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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
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Being prolific, highly inventive, and technically versatile—and on top of that, even being acquired early on by someone whose collection contributed to the founding of one of the greatest museums in the world—will still not guarantee posthumous fame. This became quite apparent while I was trying to do some research on a certain Elisha Kirkall (1681/82–1742), whose mixed-media chiaroscuro prints, I thought, would make an interesting addition to the ongoing subseries on “translational printmaking” that has inadvertently developed within my (hopefully still distracting) missives. The information that can be gleaned on said Mr. Kirkall is rather sparse; adding insult to injury, by far the most valuable source on his life are the private notebooks of the engraver and antiquary George Vertue (1684–1756), who, in the words of Timothy Clayton, author of the entry on Kirkall in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, “was not habitually generous to his rivals.” Having said that, Vertue did call Kirkall “an industrious man,” which he indeed seems to have been.



(British Museum, inv. 1877,0210,713)

Born in Sheffield, the son of a locksmith, Kirkall “had some small beginnings to Engrave” before arriving in London around 1702. He soon began experimenting with “an Invention of engraving on the same sort of Metal which Types are cast with”—i.e., matrices made from metal soft enough to be cut in white line. Since they were relief prints, they could be pulled through the press together with regular typeface letters. This made it much easier to embellish books with head- and tailpieces as it allowed for illustrations to be printed in a single stage with the text. The new method enjoyed considerable popularity in the book trade, and Kirkall and his wife, Elizabeth, went on to produce a large variety of book illustrations, many of them in this new form.



Yet his ambitions clearly went beyond the confines of the illustrated book. Kirkall became a member of Godfrey Kneller’s Great Queen Street Academy. There he encountered the French émigré artist Louis Chéron (1660–1725), a Huguenot who had left his homeland in the wake of the persecutions that had sprung up in France after 1685, when the Edict of Nantes had been revoked and, with it, many of the civil rights that had been granted to Calvinist Protestants in Catholic France a century earlier. Kirkall attended Chéron’s life classes and embarked once more on the development of a new printing method. Now the aim was to come up with a way to imitate drawing, making Kirkall an early exponent of the period’s increasing enthusiasm for Old Master drawings. His experiments represent a distinct sideline in the general quest to reproduce drawings faithfully in printed form—a tradition that leads from Italian chiaroscuro prints, via the increasingly sophisticated combinations of a multitude of intaglio techniques perfected foremost in eighteenth-century France, to the paradigm shift brought on by the invention of lithography in the years around 1800.



(British Museum, inv. Heal,59,98)

On a subscription ticket from 1722, the printmaker states, “One Guinea being the first Payment for 12 Prints in Claro Obscuro which I Promise to deliver when Finished on the Payment of One Guinea more.” Whereas his earlier innovation limited the printing procedure to a single pass through the letter press, Kirkall now combined the intaglio processes of etching and mezzotint with a tone block added by using a relief woodblock to achieve the desired effect. In the two examples we can offer here, Kirkall used as models drawings that his teacher Chéron had probably made in the life classes Kirkall attended at the Great Queen Street Academy.



In 1722, the year of the subscription offer, George Vertue recorded in his notebooks: Kirkall “now has done some large prints after a new manner from all others. being a Mixture of Etching, metzotint. & stamps of wood.” Later in the century, John Baptist Jackson (1701–1780) would pursue a more purist approach to the revival of the chiaroscuro woodcut, and it might therefore not come as a surprise that in his *Enquiry into the Origin of Printing in Europe: By a Lover of Art* from 1752, he could not help but to remark about Kirkall’s experiment that “the Curious complained, that the ancient manner of Hugo di Carpi was not found in this Performance.” Such reservations clearly did not keep Sir Hans Sloane from assembling 57 of Kirkall’s color prints in an album that, as part of Sloane’s extraordinary collection, was bequeathed to the British nation upon his death in 1753. Yet even being part of the British Museum’s founding bequest did not prevent their maker from getting (mostly) forgotten by posterity—which I felt was reason enough to ignore the rivalry and complaints of Messrs. Vertue and Jackson and instead devote a *Distraction* to this ingenious tinkerer in all things print.

a prophet and a river god

