

Book Review

Holly Borham (ed.), *The Circulating Lifeblood of Ideas: Leo Steinberg's library of prints*. Austin, Blanton Museum of Art, and Marquand Books, 2023. ISBN 978-1-64657-034-8. 164 pp., 125 col. illus. \$39.95.

Throughout the second half of the last century art history was dominated by an iconological method characterized by an over-reliance on texts. Leo Steinberg (1920–2011), the Russian-born Jewish–American art historian, was reminded of this when one of his professors dismissed his dissertation of 1960 on Francesco Borromini's church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane as 'only an interpretation'. He proudly reprinted this remark when he published a revised version of his study in 1977, commenting how 'any inquiry into artistic meaning if it could not be documented as a recorded intention or objectified by supporting texts' was 'dismissed as *a priori* invalid'. Against this, Steinberg emphatically believed that visual intelligence was transmitted through images and not texts. What better way to disseminate visual models beyond the limitations of place and time than through prints? For Steinberg they were 'the circulating lifeblood of ideas', a phrase that serves as the title of Holly Borham's beautifully produced volume published in 2023 in the wake of her exhibition *After Michelangelo, Past Picasso: Leo Steinberg's Library of Prints*, shown at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas in Austin in 2021. The book contains two essays by Borham and one by Peter Parshall, followed by catalogue entries for a representative selection of fifty-two prints from Steinberg's expansive collection. Each of the prints is accompanied by Borham's detailed descriptions, which, taken together, provide a concise overview of 450 years of printmaking from sixteenth-century broadsides to Josef Albers and Ray Johnson.

Prints that were based on existing works of art and translated into a graphic medium have long been dismissed as merely 'reproductive'. They were generally less sought after and hence far more modestly priced than the works of such artist–printmakers as Dürer, Rembrandt and Goya, which allowed Steinberg to build an astonishingly comprehensive collection.

Between the early 1960s and 2002, when the collection was acquired by the Blanton, he had amassed more than 3,500 prints (a number that can be easily doubled if all the swaps or sales that took place along the way are taken into account). Steinberg clearly enjoyed being a print collector and belonging to what he called 'a club composed of a small band of dedicated enthusiasts, spread out over continents and centuries'. The discriminating study that is required to determine different states or to ascertain the date when a specific impression might have been printed clearly appealed to his proclivity for the visual. Yet here, too, he deviated from the mainstream: Steinberg did not mind – and even sought out – prints with paint marks or other traces from the artist's studio, that had been pricked for transfer or just simply used as notepads. These 'compromised' sheets came to form a veritable sub-collection, and he donated 272 of them to the New York Public Library between 1980 and 1996.

In her first essay – 'Leo Steinberg and his library of prints' – Borham combines an insightful biographical sketch with the history of the collection's formation. This makes for an entertaining read, as we can follow Steinberg through what he liked to refer to as his 'raids in Paris and London'. The text offers fascinating insights into a commercial ecosystem – now pretty much teetering on the edge of extinction – where one could still rummage through masses of prints priced in bulk, either by weight or by the height of the stack piled up next to the cash register. Borham's second essay addresses 'Steinberg as a scholar'. Refreshingly free of jargon, it provides a circumspect survey of Steinberg's writings and of the central role assigned in them to the image. She points out that, for Steinberg, 'prints were fundamental to early modern practice and, therefore, to art history'. Reproductive printmaking is, in his own words, 'not so much a branch of art as the medium through which, for nearly 400 years, all branches of art interacted'. This understanding of the importance of prints also informed Steinberg's famous notion of the 'flatbed picture plane', formulated in 1972 against Clement Greenberg's claim that art's self-referential acknowledgement of its materiality

and two-dimensionality (as opposed to the illusion of spatial depth constructed through one-point perspective) is an exclusively modern achievement. Steinberg argues that such ‘self-referential consciousness’ was hardly new and that even before the advent of Cubism artists were continuously ‘inventing interferences with spatial recession’.

Peter Parshall refers to the flatbed picture plane as a ‘metaphor’, and his essay explores this further by illustrating an eighteenth-century printing press whose framed block of types could be arranged in ever changing ways – not dissimilar to the elements on the surface of a Rauschenberg picture to which, according to Steinberg, ‘anything reachable-thinkable would adhere’. Parshall then goes on to ask why Steinberg chose a press and not merely a simple table top as a model. Ultimately, though, his insightful, veritably Steinbergian reflections on the nature of the printing press – its ‘structural and procedural properties’, its ability to take ‘the world in’ and then to return it ‘in multiple for widespread consumption’, ‘the reflective/inversion factor inherent in the print medium’, etc. – make him realize that ‘the metaphor of the picture plane becomes complicated in ways that do not precisely apply in the sense that Steinberg intends’.

For Parshall, Steinberg’s ‘infatuation with acquiring prints’ should be seen not ‘as something principally motivated by his investigative method, but as a reflection of it’. One might ask, however, what else could have motivated ‘Leo Steinberg’s print affair’ – the title of Parshall’s essay. In his wide-ranging 2003 lecture *What I Like about Prints*, delivered at the Blanton Museum to mark its acquisition of his collection, Steinberg remarked that by the time he made his first print purchases he had already ‘escaped graduate school’. (The text was posthumously published in *Art in Print* (vol. 7, no. 5, 2018) and not to have reprinted it here is my one minor quibble with Borham’s book.) There was hence an undeniably auto-didactic but also very personal aspect to his approach to prints. He looked at them – and at art in general – first and foremost as an artist. As a Jewish refugee in London during the late 1930s, he had enrolled at the Slade School, and, after arriving in New York, taught

life-drawing classes at the Parsons School of Design from 1948 until 1960, the year of his above-mentioned dissertation. Accordingly, as Borham writes in her biographical essay, ‘proficiency in the making of art preceded writing about it’.

This is confirmed by Jonathan Bober, who knew Steinberg well and, as the Blanton’s curator of prints, drawings and European art at the time, was responsible for securing Steinberg’s collection for the museum. In a conversation with this reviewer, Bober stated that what drew Steinberg to prints was less the building of a visual library than the ‘sheer wonder at technique’. In his scholarly, as well as critical, writings, Steinberg repeatedly tackled those maximalist artists of the past and present – Leonardo, Michelangelo (again and again), Picasso, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg – but his collecting was first and foremost, according to Bober, a source of delight and pleasure: ‘He loved the humble, the sincere, the unorthodox with which he could identify completely, effortlessly’. It was this openness, even permissiveness, that made him seek out the intriguing work of amateurs like John Clerk of Eldin (cat. no. 38) or Gilles-Louis Chrétien (cat. no. 41), and anonymous British caricatures (cat. no. 42), as well as the wilfully primitive-looking wood engravings of the provincial nineteenth-century French publishing house Imagerie d’Épinal (cat. no. 44). The result is a treasure trove which also functions as the best representation of Steinberg’s sheer boundless curiosity. Only later, once the hunt for purchases was over, did he begin to look for connections between these diverse items, always guided by a firm belief in ‘the supremacy of visual evidence over textual sources’. Borham’s elegant survey has now given us a sense of the scope of it all. Beyond that, her essays serve as a well-researched introduction to Steinberg’s print-related writings. It is to be hoped, therefore, that the book will instigate more studies of this eminent artist-scholar’s work and, even better, encourage students to make their way to Austin to further explore his multifaceted collection.

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