Preliminary sketches for Gravelot's Corneille

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ONE of the most fascinating, and, at the same time, least well known subjects of bibliophilic study are drawings for book illustration. From the eighteenth century on, a surprising number have been preserved, thanks to a growing body of intelligent collectors. But far less has been made of them than they deserve, in view of the light they throw on the way the artists worked, what was expected by authors or publishers, and the artist's own conceptions of the text in those cases where he was allowed to make a personal choice.

Students of 'master drawings' have tended to deprecate illustrations as inferior to designs drawn for their own sake or as preliminary studies for paintings. Students of book illustration, on the other hand, have not been quite ready to tackle the subtleties and imponderable elements which are sure to be encountered except where the finished illustration reproduces the drawing precisely. This is strange, since such niceties should attract the bibliographical mind that delights in textual variants. But somehow librarians have not been so attracted. Therefore, the collecting and comparison of illustrators' drawings remain a fertile field for exploration in which this country, particularly, is far behind European nations.

Perhaps the most important groups of drawings for illustration which survive in considerable numbers are those for the French 'de luxe' book of the eighteenth century. And of these a fair number have now been accumulated in the public institutions along the Atlantic seaboard: notably in the National Gallery of Art in Washington and, more recently, in the Harvard Library. One somewhat scattered group of these — Fragonard's drawings for Ariosto — was published for the National Gallery and the Harvard Library in 1945. Another, and smaller group in every way, is the subject of this article. It was deposited at Harvard, in the Department of Graphic Arts, only within the last few months. Although the illustrator, Hubert Gravelot, is, in some respects, not to be compared with Jean Honoré Fragonard, nevertheless, as a precursor of the greater artist, and as a master of very accomplished drawing on a

miniature scale, he has a more important place in the history of art than has yet been accorded him. Perhaps the illustrations to this article will explain the reason for this statement better than the writer's words. But more of the eighteen hundred or so preliminary sketches which Gravelot left on his death in 1773 in a large portfolio [1] should be seen to judge of the quality, as well as fecundity, of Gravelot's talent. Miss Alice Newlin of the Metropolitan Museum in New York has published an article mainly about the drawings made by Gravelot during his early (English) period,[2] and very recently Edwin Wolf, 2nd, has written interestingly of 'Gravelot as Designer of Engraved Portrait Frames.' [3] These next pages will be devoted to the preliminary drawings for one of Gravelot's French series: *Le théatre de Pierre Corneille*, first published at Geneva in 1764.

Gravelot's life, which is not, on the whole, exceptional, has been related many times.[4] Perhaps its most surprising feature was his twelve years of activity in England (1733–45), where he established his reputation, trained the first eighteenth-century English illustrators of note, and was an early master of Gainsborough.[5] But once back in France, he married, and settled down to the typical artist's life of the period. This consisted in much hard work, and only a very modest subsistence, despite the luxury of those whose activities he depicted, and who gave him their patronage.

Probably his illustrations for the first edition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), even more than for Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1757), established his reputation in France. For although the *Decameron* was a real success, it was not, in this highly sophisticated period, fashionably controversial, as was Rousseau's novel. Moreover, Gravelot had succeeded in following the exact specifications which Rousseau set down for each scene, in giving life to his drawings, and in pleasing that intractable author.[6] Finally, through *La nouvelle*

[1] Baron Roger Portalis, *Les dessinateurs d'illustrations au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1877), pp. 293–294.

[2] 'The Celebrated Mr. Gravelot,' *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, n.s., V (1946), 61–66.

[3] *Print Collector's Quarterly*, XXX (1950), 41–47.

[4] Notably by Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, and Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *L'art du dix-huitième siècle*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1874), II, 7–47.

[5] Louis Réau, *La gravure en France au XVIII^e siècle: La gravure d'illustration* (Paris, 1928), pp. 17–18.

[6] Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, pp. 277–278.

Héloïse, whose illustrations had been paid for by a Genevan banker named Coindet, Gravelot grew to know the art publishers of that city, the brothers Cramer. Through them, again, he came to the attention of Voltaire, then living in exile near by.

At last came a really interesting episode in our artist's life: his relations with the Sage of Ferney. Letters between the two exist, and between each of them and the publishers Cramer. It appears, after evidence on both sides has been read, that Voltaire was really pleased with samples of Gravelot's work — and left to his decision, not only what scene of each play to illustrate, but the engravers whom he would employ, for a memorial edition of Pierre Corneille's *Oeuvres*, to be published by the Cramers.[7] This was in marked contrast to Rousseau, and a great tribute from the mightiest literary figure then living in Europe.

One must go back for a moment to relate the cause of Voltaire's special interest in a brother dramatist so long since dead. Voltaire had all the attributes of the modern showman. His whole life is evidence of the desire, and ability, to startle kings as well as people out of their complacency. He knew how to bring the people to his side — the people whose revenge Voltaire predicted, though he did not live to see the revolution of 1789.

About 1760, Voltaire heard that a collateral descendant of the seventeenth-century classic playwright was living in great poverty, and that a benefit performance of *Rodogune* had created a very general interest in France, among the literati, for this man, his wife, and daughter. Immediately, Voltaire sensed the dramatic possibilities of taking Mlle Corneille under his wing at Ferney, where Mme Denis was entrusted with the completion of her education. He also loudly voiced his duty, 'as an old soldier of the great Corneille,' to be useful to the grandniece of his general. And what better 'dot' when she came to be married could he offer her than the proceeds from an edition of Corneille with commentary by himself? So for the sake of the publicity no less than the pathos of the situation he set himself at once to work, with the tremendous drive which was so characteristic of him. Subscriptions poured in. The King of France and the Empress of Russia each subscribed for a hundred copies, Madame de Pompadour for fifty, the Fermiers-Généraux for sixty, a wealthy individual for twenty-four, and even the artist-dilettante, Watelet, for five.[8]

[7] Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, p. 280.
[8] Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, pp. 282 and 648.

But the production side of the project did not go as rapidly as Voltaire wished. No doubt, he was impatient, for he was nearly seventy years old, and had not yet readied the 'complete' edition of his own works which the same publishers were to issue from 1768 to 1774. So he wrote petulantly of Gravelot's tardiness in fulfilling his part of the Corneille venture — an illustration for each one of the thirty-four plays. He implored the Cramers to see that Gravelot completed his drawings in the year 1762,[9] and from this letter, as well as from a few other indications that our artist refused to be hurried, even by Voltaire, we have the erroneous statement of the de Goncourts, that Gravelot was 'paresseux et avare de son talent.' [10] Although the memorial edition of Corneille in twelve octavo volumes did not appear till 1764, there may well have been other delays, such as a frontispiece by Watelet. And finally Voltaire was not so irritated but that he gladly used Gravelot again for the 'complete' edition of his own works four years later.

The matter of this frontispiece by Watelet is a confusing point not clearly explained by an existing bibliography. Edwin Wolf, on the authority of Portalis and Béraldi, writes [11] of a frontispiece portrait with a frame by Gravelot for which there are four (see Plate VIIb)[12] preliminary sketches among the sixty-one drawings in the series at Harvard. Vera Salomons [13] and Cohen-De Ricci,[14] on the other hand, suggest that the engraving by Watelet, after Pierre, which appears in the copies at Harvard of the 1764, 1766, and 1774 editions of Corneille, is the *only* one for the work in question. Without a comparison of many copies of the 1764 edition, it would be difficult to establish the facts. Edwin Wolf, in a letter to the writer, agrees that copies may probably be found with either one portrait or the other, although which is the right one, or the earlier one, is still open to conjecture. Perhaps Grave-

[9] Vera Salomons, *Gravelot* (London, 1911), p. 27.

[10] *L'art*, II, 18.

[11] *Print Collector's Quarterly*, XXX, 46 (and fig. 8), referring to Baron Roger Portalis and Henri Béraldi, *Les graveurs du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1880–82), II, 265.

[12] The drawings illustrated in the accompanying plates are all roughly 6 by 3½ inches except Plates IIIa (6 by 4 3/16 inches), VIa (7⅜ by 6⅛ inches), VIIIa (5⅛ by 3 inches), and VIIIb (7¼ by 5 3/16 inches).

[13] *Gravelot*, p. 47.

[14] Henry Cohen, *Guide de l'amateur de livres a gravures du XVIII^e siècle*, 6th ed., rev. by Seymour De Ricci (Paris, 1912), col. 255. Emile Picot in his *Bibliographie Cornélienne* (Paris, 1876), p. 307, cites a frontispiece drawn by 'Plater' (i.e., Pierre?) and engraved by Watelet.

lot's version with a portrait of Corneille, engraved by Gaucher, after LeBrun, was the original one, which was superseded, on Voltaire's or the Cramers' orders, out of deference to Watelet, who had not only presented his engraving to the publication, but had subscribed to the generous total of five copies.

When the 1764 edition of Corneille was finally sold, it realized two hundred thousand livres, which handsome sum was divided between the generous publishers and the young lady whom Voltaire so well befriended. The plates and text were reissued at Geneva in 1765, at Paris in 1766, and again at Geneva in 1774. This last edition is eight volumes quarto, and has a new frame by Gravelot around each engraving. But not a trace of these later (1774) frames is to be found in any of the drawings at Harvard under discussion. This fact suggests, as does everything else about the Harvard sketches, that they are really the preliminary ideas of the artist for his portrait frame and for the thirty-four scenes from the plays, drawn from 1762 to 1764, while Voltaire impatiently waited.

We are now led to consider why Gravelot was so long in preparing the finished drawings which five engravers, chosen by him, then translated to copper plates. Voltaire wrote to Cramer in 1762 that, in three months, Gravelot had only finished two drawings. Gravelot himself claimed to have done seven. But Voltaire, who had written twenty 'commentaries' in the same period, was sure he would be dead before this work, which he was so anxious to see finished, saw the light of day.[15] The answer probably lies in Gravelot's refusal to be rushed, and in a desire, still to be observed in the present day, of the artist to keep every one of his many clamoring clients *partially* satisfied! A look at the long list of Gravelot's work compiled by Richard Oehler [16] shows him to have been very active during this period for book illustration alone, without taking into consideration the many commissions of clavichord cases, tapestries, snuffbox covers, bookplates, watch cases, fashion plates, binding tools, and ornaments [17] with which a popular French artist of this period was constantly beset.

Moreover, another reason for Gravelot's measured pace can be found in a study of the Corneille sketches themselves, which show the greatest attention to detail, and a constant revision, despite the rapid manner

[15] Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, p. 283.
[16] 'Gravelots Werk als Bücherillustrator,' *Gutenberg Jahrbuch 1927*, pp. 108–115.
[17] De Goncourts, *L'art*, II, 45.

in which part of their drawing is done. Here is the crux of the matter: how fast could Gravelot work, and how many preliminary sketches did he make before he finally undertook a definitive pen drawing, complete with all its bistre tonal washes? That such a drawing was the final outcome for each of the thirty-four scenes in the plays we know from Cohen-De Ricci,[18] and other, more contemporary, records, including the sale catalogue after Gravelot's death.[19] Gravelot was over sixty years old, and in less than ten years his eyesight failed him — it is said from overstraining on fine work. The eighteen hundred 'esquisses, premières pensées, and études' which Emmanuel Bocher acquired from the Marquis de Fourquevaux are mute testimonials to a very conscientious workman. Our sixty-one sketches were according to Cohen-De Ricci once a part of one hundred and thirty-eight in the Marquis' hands. And the number Gravelot actually made for the thirty-four scenes, and the portrait frame, is likely to have been considerably greater than that, if one is to judge by the gradual progressions among the drawings here at hand. A good example is the series of four drawings for the play *Médée*. The changes are not at all rapid between the first free idea (Plate IIa) and the last far-from-finished sketch (Plate IIIb), which still lacks many details to be found in the final engraving. If this series is typical, then six or seven drawings may have been an average for each subject.

Gravelot certainly was painstaking, but he was by no means pedestrian, nor did he work by a formula. Large drawings by Gravelot exist. There are several belonging to a different series [20] at Harvard, and many more in the Cabinet d'Estampes of the Bibliothèque Nationale, and in the British Museum,[21] on different kinds and colors of paper, and in different mediums. Yet the smaller sketches with which we are dealing, and others from the same portfolio, have one or two features in common. They are all on a very thin fine quality paper which would permit the outline of one drawing to be traced from another. Also, it is clear that after the earliest stages they are usually the exact size of the finished engravings. Finally, they are almost always, as one would expect, in reverse, suggesting that the engravers themselves may have

[18] *Guide*, col. 255.
[19] De Goncourts, *L'art*, II, 25 n.
[20] *Abrégé de l'histoire romaine*, published at Paris 1789.
[21] De Goncourts, *L'art*, II, 36-47.

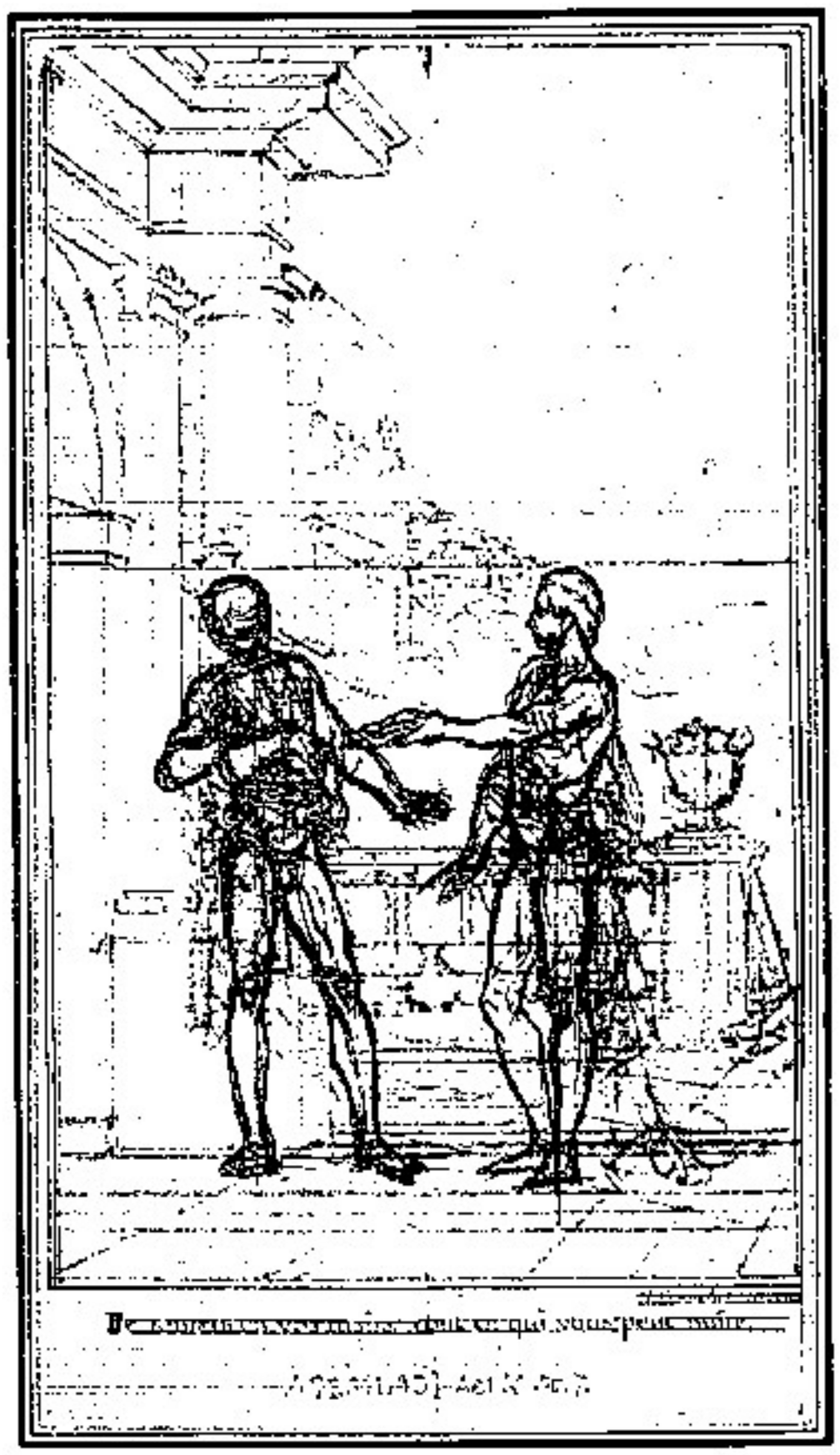

PLATE Ia

PLATE Ib

PLATE IIa

PLATE IIb

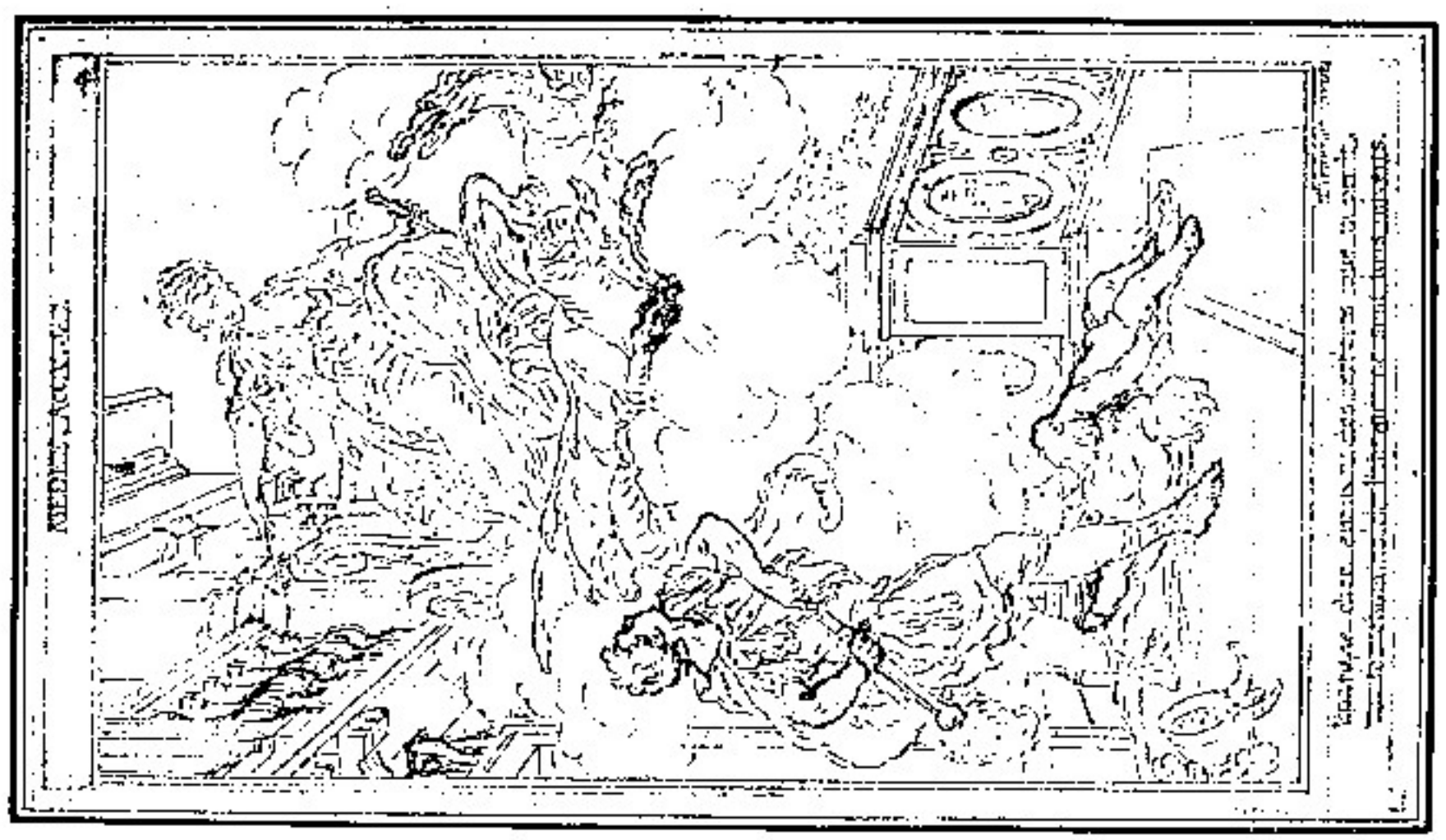

PLATE IIIb

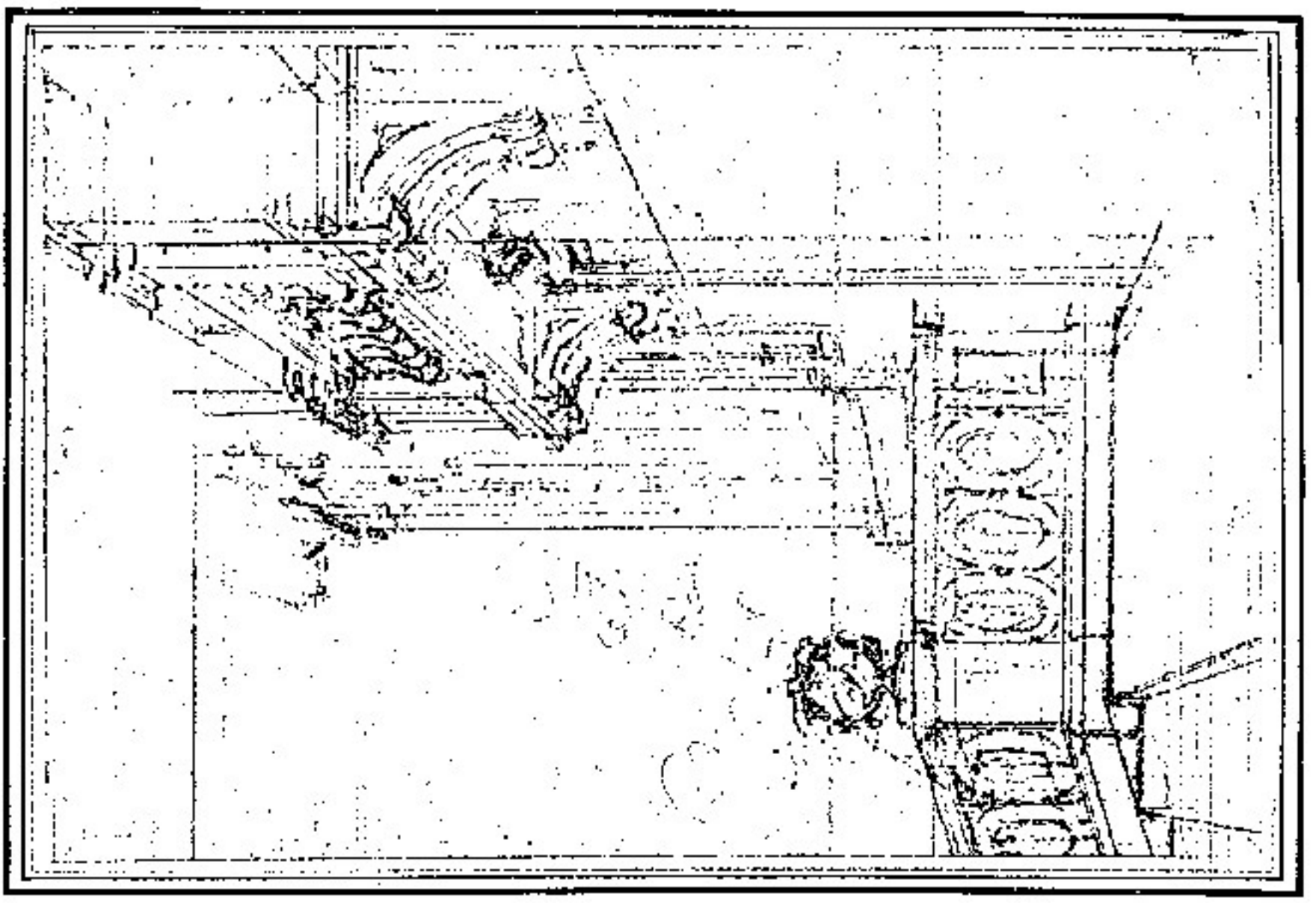

PLATE IIIa

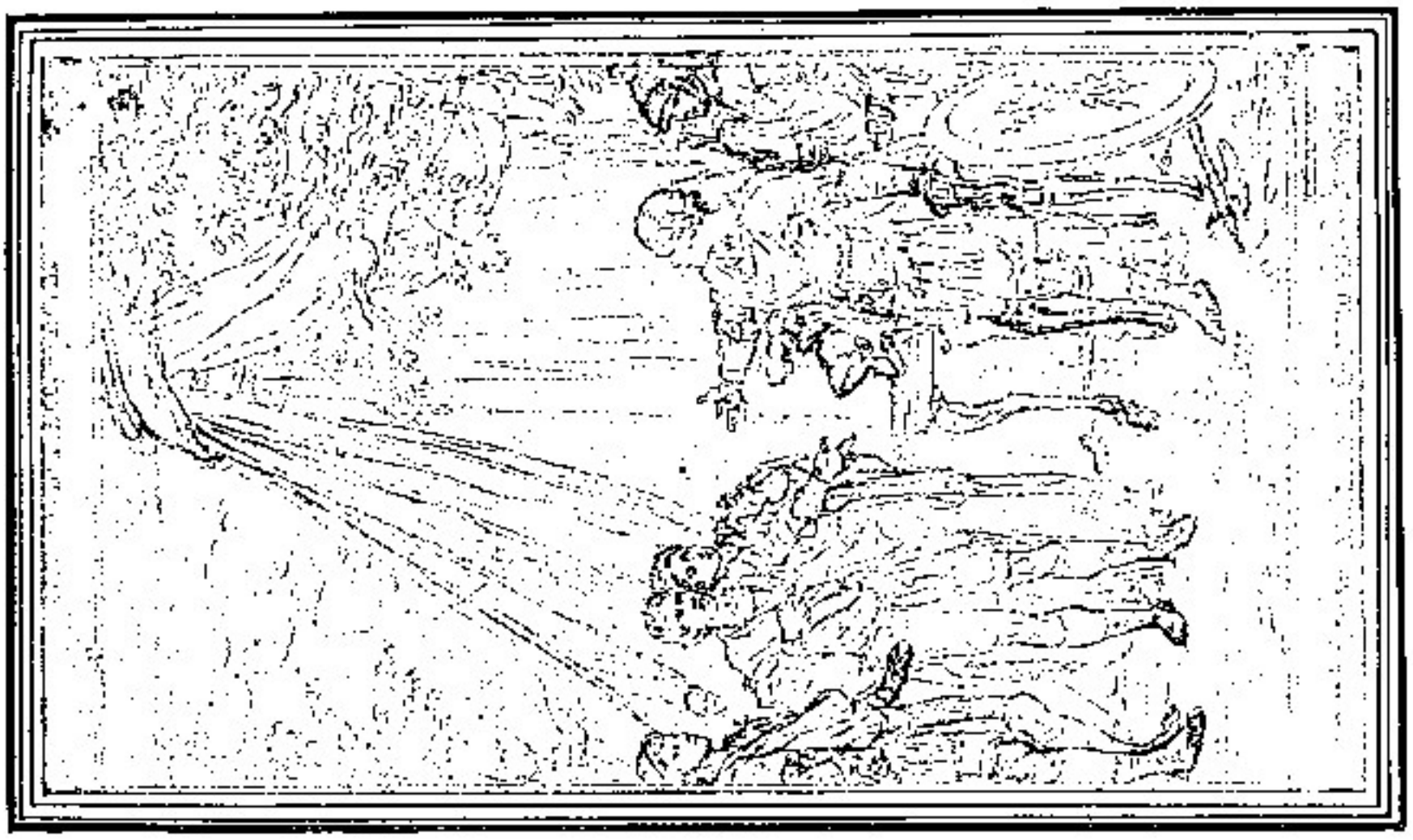

PLATE IVb

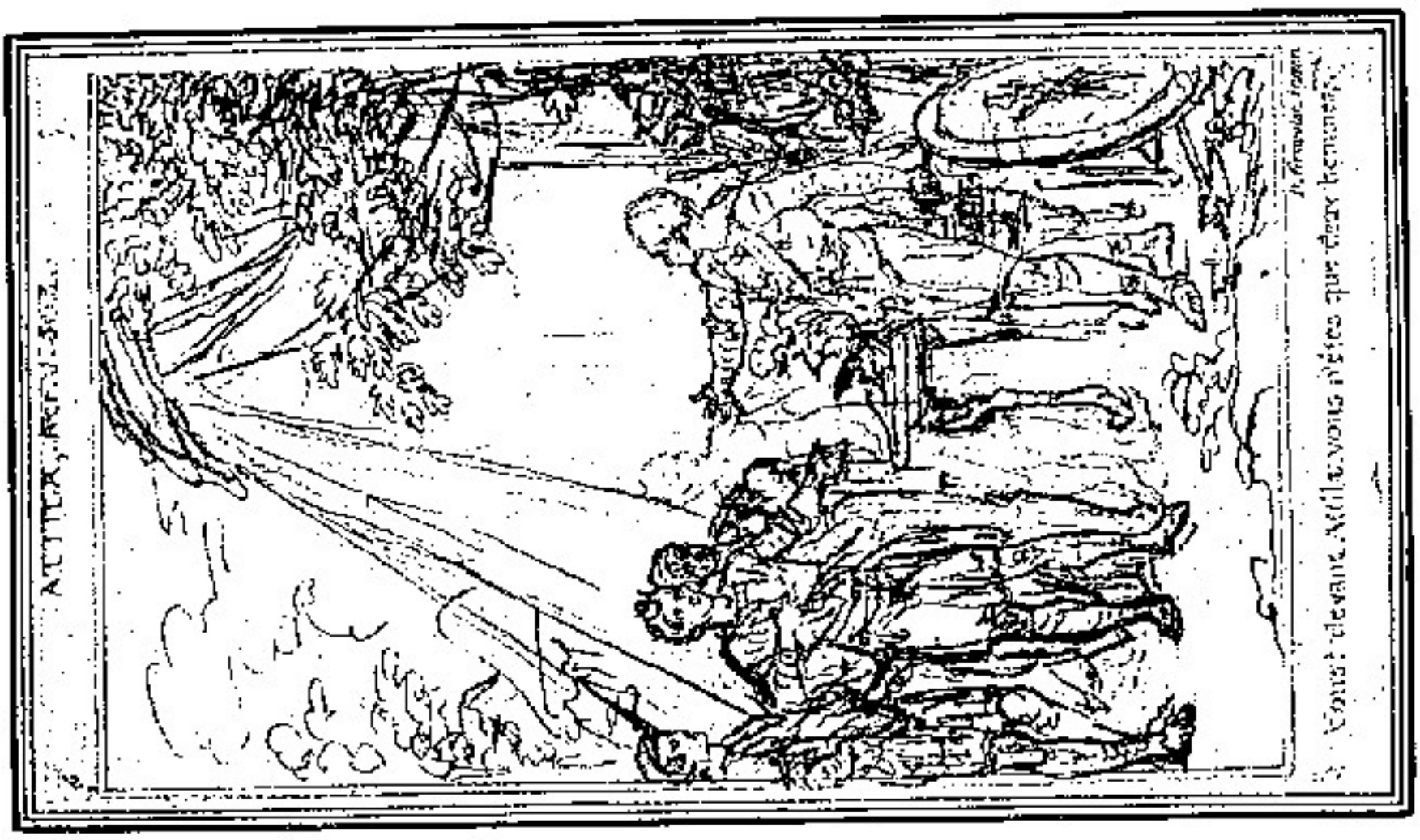

PLATE IVa

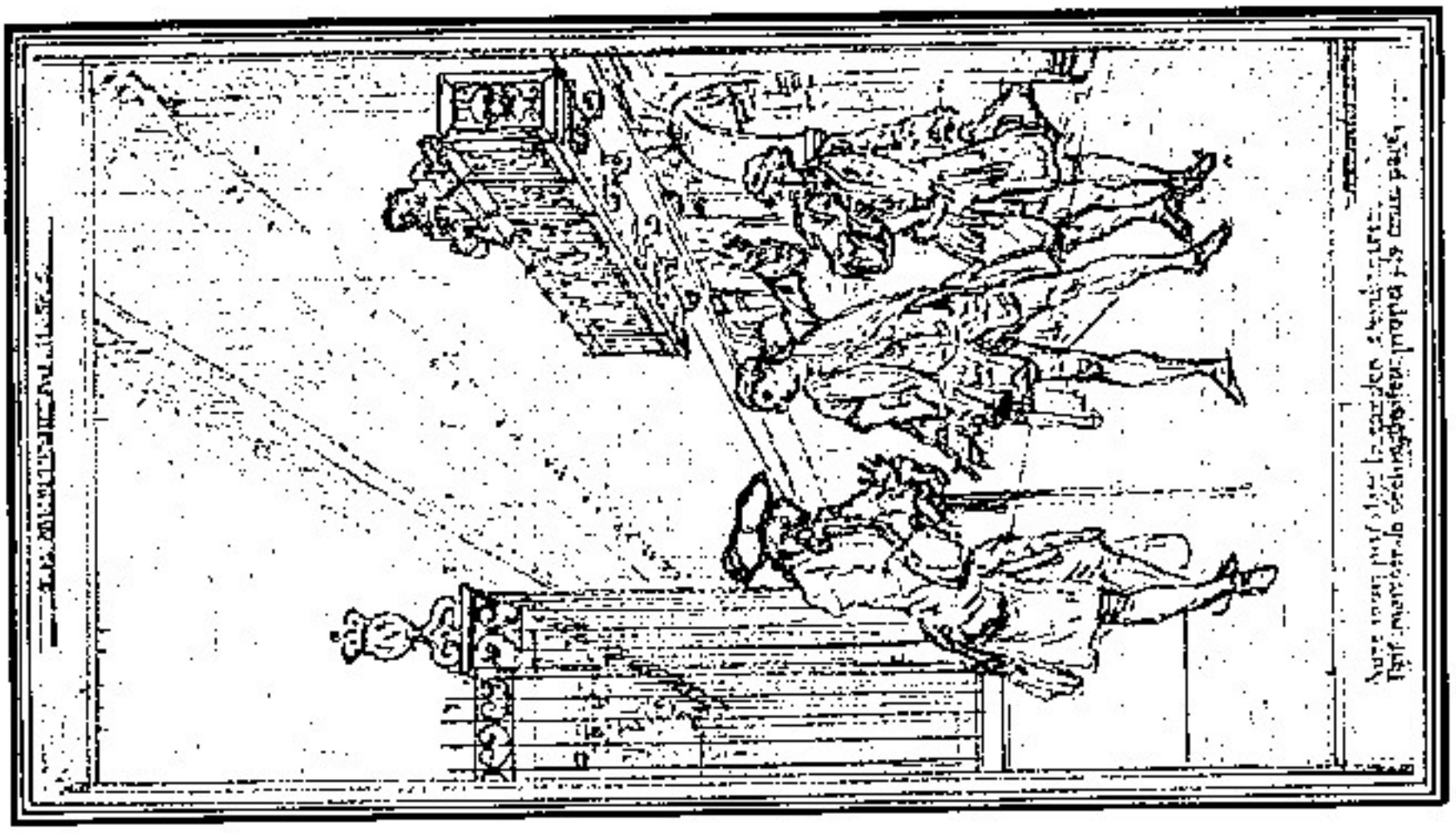

PLATE Vb

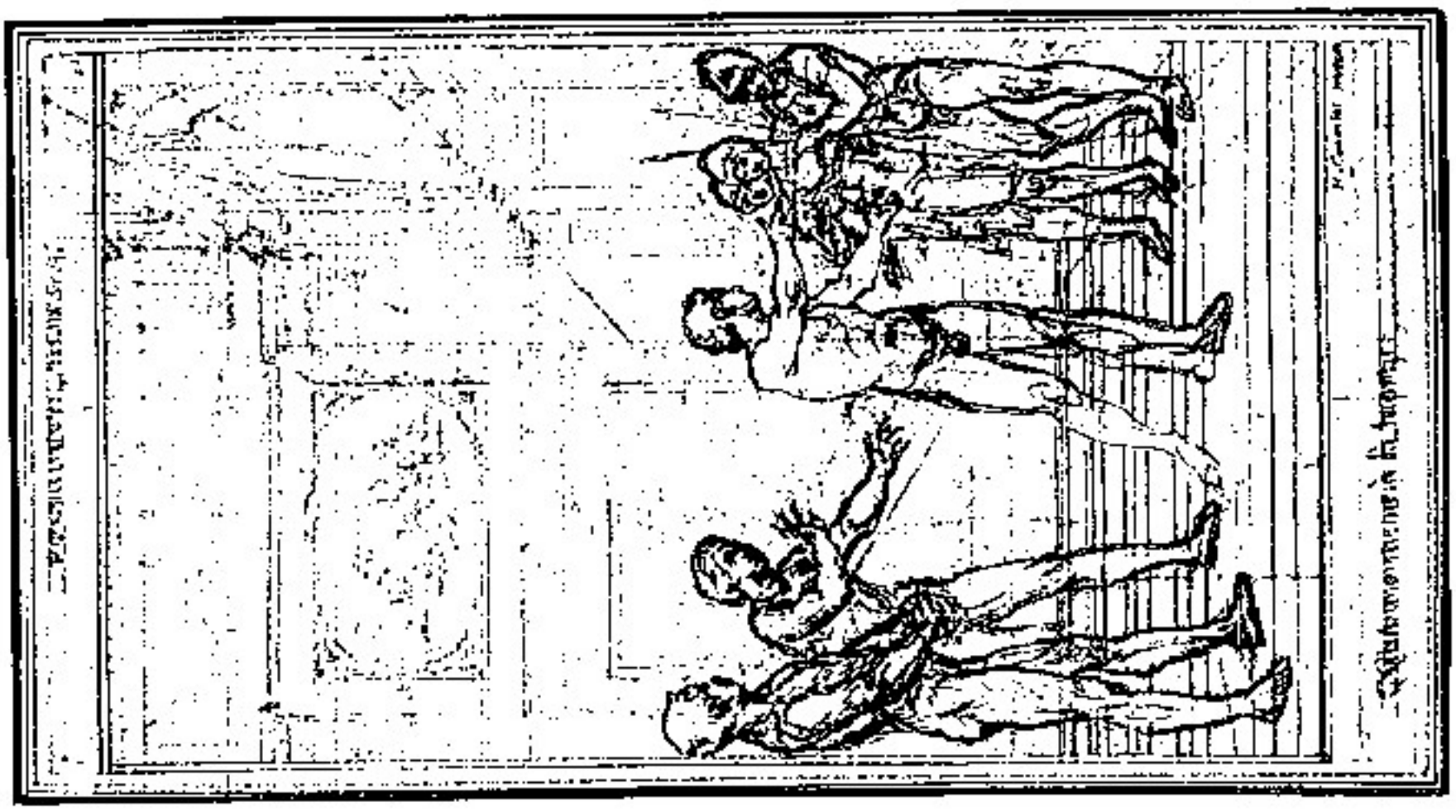

PLATE Va

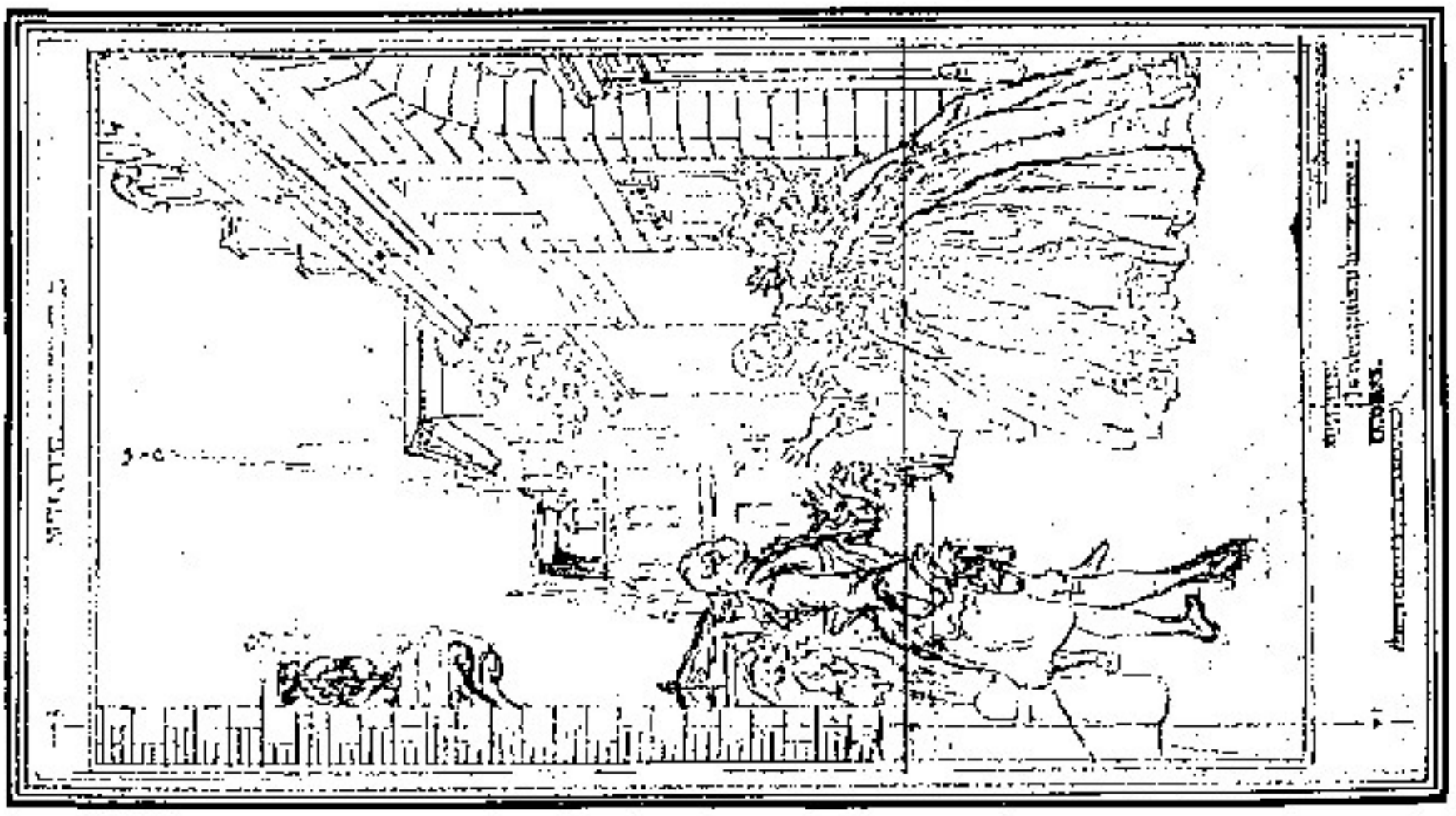

PLATE VIb

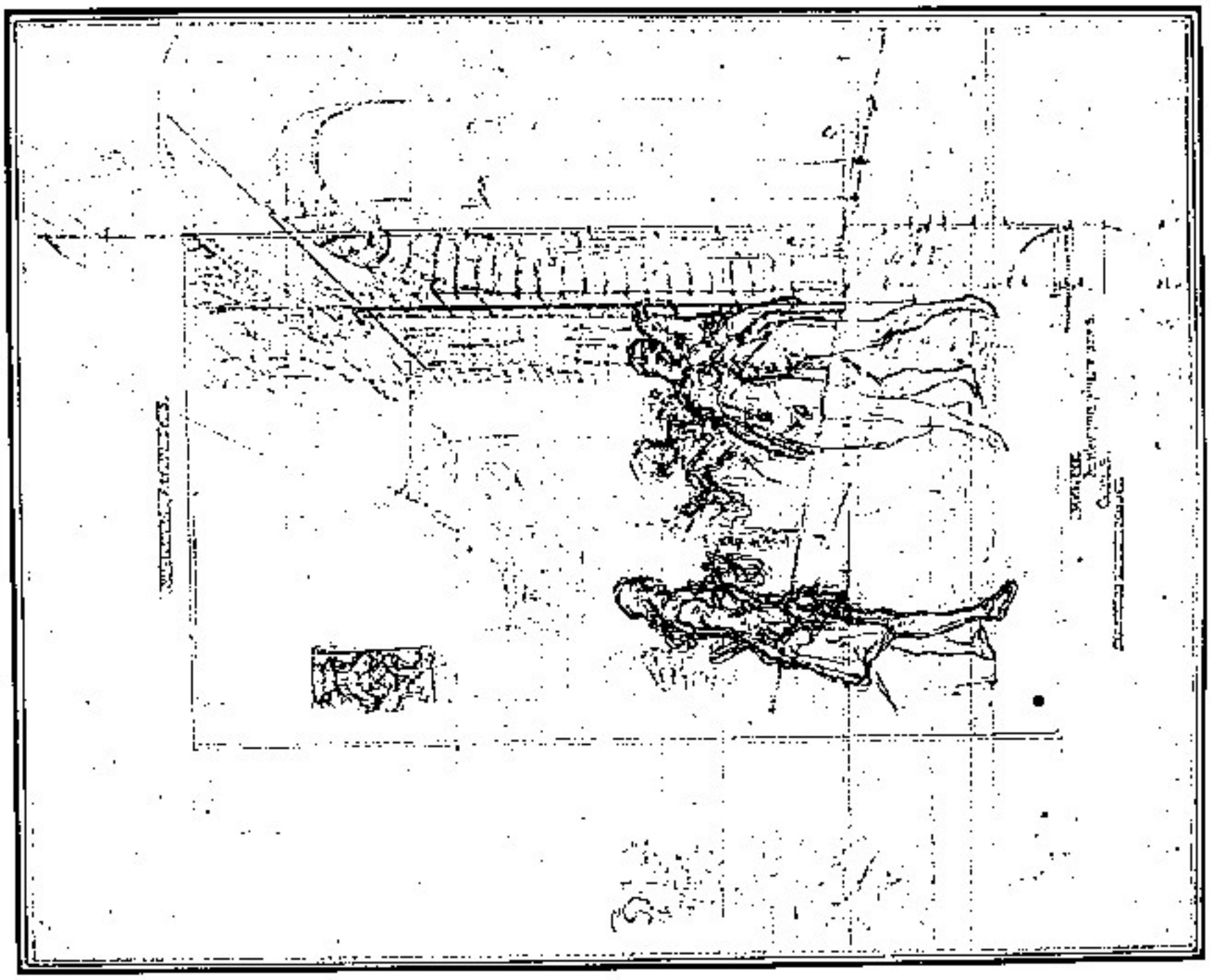

PLATE VIa

PLATE VIIa

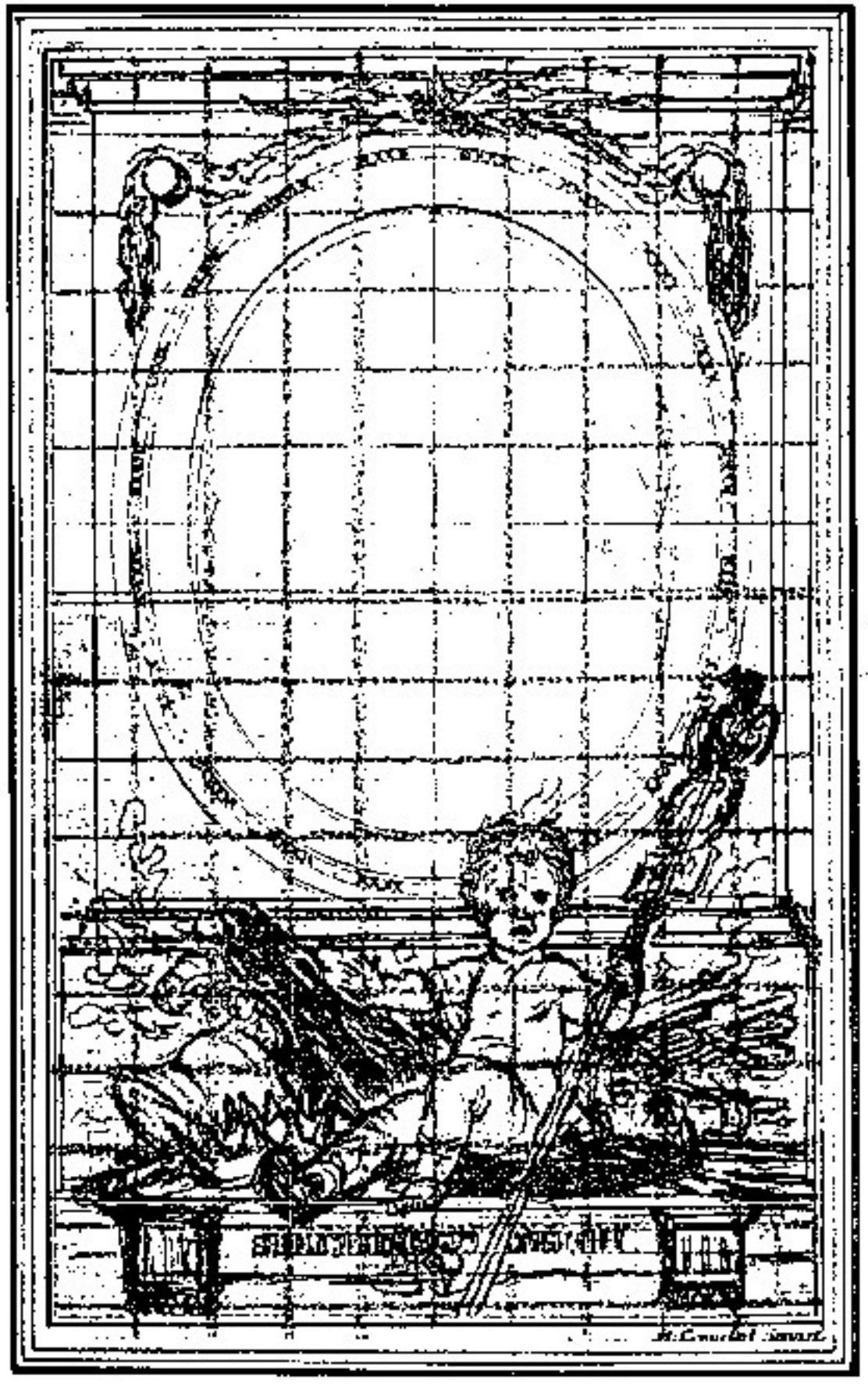

PLATE VIIb

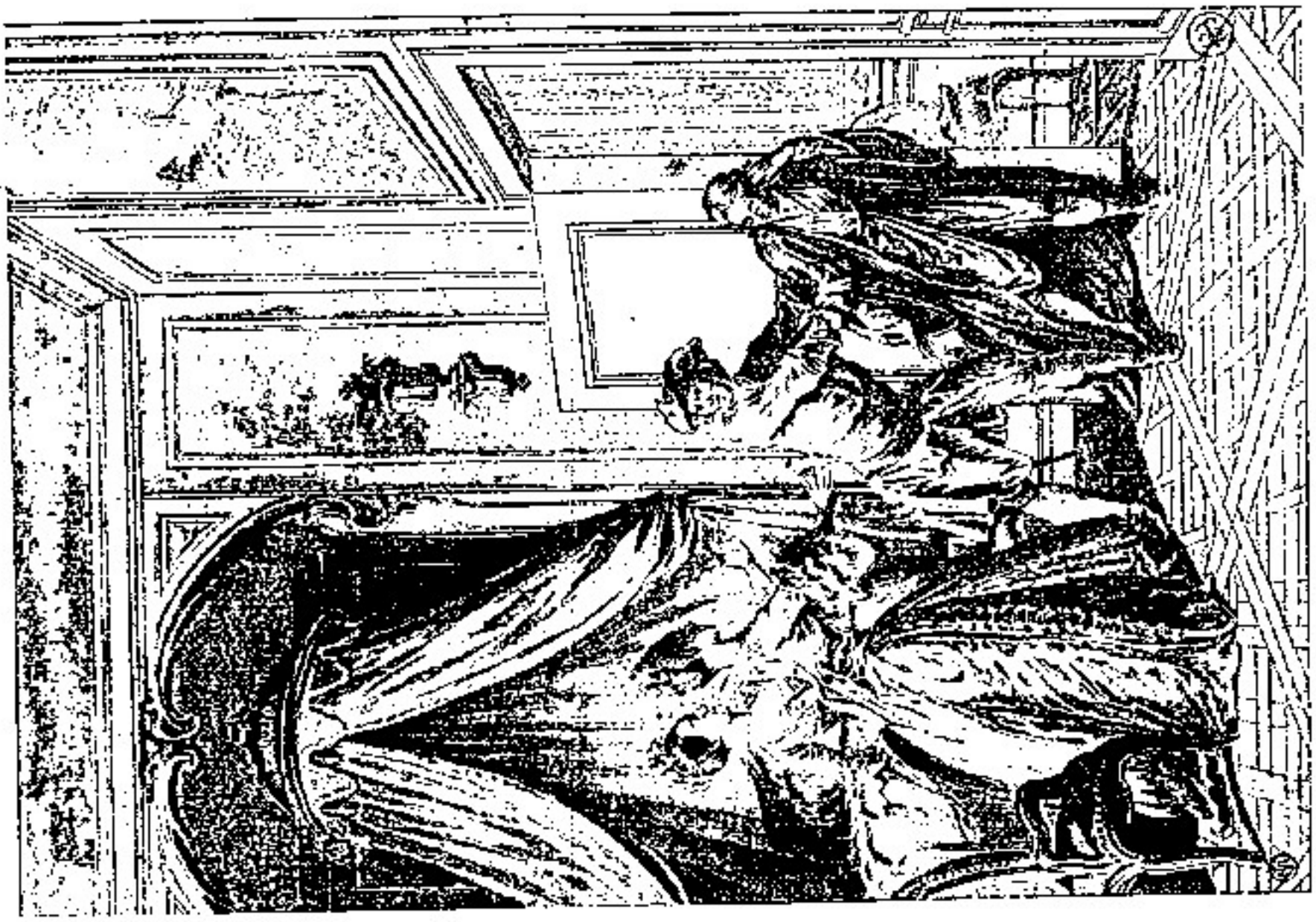

PLATE VIIIb

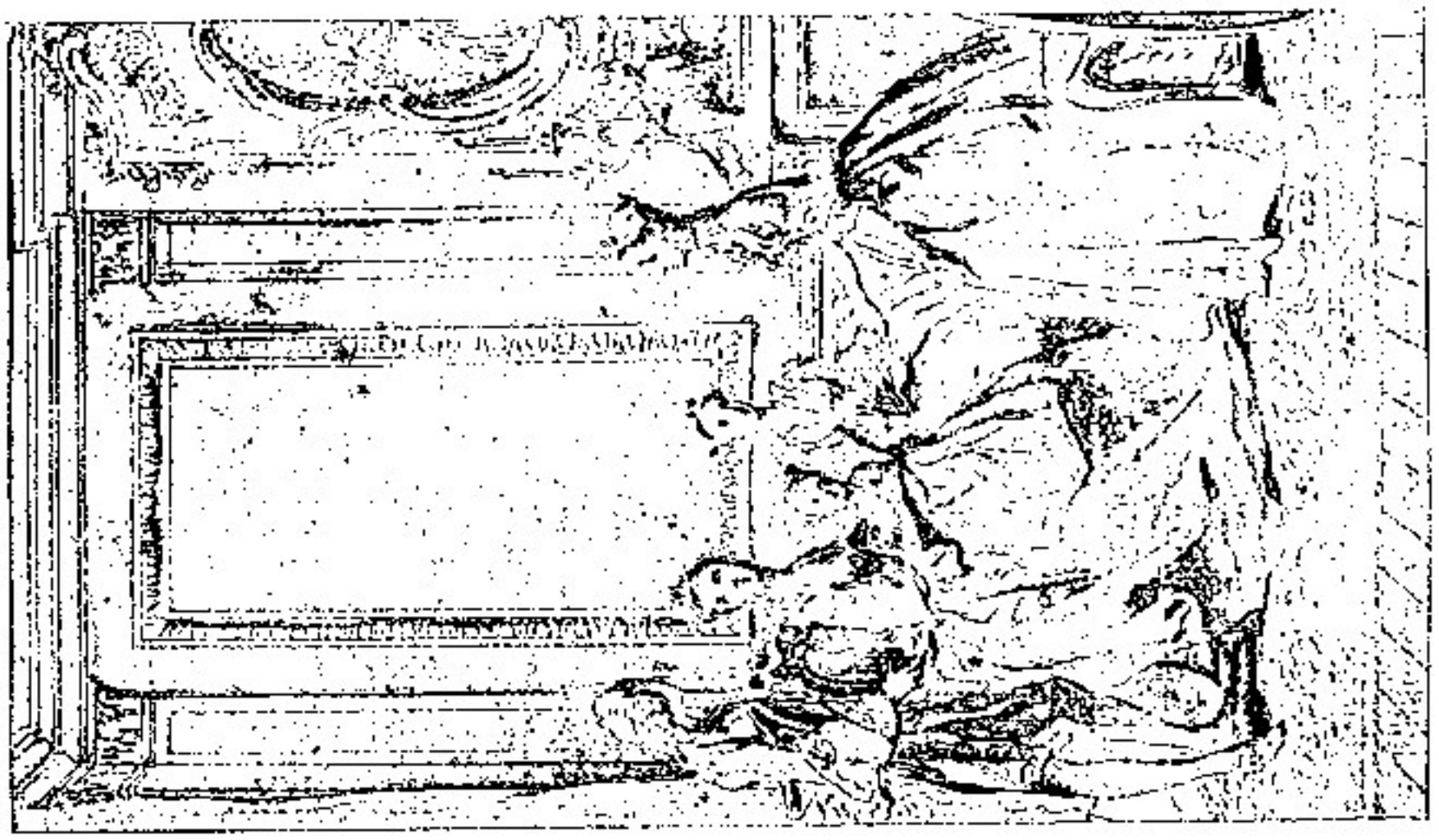

PLATE VIIIa

made tracings from the final drawings, which they transferred to the copper plate before they began their work.

One more notable similarity bespeaks the strong influence of the French academic tradition. Gravelot's figure studies are normally commenced as nude figures (see Plates Ia and Va) and then clothed with the appropriate garments once their correct anatomy and pose have been attained. All Gravelot's biographers [22] mention the three mannequins, about fifteen inches high, which the artist had had made for him in London. These figurines were beautifully constructed, and articulated to the tips of their fingers. Thus Gravelot was able to adjust them and then to clothe them, from an ample wardrobe, with appropriate costumes. By manipulating these figures and then studying them minutely, from the proper angle, he could achieve a remarkable grace of composition and truth of perspective, beyond that attained by many of his contemporaries.

But here the reliance on a system of procedure ceases, and the varied genius of an accomplished French artist begins to assert itself. Gravelot was not bound by one kind of drawing instrument — he employed a number of varieties with equal facility. Normally he commenced with red or black crayon [23] — though later he often used a graphite pencil — and made his corrections with pen and ink. When red crayon was used over black, or vice versa, in the earliest stages, corrections are more easily visible. Yet perhaps the most revealing figure study in the sketches for Corneille at Harvard is that of the two undraped personages (one male and one female) for *Agésilas* (Plate Ia). They have been drawn very powerfully in pen and ink after the main axis of the figures, and the lines of perspective, had been sketched in with graphite pencil and pen.

It is curious that even in such a very preliminary stage, Gravelot often lettered in the captions — the lines from the play which he was illustrating. He even normally also lettered in his signature, as if he were then preparing the finished drawing. A later stage (as in Plate Ib) of this same subject, where the figures have been draped, and the background is much further advanced, may not have had this lettering so carefully worked out, if we are to judge by other examples. But here the margin below the drawing has been cut away. Red crayon has

[22] For example, Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, p. 274.

[23] The present writer's opinion does not agree, in many respects, with that expressed by Réau, *Gravure*, p. 18.

been used to suggest additions, or corrections, in this second stage. Yet one feels the composition is far from finished, and might require two or three more renderings before the final drawing could be undertaken.

Let us now examine carefully a subject for which we have reproduced four preliminary drawings (Plates II and III). In the first sketch for *Médée* (Plate IIa) we have all the freedom one would expect in a drawing by a far less meticulous master. Yet when we examine the figures carefully, we see that already Gravelot has worked and reworked the two principal figures, establishing their balance and counterbalance with great care, as well as their fundamental outlines, so no serious change has been necessary from this study through the last sketch with which we are provided. But only in the second stage (Plate IIb) do we find the vanishing point and the general character of the architectural background established. Moreover, in this stage the other figures are more carefully outlined. Still Gravelot seems to have been dissatisfied with his architecture and his perspective. So stage three (Plate IIIa) concerns itself solely with these parts of the composition: the figure studies are left out. Perhaps one or more further studies may have been made at this point; for in stage four (Plate IIIb) we not only find the figures reintroduced, and the architecture further advanced, but we see that the whole composition has been reversed. The reasons for this are best known to the artist. Perhaps one was because he felt the action of the composition would look better inclining outwards — all the engravings in the series being destined for the left-hand page in the book facing the title of the play. Another reason might have been that he felt that Jason, in the engraving, should be drawing his sword with his right hand — not with his left — as would have resulted when the copperplate was printed.

Gravelot leaves us with many questions like these unanswered. But once in a while his reasoning is plain, as when (in Plate IVa) he moves Honoria, sister of the Emperor Valentinian, nearer to the sheltering figure of her lover, Valamir, King of the Ostrogoths. The original sketch of Honoria, almost obliterated by erasure and white chalk, left nude as she was originally drawn, can still be seen to the right of the new figure. In stage two (Plate IVb), the later pose of the two figures has been retained, and their hitherto partially clothed bodies are now fully dressed. In both these stages, Gravelot has put in all the lettering, even to the number of the act and scene of the play. This sometimes disappears in the finished engraving. Why this is, one is at a loss to

explain, unless to remind him of his place in the text. But this is only a conjecture. An artist today would hardly have been so painstaking, or formal.

The sketch for *Polyeucte* (Plate Va) is in many ways more powerful than the finished engraving. And although clearly in a very preliminary stage, in view of the nude figure and lines of perspective, it is remarkably detailed as to architecture and décor. One might suppose that here only two or three studies altogether were made. However, the series at Harvard possesses two more, which for reasons of space cannot be reproduced — and still the subject is by no means finished! A way one can sense an advanced stage of Gravelot's sketches, is when his drawing becomes thin and sharp: when only the outlines appear, and yet there is precise architectural detail. Tonal effects were not introduced till the very last stages — perhaps in the final version only.

Gravelot is most successful when dealing with the contemporary scene, and with comedy rather than tragedy.[24] Such a statement recognizes, in a sense, his defects as an artist, although the question can be asked, who has *ever* really gripped us with a scene from a classical tragedy? They are all either 'frozen' or a little absurd. In this respect, Gravelot is not less successful than Moreau le jeune, his contemporary, or David, who so captivated the admiration of later generations, but leaves our emotions cold. So in Plates Vb, VIa, and VIb, we find Gravelot in his happiest vein. *Le menteur* is a drawing with all the best of Gravelot's excellent perspective, and the first sketch for *Mélite* shows how he quickly cut down a chalk drawing to his exact scale, and sometimes tried out the details of his ornamentation in the margin. The third sketch for *Mélite* suggests, though it does not fully interpret, Gravelot's amazing ability and taste in décor.[25] The de Goncourts, in an earlier work than that hitherto quoted,[26] write eloquently of this quality, and of his ability to select and depict the significant contour. They correctly claim that his drawings often have the substance of little paintings, and that one must not consider them minor works of art, because they are small, but rather, as Boucher felt, the cleverest illustrations of their day. Gravelot's figures are often like the porcelain Saxe figurines, so beautifully are they 'sculptured.'

Nor is anything more charming than the scene from *La galerie du*

[24] Cf. Salomons, *Gravelot*, p. 25.
[25] De Goncourts, *L'art*, II, 20–21.
[26] *Les vignettistes* (Paris, 1868), pp. 6–7.

Palais (Plate VIIa); for it was in the gallery of the Palais de Justice, which forms the setting of this play, that the fashionable shops were situated before the day of the Palais Royal. Even in the unfinished sketches of the Harvard series, one can almost identify the objects the ladies are buying — can almost hear the pertinent, and not too proper, conversation of the gentlemen who watch them with such a carefree air. Some writers[27] consider Marmontel's *Contes moraux* (1765) to have been Gravelot's best work, largely, one would guess, because more of the subjects are from contemporary life. But all agree on the quality of the best scenes from Corneille, of which the last four here discussed are good examples.

Of the sketches at Harvard, we still must consider the portrait frame (Plate VIIb), reproduced from a drawing not used by Edwin Wolf in his article in the *Print Collector's Quarterly*. It is pictured here because it throws light on another device of Gravelot's, shared in common with many other artists of all periods: the squaring off of the page before starting the first drawing. Yet we have seen from sketches (Plates Ia and Va) which are even less advanced that this was by no means Gravelot's habitual practice. He was too facile and too accomplished a draughtsman to need this help continually. Curiously, in this case he letters in the author's name, Pierre Corneille, in reverse, anticipating the needs of the copper engraver. Yet he signs his own name, 'H. Gravelot invenit,' directly writing from left to right. It is not likely that this contradiction signifies anything more than that Gravelot, like all of us, was human, and liable to thoughtless inconsistencies.

The last two illustrations in this article reproduce a *finished* (?) drawing in pen with bistre washes, from Richardson's *Pamela* (Plate VIIIa), and a very elaborate, and certainly finished, drawing of larger size for Voltaire's *La prude* (Plate VIIIb), in the same technique. These drawings are also in the Harvard Library, Department of Graphic Arts. They are included here because they illustrate the difference between unfinished sketches and finished drawings by our artist, and something of the style change, and the difference in feeling, between Gravelot's early period in England (1742) and his late period in Paris (1768).

The writer agrees with Miss Newlin[28] that something of Gravelot's simplicity and picturesqueness is absent from the later, 'more impor-

[27] Such as Salomons, *Gravelot*, pp. 30–31, and Portalis, *Dessinateurs*, p. 284.
[28] *Metropolitan Museum Bulletin*, n.s., V, 66.

tant' work. Yet he does not feel that the intermediate drawings, done in Paris between 1757 and 1766, are in any sense inferior, aesthetically or technically, to their 'English' predecessors. They are simply 'different' in their style and taste.

The thirty-four finished drawings for Corneille are recorded by Cohen-De Ricci [20] to be in a private collection (Comte de Chabot) in France. There has not been an opportunity, up to the present, to make a comparison between them and the preliminary sketches. But it is unlikely that any very useful end would be served thereby. The unfinished sketches of other series and the corresponding finished drawings all bear about the same relationship to each other, the difference being mainly a matter of completeness, neatness, and tonal qualities or textures. Actually what is gained in the latter direction seems more than counterbalanced by losses in spontaneity, liveliness, and strength. A number of people who have compared the finished Gravelot drawings at Harvard with the unfinished sketches under discussion have found the latter definitely more appealing. To be sure, a comparison has been made with only five finished drawings on the one side and nearly a hundred sketches on the other. Perhaps the comparison is not fair — or perhaps these people are subject to that predilection for the 'unfinished' which a number of criticis are wont to observe in current artistic opinion.

But one other conclusion is possible: that the 'finished' drawings were made *after* the engravings rather than before — an idea suggested to the writer by Edwin Wolf in correspondence. These very elaborate drawings would not have been necessary for the engraver, and, indeed, had the engraver sought to transfer their outlines to his copperplates in the manner in which Gravelot traced his own successive studies, the originals would now be lost, or, at least, would not have been preserved in the present 'spotless' state. Perhaps the elaborate drawings in sepia and wash which are recorded of many of Gravelot's most important series were made for the eighteenth-century 'amateurs' of books and drawings? Edwin Wolf states that he has seen two sets of 'finished' Gravelot drawings for Collé's *La partie de chasse* which are almost identical. Why were two sets necessary — unless for some such purpose as above suggested? Mr Wolf favors this theory for nearly all the finished Gravelot drawings he knows. The writer is somewhat more

[20] *Guide*, col. 255.

cautious. While agreeing with Mr Wolf that many drawings may have been made 'ex post facto' for such a purpose, he inclines to the opinion that *some* drawings with tonal washes were the final conclusion of many of the series, especially of those made to be executed by less rather than more experienced engravers. Factors of time and the contract made with his publishers might also determine Gravelot's procedure. The *Pamela* drawings at Harvard (Plate VIIIa) are a case in point, for, as already noted, they are in pen and bistre wash, even if not so finished as the drawing for *La prude* (Plate VIIIb).

In any event, there is plenty of reason, and there are enough unsolved questions, to warrant further study of Gravelot's technique in working up drawings towards a finished result, and in the aesthetics of his design. One hopes that this will be forthcoming when there are more students of book illustration who are concerned with the source material itself: the artist's original drawings.

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