Scattered about in various places in the Museum’s collection of prints there is a group of engravings that technically are not prints, for although they were printed from engraved plates the plates were engraved to be decorative and not for the purpose of yielding impressions. Many such plates were made to be incorporated in pieces of church silver, to be mounted on gun stocks, or to be inserted in the tops or sides of étuis or snuffboxes. The most famous of the prints, perhaps, is the little round Crucifixion which, according to tradition, Dürer engraved in miniature on a piece of gold to be mounted in the pommel of the Emperor Maximilian’s sword of state. It is very rare. The most interesting and important of them, probably, are the set of impressions taken from the plates that formed part of the great lantern, or candelabrum, which was made and presented to the already ancient cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle at the cost of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Like so many of the best things of life they are quite common.

Not only were these plates of the Aix lantern engraved at least two and a half centuries before “engraving” was invented, but they were not printed from until the lantern was taken down for cleaning and restoration in the mid-nineteenth century. A good many impressions were struck off at that time. In the eyes of collectors these impressions suffer from the fact that they are not technically engravings, that they are restrikes, and that they are rather easily to be had. In spite of these defects it is practically impossible to procure prints pulled from plates made earlier than those in the Aix lantern, and they are therefore among the rarest prints in the collections of those wise enough to possess them. Their real date is not the nineteenth century, in which they were printed, but the twelfth century, in which they were engraved.

With time and energy it would be possible to discover a great deal about their designs, their history, and the various influences that went into their making. These things would be interesting and their excavation would provide scholarly exercise—but, after all, they would be aside from the essential point, which, given a little ingenuity, can be extracted by anybody from the encyclopaedia.

Charlemagne died in 814 and was buried in the church he had built at his favorite residence of Aix-la-Chapelle. In 1165 his tomb there was opened. About the same time that this happened the great lantern was given to the church by the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa—he who, according to the story, now sits in a cave in the Thuringian mountains, his great red beard grown through the stone table in front of him, waiting until his country’s dire need shall call him forth again. The building of the church of Notre Dame in Paris had begun the year before Charlemagne’s tomb was opened. Thomas à Becket had only recently become Archbishop of Canterbury. Richard Coeur de Lion was still a small boy. The great Emperor Frederick II, whom his contemporaries referred to as Stupor Mundi, the amazement of the world, was not to be born until 1194. The Third Crusade had not yet been talked of. Berengar and William the Conqueror had been dead less than a hundred years. Many men still had vivid personal memories of Abelard and Saint Bernard. None of the universities, not even that of Paris, had yet been organized. The Dies Irae, the Stabat Mater, and the Pange Lingua had not been written. The Fourth Lateran Council, which decided that Transubstantiation was one of the official dogmas of the Church, did not meet until 1215. Albertus Magnus was not born until about 1200, nor Thomas Aquinas until 1225. Joan of Arc and François Villon were still two hundred and fifty years in the future. More than three hundred years were to pass before Columbus set sail from Palos. It was a very long time ago.
The Beatitude "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." This print and the one on the next page are impressions from engraved plates in the lantern in the cathedral church at Aix-la-Chapelle. Dick Fund, 1923

The world was very different from any place that we know. There were no firearms, no coffee, no tea, no potatoes, and no tobacco. There were no table forks, and kings and beggars ate with their hands. No one yet knew how to cast iron. There were no windmills. Flour was ground by hand. There were to be no words for chimney in English or French until the fourteenth century. Ships could not sail into the wind. The earth was flat and Heaven was high above it. There could be no antipodes, because, if there were, everything would fall off—and
where would Heaven be? The earth was the center of the universe, and the sun and planets went around it in perfect aesthetic circles. The earliest existing translation of Euclid was only about fifty years old. Perspective was unknown. There was almost nothing that we would call science, but almost as many people believed in astrology as do today. Little of Aristotle was available and that to very few men. "I believe because it is impossible" had become "I believe in order to understand," and as yet only a few hardy spirits had taken the step to "I must understand before I can believe." The classical forms and learning, like the Greek language itself, had at last been very successfully forgotten, and, thus freed from the tyranny of the dead hand, men were fashioning their own thought and their own art at the forge of their own problems. Logic, no longer a sort of backgammon for the club corner, was becoming as important as death and the life hereafter, to which it eventually led so many who took it seriously.

Among the other things which men discovered at this time while thinking for themselves were new and wonderful forms of beauty—some of which they engraved on the plates of the lantern in the cathedral church at Aix-la-Chapelle.

The Beatitude "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."