

The Renaissance of Etching

From Dürer to Bruegel

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The development of techniques for making graphic prints numbers among the greatest artistic achievements of the late Middle Ages. With the advent of the woodcut in the early 1400s, the midcentury innovation of chalcography or copperplate engraving, and finally etching shortly before 1500, the graphic print became an artistic genre in its own right. The present exhibition at the Albertina Museum focuses on the etched print from its beginnings in Dürer's time to the era of Bruegel, a period during which this technique was a matter of experimentation in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and France.

From Arms to Art

The foundations of this technique were developed in the workshops of armor decorators, who use various acids to add ornamentation to their products. Later on, in the 1490s, the German printmaker Daniel Hopfer began using etched (i.e., acid-treated) metal plates to produce prints on paper. In contrast to copperplate engravings and woodcuts, which require considerable technical experience and mastery to create, etching is so easy that virtually anyone can do it. It was thus that artists as well as professional printmakers and architects began using this new technique—and the list of its pioneers soon came to include some of the greatest Renaissance artists including Albrecht Dürer, Parmigianino, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

Creative Experiments

The technical and aesthetic possibilities of the matrices for woodcuts and copperplate engravings, which one produces via a purely mechanical process, are quickly exhausted. Etchings, on the other hand, offer a great deal of latitude for creative experimentation. Etching numbers among the intaglio printing techniques, in which the lines to be printed are etched into a flat surface known as a matrix. In copperplate engraving, the lines are engraved into the metal with a sharp tool known as a "burin" or "graver." But in etching, base metals' vulnerability to acid is exploited in order to create the contours and shadings desired in the final printed result by chemical means. Thanks to the frequently spontaneous appearance of the lines that are printed, etching comes closer to actual drawing than all other printmaking techniques. And by combining it with techniques such as engraving, drypoint, aquatint, and

working directly on the matrix with a brush dipped in acid, one can achieve a greater degree of drawing-like subtlety and even nuanced hues of a more painterly character.

Media Revolution and Cultural Transfer

These new reproduction techniques transformed art into a veritable mass medium. Pictures learned to walk, as it were, in effect becoming timeless and placeless—which finally made it possible for a large number of people to access artworks. For the first time in history, pictures became widely distributed commercial goods. And this mobilization of art via printmaking made it possible to get an impression of what was being done elsewhere at any time, which gave rise to a constant flow of fruitful exchange between local traditions and far-off artistic centers.

With its approximately 100 works on exhibit, this exhibition of the Albertina Museum provides a glimpse into etching's early years. And alongside numerous well-known masterpieces by artists who employed etching in their work, this presentation also holds in store some surprising discoveries that demonstrate the entire breadth of this fascinating technique and its masters' penchant for experimentation. The refinement of this printing process is also made clear by etched pieces of armor, drawings, and printing matrices. The Albertina Museum thus offers a one-of-a-kind look at the nascence of a medium that went on to revolutionize the entire world of art.

This exhibition has been conceived in cooperation with the Metropolitan Museum in New York.