

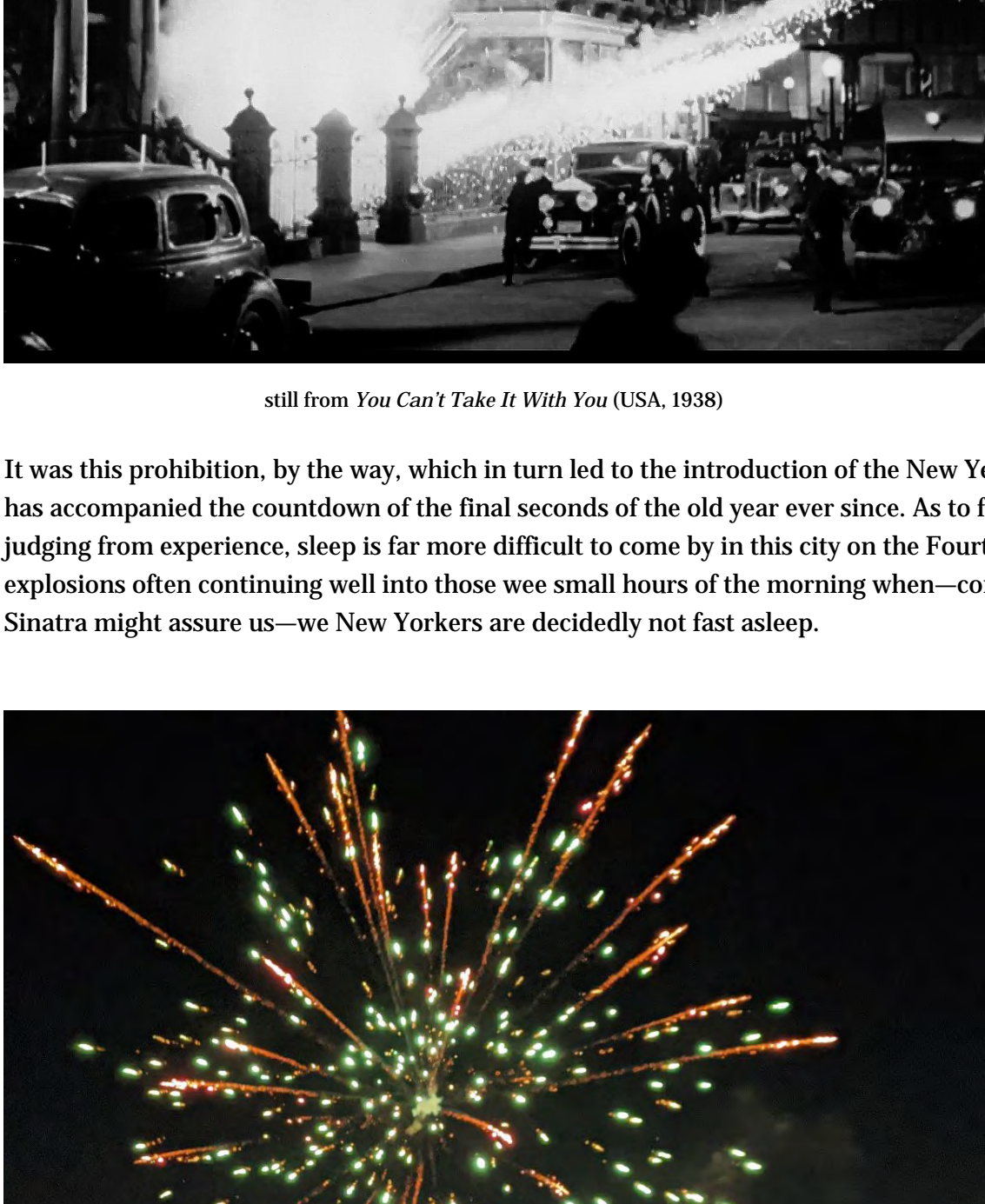
C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

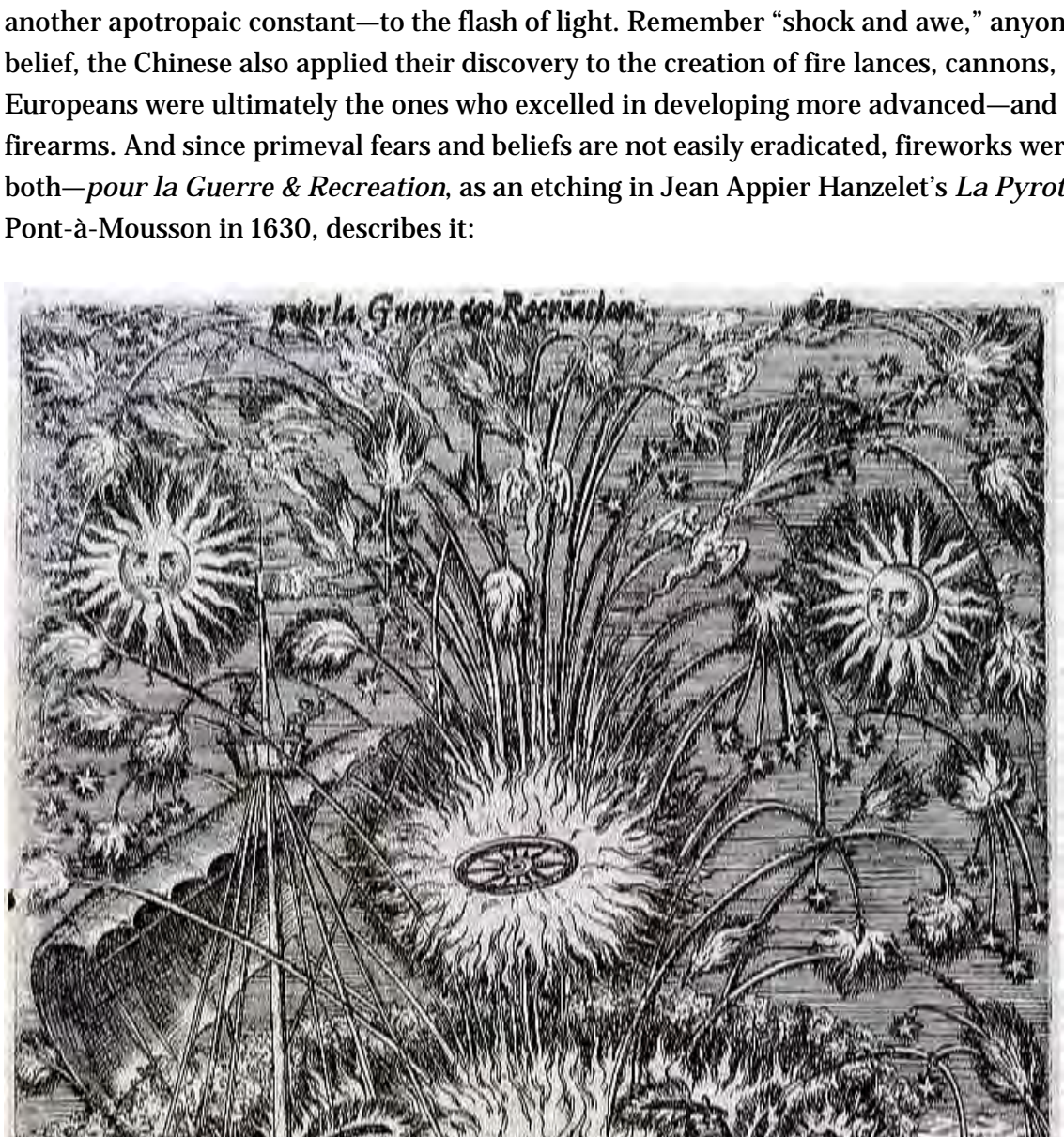
31 December 2025

Writing about fireworks from New York City on New Year's Day is somewhat counterintuitive, since only three years after fireworks were introduced to the city's Times Square celebration in 1904, they were banned over safety concerns—with good reason, as one can learn when watching *You Can't Take It With You*, Frank Capra's gem of a feel-good movie that we discovered over the holidays.



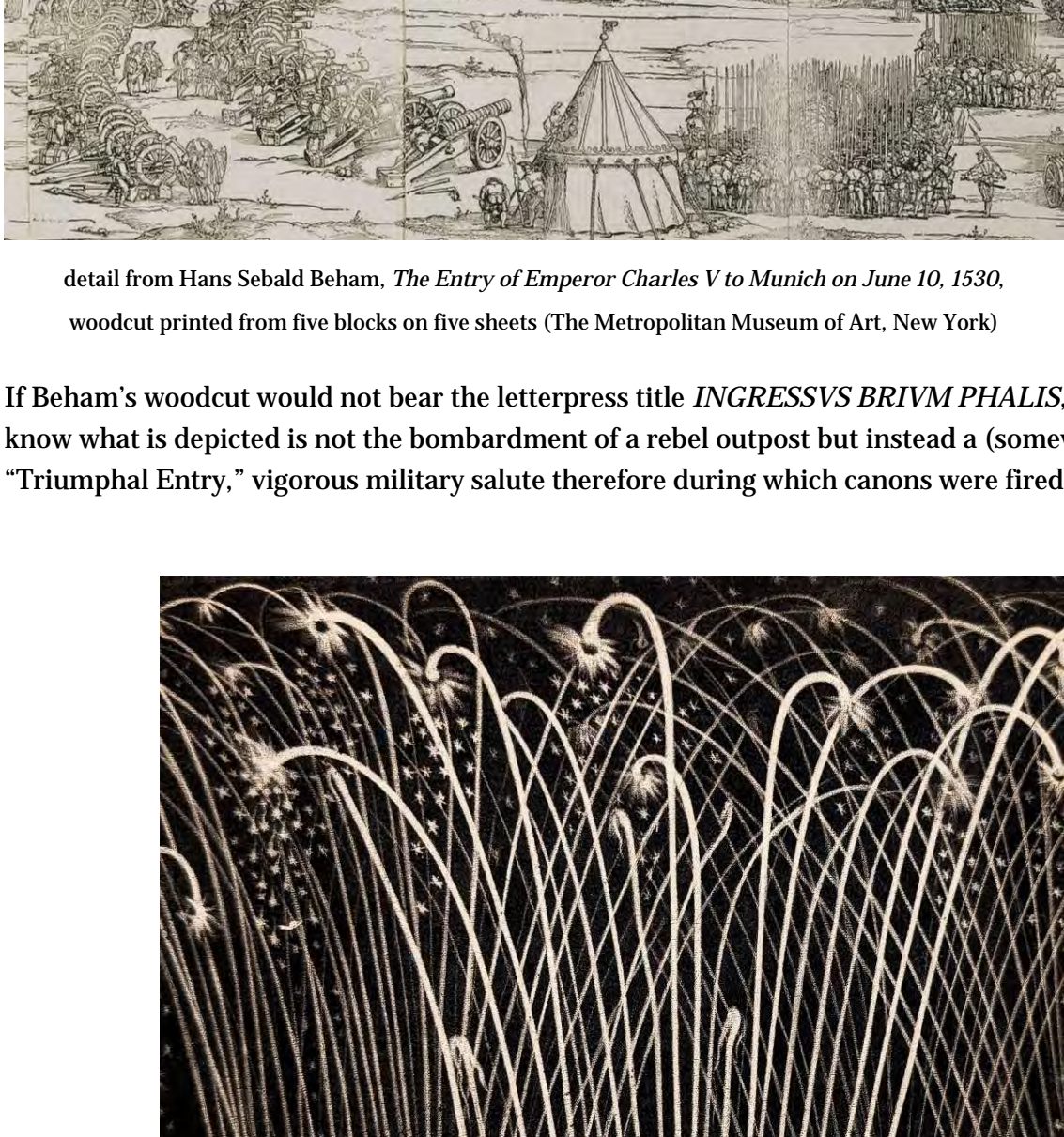
still from *You Can't Take It With You* (USA, 1938)

It was this prohibition, by the way, which in turn led to the introduction of the New Year's Eve ball drop that has accompanied the countdown of the final seconds of the old year ever since. As to fireworks in New York: judging from experience, sleep is far more difficult to come by in this city on the Fourth of July, with explosions often continuing well into those wee small hours of the morning when—contrary to whatever Frank Sinatra might assure us—we New Yorkers are decidedly not fast asleep.



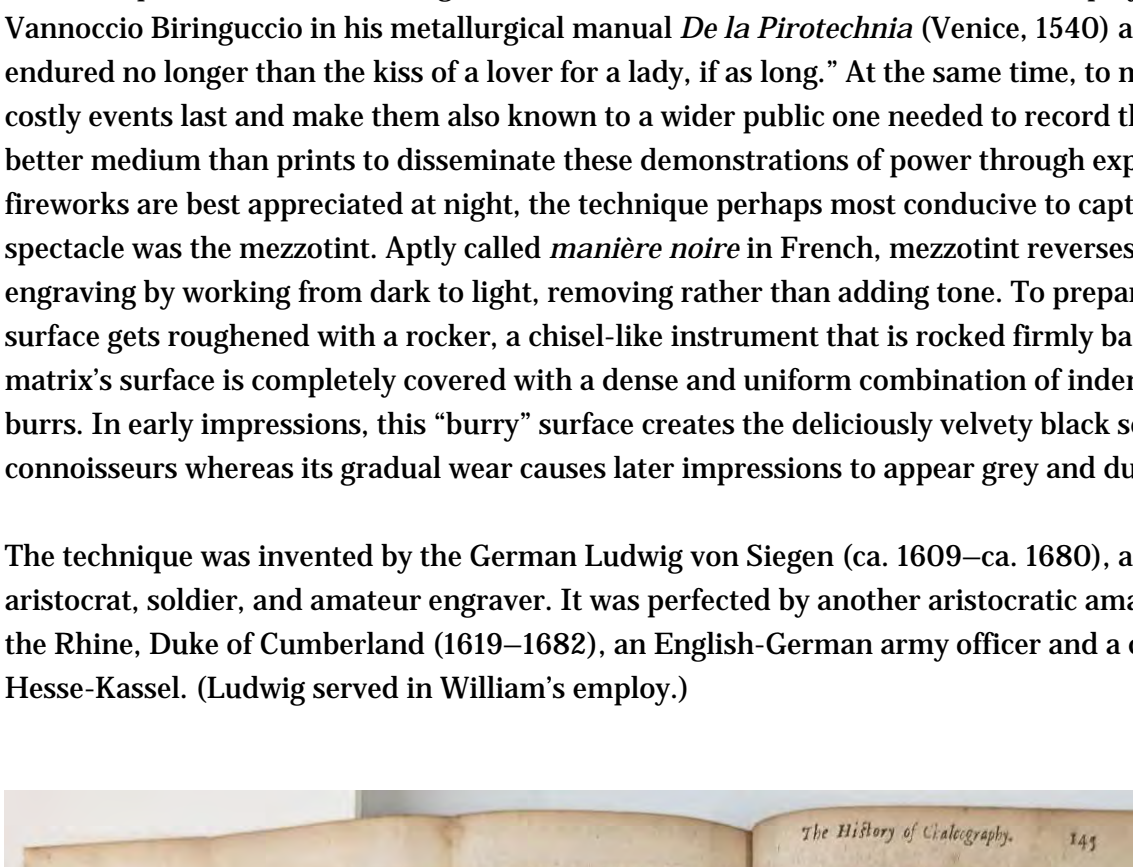
the sky over Harlem, any given year on the Fourth of July

The apotropaic belief that light wards off evil spirits is deeply embedded in human consciousness, dating back to the time when *Homo erectus*, our distant ancestor, began to control the use of fire around one million years BCE. Quite a while later, toward the end of the first millennium CE, the Chinese discovered that a mixture of sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter possesses the rather volatile quality of exploding, thereby adding loud noise—another apotropaic constant—to the flash of light. Remember “shock and awe,” anyone? Contrary to popular belief, the Chinese also applied their discovery to the creation of fire lances, cannons, and bombs, even if Europeans were ultimately the ones who excelled in developing more advanced—and hence more lethal—firearms. And since primeval fears and beliefs are not easily eradicated, fireworks were from then on used for both—*pour la Guerre & Recreation*, as an etching in Jean Applier Hanzet's *La Pyrotechnie*, published in Pont-à-Mousson in 1630, describes it:



(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

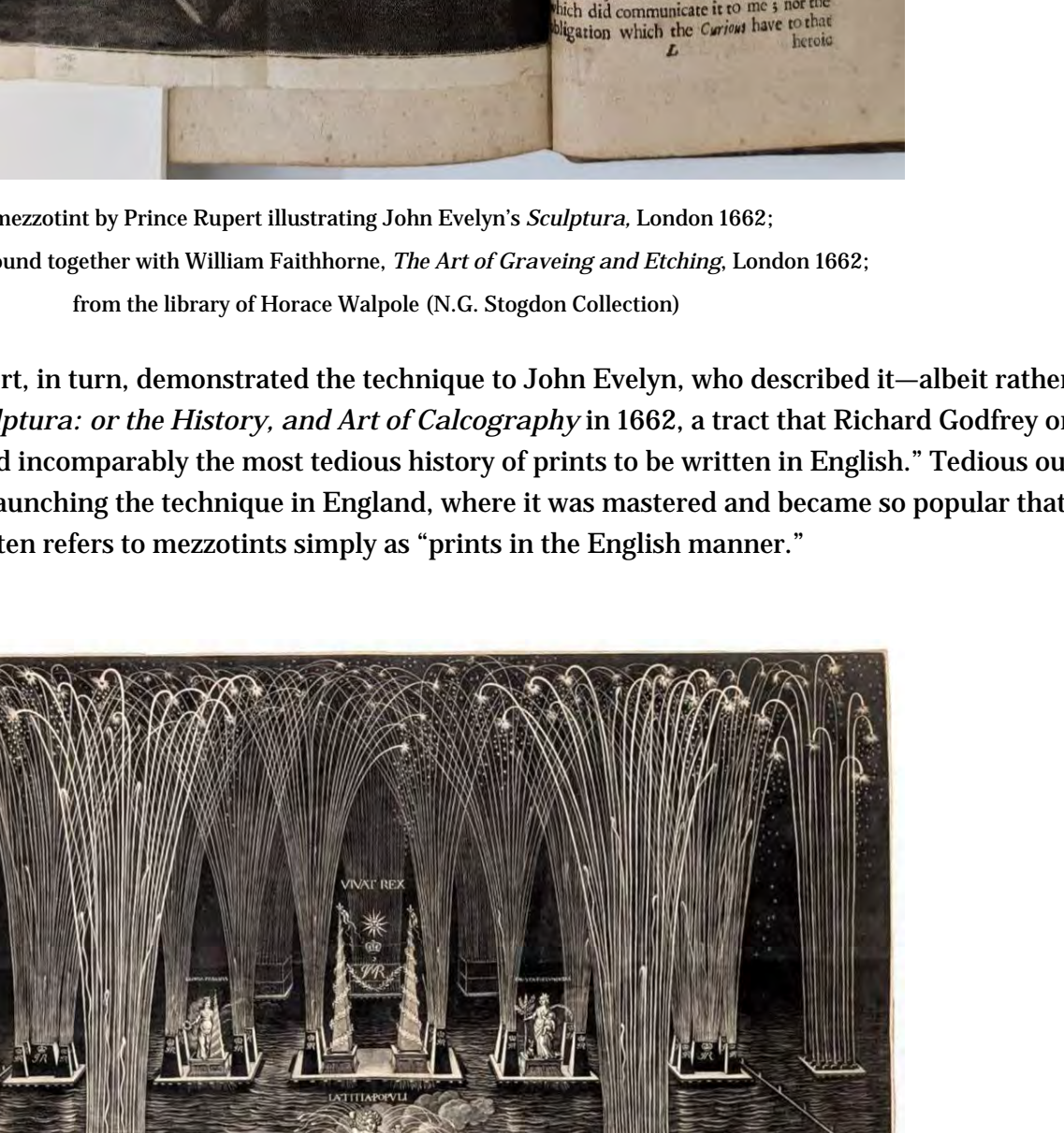
It is therefore not surprising that, when perusing *Fireworks! Four Centuries of Pyrotechnics in Prints & Drawings*, Suzanne Boorsch's useful survey on the subject that accompanied an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000, the earliest images featured there required explanatory titles.



detail from Hans Sebald Beham, *The Entry of Emperor Charles V to Munich on June 10, 1530*

woodcut printed from five blocks on five sheets (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

If Beham's woodcut would not bear the letterpress title *INGRESSVS BRIVM PHALIS*, how else would one know that what is depicted is not the bombardment of a rebel outpost but instead a (somewhat awkwardly spelled) “Triumphal Entry,” vigorous military salute therefore during which canons were fired at a stage set?



In a world that knew neither photography nor film, it fell to artists to create images that could endure and thereby contribute to the forming of a commonly shared memory. Yet to preserve something as fleeting as fireworks posed a double challenge. First, there was the transient nature of the display, described by Vannoccio Biringuccio in his metallurgical manual *De la Pirotechnia* (Venice, 1540) as an “amusement endured no longer than the kiss of a lover for a lady, if as long.” At the same time, to make such ephemeral but costly events last and make them also known to a wider public one needed to record them. What could be a better medium than prints to disseminate these demonstrations of power through expenditure? And since fireworks are best appreciated at night, the technique perhaps most conducive to capturing such nocturnal spectacle was the mezzotint. Aptly called *manière noire* in French, mezzotint reverses the mechanics of engraving by working from dark to light, removing rather than adding tone. To prepare the printing plate, its surface gets roughened with a rocker, a chisel-like instrument that is rocked firmly back and forth until the matrix's surface is completely covered with a dense and uniform combination of indentations and raised burrs. In early impressions, this “burry” surface creates the deliciously velvety black sought out by connoisseurs whereas its gradual wear causes later impressions to appear grey and dull.

The technique was invented by the German Ludwig von Siegen (ca. 1609–ca. 1680), a well-educated German aristocrat, soldier, and amateur engraver. It was perfected by another aristocratic amateur, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, Duke of Cumberland (1619–1682), an English-German army officer and a cousin of William VI of Hesse-Kassel. (Ludwig served in William's employ.)

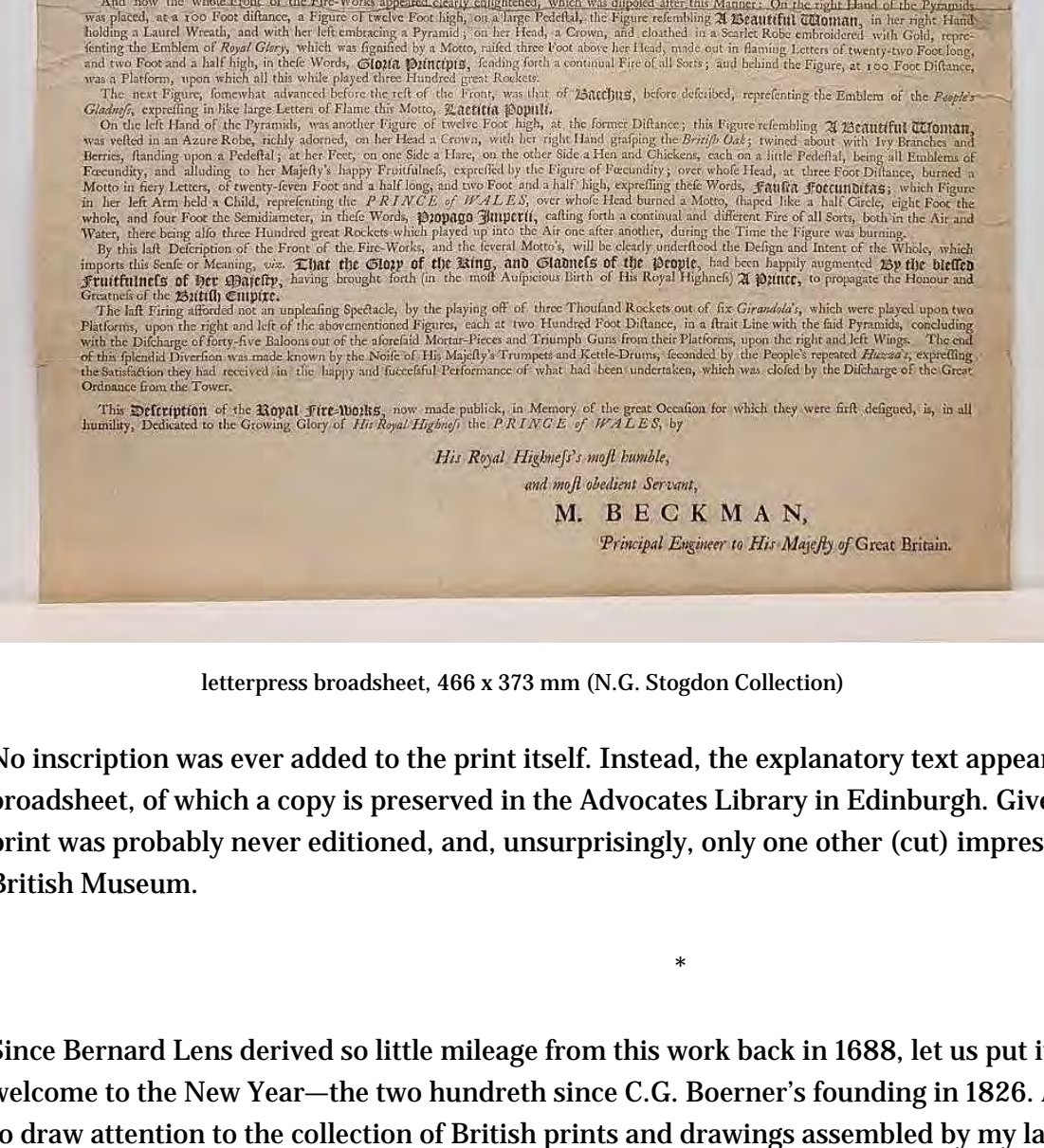


a mezzotint by Prince Rupert illustrating John Evelyn's *Sculptura*, London 1662;

this copy bound together with William Faithorne's, *The Art of Graving and Etching*, London 1662;

from the library of Horace Walpole (N.G. Stogdon Collection)

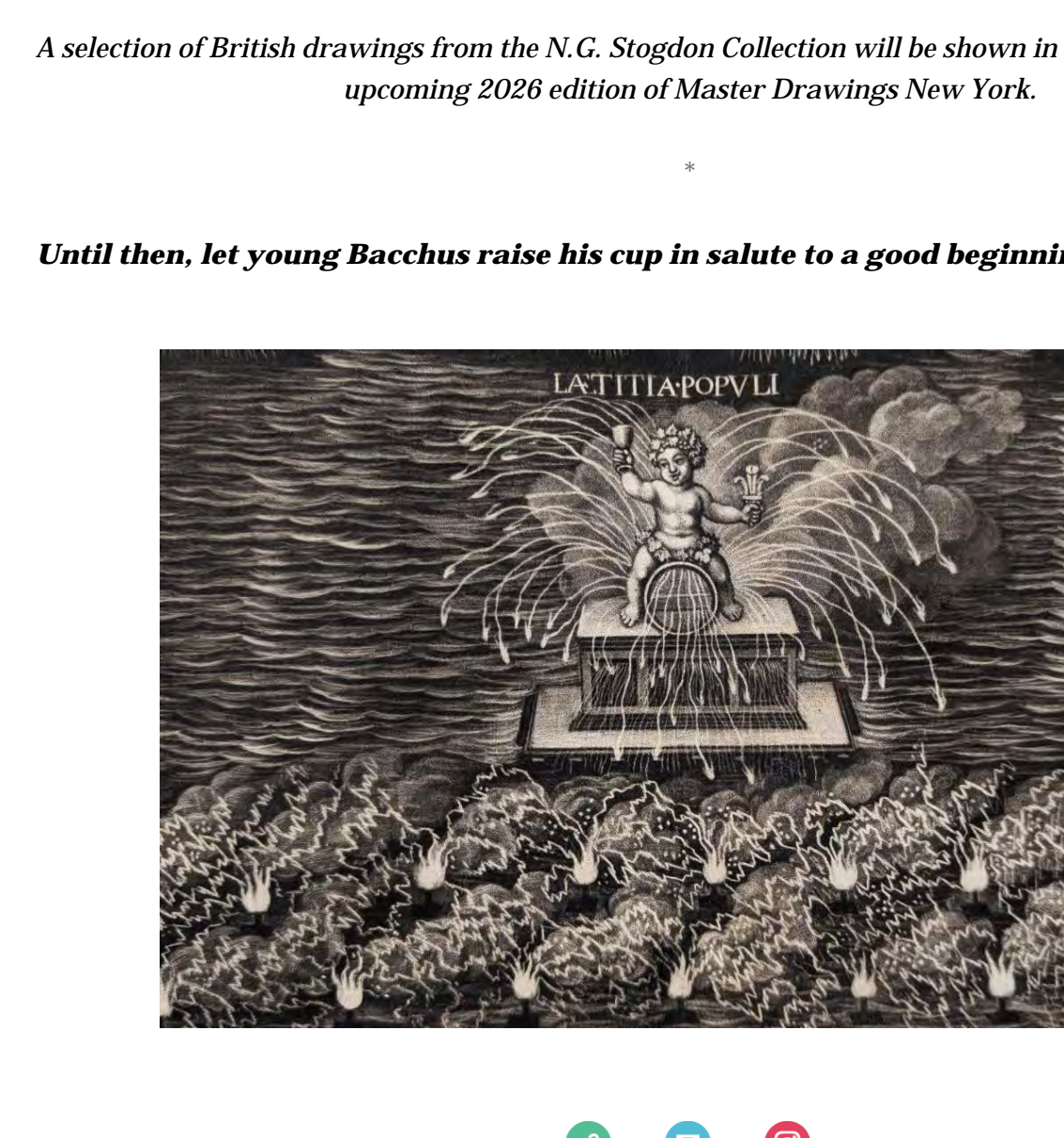
Prince Rupert, in turn, demonstrated the technique to John Evelyn, who described it—albeit rather obscurely—in his *Sculptura: or the History, and Art of Calcography* in 1662, a tract that Richard Godfrey once called “the first and incomparably the most tedious history of prints to be written in English.” Tedious our not, it caught on, launching the technique in England, where it was mastered and became so popular that older literature often refers to mezzotints simply as “prints in the English manner.”



Bernard Lens II, *The Royal Fireworks*, mezzotint, 467 x 690 mm,

published by Martin Beckman, London, 1688 (N.G. Stogdon Collection)

A rare early example that applies this new method of printmaking to the subject of fireworks is a spectacular—and spectacularly large—print by Bernard Lens II (1659–1725), the son of a Dutch preacher and painter who settled in England. George Vertue (1684–1756), an engraver known for his meticulous note-keeping, refers to him in his notebooks as a “mezzotintor scraper.” The fireworks were held to celebrate the birth of Prince James Francis Edward Stuart in June of 1688. Prince James was the senior House of Stewart claimant to the thrones of England, Ireland, and Scotland, and his birth was announced by an admittedly somewhat pedestrian mezzotint, also produced by Lens.



letterpress broadsheet, 466 x 373 mm (N.G. Stogdon Collection)

No inscription was ever added to the print itself. Instead, the explanatory text appears on a letterpress broadsheet, of which a copy is preserved in the Advocates Library in Edinburgh. Given the circumstances, the print was probably never edited, and, unsurprisingly, only one other (cut) impression survives, now in the British Museum.

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Since Bernard Lens derived so little mileage from this work back in 1688, let us put it to use again today to welcome to the New Year—the two hundredth since C.G. Boerner's founding in 1826. At the same time, it serves to draw attention to the collection of British prints and drawings assembled by my late friend N.G. Stogdon (1948–2024). The result of a lifelong passion for prints—and of collecting in a field in which he was not active as a dealer—the collection traces what Nick himself described as “Printmaking and the Rise of the Arts in Britain before circa 1810.” That one of its earliest highlights is a print by a Dutch printmaker born in Cologne (Crispijn de Passe), while its later bracket is provided by a Frenchman working in London (Théodore Géricault), is just one of the many idiosyncrasies that characterize this remarkable group.

The four works featured here further demonstrate the scholarly acumen with which this collection has been brought together over a lifetime. Yes, there is Bernard Lens's sparkling masterpiece of “incendiary art” (to borrow Kevin Salatino felicitous phrase, used as the title of a memorable exhibition shown at the Getty Research Institute in 1997–98). Yet the image of the ill-fated infant in its cradle is rare as well, given its short lifespan. This may excuse the quality of the sheet, which undeniably belongs to the mezzotint's notorious purgatory of grey impressions. (Having done the labor of producing the plate, Lens was able reuse it efficiently a year later to depict another baby prince—William, Duke of Gloucester [1689–1700], the exiled king's grandchild and son of his daughter Anne who would become Queen in 1702.) Most astonishing to me, however, is the fact that Nick even owned the accompanying letterpress broadsheet—arguably the most ephemeral form of printed matter.

Master Drawings New York 2026

A selection of British drawings from the N.G. Stogdon Collection will be shown in our gallery during the upcoming 2026 edition of Master Drawings New York.

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Until then, let young Bacchus raise his cup in salute to a good beginning of the New Year!

the sky over Harlem, any given year on the Fourth of July

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