A Bequest of Prints by Callot and Daumier

by A. HYATT MAYOR, Curator of Prints

For many years the Museum has received distinguished gifts of prints by Turner, Daumier, Meryon, and Hollar from one of the last great print collectors in the classic manner. This was Edwin de Turck Bechtel, who, at his death on July 4, 1957, bequeathed the Museum over eight hundred etchings by Jacques Callot, practically all the books about Callot or illustrated by him, over five hundred prints by Honoré Daumier, and many impressions of the rare large lithographs issued by L’Association Mensuelle in 1832-34, to which Mrs. Bechtel has added a generous gift of books about Daumier. Selections from this bequest, comprehending every aspect of the two great artists, have been on exhibition this summer in our Special Exhibition Galleries.

People collect for almost as many reasons as there are collectors. Mr. Bechtel collected prints in order to adventure and to write about the vividness of his adventures. He lived his collection as fully as he lived his life, and by fusing the parallel experiences of his collecting and his work as a lawyer he wrote two excellent books. In 1952 he published through The Grolier Club a pioneer investigation of the relationship of law to art in his Freedom of the Press and L’Association Mensuelle. In 1955 he applied the methods that make a well-ordered and convincing legal brief to the writing of his book Jacques Callot, a remarkably succinct and lucid account of that sprightly print-maker.

Callot was born about 1592 at Nancy in Lorraine, which is, as Mr. Bechtel aptly observed, “about 220 miles east of Paris, and about 500 miles west of Vienna; Antwerp and other important Dutch and Flemish cities are about as near as Paris . . . . Over the crossroads of Nancy passed Flemish, French, German and Italian artisans and artists.” Thus Europe came to Callot even before he started to travel, making him, almost inevitably, into the first international personality among the inventive print-makers. His art, which had culled something from everywhere, in turn imparted something to practically all subsequent etching and engraving.

Callot left his birthplace in Lorraine when he was about fifteen years old, to explore Rome for some three years and Florence for ten more. When he was about twenty-eight he came home to Nancy, where he remained except for extended visits to Flanders and Paris. He died in 1635, aged about forty-three, of what may have been an intestinal cancer. In this brief time he made over fourteen hundred etchings and engravings that were instantly popular all across Europe and have remained so ever since. The Louvre in recent times has sold many impressions from original Callot copperplates.

The first and deepest influence on Callot was his native Lorraine, a struggling duchy about as big as Vermont, with a little capital, Nancy, of aggressive elegance. Callot recorded the close-packed ornament of its small palace garden in an enchanting etching for which the Museum has a beautiful preparatory drawing, given by Anne Stern. The cavaliers of the ducal court of Lorraine strut in many a print, and flash their rapiers and point. Callot, as the son of the duke’s master of ceremonies, learned an observance of decorum and a devotion to the laws of God. The father was also a herald, which means that he probably taught his young son to draw as exactly as one must do for coats of arms.

Callot’s countrymen were forever fighting off
the wolfish soldiery of the surrounding great powers, so that the little boy soon knew horrors at first hand. When he came to etch his celebrated Miseries of War (certainly the inspiration for Goya’s Disasters) he made something unforgettable out of the random destructiveness of war, its impersonal suffering, by presenting it with lucidity, good manners, and even a certain dramatic indifference that he must have learned by growing up in Lorraine in the midst of burning and butchering.

Callot started by engraving in the routine crosshatching that was common everywhere for copying paintings and drawings. In Florence he began to etch in sweeping, tapering parallels based, according to old accounts, on the pavement of Siena cathedral, but which could more credibly have come from Schongauer’s engravings of over a century before. These parallels took less time to draw than crosshatchings, and they turn the roundness of a figure with grace and swing. Schongauer probably also gave him the Northern sense of the grotesque, the imagination to animate a whole fauna of nightmare by assembling believable monsters out of roosters’ beaks, crab claws, fish fins, and similar crisp giblets from market stalls. His sense of elegant unreality served him well in Florence when he created convincing visions of the sham battles on the Arno, the horse ballets and circus chariots in Medici festivities. His Northern eye was perhaps even more astonished by the prancing jesters who improvised ribaldries in public squares on platforms thrown together with loose boards. Callot’s marvelous miniature etchings of the commedia dell’arte—the only pictures that convey its wit—helped to advertise it and make it one of Italy’s most applauded exportations.

In Florence he also picked up a remarkable style of ornament which Buontalenti was developing for decorative stonework and Medici porcelain. Callot twisted these thick volutes, shaped like sagging ears and bellowing lips, to surround his prints. The popularity of his etchings helped to spread this swelling, swinging ornament over all Europe. The Museum is fortunate in having a Callot drawing for a compartment in a decorative frame, which was recently given by Harry G. Friedman.

Callot took much from his age, but gave back even more. His lively studies of picaresque beggary inspired the young Rembrandt—not to mention the Le Nains, Hogarth, and Piranesi. Callot extended the baroque conquest of space when he combined the expanse of a map with the sweep of a panorama in three vast etchings of military campaigns. These helicopter hoverings enlarged the horizon of landscape painting and

Callot: The Great Miseries of War. The Estrapade
probably suggested to Velázquez the famous composition of The Lances. Callot’s big etchings of crowds contain more figures than any pictures before his time. Into the Fair at Impruneta he packed 1138 people, 45 horses, 67 donkeys, and 137 dogs, and he kept this multiplicity from tangling by clumping groups inside lanes of bare ground. This was more picturesque than the old scheme for crowds, which had massed heads like a bumper crop of pumpkins.

Callot’s populous prints cost him a labor that is hard to imagine, for he prepared many sketches for each composition, as well as detailed pen studies for each figure, for each etched stroke. Over two thousand of his drawings still survive to show that he left nothing to chance, like an actor who rehearses most what is to seem most casual. Few artists with so strict a method have maintained such inexhaustible vivacity. The combination of talents enabled him to copy some of his most complex etchings exactly and with practically no loss of freshness.

But Callot’s most lasting innovation was technical. In Florence he thought of grounding his etching plates with the tough varnish of mastic and linseed oil used by lute-makers, instead of
the old uncertain etcher’s ground, which often flaked and caused foul biting. When the new varnish ground turned etching into a predictable and dependable method of picture-making, it encouraged an artist to put more work onto a plate, because he could be reasonably sure that the acid would bite the metal where he had scratched the ground away and not elsewhere. Think of Callot’s despair if foul biting had ruined his months of labor on the Fair at Impruneta!

Callot scratched the gummy ground with a needle called a *chope*, which was nothing but a stout steel wire honed to a slant at the end. The slanting oval edge at the end of the wire was slowly turned while drawing a stroke in order to make the line start slim and gradually broaden, the way an engraved line swells. This tapering regular line transformed etching from a free sketching into a controlled geometry. Abraham Bosse adapted Callot’s technique to make etching counterfeit engraving. For two centuries practically all so-called engravings were really etchings made to imitate engraving, with no graver work except for little touches to soften transitions and to model delicate areas like faces. After Callot most etchers either elaborated his technique or else, a century ago, consciously broke away from it.

In the age of autocrats the realist Callot, knowing that he could do nothing to alter events, observed princes and beggars, actors’ antics, and executions with the detached, astute, and witty eye of the courtier. But in the nineteenth century, when any man could throw his weight into the hurly-burly of politics, the realist Daumier pitched into events as the hardest and bravest political fighter among all the great artists. Forain said of him: “He is not like the rest of us. He is generous.” He threw himself with such headlong generosity into the events of his age that the development of his art actually influenced events in the history of nineteenth-century France. He looked with such grim, inextinguishable hope into French politics that his cartoons could appear in today’s paper without change. His comments on the turmoil of France are terrible because they are still true—and if such things have been true for so long, how can they improve now?

The story of Honoré Victorin Daumier’s life is outwardly uneventful. He was born exactly 150 years ago in Marseilles, where his father was a glazier who cared more about writing poems than setting windowpanes. In the hope, perhaps, of a literary career, the father moved his family to Paris in that year of fate 1814. The breakup of Napoleon’s Empire would have made it hard for even a brilliant poet to attract attention, and Daumier’s father was not that. So little Honoré helped support his parents by carrying a bailiff’s writs and summonses, as a *saute-ruisseau* or “gutter-jumper,” and thus began to explore the human turmoil of Paris which he was to immortalize. After a spell of running errands he went to work in a bookstore. But since the family lived in a poor part of Paris where presses were starting to exploit the new invention of lithography, nothing would do but young Daumier must try to become an artist. He had always drawn, so now he took a few lessons from a minor painter and copied Greco-Roman statues in the Louvre. In his later teens he was making catchy little lithographs of daily life and of political caricature for a small print-publisher, aping the styles of various popular lithographers who are now forgotten.

His political satire became bolder until, when he was twenty-three, he caricatured King Louis Philippe as Rabelais’s giant Gargantua gorging on the wealth of France. This was a risky bit of...
impudence, for the new Citizen King, after promising the rule of the common man, was reverting to Bourbon reaction and rigidity. So Daumier went to jail where, in a lively, misspelled letter, he wrote that his fellow prisoners had nicknamed him Gargantua from his caricature, and were all begging him to draw their portraits; he was busier than at home and would be just as happy were it not for wondering about his parents. Several months later he left prison to find himself unexpectedly a hero in the struggle of the populace against the government.

This struggle has been going on ever since the French Revolution stopped the ancient and inert momentum of privilege by a revolt that has trained all revolutionaries forever after. While establishing the bourgeoisie, it did so little for the proletariat that it left the cities full of bitterness against all authority. The French Revolution has been a continuous process, seesawing day in and day out, dividing France into intransigent parties, sometimes dividing the parties within themselves to the point of political paralysis. It is significant that “collaboration” is not an honorable word in French. The interminable tussle has formed and matured the proletariat to the point where, as a recent census has shown, today’s French workman wants above all else to acquire power by getting an equal share of higher education for his children.

The infinite divisibility of Frenchmen made the battle that raged around Daumier’s whole life. He fought in it first through a pioneer and radical newspaper that began to appear on November 4, 1830 to oppose Louis Philippe, who had become king three months before. This was La Caricature, the first publication to “combine the art of caricature with that of journalism,” as Mr. Bechtel observed. Each number of four pages printed on a single sheet was folded around a lithograph devised by Philipon and drawn by one of his group of artists. Political caricatures were not new in themselves, but they had never been organized into a regular, disciplined campaign as they were now in “Philipon’s war against Louis Philippe.” Philipon naturally took on Daumier after Gargantua had made him notorious. Daumier’s first lithograph in La Caricature appeared a bare fortnight after he left prison, and he continued to contribute until more stringent press laws closed the journal in August 1835.

Philipon must have foreseen that the stiffening of the monarchy would shortly kill La Caricature, for he launched a milder periodical in December 1832, a daily in a similar format called Charivari, with a more bantering tone that could get by the censors and an editorial policy sound enough to keep it alive for over a century. Daumier contributed his first lithograph in the second month of publication and continued to contribute six or eight stones a month until March 1860, when he was apparently discharged. He then tried in vain to earn his living as a painter until De-
Négresse.” The childless couple lived simply and quietly on the Île St. Louis on the top floor of one of those old patrician houses that seem to have settled sedately on their haunches. Above their little flat Daumier used a vast attic for his studio, a great gaunt room where he worked for thirty years at a table cluttered with lithographic equipment, near a black iron stove and under a skylight overlooking treetops and a green bend of river. When he started to lose his sight his friend Corot gave him a cottage in the country near his own. Daumier called his staunch old comrade the only man from whom he could accept a gift without humiliation, and he put a touching love into the water color of Corot sitting in his garden, which was bequeathed to the Museum by Mrs. Havemeyer. Still Corot’s neighbor, Daumier died on February 11, 1879, after a stroke.

Daumier grew to his unique greatness laboriously and gradually. He began lithography in the fashion of the 1830s by carefully shading and stippling from pearly grays to velvet blacks. He achieved his first artistic success at the age of twenty-four when he lithographed a series of portraits of politicians for La Caricature, studying his victims from the visitors’ gallery of the Senate, then going home to model little heads of them out of what Baudelaire called his “almost divine memory.” Throughout his life, instead of sketching on paper, he kept a lump of clay to push into the shapes that his imagination was seeking. What a pity it is that he kneaded up the clay sketches as soon as they had served his purpose, for the modeling that he allowed to survive moves with a grander bulk and vigor than the professional sculpture of his day.

In 1834 Daumier made his most famous though not his greatest picture, which represents the bedroom of a working-class family shot by soldiers during a riot in the Rue Transnonain. The still disorder of the furniture and the bodies littering the moonlit floor—“trivial and terrible,” as Baudelaire called it—is an astonishing achievement for an artist of twenty-six.

The lithograph attracted queues of spectators, was seized by the police and probably hastened the passing of the stringent laws of censorship which closed La Caricature in August 1835. It was
the final number in _L'Association Mensuelle_, a series of monthly lithographs which Philipon published to raise money for his legal battles. The Rue Transnonain is Daumier's parting shot in his first skirmish against the French government.

Young and strong though he was, Daumier must have felt a certain battle fatigue, for he put amusement, but not much zest, into the lithographs of social satire that followed for over ten years. He (or his publisher Philipon) grouped pictures in series under descriptive names—the Good Middle Class, Lodgers and Landlords, Conjugal Customs, Men of Law. His series of Bathers may have been his first work to attract the attention of artists, for Delacroix copied the nudes and Baudelaire commented on their remarkable drawing. The most famous of these early lithographs were the series of 101 devoted to the grandiloquent shyster Robert Macaire; these Mr. Bechtel gave to the Museum in 1953.

When 1848 threw out Louis Philippe, in a revolution that seemed to promise peace and freedom for a year, Daumier fought among the first and best with attacks on the government which were more mature and less vindictive than his earlier cartoons, but for that very reason more deadly. His freedom of expression did not last long, for in 1851 Napoleon III managed to gag the press once again, forcing Daumier to turn back to social satire. Several new series of lithographs such as the Musical Sketches and the Amateur Actors show Daumier studying his well-born neighbors in his quiet and old-fashioned part of Paris, as he began to be invited a few doors away to evenings of chamber music or private theatricals. Yet the broadening of his acquaintance brought him no relief from lifelong poverty.

One can understand why _Charivari_ dismissed him in 1860, for he was too deeply human an artist to have any chic. As his sculptor's eye concentrated more and more on the bulk and action of the body, clothes degenerated to a loose, non-descript skin that the wearers might have grown too abundantly. So unstylish an illustrator must have embarrassed any Parisian periodical. After

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_Daumier: Murder in the Rue Transnonain. From L'Association Mensuelle, 1834_
his dismissal he tried for three years to live by selling his water colors for the same modest price as his lithographic stones, and by painting some magnificent oils. But when he failed to meet even his small expenditures he had to return to the slavery of illustrating in December 1863. By that time Charivari could probably overlook his dowdiness in its need for a strong political cartoonist to comment on the gathering storm of disaster.

As if to aggravate his servitude, the magazine began to be printed on cheaper paper and ever more sloppily. Then, in July 1870, it halved its printing costs by eliminating the expensive hand-inked and hand-fed lithographic press that had printed the pictures but not the text. Daumier's drawings were henceforth reproduced on zinc relief plates called gillotypes, so that they could be printed by the same press as the text, in one operation. Thus Daumier's latest and greatest works survive only in gray, granular, mechanical approximations. The loss of delicate gradations made Daumier draw his last illustrations with the utmost boldness.

His one fling as a painter inspired some lithographs called Landscape Painters and Sketches at the Salon, but his enormous series from the sixties until his blindness in about 1872 was the Political Events, which show how clearly he fore-saw the dangers that were pulling the Second Empire toward its downfall in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Not being allowed to comment on the French government, he concentrated his prophetic acuteness on foreign affairs, where his cartoons must have shaped public opinion like brilliant editorials—as Low's do today—thanks to a sweep and brevity of expression that ranks them with any drawings anywhere. Out of the darkening of Daumier's eyesight came the full and most terrible greatness of his inner vision. It was the last, great, passionate outburst of baroque expressiveness.

Daumier became a great lithographer partly because he hated lithography—his "pushcart" to which poverty had harnessed him, but which he was forced to use in order to work out the forms that he could not paint or model. This pursuit of shape and expression regardless of, or even against, a medium saved him from the professional print-maker's finicky technicalities, while the brute recklessness of his despair drove him to invent more than any French artist of his century. Though his four thousand lithographs...
were mere comics to most people, they appeared weekly or oftener, year in and year out, in editions of thirty-five hundred or more, with an originality of vision that helped to show the impressionist painters what to paint and how to put it on the canvas. In the rough daily chores of ephemeral illustration he could risk spoiling a picture by splitting it into a light half and a dark half, or by slicing a row of dancers with a falling theater curtain. Since he dared less in the noble and reflective art of painting, it was not his paintings but his lithographs which led Degas, Lautrec, and Bonnard to look for subjects in the boulevards, the cafés, and the theaters, in the garden, the kitchen, the bedroom, and the office. Daumier’s firm footing in the life of his age makes him the one artist who comes nearest to summing up the complexity of the nineteenth century.

By working from the storehouse of his sculptural memory, he gradually developed an emphatic shorthand of lines that define shadow and shape by one stroke—lines like an actor’s make-up, that follow the 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 strokes flowing deliberate and free.

So much for Daumier’s public life as a lithographer, which made him as well known to his contemporaries as Rube Goldberg or Al Capp is to us, and which is fully illustrated by Mr. Bechtel’s bequest. It would be a pity, however, to omit all mention of his paintings, for there are few artists whose public and commissioned works differ so deeply from their private productions. Although he had hoped to be remembered for his paintings and sculpture, almost nobody saw these until his first one-man show a year before
his death. Since that time his private works have influenced painters as diverse as Rouault and John Sloan.

Daumier’s lithographs are bullets shot in every political scrap he was able to enter, but his paintings never refer to any specific political event, for their vehemence probes far beyond caricature into the heart of human struggle. His pictures of lawyers, for example, have been said to show a hatred of courtroom chicanery which he may well have acquired when he was a bailiff’s errand boy. Yet if he had really wanted to pillory the ranciers of the courtroom, would he have given so many of them the likeness of his own splendid leonine head? What he saw in the courtroom was an almost frightening discharge of energy in the falcon glance, the writhing lips, and the wide arc of the arm.

While the lithographs never repeat a composition, the paintings reiterate a few themes, such as the third-class carriage or the washerwoman lugging her sodden load. It is as though Daumier’s paintings never satisfied him but drove him again and again to attempt some haunting vision that barely eluded him at each try. A subject that must particularly have harassed him was Don Quixote and Sancho Panza dashing across some dusty plain or down some desperate gully, for he was fascinated by that heroic comedy, that clash of contradictions that divides the heart of each of us, half animal and half angel as we are. Perhaps his greatest artistic tragedy was the fact that, though he made more than a thousand wood engravings for worthless texts, he was never given a chance to illustrate the Quixote. He was better fitted than any artist of his time to interpret Cervantes’ teetering between laughter and tears, for the Spanish knight’s tragic absurdity spoke home to the son of the glazier who so desperately failed to make himself a poet.

After a schooling too sketchy to give his thought any literary shape, Daumier discovered great books as an adult; perhaps he experienced them all the more profoundly for not having been driven to read them before he could understand them. In his thirties he approached Greek and Latin literature through the back door, by way of a series of lithographed parodies of Greek and Roman epics and classic French tragedy. Since the nicest judge of the deformations that turn the grand manner into ridicule is often a master of the grand manner, Daumier in his middle age painted some oils that are among the noblest modern evocations of classical mythology. Bernini, the most dramatic sculptor of the baroque, was also its most malicious caricaturist, and was the first to introduce the word caricatura into France. Ridicule thereafter became the tyrant of the French, their sharpest weapon and their heaviest dread, so that Daumier’s youthful lampoons on French classical tragedy explode in a French mind with a liveliness hardly to be appreciated by a foreigner.

Daumier took up painting when he was already a great lithographer; consequently he made no student paintings, nor any immature ones. Had he been an engraver the tight, geometric discipline of the burin would almost certainly have curbed his daring and inventiveness with the brush, but as a lithographer he had already learned much that a painter has to know. Baudelaire, for instance, was struck with the painterly

Daumier: At the Bordeaux Assembly the Moderate Party Takes a Conciliatory Stand. From Charivari, 1871
richness of his printed black and white. In addition, the discipline of turning out illustrations against editors’ deadlines enabled Daumier to attack his first canvas promptly and to carry it through with resolution. But above all, lithography had taught him to draw.

He worked on his canvases exactly as he did on his stones. In his earlier lithographs and paintings he carefully established his shadows and then refined them into detail. In his later work he “marbleized” his canvas or his stone to indicate the masses of his picture, on top of which he drew the precise lines of form. Most painters draw on the primed canvas and then color the drawing, but Daumier, by reversing this method, left his inimitable drawing right on top, where it shows. It is precisely this assured drawing with the brush that his many imitators have found it impossible to re-create. None of them ever grasped form so sculpturally, could ever follow a solid when it sloped into shadow—so that the shapes in a fake Daumier always dissolve somewhere into a soup of obscurity.

Much as he amused and stimulated the average Frenchman, during his active working life there was only one critic who wrote seriously about Daumier. But that one was the keenest art analyst of his century—the poet Charles Baudelaire, whose visual acuity is supreme among men of letters. It is strange how much they had in common: Baudelaire the most aristocratic intelligence among French poets and Daumier the most proletarian of French painters. Starting from opposite poles they met in the discovery that the life of a modern city was a new subject for art. It is seldom that poet or painter finds unexploited a field that is humanly rich enough to warrant his exploration. Both these men perceived the heroism of modern urban life—as Baudelaire put it, the dignity of trousers and a plug hat. Without resorting to the glamor of corsairs or troubadours they could make the top of your head go cold with a poem about the dawn cry of a bugle at the end of a stony street or a picture of ballad-singers trudging to some less hopeless pitch around the corner. While the painter, on his side, may not have appreciated the poet’s heroic nakedness to the assaults of life, Baudelaire wrote, out of the depths of their shared vision, the most perceptive observations that have ever been made about the solitary greatness of Daumier.

The passing of the years has reversed Daumier’s reputation as drastically as Cézanne’s. A century ago young Manet was thrown out of an art school with the warning, “You will become the Daumier of your time.” This sounds today as though the teacher had said, “If you don’t watch out you will become another Michelangelo.”