

Prints and People*

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PRINTERS' SHORTCUTS

The sainted queen of Hungary is smuggling scraps from the royal table. They will miraculously become roses when the stingy king uncovers her bowl to accuse her of squandering on the poor. Her head, her bowl, and her name, *elspett*, are all cut on a removable plug, the join showing in a white line. The canny manufacturer who signed this cut *wolfgang* must have inserted many plugs into this all-purpose body to print dozens of different female saints in thousands of impressions, of which this one alone escaped destruction by being pasted into the cover of a folio Augsburg Bible of 1477.

About 1500 a Venetian composite cut helped to sell an unillustrated Florentine book then some fifteen years old. The remaindered Florentine edition was apparently bought up by a Venetian bookseller who smart-

* Editors' note: These essays have been selected from Mr. Mayor's book *Prints and People: A Social History of Picture Printing*, soon to be published by the Museum. All of the prints illustrated are in the collection of the Department of Prints and Photographs.

Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, hand-colored south German woodcut, 1470s. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 30.51.2



ened it with a leaf on which the book's title is printed in red Venetian type, sometimes above the picture, sometimes below. Like the Saint Elizabeth, this Saint Gregory has not survived with any other head or attribute.

At Bamberg about 1460, some of the first woodcuts printed with type started a custom that entirely shaped the Strassburg edition of Terence's *Comedies*. There each character is represented on a little cut like a slug of type, to be grouped with other cuts for spelling out pictorially who is on stage in each of 660 scenes. The most recent arrival appears in the center. Each play begins with a full-page curtain call for all its characters, with long hyphens uniting the pairs of lovers.

As printers accumulated working capital and realized the capabilities of the press, they stopped economizing on blocks by combining them, and economizing on paper by imitating the old scribes' shorthand signs, retaining only the contraction of *et* into &.

Saint Gregory, Venetian woodcut, about 1500. Added to Saint Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, Florence, 1486. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 53.629.1(1-2)





Nude Man Reclining, etching by Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (1606–1669), Dutch, 1646. Gift of Henry Walters, 23.51.4

REMBRANDT'S FIGURES

No matter how many kinds of things Rembrandt drew, he never deserted that pivot of Western art, the human being. Unlike Michelangelo, who was obsessed by the muscular young man, Rembrandt, being an endless person, studied all ages and all conditions. As he developed, he saw people as he saw everything else, in ever more subtle and complex relationships. Before he combined figures effectively, he etched small heads, then small single figures in simple poses. Whereas most painters learn when young by drawing nudes, he etched almost all of his when he was forty to fifty-five. His male models were certainly apprentices, who were everywhere expected to pose on warm days if they stripped passably. Although Rembrandt painted two anatomical demonstrations, no drawings of dissections by him now survive. The engineering of bone and muscle (Leonardo's passion) probably interested him as little as the

Woodcut illustration from Terence's *Comedies*, Strassburg, 1499. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 26.100.2



The Bathers, etching by Rembrandt, 1651. Gift of Henry Walters, 17.37.6

engineering of buildings. Provided a gesture or a vault looked convincing, it did not bother him if the arm was too short or the dome would collapse if built. The optical age of the baroque had no more optical painter than Rembrandt.

While he was etching his last great landscapes, he took a copperplate to a swimming hole to sketch the bathers in the open air. He saw them like Cézanne, as bodies fractured in dappled shade or obliterated in sunlight. No such etching occurs again until the 1880s in France. From this noonday observation, Rembrandt could plunge deep into Giorgione's half-light for the so-called *Negress Lying Down*, in a Venetian twilight compacted to a dusk as thick as aspic with a skill that no other etcher has commanded. It is hard enough to draw a thing to look round, but next to impossible to embed it in a shallow yet palpable deposit of air. To print the magic of such a drypoint, Rembrandt wiped the copperplate with a touch almost as rare as the etching itself, and printed on oriental papers that absorbed

all the warm ink into their creamy softness. The woman lies in counterswings of hip and shoulder like the *Venus* that Velázquez was then painting in Madrid, also under Venetian influence.

Italian prints showed Rembrandt how to entwine Abraham, Isaac, and the angel in a human column as inextricably linked as Giovanni Bologna's marble *Rape of the Sabines*, three views of which were published in 1584 through woodcuts. Rembrandt's expressive invention was to cover the boy's face so that the shivering of his ribs makes us also suffer the gooseflesh of martyrdom. Thus a veteran actor conveys the pang of a crisis by turning his back on the audience.

Rembrandt's mastery of figure drawing appears most vividly in enlargements of details so tiny that he must have drawn them under a magnifying glass. This painter of wall-size dramas could also work like a gem engraver on heads that would not cover your thumb nail. On any scale, it would be hard to find a face more expressive than old Simeon's at the temple when he



Negress Lying Down, etching by Rembrandt, 1658. The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 29.107.28



Abraham Sacrificing Isaac, etching by Rembrandt, 1655. Bequest of Ida Kammerer in memory of her husband Frederic Kammerer, M.D., 33.79.13

Simeon and the Christ Child, enlarged detail from *The Presentation in the Temple*, etching by Rembrandt, 1654. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.16



holds the Christ child in his arms and says: "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen my salvation." When Rembrandt scratched hairlines through the etching ground, he had to calculate on their expanding through the ragged, thick bite of the acid. He shaded behind these two heads with the tapering straight lines of the graver. The next year he achieved equal character in as small a head that he incised into the hard metal itself with the jerky, slipping, stiff dry-point needle. Arresting as these details are when enlarged and isolated, they act even more remarkably in their setting. They never call attention to themselves, unlike Dürer's insistent particularities, but blend like musicians in an orchestra pulling together for an over-mastering effect.

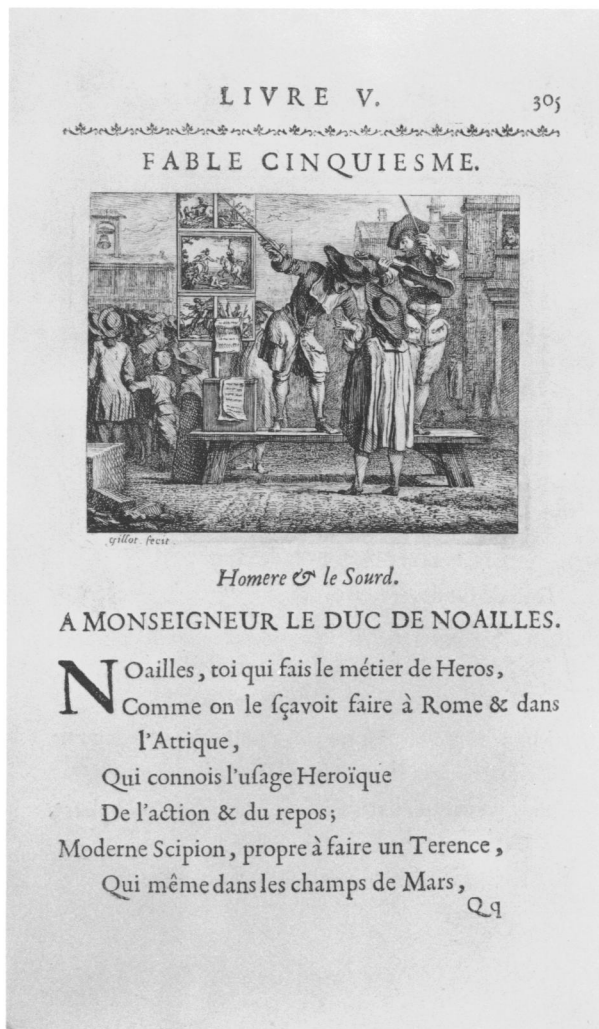


Head of Barrabas, enlarged detail from *Christ Presented to the People*, etching by Rembrandt, 1655. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 41.1.34

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BOOKS

The eighteenth century perfected a fresh, seductive format for books subsidized by wealthy patrons for wealthy bibliophiles. Not meant to be read, these books were designed to be admired two facing pages at a time. In 1719 Claude Gillot, Watteau's teacher, diminished Louis XIV's royal folio pages into a neat block of type and picture. Gillot was the next French printmaker after Callot to see wit and grace in the everyday, and to keep pace with comedians.

The Venetian invention of the rococo book completed four centuries of collaboration between artists and publishers in Venice. Borders as elaborate as those in old Parisian prayer books surrounded gratulatory odes in



Etching by Claude Gillot (1673–1722), French, in La Motte, *Fables Nouvelles*, Paris, 1719. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 34.15



Etching by Francesco Bartolozzi (1728–1813), Italian, 1763.
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 35.81.1



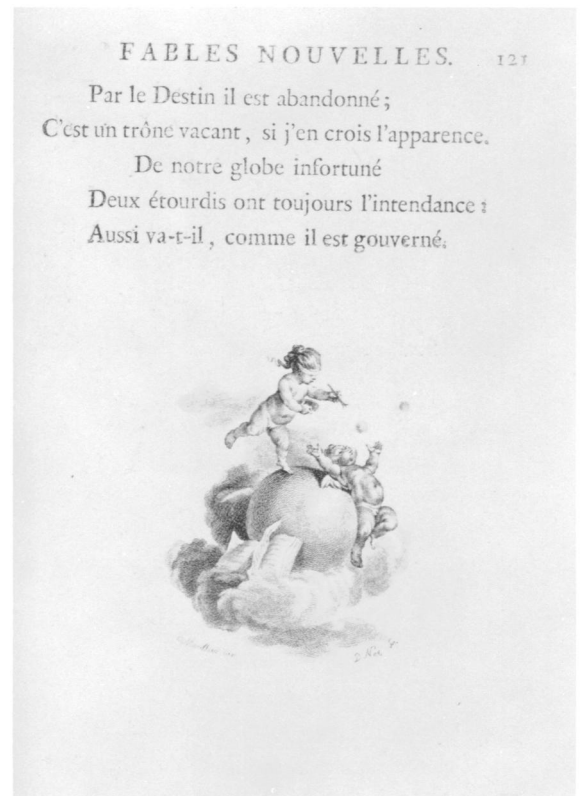
Etching after Giambattista Piazzetta (1682–1754), Italian, in Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Venice, 1745. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 37.36.1

Etching after Clément-Pierre Marillier (1740–1808), French, in Dorat, *Fables Nouvelles*, Paris, 1773. Gift of Philip Hofer, 33.77.2

the souvenir pamphlets that Venetian grandees gave to guests at family ceremonies.

The last of many Venetian books to be imitated outside Venice was a massive folio of Tasso that took years to prepare. Though each canto begins with the old baroque full-page copperplate, they end with a new kind of vignette of figures sporting on an airy island.

But since Piazzetta's witty vignettes were dwarfed by a monumental page, about fifteen years later the French scaled down the Venetian scheme to cupids lolling on capriciously evaporating cloudlets, harmonizing picture, type, and paper with a delicacy better calculated to amuse the exacting idlers of the age. The paper, "singing" through the ink, sets the brilliant key. C. N. Cochin noted that "vignettes must be etched, not engraved, to keep the spontaneity of a sketch, which engraved finishing destroys." Though some Parisian book illustrators specialized in designing, and others in etching, each could do the other's work well enough for any number to collaborate as one. This unity of effort so impressed alert amateurs that they began to bind preliminary drawings with the engravings to make up de luxe copies.



DEGAS AND CASSATT

Degas learned from quattrocento Tuscans to color lucidly and draw clearly, from Japanese woodcuts to spot pictures in patterns never imagined by Giotto or Raphael, from Ingres to control distortions of line, and from Daumier to spy from ambush for the gesture that sparks drama into somebody crossing a street, listening to music, or ironing a shirt. Degas explored more media than any artist between Dürer and Picasso. With intelligence and passion he investigated painting, pastel, sculpture, and all the varieties of drawing and printmaking, including photography, which he started when his eyes were dimming at the end. A beginner, but not an amateur photographer, he took advantage of the latest lenses and emulsions to master a medium that,

like the piano, any child can use to some effect, but only the strong can bend to their will. He was the first photographer to see that multiple exposures might serve picture making as usefully as reflections in plate glass.

Most of his photographs seem to have disappeared when his heirs cleaned out his studio for auctioning. His other prints are also rare, since he pulled only enough impressions to check his progress through as many as twenty retouches on the copperplate. He combined etching with an aquatint of grains as sparkling as Goya's to flatten the world like Japanese prints.

He concentrated his printmaking from 1874 to 1893 on over four hundred monotypes, creating more than anybody since Castiglione, the inventor of the process.

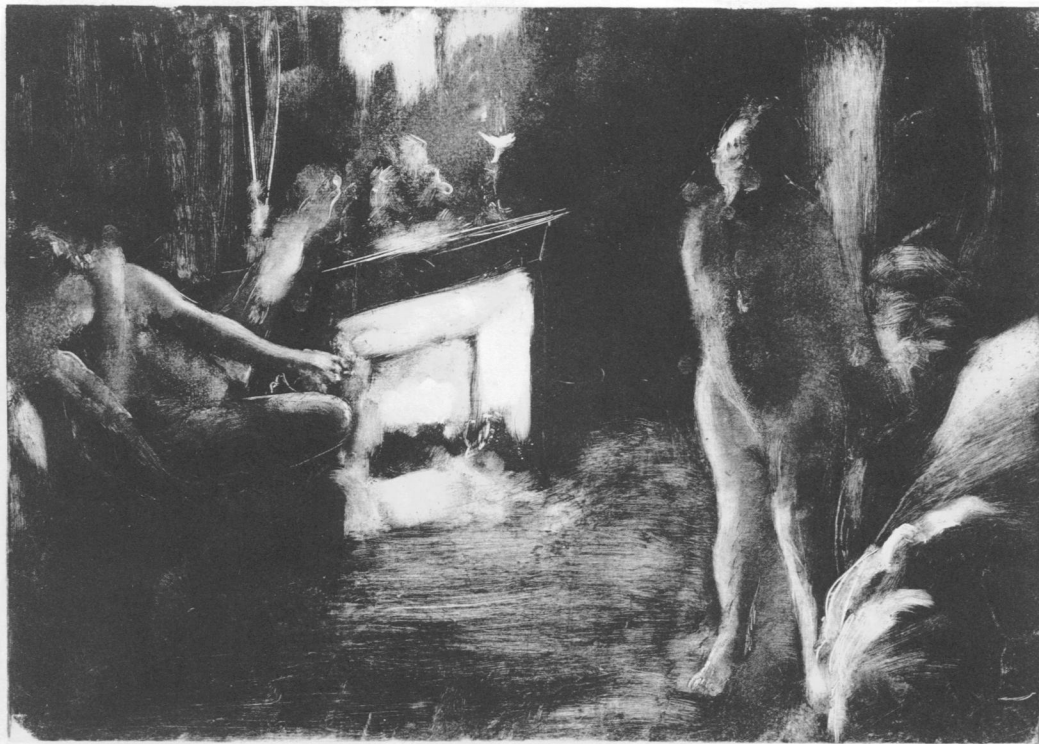
The Halévy Family, multiple exposure photograph by Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas (1834–1917), French. Gift of Mrs. Henry T. Curtiss, 64.673.17





Mary Cassatt in the Louvre, aquatint by Degas, about 1880. Rogers Fund, 19.29.2

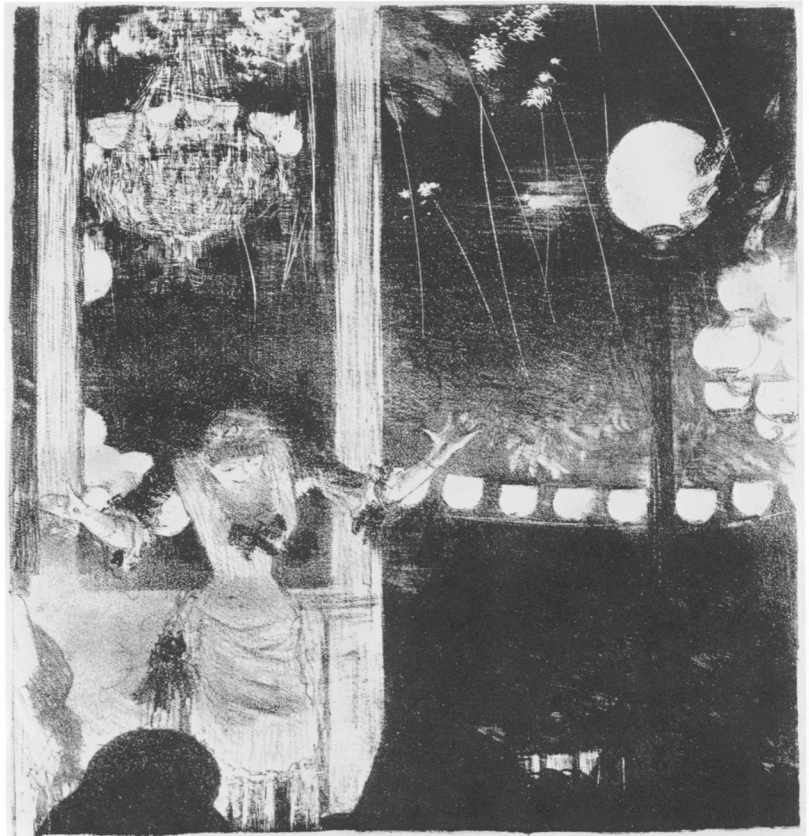
In the Firelight, monotype by Degas. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, Elisha Whittelsey Fund, and Douglas Dillon gift, 68.670



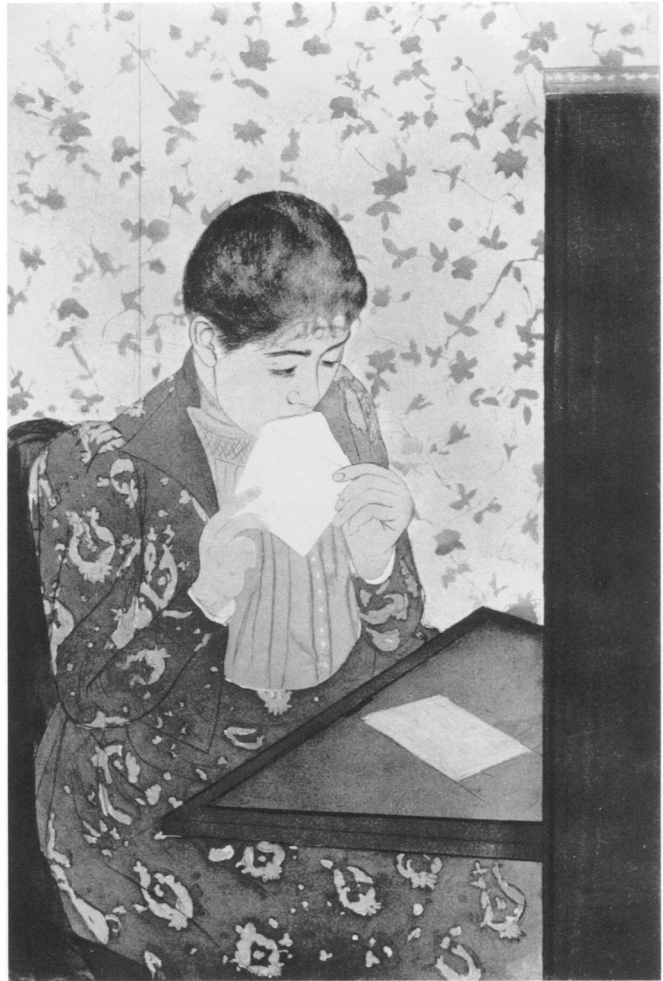
The Jet Earring, monotype by Degas.
Anonymous gift in memory of Francis
Henry Taylor, 59.961



Mademoiselle Bécât Singing
at Les Ambassadeurs,
lithograph by Degas, about
1875. Rogers Fund, 19.29.3



The Letter, color aquatint by Mary Cassatt (1845–1926), American, 1891.
Gift of Paul J. Sachs, 16.2.9



Though he painted a few exquisitely finished pictures on the copper, he more often mopped smudges of tone that anticipate the distortions of the German expressionists. When he massed these suggestive monotypes still more broadly, he colored the printed paper with lines that blend his precise draftsmanship into the broad effects of the impressionists, who rarely or never drew.

He applied his monotype technique to the stone of his lithograph of the Ambassadeurs nightclub, darkening it all over and then scraping out the grays and the highlights, as Goya had done for his big bullfights. His gaslight globes might have been suggested by Harunobu's *Girl with a Lantern* in one of these rare instances where a specific Japanese print can perhaps be linked to a specific work by one of the many Western painters inspired by a general Japanese way of seeing.

Degas shared his admiration for Japanese prints with his only outstanding disciple, Mary Cassatt. This Phila-

delphian from a family as conservative as his own had spent her girlhood in France, where she settled permanently when she was twenty-one. After mastering the academic discipline of painting, she broke away from it so effectively when she was thirty-three that Degas invited her to show with the impressionists. In 1891, after she and Degas had gone together to an exhibition of Japanese prints, she consciously applied the elegance of Utamaro to the intimacies of her dressing room, her writing desk, her tea table, and the nursery of her baby nieces. Through these color aquatints, as well as her etchings and drypoints, Mary Cassatt became one of the very few women to discover a new vision in the abstract medium of printmaking. Her originality lay in seeing women and children as only a woman—indeed a lady—can see them, and in drawing her delicate insight with a supple strength that Degas thought possible only in a man.