*The Hartford Courant* Sunday, November 15, 1925, p.1.

# **A Printer’s Devil Wins His Spurs:** Penniless in 1919, Louis Orr Today a World-Famed Member of The Legion of Honor.

## Hartford Boy Became the First Living Artist to Have an Original Etching Accepted for the Art World’s Holy of Holies, the Louvre Gallery in Paris.

## Climax of Thrilling Career Provided by the French Government’s Request for Etching of Pasteur Portrait then Hidden Away in an Old Museum.

*By Louis Orr, In Interview*

*A world-famous artist today, Louis Orr looks back upon a colourful career as he reflects upon his amazing rise from printer’s devil in a Hartford shop to Chavalier in the Legion of Honor—the first living artist to have an original etching in the Louvre gallery. The story of that rise is given here for the first time as related by Mr. Orr in an exclusive interview for “The Sunday Courant.”*

Christmas Day six years ago found me in Paris without a cent, the rent more than overdue,a nd the prospect of eating in the near future none too bright.

At the dusk of dawn my wife had me a ‘Merry Christmas” which sounded like a parody. The day was wet, misty, and very cold. Paris was afraid to get up, even for Christmas Day. Our credit at the little restaurant across the way had been seriously damaged; the proprietor was fast losing his confidence in art. My wife and I talked it over and decided there was no use getting up.

Then the landlady knocked at the door; we had grown to know that knock. I arranged my smile and opened to her. There was, she said, a box from England in the hallway. We descended upon that box like the bubonic plague. Wood flew, paper went to the four winds, and as we sat back exhausted, there before us in all its pristine glory lay an English pheasant. ‘Prepaid’ murmured my wife, stroking the bird affectionately.

Proudly we bore it to the little restaurant. It was to be cooked so and so, with not too much of this, nor too little of that. And what would we have with it? I put my hand in my pocket. It encountered no obstacles. After a whispered consultation, my wife informed the French chef of a curious American custom of which he had been in ignorance up to that time—Americans ate pheasants unadorned. Any embellishment served only to distract from the subtle flavor of the bird. Christmas afternoon saw us sitting down to a pheasant sent from England, and a bottle of wine sent from southern France. Half way through the meal the door opened and an American head was thrust in. My wife bowed to the young artist, who smiled and withdrew. Outside we could hear him shouting down the street that Louis Orr had sold a picture.

## The Pasteur Portrait

Times changed. Food became an ordinary event, and life, if not more enjoyable, at least easier. As the centennial of Pasteur approached the Minister of the the Beaux Arts sent for me. Somewhere in Paris there was an old painting of Pasteur by Edelfelt. The work was described to me, the old scientist bending overhis tubes, and the minister asked if I would find it, and etch a plate for the centennial. Just then I did not think what it meant. I knew it was a tremendous task, but I did not realize that it meant a turning point in my life. I am glad now that I did not.

The work had to be done in five weeks and there was no chance of its being done over or touched up. I did not have the sense to refuse. I said I would do it without having seen the portrait, or even knowing where it was. And I promised that I would not touch up the plate once I had finished it.

The painting was found, up under the eaves of an old gallery in a most inaccessible place. Would they take it down? Indeed they would not. It had been there for decades and there it would stay. So I started to work. Within an hour every artist in Paris was talking of it, while I tried not to think what would happen if I turned out a mediocre plate. The picture was to go to every hospital and school in France. Coming generations would get their only idea of Pasteur from my work. And the minister of the Beaux Arts expected something great.

The head and hands came first. Once those were done I felt I could fit the rest around them. The days went by; fourteen hours the first day, sixteen the second, and later eighteen hours in the musty little gallery where the myriad noises of Paris were hushed to a drowsy droning.

My wife came down to see the first proof of the hands and head. The press groaned as the weight was released, echoing perfectly my spirits at the time. We carried the proof over to a table and looked at it together. Neither spoke. Every line, every value, every mass was scrutinized by four yes, and then unanimously we sighed. The first strain was over—the head and hands, they lived.

I finished the plate in a little over four weeks, but did not dare bring it in ahead of time. I used to stall in school that way to make the teacher think that I had consumed every minute in doing the best ‘exam’ that was humanly possible. On the appointed day, I waited until noon, and then slipped the plate on the desk of the committee room. Late that afternoon word came to me that the plate was accepted. The fight was over; the turning point had been passed. I had redeemed a trust which had weighed heavily upon me for five weeks. My wife and I sallied forth for a week; we slept at hotels instead of going home; we danced, went to the theatre and then danced again afterward.

Not all the Orrs would have danced at such a time.

Our family is as diverse as any other, but one thing has run through the tribe—the love of working in black and white. My grandfather, James W Orr had a place at No. 27 Nassau street in New York in 1850 where he printed all the illustrations for the text-books of the period. My father was one of a large family; the boys receiving their training inn the shop on Nassau street.

But the desire to see the world descended amongst them, and the more adventurous set forth. My uncle Louis carried the thing too far. His unconquerable lust for wandering landed him in Springfield, Mass. But there is a limit to everything, and he settled there to pass his days in comparative prosperity. Father was not so bold. He journeyed to Hartford before becoming satisfied and it was in Hartford that he made his home.

## A Family of Printers

Back in 1745 there were Orrs in the printing trade in Edinburgh. Ever since then some unfortunate member of the family branched off into art. That branch had little or so survival value. So, when my father noticed me as a kid, cutting out pictures in patent leather and pasting them on boards to make wood cuts, he calmly informed me that he would ‘break my back’ if I ever became an artist. At that time I did not want to become an artist—I just wanted to cut out pictures and stick them on something else.

When I was old enough I was apprenticed to Levi Sherwood at Plimpton’s. I recall that with all the solemnity of youth I promised Mr. Sherwood $5 ‘when I learned the trade’. Every time I see him I expect the inevitable question, and always I answer no. First because an artist is always ‘learning the trade’, and second because I would lose $5.

Holding the distinguished position of printer’s devil at Plimpton’s I found myself becoming interested in the decorative borders the company turned out.

Through these same decorative borders I started my career as an artist. By the merest chance a pamphlet came into my hands from the YMCA. Mother had saved it for me, because the border was pretty. I was in deep admiration of the folder when it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps the men who did that border could teach me to do it also. Immediately I went down to the printers’ school at the ‘Y’.

I worked half a day at Plimpton’s and went to the night school the rest of the time. Finally I did a series of illustrations which suggested to the instructor that with sufficient training I might become a passable illustrator. If I remember rightly the illustrations were for Eugene Sue’s ‘Wandering Jew’, weird things, with cringing figures encircled by frightful shadows. The instructor, Mr Maison, took the pictures to Mrs Charles C Beach, who was then head of the art school. From some incomprehensible reason, Mrs Beach thought the hideous things showed promise and secured a scholarship for me at the school. I dashed home with the news and was received variously by my parents. My mother was delighted and my father was furious.

He took his hat and coat and we marched impressively to the beautiful home of Mrs Beach. ‘Am I to understand that my son is about to become an artist, long haired, absent minded, with dandruff on his collar?’ my father demanded of Mrs Beach. I was amazed. Was that an artist in the flesh, this horrible description? I will always remember Mrs Beach’s reply. ‘I don’t think Louis’s hair will grow very long,’ she said, and I was enrolled in the school.

Later I left Plimpton’s and in order to eat, read copy for the ‘Morning Telegram’ from 8 o’ clock in the evening until 3 in the morning. From 9 until 4 I attended art school. The rest of the time I slept and ate. Two great events have had a decided influence on my life, and one of them came just as this time—the California earthquake.

## High Finance

By some means known to those dealing in ‘higher finance’ the earthquake shook my scholarship into nothing at all. In this emergency some of those connected with the art school came to my rescue. Mrs Beach, James Goodwin, Dr Henry White, and Miss Ferguson, the daughter of the president of the Trinity, were among my fairy godparents and together they gave me $350, and with it the suggestion that I go to Lyme instead of Paris as there the money would last longer. I talked it over with my mother, who has always stood behind me and recommended ‘*aut Caesar aut nihil’*. So I set forth for Paris.

There the problem of how to eat presented itself immediately. Food was very cheap,a nd I had a little money, but no possible means of telling anyone what I wanted. The waiters seemed as bewildered as I. Finally I bethought me, was I not a scholarship man from the Hartford Art School? Did I not have the universal language at my command? Forthwith I drew a pencil from my pocket and on the back of the menu sketched three delicious hard boiled eggs and an elongated roll of French bread. The waiter was delighted with my handiwork and exhibited it to everyone in the shop. Later he proudly returned to me, bearing three baked potatos and a German sausage.

That night I learned the menu by heart, every word of the thing. The following day the proprietor changed it. But I espied an item marked ‘pied de mouton’ which could be nothing but mutton pie. I ordered it, but the waiter got mixed up and brought me sheeps’ feet. I ate them, ate anything, and loved it, for I was in love with Paris and with life in general.

## A Bull-Dog Gaurdian

After a month in France I was confronted with the choice of starving or sleeping in the street. There was a chance I might do both. Then Providence in the form of three bull-dogs came to my rescue. By chance I was asked if I knew anything about dogs. I recalled having seen a bull dog on Asylum but the immediate prospect looked like food and I assured the gentleman who inquired that, without conceit, I might say that there were few who could compete with me in that particular field. I got the job, which consisted of being nurse maid to three small and disagreeable animals that snored, but to my great delight a place to sleep went with the dogs. That the roof leaked so that I had to sleep under a sketching umbrella did not detract from the very joy of knowing that somewhere I had a bed.

That fall I won the scholarship at the Julian Academy. Luck has entered into my career more than any other alien factor—this time it was fool luck.

Jean Paul Laurens, the head of the Academy, made it his custom to ask each new pupil where he came from. Not that he cared at all, but he thought it was the thing to do. When I was presented with the inevitable question was forthcoming and I answered ‘Hartford, Connecticut’, feeling not a little proud. ‘Is that near Philadelphia?’ he asked the interpreter. I hesitated. Then, I recalled having once seen a print of a drawing in Philadelphia by the same Laurens, depicting the surrender of Cornwallis.

I told him Hartford was right next door to Philadelphia, and went on to inform the old gentleman of the forsaken aspect of the City of Hartford, deserted by its populace which had dropped over to Philadelphia to see a certain picture of Cornwallis. Jean Paul Laurens did not forget that, and never having the opportunity to study geography, he gave me the scholarship. Of course my ability did count, but only for about one half of one percent.

## M Brun’s Daughter

The summer of 1909 in Paris was the wettest, coldest, most thoroughly disagreeable summer ever recorded. I betook myself to Arles in the south of France because someone told me it never rained there. Arles is gorgeous. I did the best work of my life, I think. The next year I went back to Arles and was here introduced to a charming Frenchman by the name of Brun. M Brun was a Huguenot, a connoisseur of art, and the father of a very beautiful daughter.

This same very beautiful daughter accompanied us on an inspection of the Cathedral of San Gil. My French, as I have said, had its limitations, and upon arriving at the cathedral, M Brun in a low voice, so as not to be overheard, started a discourse on the charms of his daughter. It might be very helpful to me now, for I married that same beautiful daughter in the fall of 1913.

The California earthquake was the first national disaster that changed the course of my life; the second disaster was international. The Great War broke out shortly after my marriage, and the world forgot painting and painters. We stayed in Paris because we had neither dollars nor sense to get out. My pupils fled, and the little following that I had gathered in Paris scattered to the four corners of the earth. Again, food became of the first importance. It was at that time that I formulated my theory that of all laudable ambitions, the one with the greatest driving force was the ambition to eat. The staff of the Paris edition of the New York Herald was down to its zero point. One day found only the chief compositor, the city editor, and the proprietor, Old Commander Bennet in their places when the office opened.

## The Kings’ Conference

The Commodore must have been driven to desperation, for he had asked me if I would take charge of the art department for the paper. Everything went beautifully. I even invented the ‘Communication Maps’ that ran in so many papers during the war years. But at the close of my first year I took a fatal flyer in international diplomacy. In fact, I might be said to have changed the entire aspect of the European situation. I came about this way. The Kings of Norway, Sweden and Denmark decided that the war had gone on long enough and they held a meeting to think up ways to stop it.

Interest in the thing was general, so I got out the pictures of the kings, and put them in a perfectly gorgeous border like those I made at Plimpton’s. Underneath, I put the arms of the countries, and wove swords and scepters into the design. It was a lovely thing. *The Herald* was a six column box on the front page, which was well received. I tried to be modest and say that anyone might have done it. As it happened few could have.

Three days later I found a note on my desk. Across the front of it in the Commander’s hand was written, ‘What about this!’ The note was from a lady of the diplomatic service, saying that she knew the three kings very well, and was vastly interested to find that the King of Norway had been crowned in Sweden, while the Kings of Sweden and Denmark had changed places. There was only one possible way of getting all three kings in the wrong countries, but I had achieved perfect success. I took my hat and went home. I told my wife that the newspaper business had become repulsive to me, and she said that was a shame just after I had done so well with the Kings’ Peace Conference.

The war years were hard. Hard on men and women and very hard on art. When the war department asked me to some work for them at the front, the question of money was a great factor. The work was not easy. I prefer the solitude of the studio to sitting in a ruined cathedral with the guns booming in the offing, and an occasional shell whizzing overhead, with every intention of making the ruin more complete.

## Success

Several times we were directly under fire. The excitement had a peculiar effect on me. I concentrated as never had before and never will again. If once my mind wondered, I knew I was done, for I am not one of those who find sport in bearding death in his lair. In one cathedral shells had succeeded in tearing out most of the interior, and German gunners seemed to have further ambitions. In the middle of the ruin stood a statue of St Anthony which had gone through thirty-two months of continual bombardment and had not suffered a scratch. I decided to throw my lot in with St Anthony. All I wanted was two days.

My plates of the front were bought by the French government, and it was for this work, and perhaps because I was one of the few Americans that stayed in France during the war, that in the winter of 1918 I was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.