

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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THE ART OF ORNAMENTAL PRINTS AND DECORATIVE OBJECTS

HIGHLIGHTED AT NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Ninety-two prints, drawings, illustrated books, and decorative objects from the National Gallery of Art's collections present the beauty, imagination, and delightful--sometimes outrageous--wit of graphic and decorative arts over five centuries. By bringing together works on paper and three-dimensional objects, Fanciful Flourishes: Ornament in European Graphic Art and Related Objects, 1300-1800 demonstrates the longterm close relationship between the graphic and decorative arts. The exhibition is on view from March 20 through August 21, 1994, in the National Gallery's East Building.

Among the works on paper are ingenious designs by eminent artists for functional objects as well as fantastic decorative works possibly produced for their own sake. Included are a preliminary sketch for a painted wall panel by Antoine Watteau, an illustration for an Egyptian-style fireplace by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, and an engraving for a coat of arms by Albrecht Dürer, along with whimsical alphabets, comical chinoiserie, and amusing theatrical costumes.

"Thanks to the generosity of many donors, we are fortunate to have a very rich resource of decorative prints and drawings,"

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said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery. "This is the first time we have singled out ornamental images to show the beauty and imaginative range of this overlooked art form."

Beginning with late Gothic illuminated manuscript miniatures, the exhibition proceeds through lavish seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works. These include a fanciful depiction of parade floats by Jacques Callot as well as prints of classical vases and highly embellished furnishings. A fountain with putti and a swan, depicted in an etching by Jean Lepautre, was made for the garden of Versailles by Jean-Baptiste Tubby I and is now installed in the West Garden Court of the National Gallery's West Building.

Ceramics, bronzes, armor, a candelabrum, commodes, and a writing table are among the objects displayed near related prints and drawings. Works on paper are organized by the style of ornament depicted or the kinds of objects the designs were intended to decorate.

Among the variety of designs are classical and architectural ornament; stylized calligraphy; rocaille, a representation of rock and shell work; and chinoiserie, interpretations of Chinese designs. There are also grotesques--bizarre details of masks, monsters, and other fanciful imagery. This widely practiced art form ultimately derived from the painted designs discovered on the walls and ceilings of the ancient Golden House of Nero in Rome in the late fifteenth century.

Patterns and designs were transmitted across continents and

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cultures and were often reinterpreted to reflect the spirit of the culture adopting them. Trade with the Middle East brought the intricate linear, interlacing geometric patterns known as arabesques into the ornamental vocabulary of European art. The arrangement of arabesques on Islamic book covers probably inspired a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci of six complex, interlacing knots. An engraving by his followers (c. 1490/1500) from that drawing appears in the show. Dürer later copied the engravings in woodcuts (probably 1506/1507), one of which is also on display.

Many of the first graphic artists trained as goldsmiths or ornamental metalworkers, and ornamental designs were prominent subjects of the earliest surviving prints. The art of engraving began as artisans made ink impressions on paper to record and check the accuracy of their designs. Artists and craftsmen began collecting ornamental prints and drawings for inspiration, to copy, or to show prospective clients. Bound volumes of ornamental images were widely circulated and helped to create an international vocabulary of decorative motifs.

The curator of Fanciful Flourishes is Virginia Tuttle Clayton, associate curator of old master prints at the National Gallery of Art, with the assistance of Alison Luchs, associate curator of early European sculpture. An illustrated brochure by Clayton accompanies the exhibition.

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