

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

21 July 2021

Today's missive *could* be seen as another chapter in the history of “translational prints” since it deals with Eugen Eduard Schaeffer, an engraver who was one of the foremost German *Reproduktionsstecher* whose technical brilliance helped popularize the expansive historical narratives and genre scenes of the mid-nineteenth century academicians painting in Dresden, Düsseldorf, and Munich. Schaeffer was born in 1802 in Frankfurt, where, at the age of sixteen, he received his first artistic training at the *Staedelsches Kunstinstitut* in 1818. Three years later, he moved to Munich, where he studied until 1824. He then went on to become a pupil of Peter von Cornelius at the academy in Düsseldorf. After another Munich sojourn between 1826 and 1833, Schaeffer finally returned to his hometown. He began to teach printmaking at the *Staedel* and became full professor in 1848. Schaeffer was celebrated for his refined engravings after all the great artists of the time: the Neoclassicist Asmus Jakob Carstens, the Nazarene artists Johann Friedrich Overbeck and Philipp Veit, immediate contemporaries such as Karl Friedrich Lessing and Wilhelm von Kaulbach, and his Frankfurt colleague Eduard von Steinle. Schaeffer also made engravings after works by Raphael, Titian, and other Renaissance masters in German collections. It were nonetheless the paintings and decorative cycles of his teacher Cornelius that form the largest part of Schaeffer's oeuvre as a reproductive printmaker.



Eugen Eduard Schaeffer, *Orpheus in the Underworld* (after Peter von Cornelius), engraving

Cornelius proudly sent Schaeffer's prints after his frescoes in Munich's *Glyptothek* (destroyed during World War II) to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, but, much to his disappointment, never received a response. Cornelius's friend Sulpiz Boisserée, an art historian and collector who was instrumental in the rediscovery of German art before Dürer, later reported the Weimar sage's comment that Schaeffer “took Marc Anton [Raimondi] as his model instead of the moderns, a sad consequence of the German retreat into the Middle Ages.” This was not the only time in his later years that our client showed his cantankerous side, but it is arguably one of those rare instances in which it is safe to state *Hier irrt Goethe!* (Here Goethe is wrong!) As Heinrich Weizsäcker and Albert Dessoiff pointed out, Goethe's judgment probably had less to do with the “phenomenal technical perfection” of Schaeffer's prints which they evocatively describe as being characterized by “a silvery web of lines that weaves around the larger forms of the original in a congenial way.” Instead, Goethe's dismissiveness was more likely a reflection of his more principal reservations against the later work of Cornelius (*Kunst und Künstler in Frankfurt am Main im 19. Jahrhundert*, 1907–9).

I started this missive with a conditional statement, since it is ultimately *not* about another aspect of the “last flourishing of the burin,” the subject of an earlier *Distraction*.

The Last Flourishing of the Burin

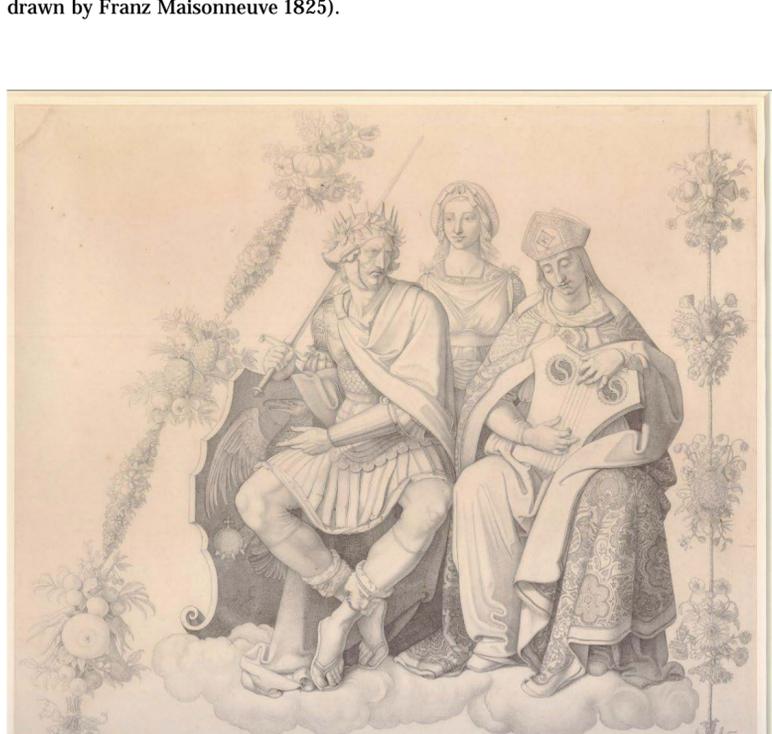
Instead, I would like to present a print by Schaeffer that has little to do with the engraver's mature work. It is a *Frühwerk*, and as an early work in every respect an outlier—not only within the context of the artist's own work but also when compared with the other prints comprising the portfolio *Radierungen Frankfurter Künstler*, in which it was belatedly published in the 1860s. Schaeffer had created the print in 1824 during his initial studies with Cornelius in Düsseldorf. By the time the Frankfurt firm F. A. C. Prestel published the portfolio, a new interest in the *Maler-Radierer*, or *peintre-graveur*, had already begun as an appreciation of printmakers, and here especially of etchers, who worked after their own designs instead of translating those of other painters. Portfolios such as this were often initiated by the *Kunstvereine* (art unions) that had sprung up in many of the more prominent artistic centers all over Germany.



Prestel's publication was therefore also meant as a promotion for artists in Frankfurt. To be able to include a work by Schaeffer, the local engraver extraordinaire, in a selection that intended to document the new shift away from “the tyranny of the rule” (William Ivins) and toward a more spontaneous way of printmaking, the publisher chose one of the artist's earliest essays in printmaking. With its unfinished “sketchiness,” such a work could also appeal to the younger generation of etching revivalists.

What we can offer here is not the professionally printed plate from the portfolio, in which the thick machine-made extra-white paper exorcises much of the print's subtlety. Ours is an early impression on a warm, buff-colored sheet pulled around the time the print was made. Looking closely, one can discern sensitively etched lines and even faint touches of drypoint where the etching needle had scratched into the surface of the plate. They appear next to more regularly engraved lines, which, however, have not yet reached the highly systematized regularity that characterizes Schaeffer's later burin work.

Judging from the delicacy of the linework, it is highly plausible that this plate was actually engraved directly in front of the model. Our sheet is annotated accordingly by an early (the artist's?) hand “Nach dem Leben gestochen” (engraved from life). What remains somewhat of a mystery, though, is the identity of the sitter. In the manuscript catalogue of Schaeffer's work compiled by his brother, the print is dated to 1824 and described as “Portrait Maisonneuve,” whom the literature usually identifies as a pupil of Schaeffer. Given the fact that the artist was only twenty-two at the time and was himself still a student of Cornelius, this is highly unlikely. Instead, the sitter must have been a fellow pupil of Cornelius. And while he seems to have left no trace in art-historical literature—he was most likely another of those fast-living, young-dying Romantics!—there is indeed a fine pencil drawing in the British Museum that is inscribed “Nach einem Carton des Herrn Director Cornelius / gezeichnet von Franz Maisonneuve 1825” (after a cartoon by Director Cornelius / drawn by Franz Maisonneuve 1825).



Franz Maisonneuve, *Emperor Justinian, Folchetto di Marsiglia, and Cunizza da Romano* (after Peter von Cornelius), pencil (British Museum, inv. no. 1875.0508.1235)

This drawing carefully copies one of Cornelius's cartoons for the frescoes in the Dante room of the Villa Massimo in Rome from around 1817. Giulia Bartrum was the first to make this connection in her entry on Schaeffer's portrait print in the catalogue for the exhibition *Wahlverwandtschaften* held in Weimar in 2013. When acquiring a similarly early impression as the one presented here for the British Museum in 1999 (the museum already owned an example of the later portrait), she described Schaeffer's print as “perhaps the most striking of engraved portraits of the Romantic period.”

Schaeffer, Portrait of Franz Maisonneuve

