FRENCH XVI CENTURY PRINTS

By WILLIAM M. IVINS, JR.

Curator of Prints

There has been placed on exhibition in the print gallery (A22) a selection from the Museum’s collections of French sixteenth-century prints and illustrated books. To avoid pedantry a few prints and books of the immediately preceding and succeeding periods have been included. No previous exhibition exclusively devoted to this material has been made in the Museum.

From an artistic point of view the most important thing that happened in France during the sixteenth century was the rebuilding and redecoration of the old palace of Fontainebleau that was undertaken by King Francis I in 1528. For this task the king gathered together a group of Italian, French, and Flemish artists and workmen who were presided over by the Italians II Rosso and Primaticcio. This international group produced a new style that was a commingling of native French and imported Italian traditions and fashions. It spread over France very quickly and was imitated in the other northern countries. On the ornamental side it produced the motif known as the plate bande, or “roll work,” which promptly received general acceptance as one of the basic elements of design. On the pictorial side it was the first northern art that showed definite preoccupation with the various frivolous problems of the nude. The gay and thoughtless descendants of the Nymph of Fontainebleau until very recently disported themselves in the pages of La Vie Parisienne and other journals of that type. To an extent that is little realized the principal pictorial interests of France during the years that followed the overthrowing of Fontainebleau found their origin in that event. The style thus initiated was a style of the nouveaux riches, the successful men of politics, war, and finance. To an amazing extent the styles that have grown out it have had the same basic character. It was a fashionable and a worldly art, all but completely devoid of the faiths and the flaming arars which have produced the memorable art of western Europe. In underneath it the old native, sober tradition kept precariously alive until, a little more than a hundred years ago, its embers burst into the flames which have been the glory of the last century.

Most of the French book illustration of the sixteenth century is anonymous, and many of the prints are by men whose names, even when known, are known only to specialists. The attributions that were given to much of this work in the older reference books are of the most doubtful validity, and of recent years the fashionable interest in Italian and German primitive prints has directed the interest of students in other directions.

These facts, taken into consideration with the absolute rarity of the material, have made it seem advisable to fill the space available for this notice in the Bulletin with reproductions rather than with any attempt at analysis or criticism.

The reason for the very great rarity of many of the books and prints shown will be obvious to anyone who is familiar with the political history of the time. For at least a third of the century France was ravaged by the bitterest, most merciless and cruel of civil wars, in the course of which there was an almost unparalleled destruction of both life and property. Not only did an inestimable number of Gothic things disappear, but most of the art of the French Renaissance itself. In view of the importance of that art the preciousness of the present exhibition of prints and illustrated books needs no elaboration of comment.

The Museum’s collection of these things is not very large but it is probably fairly representative, and it includes a number of very important items. The single-sheet prints of the period are represented among other things by
Adam and Eve, woodcut in an undated French Bible published by Antoine Vérard shortly after 1500. This woodcut is an example of the style of French book illustration, based on miniature painting, which developed in the last twenty years of the xv century. This style persisted well into the xvi century alongside the Italianate French illustration, like that of Geofroy Tory and Bernard Salomon, which succeeded it in fashionable books. The old blocks continued in use in popular books for two centuries and more.
The Garden, etching by the Master L. D. after a painting by Primaticcio at Fontainebleau. Rebecca at the Well, anonymous etching of the School of Fontainebleau after Primaticcio. These prints were made by men of all degrees of skill, many of whom are unknown to us by name. However, in spite of their technical shortcomings they achieved a careless stylishness and an elegance that have rarely been surpassed.
The Nativity, etching by Geoffroy Dumonstier. Dumonstier was a court painter who worked under Il Rosso at Fontainebleau. Several unsigned etchings have long been attributed to him.

Hercules and the Cretan Bull, woodcut by the Master G. S. Nothing is known of the designer of this set of the Labors of Hercules, which was formerly attributed to Geofroy Tory.
ABOVE: *The Nymph of Fontainebleau*, engraving by René Boyvin after Il Rosso.

BELOW: *An Allegory of Death*, an anonymous popular woodcut
The Crucifixion, engraving by Jean Duvet. The only known French engravings earlier than Duvet's were those in the Lyons Breydenbach of 1488.
a sizable group of engravings by Jean Duvet and a larger number of those made by members of the so-called Fontainebleau School. A small group of the earliest known French etchings includes some by Cousin and others by Léonard Limousin. Duvet if not the most skillful was certainly the most imaginatively powerful of the French print-makers of the time.

Among the illustrated books attention may be called to the group of Horae, or lay prayer books, which includes such remarkable volumes as the “Grandes Heures royales” for the use of Rouen, published by Vérard about 1489, Pigouchet’s Horae of August, 1498, the “1524” Horae of Geofroy Tory, and the apparently unique copies of two later Horae with woodcuts by him. In a representative group of the “profane” books that came from the Paris presses in the middle of the sixteenth century there are to be seen such things as the Tableau de Géhes of 1543, the Hypnerotomachie of 1546, Martin’s Vitruvius of 1547, the Entrée de Henry II of 1549, Paschal’s Henriici II . . . Elogium of 1560, Cousin’s Perspective of the same year, Beaujoyeulx’s Balet comique de la royne of 1582, and Savigny’s Tableaux accomplis of 1587. The group of Lyons books begins with the Du Guesclin of about 1486 and the Breydenbach of 1488, and includes the Arnoulet Epitome des roys of 1546, Woeiriot’s Pinax of 1556, and a number of the prettily illustrated books associated with the name of Bernard Salomon. There is also a series of volumes devoted to the decorative arts, from the architecture of Serlio and Philibert de l’Orme to designs for furniture by Ducerceau and for jewelry by Boyvin, many of which are no more than bound collections of prints.

RED CROSS WORK AT THE MUSEUM

The Red Cross surgical dressing unit in the Chinese sculpture court of the Museum closed December 18, 1944, after nearly two years of operation. Since its opening in March, 1943, the work room turned out 1,260,000 surgical dressings, 25,000 of which were made by members of the Museum staff after hours. If the New York Chapter should again have occasion to make dressings for the War Department, the work room will be reopened. At present volunteers are especially needed for work as nurses’ aides and for daytime work Mondays through Fridays as dietitians’ aides.