Andrea Andreani and Reproductive Prints

Distraction / Abwechslung
27 April 2020

Reproductive prints have always been considered the ugly ducklings of the print world, thought of as somewhat inferior and second class. They are dismissed as non-original since they—supposedly—merely copy what a greater artistic mind had thought and visualized before. There is a lot that is wrong with this, too much to summarize in what is supposed to be a short Abwechslung. Suffice to say, such an understanding of reproductive prints mistakes them as mere mechanical facsimiles and ignores the technical acumen that is required to translate a drawing, painting, or sculpture into a multiplicable medium.

It is therefore encouraging to see that reproductive prints seem to be making a comeback in recent years. One indicator was the Getty Research Institute's acquisition of a comprehensive collection of such prints in 2016. It had been put together over a lifespan by the Swiss art historian Norberto Gramaccini, himself a pioneer in the study of these prints. Equally helpful for a renewed appreciation of these prints was Antony Griffiths' reintroduction of the term "translational print" in his seminal survey The Print Before Photography: An Introduction to European Printmaking 1550–1820 that was coincidentally also published in 2016. Griffiths reminds us that the concept of "the print as translation" was prevalent in the discourse among art critics in 18th-century France. Of the various writers quoted by Griffiths, Charles Nicolas Cochin was perhaps the one who put it most succinctly when we wrote: "Engravers are not simply copyists, they are translators who take beauties over from one language that is very rich into another which is less so, but which offers difficulties and demands equivalencies that are equally inspired by genius and by taste." Unlike "reproduction," the term "translation" hence acknowledges the active role which the makers of prints play in transferring and adjusting – and occasionally even improving – their models to a new medium.

One of the masters of such "translation" was the Italian woodcutter Andrea Andreani (ca. 1580–1610). His chosen technique was the chiaroscuro print, a woodcut style that had been developed during the first decade of the sixteenth century in Germany. By 1516 it had crossed the Alps where Ugo da Carpi petitioned the Venetian Senate to protect what he claimed was "his" new-found modo di stampare chiaro et scuro (method for printing in light and dark). Andreani's work belongs to the last flourishing of the chiaroscuro print. After training as a traditional Formschneider (blockcutter for woodcuts), he started to employ multiple blocks to be printed in different colors in the early 1580s. Andreani succeeded in infusing an old technique, which appeared to have seen its heyday, with new life and carrying "it to a degree of perfection which hath not since been exceeded," as William Gilpin observes in his Essay upon Prints of 1786.

Chiaroscuro printmakers, until this point, had primarily worked with designs by contemporary artists. Andreani was among the first to use works by masters of earlier generations as models. And for someone born in Mantua, what could be better than choosing Andrea Mantegna (ca. 1431–1506)? Mantegna's Triumph of Caesar, a series of nine large canvas paintings, were commissioned around 1485 by Francesco II Gonzaga, the great-grandfather of Vincenzo I, the reigning duke in Andreani's time. In 1595 Vincenzo paid the woodcutter 30 scudi to publish Mantegna's painting cycle "in print." The title- and dedication-page gives 1599 as the publication date.

That the project took Andreani four years to complete is not surprising. The task was enormous: nine images, each using four blocks, plus five blocks for the title-page, and two blocks to print the sheet with the pilasters that were meant to be cut out and placed between each of the individual scenes. All of this added up to no less than 43 blocks! Once finished, Andreani's prints were the first to depict Mantegna's cycle in its entirety – and, thanks to the new modo di stampare, they could show it in color. It was Andreani's set of woodcuts, therefore, that guaranteed the continuous visual presence of the Triumph of Caesar, especially after the canvases themselves were sold to Charles I of England in 1628 (they can still be admired today in Hampton Court Palace).

Goethe (yes, him again, our client …) was among the first to "discover," or one might better say: truly appreciate the "pre-raphaelite" qualities of Mantegna's art. Recalling his 1786 visit to the Church of the Eremitani in Padua thirty years later in his Italian Journey, Goethe mentions Mantegna's frescos there (sadly destroyed by an Allied bombing raid in 1944) and praises their "clear and secure presence." He calls Mantegna "one of the older masters" and viewed him as the crucial starting point for the development of "art after the barbaric era." In 1820, during the time when Goethe was still working on revisions of his Italian Journey, he had the opportunity to acquire a complete set of Andreani's Triumph at an auction in Frankfurt, the impressions of which he describes as noch sehr respectabel, wenn auch nicht von den ersten, wohlerhalten, unbeschädigt und so eine sehr schöne Erwerbung (still very respectable albeit not the earliest, well preserved and not damaged and therefore a very nice acquisition).

The set we offer here equals Goethe's in condition and preservation. However, the dominance of grey and subtle light-brown colors proves that ours is actually an early printing. Unusual is also the homogeneity of the set as a whole, since many of them, especially those that can be found in more modern (i.e. American) collections, are so-called "matched" sets that were put together at a later point in time.

The fact that Goethe's impressions were nicht von den ersten did not dampen his enthusiasm, though. Upon receiving his purchase, he excitedly wrote to the Swiss artist Johann Heinrich Meyer, whom he had met in Rome and who, after settling in Weimar in 1791, became Goethe's right-hand-man in artistic matters (often referred to by him as "Kunstmeyer" or, in Goethe's soft Hessian pronunciation not unsimilar to that of yours truly, as "Kunschtmeyer"): Wie man aber bisher ohne ihn leben konnte, begreif' ich nicht recht (Just how one could live without this set thus far, I do not quite understand.).