

**THE CARTER BURDEN COLLECTION OF THE WORKS
OF
W. H. AUDEN**

When W. H. Auden was asked by his Oxford tutor what he intended to do after his university days, Wystan allowed that he was going to be a poet. The don approved, noting that the composition of poetry was an excellent way of improving one's prose style. "You don't understand at all," the young man burst out, "I mean a great poet."

The prescience of that aggrieved assertion has, of course, long been borne out, the unalloyed confidence of its precocious speaker confirmed by critical consensus. No poet of the 20th Century enjoyed a greater command of metrics and versification or a larger understanding of the origins of words and how they worked together. These technical skills, combined with a singularly integrated view of the human condition that expressed itself in unmistakable imagery, were among the qualities that made Auden a great poet.

Reading an Auden poem aloud, especially those composed in the Fifties and Sixties, is like listening to the conversation of a gifted teacher who is also a friend – one who communicates complex ideas in the easiest of way and, not incidentally, points the way toward a good life. Two of the most learned men I have known, themselves writers and teachers, spoke (and wrote) feelingly of the effect Auden had on them when he was their teacher – as does Pulitzer Prize-winning poet William Meredith in the afterword to this catalogue.

The only time I "met" Auden was some 25 years ago. I walked from my Greenwich Village apartment to N.Y.U. where he was to read his poetry. By the time I arrived the auditorium was filled, with perhaps twice as many people waiting outside. The instructive part of this anecdote is that the reading was delayed a good hour on Auden's orders until a loudspeaker system had been rigged up outside the building to accommodate the overflow crowd.

The cliché "voracious reader" might have been coined with Auden in mind. His was a catholic appetite – Greek mythology and Norse Eddas, Soren Kierkegaard and detective fiction, scientific papers and journals of all sorts, Hegelian dialectic and Episcopalian liturgy, cabaret songs and opera libretti (several of which Auden himself composed in collaboration with the love of

his life, Chester Kallman).

In the early 1950's Random House instituted a series of magazine advertisements designed to sell its lexicographical publications, and W. H. Auden became the initial subject of its "The man who reads dictionaries" campaign. (Auden's own 13 volume O.E.D. was hopelessly dilapidated, though not solely from continual use. In keeping with his ramshackle sense of décor, the poet regularly employed its tomes as chair cushions in his Austrian summer house.)

W.H. Auden's oeuvre, however, reflects a design common to much great art – unity of intuition and intellect. A book by book perusal of this comprehensive collection reveals concretely Auden's poetical progress from early verbal virtuosity and social engagement all the way through to the inimitable conversational style characteristic of his post-World War II work.

As I reread these late lyrics that issued so ripely from Ischia and Kirchstetten, from the barbarous streets of the East Village and the serene lawns of Oxford where the poet nested near the end of his life, I picture Auden not as the peremptory and disheveled old man he became, but as some mythical, omniscient bird, perching briefly to gossip in magisterial manner of life's pleasures or peculiarities before soaring on to uninhabited planes of interest.

The W. H. Auden Collection offered in these pages is as fine as most and representative as any of Carter Burden's more than 3000 author collections of modern American literature. A typical collection includes all of the published books, a good number of which are signed, inscribed, or association copies. Many of the collections also include a choice manuscript or group of letters. Carter Burden's 75,000 modern first editions comprise a feat unprecedented in book collecting history. Quality as well as quantity counts for this most sophisticated of collectors who began to acquire "objets d'art" at a tender pre-school age (toy soldiers).

Condition was from the beginning a central factor, though never a fetish. Dust jackets are required for all but the rarest of titles, and upgrading to better copies is an ongoing part of the process. A regular visitor to the Burden library cannot fail to notice the ubiquitous roll of Mylar from which Carter himself cuts dust jacket covers for those books which arrive in unprotected state. The 28 rooms (and several out-of-house storage areas) of the Burdens' recently vacated East Side apartment had books

shoehorned into just about every inch of space, including ceiling-high shelves that perimetered the kitchen. I once caused their otherwise imperturbable housekeeper to roll her eyes in mock horror when I remarked on the gradual encroachment of her culinary domain by ever-arriving volumes.

When Carter and Susan Burden moved recently to smaller quarters, the dispersal of expendable parts of the collection was begun. All of the science fiction books, for example, were given to the New York Public Library. The pruning away of the British-born Auden's works signals a further reshaping of this unparalleled American literature collection into a more cohesive and manageable unit. Its deaccessioning provides a timely opportunity for collectors of modern poetry to enhance their own holdings.

Joseph The Provider / Books , 1989