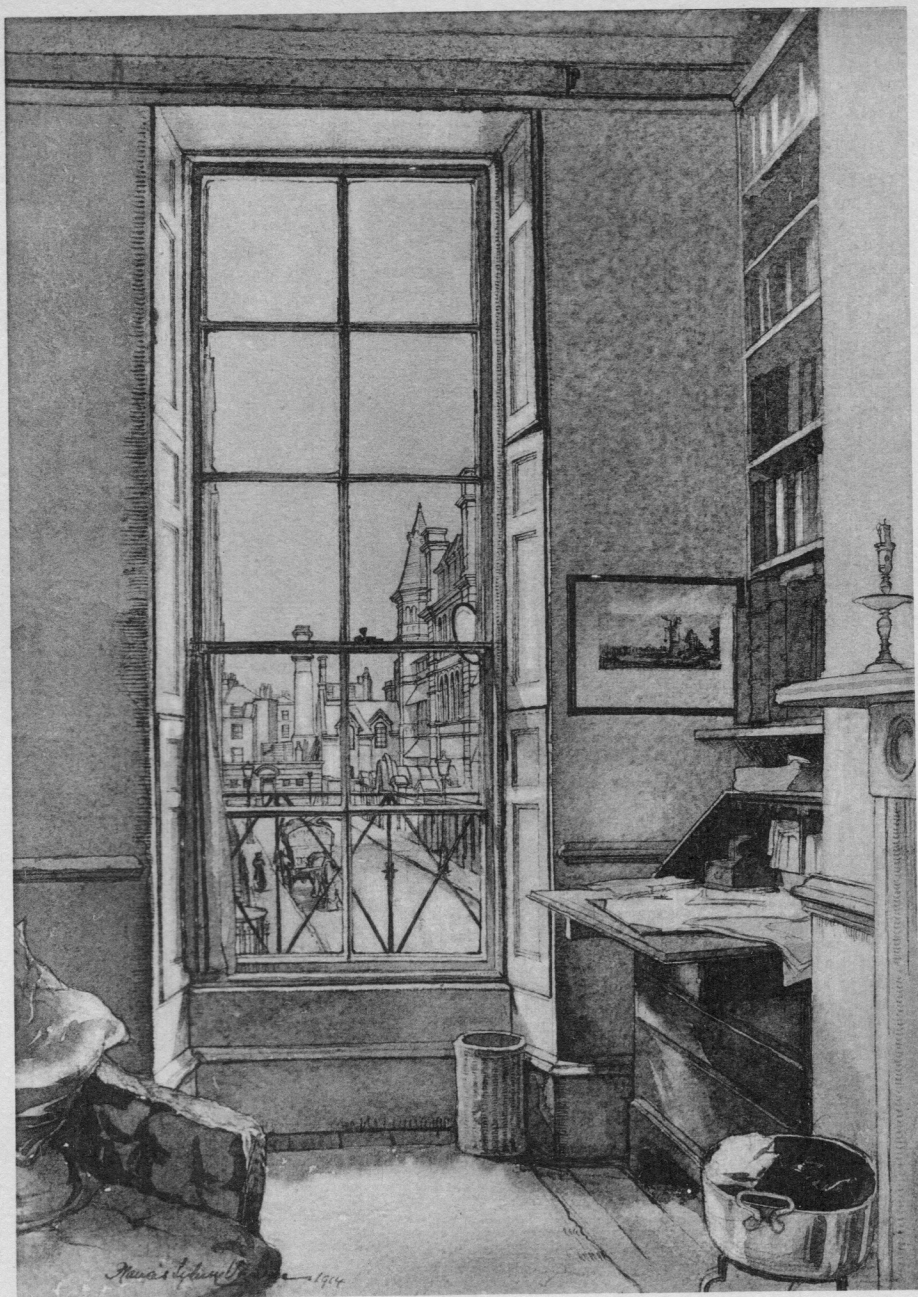
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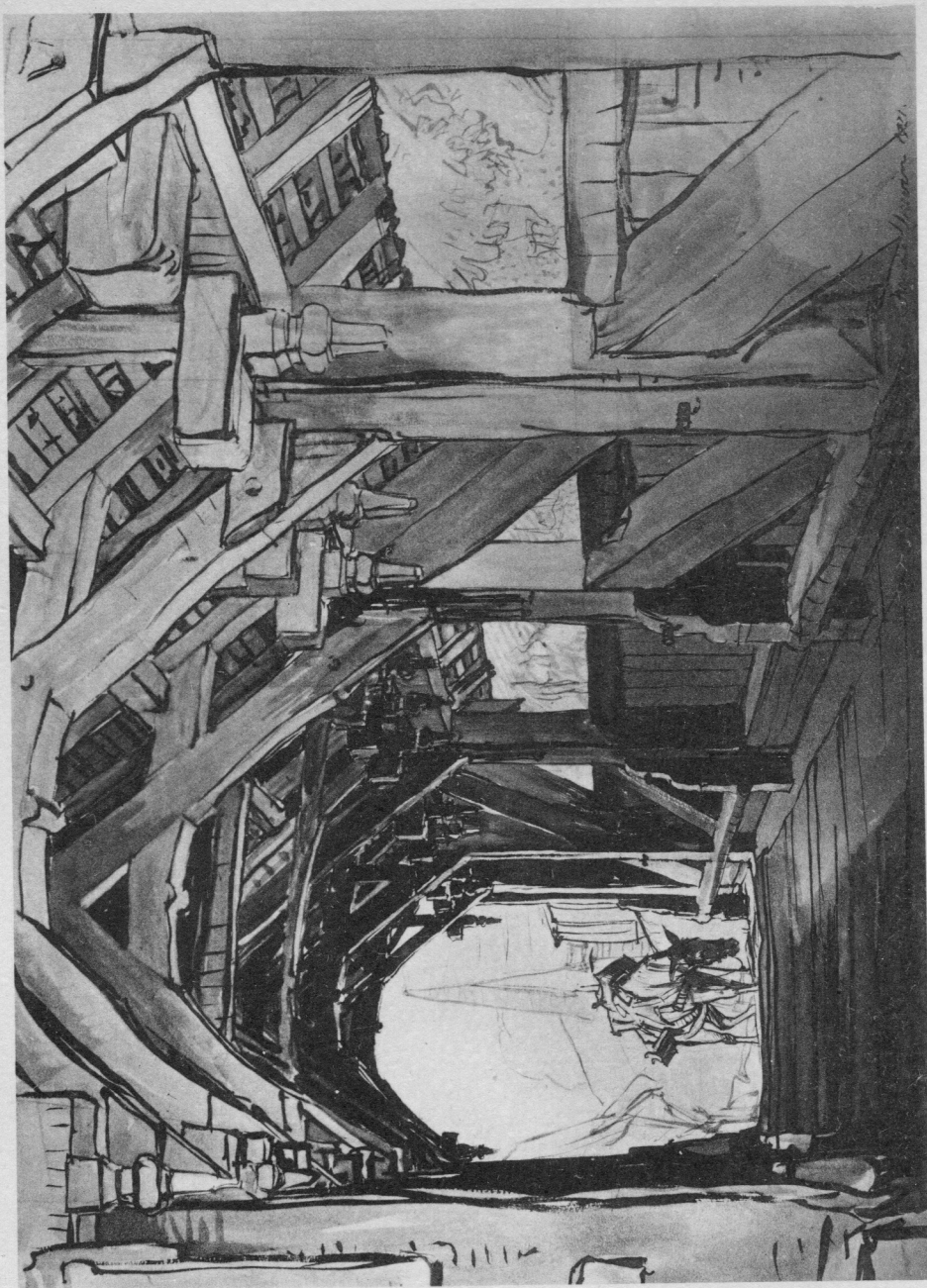
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12. THE WINDOW



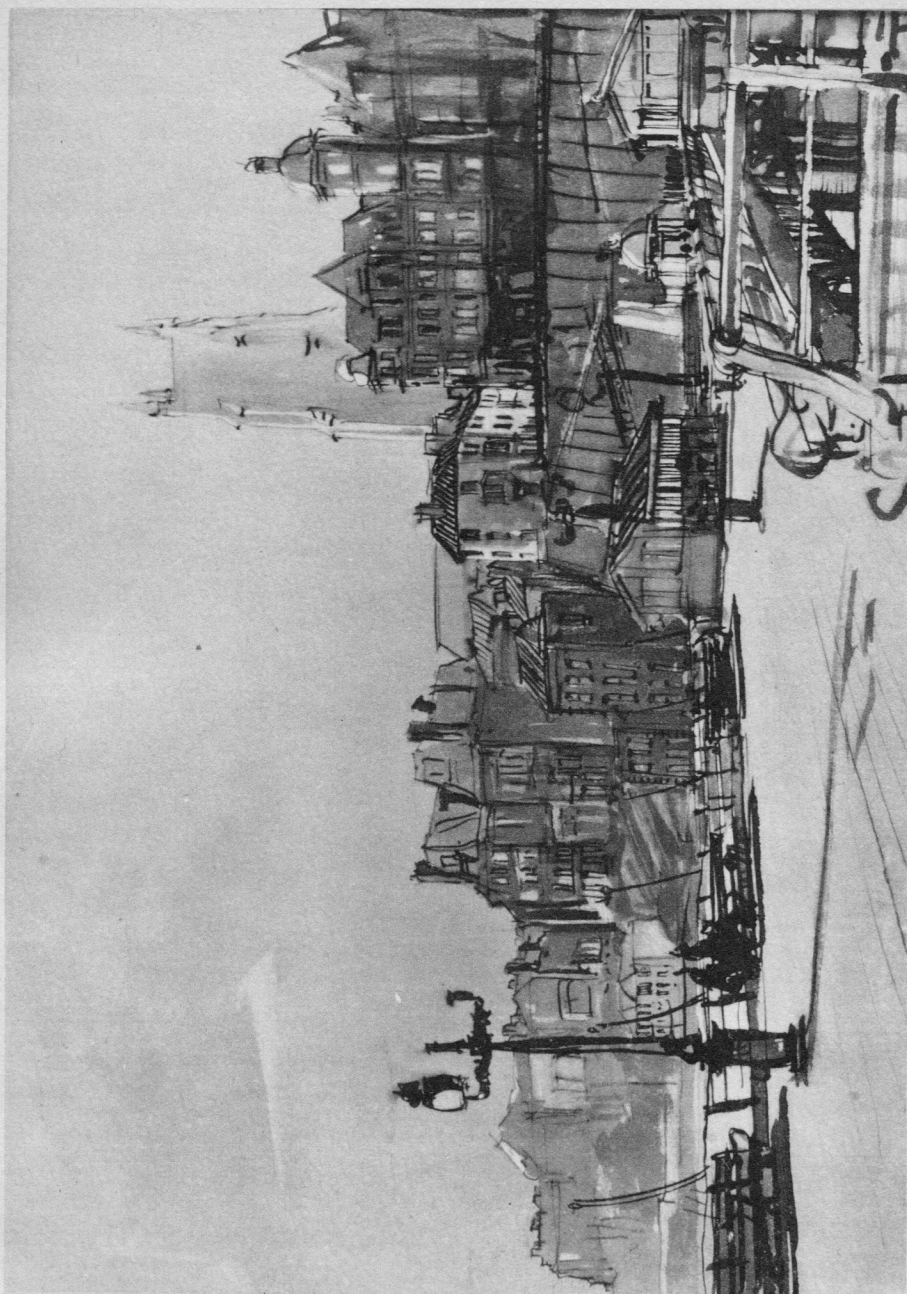
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