“TIRESOME AND BAROQUE”

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The large and important group of prints represented by the current exhibition Prints of the Time of the Counter-Reformation is all but unknown in this country. So far as remembered by the present writer this is the first exhibition of its kind to be held in New York. This is not due to the rarity of these prints, for many of them are not very rare, and it is not due to their lack of interest or beauty, because many of them are very interesting and beautiful. More than anything else it is due to our ignorance of them. They have been left out of the packages in which our history is made up. Unlike real history, which comes loose and in bulk, the history of the museums and the art books is apt to come in neat paper parcels the bright labels of which proclaim their contents to be the choicest blend of selected home-grown and fancy imported prejudices, artificially colored and sweetened with apple sauce. We have become so habituated to packaged groceries and sloganed thought that we like our history served in the same way. Unfortunately, standardized brands of history become such only by omitting things and adding lots of synthetic flavoring matter.

As Benedetto Croce said, to think is to exaggerate (or did he?), and so——

Every philosopher worthy of the name has given his list of the major vices of the intellect, but very few of them mention among these the two outstanding failblesses of the museums and the compilers of books about the history of art. These are, first, the abstraction of art from life and thought, and, second, the reduction of all things to conventional labels and categories.

One of the most curious things about the peoples of the past was that they never knew the names of the periods in which they lived, the dates on which these periods began and ended, or the things which made them important. The contemporaries of Euclid, when their arms had conquered Egypt and the East and their mathematicians and scientists were producing such knowledge as had never been dreamed of, were not aware that they lived in the Hellenistic Age, that it was degenerate and that they themselves were far less intelligent and interesting than their squabbling small-town grandfathers. The men of the Dark Ages won that name for themselves because they were so densely ignorant and intellectually debased that instead of worrying about their loss of the great culture of the past they put their minds on such things as the invention of cranks and horse collars, which did more to abolish brutalizing drudgery than anything previously known. The scholastics of the Middle Ages, who dug out and absorbed Aristotle and clamped Greek logic on the mind of western Europe, never fancied, even in their wilder moments, that they would be considered stupid and ignorant because they did not read Greek poetry in the decent obscurity of its learned tongue. The men of the Renaissance, who rounded the Cape and discovered America, would have been amused to know that the most important thing they did was to have a fashion for classical notions. In the 1600’s, when the world was in the doldrums between the culture of the Renaissance and the elegance of the eighteenth century, many men were so obtuse to those things as to agree with an amateur geometer of their number, who, lying abed until lunch time, said, “Our age appeared to me to be as flourishing, and as fertile in powerful minds as any preceding one.”

A bookkeeper who leaves out or puts in things that are hard to explain has trouble with the sheriff, but the writer of art history and labels is a licensed Procrustes. His task being “to state facts and not argue about opinions,” he omits what he can’t understand and doesn’t like. This inevitably leads to the truthfulness, clarity, and precision of textbooks and other complete fiction.

The fact is, if there is a fact, that no age, surveying its endeavors and its accomplishment,
Saint Catherine, touched counterpoint of an etching by Rubens (1577-1640).
Rogers Fund, 1922
ever said to itself: “Go to, you are losing the great culture of your past, you are debased and transitional, your taste is atrocious, your style is impure, and your general intelligence of a very low grade.” When we say those things about an age of the past we prove not our wisdom and knowledge but our ignorance, for no one ever learned anything by making comparisons or uttering judgments of that kind.

Considerations of this sort explain why prints like these in our show are unknown to us. They don't come in the labeled containers of today's nationally advertised brands of history, and they can't be explained in ten snappy short words. But it is largely because of this that the ideas they stand for have dominated the world of picture-making for more than three hundred years. The highroad traveled by modern art from the Carracci to at least the end of the nineteenth century was surveyed and graded by men who didn't have the wit to know that they were tiresome and baroque.