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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

23 December 2025

It is around the time of the shortest days of the year that Christians celebrate the birth of Christ. Taking place at a significant moment in the astronomical calendar, the event—as narrated by the evangelists Matthew and Luke—has long been understood as a powerful metaphor for the spiritual rebirth of light at a moment of greatest darkness. The earliest depictions of the Nativity date back to the third or fourth century, appearing in wall paintings adorning Christian catacombs and carved on Roman sarcophagi. These early scenes were often simple, showing a swaddled infant in a trough, accompanied only by an ox and a mule. Mary and Joseph soon entered the scene, and over the following millennium the iconography expanded further. Additional narratives emerged, such as the Adoration of the Shepherds and that of the Three Magi, who arrived in Bethlehem in search of the Savior. The settings varied between stables, caves, or classical ruins, the latter imbuing the scene with further symbolic meaning by historicizing the timeless metaphysical antinomy between light and dark into a teleological narrative in which classical ruins signify an “old world” overcome and replaced by Christianity.



Geoffroy Dumonstier, *Nativity*, ca. 1543, etching (Baselitz/Blau Collection)

Yet it was the nightly setting that most appealed to artists, challenging them to convey the darkness in which the biblical scene unfolds. The subject clearly held a special fascination for the French artist Geoffroy Dumonstier (ca. 1510–1573), who etched no fewer than four variations on this theme. These highly idiosyncratic works can arguably be counted among the most peculiar depictions of the Nativity in the history of Western printmaking.

Dumonstier is documented as an illuminator of manuscripts who is praised in contemporary sources as the most famous painter in Rouen. In the late 1530s, he is mentioned in the royal accounts as working at the Château de Fontainebleau as an assistant to Rosso Fiorentino (1495–1540). Today, he is best known through twenty etchings, even if all of them are of the greatest rarity. None of the plates are signed but some impressions have the artist’s name added in pen and ink. Since all these inscriptions appear to be in the same hand, they are generally considered autograph signatures rather than additions by a later collector. The fabulously strange style of these etchings makes them stand out and has allowed scholars to attribute several additional sheets for which no signed impressions are known.



Geoffroy Dumonstier, *The Adoration of the Christ Child at Night*, ca. 1543, etching (Baselitz/Blau Collection)

While highly unusual, Dumonstier’s prints nonetheless fit within the broader context of what is known as the School of Fontainebleau. Its printmaking enterprise lacked a well-established tradition of engraving, a medium that requires a time-intensive training to master the counterintuitive handling of the burin needed to incise the sinuous lines familiar from the works of such master engravers as Dürer, Goltzius, or Nanteuil. The Fontainebleau printmakers therefore turned to the then still relatively new technique of etching to disseminate the designs created by Italian artists for the French court. Etching allowed to draw loosely with a stylus into the soft protective ground that was subsequently bitten into the copper plate by acid. What was lost in precision in elegance was compensated by a remarkable linear freedom.



Geoffroy Dumonstier, *The Nativity*, ca. 1543, etching (Baselitz/Blau Collection)

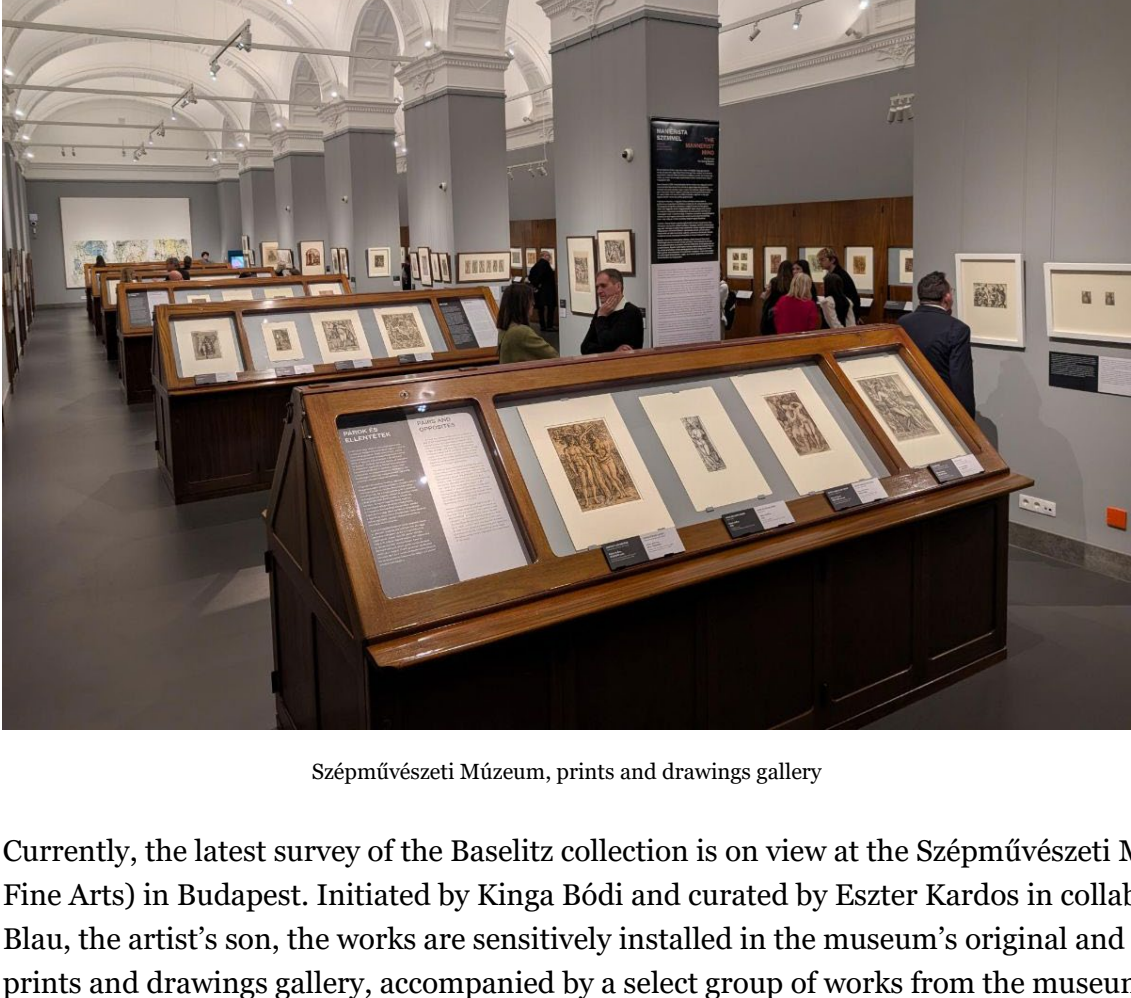
Dumonstier—familiar with creations of the Fontainebleau printmakers and having learned the etching process—did not interpret the designs of others but produced prints based solely on his own inventions. Echoes of other artists’ work are therefore stylistic and technical rather than compositional. Henri Zerner, the undisputed doyen of the study of this period, has pointed to Rosso—under whom Dumonstier worked as an assistant—as a key influence, particularly in the “manner of composing in the picture plane and not in space, and even in violence of effect, which he exaggerates.” Zerner also notes the technical “carelessness” of the plates and identifies Antonio Fantuzzi, an Italian printmaker active at Fontainebleau, as another important influence—one whom Dumonstier “even outdoes the abruptness and the unnatural light effects that Fanuzzi effected.”



Geoffroy Dumonstier, *The Nativity*, ca. 1543, etching (Baselitz/Blau Collection)

What might be read as criticism is precisely what appealed to the German artist Georg Baselitz, who has collected mannerist prints ever since encountering them during his first visit to Florence in 1965. He owns all four impressions shown here—a grouping rivaled only by the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. When the late Ger Luijten presented a first survey of the artist’s old master print collection in the lavishly produced tome *La Bella Maniera* in 1994, Baselitz explained his interest in “such borderline cases of art.”

Mannerism is such a “borderline case” *par excellence*: It denotes a moment when the achievements of the High Renaissance were thrown into a radical instability, “the acquired territory became unsafe and the classical image fell apart.”



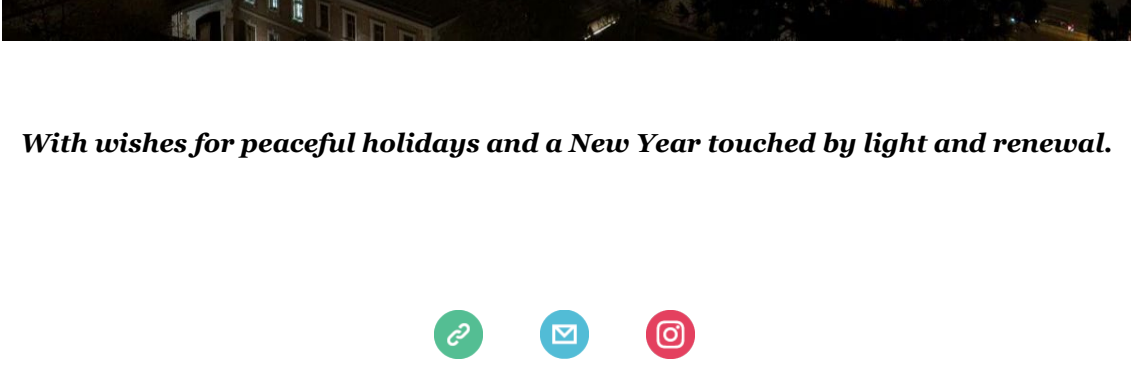
Szépművészeti Múzeum, prints and drawings gallery

Currently, the latest survey of the Baselitz collection is on view at the Szépművészeti Múzeum (Museum of Fine Arts) in Budapest. Initiated by Kinga Bódi and curated by Eszter Kardos in collaboration with Daniel Blau, the artist’s son, the works are sensitively installed in the museum’s original and beautifully renovated prints and drawings gallery, accompanied by a select group of works from the museum’s own rich holdings. The exhibition demonstrates how the Baselitz Collection has developed beyond the narrow confines of Mannerism proper, broadening over time while remaining faithful to the artistic vision of its creator.

The Mannerist Mind: Prints from the Georg Baselitz Collection

On the occasion of an exhibition held at the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden in 2018 that placed Baselitz’s own work in dialogue with that of his artistic forebears, Günther Gercken observed: “Old art is lifted from the drawer of art history and filled with life, while, conversely, the origin of Baselitz’s art becomes visible.” Eszter Kardos further underscores the contemporary relevance of this historical material when she writes in the Budapest catalogue: “Our discordant times, filled with confusion and uncertainty, share much with the age of Mannerism. Today’s visual culture is similarly disruptive, favoring agitated expressiveness, striking conspicuousness, exaggeration, and unique solution.”

She may well have a point, even if one can’t help feeling that it is something of a pious hope that in today’s world disruption, agitation, and exaggeration exist only in art—making Dumonstier’s Nativity scenes an unexpectedly fitting accompaniment to this year’s holiday greetings.



*With wishes for peaceful holidays and a New Year touched by light and renewal.*

