
H-France Review Vol. 14 (August 2014), No. 130

Perrin Stein, *Artists and Amateurs: Etching in 18th-Century France*, with essays by Charlotte Guichard, Rena M. Hoisington, Elizabeth M. Rudy. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London. viii + 231 pp. Color illustrations, works in the exhibition, notes, selected bibliography, index, and photograph credits. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-58839-498-9 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), ISBN 978-0-300-19700-6 (Yale University Press).

W. McAllister Johnson, *Versified Prints: A Literary and Cultural Phenomenon in Eighteenth-Century France*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012. xi + 131 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and indices. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4426-4285-0.

Review by Candace Clements, University of Houston.

Eminent art historian and dedicated print collector Leo Steinberg is reported to have justified his interest in the form by noting that prints were “the circulating lifeblood of ideas” in art.[1] At no time was this truer than during the eighteenth century in Europe, when handmade printmaking achieved a richness of techniques, formats, and functions unsurpassed before and arguably since. In France this production was shaped by an ambiguous protection afforded by the state, notably the royal Edict of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, 1660, which designated engraving a liberal art, and the consequent inclusion of printmakers among members of the Paris Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. As the name of that institution suggests, however, they were admitted only in their capacity as skilled renderers of others’ designs, as what we now generally term reproductive engravers. Another function of printmaking, to capture and multiply the inventor’s inspiration more directly—“original printmaking”—found less purchase in France than in other countries, or so it is generally accounted. “The strength of reproductive printmaking in eighteenth-century France,” to quote a recent survey textbook, “has as its corollary the weakness of the concept of the original print.”[2]

The publications reviewed here serve notably to complicate this zero-sum equation by changing its terms, with varying degrees of success. They draw us into a visual culture (or cultures) where, on the one hand, the appreciation of prints was not particularly based on their originality, or limited, on the other, to their pictorial elements. The more broadly based and generally accessible of the two accompanied an exhibition of over one hundred prints at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (October 1, 2013-January 5, 2014) that must have been a delight to see. Perrin Stein of the Department of Drawings and Prints there curated the exhibition and is the primary author of its catalogue, signing the introduction and two of the six essays following.

Stein’s “Introduction” follows a rhetorical pattern that is repeated in most of the other essays. Beginning with colorful anecdotes, the author continues on to situate them in a larger and generally unfamiliar cultural landscape. Here the stories concern the etching activities of François Boucher and Jean Honoré Fragonard, prominent painters both, and they preface a statement of the main premise of this collaborative enterprise: “To be clear, prints in eighteenth-century France were made by two types of people: trained professionals, who earned their income by reproducing the works of others or creating works, such as book illustrations, intended for a mass market, and nonprofessionals, those artists and

wealthy *amateurs* who etched their own inventions or sometimes the works in their collections and did so often for reasons other than income. It is this latter group, relatively understudied, that is the subject of this book and its accompanying exhibition” (p. 7). Etching, Stein continues, being a relatively simple, direct and swift method of producing a printing plate, was preferred by these nonprofessionals to engraving, which requires long practice and painstaking execution. *Amateurs*, a term with no exact English equivalent, were “an elite class of art lovers in eighteenth-century France who socialized with artists and whose activities often included the study and practice of art” (p. 7). In an important corollary, Stein proposes that the etching activities of these nonprofessionals fell largely outside strictly regulated juridical (including academic) and commercial definition, often (although not only) operating within an intimate circuit of elite *sociabilité* familiar from other cultural studies of the ancien régime (pp. 9-10, and notes).

The six essays in the catalogue follow themes rather than chronology, and even the final exhibition list corresponds to their headings, as opposed to the more usual ordering by maker’s name or date. In “Learning to Etch,” Rena M. Hoisington investigates how artists—here mostly Academy members or affiliates—mastered etching, a process not taught in Academy classes (nor were, in point of fact, painting and sculpture). They learned, she suggests, by working *with* professional printmakers on preparing reproductions of their own works (Watteau, Boucher, Charles Joseph Natoire), by working *for* wealthy individuals in etching after drawings in important collections (the *Recueil Jullienne*, 1726-35, and the *Recueil Crozat*, 1729-42, both engaging numerous artists), and by instruction *from* interested masters in their private studios (among whom Hoisington cites painters Boucher and Fragonard, but also a professional printmaker and academician, Johann Georg Wille). Some of this is necessarily speculative (we rarely know what went on in artists’ studios of the period in any detail), yet plausible, and what is known is extensively documented.

Elizabeth M. Rudy examines the context for a selection of commercial enterprises of artist-printmakers in “On the Market: Selling Etchings in Eighteenth-Century France.” This investigation diverges somewhat from the broad argument of the publication, as acknowledged by the author’s introductory statement that “few *peintres-graveurs* sought to sell their work commercially” (p. 41). Most of her essay is devoted to documenting exceptions to this rule, resulting in a fascinating but somewhat frustrating miscellany that is not apt for succinct summation, nor linked by a strong argument (which may not in fact be possible). Her examples range widely in date, technique, and function; they include the only programmatic Revolutionary prints discussed in this volume; and they challenge the continuing adoption by these authors of the conventional term *peintre-graveur*, current only from the nineteenth century, for those who made and marketed them. Names cited here encompass a sculptor (François Joseph Saly), two architects (Jean-Laurent Le Geay, Pierre Moreau), an embroidery designer (Charles Germain de Saint-Aubin), and several wives of artists along with many painters. They worked, Rudy’s examples show, mainly in established commercial formats including suites and series, reproductive prints, book illustration, and ornament prints. Perhaps Rudy’s most suggestive conclusion is that, based on sale announcements, their prints enjoyed no special consideration in the broader marketplace, whether in status or in price (pp. 47, 67). This was, of course, in contrast to their appeal to cultivated *amateurs*, more fully documented elsewhere in these essays. Her notes, the most copious in the book, supply a trove of up-to-date resources for further research on all these fronts.

Hoisington’s second contribution, “Etching as a Vehicle for Innovation: Four Exceptional Peintres-Graveurs,” examines the cases of artists Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, Louis Jean Desprez, and Jean Etienne Liotard, all active in the second half of the century, who “pursued printmaking with a passion and an eye toward innovation unequalled by their French *peintre-graveur* contemporaries” (p. 69). Both the passion and the innovation are conveyed in this essay, with the illustrations providing clear visual documentation of the last three named artists’ experimentation with the tonal effects made possible by etching in combination with other printmaking techniques, such as newly developed aquatint. Some pointedly raise a question of definition never quite addressed here or

elsewhere in this volume. In what sense does a print like Desprez's stunning *The Capture and Burning of Selinus by Hannibal*, ca. 1779-84 (pp. 68, 94), dominated by carefully manipulated and repeatedly bitten fields of aquatint tone, connect with the direct, dashing idea of etching evoked in Stein's introduction? Or, even more, the densely worked surface of Liotard's *Self-Portrait* of ca. 1778-81 (p. 99), resembling nothing so much as an old halftone reproduction, in which etched line is nearly wholly subsumed within mechanically produced mezzotint and rouletted textures? Liotard was actually Swiss by birth, and although he did spend formative years in Paris, as a mature artist he was self-defined by his opposition to much that was current in French art, an attitude as apparent in the prints reproduced here as in his famous pastels and his cantankerous theoretical writing. Hoisington omits none of these considerations, but they seem rather to undercut her conclusion that all of these figures should be considered pivotal to "the history of etching in the eighteenth century" (p. 101) rather than to that of intaglio printmaking (encompassing all these techniques), or simply of printmaking period.

Stein's essay on "Diplomacy, Patronage, and Pedagogy: Etching in the Eternal City" returns to firmer ground in a consideration of etching in and around the Academy of France in Rome during the directorates of Nicolas Vleughels, Jean François de Troy, and Charles Joseph Natoire (1725-1775 collectively). She convincingly demonstrates that exploration of etching by state-supported pensioners and visiting *amateurs* often flourished in an atmosphere of permissive directors, informal commercial opportunities, and heady artistic encounters, encouraging in turn transmission of an Italian-inspired "sketch aesthetic" in etching back to France. Works and encounters marshaled in support include the brilliant etchings produced by students commemorating, with clear diplomatic application, their participation in Roman carnival and other festivities; the establishment in 1745—across the street!—of the studio of Venetian architect-printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose friendly presence helped inspire not only imaginative architectural compositions but "a fascination with hybrid areas of ephemeral ornamental design" expressed in etching (p. 120); and the extended visit in the mid-1760s of Claude Henri Watelet and his companion Marguerite Le Comte, enthusiastic *amateurs* of etching, sparking "a flurry of printmaking activity" among pensioners (p. 126). Stein also discusses several etchings made after paintings, some of which recall the format, if not the finish, of contemporary reproductive engravings. One might go a little further than she does in speculating that the etchings by French artists after their *own* paintings illustrated here—Pierre Hubert Subleyras's *Banquet in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, 1738 (pp. 112-13) and Jean Bernard Restout's *Saint Bruno*, 1764 (p. 135)—translated not so much personal experimentation with the medium as the frustration of artists not established or affluent enough for professional reproductive engravers to publicize their works.

The contribution by Charlotte Guichard, "Amateurs and the Culture of Etching," begins by alluding to a dictionary definition rather than a colorful story. But this conventional gambit presents a stumbling block for a reader curious about the history of the term in question: it is difficult to see how the brief definition of "amateur" proposed in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 1694—"qui aime. Il ne se dit que pour marquer l'affection qu'on a pour les choses, & non pour celle qu'on a pour les personnes"—conveys the two meanings of the term she claims were current: "someone who rendered artistic judgments and commissioned works from artists with whom he (or she) was engaged in a social context" and "someone who practices the arts in an occasional manner" (p. 137).^[3] That these meanings did come to cohere to the term in the eighteenth century is beyond doubt, as Guichard documents in the following paragraphs, and she is not alone in noting that, as such, "the *amateur* occupied a central place in the art world of the eighteenth century" (p. 137). Her topic here, entailing some overlap with Stein's preceding essay, is such *amateurs*, most affiliated with the Académie Royale, who made etchings themselves, often "within the new framework of *sociabilité mondaine*" (p. 138). They are an elite, albeit diverse crew, including Louis Carrogis, called Carmontelle, again Watelet, whose country house outside Paris constituted an agreeable gathering place for many of the other artists and *amateurs* discussed, the abbé de Saint-Non, who traveled and published with Hubert Robert and Fragonard, Ange-Laurent La Live de Jully, Madame de Pompadour, Pierre Jean Mariette, the comte de

Caylus, credited with three thousand etchings, many for publication, and, extending late into the century, Baron Dominique Vivant Denon.

Guichard's presentation has the very great virtue of making the outlines of their ideas, productions and (even more) connections available to English-speaking readers. Her concluding section establishes how much of their activity was meant to serve not only friendship but the broader project of connoisseurship, of enhancing the understanding of different artistic manners, notably Rembrandt's, through exploring and circulating them in etching: "practical knowledge put into action," as Guichard remarks of Mariette (p. 149). The documentation of this essay is somewhat less complete than for the others—I would like to know, for example, whether the term "gravures de société" (pp. 145-46) is the period's or her own, as well as the degree to which Caylus's immense etched *oeuvre* might have been facilitated by others ("retouché par Et. Fessard," notes the caption of one plate, p. 150). There are occasional lapses of language—as when Guichard alludes to Saint-Non etching a number of drawings by "his protégé" without making clear which one (p. 142: Fragonard, the reader finds on another page, in another essay)—and one significant error: Académie Salons began on regular basis in 1737, not 1747 (p. 137; Stein's introduction gets it right, p. 10).

Stein's concluding essay, "Echoes of Rembrandt and Castiglione: Etching as Appropriation," pursues some implications of Guichard's conclusion regarding the mid-century vogue for Rembrandt's etchings. To it she joins her contention that French artists returning from Rome in the latter half of the century brought with them a taste for a freer manner derived from Italian as well as some Northern artists. This occurred even as, in France, the techniques of reproductive printmaking were advancing in number and sophistication to the point that, as she begins, "by the final decades of the ancien régime, the practice of printmaking had effectively split into two paths" (p. 157). The degree to which this split differed from that described earlier in the century is not quite clear and would take a more comprehensive study than this exhibition proposes to elucidate. Within her chosen range Stein chooses and explains her examples lucidly, with especially subtle discussion of the varieties and uses of self-conscious appropriation, as opposed to professional reproduction, in the prints in question. "Even without an artist's name attached to it," she writes of one "sketch plate" also emulating, in part, Rembrandt, "the plate brings together many of the qualities that distinguish the private and nonprofessional pursuit of etching in late ancien régime France: the echo of Rosa, the ascendance of the sketch aesthetic, and the cross-pollination of collecting, connoisseurship, and play" (pp. 174, 176).

It will be clear from the above that these essays sometimes jostle the categories established at the outset, insofar as they venture into printmaking that is not always predominantly etching, privately circulated, or even French. But in general, their insertion of "professional" and "nonprofessional" into our vocabulary for discussing eighteenth-century printmaking seems a fertile strategy, directing as it does our attention to the shifting social contingencies that shaped both areas of production. This publication does not, of course, exhaust the issues, and it raises many questions. How to categorize, for just one example, the generally anonymous makers of the "popular," often hand-colored etchings that proliferated during the Revolution, but predated it as well? Their productions have not caught the attention of connoisseurs much, but their number seems to justify some consideration in a discussion of etching in eighteenth-century France. Some of its generalizations are also questionable, such as those about the "rigidity" of the Académie Royale and its teaching, always truer in theory than in practice. But it is generally very readable, immensely informative, and extremely well documented, all of which makes it a very significant addition to the literature on the topic. It is also, not least, visually seductive, being beautifully illustrated with color plates of all the works discussed and fascinating details of many. A minor quibble is that these illustrations are not always well keyed to the texts, and lack a good system of cross-referencing when they are not, as seen notably in the difficulty of locating those evoked in Stein's closing (and quite lovely) paragraphs.

W. McAllister Johnson's study, *Versified Prints: A Literary and Cultural Phenomenon in Eighteenth-Century France*, is in many ways a complement to the work of Stein and her collaborators. By a long-established scholar in the field, it concerns prints that fall primarily toward the "professional" end of the spectrum, and a "phenomenon" that is of fundamental interest to art historians, literary historians, and all those interested in word/image debates. The book is very short and originally based, the author notes, on lectures delivered some time earlier (p. x). The reader is prepared to encounter an informal presentation of a well-delimited topic with, perhaps, a somewhat speculative character to its conclusions. A warning note sounds in the French epigraph to the preface, nowhere translated, and even more in the beginning of the first chapter, disarmingly titled "The Phenomenon Defined." It is not, at least if the phenomenon is that named in the book's title, which seems defined only in the book jacket copy: "images that are accompanied by poetic explanatory text." Instead Johnson seems to assume a deep familiarity with versified prints, and plunges into a rather unsystematic consideration of the methodological issues involved in their study, as well as comments about their critical and historiographical status.

As a result, the distinction between this as the next chapter, "Methodological Issues," is blurry, especially insofar as the actual language describing what has and has not been done, by whom, and how, is often ambiguous. Study of these prints, he begins, is "not dependent on archives," but on the prints themselves. His study was apparently (although it is not specified here) carried out mainly in the magisterial Département des Estampes et de la Photographie of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. From this study, one gathers, "present finds represent roughly one-tenth of a sampling of 11,000 prints" or, alternatively, "an unscientific sample of some 1,250 versified prints" (p. 12), leaving the reader uncertain about how this sample was determined, and with what end in mind. What seem to be conclusions drawn from it emerge both here and throughout the following three chapters, rather than waiting for the one entitled "Conclusion," as in his early broad assessment that "the later Ancien Régime knew but three means of implying content in prints: (1) a title alone, (2) title and verse, and (3) verse alone" (p. 9)—a statement that would surely be disputed by the authors in Stein's catalogue. The heart of the book seems to be the chapter entitled "Case Studies of Text versus Image." Here Johnson presents what the book jacket copy terms a "typology" of versified prints, although Johnson does not use the term in this context. They are "twenty classes" of "the most highly characterized types of text-image relationships to be found" (p. 55). The word "characterized," however, seems insufficient to explain Johnson's criteria for defining these classes, several of which cite only one case in point. At the end of the chapter Johnson notes that more may yet be defined, potentially leaving them as "a repertory of instances mainly of use as enhancement for differential studies" (p. 55).

"Anecdotes are necessary and unavoidable in the writing of print history," Johnson remarks at one point. "So is narrative" (p. 18). This review has not yet acknowledged the quantity and quality of anecdotes concerning individual prints united in this book, only the difficulty of perceiving the scholarly narrative linking them. It is clear that a great deal of research, representing many years of work, lies behind this publication. Yet Johnson's book will probably prove, as he seems sometimes to suggest, most useful as an interim compendium: of those anecdotes, of over a hundred sharp albeit black-and-white illustrations of prints, and of the verses that accompany them. (There are as well two useful appendices compiling their writers' names, and, to the degree possible, identities). The illustrations include well-known prints that have provoked occasional study of their versification—after Watteau and Chardin, mainly—but also many obscure images, some anonymous, that have rarely if ever been reproduced. Where most cataloguers, as Johnson notes, have only indicated or abbreviated their verses, Johnson generally transcribes them in their entirety, albeit without English translations. Thus, although he does not often analyze their literary form, content, or interaction with the images in much detail, he provides the suitably equipped reader with the means to do so. He or she may want to accompany this knotty text with a succinct article by Anne Sanciaud-Azanza, cited in Johnson's bibliography, that draws on Johnson's own earlier work while introducing the nature and enduring interest of eighteenth-century print "letters," including verses, in a clearer fashion.[4]

NOTES

[1] On the occasion of his donating his collection to The Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, in 2002; Holland Cotter, "Critic's Notebook; An Audacious Thinker With a Passion for Prints." *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2002; <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/10/arts/critic-s-notebook-an-audacious-thinker-with-a-passion-for-prints.html?src=pm&pagewanted=1> (April 30, 2014).

[2] Linda C. Hulst, *The Print in the Western World: An Introductory History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 347. As Stein notes (p. vii), Victor I. Carlson and John W. Ittmann, eds., *Regency to Empire: French Printmaking, 1715-1814*, exh. cat. (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art; Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1984) remains a fundamental overview, anticipating many aspects of this exhibition; many more recent and specialized studies are grouped in her note 7, p. 200.

[3] University of Chicago, *The ARTFL Project: Dictionnaires d'autrefois*, <http://portail.atilf.fr/cgi-bin/dico1look.pl?strippedhw=amateur&dicoid=ACAD1694&headword=&dicoid=ACAD1694> (April 30, 2014). An earlier, closely related publication by Guichard is much clearer on this point, raising the possibility the translation of her essay may have been an issue: "Taste Communities: The Rise of the *Amateur* in Eighteenth-Century Paris," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45 (2012): 519-47.

[4] "Le Texte au service de l'image dans l'estampe volante du XVIIIe siècle," *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes* 158 (2000) 129-50.

Candace Clements
University of Houston
cclements4@uh.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172