

French Lithography at Kingston

French Lithography: the Restoration Salons 1817–1824. An exhibition held at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 15 October–30 November 1976.

Related publication: W. McAllister Johnson, *French Lithography: the Restoration Salons 1817–1824*, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1977. 212 + xii pp., 326 illus., \$15.00 (paper).

Taken together, this exhibition and its related publication document the introduction of the new process of lithography to the French Salons in 1817 and its development to 1824 (the first year in which a special section was devoted to lithography at the Salons). The exhibition was limited in scope, as far as original items were concerned, to prints which were shown at the 1824 Salon, but a continuous slide performance introduced visitors to lithographs shown at the Salons of 1817, 1819, and 1822. It followed only a few years after a number of general and wide-ranging exhibitions of lithography prompted by the bicentenary of the birth of the inventor of the process, and stands in marked contrast to them in terms of approach. The Kingston exhibition presented lithography in relation to one country, and specifically the largely biennial Salons, within a narrow period of time. It did not set out to present the great masters of the process or its crucial developments. It was selective only in the sense that items shown were determined by the terms of reference of the exhibition.

The difference between this and other exhibitions of lithography is essentially one of outlook, which is referred to in a general art historical context by McAllister Johnson in the introduction to his publication. The exhibition was his conception and he seized on the opportunity offered by the documentation of the Salons and the availability of items in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris to provide a comprehensive exhibition and publication which effectively recreate the lithographic contributions to the Salons of 1817, 1819, 1822, and 1824. The result is a unique record of the visual taste of the time and of French lithography in its formative years. It is to be hoped that more small galleries will take up the challenge of arranging comprehensive and well documented exhibitions of work which — in collecting terms — must be regarded as thoroughly modest, and that other major collections will be as generous as the Bibliothèque Nationale in their loan of material.

Few artists of the highest order exhibited lithographs at the Salons between 1817 and 1824, and the exhibition and publication deliberately avoid the building up of artistic personalities. In the organization of his catalogue McAllister Johnson puts the emphasis on the printer rather than the draughtsman. His position is stated in the introduction to the publication: "The catalogue provides a methodical view of the progress of a technique at the direct expense of artistic personalities, uneasy stylistic nomenclatures and any period designation. It assembles for a new public those *elements* necessary to an understanding of the years 1817–1824 as defined by the criterion of public exhibition at the Louvre."

Many of the lithographs exhibited at these Salons were reproductions of paintings. Perhaps the largest category of all in terms of subject matter were landscapes and topographical views (many of the latter being single sheets from publications or proposed publications). History pieces were also shown, as were portraits, architectural studies, drawing models, and, oddly enough, a few isolated examples of jobbing printing, including two maps and a sheet of music. It was not the subject matter of the prints, however, that provided the major point of interest at Kingston, but the development of the lithographic process itself and the growth in assurance of those who handled it (both draughtsmen and printers) in the period 1817 to 1824. These were the crucial years for the development of lithography in France and this exhibition and its related publication document the change from lithography as an extension of drawing on paper to a reproductive process with its own special techniques and methods of producing effects.

The pioneer work of Engelmann and Lasteyrie, the two printers largely responsible for promoting the new process in France following the Napoleonic Wars, provided the cornerstone of the lithographic contributions to the early Salons and they were responsible for printing almost all of the lithographs shown in 1817. Their intention was clearly to demonstrate the diversity of the process, and particularly the possibilities that it offered to artists. No doubt it was with this last point in mind that Engelmann submitted to the Salon of 1817 some confidently drawn lithographs by Mongin, Bourgeois, and the Vernets (*père et fils*), and Lasteyrie some by Thiénon and Carle Vernet. In the first three Salons under consideration, comparatively few lithographs were exhibited: 24 in 1817, 27 in 1819, and 26 in 1822. But in 1824 the number of exhibitors had risen to 28



FIGURE 1. *Galatée*. Drawn by Joseph Dassy after a study by A.-L. Girodet-Trioson, printed by C. Constans, lithograph, 49.5 × 40.5 cm. Exhibited at the Salon of 1824. Cat. no. 111 (Photo: Agnes Etherington Art Centre).

and the number of exhibits to 104 (this last figure was exceeded only once in the Salons up to and including 1870).

The exhibition underlined the fact that by 1824 pictorial lithography was more or less synonymous with chalk drawing on stone. (Apart from three small pen-and-ink lithographs, two tinted lithographs, and a set of drawings of tessellated floors which carried a little hand-colouring, all the lithographs shown were monochrome chalk drawings.) By 1824 the techniques of monochrome chalk lithography had been developed to a level of craftsmanship that was rarely to be surpassed. The overwhelming impression created by the appropriately austere Kingston display of the lithographs from the 1824 Salon was of the delight taken by draughtsmen and printers in the exploration of effects within the constraints imposed by monochrome lithography.

The techniques of monochrome lithography perfected by Aubry-Lecomte and other professional lithographic draughtsmen of the period were developed in direct competition with the engravers. They ranged from the building up of soft grey tints which gave no indication of the direction of shading, to vigorous hatching with swelling lines of the kind made fashionable in copper-engraving, which reinforced form and also provided texture. Most tones were built up positively by means of painstaking hatching, and highlights were frequently produced by scraping away the prepared tones. The range and subtlety of lithography in the field of reproductive work allowed for the production of effects that were quite beyond all other

graphic processes of the time, and the prints in the 1824 Salon reveal the enthusiasm with which the draughtsmen displayed their skills in rendering such effects as the sheen on curling hair or hazy distant views. Aubrey-Lecomte's work as a reproductive lithographer was well known before the Kingston exhibition, but equally impressive are some lithographs after Girodet drawn in a bold and open style by Joseph Dassy (Fig. 1). Dassy's work is virtually unknown and he does not figure in the standard works on lithography. The appearance of prints by such little known figures is in itself justification of the approach adopted by the organizers of the exhibition.

The leading printer of lithographs in terms of numbers submitted to the early Salons was Engelmann, whose influential treatise on lithography was first published in 1822. He was responsible for printing over half the items exhibited at the four Salons under consideration. The quality of his printing was recognized in his day as being of a very high order, though the Kingston exhibition revealed that some of the printing of Constans, Langlumé, and Villain was in no way inferior to his.

The conventions and markets for lithographed landscape and topography were already well established by 1824, but the exhibition showed, incidentally, the birth of a new convention in printmaking for drawing portraits. Examples of squared-up portrait lithographs and of portraits set within an oval in the copper-engraved manner were to be seen at the 1824 Salon; but there were also portraits of a new kind in which head, shoulders, and background were united

within a strongly shaped vignette. This latter approach soon became the norm for lithographed portraiture and early examples of it by Maurin and others were on display at the 1824 Salon.

The publication associated with the exhibition is described by its author, McAllister Johnson, as a "catalogue-exhibition"; it is a major work of documentation and makes an important contribution to the history of lithography. The scale of the work explains the regrettable, though understandable, fact that it appeared some six months after the exhibition closed. The scope of the publication is greater than that of the exhibition and, though bearing the same title, should not be considered simply as a catalogue of the exhibition. It documents in full all (or very nearly all) the lithographs that were exhibited at the four Salons of 1817, 1819, 1822, and 1824, as well as all prints in a series where the particular print shown could not be identified. The documentation is based on information provided by the Salon *livret* and entries in the *dépôt légal*, supplemented in the case of the 1824 Salon by the *Registre d'inscription des productions des artistes vivans, présentées à l'exposition, Salon de 1824*. The publication is, however, much more than a detailed catalogue of Salon lithographs; it includes transcripts of a number of documents of the period relating to lithography, including the *Rapport sur la lithographie* that Engelmann submitted to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1816 (together with reproductions of all its specimen plates), and a catalogue of the lithographs which appeared in the *Ancienne Normandie* volume of Baron Taylor's *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'Ancienne France*. The publication is a model of organization in terms of classifying information and cross-referencing, and is provided with excellent indexes. Over 300 lithographs are illustrated, mostly on a small scale, but sufficiently well for the purpose of identification. An intelligent selection has

been made of those prints to be reproduced on a larger scale, and all the prints are shown with the necessary letters and borders and, where relevant, accompanying letterpress text.

Designer Peter Dorn has produced a handsome publication that is well designed in every sense: it works well as a vehicle for scholarship, the choice of typeface and use of space show a sensitivity to the period, and the book is attractive to view and to handle. The quality of the typesetting is generally good and the machining of the text and illustrations of a high order. It is a pity therefore to have to record that rather too many typographical errors escaped notice at proof stage, some of which may lead to confusion (as on p. 56, where successive catalogue entries have been deprived of their first digit, thereby reducing *14* and *15* to *4* and *5* respectively).

Johnson's publication exemplifies — as it was clearly intended to do — some of the ideas he presents with conviction in his introductory essay "On cataloguing and some unrelated matters." It has to be asked, however, whether this was the right place for such an essay on art historical method. Though it provides a theoretical framework and justification for the work that follows, it does so at the expense of the reader with an interest in the content of the catalogue who may well have wished for a little more background information concerning the development of lithography in France or the organization of the Salons. But this is a minor and subjective point of criticism. The publication is the first historically based catalogue of early French lithography — albeit of a fairly narrow cross section — and the author should be congratulated for producing such a notable work of scholarship. It will undoubtedly become a standard work of reference in the field of lithography along with the catalogues of Abbey, Adhémar, Delteil, and Winkler.

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