

Remarks on Giambattista Tiepolo's *Scherzi*

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It is a well known fact that on 29 December 1757 Giandomenico Tiepolo sent some prints, accompanied by a letter, to Pierre-Jean Mariette.¹ This consignment included sets of the *Capricci* and the *Scherzi*, which later formed an album that was bought by the Bibliothèque Royale in Paris.² The accompanying letter was not just a kind of delivery note, for it explains three main points regarding the prints. First, that work on the *Scherzi* was not finished, a fact used in the past to determine a *ter-*

minus ante quem for their dating; second, that the Tiepolos had pulled new impressions; and third, the letter comments on the low quality of some of the plates as there had not been enough time to retouch them.

Another piece of evidence for the dating of the *Scherzi* is a list included in an album assembled by Anton Maria Zanetti, the leading Venetian print collector. The album, donated by Zanetti to the Dresden collection, contained his own prints as well as Tiepolo's

1. See L. C. Frerichs, 'Mariette et les eaux-fortes des Tiepolos', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXXVIII, 1971, pp. 233–40, supplemented by her transcripts of all the documents in *Nouvelle de l'Estampe*, 1971,

no. 4, pp. 213–28. See also *Le Cabinet d'un grand amateur: P. J. Mariette 1694–1774*, Paris, 1967, no. 318, pp. 180–82.

Capricci and *Scherzi* etchings. Most research has concentrated on using this list to establish a historical context to support various datings.³ Yet no satisfactory conclusion in favour of a specific date has been reached and it now seems more likely that the *Scherzi* were created gradually. Other research has addressed the iconographic meaning of this series and has tried to situate them within Giambattista's printed oeuvre.⁴

Two important issues mentioned in the letter to Mariette have not been adequately discussed: the continuous printing of these etchings and the technical difficulties involved in printing the plates. Such difficulties are not evident in the prints sent to Mariette now in Paris, which are probably among the most homogeneous and perfect impressions of the first state. In contrast to most other impressions of the first state, which seem to have been printed in haste, they appear very clear and crisp.⁵

A closer examination of the impressions of *The Solitary Philosopher* (Il filosofo solitario) may shed some light on its printing history. Three states have so far been identified; the first two were printed during Giambattista's lifetime and the third posthumously by Giandomenico in 1777. The first state (not included in the Mariette album) shows the heads of two boys appearing between the body of the philosopher and an open book. A number of impressions of this state are known, some of which were incompletely wiped, with the considerable amount of ink used causing individual plate-tone. But the plate-tone is not as even as in some seventeenth-century prints and the technique resembles more a practice used by James McNeil Whistler and other artists of the late nineteenth-century etching revival.

The impressions of this first state of *The Solitary Philosopher* in the British Museum (fig. 195), Berlin and Geneva (fig. 196), which exhibit distinctive plate-tone, also contain another peculiarity in regard to the lines in the top left part, which later become a medallion with the profile of Pulcinella, a character from the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In the earliest impressions from the plate, such as the one in the British Museum, these lines are missing

or barely visible. However, in the slightly later impressions in Berlin, Geneva and Rotterdam (fig. 197) these lines appear and remain in all subsequent impressions. Thus, the lines make it necessary to differentiate more states than hitherto recorded or to further distinguish the first. Therefore the new description of states would run: the first, with the heads of the two boys on the right and with an empty space at top left (fig. 195); the second, with the heads of the boys and with the face of Pulcinella in the medallion (figs. 196 and 197); the third, after the heads of the boys have been erased; and the fourth, published by Giandomenico with the numbers.

Apart from this hitherto unrecorded, new first state, there is little evidence that other plates were worked on repeatedly. More often, the differences between impressions are less a question of reworking than of inking, wiping and printing. It seems that for Giambattista, probably assisted by his sons, printing was not a straightforward process. Some impressions show that the plates had carelessly wiped areas and present themselves as unclean impressions. But with the exception of sets in London and Geneva, most of the known impressions are carefully printed. This does not mean that the London and Geneva sets have to be seen as inferior impressions. On the contrary, they reveal the difficulties Tiepolo had in pulling good impressions from his plates. The London and Geneva sets, with all their clearly visible scratches, small marks caused by accidents with the acid, badly applied varnish or unclean areas, reveal his aim to achieve deep shadows and clear black lines. On the other hand, the cleaner impressions, such as the ones in Paris and Dresden or most of those in Berlin and Rotterdam, have fine lines, minimal surface tone, were more carefully prepared for printing, but also exhibit less variety in the treatment of the lines. Within these first states, it seems that Tiepolo faced two options: either to print clean and bright impressions, or to have heavily inked impressions with deep, dark lines and greater atmospheric effects but with a less perfect appearance. This heavy inking, however, revealed a technical problem apparent in many impressions,

2. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Réserve des estampes, Bc 19 rés., today in three vols.

3. Maria Santifaller, 'Carl Heinrich von Heinecken e le acquaforti di Giambattista Tiepolo a Dresda', *Arte Veneta*, XXVI, 1972, pp. 148–49.

4. See the summary and new research presented by J. Rutgers, 'The Dating of Tiepolo's *Capricci* and *Scherzi*', *Print Quarterly*, XXIII, 2006, pp. 254–63, with the older but nevertheless fundamental literature.

5. A census of known impressions of the first state of the *Scherzi* is still missing. Complete sets are known to exist in: Dresden,

Geneva, London, Paris, New York and Washington, incomplete sets in Berlin, Rotterdam and Madrid. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following colleagues who helped me with the research on these sets, especially Peter van der Coelen, Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Mayte Garcia Julliard, Cabinet d'arts graphiques, Geneva, Gregory Jecmen, National Gallery, Washington, Catherine Jenkins, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Severine Lepape, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Gudula Metzke, Kupferstichkabinett Dresden, and Cordula Severit, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin.



195. Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Solitary Philosopher*, before 1757, from the *Scherzi*, plate 20, etching, 232 x 171 mm (London, British Museum).



196. Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Solitary Philosopher*, before 1757, from the *Scherzi*, plate 20, etching, 232 x 171 mm (Geneva, Cabinet d'arts graphiques).

which is an uneven etching with uneven dense lines. Giandomenico might have been referring to these parts in his letter to Mariette when he mentioned the difficulties they had had with the printing.

Another problem, again almost invisible in the Paris impressions as well as in those in Dresden and Rotterdam, concerns some areas with doubled lines, indicating that the plate moved during printing. These lines usually appear on the left side of the impression, therefore the right side of the press, and indicate different pressure on the left and right side of the press. The usual construction of a press allowed for adjustments of pressure on both sides, and it seems that the press used by Tiepolo was not well regulated to provide an even pressure over the whole surface. This effect does not appear on all plates, but is evident even in relatively homogeneous sets, in which most of the plates were carefully printed.

It seems that these difficulties were not isolated cases or appeared only in individual impressions. Closer examination of impressions from the first state reveals that this effect occurred regularly. The only explanation could be that Tiepolo printed these plates on at least two occasions, first the quite heavily inked versions, such as the ones in London and Geneva, and slightly later the cleaner ones in Paris, Dresden, Rotterdam, Berlin and probably also the ones in New York. Various small scratches print in both versions, although not as visible in the brighter ones.

The assumption that the plates were printed twice is supported by a closer examination of the watermarks in the various sheets. The watermarks on Giambattista's prints have not been the subject of a comprehensive survey and cannot be used to date the impressions, but initial research reveals an astonishing variety.⁶ It

6. In general, see E. Heawood, *Watermarks mainly of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Hilversum, 1950, and more specifically on Venetian papers: I. Mattozzi, 'Le filigrane et la questione della qualità della

carta nella repubblica veneta della fine del '700: Il caso delle carte filigranate esportate nell'Imperio Ottomano', *Ateneo Veneto*, 1994, CLXXXI, pp. 109–35.

seems that no larger stock of paper was available and therefore a wide variety of papers was used. The watermarks basically belong to a limited number of distinctive groups, such as 3 *Crescents* and their respective countermarks, *W* with an oak leaf or ones with coats-of-arms, including in one instance a French paper with a fleur-de-lis, and with the same watermarks or countermarks appearing on impressions from different plates (figs. 198 and 199) and on both earlier and the later printings. The impression in Berlin is one of the very clear ones, while that in Geneva shows some tone and is slightly less careful. Although no conclusion can

be drawn about the individual dating of these two impressions, they show that the Tiepolos printed on whatever was available in the studio at the time, sometimes without even paying attention to the direction of the paper. Their main concern was not primarily to pull fine impressions, which then could be sold, but in the first instance to get a printed image, even if only in a few examples.

Why, then, did Giambattista make these etchings and why did he pay relatively little attention to the quality of the impressions? Few examples of the first state survive and probably few complete sets were ever



197. Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Solitary Philosopher*, before 1757, from the *Scherzi*, plate 20, etching, 231 x 171 mm (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen).

printed. The posthumous numbered impressions are much more common and raise different questions. But for the lifetime states, one puzzling question remains as to the use or function of these prints. The re-working of at least one plate, the continuous printing of the various parts of the series combined with the uneven inking and rather careless treatment of the plates, and the letter from Giandomenico to Mariette indicate that the Tiepolos were printing on request. Mariette clearly had approached Giambattista for a set, although it is not known if he wrote directly to the artist or via Zanetti. In any case, Tiepolo probably had none available and therefore was forced to print one. Awareness of Mariette's importance as a dealer and collector might have forced Tiepolo to try printing a set of very high quality. Presumably all previous impressions were done for local collectors.

To date, no document has been found that reveals the precise function of this series, but they might have served as a kind of intellectual game for his collectors and friends. The series includes a large number of visual quotations from prints by Salvator Rosa, Castiglione or Rembrandt. One aim might have been to

recognize the sources and to detect the intended meaning. On the other hand, the series enabled Tiepolo to present references to his own inventions, to include his stock figures and to prove that he was on at least the same level as the great seventeenth-century printmakers. Of course it was a serious game, testing not only the knowledge of the recipients of the prints, but also showing the artist's ability to adapt his technique to different uses and styles.

With the arrival of Mariette's commission, however, what had been a private game among friends and collectors in Venice became a more serious endeavour, with the works of art serving as major representatives of Giambattista's artistic practice, his creativity, success and reputation. It is difficult to imagine that he would have sent anything other than the best obtainable impressions to one of the most important print collectors in Europe of his time. With the shipment to Mariette, the *Scherzi* became more public and therefore Tiepolo reprinted the plates, trying to make sure that they were as crisp as possible, and, in a kind of preventive rhetoric, anticipating some potential dissatisfaction with the impressions, sent along with them written excuses to the patron.



198. Watermark 3 *Crescents* of Giambattista Tiepolo, *A Soldier, a Magician and a Bacchante looking at a Burning Skull*, 1748–49, from the *Scherzi*, plate 7 (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Photo: Cordula Severit).



199. Watermark 3 *Crescents* of Giambattista Tiepolo, *A Soldier, a Magician and a Bacchante looking at a Burning Skull*, 1748–49, from the *Scherzi*, plate 7, etching, 222 x 180 mm (Geneva, Cabinet d'arts graphiques, Dépôt de la Fondation Jean-Louis Prevost).