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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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Let's start with a little anecdote:

Once, a very meticulous expert was kind enough to preview a print for me that was about to come up for sale at auction. This expert, known for his thoroughness, gave me a long and detailed account: on the richness of the impression, the quality of the paper and its watermark, the margins visible beyond the platemark, the inky plate edges (*schmutzige Plattenkanten*, as the German *Graphikkenner* likes to call them), the collectors' stamps and dealers' marks visible on the verso. We were already several minutes into our conversation—and this at a time when long-distance phone calls still came at a significant cost—when, somewhat in passing, he mentioned that the sheet had actually been torn into two and hence skillfully repaired . . . Since the print under review could hardly be described as rare, this was clearly a case of not seeing the wood for the trees. (I have since learned that this is a phrase used in British English and that in American English it is “forest for the trees”—so, take your pick!)

Shall one therefore conclude to never acquire a restored print? That the answer to this question can alternate between “yes of course” and “not at all” points to the limits of quantifiable connoisseurship—even if, especially during this last year of the pandemic, with its restrictions on travel and in-person meetings, the efforts to try and find ways to determine the physical qualities of a print have only increased. The (elusive) hope is for some sort of scientific method by which to reach a strictly objective qualitative judgement. The condition report I discussed in the first installment of this little series nicely exemplified to which lengths the market is willing to go to ameliorate this remoteness, to bridge the gap between us and the object.

The introductory episode alluded to a print that is common and therefore best avoided in an impression torn in halves. The next two examples are meant to show that this can hardly be turned into a rule, or that, if one ever were to make such a rule, exceptions abound.

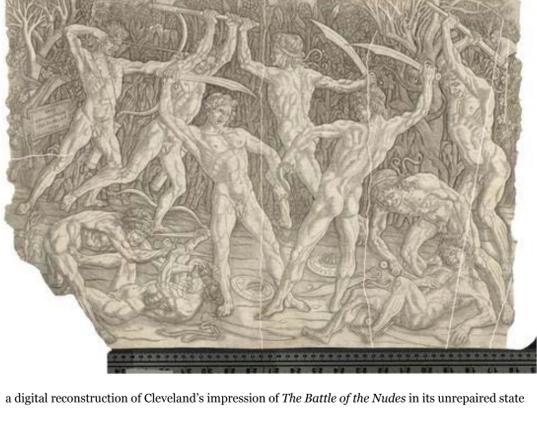


Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *The Battle of the Nudes*, 1470s, engraving, first state (Cleveland Museum of Art)

The Battle of the Nudes by the Florentine goldsmith Antonio Pollaiuolo is one of the seminal prints of the Quattrocento. The powerful, enigmatic, and—for a print—monumental composition depicts a variety of naked male figures fighting each other. It was probably engraved in the 1470s and is the first Italian print signed by its maker. Only one impression is known of its first state, before the whole plate was extensively reworked, in all likelihood by someone other than Pollaiuolo. It is the pride of the Cleveland Museum of Art's print collection.

When the print was purchased in 1967, it was already clear that the condition of the sheet was anything but perfect. Accordingly, Louise Richards, then the museum's curator of prints and drawings, weighed this against the quality of the impression, the importance of the image, and the print's overall rarity. In the *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, she described how all known impressions of Pollaiuolo's engraving show evidence of creases and have lost areas of printed design, which were then often redrawn in pen and ink. She concludes: “Thus, the comparison of impressions of Pollaiuolo's engraving must take into account a greater than usual incidence of restoration.”

Recent state-of-the-art research conducted by the museum's fabulous paper conservator Moyna Stanton has revealed just *how* much of the sheet was lost and had been superbly (and deceitfully) restored:

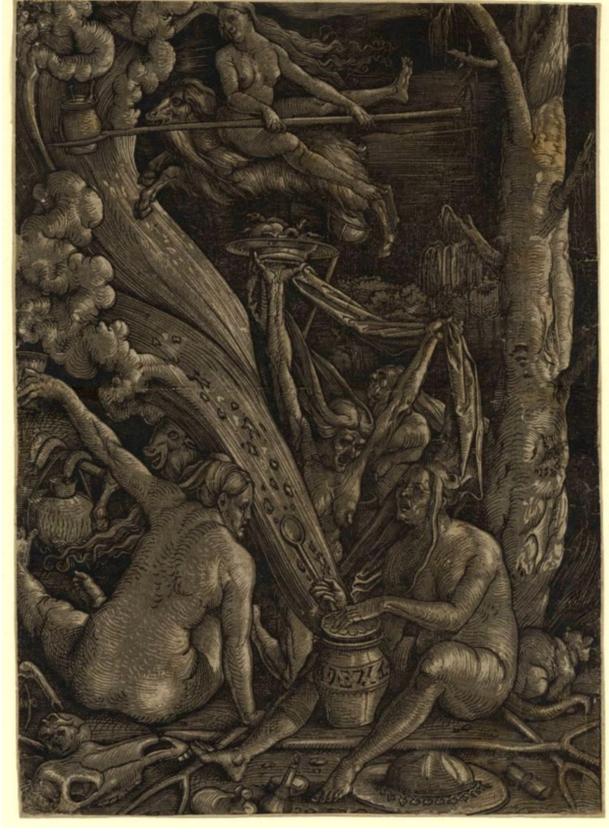


a digital reconstruction of Cleveland's impression of *The Battle of the Nudes* in its unrepaired state

Does such a seriously compromising “condition issue” make this impression undesirable? When the new findings were published, I asked Jane Glaubinger, the former print curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art and Richards's successor, if, knowing all that we are privy to now, she would still acquire the print for the museum. Her answer came without a second's hesitation: “Yes, absolutely. After all, it is the only impression to retain the integrity of the artist's intent.”

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Not long ago, we faced a similar question ourselves when we had the good fortune to be able to offer a Northern European Renaissance print of arguably equal importance, and even greater rarity.



Hans Baldung Grien, *The Witches' Sabbath*, 1510, chiaroscuro woodcut printed from two blocks

Whereas the *dossier* that was meticulously compiled by Shelley Langdale in 2002 for her in-depth exhibition on Pollaiuolo's print lists a total of 46 impressions, we could only trace fifteen of Hans Baldung Grien's *The Witches' Sabbath*. A single-leaf woodcut of imposing size, it was created in 1510, soon after Baldung had established himself as an independent artist in Strasbourg. Here, for the first time, Baldung emulates Dürer by using a tablet with his monogram as a sign of his authorship. The nightly scenery of the composition is both ominous and dramatic, showing at its center three nude women surrounding a cauldron from which powerful columns of steam escape. The color, added through the use of a tone block, only increases the sense of doom that emanates from the figures who have undoubtedly come together to spell some *Schadenzauber*.

Since World War II, only two impressions of Baldung's dark fantasy have come on the market—one was acquired by the Achenbach Foundation at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 1984 from the eighteenth-century collection of the Earls Spencer (of Lady Di fame), the other was ours, a duplicate from the British Museum that had been bought by a private collector at auction in 1989. (*Note*: When doing our research, we realized that the impression at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts has an acquisition date of 1969; as it turned out, that was merely the year when one of the museum's most generous print bequests entered the collection. Its donor, W.G. Russell Allen, had bought the print back in 1932 at a sale held by C.G. Boerner in Leipzig.) Our impression was trimmed at the top and had various other restorations, all probably done early in the nineteenth century and easily recognizable, not intended to deceive but merely to keep the visual integrity of the image intact. Is it a print worth buying?

We thought so, but, as the saying goes, it is a question of price. Yet how to set one when dealing with a print so rare that there are virtually no comparisons? Repairs and restorations can be examined by paper conservators. Rarity can be established by compiling a census of known impressions. Assigning a monetary value, however, is an altogether different question that nonetheless has to be answered: when a print is purchased, but also when it needs an insurance value, or perhaps when it gets donated to a museum. If the value of a print (or any object, really) in pristine condition represents 100 percent (of an amount that in itself, when it comes to art, is open to discussion), is there a percentage by which condition problems diminish its value? Surely, but where this percentage lies, is, again, a matter of opinion, with one person hoping the value might only decrease by 20 percent and another judging the decrease being possibly closer to 80 percent. Ultimately, only the market will be able to decide—once the seller is willing to part and a buyer is found.

. . . to be continued . . .



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