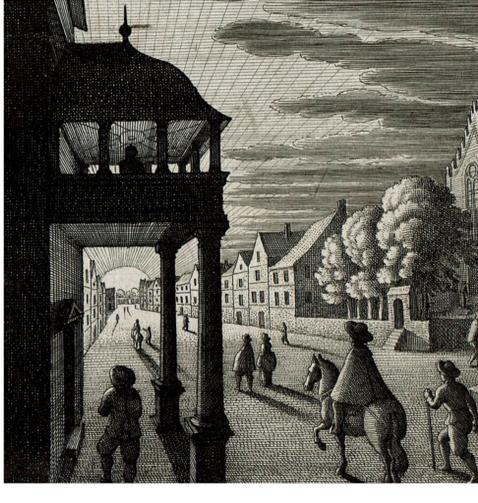


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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What is it with sunsets?



Thanks to today's smartphones, our world has become visually saturated in an unprecedented way. Some estimates say that worldwide about one trillion photos are taken each year, a number that will only continue to increase—and exponentially so. As Teju Cole observed, this "flood of images has increased our access to wonders and at the same time lessened our sense of wonder. We live in inescapable surfeit." To this, we can now add our phones' capacity to shoot videos. It is probably fair to say that in the lives of today's children, so many moments are captured in digital form that neither the children nor their parents will ever have time to actually watch all those moments that were deemed worthy to record. Our lives are just too short.



Erik Kessels, *24 Hrs in Photos* (2011)

Artists such as Erik Kessels or Penelope Umbrico have made these developments the theme of their own art. Kessels's *24 Hrs in Photos* creates a tangible, real-world expression of what he describes as "the feeling of drowning in representations of other people's experiences" by piling thousands of photos into a room. The fact that the photos represent images uploaded to Flickr in a single day makes the work feel already somewhat antiquated: it dates from 2011.



Penelope Umbrico, *Sunset Portraits* (2011)

Umbrico's *Sunset Portraits*, on the other hand, are monumental collages of seemingly infinite variations of similar sceneries. Sunsets in all forms have undoubtedly become veritable leitmotifs in our ever-growing urge to preserve each and every experience digitally. What started as *41,795 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* 01/23/06 had grown to *Sunset Portraits from 30,253,384 Sunset Pictures on Flickr* on 03/07/16 a decade later.

Having checked this morning, I can report that the count for the hashtag "#sunset" on Instagram now stands at 268 million! I have to plead guilty myself for contributing to this by keeping a visual diary of the sky over Harlem—although, since my windows are facing east, what I capture are sunrises.



People not suffering from middle-aged sleep deprivation (or simply those with blinds on their windows) are probably less likely to relate to the moment when the sun rises than when it sets over the horizon to the west. Even now that the night has gotten "disenchanted" through what Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls "the industrialization of light," the sunset still marks at least the beginning of the end of the day—a moment of romance whose kitschiness is exposed in Umbrico's collages, but also occasionally a moment of scientific intrigue. Since the earth's atmosphere functions as a prism that refracts the light emanating from the sun, under the right meteorological conditions, a brief green flash can appear at the point of the sunset. This has inspired artistic responses, starting from Jules Verne's 1882 novel, Eric Rohmer's feature film of 1986, and, more recently, Tacita Dean's experimental short film of 2001.



still from Eric Rohmer, *Le Rayon vert* (1986)

In earlier times, especially before the Romantic turn of the nineteenth century, when colorful sunsets (and sunrises) became a staple of landscape painting in both Europe and America, the sun hovering close to the horizon was usually symbolically infused—marking not only the end of a day but of a life or even an era, yet often also incorporating the promise of renewal: *occidit ut oritur* (go down to come up again).



Given this overdetermination of sunsets in older art, the print shown here by Matthäus Merian (1593–1650) stands out for its lack thereof, bearing neither a motto nor a title. The geometry of the urban architecture emphasizes the perspectival construction of the composition, with the sun, off-center to the left, marking the vanishing point. All figures, even the animals, are turned toward it. The scene emanates the atmosphere of a movie set, shot with a telephoto lens that causes the sun to appear much larger than in real life and with each figure and object trailing a long stark shadow. All that is missing is a soundtrack that could help us determine if the depicted moment is to be read as foreboding or as hopeful.

This ominousness could make Merian's etching a fitting frontispiece for a classic 1941 science fiction story by Isaac Asimov, one of the undisputed masters of the genre. In *Nightfall* Asimov describes a group of scientists on the fictional planet Lagash who have discovered numerous ancient civilizations that had all been violently destroyed at intervals of roughly two thousand years. A prevailing myth tells about a recurring event during which the planet has to pass through a cave. In this period of darkness mysterious lights appear that rain down fire from the heavens and reduce all people to beast-like savages. The story hinges on the fact that Lagash is permanently illuminated by one of the six stars of its multiple-star system. The inhabitants of the planet are therefore not used to darkness and are incapable of tolerating it. They only have to experience it briefly to frantically start lighting fires. At the end of the story, an invisible moon eclipses all the suns at once, and darkness falls. The scientists had calculated as much, but even they were not prepared for the thousands of stars suddenly illuminating the sky. Only now, with the fires of destruction already raging on the horizon, do they realize that the universe is far larger than they had ever imagined and ultimately succumb to madness along with everyone else.

And what is it, then, that is dragging everyone in Merian's print toward those last moments of light? About this we unfortunately seem to know as little as the scientists in Asimov's story do about the stars.

Matthäus Merian "City Street at Sunset" (ca. 1615–20)

If, however, you now realize that sunsets and science fiction are less your thing: perhaps a stroll through the London Original Print Fair could make for a worthwhile alternative distraction . . .

C.G. Boerner at the London Original Print Fair

