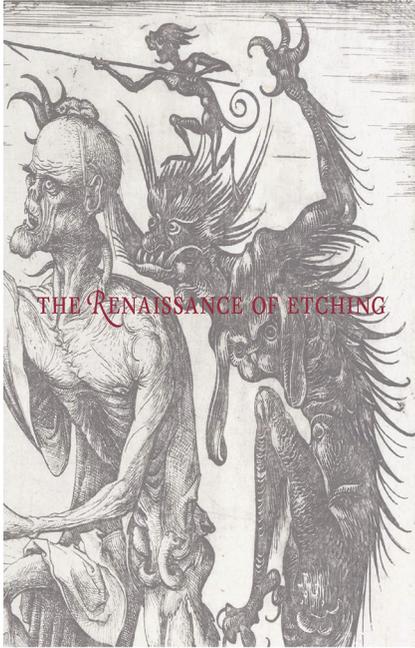


## Review

Catherine Jenkins, Nadine M. Orenstein, and Freyda Spira (eds.), *The Renaissance of Etching*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019, 304 pp. ISBN 9781588396495.



In 1609, the writer and printmaker Matthias Quad wrote that brothers Jan and Lucas van Doetecum had invented a way of etching ‘so neatly and smoothly, and with such gentle gradations, that it was long considered by many connoisseurs to be no etching, but pure engraving’ (244). Quad set their manner of etching against that of another etcher of the time, Simon Novellanus (and others like him), who, ‘although [he] had a pleasant, attractive, clever and practiced hand in etching... nevertheless any novice can immediately distinguish these etchings from engraving’.<sup>1</sup> In this passage, Quad reveals that not only was there a period attentiveness to print processes and their particular aesthetic qualities, but also that he believed such connoisseurial knowledge was available to ‘any novice’. Such an assertion posits a period eye very different from our own, a perceptual gap that *The Renaissance of Etching* exhibition catalogue will no doubt lessen. In this book, Catherine

Jenkins, Nadine M. Orenstein, Freyda Spira, and other contributors expertly examine the genesis of the medium of etching, setting works of early etchers in their respective contexts and providing thorough technical and historical background for better understanding the early history of this particular print process.

*The Renaissance of Etching* is the first full-length study to focus on the origins and early history of etching as a print process. The catalogue excels at explaining the technical aspects of the etching process. It prioritises an understanding of the physical process of

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Timothy A. Riggs, *Hieronymus Cock. Printmaker and Publisher* (London 1977), 140.

etching by opening with a short technical and material essay cowritten by curator Nadine M. Orenstein and technical art historian Ad Stijnman. They trace the history of the development of etching in broad terms before delving into the intricacies of the chemical and material components of etching, from the metal of the plates and the acid required to etch them, to the composition of the grounds and the tools used to draw in them. Such an essay is a necessary primer for the rest of the book, which employs substantial analysis of details in order to discern etched from engraved line, and to explain differences in technique and process. In a number of instances, conventional knowledge is challenged with respect to prints previously thought to have been etched or engraved. One thinks of the limits of Quad's astute 'novice' when reading Orenstein's reassessment of Dirk Vellert's *Man with Fish* (1522) and *Deluge* (1544), which in contrast to previous literature are here listed as pure engravings. Another example is Catherine Jenkins' analysis of a small print by Marcantonio Raimondi (cat. 55): despite microscopic examination and consultation with a conservator and a practicing engraver, no concrete conclusions could be made as to whether Marcantonio employed etching in any of his prints. Jenkins' willingness to leave the question open is prudent, and reminds the reader that even the most thorough technical examination can be inconclusive.

Aside from the introductory essay, the catalogue is largely organised along regional lines, and loosely chronologically. Albertina curator Christof Metzger's essay addresses the beginnings of the medium in Germany, with particular attention to Daniel Hopper and his experimental use of iron etching. Orenstein then explores early etching in the Netherlands, and the switch from iron to copper etching. Curator Freyda Spira returns to etching in Germany, examining Albrecht Altdorfer and the generation of German etchers following Dürer and Hopper in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Jenkins contributes the next three essays, two on etching in Italy and one on etching in France. The former essays deal with Parmigianino and his followers and etching in Venice and Verona. Jenkins' essay on etching in France draws heavily from her excellent 2017 study on prints at the court of Fontainebleau. The catalogue concludes with a final essay by Orenstein on the professionalisation of etching in the Netherlands around 1550, largely through the efforts of Hieronymus Cock and his publishing house Aux Quatre Vents. Orenstein's essay is an appropriate conclusion in that it sets the stage for the further professionalisation and organisation of print that would occur in the following decades.

The book's organisation by country highlights how approaches to etching varied widely depending on region. For example, one can see the stark contrast between early explorations of etching in Italy and the North, especially the Netherlands. Early Italian etchers – and Parmigianino in particular – were interested in replicating something like drawing in print. They made fluidly hatched etchings that exploited the speed with which one could make marks in the medium. In the North, etching was treated as more of an expedient alternative to engraving, and those who employed it were often trained printmakers who attempted to integrate it into the visual vocabulary of engraving's tight, regular, and even hatching. Lucas van Leyden, foremost among early Netherlandish printmakers, always employed the medium in combination with engraving, and his etched lines largely follow the logic of an engraved idiom. As Orenstein notes, Lucas went to pains to make his etched lines appear more engraved. In his *Eulenspiegel* of 1520 (cat. 28), Lucas went back over his

etched lines with a burin, extending them so that they ended with the tapered tip typical of engraving. In 1524, Nicolaas Hogenberg created a large printed triptych (cat. 33) in which the wings were etched and the central panel engraved, but he kept his manner so consistent that in the past, all three had been catalogued as etchings. While someone like Vellert may seem an exception in that his etchings are more drawing-like, they still imitate his engraved manner, and in any case seem tightly controlled when viewed alongside the much looser handling of Parmigianino and his followers. In both the introductory and final essays, Orenstein (as well as Jenkins when discussing Parmigianino) calls attention to this distinction between printmakers who exploited etching's drawing-like potential and those who used it more as a means to an end – that is, the painter-etcher versus the professional printmaker. The question of how and to what degree period viewers might have understood this distinction remains open, though the authors offer a number of enticing hints.

Dividing the book into regional studies sometimes hinders a more holistic view of how etching developed everywhere, and hides some perhaps interesting transnational connections. One thinks of the similar ideas behind Altdorfer's more calligraphic landscape etchings discussed by Spira and the *disegni di stampa* (printed drawings) of Parmigianino (134). Still, within the essays the authors do a good job of linking the development of similar practices across Europe. Jenkins' essay on French etching in particular displays the ways in which artists and their works undermined and transcended national boundaries. The first etchings discussed in this section are probably not French, but Southern Netherlandish, incorporating ornamental designs that originated in Bruges, Brussels, and Liège, and influencing the work of early French etcher Androuet du Cerceau. The print centre set up at Fontainebleau – despite being very fixed in a specific place and time (1542-1547) – was a truly international endeavour involving artists from Italy, France, and the Low Countries. The international collaboration typical of Fontainebleau is literally etched into the plates: Antonio Fantuzzi etched the *Frame of Venus Frustrated* (cat. 99) after Rosso Fiorentino's design, framing a landscape likely designed and etched by a Flemish hand. The Master I ♀ V similarly juxtaposed motifs borrowed from Italian, German, and Netherlandish sources. Jenkins even suggests that, based upon style, the Master I ♀ V was himself Flemish. Such examples demonstrate the ways in which, even early on, etching was very much an international endeavour that transcended national boundaries.

*The Renaissance of Etching* offers a thorough overview of the development of etching throughout Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, providing new insights into the medium's early history. It illuminates a little understood moment in the history of print, and clearly and concisely explains the complexities of a highly technical print process. The catalogue is filled with careful and close observations that are effectively communicated, and which serve as models of how to look at and understand prints. As such, it is a valuable resource for any scholar of early modern print.

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