

Prints and Privacy in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Peter Parshall, *The Darker Side of Light: Arts of Privacy 1850–1900*, with contributions by S. Hollis Clayson, Christiane Hertel and Nicholas Penny, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum, 5 April–28 June 2009; Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, 1 October 2009–18 January 2010; Chicago, Smart Museum of Art, 11 February–10 June 2010, Washington, National Gallery of Art and Burlington, VT/Farnham, Lund Humphries, 2009, 180 pp., 90 col. ills., \$50/£35.

Printmaking of the late nineteenth century is often reduced to movements such as Impressionism, Post-Impres-

sionism and Art Nouveau, although there was a much wider range of artistic production, some of which was preeminent in its time. It therefore comes as no surprise that most of the books and exhibition catalogues on this topic are either monographs on individual artists or are restricted to a particular school. Important research, however, has been undertaken to determine the notion of landscape as well as developments in certain countries, such as England and France, and national particularities. Attention has also been paid to the use of etching in the second half of the century, raising a variety of fascinating questions. An outstanding example of such research is



125. Albert Besnard, *Morphine Addicts*, 1887, etching, 235 x 369 mm (Washington, National Gallery of Art).

provided by Peter Parshall's recently published exhibition catalogue.

Accompanying an innovative print exhibition, the catalogue treats the subject of privacy, the use of prints, their perception at the time and parallel developments in the realm of small sculptures. It may sound too wide-ranging at first, but the four essays that constitute the volume's text cover the subject very well. In his introductory essay on 'Prints, Privacy and Possession' (pp. 3–39), Parshall outlines the boundaries of the topic. As he rightly points out, privacy has a long history, especially in regard to printmaking, and the use of prints in the late nineteenth century was surely not a random occurrence but a determined activity. With the foundation of the Société des Aquafortistes in 1863, printmaking and collecting of prints became closely linked and a much broader selection of new subjects appeared. A large number of late nineteenth-century prints, drawings and paintings attest to the gloomy reality that many people experienced despite the use of gas lighting, beginning in 1880, for the streets and the electric lighting in Paris, and notwithstanding the Impressionists' cult of light.

The cultural context changed, reflected not only in works of art but also in many books, poems and novels.

Etching especially was perceived as an appropriate way to portray deep artistic emotions, as Baudelaire pointed out in his 1862 essay, which touches on most of the important questions concerning the medium in the second half of the nineteenth century. Etching was, according to Baudelaire, and as Parshall rightly points out, a celebration of the artist, because its inherently private character put aside the questions of mechanics and chemistry, even though these were discussed at great length in handbooks on etching. What became increasingly important was the appreciation of the work, akin to the romantic idea of a direct communication with the artist through his creation. One might even go a step further than Parshall and quote Maxime Lalanne's introduction to his handbook of 1866, which stipulated that etching should be seen as a printed drawing and not as a mechanical way to replicate images, an idea that first arose in the mid-eighteenth century. The consequences were ground-breaking: new subjects could be introduced, and themes once limited to the more private drawings and sketchbooks could now be explored more widely. The crossing of thematic and iconographical borders, which was not really imaginable in painting, became newly possible in printmaking. Parshall cites some very striking examples, such as the work of Albert Besnard

(1849–1934), today a rather forgotten painter, who produced with great iconographical freedom some extremely disturbing etchings representing a variety of people (fig. 125).

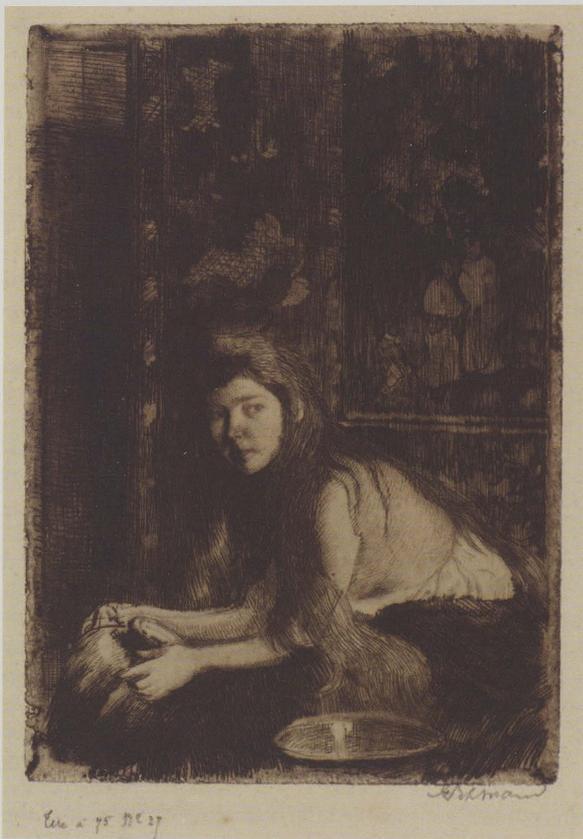
This increased freedom in subject-matter coincides with another development: the creation of suites of images. Parshall discusses Redon's *Temptation of St Antony* and Klinger's portfolios, but overall one might have wished for a more detailed development of this particular point. After 1870 the emancipation of book illustration and the increasing distance between text and image resulted in previously unseen functions for printmaking. The portfolio as a printed publication was surely new, but it was a consequent development from previous volumes containing print collections or that assembled the ideas of one artist (such as the *Improvisations sur cuivre* by François Chiffart, quoted by Parshall). The publications by Alfred Cadart, either the volumes of the Société des Aquafortistes or the subsequent *Eau-fortes* volumes, demonstrate their potential as vehicles for the promotion of prints. What they have in common is that they were intended for private use and contemplation, particularly by a bourgeois public. It might be fruitful to follow up on Parshall's idea that they were not made to be held in a library and that the function of these prints changed, in comparison to previous works, although admittedly, to do so would have fallen outside the scope of the exhibition and catalogue. The role of such albums changed quite dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century, altering approaches to print collecting.

There are some remarkable differences between the late eighteenth century and some hundred years later in print collecting. Parshall rightly concentrates on this aspect, emphasizing the change in social status of the collector, with collecting becoming more of a bourgeois than a princely activity. As he also notes, it was largely a male activity, but the demographics had changed slightly by the nineteenth century, with women becoming more involved. Women became increasingly responsible for the daily running of a household and also for the decoration of the home and the presentation of taste. Handbooks on interior design, such as the original one by Jacob von Falke, published in Vienna in 1871, or its English translation, as well as the publications by Robert Kerr (1865), Charles Locke Eastlake (1868) and the Comtesse de Bassanville (1878), provided a wide background and guidelines on how to arrange prints on walls or where to hang what subjects. One of the most fascinating of Parshall's achievements in this publication is to draw attention to these discussions, which continued until the turn of the century, and to the distinction between collecting and presenting prints. Although he does not make this explicit, it seems that for the first time in the history of print collecting a precise distinction was made between assembling a collection and displaying prints as the decoration of particular rooms.

For both activities a wide range of literature was available. There were books to help identify printmakers or to distinguish states for both old master prints and contemporary printmakers, to advise on how to collect and store prints, and to help understand the function of prints in a particular social context.

A few additional remarks might open this field of enquiry. Parshall rightly pointed out that print collecting in the late nineteenth century often consisted of the pursuit of rare states and impressions, frequently combined with the goal of owning a particular artist's oeuvre as completely as possible. With good reason, he refers to Adam von Bartsch's *Peintre-Graveur* and the deep changes these volumes caused. But the role of this publication needs to be seen in a slightly more differentiated way. Bartsch basically compiled a catalogue of the Austrian Imperial collection, added further information and published his results as a series of reference books. His classification reflects the organization of the collection in a well-established eighteenth-century tradition, and he also had recourse to the arrangement of the print collection in Dresden. With the exception of some outstanding professional engravers, Bartsch, however, limits himself mostly to 'peintre-graveurs', in other words, to painters who also worked as etchers, and to artists up to 1800. This limitation proved crucial for the understanding of etching later on, because for the first time in the history of printmaking a large part of what existed was excluded. Furthermore, this publication signalled the beginning of the cult of the artist who himself created his prints – a development that is not understandable without Bartsch's foreword to the first volume, of 1802, although in his 1823 *Anleitung zur Kupferstichkunde* he reverted to a more inclusive classification and helped collectors to identify and classify their collections more quickly. None the less, with *Peintre-Graveur* Bartsch invented a new type of literature, followed up in the nineteenth century in more detail and for other countries (for example, for the French school, by Robert-Dumesnil and Duplessis's supplements, by Passavant and Andresen for the German school and by de Vesme for Italy).

It might have been helpful to examine in more detail this shift away from a more educational approach to collecting, which had focussed on the appreciation and discussion of the particular work of an engraver or painter, to the closer consideration of painter-etchers. Private collecting existed already during the eighteenth century, and it often encompassed a social activity that consisted of discussions surrounding a particular impression or a particular painter or printmaker, the translation of a painting into print, or the comparison of different prints. During the nineteenth century prints not only became part of the decoration of a house or apartment, but collecting increasingly became a private pastime, a change that might also have had implications for the contemporaneous shift



126. Albert Besnard, *Woman with a Vase*, 1894, etching and aquatint, 200 x 138 mm (Washington, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Bell).

in subject-matter. Parshall indicates as much in his examination of the prints by Klinger and their particular imagery and in his discussion of Degas and the notion of a 'neo-romantic sensibility'.

In the second essay, Susan Hollis Clayson concentrates on etched interior scenes as the most striking representations of privacy – depictions that include figures sleeping, reading, in reverie or grooming themselves. Clayson accepts Parshall's point about the privacy of the interior and the female's role in the decoration of the household spaces. Her close examination reveals that in some cases the scene is basically a virtual construct, where, for instance, part of a studio is used rather than depicting a real situation. Through analysis of the etching *Woman with a Vase* by Albert Besnard, of 1894 (fig. 126), and a sheet by Anders Zorn that shows the same setting and presents Besnard at the moment of creating the plate, Clayson clearly demonstrates that the representation of intimacy and privacy were no more than an artistic strategy. Choosing to represent scenes that differed significantly from the

actual situation was a strategy that proved especially successful in the case of images of women. A toilette scene by Mary Cassatt (*The Coiffure*, c. 1891; fig. 127) and a corresponding drawing are a particular interesting case. The omission or representation of facial expression help to understand, according to Hollis Clayson, the privatisation of interior scenes. At this time too, strange, unsettling scenes became common, and it is interesting to see that many artists adapted their technique to match the uncanny content of their prints. For example, Besnard, Cassatt, Whistler and Zorn used mostly parallel hatching, a variation in the depth of the etched lines, a subtle play of shadows, often remarkable chiaroscuro and a near total exclusion of any middle tones. This point does not contradict the analysis by Clayson; on the contrary, it would have strengthened her argument.

The third essay, by Christiane Hertel, deals with German prints from the end of the nineteenth century, especially by Klinger, Kollwitz and Liebermann. Despite their differences, the three artists have much in common, notably their approach to printmaking. All three were found-



127. Mary Cassatt, *The Coiffure*, etching, 365 x 263 mm (London, British Museum).

ing members of the Berlin Secession in May 1898. Privacy in Wilhelmine Germany had different implications from France at this time. It usually allowed a greater freedom on a personal level as well as in subject-matter. Hertel's starting point is Klinger's treatise 'Painting and Drawing', dating from 1891. Her precise and detailed analysis reveals many fascinating aspects of the prints under discussion, including their metaphorical or symbolist content, and helps to understand their cultural and moral context; she shows, for example, the major differences between Liebermann's etching *Old Men's Home* (1890) and some of Klinger's and Kollwitz's prints. 'Threshold', 'witness, observer, voyeur' or 'closeness and distance' are finally some of the terms that help her to investigate the depiction of a wide variety of emotions, often not very openly shown at the time. The fourth essay, by Nicholas Penny, deals with small sculpture and its role concerning privacy around the turn of the century, and is very revealing in the context of visual culture.

Overall, one can only congratulate Parshall for having left for once his usual subject of the early modern

period. He has achieved a groundbreaking catalogue, offering a stimulating range of new ideas and approaches. A few other questions might have been addressed, especially concerning French printmaking during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many artists, for instance, preferred woodcut or lithography to etching. Although beyond the scope of this catalogue and perhaps not changing the overall picture much, it might yet be worthwhile to expand the investigation to include these techniques and to link them to the marvellous results of this publication. Other questions that could be raised concern the perception of women in France, the perception of relationships, and the different concepts of space arising during this period. If one thinks of prints or works by Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec or Vallotton, for instance, additional psychological aspects might need to be considered, although they would not call into question the observations made for the etchings. Such investigations, however, will not change the scientific value of this catalogue. It is a milestone, an innovative study and a great achievement.