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12-1-1996

The French Renaissance in prints [Review]

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Recommended Citation

Emison, Patricia, "The French Renaissance in prints [Review]" (1996). *Renaissance Quarterly*. 49.
https://scholars.unh.edu/art_facpub/49

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CHICAGO JOURNALS



The French Renaissance in Prints, from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. by Karen Jacobson

Review by: Patricia Emison

Renaissance Quarterly, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter, 1996), pp. 910-912

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Renaissance Society of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2863008>

Accessed: 21/02/2013 10:45

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Petrus Christus lived until 1475 or 1476. While several other Bruges painters are prominent in the archives of the period, scholars have not yet isolated their works by name. Hans Memling, who became a citizen of Bruges in 1465, and who signed his name and dated several of his own works, is the next major Bruges artist.

Ainsworth's basic chapter on Christus deals with the historiography of Christus scholarship and the documentary evidence of signed and dated works, seven of which are valuable as such, especially since no proven documents of commission or payment for Christus's paintings survive. Ainsworth follows with an analysis of the artist's painting technique and chronology, devoting considerable space to the comparison of underdrawing techniques by Petrus Christus.

These criteria tend to be confusing. The discussion of the *Lamentation* in Paris, for instance (not in the exhibition), first acknowledges the apparent authenticity of the underdrawing of figures and faces, then finds the faces in paint uncharacteristic of the artist, though these follow the underdrawing closely. Meanwhile no discussion ensues on the poor condition of the entire paint surface or repainting of the Paris work which is distinctly evident, even in the reproduction. Comparison of the *Lamentation* with the *Death of the Virgin*, cat. 15, in the Timken Art Gallery, San Diego, presents some distinct affinities in painted drapery style, faces, and landscape, despite the erosion and size differences between the two works.

The computer-assembled reflectographic images were difficult to read in originals at the exhibition and are much more so in the text. Further, the assertions of technique that seem to derive from them seem based on far too few comparisons for this reader to feel secure about the conclusions drawn. This

analysis continues to represent specialized knowledge about which the lay viewer is advised rather than actively engaged.

In the Friedsam *Annunciation*, for instance, the reader is invited to compare the underdrawing of the Virgin's garments with that of the Virgin's garments in the Frankfurt *Madonna and Saints* (figs. 132, 142, 145). Not only is the comparison inconclusive when the images are confronted, but the styles of drapery in the two paintings are so different as to increase doubts as to the common source.

The Friedsam *Annunciation* is in general an ongoing problem, presented here as "attributed to Christus" with many arguments for the attribution. Unconvinced, this writer has no reasonable alternative to present for an attribution but can only note the work's affinity with the several magnificent paintings displayed as "School of van Eyck" or even "Hubert van Eyck" in the world's museums.

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Karen Jacobson, ed. *The French Renaissance in Prints, from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Los Angeles: Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, 1994. 14 pls. + 493 pp. n.p.

For too long the French Renaissance has fallen between two schools: its Italianate character (and Italian personnel) let the northernists off the hook, yet clearly the French Renaissance was not a simple extension of the Italian (one need only look at St. Eustache in Paris), and so the Italianists neglected the work too. 1995 provided the needed stimulus with exhibitions of prints, drawings, and illustrated books. The ample and

beautiful exhibition catalogue under review here is more than just a record of one of those exhibitions, co-organized by the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at UCLA and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. As the Renaissance is increasingly redefined as part of the early modern period, and the revival of antiquity is accordingly made to compete for scholarly attention with issues such as the rise of national cultural identities, *The French Renaissance in Prints* will stand out as a valuable resource for scholars of various persuasions and diverse concentrations.

Henri Zerner's book on Fontainebleau prints appeared twenty-six years ago. Here he provides the introduction, followed by "Printmakers in Sixteenth-Century France," by Marianne Grivel, formerly of the Bibliothèque Nationale. She discusses the documentary record as it informs us about production and consumption. Marie Fontaine wrote "Stories Beyond Words," covering new ground on the interaction of poetic and visual imagination, including an excursus on Barthélemy Aneau's *L'imagination poétique* of 1552 in which poems were written expressly to gloss woodcut illustrations (oddly, none is illustrated). Suzanne Boorsch on "The Prints of the School of Fontainebleau," tries to pin down the identities of Master IV, Antonio Fantuzzi (the conflation with Antonio da Trento is dismissed without discussion in the thumbnail biographies at the back), Leon Davent, and Jean Mignon. Nancy Vickers, in "Courting the Female Subject," expands upon her essay of 1986, "The Mistress in the Masterpiece," in *The Poetics of Gender*, giving a close analysis of Cellini's fraught relationships with his French model Caterina and with Francois I's mistress, the Duchess d'Estampes. Philip Benedict in "Of Marmites and Martyrs, Images and Polemic in the Wars of Religion," complements Keith Moxey's and

others' studies of German pamphlet and broadsheet imagery of the Reformation, dealing in particular with the period of the Catholic League in the 1580s and with woodcut imagery, much of it anonymous. Cynthia Burlingham of the Grunwald Center in "Portraiture as Propaganda, Printmaking during the Reign of Henri IV," brings the scope of the exhibition into the seventeenth century. Peter Fuhring discusses grotesques, terms, moresques, strapwork, and other essentials of ornament at Fontainebleau and beyond in "French Ornament Prints."

As Zerner notes, the exhibition was not conceived of as "Duvet to Bellange," that is, as a succession of master or nearly master printmakers. Instead a happily melded diversity of methodological approaches in the essays yields a new, more inclusive picture of French Renaissance printmaking, one which extends chronologically and geographically, not to mention artistically, beyond Fontainebleau; assigns a significant part to woodcut even apart from book illustration; and deftly avoids terminological straight jackets in handling a body of prints that has long been dismissed as falling short of the standard of *peintre-graveur*, being often poorly printed and by any reasonable definition not "original" prints. The authors are in general comfortable with treating the print tradition in France with respect even when labelling it craft or the ancestor of the cartoon; indeed they welcome the chance to deal with popular imagery alongside that which is not. The book is a treasure, and also an open door, as the paucity and agedness of many of the bibliographical references makes clear. Two quibbles may nevertheless be mentioned: the index is rudimentary, and the authors of the catalogue entries are at times

hard to identify (see the Contents for authors' names). The entries are nevertheless substantial. For instance, Pierre Milan is now given the *Mars and Venus* after Rosso, instead of Caraglio.

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Paolo Fabbri. *Monteverdi*. Trans. Tim Carter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xvi + 350 pp. \$69.95.

This book, the best complete survey of the life and works of Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), first appeared in Italian in 1985 and is now made available to English-speaking readers through Tim Carter's graceful translation. The new edition is valuable for other reasons as well. As Carter points out in his foreword, Fabbri revised his text in 1988-89, incorporating new research. Thus, for example, chapter 30, which narrates the composer's life from 1628 to 1632, now summarizes findings that precisely date the aging composer's entry into the priesthood in 1631 and 1632 (226). Another change is the elimination of the "Catalogo delle opere" of the original in favor of an "Index of Monteverdi's works" (323-336), an easier-to-read alphabetical listing that is also keyed to a more detailed catalogue published by Manfred Stattkus the same year as Fabbri's book. Finally, twelve pages of half-tone plates have been suppressed, as well as much of the discussion of the music. The former, no doubt an economic decision, is no great loss; the latter is a less happy change. The author, Carter writes, did so himself, "given that it was designed for a specific Italian readership" (xi). Still, one wonders from which side of the Alps the idea originated. Those Anglo-American readers with a penchant for more severe musical analysis may find Fabbri's treatment too empirical, too descriptive for

their tastes. Others, however, might find it useful, as this reader did. Just as importantly, non-specialist readers with basic musical skills, to whom this book is also addressed, would find his work here invaluable.

Monteverdi is cast in three parts, which correspond to the cities in which the composer resided. Chapters 1-6 treat his youth and apprenticeship in his native Cremona, chapters 7-21 his years of service to the Gonzaga in Mantua from 1590 to 1612, and chapters 22-40 his service as *maestro di cappella* of S. Marco in Venice. Each part consists of chapters of biography alternating with analysis devoted to Monteverdi's music. The former are distinguished by straightforward narration, rich detail, and generous selections from the composer's letters. The musical chapters, despite the cuts mentioned above, are useful nonetheless. The contents of each madrigal book or sacred collection are listed in detail, together with all known authors of poetic texts; the libretti of stage works are accorded similarly careful treatment. Fabbri also offers a sensitive reconstruction of each work's historical context, providing information on such questions as patronage and liturgy. Finally, Monteverdi the controversialist, in his enormously important disagreement with the conservative theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi, is given first-rate coverage in chapter 10 (34-52).

A final word on this otherwise splendid book is in order. After explaining Fabbri's decision to cut most of his musical discussion, Carter adds that "present readers can find ample material in the rich bibliography in English on the composer" (xi). Perhaps so, but not from this bibliography alone. "Works cited" (312322) is an impressive list, but it omits the two most important monographs in Eng-