In the beginning was the Word: the opening trumpet call of Saint John’s Gospel is constantly being brought to mind as one looks back over the history of the graphic arts. Prints in the early centuries were almost inseparable from the texts they were created to complement or interpret. At a time when a mere fraction of the people of Europe could read, woodcuts and engravings were the only library of the man in the street.

To understand the ideas that influenced a period in history it is useful to look at its printed pictures and to study the words from which each drew its inspiration. Dante’s precise evocation of Hell and Paradise suffused early Italian art, establishing for the Christian world an iconography of good and evil. The classics, especially the sensuous imagery of Ovid, were inextricably bound up with the Renaissance, and the spread of the new humanism throughout Europe can be traced, as with thumbtacks on a map, by the editions of the Metamorphoses. The Bible has provided all our art with an almost inexhaustible well of subject matter, offering different messages to different ages. The Revelation of Saint John, for example, was a favorite text for sixteenth-century German artists, understandable in the light of such turbulent forces as the Peasants’ War, the Reformation, and the growing conflict of church and state.

For the most part those whose medium is the word and those who use pencil, burin, or brush have worked with widely divergent points of view, sometimes even conflicting (Lewis Carroll, for instance, never became reconciled to Tenniel’s illustrations for his Alice in Wonderland). And the man who creates in graphic images as well as words is a rare phenomenon. Blake’s extraordinary and private vision is one of the few that have been conveyed to us through the doubled strength of a bifocal talent. It would be difficult, if at all possible, to understand either aspect of his work without the other.

In the nineteenth century the relationship between picture and text, with certain exceptions, ceased to be mutually useful, and the artist’s work, no longer vital, sank to mere illustration. As a result the pictorial art of this century has been distinguished by a revolt against illustration and anecdote, carried to the extreme of nonrepresentation. But now that the slate has been cleared there are evidences of a swinging back to the use of poetic imagery and precision, to a new and constantly enriching interplay between the image and the word.

Word Becomes Image, an exhibition of prints and drawings inspired by literature, will remain on the balcony of the Main Hall through the summer.
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). The Revelation of Saint John the Divine, with its wild poetry of prophecy and doom, was a perfect subject for Dürer, who could give free rein to his Gothic imagination by the strength of his technique. Gift of Junius S. Morgan, 1919
LEFT: The Good Samaritan, detail of a lithograph by Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-1885). Bresdin, a strange figure who, in the middle of Paris, lived the life of an anchorite, found in the parable recounted by Saint Luke the inspiration for his most extraordinary and fanciful print. The J. B. Neumann Collection, Gift of F. H. Hirschland, 1952.

ABOVE: The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, water color by William Blake. Blake's interpretation of this story from Saint Matthew, with its lesson of watchful preparation in contrast to careless security, is a particularly good example of the way his style combined mysticism and power. Rogers Fund, 1914.
Aesop's Fables have been translated into virtually every language and illustrated in almost every conceivable style. The anonymous woodcut of the Dog and his Shadow (left) is from the edition printed in Verona by Alvise in 1479, one of the earliest Italian illustrated books. Rogers Fund, 1921. The wryly witty version of the Jay in Peacock's Feathers (above), from an edition published in 1931, was drawn by the contemporary American sculptor Alexander Calder. Gift of Monroe Wheeler, 1949
The print on the left is an illustration for “Les Amours Pastorals de Daphnis et Chloé” by Longus, engraved after François Gérard (1770–1837) by Godfroy and published in Paris in 1800. It demonstrates the new interest in classical literature that overwhelmed art just after the French Revolution, taking a form which to our eyes seems elaborate and somewhat cold. To the artists of Europe after the first World War interpretation of the classics required simplicity and elimination, as in the two woodcuts on the right, by the sculptor Aristide Maillol (1861–1944) for the “Eclogues” of Virgil, published in Weimar in 1926. Dick Fund, 1929 and 1928
The Innermost Circle of the Inferno as described by Dante Alighieri in "The Divine Comedy." This anonymous Italian fifteenth-century engraving in the Florentine Fine Manner was made after one of Orcagna's frescoes in the Campo Santo in Pisa. Whittelsey Fund, 1949
The two prints on this page might serve as symbols of the opposing and interweaving influences in the literature and art of the Italian Renaissance. The anonymous woodcut (left) is an illustration for the “Laude” of Fra Jacopone da Todi, printed by Bonaccorsi in Florence in 1490. The chiaroscuro woodcut (right), attributed to Titian, is the frontispiece for the “Stanze” of Pietro Aretino, printed by Marcolino in Venice in 1537. The style of the Florentine print is linear, austere, and spiritual, in keeping with Jacopone’s poems in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Venetian work, on the other hand, is splendid and profane, shaded with an overlay of rich color suitable to the divine Aretino’s poems in honor of Madonna Angela Sirena. Dick Fund, 1925, 1937
ABOVE: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, wash drawing by Honoré Daumier (1808–1879).

Faust in his study, etching by Rembrandt (1606–1669). Rembrandt was undoubtedly familiar with Christopher Marlowe’s “Tragical History of Doctor Faustus,” published in 1604 and based on a German legend, which was carried all over the Continent by English traveling players. Marlowe’s Faustus was a magician whose mastery of the black arts led to his destruction. In this brooding print, done about 1652, Rembrandt anticipated by a century and a half Goethe’s conception of Faust as the aged philosopher torn between good and evil in a constant search for the ultimate wisdom. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his Family, 1941. Right: Edgar Allan Poe’s “Raven,” a lithograph by Édouard Manet (1832–1883), is an example of the influence that the work of the American writer had on the artists and writers of continental Europe, particularly France, where Baudelaire and his circle “discovered” him. Dick Fund, 1924
Wood engravings from the edition of Tennyson's poems published by Moxon in London in 1857. Left, the Lady of Shalott in her tower, weaving by night and day a magic web, by William Holman Hunt (1827–1910). Right, Sir Galahad, whose strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882). Moxon’s Tennyson ushered in the so-called golden age of English book illustration in the 1860’s, and for it the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood did some of their most distinguished and characteristic work, making of it a delightful picture gallery. Tennyson took less interest in it than anyone else. His attitude was that if the public had to have pictures it was all very well, but the poems were what mattered. The poet, who was completely indifferent to the visual arts, is reported to have been particularly puzzled by Rossetti’s illustrations. Rogers Fund, 1920