

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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ITALIAN ETCHINGS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY THIS FALL

Washington, D.C., July 27, 1989 - An exhibition surveying the role of etching in Italy from 1520 to 1700 opens at the National Gallery of Art on September 24, 1989. Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque features etchings that are little known, even to specialists, by artists renowned for paintings and drawings such as Parmigianino, Federico Barocci, Annibale Carracci, Stefano della Bella, and Salvator Rosa. The exhibition, made possible at the National Gallery by Mellon Bank, appeared earlier this year at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and The Cleveland Museum of Art.

"The National Gallery is especially proud to open its fall exhibition program with this quiet gem of a show," said director J. Carter Brown. "It adds new dimension to our understanding of the work and creativity of many important artists, and I commend the scholarly effort that has made these insights possible."

(more)

Etching is arguably the most varied, versatile, and flexible of all the graphic arts. Unlike engraving, for example, etching does not require great technical expertise. The artist simply uses an etching needle to draw his design through an acid-resistant "ground" of wax or varnish covering a metal plate. The plate is then exposed to acid that "bites" the design into the metal. Before printing, the ground is removed from the plate, leaving a clean surface with the etched lines forming fine grooves to hold the ink, which is forced onto the paper as the plate passes through a press.

"The etching medium enabled Italian painters to draw freely and spontaneously on a copper plate, in order to create original works of art that could be shared by many," said Sue Welsh Reed, co-curator of the exhibition and associate curator in the department of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. "It seems extraordinary that paintings and drawings by the artists in the show have been published and exhibited many times, and yet their etchings have been virtually neglected," she added.

Italian Etchers explores the development of etching during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Italian artists produced more etchings than any other Europeans. Through 135 prints, nine books illustrated with etchings, and seven comparative drawings by 80 artists selected from public and private collections in the U. S. and Europe, the show charts the close parallels between the evolution of etching and major stylistic developments in Italian mannerist and baroque art, highlighting when and where innovations in technique occurred, and the differences among printmaking centers such as Venice, Bologna, and Rome.

The first major Italian painter to etch was Parmigianino, influential mannerist painter and prolific draftsman. He recognized immediately that the etching process permitted a free and sketchy handling of line, and he exploited those characteristics to create some of the most original etchings ever produced, setting the tone for Italian etching for the next two hundred years. Among the other important, original, and influential etchers featured in Italian Etchers are Guido Reni, Jusepe de Ribera, G. B. Castiglione, Pietro Testa, Palma Giovane, Claude Lorrain, Jacques Callot, and Luca Giordano. Although only one etching in the exhibition is attributed to Caravaggio, his distinct influence on printmaking is represented in the works of Orazio Borgianni, Giovanni Battista Mercati, and others.

The etchings selected for the show cover a wide range of subject matter. While religious images dominate, prints in Italian Etchers also treat mythology, history, portraiture, theatre, ceremonies, festivals, architecture, engineering, hunting, fantasy, legend, anatomy, ornament, and "how-to" books, reflecting the social, intellectual, political, and technological developments of the time.

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The exhibition, at the National Gallery of Art through November 26, 1989, was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and selected by Ms. Reed and Richard Wallace, professor of art history, Wellesley College. The catalogue, published by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was written by Ms. Reed and Mr. Wallace with contributions from David P. Becker, acting curator of prints and drawings, Harvard University Art Museums; David Acton, curator of prints and drawings, Worcester Art Museum; Elizabeth Lunning, associate paper conservator, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Annette Manick, intern in paper conservation, Museum of Fine Arts department of prints, drawings, and photographs. The exhibition and catalogue were made possible by Fabriano Paper Mill, Italy. Generous funding has also been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. The exhibition has been coordinated at the National Gallery by H. Diane Russell, curator of old master prints.



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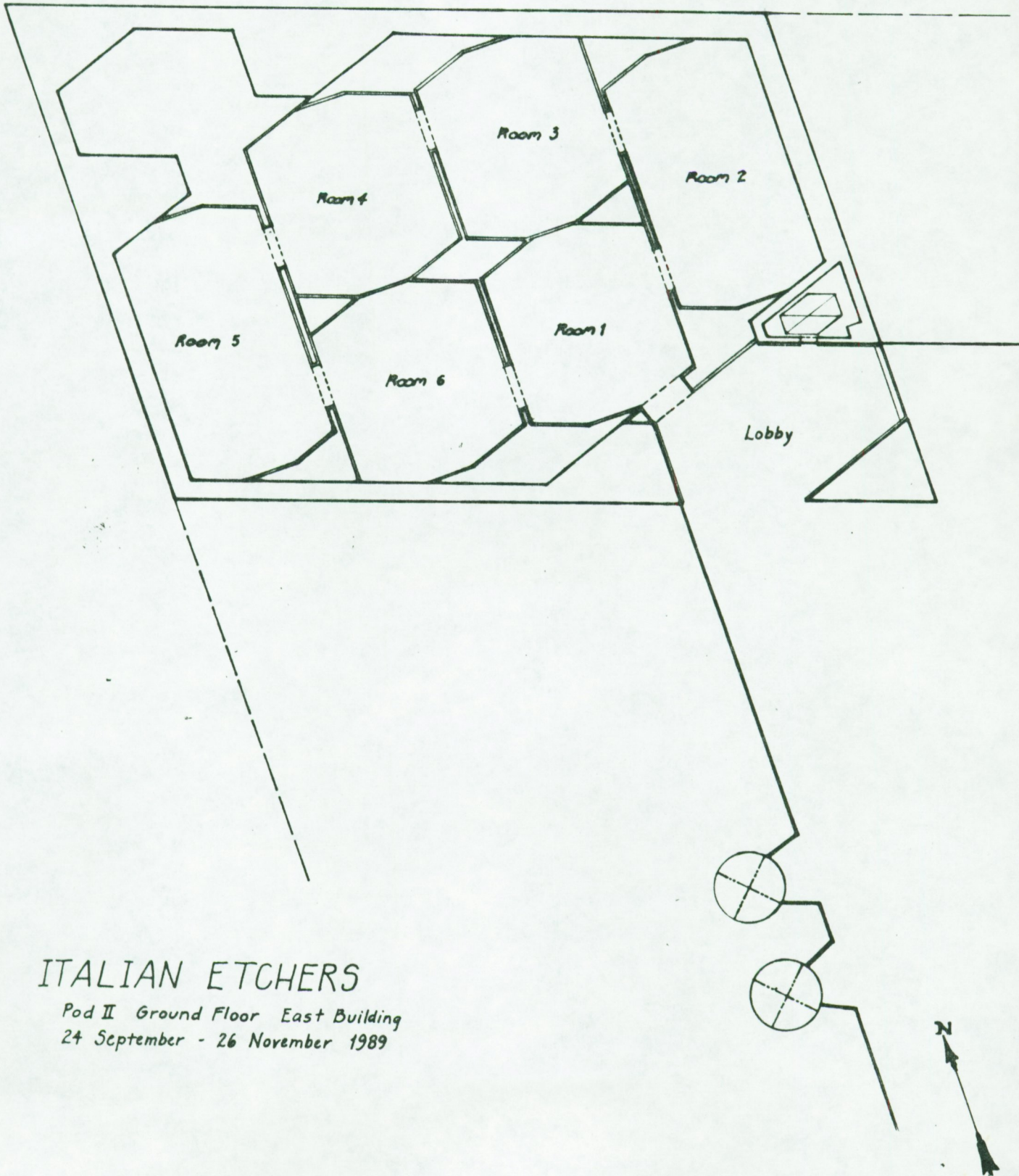
The Mellon name has been closely associated with the National Gallery of Art since Andrew W. Mellon made the Gallery a gift to the nation in 1941. Today, Mellon Bank Corporation--a descendant of the bank founded by the Mellon family--is pleased to continue this affiliation by sponsoring "Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque."

The prints in the exhibition, by some of the most noted European artists of the 16th and 17th centuries, are an important part of the history of the period. They provide insight and information about artists who often are better known for their paintings and drawings. Their accomplishments are an important source of cultural education and enjoyment.

Mellon Bank Corporation's commitment to the arts is an integral part of our business philosophy. As one of the largest banking organizations in the United States, we believe we have a responsibility to enrich the communities in which we do business. In addition to supporting cultural events and activities, we are involved in many economic and community development initiatives.

Through sponsorship of the "Italian Etchers" exhibition, we are honored to continue Mellon Bank Corporation's tradition of supporting our cultural heritage.

Frank V. Cahouet



ITALIAN ETCHERS
Pod II Ground Floor East Building
24 September - 26 November 1989

ART VIEW/Michael Kimmelman

Italian Etchers Sing a Siren Song In Boston

WE TEND TO DESCRIBE BOSTON the course of art history during the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe almost exclusively through paintings, sculpture and architecture, but it was hardly less through the humbler medium of the print that art was experienced at the time. When King Francis I commissioned an elaborate decorative program for the palace at Fontainebleau from the Bolognese painter Francesco Primaticcio, it was the influence of Parmigianino that could everywhere be felt in the result. Parmigianino completed few paintings but his version of the Mannerist style had already become familiar in France through the proliferation of his etchings and through prints by other artists based on his canvases. Something along the lines of what could be seen in those works on paper was what the King expected from Primaticcio.

Prints were the primary focus of attention for a number of artists, like Pietro Testa and Jacques Callot, who created in etchings and woodcuts and engravings what were among the most ambitious works from that era done in any medium. To look at Federico Barocci's print depicting the Annunciation of the Virgin should provoke no less awe and admiration than to see other masterworks completed at around the end of the 16th century.

Barocci's "Annunciation" has been included among the 150 prints from public and private collections in the United States and Europe that make up "Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque," a handsome and intelligent exhibition organized here at the Museum of Fine Arts. It remains on view in Boston until April 2, after which it travels to the Cleveland Museum of Art (April 25 through June 25) and to the National Gallery of Art in Washington (Sept. 24 through Nov. 26).

"Italian Etchers" describes a medium rich in objects of the very first order that have been unjustly neglected even by devoted students of Italian culture. Among all the different printmaking techniques available during the 16th and 17th centuries, etching allowed a kind of flexibility and spontaneity that could otherwise be found only in drawing. First used by artists around 1510, it involved a fairly simple process accessible not only to professional printmakers but also to painters, and as a result many of the most famous left their legacy partly in etchings. This includes Claude Lorraine and Annibale Carracci. Both of them have been appropriately represented

in the exhibition, which encompasses Italian-born artists and also artists from other countries who worked in Italy.

To make an etching an artist coats a metal plate with an acid-resistant layer, or ground, of either wax or varnish and then draws through the ground with an etching needle, much as one would with a pen or pencil. The plate is exposed to acid, which eats, or bites, into the metal only where lines have been drawn. In time, etchers learned to modulate a line's darkness and width by rebiting part of the work so that, by the end of the 16th century, prints increasingly took on something of the complexity of drawings and paintings. While only one etching has been (dubiously) attributed to Caravaggio — and is included in the exhibition — that painter's style of stark dark-light contrasts and his highly naturalistic way of representing figures in space could be mimicked in etchings by other artists of the early 17th century.

Claude Vignon's "Adoration of the Magi" (1619) makes a good example with its dramatic lighting effects. But what Vignon's print also illustrates is just how freewheeling an etcher could be in approach. Vigorous and slashing lines crisscross the work, as if, like a sketch, it had been completed in a single burst of creative energy.

Because of the medium's adaptability, etchings could serve various purposes, grandiloquent in the case of Jusepe de Ribera's excited version of "St. Jerome Hearing the Trumpet of the Last Judgment" (1621), more modest in other printmakers' hands. There were casual portraits that Ottavio Leoni made of Roman artists and friends; painstaking renditions of Roman ruins by Etienne Dupérac that reflected a blossoming fascination with archeology during the 1500's, and book illustrations by Raffaello Schiaminossi, including a large and vertiginous depiction of a sheer cliff for a 17th-century travel guide that is exhibited here. To Niccolò Nelli a combination of farming tools, when carefully arranged, could wit-

tily simulate a portrait of a bearded figure in what was among the more popular prints of the mid-16th century.

"Italian Etchers" presents its subject in many different guises and during different phases in its evolution, beginning with the early 16th-century prints by Marcantonio Raimondi and Parmigianino that were among the first etchings ever made, through the works done in the 17th century in cities like Naples and Genoa and Florence, each of which fostered its own particular school. Whether proper weight has been given to artists like the prolific Schiaminossi or whether certain issues of attribution have been adequately resolved could be argued among Italian print scholars.

Accepting, as the curators do, the assignment of two different versions of an "Entombment" to Parmigianino, for instance, may prompt some debate from art historians who remain unconvinced that both are from the same artist's hand. Still, the accompanying catalogue by the show's organizers, Sue Welsh Reed and Richard Wallace, lays out most problems clearly and acknowledges doubt wherever doubt is due.

What should trouble no viewer of this exhibition is the sheer variety of splendid etchings presented, many of the works in the very best existing

impression of a given print. Few renditions of landscape approach in subtlety and calm assuredness Claude's etchings, including "The Brigands" (1633), "Seaport" (1641) and "The Herd at the Watering Place" (1635), the last with its wonderful trompe-l'oeil frame. For their eclectic and colorful descriptions of soldiers and maidens and other characters from the time, Salvator Rosa's "Figurines" are among the most charming prints of the 17th century.

More ambitious in scale and distinctly stranger in mood are Camillo Procaccini's "Transfiguration" (1587-1590), with its spectral depiction of Christ, and Ventura Salimbeni's "Baptism of Christ" (1589), with oddly flickering shadows that cause the twisted and elongated figures depicted virtually to dissolve in pools of shimmering light.

Jacques Callot's minutely detailed etchings — some based on court festivals and looking very much like stage sets and theatrical presentations — established a standard for technical sophistication among printmakers of the early 17th century that remains unmatched. Among his works, the less familiar but no less impressive of two versions of "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" (1617) has been put on view. There are other curios in the exhibition, like Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione's extraordinarily vibrant monotype of "God Creating Adam" (1654), derived in part from Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling.

It is, in the end, the particular virtue of "Italian Etchers" that the show at once serves to introduce an overlooked field to uninitiated viewers and to provide connoisseurs with a handful of unusual items. As it happens, Harvard University's Sackler Museum is concurrently presenting the exhaustive retrospective of Testa's work that was organized and first shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Thus among its other virtues the show at the Museum of Fine Arts establishes a context in which Testa's formidable skills as a draftsman and his idiosyncratic combination of passion and intellect can be appreciated. For anyone interested generally in the history of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque, or more particularly in the history of the Italian print, now is the time to visit Boston. □