

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

## Washington

### COLOR PRINTS AND BOOKS

#### FROM THE WIDENER COLLECTION

The Widener French 18th century prints and illustrated books were given to the National Gallery of Art in 1942 with the Widener paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts. The prints, numbering between three and four hundred, include a large group of color prints. The most striking shown in the exhibition is the goddess FLORA, done in the crayon manner to give the effect of pastel. The artist, Louis Bonnet, working after a painting by François Boucher, used separate plates to print the different colors. Most of the other prints are aquatints. This process is a variation of etching, with which it is often combined. A grained plate is made with acid by laying a porous ground. This technique was intended to imitate the effect of water-color.

François Janinet, who did many of the prints in this exhibition, was probably the first artist to use the aquatint method in France. A born experimenter, he called himself a physicist rather than an artist, and quickly adapted the new process to the making of elaborate color prints. His process consisted of making a series of plates, starting with pure etching for the outlines. The marks which often show on the four sides of the margin indicate where the plates for the various colors were attached in succession to the surface of the print. For all his skill and virtuosity in making his color prints, Janinet, however, was primarily a reproductive artist, taking his subjects from works by other people like Boucher, Fragonard, Lavreince and others.

Philibert-Louis Debucourt, using the same technique for color prints, worked after his own designs and was a much more original artist. He liked genre scenes of different kinds and gives us some idea of life in Paris and in the country at the time of the French Revolution. His domestic subjects such as LE COMPLIMENT and LES BOUQUETS, based on his own family circle, have appealing charm. The country scenes, if slightly romanticized, have a genuine feeling about them. The famous PROMENADES are society-genre showing a particular side of Paris life at the time of the Revolution.

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The drawings are connected with publications of one kind or another. The most striking ones are the sketches OUR OU NON and LA PETITE LOGE by Moreau Le Jeune for the Monuments du Costume, third series, Nos. 31 and 33, signed and dated 1778 and 1777, respectively.

Other drawings are preparatory sketches for engraved illustrations of fine French editions of classics like Ovid's METAMORPHOSES, Lucretius' DE RERUM NATURA, and Boccaccio's DECAMERON. They are all by leading French artists of the period, including Boucher, Gravelot, Eisen, and Cochin. Unique is a manuscript copy of LA PARTIE DE CHASSE DE HENRI IV, made from a book by Collé, published in 1766. It contains six drawings by Gravelot for a quarto edition never published. The drawings were engraved by various artists and some of the prints are bound into the manuscript. Collé's first name is apparently unknown.

The Widener Collection contains a large group of 18th century books, many of which have their original bindings. A two-volume set of Fontaine's Fables is included in one of the cases. It is the Fermiers-Généraux edition, which is particularly highly prized, with a portrait of La Fontaine engraved after Rigaud and 144 engraved illustrations after various artists.

In the Widener furniture rooms adjoining the Graphic Arts Exhibition Gallery, more drawings from the Widener Collection may be seen, and in the bookcase there is a display of books with fine bindings.