ENGRAVINGS BY FOUR RENAISSANCE MASTERS

By WILLIAM M. IVINS, JR.

Curator of Prints

The Department of Prints has celebrated the return of its collections by selecting from them an exhibition of engravings by and after Mantegna, and by Dürer, Lucas of Leyden, and Marcantonio. Very rarely has a more remarkable exhibition of prints been made in the Museum.

The four heroes of the exhibition were beyond any doubt the most famous engravers of the Renaissance. Mantegna, the oldest of them, was a mature artist when the Gutenberg Bible was printed. At the time of his death in 1506, at the age of seventy-five, Dürer was thirty-five, Marcantonio was about twenty-six, and Lucas about twelve. Dürer died in 1528, Marcantonio about 1530, and Lucas in 1533. Dürer, as a young man, made pen and ink copies of engravings by Mantegna. Marcantonio made engraved piracies of the woodcuts and engravings by Dürer and used passages from the prints of Lucas for his own purposes. Marcantonio and Dürer were in Venice about the same time and may well have met. Dürer and Lucas knew each other and exchanged prints. At one period in the middle of Lucas's life he was much influenced by Dürer's technical dexterity and later by that of Marcantonio. He was seemingly the first man to etch on copper and to mix etching and engraving on the same plate. In spite of all these cross currents of interest it would be difficult to find four contemporaries who were basically so different from one another. Each in his own way summed up one of the major renaissance streams of interest.

Mantegna, of Padua, a pupil of Squarcione’s and a brother-in-law of the elder Bellini, was a willful creator of great, passionate, godlike forms stripped of all excrescence and irrelevancy. His work was as lean and muscular and logical as a theorem of Euclid’s. Dürer, of Nuremberg, a pupil of Wolgemut’s and a friend of Pirckheimer and Celtis, was a traveled German humanist, equally vain of his curious learning and his beautiful handwriting. A dandy, he was blind to human relationships and emotions. He told stories as a means of exhibiting his erudition and his amazing calligraphy. His pictorial style has all the simplicity and clarity that are associated with German scholarship. Marcantonio, of Bologna and Rome, a pupil of Francia’s, was a man of taste and a student of patterns. By the end of his life he had become the great law-giving master of academic pictorial grammar and syntax. He was the first man to make engravings of classical sculpture, and his prints carried the knowledge of Raphaelesque design to the North of Europe. Lucas of Leyden, a pupil of Engelbrechtsz, was a smiling teller of dramatic tales, as artless, as skilled, as pointed, as those of Hans Christian Andersen. Prematurely aging, towards the end he sacrificed his unique gift to a bald, calligraphic search for abstract form.

Engraving was a minor part of Mantegna’s work. One of the greatest of all Italian painters, he made but seven prints with his own hand, the remaining Mantegnesque engravings being copies after his drawings by other men. Dürer, although an important German painter, regretted that he had not confined himself to print making. He made many more prints than paintings, and his graphic oeuvre is in no way subordinate in importance to the corpus of his painted work. It is seldom realized that, if modern attributions are correct, by far the greater number of his prints were woodcut book illustrations and a very high proportion of them theoretical diagrams. At the end of his life he devoted himself principally to the task of writing three theoretical
books, on fortifications, on the canon of human proportions, and on applied geometry. So far as appears to be known Marcantonio was only an engraver. Lucas was painter, engraver, designer of woodcuts, and painter on glass. He is known to us primarily by his engravings, little of the rest of his work having survived or been recognized. He was famous as an infant prodigy and produced a number of his greatest masterpieces when he was fourteen or fifteen.

In spite of all the changes of fashion among collectors the prints by these four men have never been out of favor since they were made. That Dürer is the only one of them whose prints are commonly seen is explainable by the fact that they have always been comparatively easy to procure and that many of them have always been available in good impressions. Any kind of impression of an engraving by Mantegna is a rarity, and a really good one is so rare that only a very small number of people have any conception of what its quality should be. Some of the prints by Lucas are
The Nativity, by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)
among the greater rarities, and really fine impressions of many of the others are so rare that it is doubtful whether a single large collection in the world has them in uniformly fine quality. Few people know what a right Lucas looks like. They were engraved so lightly that they yielded very few good impressions. Although Marcantonio's engravings were printed in great numbers they were destroyed by generations of hard use in the painters' studios. Really good impressions of them are extremely scarce. Dürrer was the only one of the four great masters who deliberately so engraved his plates that large editions could be run off from them before they showed disastrous wear. In spite of that, it was his woodcuts and not his engravings that had the most influence on his contemporaries.

To counterbalance this familiarity of the world with Dürrer's engravings and the great number of them that have survived, there is the curious fact that since some time in the late sixteenth century Dürrer has exerted much less influence on painters and print makers than any of the other three heroes. Nothing more clearly shows the cleavage between the interests and importances of collectors and scholars on the one hand and those of men who create art on the other. It is something that scholars and historians might well give more thought to than they do.

Collectors naturally only collect what they can collect. Of the works of these four men it is possible to collect only that of Dürrer; prints by the other three can only accidentally and occasionally be acquired—which is a very different matter.

Scholars, like collectors, are limited by fashions and conditions. The primary factor needed to stir up scholarly interest is ignorance. Scholars do not devote their time and ingenuity to the obvious and the well known but to things that are unknown and puzzling. If the things that are unknown and puzzling are common, so much the greater is the scholar's interest. The prints of Mantegna, Marcantonio, and Lucas present comparatively few puzzles. Those of Dürrer are honeycombed with them. This is especially true in respect of subject matter. Mantegna's subject matter is simplicity itself: a Virgin and Child, the Risen Christ, the Entombment, a Bacchanal, and a Battle of Sea Gods. There is little of Marcantonio's subject matter that is not obvious to one who has enjoyed the benefits of an old-fashioned classical education. The single requisite to an understanding of Lucas's subject matter is smiling, sympathetic observation of your fellow men. To succeed in it you have only to waste your time sitting or standing around watching and listening to people and swapping nonsense and boasts with them. You need no notebooks or long verbal memory, but you do need the ability to recall vividly how Tom looked at Sue and the silly little gestures he made with his hands when she fell and hurt herself, the expressions on men's faces when they throw their weight into what they are doing, and the way the stuffed shirts strut and purse their lips and scowl. In contrast with all this it seems as though it were impossible to understand much of Dürrer's subject matter short of long study in libraries of old books and the assiduous filling of notebooks with quotations from forgotten authors and references to learned commentaries in all the languages. It is easy to see why scholars find Dürrer important. The problems that he presents suit their bookish training and habits. They are equipped to deal with him. He fits into footnotes. But, interestingly, only the slightest trace of his influence is to be found in the work of Rembrandt, that greatest of all students of prints, of picture making, and of the human soul. However, he did look long and hard at the work of the others and learned deeply from all three of them. This too is something to be pondered over by scholars and historians. It explains a great many things.

With few exceptions the impressions shown in this exhibition have the unfamiliar and unusual quality that is right. To signal but one print by each master: Mantegna's Risen Christ, Dürrer's Melencolia, Marcantonio's Judgment of Paris, and Lucas's round Mocking of Christ are worthy of the most prayerful consideration.