Prints Recently Acquired

by A. HYATT MAYOR  Curator of Prints

During the past year and a half the Print Department has acquired an unusual number of prints of a variety and quality sufficient to make an exhibition—on display in the Auditorium Lounge, beginning May 25—that briefly reviews five centuries of printmaking. Many fine acquisitions have come as gifts from generous and understanding friends of the Department, and last spring some two thousand prints and ornament drawings were purchased by the Curator in Europe. The following illustrations show the main types of things acquired and the captions indicate the main sources from which they came.

But neither the illustrations nor the exhibition can give an idea of the eccentricities of the hunt for prints, or the excitement of its unpredictability. The chase leads everywhere—into the great international galleries where the experience of generations has selected and documented every scrupulous mat, into the small, packed shops of roughly sorted portfolios, right down to the flea market stall where some prints and drawings lie jumbled in a broken bureau drawer. Such a wide dragnet naturally catches most things without catalogue numbers or identifications. One naturally learns to recognize a good many prints—or at least to identify the printmakers—as their corners flip past while one ruffles a stack of odd-sized papers, but the bulk whisk by in anonymous dullness. Then, just occasionally, something sparks off a half-glimpsed edge—some beckoning line, some happy adjustment of black and white, some startling shape in the void between two forms—something that says STOP! And stop you must, for only authentic signals hit in that instant of preconsciousness, that hunch that comes as you glimpse a thing before seeing it. Later you may start to compare, to look up references, to meditate and muddle, only to return very often to that first pot shot of instinct. You naturally must doubt that instinct, must put it to all possible tests, but you must never ignore it. Through it have come some of the gems of the print collection—without anyone’s knowing, sometimes for years, what to call them.

If one makes at least part of a collection out of ignorance one finds oneself collecting pictures and not names, and so acquiring things against
the taste of the time, for instinct is timeless. There is something to be said for unfashionable collecting on the part of a museum, because you bet inexpensively on future reversals of taste by buying things that cost little at the time. What El Grecos one could have bought in 1850! What Lautrecs in 1900! What German baroque sculpture in 1930! And if you collect what nobody wants you have your pick of the finest examples. The heavy cost for such collecting is not in cash, but in being called crazy—yet what supreme collection was ever made without errors and madness? So there may be more shrewdness than generosity in the rare collector who says “If they want it, let them have it. If they throw it out, it’s good enough for me.”

_ABOVE:_ Woodcut from _Libellus Compendiariam_, by Nicolaus Brontius, Antwerp, 1541. 6 ¼ x 4 inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1960

Early Netherlandish woodcuts are less intricate and brilliant than German ones, but they have a more painterly black and white.

_RIGHT:_ Grotesque ornament, about 1500, by a member of the Decio family, Milanese. Pen drawing. 13 ¼ x 6 ½ inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1959

In the late 1400s Tuscan and North Italian artists who were in Rome discovered the stucco decorations in the ruins of Nero’s Golden House. Since the half-buried rooms were then called grottoes, their playful decorations became famous throughout the world as grotesques.

_LEFT:_ Poetry, about 1465-1475, from the first set of “taroch” cards, Ferrarese. Engraving. 6 ¼ x 3 ½ inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1959

This engraving is from a suite of cards that may have been made for an instructive game like “Authors.” The lithe eccentric grace of Ferrara—a court of mad poets—inspired Dürer and many other renaissance artists.
Head of an Old Man, by Hans Baldung Grien (1476?-1545), German. Drawing, and woodcut. 6 x 4 1/2 inches, and 4 1/4 x 3 inches. Gift of Mrs. John H. Wright, 1959; Whittelsey Fund, 1959

Baldung reshaped his grandly flowing sketch to give it more particularity in the extremely rare woodcut. It is always fascinating to watch a great artist reconsidering.

Brueghel’s art is so human that even his ships gesticulate like flamboyant skaters on the ice.

The Hermit, by Nicolo Vicentino, after Parmigianino, first half of the xvi century, Italian. Color woodcut. 9 3/4 x 7 1/2 inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1959

In the early 1500s Italian woodcutters imitated great figure drawings in color woodcuts which helped to bring the Renaissance to the rest of the world.
The Old Man and the Girl, by Jacob Matham (1571-1631), Dutch. Drawing for an engraving. Diameter 7 ¾ inches. Anne and Carl Stern Fund, 1959

A master of the strict and sinuous discipline of engraving is here drawing with superb control as he swings line around forms.

Saint Matthew, by Jacques Bellange (worked 1602-1617), French. Etching. 11 x 6 ¾ inches. Dick Fund through exchange, 1959

In Lorraine, where this apostle was etched, French elegance met German expressiveness. Bellange’s courtly ambiguity leaves one asking “Is this apostle walking or curtsying? Do the curls belong to a man or a woman?”
Blackfriars Bridge, London, 1764, by G. B. Piranesi (1720-1778), Italian. Etching. 9 1/4 x 7 1/2 inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1959

Piranesi, who never left Italy, etched this London bridge from the architect’s drawings. Only an insatiable master of perspective could have made a game out of the perplexity of this cat’s cradle of carpentry.

Pour toi (portrait of Désiré Dihau), by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), French. Lithograph. 10 5/8 x 7 3/4 inches. Bequest of Alexandrine Sinzheimer, 1959

Lautrec excelled in portraying the concentration of the performer. His posters for actors and singers opened a new field for the painter.
The travel sketches that Leprince made in 1757-1762 were the first picturesque impressions of Russia to circulate in prints, and started a fashion for "russerie."

The triumphant femininity of the eighteenth century survived in the work of this unjustly neglected artist.
Self-portrait, by Lovis Corinth (1858-1925), German. Etching. 7 3/4 x 6 1/2 inches. Gift of Bruno and Sadie Adriani, 1959

Self-portraits look at you with gimlet eyes because the artist is searching to discover what everybody knows but he.


On a tiny copper Degas smeared some printer’s ink and pushed it around to make this crisp surprising vision of elegance, modish and immortal.

New York between the wars will probably survive most vividly in the pictures through which Marsh expressed his attraction and repulsion.