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After Leonardo da Vinci
ANDREA MANTEGNA
AND THE ITALIAN
PRE-RAPHAELITE ENGRAVERS

WILLIAM HEINEMANN
LONDON 1911
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No period or school of engraving offers more attraction to the searcher after the rare and the beautiful in its less popular forms than that of Italy in the fifteenth century. It is hardly the field for the private collector, for good examples of its earliest masters are of the utmost rarity and in many cases unique; but the amateur who is content to appreciate the good things preserved for him in museums will find enjoyment of the keenest flavour in its study.

London, Paris, and Vienna have by far the richest collections of prints of this school, and the collection of Baron Edmond de Rothschild in Paris is the only other of comparable value, but Florence, Rome, Berlin, and Dresden all possess sufficient treasures to satisfy the student.

The extreme rarity of the earliest prints has rendered a comparative study of the school a difficult task, and its history is still enveloped in considerable obscurity. Much of the work remains anonymous, and the historian has to be content with grouping many of its examples according to the style of engraving or design. Few of the great painters of the period seem to have taken any immediate part in engraving, except in supplying designs to the lesser craftsmen. Mantegna is the one great exception, for the attempts to attribute the production of Florentine engravings to Filippo Lippi and Botticelli are quite without foundation. In fact the earliest Italian prints are largely the work of craftsmen of quite secondary rank. But the Italian craftsmen were artists of independence, and never mere tools in the hands of the greater masters. And the wonder of the early Renaissance in Italy is that so many secondary artists were able to express the same indefinable charm and freshness of outlook that pervade the greater masterpieces.

The earliest engravings in Germany and in the North of Europe largely consisted of pictures of saints, illustrations of the Passion of Christ, and little devotional prints scattered broadcast from the convents, with far more thought for their missionary uses than for their artistic value. A considerable number of the early Italian engravings were likewise devotional prints and illustrations of the lives of the saints, but the Renaissance in Italy had opened up many new channels of thought, and in a country with an awakened sense of beauty, where art was recognised as having ideals apart from the service of the church, the artists commanded a far more liberal range of
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subject. Their own great poets, Dante and Petrarch, and the great writers of Paganism, who were beginning to be read with so much ardour, afforded them many subjects outside the Bible; while prints of amorous and decorative subjects, sold to embellish the spice and jewel boxes presented by the gallant to his mistress, and illustrations of current astrological lore add the flavour of variety that is lacking in the North.

Vasari in his "Lives of the Painters," first published in 1550, attributed the discovery of engraving about the year 1460 to a Florentine goldsmith, Maso Finiguerra. Modern research has definitely proved that certain Northern engravings were produced before 1445, and has rendered it probable that the art was practised at least a decade before that date. Now Finiguerra was only born in 1426, and although he was working as a goldsmith in 1447, it is unlikely that any of his engravings date before the last ten years of his life, which ended in 1464. What his engravings are, has until recently been a matter of complete obscurity, and the failure of Vasari's tradition in one part has induced certain critics to doubt the rest of his statement, and call into question the very existence of any engravings by Finiguerra at all.

It is the especial merit of Sir Sidney Colvin to have recovered the name of Finiguerra from this fairy-tale atmosphere, and by a remarkably secure chain of reasoning to have attributed to him or his workshop a group of early Florentine prints, which have hitherto remained anonymous, or catalogued under the hospitable name of Baccio Baldini.

Vasari states that Finiguerra, who was one of the most famous workers in niello of his time, made the discovery of printing on paper from engraved plates by a mere chance in the course of his practice of that art.

Now the niello is a small plate, generally of silver, on which the design is shown in black like the name on a brass door-plate. The method of work is to cut lines or spaces on the plate for the design, and fill these by the fusion of a black composition formed of copper, silver, lead, and sulphur (nigellum, niello). The art was known for the simpler forms of decoration in antiquity, and practised to some extent during the Middle Ages, but it only sprang into any popularity about the middle of the fifteenth century in Florence and Bologna (to die out again early in the next century), and it had never been used for elaborate figure-subjects before this time.

To test his work before completion, the niellist was accustomed to take sulphur casts. The lines being filled with ink show up the
design on the bright surface of the sulphur even more clearly than a paper impression. The most perfect of these sulphur casts in existence (and they are of extreme rarity) is the Coronation of the Virgin in the British Museum (i). It is a cast from the celebrated niello pax preserved in the National Museum, Florence. For a long time (but only since the middle of the eighteenth century) it was quite wrongly attributed to Finiguerra, but it is evidently the work of Matteo Dei, and very closely reflects the style of Filippo Lippi. The pax which Finiguerra is known to have supplied to the Baptistery of St. John in 1452 is almost certainly another of the niello plates in Florence, a Crucifixion with the City walls in the Background, much coarser in technique, and nearer in style to Pollaiuolo.

Besides taking casts on sulphur, the niellist proved his work by taking impressions on paper. Several of these impressions are shown in our plates, two examples of Florentine work,* and six Bolognese, one of which is probably by the famous goldsmith and painter Francesco Francia. In general the Florentine work is the more clearly and deeply cut, while the Bolognese nielli are often so delicately engraved as to present the appearance of a surface of tone rather than a network of line.

Early Florentine engraving is generally divided into two groups (which, no doubt, represent different workshops) called the Fine Manner and Broad Manner. In the former the shadows are given by means of close and fine cross-hatchings, with a result analogous to a washed drawing. In the Broad Manner the shading is engraved in open parallel lines, sometimes with a short return stroke laid at an acute angle between the parallels, after the manner of a drawing in pen and ink. Now comparison of engravings in the Fine Manner such as the Libyan Sibyl (xxxiv and xxxv) with a niello shows the elements of an absolutely similar technique. So whether Finiguerra or another received the first idea of engraving proper from pulling impressions from niello-plates or not, it must be admitted that the development of line-engraving in Florence went hand-in-hand with the methods employed by the niello-worker.

The general conclusion of Sir Sidney Colvin's arguments in relation to Finiguerra is that the earlier specimens of the Fine Manner group, such as the Wild Animals Hunting and Fighting (xvii), the Road to Calvary and the Crucifixion (xviii), and the Judgment Hall of Pilate (xix), are by Maso Finiguerra himself. They are so closely related

* The largest collection of these Florentine nielli is that of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Paris (from the Salamanca Collection).
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in style to a series of drawings in Florence (traditionally attributed to Finiguerra), to the group of Florentine nielli which are also probably of the same workshop, and to the intarsia panels in the Sacristy of the Duomo, whose designs are known to have been partly due to Finiguerra, that there seems every reason to regard them as the engravings which, according to Vasari, Finiguerra produced. Another clinching document is the book of drawings forming a sort of “Chronicle of the World” (acquired from Mr. Ruskin for the British Museum in 1888), whose style is incontestably that of a goldsmith of the same workshop as the drawings in the Uffizi. Several of the designs in the book have been turned to account in the engravings of the school, e.g. in the Cretan Labyrinth (xx) and in various plates of the series of Otto Prints (see xxiii and xxiv). That the subject of the Cretan Labyrinth has been reversed, elaborated, and completed with another figure in the engraving makes it in the highest degree unlikely that the drawings are merely copies from the prints.

It is interesting to note in another plate of the school, the Mercury from the series of Planets (xxii), a goldsmith in his shop actually engaged in engraving a copper-plate. The shop and its contents reflect in many details what we know of Finiguerra’s workshop.

The chief argument against the literal truth of Vasari’s relation of Finiguerra’s discovery of engraving is the existence of a number of Italian engravings which seem considerably more primitive than those attributed to Finiguerra. This primitive group is illustrated on plates x–xv. The outstanding characteristics of the Master of the Larger Vienna Passion (as I have ventured to call him from a unique series in the Albertina, Vienna) is coarse line-work, exaggeration of muscular structure, complex drapery with broken bulging folds, and a harsh energy of character and expression in the face and hands that point to the influence of Andrea del Castagno. His fondness for elaborate and overladen ornament, and a tendency to throw his figures into relief by a border of shadow, betray the hand of a goldsmith. His apparently later prints (e.g. the Triumphs of Petrarch, which must not be confused with the better-known series in the Broad Manner) come much nearer the style of Finiguerra, and reflect more romantic and fantastic elements borrowed from the style of Pesellino and Baldovinetti. The earliest of the Italian engravings to bear a date is a Resurrection of 1461 (xv), and although this is certainly later than the Larger Vienna Passion it is not likely that any of the known Italian prints go back much before the middle of the century.
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Apart from the great probability of the connection of a large part of the Fine Manner prints with Finiguerra and his workshop (which is known to have been carried on by his brothers and nephews until 1498), it is difficult to come to any conclusion as to authorship. Vasari states that Finiguerra's successor in the Florentine school of engraving was Baccio Baldini, "who, not having much power of invention, worked chiefly after designs by Botticelli." There are designs by Botticelli in both the Fine and Broad Manners, so that if, as seems a priori more natural, the Finiguerra family carried on Maso's tradition, then Baldini may perhaps be the head of the Broad Manner workshop, whose prints date somewhat later than Finiguerra (i.e. from about 1470). Recent discovery of the inventory (1528) of a Florentine mercer, Alessandro di Francesco Rosselli, a son of Francesco Rosselli, who is described as an illuminator and printer, throws a somewhat new light on the question. Besides a large number of unidentified woodcuts, chiefly maps and views, it also contains several of the best-known plates, in the Broad and Fine Manners. It is conceivable that Francesco Rosselli (a brother of the better-known Cosimo Rosselli) may himself have been the master of the Broad Manner workshop.

The principal Broad Manner prints, the series of the Life of the Virgin and of Christ, and the Triumphs of Petrarch (see xxvii and xxviii), are most nearly inspired by the styles of Alessio Baldovinetti and Filippo Lippi. The large Assumption of the Virgin (xxxii) is perhaps the only Broad Manner print definitely after a design by Botticelli, but others, such as the second series of the Prophets and Sibyls (xxxv), show his influence. A much more immediate connection with Botticelli is the Fine Manner series of illustrations to Dante, made for (but only partially used in) Landino's edition of the Divina Commedia, 1481.

Engraving may have started in North Italy in the School of Mantegna very soon after its introduction in Florence. Lomazzo, who wrote a Treatise on Painting, in 1582, spoke of Mantegna as the first Italian engraver, and Vasari, in the first edition of his Lives, almost implies as much, though he revises his phraseology and adds the story of Finiguerra's discovery in his second edition, in the added Life of Marcantonio. In his second edition, Vasari states that Mantegna only took up engraving when in Rome (1488-90), and this from hearing of the works of the Florentines. There is every reason, however, to think that there was a regular school of engravers in Mantua well before 1475, the year of a certain document which
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discloses a most interesting story of Mantegna and two engravers, Zuan Andrea and Simone da Reggio, who were evidently pirating the master's designs. In technical style Mantegna's engravings are similar to the Florentine Broad Manner group, or even closer to the one extant engraving by Pollaiuolo, the Battle of Naked Men (xxxvi), reflecting in all essentials the manner of his own pen drawings. Altogether, some twenty-five plates have been attributed to Mantegna, but seven so far excel the rest in quality that one is driven to the conclusion that the rest are engravings by the masters of the school working after his designs. In the authentic group the outline is deep and strong, but the return lines of shading (laid at an acute angle between the parallels) are so lightly scratched in the copper as to have lasted out very few printings. Early impressions of Mantegna, with the somewhat clouded and mysterious tonality given by the lighter lines, are of extreme rarity, but later impressions, where the outlines alone show distinctly, are by no means infrequently met in the sale-room.

Of all the early Italian engravers, Andrea Mantegna is by far the most powerful, though scarcely the most human. Like many of the Florentines, he was an ardent lover of antiquity, but his spirit was far more impassive than theirs, and far more like the antique marble itself. His art has a monumental dignity which the Florentines never possessed, but it lacks the freshness and inexpressible charm that pervade Tuscan art. His was a genius that would have made one of the noblest sculptors; the engraving of the Risen Christ (xlviii) shows what he might have achieved in the field, but it needed the warmth of Venetian colouring to give his painting invigorating life.

The fifty engravings once called the "Tarocchi Cards of Mantegna" (though they are neither Tarocchi, nor cards, nor connected with Mantegna) are the most interesting and important series of anonymous prints produced in North Italy during the fifteenth century. They illustrate in five sections: (i) The Sorts and Conditions of Men; (ii) Apollo and the Muses; (iii) The Arts and Sciences; (iv) The Genii and Virtues; and (v) The Planets and Spheres. The numbers and arrangement correspond to no known game of cards, and the existence of several complete sets in contemporary binding seems to show that they were rather a sort of book of instruction and amusement for the young. There are two complete series, and critics are entirely in disagreement as to which is the original. What is here termed the original series is much more finely engraved than the other set, more purely Ferrarese in