

THE RENAISSANCE OF ETCHING

FROM DÜRER TO BRUEGEL

Exhibition Facts

Press conference	11 February 2020 10 am
Opening	11 February 2020 18.30 pm
Duration	12 February – 1 November 2020
Venue	Tietze Galleries
Curator	Dr. Christof Metzger, ALBERTINA
Works	ca. 100
Catalogue	“The Renaissance of Etching” available for EUR 49.90 (English) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at

Contact
Albertinaplatz 1 | 1010 Vienna
T +43 (0)1 534 83 0
info@albertina.at
www.albertina.at

Opening Hours
Daily 10 am – 6 pm
Wednesdays & Fridays 10 am – 9pm

Press contact
Fiona Sara Schmidt
T +43 (0)1 534 83 511 | M +43 (0)699 12178720
s.schmidt@albertina.at

Sarah Wulbrandt
T +43 (0)1 534 83 512 | M +43 (0)699 10981743
s.wulbrandt@albertina.at



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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 such as 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.

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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.

Walltexts

What is an Etching?

Etching is one of the so-called intaglio printing processes in which the lines to be printed are incised into a metal printing plate. In the case of the engraving, which has been used by artists since the mid-fifteenth century, the metal plate is treated with a sharp burin. Etchings rely on the vulnerability of base metals to acid as a means of chemically generating the desired contours and shadings.

The origins of the technique largely go back to the etchings made on iron to decorate armor. As a printing technique, it has been employed since the mid-1490s—first in iron and only later in copper. Etchings are made by covering the metal printing plate with a ground that is resistant to acid. The artist then scratches off the ground where a line is to appear in the finished work with a pointed needle, exposing the bare metal. The plate is then dipped in a bath of acid that “bites” into the metal, leaving the remaining covered surface intact. After this ground is washed away, the final result is a metal plate with incised lines which, when inked, can be printed on paper.

Daniel Hopfer: The Invention of Etching

The Augsburg-based artist Daniel Hopfer (1471–1536) was the first to print an etched metal plate on paper around 1495. Trained as a painter and apparently also knowledgeable in the field of metal finishing, Hopfer specialized in producing prints early in his career. Famous for the production of armor in the late Middle Ages, the city of Augsburg became a major center of iron etching.

Hopfer’s astonishing technical refinement in etching remains unmatched. He developed considerable mastery in combining line and flat etching on a single plate. Another special process involved multiple etchings ensuring gradations from black to medium gray. A fourth process that marks the technical summit of Hopfer’s art is based on applying the etching ground and the acid to the plate with a brush, which results in gray tones recalling aquatints.

Other than Hopfer, the only contemporary artist in Augsburg to work with etchings was Hans Burgkmair the Elder (1473–1531). His one known effort in this field is the *Venus, Mercury and Cupid*.

Albrecht Dürer: Experiments in Light and Shadow

Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) made his first engravings in the mid-1490s, around the time of his initial successes in the field of woodcuts. As a trained metalworker, he was surely familiar with how to engrave copper plates. During the brief period between 1515 and 1518, he experimented with etching iron plates. Dürer was fascinated with the freedom of motion the etching needle ensured, allowing for a flow close to that of pen-and-ink drawing. The artist was probably nevertheless dissatisfied with the impossibility of achieving subtle gradations in the mostly strong linework. He tried to compensate for such limitations through bold lighting and veritable chiaroscuro effects and succeeded in differentiating and gradating details even in the darkest areas with highly disciplined hatching patterns.

Sebald Beham (1500–1550) was the only master in Dürer's circle who was won over by the technique. Because of his artistic proximity to Dürer, it has been assumed that Beham trained in his workshop, gathering experience in all printing techniques. Even so, his eighteen etchings occupy a special position within his enormous oeuvre.

Albrecht Altdorfer and his legacy

Around 1520, a time when Albrecht Dürer had already given up the technique, a new generation of artists headed by Albrecht Altdorfer (ca. 1485–1538) began turning to etching. Although copper was being used by this time in the Netherlands, iron was still preferred material among German artists. They nevertheless succeeded in exploiting the potentials of etching as regards motif, style, and technique. Altdorfer, for example, introduced the landscape as a new subject matter for prints, a genre that would find numerous followers throughout Europe.

Altdorfer's landscape etchings inspired two Nuremberg artists in particular: Augustin Hirschvogel (1503–1553) and Hans Lautensack (ca. 1520 – ca. 1565). Alongside mathematically accurate maps and topographical views, they each produced series of idealized landscapes. The artists gradually replaced the iron printing plates with copper, which is more flexible and easier to work and also allowed them to combine etched and engraved lines. Thanks to their collaboration with professional printers and a well-organized distribution system, their etchings reached a wide audience.

Etching in the Netherlands from 1520 to 1550

The history of etching in the Netherlands goes back to the residence and court cities of Mechelen and Wijk bij Duurstede as well as Antwerp and Leiden. Interest in the new printing technique was possibly awoken by Albrecht Dürer who exercised an enormous influence on local artists during his travels through the Netherlands (1520–1521), inspiring them in very different fields of activity. For some, like Jan Gossaert (ca. 1478–1532), Lucas van Leyden (ca. 1494–1533), or Dirck Vellert (ca. 1480 – ca. 1547), the occupation with etching represented a brief intermezzo that they gave up again after only very few forays. Others, for example Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (ca. 1504–1559), became intensively engrossed in the etching technique over a long period of time.

Copper etching plates were used in the Netherlands for the first time. Recipes for suitable etching fluids not only circulated among artists but were also disseminated by scholarly humanists and art patrons who expressed a great interest in the new technique. Lucas van Leyden was the very first artist to etch in copper, a material that is less susceptible to rust and corrosion than iron. Considerably softer, it also proved to be easier to work, enabling artists to combine etching and engraving on a single plate. In terms of style, however, this did not result in a greater freedom in drawing. On the contrary, the narrow hatching system typical of the engraving was carried over to the field of etching.

Parmigianino and the Beginnings of Etching in Italy

Francesco Parmigianino (1503–1540) was the first Italian artist to fully exploit the potentials of etching. During his brief sojourn in Bologna from 1527 to 1530, he produced altarpieces, painted portraits, made preparatory drawings for chiaroscuro woodcuts, and created eighteen etchings. While it is not known where and from whom he learned the technique, his etchings radiate a considerable sense of adventurousness. He explored the effect of colored printing ink and plate tones, worked the etched copper plate with burin or drypoint needle, and was the first to combine etching and woodcut.

Parmigianino's etchings were particularly admired for their technical execution as well as their compositions. Their elegant lines made them above all popular among collectors who also specialized in drawings. His influence on subsequent artists cannot be underestimated, especially in Venice and Verona. They adopted not only his drawing style and his compositions but also experimented with the etching technique, surpassing their artistic role model in freedom and virtuosity of draftsmanship.

Etching in Verona and Venice

The art of etching experienced a kind of golden age in Northern Italy, especially in Verona and Venice, between 1530 and 1560. Its proximity to drawing and its diverse expressive possibilities made the technique particularly interesting for draftsmen and painters who now had the means to easily translate their pictorial inventions into prints that could be reproduced on paper in large editions. The etched motifs encompassed a wide thematic spectrum. Not only were elaborate copies after compositions by the leading artists of the day popular but collectors also valued landscapes, for which the freely flowing etched lines seemed especially suited.

In the early 1560s, the etching technique was also discovered by profit-oriented professional printers and publishers who recognized in it a promising alternative to the more effortful and time-consuming production of engravings. From then on, etching grew into a mass medium in Venice and Rome, where it was used for the production of pictures, book illustrations, and maps on a large scale.

Etching in France

The beginnings of etching as a printmaking technique in France only go back to the 1540s. Employed by artists, craftsmen, and professional printmakers, the new medium was especially cultivated in Paris by the draftsman and architect Jacques Androuet du Cerceau (ca. 1511–1585) to meet the demand of the “amateurs d’antiquités” for classical motifs with ornamental prints and architectural depictions.

Around the same time, a group of artists at Fontainebleau near Paris also turned to etching. The palace that King François I had decorated after Italian models with frescoes, stuccos, and sculptures had become a center of artistic activities since the 1530s, where especially the Florentine artist Rosso Fiorentino developed a new ornamental style. Within not more than five years various artists made considerable use of the new printing technique and thus furthered the rapid dissemination of the new courtly decorative style.

Etchings were only sporadically and individually produced in France after the 1550s. However, the technique would celebrate a triumphant return as an artistic medium at the turn to the seventeenth century.

The Professionalization of Etching: The Netherlands in the 1550s

While only a few artists worked with etchings in the Netherlands during the first twenty-five years of the sixteenth century, the technique developed into an important component of the growing market for printed images in the 1550s. Especially the port town of Antwerp, which had been a major center for the book and printing trades since the late fifteenth century, attracted business-minded publishers as well as artists and highly qualified printmakers. For profit-oriented publishers like Hieronymus Cock (1518–1570), etching represented an interesting alternative to engraving because the preparation of the printing plate required considerably less time and about 1,000 good impressions could be pulled from it. Large editions of picture series designed by artists and etched by professional craftsmen were soon being produced.

Along with artists like Pieter Bruegel (1526/30–1569), who made use of etchings as one of several forms of artistic expression, enterprising printmakers like the brothers Jan and Lucas van Doetecum, both active in the third quarter of the sixteenth century, or Pieter van der Borcht (ca. 1535–1608) made their mark with reproductive prints after works by other artists.