



## Ricketts, Charles (1866-1931), and Charles Shannon (1863-1937)

by Linda Rapp

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Versatile British artists Ricketts and Shannon were long-time partners in life and in art. They both became members of the Royal Academy and, in addition to pursuing independent careers as artists, often collaborated on creative projects.

Shannon is best known for his painting and lithography, Ricketts for his contributions as a book designer and illustrator and for designing costumes and sets for the theater. Together they accumulated an impressive and eclectic collection of art.

Charles Hazelwood (or Haslewood) Shannon was born on April 26, 1863 in Quarrington, Lincolnshire. He was the son of the Reverend Frederick William Shannon and his first wife, Catherine Emma Manthorpe. As a boy Shannon showed a talent for art and an interest in pursuing it as a career, and so when he was eighteen his father sent him to study wood-engraving at the City and Guilds Technical Art School in London, where he met Ricketts.

Charles de Sousy Ricketts was born on October 2, 1866, in Geneva, where his father, Charles Robert Ricketts, was studying painting after having been invalided out of the Royal Marine Light Infantry. Ricketts's mother, H el ene Jouhan (n ee de Sousy), was a Frenchwoman who was, according to Ricketts, "bred Italian." She may have been the illegitimate daughter of a French count.

Ricketts's parents soon settled near London, but because doctors advised that the English climate was too hard on Mrs. Ricketts, she and her son moved back to the continent. Ricketts spent much of his youth in France and Italy. Too sickly to attend school regularly, he was educated mostly by governesses or left to his own devices. He became an avid reader and museum-goer.

Upon the death of his mother, Ricketts, aged thirteen, returned to England to live with his father, who died two years later. His paternal grandfather provided for him to enroll in the City and Guilds Technical Art School in 1882.

Ricketts and Shannon met shortly thereafter and soon took lodgings together. After completing their courses, they considered continuing their studies in France and went to Paris to seek the advice of Pierre Puvis de Chavanne, a painter whom Ricketts in particular admired. He recommended that they instead return to England and begin working as artists.

The two arrived at a compromise solution: Ricketts would find work as an illustrator to support them while Shannon devoted himself to developing his talents as a painter.

Ricketts and Shannon moved to The Vale, Chelsea. Ricketts began drawing for magazines. He regarded these drawings as mere hack work and later tried to buy back and destroy as many as possible.



**Top:** Frontispiece to an issue of *The Dial* by Charles Ricketts.  
**Above:** A photograph of Charles Shannon (left) and Charles Ricketts by George Charles Beresford (1913).

Lord Frederic Leighton, the President of the Royal Academy, was, however, sufficiently impressed to commission a drawing to encourage the young artist. Ricketts produced *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1891), which Leighton described as having a "weird charm" and being "full of imagination."

Shannon, meanwhile, had taught himself lithography. Like Whistler, he realized that lithography could be used for original artistic expression, not merely as a means of reproducing images.

Shannon's skill was such that he was described as "one of the most gracefully accomplished and scholarly lithographers of the day." He is regarded in particular as the master of lithographic portraiture.

In 1889 Ricketts and Shannon produced the first issue of their "occasional" magazine, *The Dial*. Four more issues would appear, the last in 1897. The illustrations in the magazine are notable for being some of the first Symbolist art in Britain.

Ricketts and Shannon sent a complimentary copy of the first issue of *The Dial* to Oscar Wilde, who came to their house in The Vale to praise their work. The young men soon became friends with Wilde and proved steadfast ones. They were supportive of him during his trial and imprisonment. Ricketts visited Wilde in jail and after his release helped him financially.

Wilde provided the pair with an important professional opportunity, illustrating his books. Ricketts, sometimes in collaboration with Shannon, did drawings for all of Wilde's books except *Salomé* (which was illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley).

When Ricketts' design for the cover of *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) was panned, Wilde defended it, saying "There are only two people in the world whom it is absolutely necessary that the cover should please. One is Mr. Ricketts, who designed it, the other is myself, whose book it binds. We both admire it immensely."

Wilde delighted in the company of the young artists, calling The Vale "the one house in London where you will never be bored." Ricketts and Shannon's circle also included writers Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley (who wrote together as Michael Field), W.B. Yeats, John Gray, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Sturge Moore, and Cecil Lewis.

In 1896 Ricketts and Shannon founded the Vale Press. Their aim was to have complete control over the production of all aspects of the book--including typeface, illustration, and even binding.

In addition to their illustrations of Wilde's works, they had also illustrated and decorated two other books, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus (1893) and *Hero and Leander* by Christopher Marlowe and George Chapman (1894), published by the firm of Mathews and Lane. The first Vale Press book, *The Early Poems of John Milton*, was published in 1896.

Ricketts created three type fonts--the Vale, the Avon, and the King's--for the Vale Press books and also designed elaborate initial letters and intricate decorative borders in an Art Nouveau style.

In 1899 a fire at the Ballantyne Press, where the books were made, resulted in the loss of many of the woodcuts for the decorations. Ricketts and Shannon persevered, completing a 37-volume edition of Shakespeare then in progress, but closed the Vale Press in 1904.

At this point Ricketts began to work at oil-painting, a medium in which Shannon already excelled, specializing in formal portraits, and biblical and classical scenes. Ricketts did not enjoy equal success and, although he continued to do some painting, turned his attention to other artistic pursuits--sculpture, lithography, and jewelry- and stage-design.

He became especially well known for his stage work. Between 1906 and 1931 he was involved in over fifty productions, designing costumes and sets, and sometimes even making properties and lighting the stage.

In addition to their own creative pursuits, Ricketts and Shannon were avid collectors of art. Although their income was always modest, they were able to acquire a diverse collection that included Japanese prints, Greek and Egyptian antiquities, and drawings by such masters as Rembrandt and Rubens. Ricketts was especially canny at recognizing undervalued works. He used this ability to advantage as an advisor to the National Gallery of Canada.

Although they spent their entire adult lives together, Ricketts and Shannon never publicly identified themselves as a homosexual couple. Commentators believe that Ricketts was certainly a homosexual, but Shannon seems at least occasionally to have been attracted to women. His relationship with Kathleen Bruce, of whom he painted several portraits, caused considerable anxiety to Ricketts, who recorded in his diary his fear that Shannon might marry.

In January 1929 Shannon fell while hanging a picture. He never completely recovered his health or senses and remained an invalid until his death in 1937. Ricketts died of heart failure in 1931.

Although some of their remarkable collection of art was sold to provide for Shannon in his final years, many of the Asian pieces now belong to the British Museum, and most of the others are in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

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