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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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It is puzzling at first to read “MICAELANGELUS INVENT ET PINXIT” in scratchy letters on a print depicting Delphica, the Delphic Sybil. The figure is part of the fresco decoration that adorns the ceiling in the Vatican’s Cappella Sistina (1508–12). Michelangelo’s masterwork was immediately recognized as such and “translations” in printed form began to circulate soon after its unveiling. They were usually the work of professional printmakers. The print here, however, shows few signs of technical mastery—and yet, it is this very awkwardness that makes it so intriguing.



In case anyone wonders: No, this is not an attempt by the painter-sculptor-architect Michelangelo to try his hand at printmaking. Rather, the print is the work of the French artist Pierre Biard the Younger (1592–1661) who, incidentally, was also a sculptor-architect. He gained early access to the French court and was appointed *sculpteur ordinaire du roi* by Henri IV in 1609. Three years later, under Louis XIII, he gained the title *valet chambre du Roi*. In 1618, he received a royal stipend of 500 *livres* which allowed him to travel to Italy where he saw and admired the art of Raphael, Giulio Romano, and, as we can see here, Michelangelo. Back in France, he made a small group of 24 prints, many based on what must have been his own studies as well as reproductive prints that he would have brought back from his trip. The Delphic Sybil is one of them.

Pierre Biard

Without professional training, Biard chose etching as a way to multiply his Italian souvenirs in printed form. Engraving would have been technically too demanding. Carving fine lines in copperplates requires movements that are very different, even counterintuitive, to handling a drawing pen: The diamond-shaped burin is pushed through the metal with the palm of the hand in straight movements. Curves and flourishes can only be formed by the movement of the plate which, for this purpose, is positioned on a flat leather pad. It is, therefore, with good reason that the first generations of engravers working in the fifteenth century have been called *orfèvre-graveurs*. Virtually all of them, Albrecht Dürer included, had been trained as goldsmiths before they adapted their engraving skills to making prints.

It needed the invention of etching in the years around 1500 to open up the print medium to non-specialists, thereby creating the true *peintre-graveur*. The lines of the composition could now be scratched with a stylus into the soft layer of wax covering the surface of the printing plate—in very much the same way as one might draw on a sheet of paper. The task of excavating the metal is left to the liquid acid. As a result, anyone who was able to draw could, with the right tools and ingredients, produce what in sixteenth-century Italy is often (and appropriately) referred to as *disegni stampati*.

I am of course not suggesting here that Monsieur Biard’s etchings rival the elegance of, say, Parmigianino, the undisputed early master of the technique. But I believe that to our contemporary eye their very awkwardness has a special appeal. Biard’s mark making reminds me more of the archaic forms of Louise Bourgeois’s 1947 portfolio *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* or the willful simplicity of Richard Diebenkorn’s series *41 Etchings Drypoints* from 1964. Or what about the fabulously weird etchings that Nicole Eisenman made with Harlan & Weaver? See for yourself:

Nicole Eisenmann @ Harlan&Weaver



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