LITHOGRAPHS

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The first lithograph was printed just 150 years ago, in 1798. To celebrate the anniversary of that important event an exhibition of lithographs, covering the entire history of the process, has been hung in Gallery A 22. All the prints shown are from the Museum collections with the exception of a Currier & Ives lent by Miss A. S. Colgate.

Unlike etching, engraving, or cutting a woodblock, the making of a lithograph involves an artist in few special technical problems. All he must do is draw with liquid grease or a greasy crayon on any flat surface that will take both oil and water. After applying weak acid and gum arabic, a printer wets the whole surface with water and rolls on oily printer’s ink that sticks only where the artist has already drawn with grease and is repelled everywhere else by dampness. A paper pressed against the inked surface is then marked with an exact replica of all that the artist drew. The resulting print is as authentically “original” as the artist’s drawing, since lithography does not reproduce that drawing but multiplies it. Thus the artist is left with one task only—one of the hardest in all art—to draw.

Lithography could perfectly well have been invented as soon as man had paper, grease, water, and even, fine-grained limestone. Ideally, it should have been discovered when Vasari’s connoisseurship set the renaissance Italians collecting sketches by painters and sculptors. (What an anatomical drawing book Michelangelo might have lithographed!) The process was actually invented when the romantic cult of genius was starting our present-day taste in which an artist’s autographic sketch, however slight, has a higher value than ambitious work painted with the aid of assistants.

Although lithography arrived at an apt moment, it was not one of those discoveries, like calculus or photography, that a generation seeks far and wide and finds through several independent inventors at once. Lithography might still be unknown if a mediocre actor dramatist in Bavaria called Aloys Senefelder had not written too badly to get his plays and songs published and been too poor to publish them himself by etching them on copper. In 1796 he tried to print from relief etchings on stone, at the very moment when Blake was printing his prophetic books from relief etchings on metal. Senefelder’s detailed account of his experiments says that he discovered “chemical printing” in 1798, when he realized what could be done with the mutual repulsion of oil and water. In 1799, he patented his invention for Bavaria. He then went to London, where in 1801 he patented it as a process for printing on “paper, linen, cotton, woollens, and other articles” in imitation of “etchings, stroke...
engraving, or drawing” made with “black and red chalk and aquatinta.”

Senefelder was then thirty. He spent his remaining thirty-odd years in perfecting practically every detail of lithography except its application to photography (then undiscovered) while he chased a fortune that he kept driving away by the very restlessness of his pursuit.

In 1801, when Senefelder was in London securing his patent, Benjamin West made the first lithograph by an artist whose name is still remembered. West was astutely chosen to initiate the new process, for as president of the Royal Academy and one of its founders, the Pennsylvanian bossed the British art world. His example encouraged other London artists to collaborate on the first album of original artistic lithographs, published as “Specimens of Polyautography.” But lithography, for all its quick start in London, was not to grow into an art in English-speaking countries.

Only one of Senefelder’s own publications influenced art directly and widely. In 1513 the emperor Maximilian had commissioned Dürer, Cranach, and others to draw borders for what might have become the greatest woodcut prayer book, had it ever been finished. When lithographic tracings of these renaissance drawings were published by Senefelder in 1808 in colors approximating the originals, the book aroused such enthusiasm that it raised Dürer from oblivion and established him as Germany’s national artist. To Goethe, who thanked God he had lived to see these copies, they revealed the effortless fantasy that was Dürer’s true greatness. After these drawings had slept for three hun-
dred years, lithography suddenly made them the model for the borders that appear immediately thereafter as the distinctive charm of the German romantic book. Ever since then Germany has continued to make the fame of old paintings and drawings, first through black and white lithographs after paintings in German galleries and later through photomechanical color reproductions.

The nineteenth-century lithograph in its highest and most original form is almost as exclusively French as the classic mezzotint is British. The French were able to make the most of lithography because in the eighteenth century they learned from the Italians to collect drawings. For a couple of generations before Senefelder's invention, drawings by contemporaries like Watteau and Boucher were so popular that a group of French engravers supported themselves by reproducing them in copperplate. People who hung their walls with clever copies after current drawings realized that lithography gave them what had formerly been the noble's privilege of owning first-hand and original work by the greatest living artists. As a result France produced so many lithographs of such variety that the story is hard even to summarize.

The earliest French lithographers were society amateurs. In an age when drawing was taught to all persons of quality along with dancing and deportment, smart hostesses kept stones in their salons for guests to sketch on after dinner. As early as 1805 the Orleans family enlivened their exile at Twickenham by following—or possibly initiating—the French pastime of lithographing sketches and profiles. In 1806 a general in Napoleon's army drew on a stone at Senefelder's press in Munich and brought news of the process to the emperor. Lithography did not make money in Paris until business began to revive after twenty years of war ended at Waterloo. Curiously enough, the process kept a Napoleonic stamp for a generation. Napoleon was hardly settled in the upland house at St. Helena when Horace Vernet drew a lithograph of him gazing from a cliff over the empty horizon, and shortly afterwards Charlet's and Raffet's prints created and sentimentalized the legend of the Little Corporal. When men grew restless under the Bourbon Restoration, the sweep and stir of his wars began to fascinate, and then lithographs of the Old Guard induced a popular nostalgia that helped to prepare the way for the prince president to seize power as the emperor Napoleon III.

The first twenty-five years of lithography produced thin, precise prints that imitated drawings made with hard pencils or steel pens. Then, in 1825, Goya blazed the way of the future by the four large lithographs of bullfights drawn in Bordeaux during his voluntary exile from the Bourbon restoration in Spain. Disregarding lithographic practice, he propped each big stone on an easel like a canvas, grayed the whole surface as though he were priming a painting with a neutral tone, then drew the darks with a blunt stump of crayon and scraped out the highlights with a knife. Half a century of painting, though it had blurred his eyesight, had stocked and sharpened his imagination. So even though he saw confusedly through his magnifying glass what his hand was sketching, he was able to draw superbly with muscles as stored with memory as a pianist's. At seventy-nine, when most men have long ceased to welcome innovation, Goya created the first lithographs that are great works of art and invented what was to become the classic maner of drawing on stone—a manner as free as a sketch but with a black and white as rich as the color in a painting.

When Goya drew his Bordeaux bullfights, Géricault was the only first-rate painter who had worked seriously on a considerable body of lithographs. In spite of the impact made by his revolutionary brutality, he died too young to have the authority to impose lithography as a painter's usual practice. The example that was to be followed by French painters was set by Delacroix, who drew his first mature work on stone in 1825, the year of Goya's Bordeaux bullfights, and continued to make lithographs until 1847. While some of his work—especially the Hamlet series—has a romantic emphasis that now looks silly, his best things still storm the imagination with undiminished vehemence. Coming from the most discussed artist of his day, the mass and force of Delacroix's litho-
graphs has encouraged almost every subsequent French painter to put some of his best effort into drawing on stone.

This fairly consistent practice in Paris has made French lithography as varied as French painting. No other country has produced lithographs so divergent as Corot’s river twilight and willows, Degas’s sniping at the everyday subject from an angle of ambush, Manet’s smart assumption of sketchiness, Lautrec’s agonized scrutiny from the exile of a dwarf’s height, Rouault’s probing at the humanity in the clown and the whore, Matisse’s calculated and ornamental simplicities. What other print process was used at such far outposts of being?

But all of these artists, who made lithographs as an important sideline, were in some ways overshadowed by Daumier, who in a tragedy of overwork turned out more lithographs than all the painters by whom his century is now remembered. Daumier’s father, like Hogarth’s, was a disappointed author, and both artists drew the dramas that their fathers had been unable to write. As he grew up in Paris near many of the lithographic presses, Daumier precociously imitated the mediocre lithographers then in vogue and educated himself by drawing in the Louvre from Greco-Roman sculptures that haunted his eye and incited him to model as long as he lived. At twenty-three he started what was to be his life’s work by cartooning for La Caricature, the first periodical ever devoted entirely to political satire in word and picture. When Louis Philippe’s censors finally managed to stop the magazine after five years of almost unceasing storms, Daumier was already working for its successor, Charivari, which turned to the safer field of social satire.
For Charivari he drew six or eight stones a month during almost forty years, until his eyes gave out when he was in his mid-sixties. At thirty-five, when most men’s earnings increase, his pay per stone was cut from fifty francs to forty. By dismissing him for three years during his mid-fifties, Charivari gave him the only chance he ever had to devote himself uninter-
ruptedly to his passion for painting. The year before he died, aged seventy-one, he had his first one-man show. His frustrations might ac-
count for the fact that he so often drew night-
modes.

After some brilliant work in his twenties, Daumier came into his unique greatness laboriously and with age. He began in the fashion of the 1830’s by carefully shading and stippling in velvet blacks and pearly grays. But delicate gradations of tone became impossible to print when Charivari’s growing circulation rushed the presswork and led to the practice of repro-
ducing lithographs in the cheaper and quicker, but coarse, relief process of the gillotine. As effects of tone were denied him, he invented a new manner of scribbling in lines open and bold enough to survive the crudest printing. Like Goya, he used stubs of crayons because he could turn their worn facets to draw broad and gray or sharp and black.

Daumier’s only models, indeed the only prepara-
tions of any kind for his lithographs, were little clay figurines that he occasionally pushed together from imagination to help him feel his way toward a firmer grasp of form. Because he was an instinctive, though self-taught, sculptor he drew clothes of no particular style that fit as though their wearers had grown them. By work-
ing from the resources of his sculptural mem-
ory, he gradually developed an emphatic short-
hand of lines that often define shadow and shape in one stroke—lines like an actor’s make-
up, that follow forms and project expressions surprisingly far. His late work shows no more erasure or redrawing than a Chinese painting on silk. Like a Chinese painter, Daumier must have had to sit still until the clearing of his inner eye discharged an accumulated energy into a few lines flowing deliberate and free.

Daumier became a great lithographer partly

because he hated lithography, his “pushcart” to which poverty had harnessed him. He had to use the stone to work out the forms that he was being prevented from painting and modeling. This pursuit of shape and expression regardless of—or even against—a medium saved him from the professional printmaker’s usual diversion into technicalities. Though his 4,000 lithographs were mere comics to most people, their originality of vision, renewed weekly or often, year in and year out, affected his greatest contemporaries. His nudes were copied by Delacroix, and the attitudes and compositions that he constantly invented from everyday ob-
servation became part of Degas’s way of seeing. His example encouraged impressionist painters to look for their subjects in the boulevards and theaters, in the garden, the kitchen, and the bedroom. Daumier’s firm footing in the life of his age makes him the one artist who comes nearest to summing up the complexity of nine-
teenth-century France.

Although America had no artist in any medi-
um who covered our world as comprehensively as Daumier did his, the homey lithographs pub-
lished by Currier & Ives and their rivals tell more than all our painting about the United States from Jackson to Grant. While today we treasure these lithographs, the English-speaking world of that time paid more for the laborious, now forgotten steel-engraved reproductions of paintings. Reproductive engraving dominated American and British lithography as much as drawings dominated the French. American lithographs, which imitated the higher priced steel engraving in their format and their sharp, smooth modeling, were advertised as the superior article through the familiar poster “Engravings for the People published by N. Currier, Lithographer.” Like reproductive engravings our lithographs were produced by professional printmakers who copied pictures by other men. Such a division of work, pointless in lithog-
raphy, had been forced on reproductive engraving three hundred years before because painters had neither the time nor the training for the intricate labor on the metal plate.

America and Britain did not realize that lithography had enlarged art by new possibili-
A Deputy's Nightmare, by Daumier, 1869. Rogers Fund, 1922
ties. Therefore Britain in Senefelder's day protected her long established reproductive engravers by levying a prohibitive duty on German stones, and the American customs to this moment taxes imported etchings by value but lithographs by weight, as though they competed only with our lithographed tomato-can labels and cigar-box tops. In 1857 when Ruskin cried "let no lithographic work come into the house if you can help it, nor even look at any," he was not utterly preposterous, since the Englishmen and Americans who then drew on stone were almost all hacks. During the nineteenth century lithography was a serious and mature expression for only a few painters like Bonington, William Morris Hunt, Whistler, and Shannon, who were Frenchified or otherwise out of the English-speaking tradition. It is only fair to say that charming early lithographs appeared in English sets of views and books of instruction
Poster by Toulouse-Lautrec, 1892. Dick Fund, 1932
in drawing by Boys, Prout, and Harding. The present obscurity of these excellent prints goes to prove that lithographs, to be remembered, must not be made by professional lithographers but by painters who, though they often maul the technicalities, can invent and draw. This law is brilliantly broken by Currier and Ives' rich graphic record because it nourishes our present-day nostalgia for America's romantic age of expansion.

In the United States, as late as 1912, when Pennell returned from Europe and drew his Panama Canal set, he had to search before he could persuade one of the many industrial lithographic presses to print an artist's drawings. The example that Delacroix set for France, of a recognized painter making some of his best pictures on stone, was set for the United States by George Bellows and for Mexico by Diego Rivera. Their encouragement has resulted in so much and such excellent work by the best artists in both countries that the story of modern lithography in the New World would fill another article longer than this one.

Mexihkanantli (Mexican Mother), by Jean Charlot, 1947. Whittlesey Fund, 1946