



# The classics in graphic art: A mid-century reevaluation

## Citation

Rosenberg, Jakob. 1959. The classics in graphic art: A mid-century reevaluation. Harvard Library Bulletin XIII (2), Spring 1959: 227-238.

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## The Classics in Graphic Art: A Mid-Century Reevaluation<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE yearning for absolute values is something deeply rooted in human nature. One may compare it to the search for security in the material world. But security in the realm of ideas is more complex and perhaps more difficult to attain. Yet we are destined to remain restless and insecure unless we make serious efforts to reach the greatest possible stability and validity in our value judgments.

The topic of this lecture leads to such an effort in a field that may seem narrow in relation to the world at large, but is important to the art historian and the educator who are concerned with the history and appreciation of the graphic arts. Our topic raises the question: Who are the classics of graphic art? In other words, it induces us to investigate the validity and stability of our evaluation of graphic artists of the past, and, if possible, even of the present. Such an endeavor is substantially helped by traditional judgment, by the accumulated and often-tested reputation of the great masters of past centuries. And therefore our first reaction to the problem may be to feel that the classics in graphic art are by now fairly well established, and that our generation hardly needs to renew such a consideration. However, the moment we are faced with a more specific challenge to our standards of judgment in this field, such as, for instance, the task of selecting the hundred best prints from the beginning of graphic art in Europe up to our time, we begin to realize that our response to the question 'Who are the classics?' is no longer the same in all cases as it was in the previous generation.

Fortunately we have a clear statement on this subject by one of the best authorities of the previous generation, namely, Campbell Dodgson,

<sup>1</sup>This is the text (with minor revisions) of a lecture delivered at a symposium on 'Graphic Art' held at Wesleyan University in October, 1952. As the subtitle indicates, it is a statement of the middle of this century, and for this reason may have a certain documentary value, although the conclusions are only of a tentative character.

In accordance with the program of the symposium, the field of graphic art in the present discussion is limited to prints.

the former Keeper of the Print Room of the British Museum. In his booklet with the very title *The Classics*, he presents in concise form views that are the result of a lifelong and most successful activity as a curator, collector, and scholar. This booklet of twenty-two pages is very little known. It appeared in 1938 in a small private edition, printed for Knoedler & Company at the Merrymount Press.<sup>2</sup> But since it gives an excellent survey of the highlights in the history of the graphic arts, and since we still feel a deep respect for Dodgson's opinions, it may be justifiable to give here an account of its content before I express my own views more extensively. Much of what Dodgson says is still valid today. After all, less than fifteen years have passed since then, and this is a short time in terms of periods or centuries. Yet changes *have* taken place that Dodgson could not foresee. I shall bring some criticism into this account only where fundamental issues are involved.

Dodgson begins with the statement that 'the standard of taste inevitably changes, and in no respect so much as in the relative esteem in which original and reproductive engravers have been held at various times.' I shall come back to this important point — the growing discrimination between original and reproductive graphic art — which Dodgson had already seen in its first decisive phase. His definition of 'What is a classic?' is most interesting to us. It reads as follows: 'The classical engraver, I suggest, is one who combines with exceptional perfection of technique intellectual endowment of a high order and the power to express in his work the characteristics of the age and country in which he lives.' I repeat: excellence of technique, high intellectual endowment, and the ability to express the characteristics of period and country — these are, according to Dodgson, the earmarks of the classics. Since this definition forms the theoretical basis for his selection we must consider for a moment its validity. Dodgson feels that Goya fits this definition best. 'If ever,' he says, 'there was an engraver completely typical of his own age and country it is Goya, who shall certainly rank among our classics.' Nobody will any longer doubt that Goya is a classic, but does Dodgson's definition really fit the unusual character of Goya's art? If it does not, then something must be wrong with the definition rather than with Goya's belonging to the classics. And so I ask: do we not feel that Goya's greatness is determined more

<sup>2</sup> During 1957, the Harvard College Library received from Mr George L. Harding the file copy of the Merrymount Press, and Mr Philip Hofer acquired the original autograph manuscript, destined by him for Harvard's Graphic Arts Collection.

by the uniqueness and high quality of his vision and expression than by any conformity to contemporary trends? And is not his art less a mirror of reality than an expression of his own powerful and often enigmatic imagination, sometimes with subjects that nobody else, even in Goya's lifetime, may have fully understood? In other words, we feel that Dodgson's definition should be extended to include the very important criterion of *originality*, a criterion that our generation has perhaps developed with greater insistence on its full meaning and significance.

In his enumeration of the classics Dodgson begins with the Northern Schools of the fifteenth century. He names and characterizes very succinctly the Master of the Playing Cards, the Master E. S., Martin Schongauer, and the Master of the Housebook. In fifteenth-century Italy he picks out — and this is not surprising — the following artists, with individual prints: Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the Naked Men*; Botticelli (?), *Assumption of the Virgin*; Mantegna, *Battle of the Sea Gods*; Jacopo da Barbari, *St Sebastian*; and Giulio Campagnola, *Stag Chained to a Tree*; together with the *Primo Mobile* of the Tarocchi series. In the sixteenth century Dürer, naturally, stands out as the pre-eminent classic, and Dodgson admits besides him Cranach, Baldung, and Altdorfer as master engravers. He adds Hirschvogel as an etcher, and as woodcut artists, besides the three mentioned above, he includes Burgkmair, Holbein, Huber, Schüffelein, Wechtlin, and Weiditz. In Italy he passes by Marcantonio, of whom he said in his introduction that he 'has lost much of his attraction for a generation that is profoundly moved by Mantegna.' But he names two masters of the chiaroscuro woodcut, Ugo da Carpi and Antonio da Trento, as classics, although their work is reproductive. He concedes that this choice is inconsistent with the new devaluation of reproductive artists, but he cannot help holding on to these two because their colorful prints, especially good in early impressions, are 'so beautiful and complete in themselves.' From the Netherlands, Lucas van Leyden maintains his traditional place as a classic, both in engravings and woodcuts; but no special credit is given to the Mannerist engravers of the late sixteenth century, except to Goltzius, for his fine realistic portraits.

In the seventeenth century Dodgson lists first Van Dyck with his original portrait etchings, and then, of course, Rembrandt as the unsurpassed climax in the art of etching. He adds Ostade, whom he finds 'unrivalled in his own particular kind of scenes from daily life,' and



mentions Hercules Seghers without, however, admitting this powerful and highly original artist to the lofty rank of classic because 'he stands too far aside from the main tradition.' Then Jacques Callot and Claude Lorrain are listed, who have retained 'a great international reputation as etchers.' In seventeenth-century France, however, Robert Nanteuil is the only one whom Dodgson calls a classic in the strictest sense. The great majority of this matchless engraver's portraits were done from life or from drawings or pastels made by Nanteuil himself. 'His work,' says Dodgson, 'constitutes a splendid record of the great personages of his time, portrayed with strict accuracy, in a simple and dignified style, and with perfect technical skill.' Thus we see Hercules Seghers, whom we consider nowadays one of the most original and interesting etchers of all time, excluded from the ranks of the classics because 'he stands too far aside from the main tradition,' but the dry and unimaginative Nanteuil, with his rather photographic images and his smooth and impersonal technique, praised in the highest terms. In fact, he fits perfectly Dodgson's definition — better than either Goya or Rembrandt.

As for eighteenth-century France, where reproductive engraving flourished in a great variety of techniques (such as line engraving, mezzotint, stipple, crayon manner, aquatint, and color printing from several plates), only Philibert-Louis Debucourt (as in his *La rose*) is celebrated as a real classic because he engraved his own designs and was therefore in a literal sense not reproductive, as all the others in this group were. And in addition, his works were 'masterly in execution and perfectly characteristic of the light and graceful side of pre-Revolution French manners.' If, however, we compare Debucourt with Janinet (as in the latter's Mme Dugazon as Nina in *La folle par amour*), whom Dodgson rejects as being reproductive, we find little difference in character. Both imitate in their aquatints the effect of water color, Janinet a water color by another artist (Claude J. B. Hoin), Debucourt one of his own. Thus Debucourt, although an original designer, was not original in his technique, which remains imitative of another form of art (water color), and this is the reason why we hesitate today to classify him with the foremost artists of unquestioned originality, such as Goya. It is a case similar to that of Nanteuil. Dodgson does not overlook the remarkable group of original etchers in eighteenth-century Italy, all Venetian in origin — Canaletto, the Tiepolos, Piranesi — and adds them unconditionally to his list. Concerning his experi-

ence with the Tiepolos he tells a charming story. When in 1907 he bought for the British Museum from a London bookseller for five pounds a volume with the complete etched work of the two Tiepolos in fine impressions, and told the dealer that his price was not high, he got the answer, 'Well, Sir, you see it's a bad period.' Consistently with his argument in other cases, Dodgson hesitates to admit William Blake to the rank of a classic because he is not a typical representative of his time and country.

Dodgson's list ends at the middle of the nineteenth century. The last names of high distinction, Delacroix and Ingres, are only briefly mentioned. Then he goes on to say: 'The great mass of original work, in etching and lithography, that begins about 1850 and goes on continuously into the twentieth century, lies still so near us that it is difficult to see the engravers, still more to see their prints, in the right perspective. . . . I need hardly mention,' he adds, 'a few of the outstanding names: Meryon, Haden, Whistler, Menzel, Daumier, Gavarni, Legros, Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Redon, Forain, Zorn. I prefer not to name the living.' This reluctance to push the classics closer to our time is fully understandable, but we wonder why Dodgson lists artists of such different rank as Daumier and Gavarni, Manet and Zorn, Toulouse-Lautrec and Forain, without any distinctions in quality. In his last sentence Dodgson makes us feel his skepticism about the latest contemporary production: 'Let us be sure,' he says, 'that some of the strange productions of the 1930's possess at least one of the qualities which I have postulated, that they have the saving element of a fine technique (as some of them undoubtedly have) or that exceptional intellectual capacity lies at the back of them, before they win our unqualified approval.'

The few criticisms that I have brought into this account of Dodgson's booklet should not obscure our agreement with the greater part of his list and our appreciation of the excellent comments that accompany it. But for our purpose we are especially interested in clarifying such differences as there are between Dodgson's notion of classics and our own. I stated these differences briefly and will add a few more points later. But is there any reason to assume that our judgment, or let us say, the judgment of our generation, has more validity to it than that of Dodgson's? Can we have any certainty that we are right in admitting Scghers and even Blake to the rank of classics, rather than Nanteuil and Debucourt? And are we justified in emphasizing, in the

definition of a classic, that 'originality' of vision, expression, and technical handling should be added as a decisive criterion and is more important than conformity to the trends of a period?

Before we answer this difficult question we should investigate the position of Dodgson's generation and ours in the history of taste and evaluation. We are fairly close to each other, yet far enough apart to show differences, and we may better realize the significance of these differences when seen in a longer perspective. So I suggest that we look back over a period of about three generations to find out how Dodgson's and our position is related to the broader development of taste during this span of time.

In a talk of a few years ago<sup>2</sup> I undertook such a review of this history of evaluation in the graphic arts and I may sum up the results briefly here. Naturally this history falls into two parts: the material evaluation that is clearly recorded in the art market; and the purely aesthetic evaluation that lies behind it and is not always easily visible. In other words, the records of the art market are a kind of barometer of the change of taste and value judgments. However, they have to be read with extreme caution, for they are not, under all circumstances, a reliable index. Only the broader and more continuous trends will be indicative of deeper and significant changes, while merely accidental fluctuations caused by the hysteria in an auction room, by the fancies of a millionaire, or by the manipulation of clever dealers, have to be dismissed as of little help for our problem. I stated in this talk that three new attitudes have developed in the art market during the last fifty years — attitudes whose initial impact Dodgson had already felt, but which have since reached a certain height in their revolutionary and perhaps excessive modification of time-honored standards of appreciation.

There is first the sharp distinction between reproductive and original graphic works already noted by Dodgson but which has since been supplemented by a sharpened and more comprehensive concept of originality — as I pointed out in the cases of Nanteuil and Debucourt.

Second, we observe that the demand for quality of the highest order has steadily increased and that the slogan 'only the best and nothing but the best' dominates the art markets. I am inclined to call this new attitude the 'Duveen principle of superselection' because Duveen's

<sup>2</sup> Given at Yale University under the auspices of the Department of Fine Arts, on the occasion of an exhibition of master prints early in 1952.



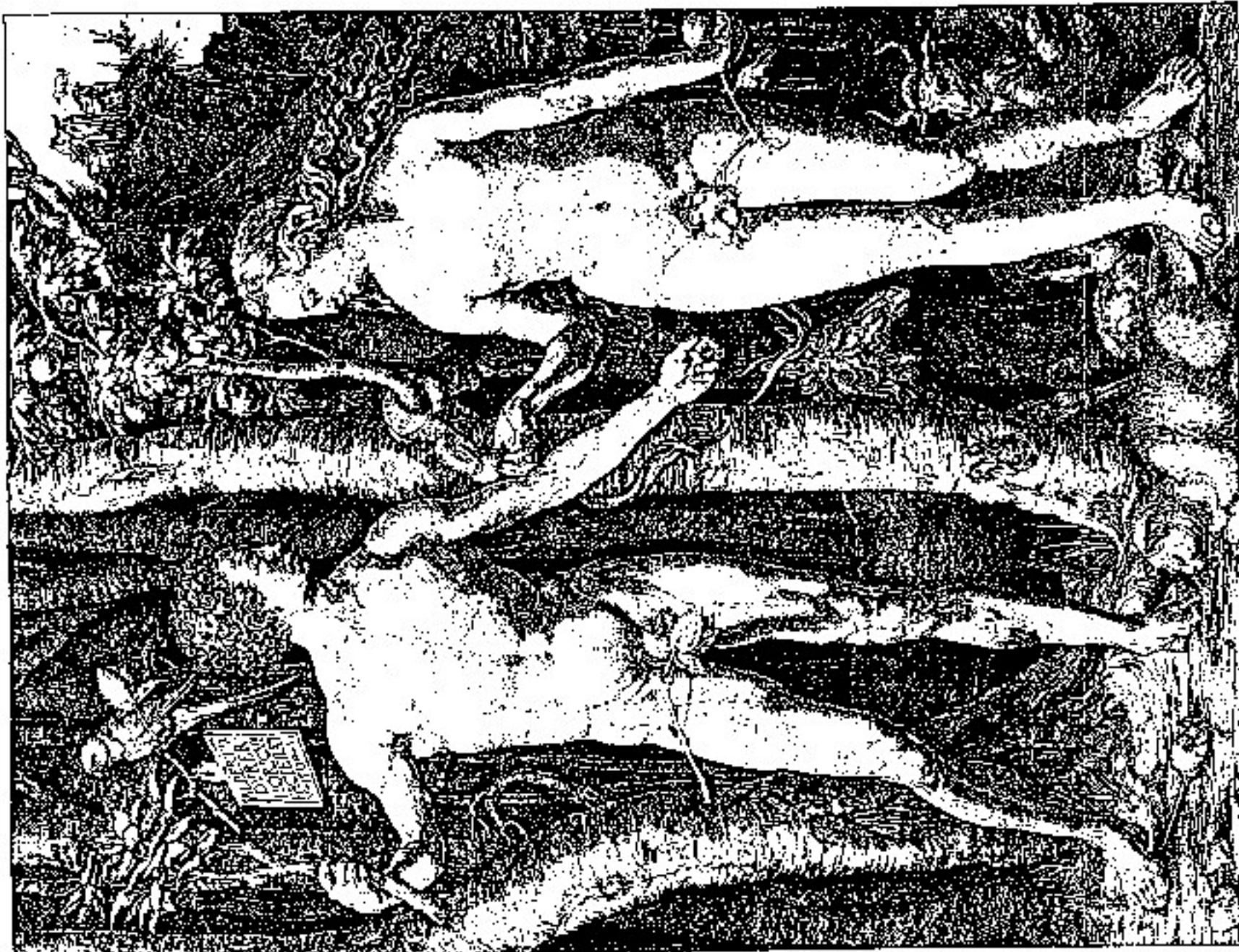


PLATE Ib  
DÜRER, *Adam and Eve*



PLATE Ia  
MARCANTONIO, *Adam and Eve*



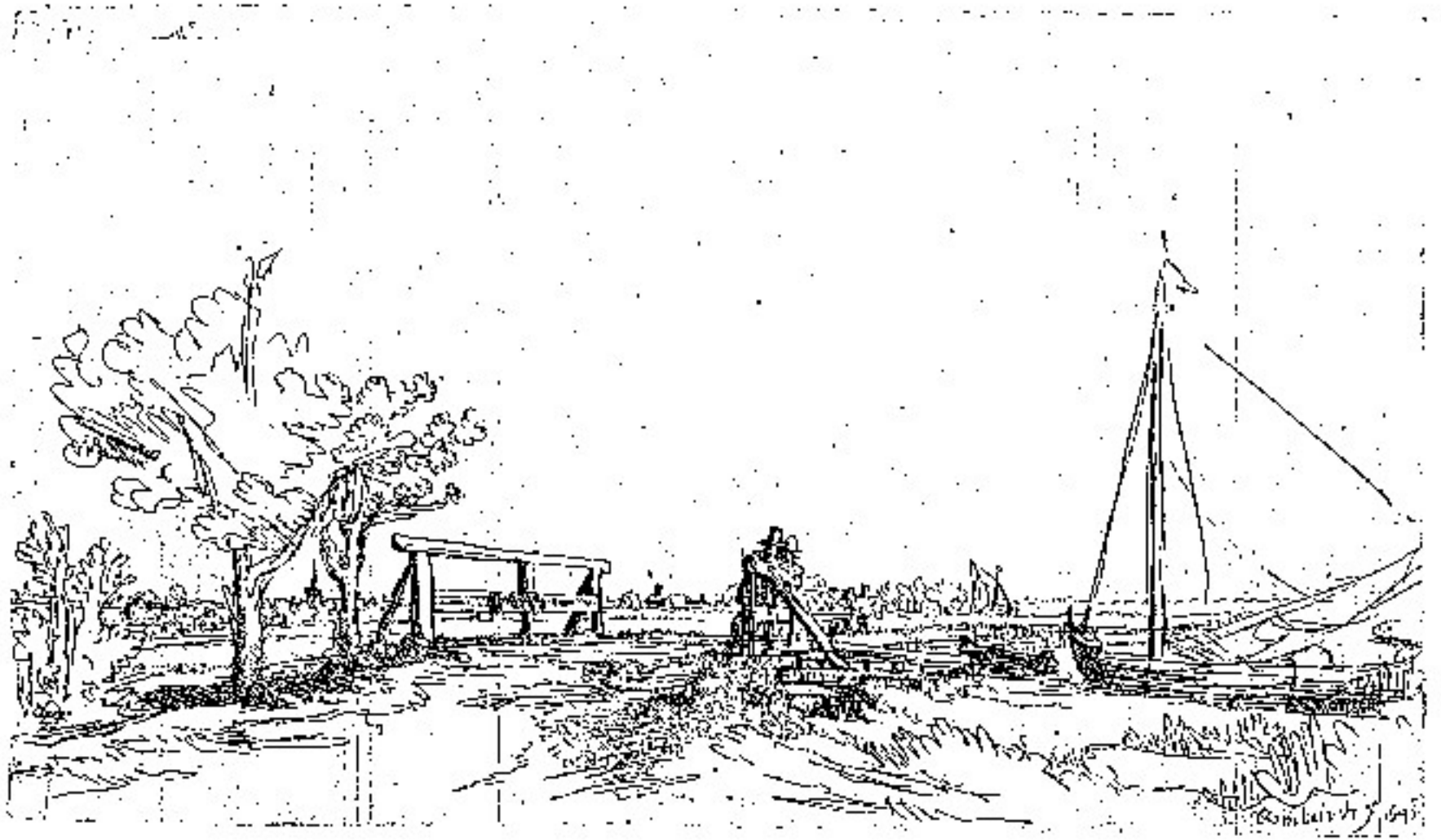


PLATE IIa  
REMBRANDT, *Six's Bridge*



PLATE IIb  
WHISTLER, *View of Zaandam*

leadership, although he had no active part in the graphic art market, was somewhat contagious in this field too.

Third, there has set in, as a consequence, a sharp devaluation, if not a complete drop, of everything that is not in this 'super' category, with the result that some interesting and original graphic artists such as Callot or Ostade have reached an extraordinarily low point on the art market.

These attitudes may be illustrated as follows. For the first point, the much sharpened discrimination between original and reproductive graphic art, Marcantonio and Dürer serve as the best examples.

It is well known that in the mid-nineteenth century Marcantonio engravings were considered as valuable if not more so than those of the German master. His personal association with Raphael, the technical excellence of his prints, their great documentary value — all combined to lend glory to his name and his works. And there was little thought given to the fact that his engravings were only reproductions of the designs of others. Thus, in the Harvard collection, the origins of which go back to these early days — it was formed by Francis Calley Gray, of the class of 1809<sup>4</sup> — there is a fine impression of Marcantonio's *Adam and Eve* (Plate Ia). This was bought by Gray about 1840-50, for the sum of 63 pounds, while he paid for a fine Dürer of the same subject only 21 pounds (Plate Ib). Today, for the reasons given above, Marcantonio has declined to such a degree that at the recent Seasongood sale (1951) his *Last Supper* — similar in importance to the *Adam and Eve*, and also after Raphael — brought only \$325, while Dürer's *Adam and Eve* at the same auction went up to \$2,750. In other words, Marcantonio is now valued at only one tenth of Dürer even though he had been for centuries one of the greatest names in the field.

Another illustration of this point may be given by the example of Robert Nanteuil, the French seventeenth-century engraver whom Dodgson still valued as a straight classic. For Nanteuil's well-known portrait of Cardinal Pomponne de Bellièvre (this one engraved after Le Brun, but characteristically not at all different in style from those after Nanteuil's own design) Gray paid in the mid-nineteenth century 1,055 francs, which was, in his time, even more than the price for a fine Rembrandt. It now brings only a fraction of that sum. At the Bishop

<sup>4</sup>See 'The Print Collection of the Fogg Art Museum,' by Ruth S. Magurn, HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, XII (1958), 35-46.

sale in 1935 fine impressions of Nanteuil dropped to an average of \$30-40, while Rembrandt portraits now often reach several thousand dollars.

I need not bring in examples of English mezzotints or French color prints of the eighteenth century, which since about 1910, and still more since Dodgson's day, have lost disastrously in material value, while Goya is steadily on the rise, if we think of his rare early proof prints, which are indeed of an exceptional graphic beauty and power.

As for the second point, the extreme demand for the 'best and nothing but the best,' one may think that this category is identical with what we call classics. But there is a little more to it than that. The demand for 'super' quality is extended to the quality of the impressions. Therefore, really high prices are now paid only for the finest early impressions of the great masters, with a much sharpened discrimination about the very best in all respects. It may be sufficient here to mention the price of \$5,400 paid at the Seasingood sale for a rather small Dürer engraving of the *Nativity*, and that of \$6,300 for Rembrandt's *Presentation in the Temple*, not much larger, at the Johnson sale in 1946.

Finally, with respect to the third point, the excessive devaluation of those artists or impressions not in the 'super' category, I only say summarily that such fine and original etchers as Callot or Ostade, whom Dodgson counted as among the best, now bring almost nothing on the market. This, however, is more true of America than of England, where the principle of 'superselection' has not been applied with the same excessive consequences.

I cannot leave the subject of the changes of evaluation on the art market without recording an event of extraordinary interest that will puzzle everybody who ponders about the validity of value judgments and about the problem of the classics. I refer to the meteoric rise and fall of the British-American impressionist etchers, with Whistler at their head, and including artists such as Scymour Haden, Cameron, Bone, McBey, and Zorn.<sup>5</sup> It was in the twenties, in the boom days of the New York stock market, that Whistler and sometimes Zorn and the others reached prices higher than fine Rembrandts. Whistler himself had done his share to stimulate the appetite of ambitious collectors for sophisticated prints. And so had his pupil Joseph Pennell, who in 1919

<sup>5</sup> Zorn, though actually Swedish, was frequently in England and the United States, and is generally ranked with this group.



in a much publicized book on *Etchers and Etching* wrote as follows: 'Since the world began there have only been two supreme etchers — Rembrandt and Whistler. I am not sure there have even been two — but I am sure the latter artist is the greater etcher.' Accordingly, fantastic prices were paid and even maintained for some time. But a catastrophic crash came when, in the later forties, at the Whittemore sale, an extensive collection of these British-American impressionists was thrown on the market. In 1935-36 Whistler's *Doorway* still brought \$1,500 (at the Bishop sale, and this was by no means the highest of the Whistler prices at that auction); and Zorn's portrait of himself and his wife, not one of his most popular prints (some of which had often gone over \$1,000), was still sold for \$425. At the Whittemore sale this Whistler brought only \$300 and the Zorn \$150, and it is not yet known whether this downward trend has reached its lowest point. One can imagine that this development was a shocking experience for many print collectors who had sought safe investment under the advice of their dealers. But also such a distinguished expert as Dodgson had given unqualified praise to this group. Best known is his monograph on Whistler, although this artist came too late for inclusion in Dodgson's list of classics.

We naturally ask: how was it possible that such erratic changes in evaluation could take place within this short time if any serious standards of judgment were applied? Should one interpret this Whistler-Zorn episode as a merely accidental fluctuation on the art market, with no deeper causes, and therefore dismiss it as irrelevant for our consideration? Or was it the outcome of a broader trend with deeper roots and new aesthetic concepts behind it to which we are all subjected and which ought to have a serious hearing on our selection of the classics? As far as I can see, the answer is that both causes were involved. The Whistler enthusiasm was not false. It was the result of the genuine application of a new aesthetic concept: that of Impressionism, with its eye-opening demand for originality and spontaneity of touch and vision. But the overenthusiasm and its exploitation by able dealers were only possible because the test of time had not yet set in, and, in addition, because this trend was favored by a period of economic boom. A more prolonged test of time, however, brought the realization that Whistler (with naturally the rest of the group) was, after all, no equal of Rembrandt — that Whistler's work shows a slight flimsiness compared to that of the great Dutchman. If we look

at the two artists in juxtaposition, as, for example, *Six's Bridge* by Rembrandt (Plate IIa) together with Whistler's *View of Zaandam* (Plate IIb), it is still true that Whistler's touch is delightfully free and spontaneous, that he catches something of Rembrandt's high economy, that he successfully suggests light and atmosphere. But there is little structure to his forms or to his representation of space, and he lacks the depth and the power of concentration and accentuation of the earlier artist.

Thus our review of the art market over an extended period has made us realize that our value judgments have been subject to broad changes and new aesthetic outlooks. And in spite of sometimes excessive attitudes or accidental fluctuations, there is a certain consistency in these changes that run parallel with the character of contemporary art and are an outcome of its own new aesthetic ideas. Dodgson's generation began to feel the impact of the new Impressionist concept and drew conclusions from it that had not yet stood a longer and therefore more valid test of time. And we, of the age of Expressionism and Abstract Art, whose perspective has been widened to the expressive values of the primitive and the exotic, to expressive quality and power of design wherever it has occurred in history, have become more critical in the application of the Impressionist standards, and have intensified the demand for originality.

If we now come back to our question whether Dodgson's list of the classics has not the same claim to validity as ours — after having realized our relative position in the history of taste and evaluation — we are inclined to say that each generation modifies the old standards with a new approach. However, the extent of the validity of the new approach can only be tested in the course of time. So we are in a better position than Dodgson to improve and validate the Impressionist criteria, just as the next generation, that is, the youngest among us, will live to see a prolonged and therefore more valid test of the Expressionist and Abstract standards. But all in all the differences between Dodgson and ourselves with regard to the decision 'Who are the classics' are not so great. We suggest only that the definition of a classic be enlarged to include, as a decisive criterion, originality with a sharpened and more comprehensive meaning — and that therefore artists such as Hercules Seghers and William Blake should be admitted to the ranks of the great, while a Nanteuil and a Debucourt have to

step back to the second row. And it is by now time to add Honoré Daumier to those of classic rank, because he not only fits our suggested definition but also has stood the acid test of Impressionist and Expressionist aesthetics better than any of his contemporaries. That the differences between our evaluation and that of Dodgson's generation are much smaller than the differences between Dodgson's generation and the one before him stems from the fact that the great break in modern aesthetics occurred about the turn of the century as a result of Impressionism, which shook and tested with fresh vision the old standards, and broke down many time-honored conventions of taste and evaluation. It was also at this time that the appreciation of master drawings began to reach unprecedented heights because in this category, in particular, were found the qualities of spontaneity and originality of touch that Impressionism cultivated. On the other hand, it was not only reproductive graphic art that became devaluated by an increasing aversion to anything imitative or reproductive. Renaissance bronzes, Italian majolica, and tapestries — once most highly priced — all went down to unexpected lows for the same reason. And, I think, we are still engaged in digesting and adjusting, weighing and validating, the consequences of this revolutionary turn.

I should like to conclude with the remark that I see a certain danger in pressing the demands for the classics too far, to the point of crying for 'only the very best,' because this leads to an unjustified neglect of interesting and original masters in the history of graphic art. I have named Callot and Ostade as such cases, but there are many more who have a legitimate claim to our appreciation, not to speak of their historical interest. Human nature needs a certain variety of experience, and we are not happy with the state of highest tension only. Dodgson did not fall victim to this cry for exclusive superselection. It would eliminate, and it has almost done so, at least in this country (though not in England), the valuable group of small collectors who find enjoyment and develop their taste by buying such masters and prints as are attainable by their pocketbooks and yet are of decent standards.

And still one more concern — at the end of my talk. I hope that the Whistler case does not discourage people from trusting their own judgment when it comes to the appreciation of a contemporary — although this is by no means an easy assignment. The final lesson we have gained, however, is that the premature establishment of a 'classic'



is an unwise thing, and that, with all our enthusiasm for a contemporary artist, we should never forget that the great masters of the past offer us a chance to test our standards, providing us with a touchstone of high quality.

JAKOB ROSENBERG

*Postscript*

Since this lecture was delivered less than seven years have passed, but within that short span the art market has again shown hectic movements. Yet the basic new trends indicated in our survey have continued and become intensified. At the present moment one feature stands out as particularly conspicuous. Modern painters like Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin have outrun the old masters in commanding sensational prices, and the print market begins to be affected in the same way. How temporary this is remains to be seen. It could become a repetition of the Whistler phenomenon. The time, however, to take stock has not yet come.

J. R.

## Corrigenda

IN the preceding issue of the BULLETIN, XIII, 1 (Winter 1959):

*Page 37, line 21, should read, in 11-point type and with paragraph indentation:*

Little Pope (who is much yours) informs me of a Storie book, which he

*Page 128, lines 25-27, should read:*

By conversion of dates, it would appear that *The Sultan & the Dervish* was issued A.D. 1925 or 1926.

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