

Printmaking as Artistic Accomplishment

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In order to give his artistic inclination the foundation of a sound education, Félix Vallotton trained as a painter in Paris from 1882 at the Académie Julian. Although he found success in the French capital relatively quickly and exhibited some of his paintings, often portraits of acquaintances and fellow painters, he remained dependent on his family, especially his brother Paul, for support. Despite this, he did all he could to earn at least part of his living himself, be it through drawings, commissioned paintings or reproductive prints after paintings by other artists.

Vallotton produced his first print even before commencing his training in Paris.¹ It is a timid beginning, a detail from another print, a portrait of an elderly man, a copy after an etching by Jean-Jacques de Boissieu (1881; fig. 40), which primarily served to increase his understanding of technique. But after 1887 his printmaking career really took off, as he made portraits and several reproductive etchings after the Old Masters and highly regarded contemporary painters alike. These were commissions, and they enabled him to earn his living.

Economic necessity undeniably pushed Vallotton towards printmaking. He developed a particular method in his early portrait painting, depicting often well-known contemporaries with a neutral background and in profile. He had a certain success with these so-called *Portraits décoratifs*, which ultimately led the publisher L. Joly to commission him in 1892 to make a series of prints, the *Immortals Past, Present or Future*. These were Vallotton's first lithographs and a further development of his previous printed portraits towards caricatures, or as Vallotton called them 'satirical portraits' (fig. 41). The following year another publication appeared: *Paris Intense*, on whose title page Vallotton announced that he would concentrate on the everyday life of the petty bourgeoisie (cat. 57). These apparently unspectacular scenes depict the arrest of two squabbling men; a crowd waiting at a counter, penned up behind a low fence and guarded by a policeman; an accident with a carriage (cat. 58); or a sudden shower of rain that takes nannies, maids and workers by surprise in the street, while the carriages of the rich stand lined up in the background (cat. 59). These small, highly charged situations characterised everyday life in nineteenth-century Paris. The most direct way to depict them in print was lithography on zinc plates, which provided Vallotton with a means to retain the peculiarity of his drawings, to use some halftones, but still to show a certain abstraction of events and combine it with a particular perspective. Vallotton tends to place the viewer slightly above the scene and consciously crops off the figures in the foreground.

Whereas lithographs and etchings were to a certain extent the commercial side of his printmaking, Vallotton's woodcuts were more of a private production, at least at the beginning. The woodcut technique allowed him to act more freely and, as he was not tied to a publisher, to let his ideas run free. It was probably his friend and teacher Charles Maurin who introduced him to woodcut.

Vallotton's interest in the woodcut began in 1891, again with several portraits. But beside these portraits, he broadened his subject-matter to encompass social themes and

landscapes, specifically in his mountain pictures. A particularly striking example is his depiction of the Jungfrau (1892; fig. 42). Vallotton broke with deep-rooted tradition in this landscape and abandoned the traditional Western use of perspective, shifting his horizon far upwards to simulate long distance or to dispense completely with a foreground and to monumentalise these alpine landscapes, despite working in a relatively small format. Vallotton's clever use of pictorial space and composition, both evident in *The Jungfrau*, develop into a new understanding of composition, with stacked elements one behind the other, and not necessarily with a conventional vanishing point. It was at this moment that the floodgates seem to have opened: in 1892 he notes only a few paintings, but numerous prints, among them 25 woodcuts.

Throughout this decade, Vallotton avoided contemporary trends in printmaking, such as the coloured woodcut, or overly detailed representation. He sought solutions that would correspond to his pictorial conception. In the early 1890s he began depicting urban scenes integrating masses of people into his pictorial spaces; in order to do so, he chose anonymous and unidentifiable cityscapes, although these were often suggestive of Paris. He did not set out to present particular political events but rather to draw attention to the increasing dissatisfaction of the general population and the sometimes violent reaction of the authorities.

The Charge (1893; cat. 64) and *The Demonstration* (1893; cat. 65) are examples of his process of concentration. In his early woodcuts, Vallotton used a rather linear approach, i.e. the contours of his figures or forms were framed by a black outline with many details depicted at a similar level, as in his drawings. Halftones, however, could only be achieved through hatching. Although this way of working was simple enough in lithography and etching, it worked only to a limited extent in woodcuts. Vallotton's remedy was to use only a few lines, omitting small elements or increasing the density of certain areas to form a shadow or a compact mass. This resulted in the loss of some detail, but nevertheless helped him to define space.

Vallotton quickly pushed this idea further, again with everyday scenes, for example, women shopping in one of the newly established department stores, *The Bon Marché Department Store* (cat. 66). As often, Vallotton first prepared this woodcut in a drawing (fig. 43). The differences between the drawing and the print illustrate how he constructed his composition, adapted it to technical limitations, and finally used it as the starting point for a later painting. The protagonists, such as the salesmen or the shoppers, are concentrated in the centre of the image in a kind of procession coming towards the viewer from the background. The displays, the fabrics, the salesmen and the shoppers define the rhythm of the picture. Although this idea was present at the very beginning of the composition, it was not until Vallotton turned his drawing into a woodcut that he changed his approach. The drawing shows much more detail in the women's dresses and thicker lines in the display shelves on the left. To address certain unclear areas, Vallotton simplified the majority of the women's dresses for the woodcut and reduced them to an almost homogenous black surface. Although some details remain, they are cut out of the black surface, thus appearing within the image as negative elements. This approach is unique to Vallotton among printmakers of the time.

However, this was merely a first step towards more radical solutions. After his lithographs for Joly, Vallotton took up the theme of the rain shower again towards the end of 1894. But now his approach to composition was completely different. Whereas in the zincograph (cat. 59) he depicted a street scene, in the woodcut (cat. 67) the crowd occupies

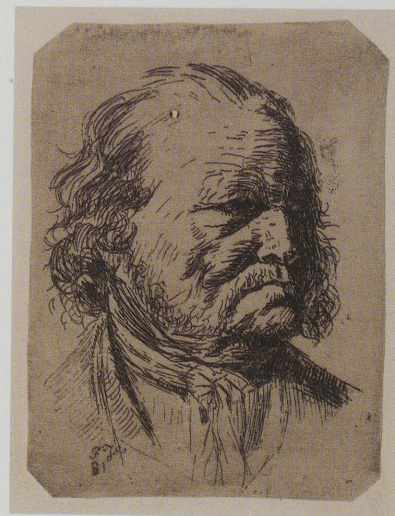


Fig. 40
Portrait of an Elderly Man (Portrait d'homme âgé), 1881, after an etching by Jean-Jacques de Boissieu. Etching, 17.3 × 11.1 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva; Cabinet d'arts graphiques. Donation of Fondation Jean-Louis Prevost

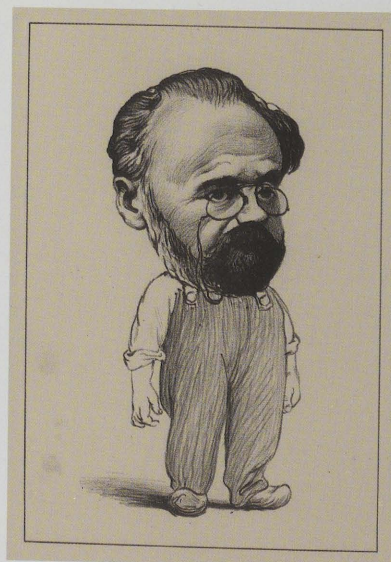


Fig. 41
Emile Zola, 1893, from *Immortals of the Past, Present or Future (Immortels passés, présents ou futurs)*, plate 7. Lithograph, state II/II, 33 × 24.8 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva; Cabinet d'arts graphiques. Gift of Lucien Archinard

Fig. 42
The Jungfrau (La Jungfrau), 1892.
Woodcut, sole state, 25.2 × 32.7 cm.
Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva; Cabinet d'arts
graphiques. Gift of Lucien Archinard



Fig. 43
Preparatory drawing for *The Bon Marché*
Department Store (Le Bon marché), c. 1893.
Graphite, brush and Indian ink, white
gouache, blue crayon on cream paper,
verso drawing in Indian ink, 25 × 32 cm.
Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva;
Cabinet d'arts graphiques



an undefined space. The figures are only partly discernible as individuals as they huddle beneath umbrellas. And whereas in the lithograph they could be distinguished from one another, in the woodcut they are simplified silhouettes, becoming almost layered in their arrangement. This strategy contributes to the development of a new understanding of space. In numerous paintings and prints from the following years, Vallotton applies these spatial layers, for example in *The Merry Latin Quarter* (1895; cat. 69). He pushes the technical boundaries of the woodcut to the limit in his quest to circumvent conventional approaches while at the same time conveying a new understanding of space and movement.

The years 1892–94 were a groundbreaking period for Vallotton.² The influential critic Octave Uzanne wrote an important essay about him in which he praised the artist as a special figure in contemporary printmaking and at the same time pointed out that this new kind of woodcut was not a reproductive technique but an independent genre.³ Uzanne's remarks, as well as those of Julius Meier-Graefe in the first catalogue of Vallotton's woodcuts, published a few years later,⁴ prove that Vallotton was quickly noted by his contemporaries as an innovator, an artist who could breathe new life and topicality into the rather antiquated medium of the woodcut.

For Vallotton this was a vindication of his previous activity and a call to make his woodcuts even more radical. The results were partly revealed in 1894, when he was invited to contribute to an exhibition organised by the newspaper *La Dépêche de Toulouse*, the first show outside Paris to recognise the Nabis as a nascent contemporary movement. For Vallotton, the exhibition was an important milestone and he showed *The Charge* and *The Bon Marché Department Store*, and another interior scene, *The Brawl, or Scene in a Café* (1892; fig. 44).

In these prints, however, Vallotton turned away from his previous crowd scenes, reducing his distance from the persons depicted. He also used the same idea in other woodcuts, for example portraits or depictions of more painful or intimate moments,⁵

Fig. 44
The Brawl, or Scene in a Café (La rixe, or Scène au café), 1892. Woodcut, sole state, 25 × 32.3 cm.
Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva; Cabinet d'arts graphiques



where he positions himself relatively close to the picture plane and therefore involves the viewer directly in the action. But this requires an extension of the technical possibilities, oriented both on subject-matter and a new understanding of space. *The Bath* (1894; cat. 61) is a striking example of this. In contrast to *Murder* (1893; cat. 62), with its prominent furniture, the interior setting plays a subordinate role here. Much more important is the proximity of the viewer and thus the conscious concentration on individual elements, even if they are still depicted summarily. For Vallotton, the suggestion of moods, fears and hopes became very important. He aimed to keep the settings of his works sufficiently unclear to enable the viewer to project his or her imagination onto the scene. And the high point of this came in 1896–97 with the series of prints on musical instruments (cats 70–81).⁶

These woodcuts are again all prepared in drawings, which actually show how Vallotton plans spatial issues and how he develops solutions for his woodcuts. A typical example is *The Violin* (cat. 75), in which Vallotton uses the furnishing of an uncharacterised space in order to create a limited depth. Again, he uses a typical *fin-de-siècle* room with elements of a bourgeois ambience, and places within it some rather intimate scenes. All the musicians are alone, practising, sometimes without scores,⁷ some sitting, some standing. The challenge for Vallotton was how to situate them in a limited space, and he achieved this by means of the room's furnishings.

Before this series, space had been merely a means for Vallotton to articulate his compositions, not an object of representation itself. This changes in the musical instruments prints and that is why they represent such an extreme caesura in his work. Thereafter, for Vallotton, the position of the figure in space becomes the main concern. Events no longer take place on parallel levels, but in a comprehensible room. Vallotton's focus on surface and the reductive layering of forms inhibited a direct representation of spatial depth: in order to achieve this, he had first to clarify his relationship with the woodcut for himself and adapt his working process. The only possibility was to combine two diametrically opposed approaches: the usual technique with black-printed lines and use of the white-line woodcut, in which lines are cut into a black surface. In preparatory drawings, this meant a complete reversal of understanding. The various lines, both black and white, and the surfaces that are meant to print must be conceived from the beginning. A striking example is the violinist. In the woodcut (cat. 75), a fine white line appears on the armrest and backrest to represent the reflection of the fire burning in the fireplace. It was important for Vallotton to structure the otherwise black surface, to separate the musician from the armchair and to indicate the significance of light in his work. Therefore, he reinforced exactly this part in the drawing (cat. 74). A detailed examination of the sheet shows that Vallotton revised it at least four times. A first layout was made carefully in pencil. A first pen drawing followed, defining forms and the composition. After that a revision in ink and brush was carried out in order partially to execute the surfaces, and finally, as a fourth step, came the revision in blue chalk and gouache. This was then the starting point for the woodcut. Numerous details – the arm, the hairline, the base of the wall panelling, decorative elements of the fireplace – are either not executed or are melded together. This reveals that the conception of the final images was not finalised in the drawing but continued to evolve as Vallotton cut into the woodblock. Even though Vallotton summarises numerous areas in the woodcut, the drawing shows that in the end he first conceived the individual forms separately and then merged them with one another. This is an intellectually important step, revealing how much he radicalises and synthesises his pictorial world, moving even further away from the direct representation of reality.

Although Vallotton developed this way of thinking and working for his prints on musical instruments, the consequences clearly go beyond printmaking. There is a new interaction between subject, conception of space and composition, as well as the balance of light and shade. In his subsequent paintings and pastels, Vallotton tries to transfer similar solutions to these media.

Shortly afterwards, Vallotton created another print series of interiors: the *Intimacies*. This was not a totally new subject for Vallotton.⁸ The series was produced in 1897/98 by *La Revue blanche*.⁹ After printing the planned 30 copies, the blocks were sawn up and a detail of each was printed together on a sheet to be included in the portfolio as certification of the destruction of the blocks (cat. 93). In each sheet Vallotton depicted a couple in some kind of relationship. It has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars that the pictures do not portray continuous action, but discrete scenes revealing the mendacity of turn-of-the-century society in relation to marriage and partnerships, either because of extramarital affairs or unhappily married couples who maintain only a social façade.

From a technical point of view, Vallotton resumed the strong contrasts and the spatial devices that he had used for his musical instruments series. Again, he radicalised his concept. He further reduced the figurative elements almost to silhouettes, which enabled him to achieve a near-complete dissolution of individual form and to rethink the place of the people within the picture. Whereas he had previously placed his protagonists largely in the centre of a picture, he now began to position them at the edge, as in *Money* (cat. 87) or *Five O'Clock* (cat. 89). Such an approach dramatises the moment, generating additional attention for them while simultaneously establishing an emotional distance. Only occasionally is there real communication between the figures; in most cases, the viewer becomes the voyeur of an extremely tense and ambiguous interaction between the protagonists. Often, rather than interacting with one another, their attention is directed outwards, suggested by the way they are positioned, looking at a point outside the picture, or else they are withdrawn into their own inner thoughts.

Very quickly, this series was recognised as a radical endpoint of the woodcut. It would be impossible to be more extreme, to reduce even further a sense of space or to enhance contrast. This is probably the principal reason why after 1900 Vallotton slowed down his production of prints and refocused his artistic energies on painting, in which he succeeded in transferring many of the ideas that had been developed in his prints to his paintings, for example *Dinner by Lamplight* (cat. 31) and *The Visit by Lamplight* (cat. 30).

On only a few occasions did Vallotton take up printmaking again after 1900, with the series *Crimes and Punishments* (fig. 45), colour lithographs for the satirical magazine *L'Assiette au beurre*, and a series on the Exposition Universelle that took place in Paris in 1900 (see cats 94–99).¹⁰ To a certain degree a circle closes with the latter, because Vallotton again takes up crowds of people as a theme, as he had done in the early 1890s. But his aim was not to celebrate the modernity of the Paris exhibition, nor the range of inventions nor the large number of exhibiting countries, but to show people's reactions to what they saw. Not much has changed since those first prints: the crowd remains a mobile mass, impersonal in its entirety, whose focus of interest remains hidden from the viewer. However, Vallotton now structures his pictorial spaces differently. More clearly than ever before, he divides them into an upper and a lower area, as in *Fireworks* (cat. 99). A void in one area is juxtaposed with abundance in the other, which can include movement, or, as here, the amazement of the crowd at a shower of light.

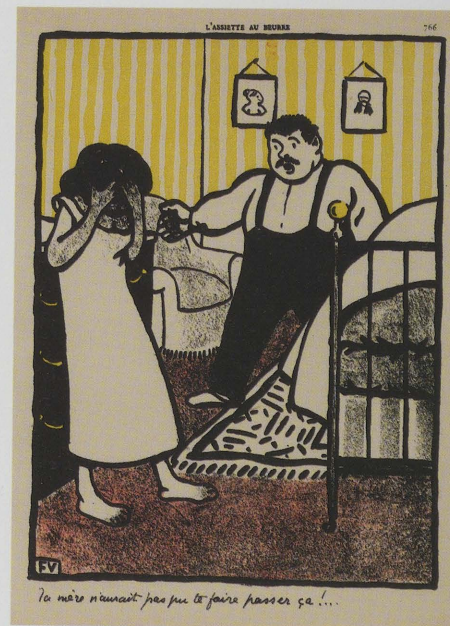


Fig. 45
 'Couldn't your mother have knocked that out of you?' ('Ta mère n'aurait pas pu te faire passer ça!'), from *Crimes and Punishments* (*Crimes et Châtiments*), plate 9, 1901. Colour lithograph, state II/II, 31.9 × 25.7 cm. Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva; Cabinet d'arts graphiques

Apart from a few commissions for bookplates, Vallotton returned for the last time to the woodcut during the First World War. The conflict's outbreak was an existential experience for the artist, who had been a French citizen since 1900. After his request to enlist for the French army was rejected because of his age, he decided to publish at his own expense a portfolio of six woodcuts, *C'est la Guerre!*, in a specially designed folder seemingly spattered with blood (cat. 100).¹¹ The images bear all his most typical characteristics: a comprehensive harmony of black-and-white surfaces, almost ornamental lines and a decorative reinterpretation of individual cruel elements, as in *Barbed Wire* (cat. 103). As Vallotton could not rely on his own experience, he was forced to draw on propaganda images and his imagination. This changed when he visited the front, after which his paintings show the force of the impacts, the mutual will to destroy, the apocalyptic emptiness of a landscape devastated by explosions and fire, and the wounded, ruins, graves and destruction (fig. 9). But in these earlier woodcuts he still idealises war: the helmets of soldiers seeking protection from grenades in a trench with no regard for the apparent beauty of the explosions, the fallen caught in barbed wire beneath starlit skies, the mutual killing or the almost decorative arrangement of a gun emplacement in *The Lookout*; all reveal Vallotton's technical means and mastery, but also a great emotional distance. These prints have none of the biting social criticism of the mid-1890s, none of the rebellion against brutal authority. From now on, emotional involvement for Vallotton takes place only in painting.