



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Dean Cornwell and the Lost Art of Commercial Illustration

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

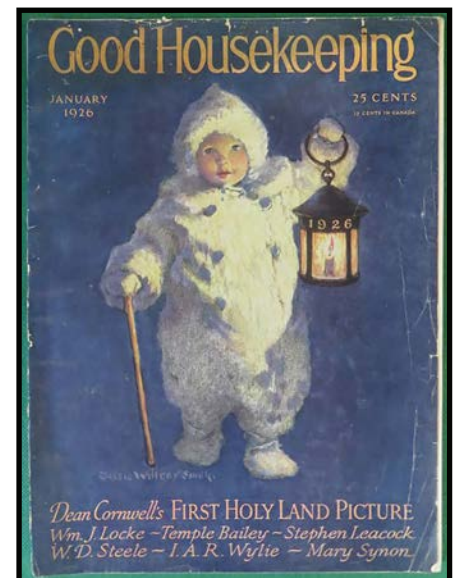
When readers of *Good Housekeeping* opened the January 1926 issue, they found the first in a series of lushly illustrated essays on the Holy Land, authored by inspirational Yale professor, William Lyon Phelps. Such was his popularity with students and the public that *Good Housekeeping* apparently found it irrelevant that Phelps was a professor of English literature, rather than religion or history. Indeed, the scholar himself would ultimately become the subject of a national magazine profile, published by *Life* in 1938. We cannot ask 1926 readers their opinions on Phelps' romanticized prose on the Holy Land, but they must have been enchanted by the vibrant, light-splashed images accompanying the text. The Museum's *Church of the Holy Sepulchre* painting was featured as the conclusion of the series in December 1926, and the artist behind the arresting images was Dean Cornwell.

The profession of commercial illustration was in a "golden age" by 1926. Many artists across the country (and the world) were producing millions of illustrations for magazines, books, posters, and other print media. Oil paintings, pastel works, and pen-and-inks were all produced rapidly and cheaply, often on cardboard. Once photographed for reproduction, the "boards" were usually discarded, and few originals are extant today. Cornwell, however, often worked on canvas, and thus some of his paintings survive.

Thirty-three year old Dean Cornwell was at the top of his game when he booked passage to Palestine in Spring of 1925 to begin his paintings for the *GH* series. His art career had begun at age eighteen as a cartoonist for his hometown newspaper, the *Louisville Herald*. At age nineteen, he was enrolled at the Chicago Art Institute and working in the art department of



Dean Cornwell (American, 1892–1960)
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 1926
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George Schriever (75.197)



Cover of *Good Housekeeping* (January, 1926) introducing the series on the Holy Land

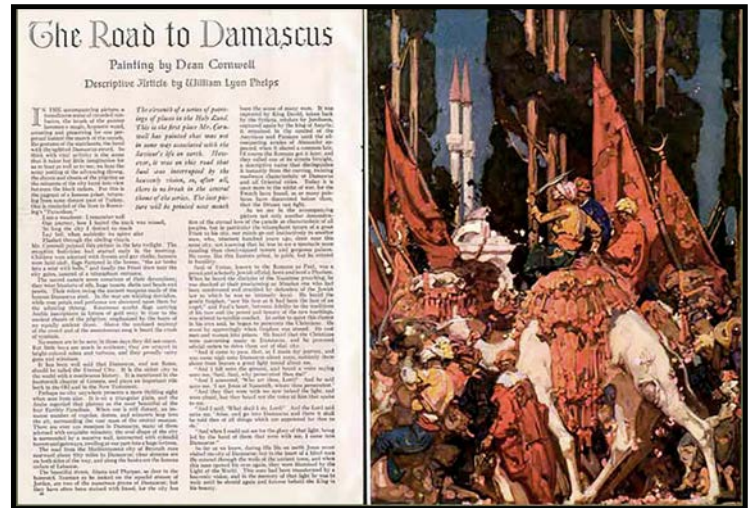
(Continued on page two)



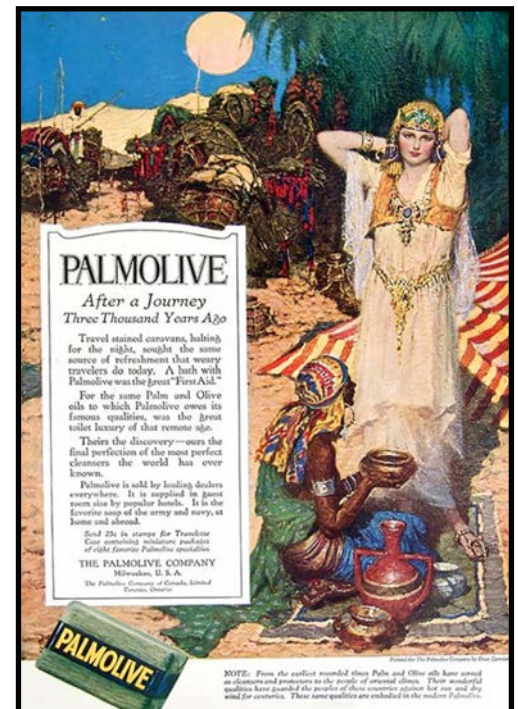
MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

the *Chicago Tribune*. At the Art Institute he studied under prodigious painter, Harvey Dunn, whose work Cornwell's resembles. In 1915 Cornwell went east with Dunn, where Dunn opened an illustration school in Leonia, New Jersey, just across the Hudson from New York. After studying with Dunn, Cornwell quickly rocketed to success, eventually landing jobs with *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Redbook*, among others. *Cosmopolitan* was so impressed with Cornwell's work that they signed him to a long-term contract in 1926, at the staggering annual salary of \$100,000. There was seemingly no end to his successes, and he would eventually illustrate for numerous companies, including Aunt Jemima, Coca-Cola, Eastern Airlines, General Motors, Goodyear, New York Life, Palmolive, Paul Jones Whiskey, Pennsylvania Railroad, Seagram's Gin, Squibb, and Woodbury Soap. During WWI, Cornwell turned to posters to promote the war effort. He also illustrated the work of many celebrated authors including Pearl S. Buck, Lloyd Douglas, Edna Ferber, Ernest Hemingway, and W. Somerset Maugham. From the late 1920s onward, he painted murals, with extant examples in the Los Angeles Public Library, the Lincoln Memorial Shrine (Redlands, CA), Eastern Airlines Building (now 10 Rockefeller Plaza, NY), Hotel Warwick (NY), and the Centre William Rappard (Geneva, CH), among others.

Cornwell's profound influence on American illustration in the first half of the twentieth century earned him the moniker, "Dean of Illustrators." His accolades were countless, with numerous gold medals, teaching appointments, honorary memberships, and even exhibitions at prestigious venues, such as London's Royal Academy, where *Washing the Savior's Feet*, which had originally appeared in the *GH* series, was exhibited. Though Cornwell was inducted into the Society of Illustrators' Hall of Fame in 1959, his name eluded public recognition, even though millions had seen his work. This was often



Article in *Good Housekeeping* (November, 1926) featuring *The Road to Damascus* by Dean Cornwell



Palmolive ad (1919) illustrated by Dean Cornwell

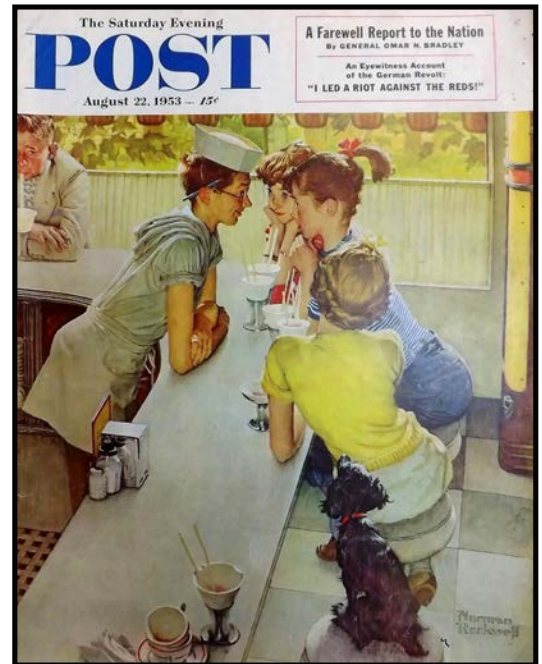
(Continued on page three)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

the fate of illustrators, largely because their work was never taken seriously by art critics. Few had exhibitions or recognizable names, and even the ever-popular Norman Rockwell, whose 45-year career illustrating for the *Saturday Evening Post* had made him a household name, was dismissed by critics as “derivative,” “trite,” and “cornball.” Had movie fans peered more closely at the covers of their favorite “fanzines,” they would have noticed the recurring names of Earl Christy and Marland Stone, whose glamorous pastel illustrations immortalized the screen’s leading ladies. Christy and Stone were never “famous” in their own time, but their work is much-coveted by collectors today. In short, the work of illustrators was once *everywhere*, encompassing an astounding breadth of material, literally everything from images of the Holy Land to those on canned vegetables. In more recent years, critics have begun to re-evaluate commercial illustration, finally giving some of the artists due attention. Dean Cornwell is the subject of two monographs, including *Dean Cornwell: Dean of Illustrators* (Watson Gupitll, 1978; reissued 2000), and *The Art of Dean Cornwell* (The Illustrated Press, 2016). The Holy Land series was also reproduced as a separate publication, *The City of the Great King and Other Places in the Holy Land* (Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1926).

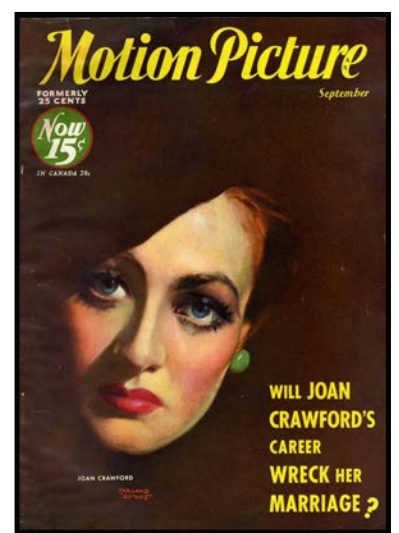
The south façade of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is little changed since Cornwell painted it in 1926, and Phelps’ narrative explains that the view is actually from the artist’s hotel room. The original church was built in the fourth century CE under the patronage of the emperor Constantine, but what visitors see today is largely from the twelfth century or later. Most scholars concur that, while the structure may be built over a first century Jewish tomb, there is no definitive proof as to the identity of those once interred there. ■



Cover of *Saturday Evening Post* (August, 1953)
illustrated by Norman Rockwell



Cover of *Modern Screen* (August, 1938)
illustrated by Earl Christy



Cover of *Motion Picture* (September, 1932)
illustrated by Marland Stone