THE "FIELD" OF PRINTS
OBJECTS VS. MEANINGS

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An exhibition illustrative of the first four hundred years of print-making in Europe has been arranged in the Print Galleries. The earliest of the prints shown was made sometime in the first half of the fifteenth century; the latest of them were made in the first half of the nineteenth century. No two of the prints shown were made by the same man. This restriction has made it possible to bring together in the galleries examples of the work of more than two hundred engravers, many of whom have not achieved the popular renown that would surely have been theirs had they been more prolific or had their prints survived in greater numbers. An exhibition of this kind has many morals.

The greatest of the print-makers, with few exceptions, have also been painters and draughtsmen of outstanding importance. Few of the men who have confined their work to the making of prints have achieved lasting fame. The reason for this is that when a man can use only one tool his hand obeys his tool more often than it obeys his mind. The slick manual adroitness of the professional engraver or etcher is achieved by a surrender to the tool. It is the antithesis of the creative will that compels a recalcitrant tool to make statements to which it is not accustomed. This is the meaning of the hard words "member of the school of" and "follower."

Another fact that becomes obvious as one surveys the exhibition is that no medium is artistically "better" than any other. They are different—but that is not the same thing. There is far less basic difference between an engraving, an etching, a drypoint, and a woodcut by one man than there is between two prints in the same medium by two different men. Thus the particular tool that is used is of very little importance as compared with the mind that drives it. When bent to the wills of great men media become simple and direct. The distinction between medium and expression vanishes, and the gesture of the hand becomes the thought itself. Examples of this are to be seen in such prints as Mantegna's engraving of The Risen Christ between Saints Andrew and Longinus, Titian's woodcut of Pharaoh's Army Submerged in the Red Sea, and Rembrandt's drypoint of Christ Presented to the People. In pictures such as these the cloaks of style have fallen away and men nakedly exert power.

Thus the present exhibition provides material for thought about many of the most interesting problems presented by "prints." Particularly, it raises a general question which is rarely or never discussed despite its very considerable importance not only in museums but in the world of collectors and special students. As this is the last exhibition which will be arranged by the present writer, he may perhaps be forgiven if he examines this question from a museum point of view. The argument so obviously applies to many situations outside of museums that it is unnecessary to call specific attention to them.

A Department of Prints contains pictures that were printed on paper. Their subject matter ranges from the most profound ideas and emotions to pattern designs for the most trivial of gewgaws, and includes everything of which informative or reportorial pictures can be made. There are special techniques for the handling, use, and preservation of pictures on paper, and unless these techniques are religiously and skillfully observed prints come to grief; for they are very perishable. From the administrative point of view it is simplest to concentrate all these specialized techniques and worry and policing in one place. The Print Department contains many of the greatest and most imaginative works of art in a museum, but
its scope is not confined by purely aesthetic considerations. The informative value of its collections is shown by their utility to at least half the other departments in the museum when they are in search of light on their own problems. Thus in all probability a Print Department has a broader purview of life and thought than any other department of a museum except its Library. This leads to thought about museum departments.

Museum departments are the creation of administrative exigencies. The boundaries of the departments are arbitrarily defined. Some are limited by geography, some by geography and time, and some by geography, time, and material. Some are confined to functions. A few departments are merely undefined remainders—i.e., what is left after the other departments have been defined. And it is never to be forgotten that the greatest of all the limitations on a department are to be sought not in any official definitions but in the mental habits and the predilections of its staff.

In the course of time these artificially limited departments grow and develop subdepartments. The departments and subdepartments become recognized as “fields” or “subjects” of specialization. The marginal areas in these fields, which cannot be surveyed without trespassing on other fields, are very apt to be disregarded. Broad topics of interest which cut across departmental boundaries are rarely or never followed across them by well departmentalized specialists, and the daring people who try to do so are called unsound, superficial, and amateurish. No great power of analysis is needed to discover the results which this attitude inevitably produces in both thought and knowledge. One of them is that departmentalized history is episodic and lacking in continuity; another is that the relations between objects in the different departments are little known; and still another is that transitional episodes, instead of being seen as the most important of all, are thought of as somehow regrettable and not to be taken seriously. In the accepted jargon, transitional styles are not “pure.” Transitions frequently begin in the field of one department and reach their final fruition in the fields of other departments. From the points of view of the departmental fields in which these transitions begin they are seen only as incompetencies and fallings away from high ideals and skills and not as the basic changes of definition and directions that they really are. Transitions are therefore more than apt to be disregarded, although all the future is implicit in them. The result is not only misunderstanding but, frequently, the positive distortion that comes from omissions and from misplaced emphasis.

The narrower and more self-contained a field of specialization, the greater is the reputation for “knowing his subject” which the specialist in it can achieve. His task is to work on the inventory, to describe, date, attribute, and catalogue the objects in his field. These things, presumably, can be definitively done, once and for all. The great task, however, to which the making of the inventory is merely a preliminary step, is to interpret the meanings of objects, and, as this has to be done afresh for each succeeding generation, it can never be finished. Moreover, it can only be done effectively by someone who is knowledgeably and sympathetically at home in the thought and art of his own time and country and who is not afraid to follow ideas across departmental boundaries. Interpretation thus takes a great deal broader knowledge and many times more hard thought than the work on the inventory. Especially it requires imaginative and emotional responses, and an ability to see things as parts of causal sequences that stretch across earlier and later times and other fields. It is no game for mute Miltons. When it is best done it is most deceptive about itself; for it carries its learning lightly and speaks with an easy air of directness and simplicity. Its right words need no explanation. The interpretation that tosses fitfully on a bed of footnotes is not only unhappy but not awake.

The museum specialists’ learning, and it is frequently very remarkable, is almost invariably confined to the lore of the object—which all too often is shockingly different from a knowledge or understanding of the ideas and emotions originally and later exemplified by
Melencolia, an engraving by Dürer. Dick Fund, 1943. Shown in the current exhibition of Masterpieces from the Department of Prints.
the object. The more “serious” the worker in a field the less he knows about or “wastes time” on other fields. He forgets that the people who made the objects which he studies with such single-eyed devotion not only traveled and went abroad but had fathers and grandfathers and were avidly interested in other fields and in adapting what they found there to their purposes. Also, and this is almost invariably overlooked in art museums, those people thought and wrote, and they cannot be understood without taking that into consideration. For Plato mathematics were vastly important. He devoted much of his time and energy to them, and what he discovered in them colored and shaped his basic thought. But—how many of the specialists in “Greek” ever bother to know any mathematics? It is certain, for instance, that Jowett, who translated Plato, did not. In practice it can be taken for granted that a museum specialist knows little or nothing about the subjects which the most intelligent men of his “period of specialization” thought most important, or of the earlier and later histories of those subjects. Nothing can be more false than a picture of a past civilization that is based on acquaintance with a few of its objects and a dense ignorance of its ideas and problems. From a departmental point of view it is very boring to realize that living thought has always been unable to foresee and to conform to the arbitrary limits, rules, and fashions (i.e., the ruts) of future museum departments.

Every object, in that it is both a physical thing and a container and reflector of ideas, is much like a book. The distinction between these two aspects of books is clearly drawn, but unfortunately it is rarely drawn between the two corresponding aspects of works of art. The man who studies the contents of books may be an historian, a scientist, a student of literature. The man who studies the physical aspects of books is called a bibliographer. The bibliographer examines his objects with great care and writes minute descriptions of them; but he is not expected to read them or to be familiar with the ideas contained in them, let alone to understand the historic and other implications of their texts and illustrations. Whatever he says about these things is more than apt to be perfunctory and to smell of the nearest handbook. In its peculiar way bibliographical description is very useful, but it is entirely aside from everything that has to do with understanding an author’s thought.

Bibliography is the most highly developed example of what happens when the inventory, or rather the inventorizing, of objects becomes recognized as a “subject.” It is a natural result of departmentalization and of its substitution of learned housekeeping for thought. The stock clerk comes to be regarded as the man who “knows” the business, but the sad fact is that very few stock clerks, eminently useful as are their activities, ever have any idea of the functions or the possibilities of the gadgets in their bins. There is much talk of the cultural value of a museum’s collections but that value can never be shown by a stock room inventory. Dictionaries are not literature, and neither are they guides to it.

Almost exactly five hundred years ago Nicholas of Cusa discovered that, if seen from within a closed field, any random point in the field has as logical a right to be regarded as its center of revolution as any other, and that the unique center of revolution of a field can only be determined from a point of view that lies outside the field. True in both physics and astronomy, this is also true in art and archaeology—and, were one cynical, one could add that it is in egoism, too. Thus the importances and unimportances of the specialists in closed fields are almost invariably false when examined from broader points of view. Pilate, washing his hands, was a specialist dismissing a matter as of no moment in his field.

Being the merest accident of administrative exigency, museum “fields” and “subjects” all too frequently are cells and not lookout stations, and they will probably stay so until long after the inventory has reached such a state of completion that it has become possible to think of it as a tool and not as an end. Once the inventory becomes, and is recognized as, a tool for use, with the same status as a collection of library catalogues, the definition of “serious scholarship” in museums will undergo a vast
change. This change, however, will cause much heartburning and deep sorrow among the members of museum staffs. The most serious crises in life are those which require a man to change his whole set of values and habits if he is to survive.

The student of "prints" is peculiarly lucky in this respect. For practical purposes the inventory (and the corpus of reproductions) has reached such a state of completion that it can be taken as a general rule of thumb that every old print and illustrated book of more than minimal importance has been described, attributed, and dated, either singly or as a member of a homogeneous group, and can be referred to by a convenient call number which is intelligible to all who are interested. The earliest, and still one of the greatest, of all the great catalogues known in museums is that of Bartsch. During the last hundred-odd years his assiduous followers in many lands have finished his inventories of old prints and done it with a wealth and fullness of detail that would have astonished him. There is no reason to believe that the things which still remain undescribed will make any changes of importance in the pattern. The laborious description and publication of "new states" and minor variants very rarely is more than an exhibition of misguided local vanity, and it "contributes" nothing "to knowledge."

The result of this is that "prints" are no longer a "field" or a "subject" in the accepted specialist sense but a broad avenue to understanding of thought and expression in general. Prints can now be studied not to discover what places they should occupy in the inventory but for what they imply, and their implications touch everything in life from the abstractions of geometry to Golgotha and what happened there. The museum "subject" of prints has thus finally become merely the dictionary of a wonderfully rich pictorial literature. Although this literature cannot be understood without a knowledge of its words, it is, like all greatly living and adventurous literatures, important not as a collection of philological specimens but for what has been said in it. This same thing is doubtless true in many other museum "fields," in which, however, it has not yet been recognized that assiduous devotion to the inventory has become merely a device to avoid thought while appearing to be serious and busy.

In the words of the old sundial: "It is later than you think."