

Framed in Fifteenth-Century Florence

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FLORENTINES OF THE late fifteenth century went to the establishment of Francesco Rosselli (1448–1508/25), in his day the principal engraver of the city, to purchase series of prints that he engraved and published. As frames for these prints, Rosselli offered printed border segments, several to a sheet. The purchaser could then cut out and arrange these border segments around the images, supporting the whole framed scene on a backing.

Only three examples of uncut sheets of borders by Rosselli are known to have survived to the present day. Two are in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figures 3, 4); the third is in the Cabinet Rothschild in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (Figure 2). Each is printed from a different plate. These three sheets were first published by Arthur Hind in 1910 and were later illustrated in his magisterial *Early Italian Engraving* (1938).¹ A few fragments from these, or similar, border sheets also survive. This essay calls attention to one of these fragments, also in the Metropolitan Museum, which resembles but is not identical to a segment in one of the known sheets, and offers a few observations about these works.

Francesco Rosselli's family, including his older brother Cosimo, the painter, was thoroughly grounded in the artistic life of Florence. During his career Francesco engraved more than one hundred plates, among them three series of figural images: thirty-six individual Prophets and Sibyls; a fifteen-print series traditionally known as the *Life of the Virgin and Christ* but more accurately referred to as *The Mysteries of the Rosary* (the name I will use here); and a set of six *Triumphs of Petrarch*.² We know that Francesco's frame segments were used as he intended because of extant examples of the *Mysteries* framed within them. It should be stressed, however, that this is the only series that has come down to us with the borders in place. A complete set of the *Mysteries* within frame segments—hand-colored and

mounted on linen—is preserved in Hamburg; a second, incomplete set of eleven prints within frame segments, hand-colored and mounted on wood, is in the Cabinet Rothschild. These two sets are framed in border segments from different sheets: the Hamburg set in the segments shown in Figure 2 (though, as discussed below, the horizontal segment is from a variant sheet, and other segments may be as well), and the Rothschild set in those illustrated in Figure 3, one of the uncut sheets in New York.

Hind observed that a cut border segment very similar to both of the vertical candelabra in this New York sheet, but identical to neither, is preserved in The British Museum (Figure 9). The British Museum segment is colored, obscuring it somewhat, but Hind nevertheless was able to conclude that “it seems to be from a different plate.”³ My own examination of this segment bears out his conjecture.⁴ If the British Museum segment is indeed a variant, it suggests that a duplicate (but slightly divergent) plate of Figure 3 existed.

This suggestion is reinforced by the cut segment in the Metropolitan's collection, mentioned above (Figure 1). It is similar to the horizontal frieze in the Rothschild print (see Figure 2) but is definitely from a different plate. The most noticeable difference is the width. The Metropolitan's segment measures 16.5 centimeters (6½ in.) from the line at the left to the edge of the sheet at the right; its counterpart on the Rothschild sheet is only 12.3 centimeters (4¾ in.) wide. The Metropolitan's segment is also symmetrical, comprising one full and two half busts of winged females and two complete garlands and anthemia, whereas the Rothschild segment consists of only one and a half of each of these elements (that is, the Rothschild segment lacks one-quarter of the design at the left).

Impressions of the plate from which the Metropolitan's segment was printed were also used for two of the *Mysteries* prints in Hamburg, the *Flagellation* and *Resurrection*. The Hamburg *Resurrection* was illustrated in Hind, and both subjects were reproduced

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METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL 37

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Figure 1. Francesco Rosselli (Italian, 1448–1508/25). Fragment of horizontal frieze with female bust in center, garlands, anthemia, cut from a plate of border segments. Engraving, 1¼ x 6⅜ in. (4.3 x 16.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1921 (21.30.5)

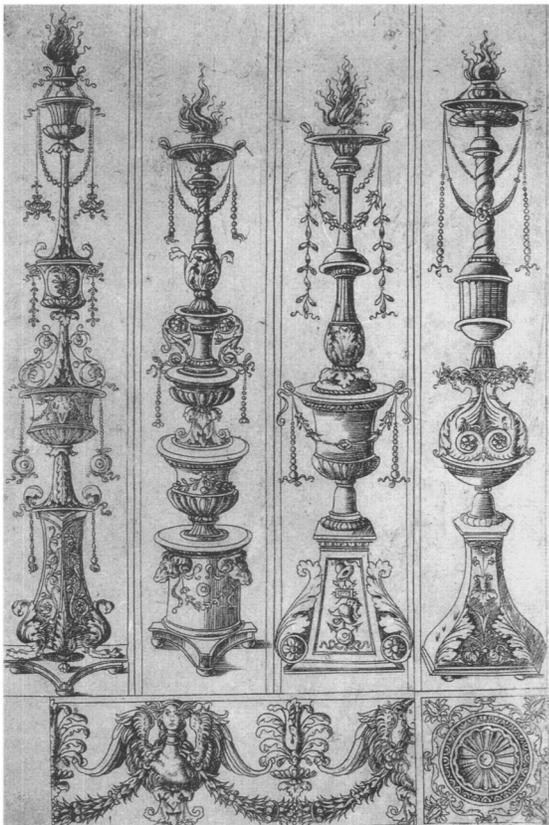


Figure 2. Francesco Rosselli. Plate of border segments: four candelabra, small horizontal piece, one corner. Engraving, 1¼ x 7⅞ in. (28.5 x 19.3 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris, Cabinet Rothschild

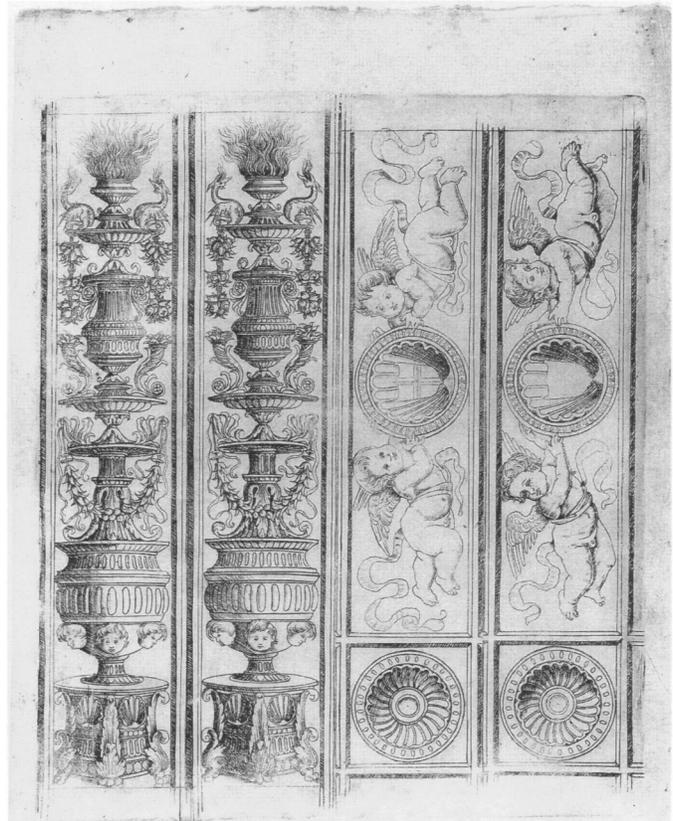


Figure 3. Francesco Rosselli. Plate of border segments: two candelabra, two horizontal pieces with cupids, two corners. Engraving, plate mark 9⅞ x 7⅞ in. (23.8 x 19.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1929 (29.16.2)

in David Landau and Peter Parshall's *The Renaissance Print* (1994), but none of these authors calls attention to the fact that the horizontal border elements are not identical to those on the corresponding Rothschild sheet.⁵ Likewise, the Metropolitan's segment is listed in Mark J. Zucker's *The Illustrated Bartsch* as though it were simply a segment cut from the sheet known in the Rothschild set.⁶ It is clearly not the same, however: in addition to the size difference, comparison of the faces of the winged female busts reveals that the Rothschild's is thinner and more elegant, with a mouth turned down slightly at the corners; the Metropolitan's (one complete and two partial) are fuller, with pudgier noses and more neutral expressions of the mouth.

The possibility that Rosselli made similar border segments on more than one plate is not at all surprising, because the buyer would have had to acquire many sheets of segments to frame the complete set of fifteen *Mysteries*. The Rothschild sheet (Figure 2), for example, has only one corner piece, and the Metropolitan's (Figure 3) has only two. The possibility exists, then—in fact, it seems fairly likely—that a sheet with more corner segments existed. Moreover, had there been only one sheet of border segments for any given set, if it had two corners it would have had to have been printed at least thirty times for each one of the figural plates, and thus the wear on the plates would have been severe. Even if a set were mounted on a support in three horizontal rows thereby sharing some border segments, as was the case with one in Berlin destroyed during the Second World War, eighteen vertical, ten horizontal, and twelve corner segments would still be needed to frame the group of fifteen images.⁷

A major point that emerges from consideration of these frames, and one that must be stressed continually, is the enormous percentage of fifteenth-century printed material that has not come down to us. The third surviving uncut sheet of border pieces, also in the Metropolitan (Figure 4), is the only known impression either of this engraving or of any part of it; in other words, no example of any section of it that was actually used as a frame is known, nor has any one section—or variant of a section—survived alone. It is also not clear what series it was intended to frame. The sheet includes one vertical and one horizontal piece of about the same length, approximately 26.4 centimeters (10 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.), and four corner sections. If each frame was meant to consist of two vertical and two horizontal segments and four corners, the framed image must have been roughly square, and no image of this shape, as Zucker

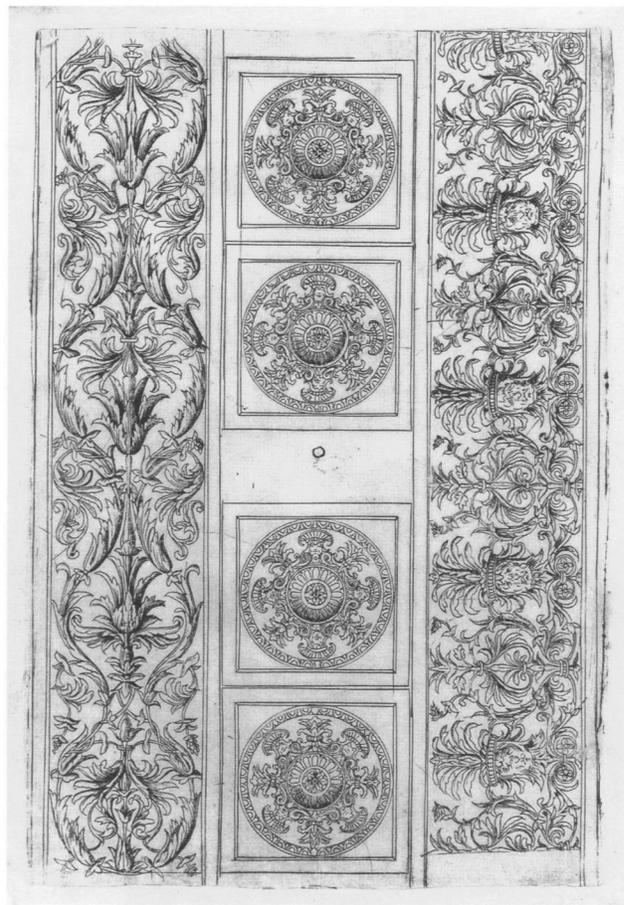


Figure 4. Francesco Rosselli. Plate of border segments: vertical floral ornament, horizontal frieze, four corners. Engraving, plate mark 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 7 in. (27 x 17.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1929 (29.16.3)

pointed out,⁸ is known in Rosselli's oeuvre. However, it is not impossible—if perhaps not that likely—that these segments could have been used without corner pieces, as shown in the montage in Figure 5. If they were used in this way, they would just fit the series of *Triumphs of Petrarch*, which measure approximately 26 by 17.2 centimeters (10 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.), as shown. Alternately, the horizontal pieces could have been trimmed to allow for the corners (Figure 6).

A few stray vertical candelabrum pieces not known from any complete sheet also survive. All are approximately of the height of the *Triumphs*, and thus it has been theorized that these were meant to frame that series.⁹ Just as there were at least two designs of frames for the *Mysteries*, it seems possible that both the Metropolitan's sheet (Figure 4) and the separate vertical candelabra segments were

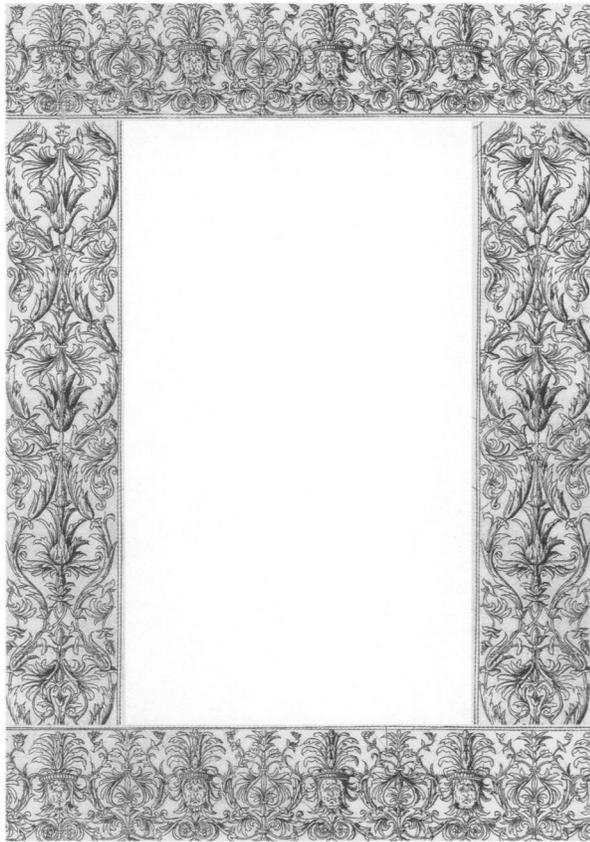


Figure 5. Photomontage, without corners, made from the engraving shown in Figure 4

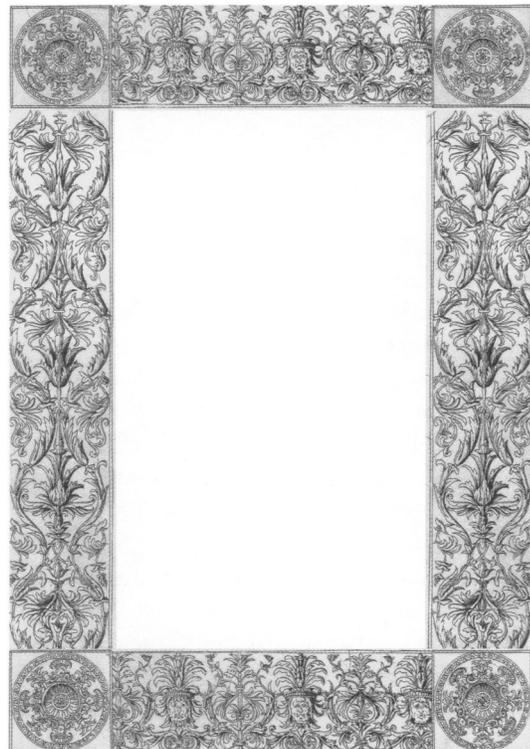


Figure 6. Photomontage, with corners, made from the engraving shown in Figure 4

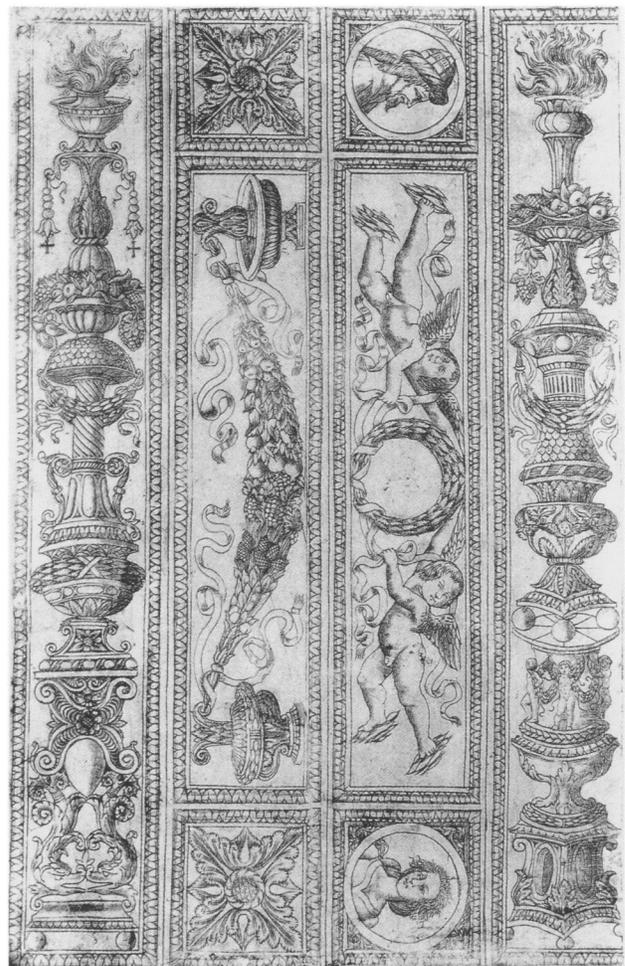


Figure 7. The supposed Baccio Baldini (Italian, act. 2nd half of 15th century; d. 1487?). Plate of border segments: two candelabra, two horizontal pieces, four corners. Engraving, 1 3/4 x 8 1/4 in. (34.2 x 20.9 cm). Albertina, Vienna

intended to frame the *Triumphs*. Without any such example, however, this suggestion must, for the time being, remain just that. Perhaps some day a fortunate find in a neglected album in an out-of-the-way library will prove these theories; in the meantime, we are reminded of how much has been lost.

Where did Rosselli get the idea to surround his images with ornamental borders? Almost certainly from the principal engraver in Florence of the previous generation. This engraver was identified almost two centuries ago as one Baccio Baldini, who was mentioned in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives*, but that identification is tenuous at best. The case against continuing to call this engraver Baldini has been argued most recently and strongly by Peter Keller.¹⁰ The question of this engraver's identity is well beyond the scope of this

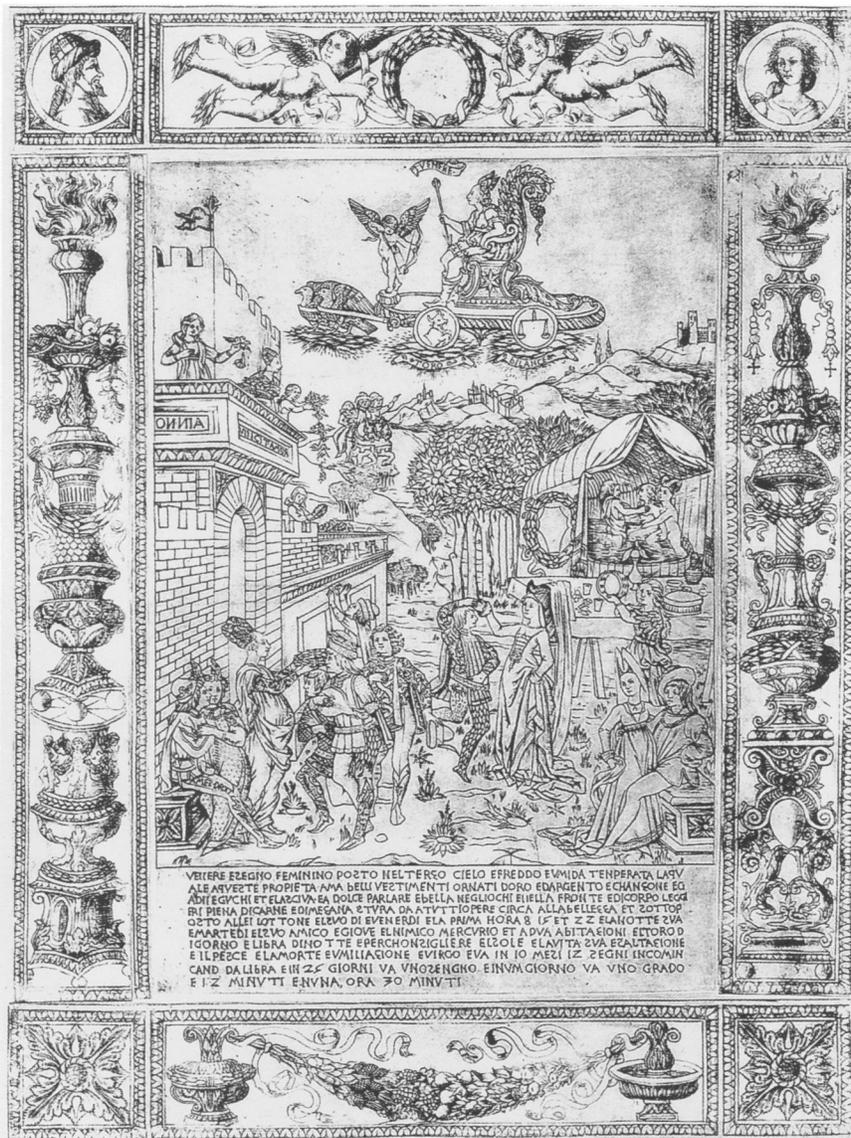


Figure 8. The supposed Baccio Baldini. *The Planet Venus*, within the border panels in Figure 7. (photo: after Arthur M. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving* [London, 1938], vol. 2, pl. 131)

essay, but Keller sounded the theme emphasized here when he wrote, “Perhaps the fragmentary nature of the surviving material will prevent convincing solutions.”¹¹ Whatever the engraver’s name, he or his shop made at least—and probably more than—two sheets of frame segments (Figure 7) and another with eleven panels of ornament. Quick comparison reveals that Rosselli obviously used Figure 7 as his model for Figure 3. Rosselli’s entire series of twenty-four Prophets and twelve Sibyls was copied from a series by this predecessor, so it is not surprising that at least one set of frames was also modeled on his work. It has been conjectured that the sheet in Figure 7 was meant to frame a series of *Planets* by the earlier engraver, and Hind included a montage illustrating this idea (Figure 8). In light of the fact that Rosselli copied the Prophets and

Sibyls and the earlier frame segment (which is probably by this same engraver), it seems likely that Rosselli’s other frames were also copied from earlier models.

Printmaking itself originated north of the Alps, and printers of incunabula in Italy were from German areas. It is fair to say that most innovations in printmaking came from these German-speaking parts of Europe. As far as I can ascertain, however—and again it should be stressed that because of the scarcity of material any conclusion must be tentative—the provision of printed borders for series of prints was an Italian idea, doubtless arising out of the tradition of illuminated manuscripts. And not surprisingly the idea seems to have originated in Florence, the city that was the birthplace of so much else in Renaissance art.



Figure 9. Francesco Rosselli. Candelabrum, cut from a plate of border segments. Engraving. The British Museum

NOTES

1. Arthur M. Hind, *Catalogue of the Early Italian Engravings . . . in the British Museum* (London, 1910), pp. 104–7, 116–17; *Early Italian Engraving* (London, 1938), vol. 1, pp. 119–29, esp. pp. 127–29. See also Mark J. Zucker, *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2 (1994), pp. 8–29, esp. pp. 24–29 and 102–3.
2. See, most recently, Arthur R. Blumenthal, ed., *Cosimo Rosselli, Painter of the Sistine Chapel*, exh. cat., The George D. and Harriet W. Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Rollins College (Winter Park, Fla., 2001), esp. Suzanne Boorsch, “Francesco Rosselli” and entries on pp. 208–44, and Virginia Budny and Frank Dabell, “Hard at Work ‘di notte chome di di’: A Close Reading of Cosimo Rosselli’s Career, with Some New Documents,” pp. 23–44. John Goldsmith Phillips, former curator of European sculpture and decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum, first put Francesco’s name to the group of prints now generally accepted as his, in *Early Florentine Designers and Engravers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 68ff. The groundbreaking study on Francesco as engraver was done by Konrad Oberhuber in Jay A. Levenson, Konrad Oberhuber, and Jacquelyn L. Sheehan, *Early Italian Engravings from the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, D. C., 1973), pp. 47–52. The most extensive and detailed publication of Francesco’s engravings is Zucker, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2, pp. 1–109. In an oral presentation at a symposium on Cosimo Rosselli in connection with the exhibition at the Cornell Museum of Fine Arts (February 25, 2001), I proposed that Francesco engraved the thirty-one plates for Francesco Berlinghieri’s *Geographia* (Florence, 1482); see Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, vol. 1, pp. 295–96, G.3.
3. In addition to the segments framing images of the *Mysteries* in Hamburg and Paris, sixteen segments cut from the complete sheets of these plates have been identified in public collections in Bassano, Italy; Dresden; London; Milan; New York; Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale); and Pavia, Italy; see Zucker, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2, pp. 24–27.
4. Zucker, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2, p. 27, seems to concur with this opinion.
5. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, vol. 1, pp. 127–28, B.I.16; David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print* (New Haven and London, 1994), pp. 82, 84–85.
6. Zucker, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2, p. 24.
7. The configuration is shown in Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, vol. 1, p. 128.
8. Zucker, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2, p. 103.
9. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, vol. 1, p. 146, B.III.19; Zucker, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 24, *Commentary*, pt. 2, p. 99.
10. Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence, 1880), vol. 5, p. 396; Peter Keller, “The Engravings in the 1481 Edition of the *Divine Comedy*,” in *Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante’s Divine Comedy*, exh. cat., Kulturforum, Berlin, Scuderie Papali al Quirinale, Rome, and Royal Academy of Arts, London (London, 2000), pp. 326–33, esp. 332–33.
11. Keller, “The Engravings,” p. 333.