

# REVIVING AN ARTFORM

## *Etchings in Nineteenth Century France*

Nineteenth century printmakers in France initiated the most significant development of the graphic image. Political, economic, and social changes ushered in an expanding middleclass with aesthetic opinions that challenged the French Academy, a group of artists who established rules for art. In order to be accepted by museums and nobleman an artist's work had to be approved by the academy who favored polished historical, mythological or religious narratives.

Etchings during this era allowed the growing middleclass to purchase affordable artworks, which provided artists an alternative to the predictable style and subjects of most print projects. Masters such as Rembrandt and Goya were cited to legitimize the use of printmaking for artistic rather than commercial gain. The process of etching was regarded as direct connection to the artist's hand and embraced as a reaction against industry and mass production.

Anderson University's *Brady Collection* demonstrates key themes of this distinctive era from established academics to visionaries who redefined etching as an artistic media. The collection stands as a tribute to this vital period in the history of art establishing the course of the graphic arts well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Darkness and Dreams*

Industry's increased repression of country life sparked a reaction by French artists who turned toward subjects of the immaterial world. Influenced by old masters such as *Durer* and graphic works by *Goya*, nineteenth century artists explored dark aspects of humanity including evil, cruelty, and death. The velvety contrast of the etching process facilitated these shadowy subjects.

### *Death and Mourning*

Illness and deathbed illustrations were common subjects that endured well into the dominance of photography. Portraiture of this variety was a means of documenting, honoring and preserving the life of a lost loved one. The images these artists produced, had a powerful allure in a society that bore the constant threat of illness and bereavement. This custom in portraiture led to the genera of narrative deathbed illustrations.

## *Scenic Simplicity*

Social and economic changes pushed resources toward cities, changed occupations and transformed the landscape. Rustic lives of working-class figures, a favorite subject of the *Realists*, could be profoundly portrayed through textural lines drawn on lithographic stones or etching plates. Whether through the lens of the *Realist*, documenting rural life or through the influence of the *Romantics*, longingly returning to pastoral themes, 19<sup>th</sup> century artists were drawn to the fading rural subjects.

## *The Barbizon School*

The Barbizon School was comprised of artists from diverse styles who painted in the forested village of Barbizon, outside Paris. Artists including Corot, Rousseau, Charles Jacque, Millet, and Daubigny set out to elevate landscape painting from a mere backdrop for allegorical or classical narratives to an independent subject. While Barbizon paintings depicted peasants working in the landscape, a subject on the rise with contemporaries, the primary focus was landscape. The Barbizon movement worked on site (plein air) in the Forest of Fontainebleau, an approach which would distinctly influence the Impressionist movement.

## *Portrait as Prestige*

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, portraiture was one of the main sources of income for many artists.

Simultaneous movements of Romanticism and Neoclassicism, formed out of the political climate in Europe, gave way to Realism by the end of the century. The advent of photography in the 1830s, while initially helpful to artists, as seen in Braquemond's *Portrait of Theophile Gautier*, led to the decline of portraiture as a lucrative art by the close of World War I (1918). The portraits in this exhibit more than any other genera exhibit the diversity of stylistic approaches in France during this time of innovation.

## *PRINTING PROCESSES*

### *ENGRAVING*

In engraving the artist cuts lines into the surface of a metal plate then rubs stiff ink into the lines. All of the excess ink is wiped off the surface, and the plate is printed on paper under pressure.

### *ETCHING*

In etching the artist covers a metal plate with a tar- like substance called ground then lightly scratches his drawings into the tar. The plate is then placed into a bath of acid and the exposed lines are deepened into groves. The ground is removed, and the plate is printed the same way as an engraving. Since the artist does not need to use much pressure while drawing allowing a more expressive mark. This process could be repeated and printed many times creating versions or “states” of the print before producing a set amount of the final state and breaking the plate.

### *LITHOGRAPHY*

Lithography was invented in the middle of the nineteenth century and increased in popularity for being cheaper, quicker, and more direct than other methods. Based on the principle that grease and water do not mix, the artist draws directly on a flat piece of limestone with a greasy substance, and the stone is treated with weak acid to harden the grease and make the stone hold water. When the surface of the stone is sponged with water it is repelled by the drawing so that greasy ink rolled on the surface of the stone will stick only to the drawing and not to the wet areas. Paper is then placed on the stone and printed under high pressure.

## REMBRANDT VAN RIJN

1606–1669, Netherlands

### *Death of The Virgin*

etching, 1639

Throughout his career Rembrandt was as famous for his etchings as for his paintings. The prints were original works in their own right, not reproductions of paintings and were sold widely as moderately priced artworks. His handling of the etching needle produced a range of marks from formed to free flowing and gestural creating convincing luminosity. This etching depicts the religious scene of the Virgin, Mary dying with great expression and humanity. The scene appears as it might have been during Rembrandt's time in Holland surrounded by men, women and a physician.

### *Etching as Artform*

In the years following the death of Rembrandt the art of etching as a means of producing original, rather than dry reproduction prints have almost vanished. Etching, as opposed to engraving is an extremely free medium where the drawing requires little pressure to mark through the acid resistant wax coating on the metal plate. It is this freedom that is so compelling in Rembrandt's etchings yet generally lacking throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the revitalization of the media is represented in this exhibit.

## FELIX BRACQUEMOND

1833–1914, France

Felix Bracquemond was one of the greatest experimenters in the etching technique of his century. His interest in surface texture with etched rather than engraved lines produced works of unmatched delicacy and textural quality. His diverse styles led to exhibits both at the Academy of Fine Arts as well as at avant-garde venues of the Impressionists. In this way, he bridged the values and styles of the Barbizon School and the Impressionists. Bracquemond's expertise was well recognized during his life and he instructed great artists such as Millet, Rousseau, Manet and Degas. Beyond his artistic role, Bracquemond promoted etching as a writer and critic.

A substantial portion of the Brady Print Collection is by Bracquemond, ranging from illustrations of paintings (such as Ingres & Moreau in this exhibit), to refined portraiture, and loosely drawn original works of art.

## GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI

1720–1778, Italy

*View of the Colosseum*

engraving, 1776

Piranesi, a great draftsman, was one of the first great masters of intaglio print in Italy. He specialized in recording the appearance of over a hundred Roman ruins, preserving earlier states of architecture which have since deteriorated or been destroyed. His work reenergized the interest in Roman antiquities and greatly influenced the Neoclassical movement in France. The works in this exhibit build on great masters like Piranesi, returning to the depth of technical skill in the media of printmaking.

## CHARLES JACQUE

1813–1894, France

Charles Jacque established his career in Paris producing book illustrations and original etchings inspired by the Dutch masters. In 1849, fleeing a cholera epidemic, Jacque traveled with Millet to the French town of Barbizon where he focused not solely on landscape but specifically rural scenes, peasants, animals and rustic works. His work, many represented in this exhibit, influenced the resurgence of printmaking as a significant artistic pursuit, in a time dominated by painting.

*His etchings are very bold, and his subject matter is well conceived. All that Mr. Jacque does on copper is filled with a freedom and a frankness which reminds one of the Old Masters.*

~ Baudelaire