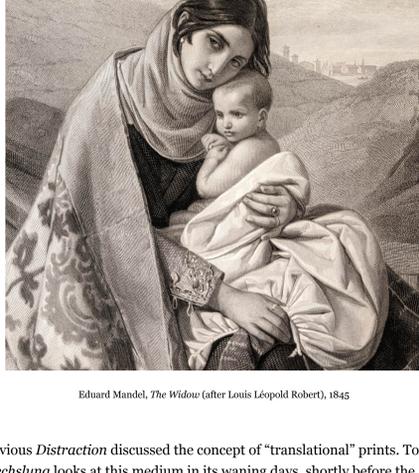


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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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Eduard Mandel, *The Widow* (after Louis Léopold Robert), 1845

A previous *Distraction* discussed the concept of “translational” prints. Today’s *Abwechslung* looks at this medium in its waning days, shortly before the ultimate “defeat of the burin” toward the end of the nineteenth century. To provide some additional diversion and to honor the upcoming celebration of Mother’s Day on Sunday, the selection of images shown throughout the text here is nearly exclusively dedicated to variations on the theme of mother and child.



Eduard Mandel, *The Colonna Madonna* (after Raphael), 1855



Eduard Mandel, *The Small Cowper Madonna* (after Raphael), 1871

What caused the demise of “reproductive” (or, “translational”) intaglio printmaking was the advent of photography in the 1830s and its gradual adaptation to a printing process. The better this mechanical way of fixing a real-world scene onto a silvered plate or a paper negative could be multiplied, the more it started to rival the burin engravings that until then had been produced for this purpose. For a variety of reasons, however, at the very moment of its decline, the burin engraving experienced an astonishing last flourishing. One reason for this was the enormous technical acumen the medium had accumulated over the previous four hundred years. Printmaking, and here especially the sophisticated combination of etching and engraving used in reproductive printmaking since the seventeenth century, was taught in demanding programs at all the major art academies throughout Europe. Another major driving force behind engraving’s widespread popularity were the newly founded *Kunstvereine* (art unions). The associations existed in many countries and on both sides of the Atlantic but played a special role in the Germanic lands, not least because they took on a patriotic mission for what was then, in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, still a nation in waiting. In his succinct overview on the *Kunstverein* movement, John Ittmann points out that “at a time when artists could no longer rely on the church or a territorial ruler for their livelihood, the art unions emerged as an innovative form of patronage, forging a mutually beneficial alliance between artists and collectors, critics and publishers, and all manner of art enthusiasts” (“Glazed and Framed: *Kunstverein* Prints for the Parlor,” in *The Enchanted World of German Romantic Prints, 1770–1850*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2017, pp. 108–123). Ittmann then quotes from an 1825 mission statement of one of those *Kunstvereine* that reads: “It is also quite undeniable that a good work of art as a family possession in a private dwelling, where it will often be regarded in varying moods by an individual, and after a time by many more, will create a deeper and more appropriate impression on the mind than if one has to seek it out deliberately each time in an exhibition of private collection.” An apt reminder of the advantages of having art in your home while museums still remain closed!



Moritz Steinla, *The Sistine Madonna* (after Raphael), 1858



Moritz Steinla, *The Madonna of the Fish* (after Raphael), 1854

To support their mission, the art unions offered prints, often large in size, as annual gifts to their members—and in turn created a new market for the makers of these prints. One of the most successful *Kunstverein* prints of the period was Eduard Mandel’s engraving *Two Children Playing with Flowers*. It was commissioned by Berlin’s *Verein der Kunstfreunde* in 1843—a technical tour de force that charms with its subject matter but equally dazzles the sophisticated connoisseur with its brilliant use of backlighting.

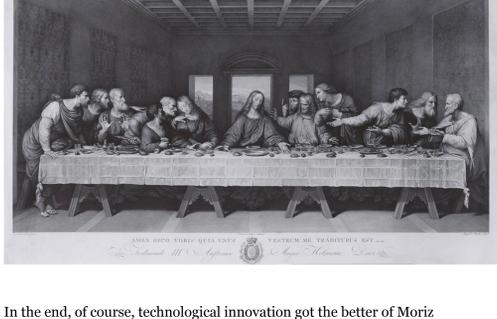


Eduard Mandel, *Children Playing with Flowers* (after Eduard Magnus), 1843

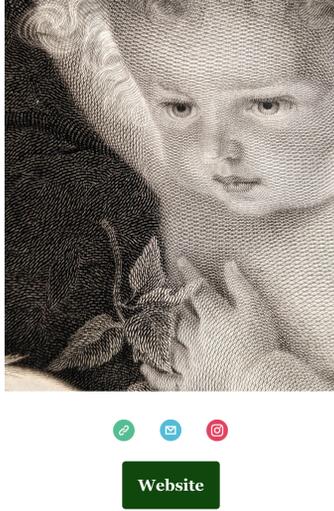
Last week we argued that Andreani’s prints were not simply “copies” but translations of Mantegna’s compositions using the technical means and visual language of the chiaroscuro woodcut. But what about the large nineteenth-century engravings shown here? Intended as “family possessions in a private dwelling,” they often hung over the sofa and became fixtures of any proper *guthürgerlich* living room. While usually referred to as reproductive prints, were they really just that, simply “reproductive”? It is intriguing to learn how this question featured prominently in contemporary discussions about these prints—and how vehemently it was actually denied, especially when these prints were directly compared with the new medium of photography.

In a perceptive 1866 article on the difference between engraving and photography, Moriz Thausing, one of the founding fathers of the Vienna School of Art History, discusses the prevalent opinion at the time that “photography will deal engraving the deathblow. . . . Why brood, after diligent preliminary studies, for years over a printing plate when the apparatus can perform this in a matter of seconds?” Yet the turn of Thausing’s argument comes as a surprise. As a great advocate of Morellian connoisseurship, he saw the documentary quality of photography as exactly its main weakness. All a photograph could show was a work of art at a specific moment in time as it appears in specific circumstances (e.g., the way it is lit, its current condition, possible changes due to decay and/or restoration). What is called for, in Thausing’s opinion, is not a reproduction but the reconstruction of an ideal *Urbild*. This can only be attained through a close study of the original *and* of other reproductions made after it, including even written sources. The engraver could thereby treat the artwork not unlike a pianist treats a musical score—bringing out the characteristics of the work in a way that is appropriate to its model but nevertheless highly individual in its interpretation (I owe this inspired comparison to what is still the standard survey on the topic: Gerhard Langemeyer/Reinhart Schleier, *Bilder nach Bildern: Druckgrafik und die Vermittlung von Kunst*, Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster, 1976, pp. 297ff.). The efforts that went into such “reproduction” projects were therefore enormous indeed. The Prussian state, for example, sent the engraver Louis Jacoby to Rome in 1860 to create a print after Raphael’s *School of Athens*. What started with a three-year stipend ultimately took twenty-two years to complete. When the work, measuring 65 x 90 cm (25½ x 35½ inches), was finally published in 1882, it was celebrated not so much as an artistic but as a scholarly achievement.

Today we are used to having digital access to works of art that allows for a close-up scrutiny that is impossible to achieve even if one is standing in front of the original in the museum. For us, the idea that the interpretive or, better, translational reproduction of an artwork could be preferred over its high-resolution digital image is strange, to say the least. But let’s think about it: How much detail can we actually still see of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* (either in Milan or on Google Arts & Culture)? Then look at Raphael Morghen’s engraving of it, arguably the most famous print of its day when it was published in 1800. Comparable in size to Jacoby’s print, it served in turn as the main source for Rudolf Stang when he engraved his version of Leonardo’s ruinous painting in 1889 (this, too, of similar size and again worked upon for no less than thirteen years).



In the end, of course, technological innovation got the better of Moriz Thausing’s defiant prediction that “engraving will never succumb to a technical medium since such a defeat of the burin would be a defeat of art in general.” Our understanding of positivist art historical method is clearly no longer the same, and we would hence be hard-pressed to claim that engravings after old masters should be our preferred visual resource. Ironically, however, the very tools available today—cameras, high-resolution images, computer screens—are what enable us to see the astonishing details of those prints perhaps closer and better than ever before.



Website

