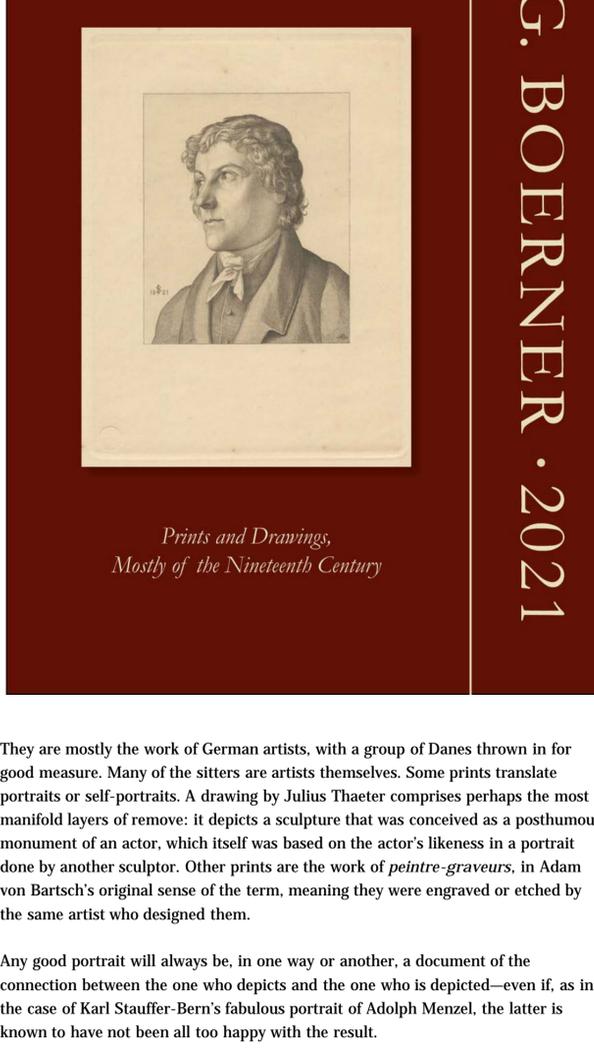


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
21 April 2021

Today we would like to present another small selection of portrait prints and drawings, all dating from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

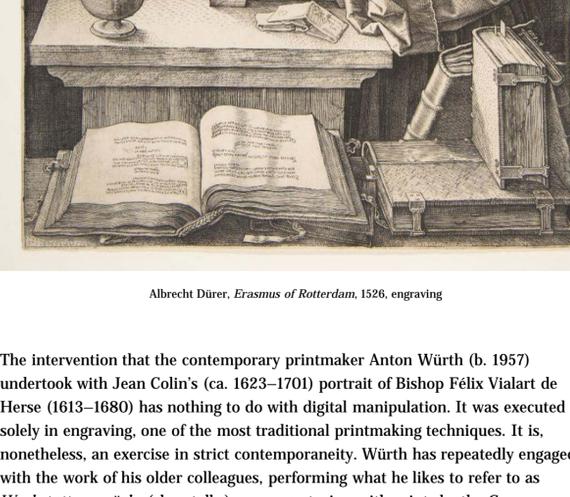


They are mostly the work of German artists, with a group of Danes thrown in for good measure. Many of the sitters are artists themselves. Some prints translate portraits or self-portraits. A drawing by Julius Thaeter comprises perhaps the most manifold layers of remove: it depicts a sculpture that was conceived as a posthumous monument of an actor, which itself was based on the actor's likeness in a portrait done by another sculptor. Other prints are the work of *peintre-graveurs*, in Adam von Bartsch's original sense of the term, meaning they were engraved or etched by the same artist who designed them.

Any good portrait will always be, in one way or another, a document of the connection between the one who depicts and the one who is depicted—even if, as in the case of Karl Stauffer-Bern's fabulous portrait of Adolph Menzel, the latter is known to have not been all too happy with the result.

Kleine Auswahl 3

That the sitter may not like the way she or he has been portrayed is in all likelihood a problem as old as portraiture itself. Just imagine what Erasmus of Rotterdam, to name one famous example of a disgruntled sitter, would have done if he could have applied the editing tools provided by such programs as Photoshop to the portrait Albrecht Dürer had engraved of him! The humanist was anything but pleased when he received Dürer's print and claimed that it looked nothing like him. Yet this was not merely a display of the bookish scholar's vanity. Erasmus did not complain about looking too old. Instead, he took issue on a far more fundamental level. He wrote to his friend Willibald Pirckheimer that he was just no longer the person whom Dürer had met during his journey to the Netherlands in August and September 1520. Erasmus had become, as Erwin Panofsky succinctly put it, "a victim of Dürer's perfectionism—having been kept waiting for his engraved portrait for a full six years."



Albrecht Dürer, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 1526, engraving

The intervention that the contemporary printmaker Anton Würth (b. 1957) undertook with Jean Colin's (ca. 1623–1701) portrait of Bishop Félix Vialart de Herse (1613–1680) has nothing to do with digital manipulation. It was executed solely in engraving, one of the most traditional printmaking techniques. It is, nonetheless, an exercise in strict contemporaneity. Würth has repeatedly engaged with the work of his older colleagues, performing what he likes to refer to as *Werkstattgespräche* (shop talks) across centuries: with prints by the German Romantic Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810), the ornaments of the German *Kleinmeister* or the architectural plans of Baroque gardens, and even with works by the great Dürer himself.

some previous comments on Anton Würth's Runge Project

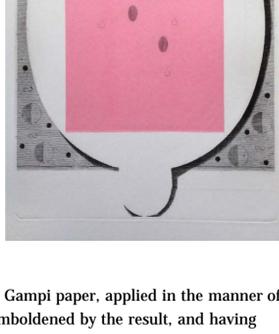
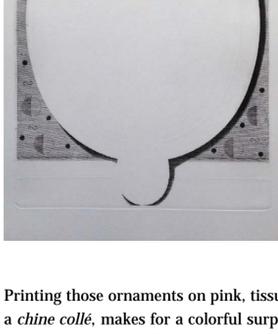
His earliest such dialogue took place back in 2007 with the *maitre suprême* of French engravers, Robert Nanteuil (1623–1678). All later French portrait engraving stands in Nanteuil's shadow; this is especially true for a lesser-talented printmaker like Colin, whose work is merely a faint echo of the earlier master. What drew Würth to Colin, though, was the opportunity provided by the survival of one of the Reims printmaker's original printing plates. As someone whose has made Engraving (the capital *E* is intentional here) the focus of his artistic practice, Würth had long been curious to work with a pre-industrial copperplate, one that was thick and hammered, and not rolled like all the plates available today.



His exploration started with the printing of the actual matrix as is. He noticed the depth of the grooves and how much ink they retained. Würth was surprised by how well the plate still printed, given its unevenness, warps, and dents.



After those initial impressions had established a baseline, the artist began to empty out the central portrait in his earlier Nanteuil project. By screening off the oval portrait in the middle, Würth created a void into which he was then able to introduce the ornamental modules that have become his trademark.



Printing those ornaments on pink, tissue-thin Gampi paper, applied in the manner of a *chine collé*, makes for a colorful surprise. Emboldened by the result, and having learned that he was allowed to keep the plate, Würth also engraved ornaments to the 300-year-old plate itself, finally even adding his own name next to that of Colin.



Despite using both a historic plate and a traditional technique, Würth affirms the historical distance from Colin's *Urbild*. His interventionist acts have transformed the portrait of the little-known bishop of Châlons-en-Champagne. As Stefan Soltek, the director of the Klingspor-Museum in Offenbach, writes in his sensitive and insightful analysis of this project, "Würth deviates in his own time and in his own manner from the representational impulse of the portraitist Colin; the *image of someone* has now become an *image of no one*, a self-referential work that exists for itself"—and that can ultimately be described as an homage to the old and still very young technique of engraving.



Anton Würth

