

PRESS RELEASE

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Nineteenth-Century European Prints

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European prints from the permanent collection show the transformation of printmaking in the 19th century, from traditional, academic images, through the work of experimental printmakers Rodolphe Bresdin (French, 1822–1885) and James Ensor (Belgian, 1860–1949), impressionists Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917) and Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940), and artists influenced by Japanese art such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864–1901) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (American, worked in England, 1834–1903), who worked for many years in London, Paris, and Venice.

Too often seen as a time of complacency and conservatism, the 19th century was an era of progress and transformation in European society. These changes are reflected in the printmaking of the day. Printmaking is a technology that stretches back to the 15th century in Europe, and in the 19th century it was being reinvigorated by new techniques and strong demand. Artists like Francesco José Goya y Lucientes (Spanish, 1746–1828) and Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863) experimented with the new techniques of lithography and aquatint in making their prints.

Printmaking never had more famous practitioners; artists like Joseph Mallord William Turner (English, 1775–1851) and Édouard Manet (French 1832–1883) make prints that are copies of their own paintings in the 19th century, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864–1901) creates posters to advertise cabarets. However, for a public that looked down on copyist printmakers, and commercial images, these works were confusing. Traditionally, copyists were the printmakers hired to make reproductions of paintings so that famous images could be published. However, they were considered inferior artists because they did not do original work. This neat hierarchy is shaken when the painters themselves make copies of their own paintings, as Turner and Manet did. Likewise, commercial art was presumed to be rather low and perhaps unseemly, but when handled by artist like Toulouse-Lautrec, posters begin to become an art form in themselves.

Perhaps partly in response to these questions, European printmakers started to put together the idea of the edition in the 19th century. Some artists, such as Whistler, and publishers destroyed their plates after printing a certain number of impressions from them to create limited editions. Others printed part of the edition on special papers, or with

particular colors to create special editions. In all of these cases the aim was to maximize the profit that could be reaped from an edition by making it rare.

At the same time the industrial revolution was transforming Europe. It made the rise of photography and lithography possible by providing new chemical processes, but it also took a toll from Europe, as cities began to swell with underpaid workers, and the countryside was dotted with “dark, satanic mills.” Many printmakers, such as Blake’s follower Samuel Palmer (English, 1805–1881) and Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne Jones (English, 1833–1898) sought to make prints that would evoke a more idyllic time and countryside. Other artists such as Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903) looked to the exotic cultures of the South Seas and Japan for relief from what was seen as bankrupt western art.

Among those displaced by the industrial revolution were printmakers themselves. As photography took over more of the work of reproducing images, copyists were in less demand. More importantly, the particular skill of the copyist fell out of favor; being able to produce images with what was seen as a mechanical accuracy became the job of the camera. Artists were henceforth obliged to do what a camera couldn’t. For printmakers as well as painters, this opened up a myriad of possibilities, and by the end of the 19th centuries artists were exploring them creating prints that celebrated the particular qualities inherent in the medium. For artists like Camille Pissarro (French, 1830–1903), the scratches and imperfections that would have been unacceptable in an etching a generation before became the main reason for making a print; these peculiar marks were what set etching apart from all other media.

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