

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
3 June 2020

In his seminal 1962 study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn introduced the term “paradigm shift” into the history of science. He used it to describe radical changes in scientific progress that can no longer be explained with the help of what he calls “normal science,” a traditional, linear model of accumulative development of facts and theories. The most obvious example of such a shift is the transition from the geocentric Ptolemaic system to describe planetary movement to the heliocentric model proposed by Copernicus. The earlier model needed ever more complicated subsets of geometric constructions to align what could be observed in the sky with its conceptual framework of a central earth around which stars as well as the sun, moon, and planets revolve. When Copernicus put the sun at the center of the planetary system, he formulated a new paradigm that offered a far simpler explanation of why the movement of the planets was so markedly different from that of the stars.

It is tempting to see the history of printmaking as reflecting a similar set of technical revolutions. One example that we have recently discussed is the substitution of traditional burin engraving as the means of reproducing artworks by photomechanical techniques. A crucial difference between science and printmaking, however, is that with printmaking it is often the earlier technique that ultimately exercises a greater historic fascination than the new and innovative one. As we have seen in our *Abwechslung* from May 8, this was the case with the last flourishing of the burin in the mid-nineteenth century, when, at the very moment it became obsolete, the older technique reached a point of consummate perfection.



Today, I would like to move half a century back from that point to the period around 1800, and turn once again to translational printmaking, a subject that has inadvertently become one of the leitmotifs of our (hopefully still) distracting missives. The late eighteenth century saw the development of increasingly sophisticated methods of printmaking, often deployed to faithfully reproduce old master drawings. Most were intaglio techniques, starting with engraving and etching but soon also including aquatint as well as roulette, stipple, and punch work. Occasionally, woodcut was added to the mix, usually to add broader areas of color. Ultimately, the capacity of lithography to replicate a line drawn with the pen or the lush stroke of a crayon made all of this technical mastery suddenly superfluous. This was indeed a paradigm shift similar to the one caused by the MP3 player, which superseded both vinyl records and CDs, or by the digital camera, which replaced analogue film. That all such obsolete cultural techniques ultimately return again as art is—in the case of printmaking—perhaps best exemplified by looking at the often overwhelmingly technique-oriented work of Stanley Hayter, along with that of his unofficial “heir,” Mauricio Lasansky, and all the students at the latter’s famed workshop at the University of Iowa. (In the case of photography, one just needs to speak with all the millennial youngsters who populate the streets of, say, Bushwick or Berlin with analogue SLR cameras dangling around their necks.)



This *long* introduction is meant to preface the *brief* presentation of the work of François-Louis-Thomas Francia (1772–1839), a little-known printmaker from Calais who excelled in the reproduction/translation of chalk drawings through a specific adaptation of the intaglio process. Francia’s preferred method was soft-ground etching. Using works by other artists as models, he drew exact copies on laid paper placed over copperplates prepared with a layer of wax. This allowed the soft ground to pick up the paper’s structure, sometimes even the watermarks, giving the resulting prints the appearance of laid-paper drawings. In reality, they were pulled from an *intaglio* matrix on unusually thin wove paper that was often also colored. As a finishing touch, Francia then applied watercolor and white heightening by hand.

The success of these astonishingly convincing experiments in reproductive printmaking is, in all likelihood, also the reason for the rarity of Francia’s prints today: their appeal to collectors was such that most of them probably ended up framed as if they were drawings or watercolors—and, as a result, they either faded through light exposure or were damaged by acidic mats, or suffered both of these fates at once.



For details on the comprehensive group of prints by Francia we currently have available, please follow this link (and remember, every click counts for the statistic!):

Francia

