

A PRINT —

THE SPONTANEOUS, IMMEDIATE EMANATION OF AN ARTIST'S
GENIUS — MUST BE WELCOMED, SAVORED A LITTLE AS ONE WOULD A
CONFIDENCE, IN THE INTIMACY OF STILLNESS AND WITH THE DEVOTION
OF SILENCE.

— *Roger Marx*

The collector J.-J. Claussin (1766–1844) is reported to have tucked his portfolio of Rembrandt etchings under his pillow at night so that when a particular print wandered into his dreams, he might wake up and reflect on it directly.¹ This is an unusual means of engaging a work of art—encouraging a subconscious haunting through a kind of sympathetic magic and then measuring it against the reality of the object seen before one's wakened eyes. Mostly we think of an aesthetic encounter in the opposite way, where the direct contemplation of a work of art becomes a means of transporting us out of ourselves. Nevertheless, what remains common to both experiences is the condition of privacy.

Privacy can be achieved in silence or incantation, in the solitude of a monastic cell or in the throng of a crowded museum. Here we are concerned with retreat and the intimacy that comes from holding a work of art in the hand. This is an experience particular but not peculiar to prints, and it has a history of its own. As a manner of relating to an object, the private and premeditated encounter was greatly significant for artists, collectors, and critics in the nineteenth century. Small sculptures ask to be lifted and handled. A print or a drawing must be singled out from its portfolio and tilted to the

light, much as a book is pulled from the library shelf. Furthermore, as the art critic Charles Blanc observed at the time, it is better to store a collection of drawings and prints rather than put them under glass and hang them on the wall, because such familiarity would detract from the subtleties they have to offer. “There are, among the treasures of art and curiosities, riches that one must always have visible to keep the sacred fire going in one’s soul. . . . But there are things that it is important not to see at every moment, from morning till evening, because one will finish by becoming indifferent to the pleasures they give.”² Sequestering an object establishes the conditions for experiencing it. Cycles of paintings were often commissioned for discrete spaces such as the Renaissance *studiolo*. Medals and rare coins were put away in cabinets just as collections of prints and drawings were kept in albums and, later, in portfolios. And for the sake of propriety, collections of erotica have always been concealed.

Under these conditions, encountering a work of art was a determined activity, not a random occurrence such as pausing before a painted landscape in the drawing room. The conditions of privacy were therefore both physical and psychological and, in the latter case, historically unrecoverable. We will never know what went on in Claussin’s mind when he woke up and rummaged under his pillow for the Rembrandt album. And yet, there is much to say about the longing for private aesthetic experience and the kind of art made to satisfy it. The habit of intimate collecting was pronounced among the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie, which cultivated an appreciation for this shadowed world and the quiet of a time and a place set aside for it. There was a fascination with the interior, not only in the architecture of the private house but in the obscurity of human consciousness. One material, the other subjective, these are the spaces of silent contemplation.

The element of darkness was a proclaimed aesthetic property, both formal and iconographic, naturally conveyed in the clouded atmospheres and tonal contrasts of black and white that are inherent in the printed media. In the preface to the first portfolio of prints issued by Alfred Cadart for the newly founded Société des Aquafortistes (Society of Etchers) in 1863, the critic Théophile Gautier delivered an intoxicated description of Rembrandt’s etching style, offering it as an example of what the medium could accomplish: “His resources, seemingly so bounded, furnished Rembrandt with the trembling light, the mysterious shadows and deep blacks which he required for his renderings of *philosophes* and alchemists in search of the microcosm; for the synagogues of solomonic architecture; his Christ resuscitating the dead; his landscapes crossed with shadows and rays of light; and all the phantasmagorias of his dreaming imagination,

powerful and bizarre.”³ This rapturous account is very much of its moment, a romantic response to the defining genius of a medium. Rembrandt’s importance for habits of collecting, for perceptions of the artistic imagination, and for the very concept of a work of art in the nineteenth century cannot be underestimated. For Gautier and most other critics in his time, Rembrandt was not only the paragon of etchers but also the grand magician of darkness and light. Darkness became a visual language understood as encouraging the exploration of shadowed kinds of subjects and indeterminate states of mind.

“The darker side of light” is meant as a paradoxical play on different levels. It is a reference to Paris, the City of Light and the capital of nineteenth-century avant-gardism. This well-known sobriquet recalls the fact that Paris was also a center of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, it was among the first cities to make broad use of gaslight and, by the 1880s, electric street lighting. Paris was also the birthplace of impressionism, the painting of light in celebration of the countryside and popular entertainments. But the artists and writers who captured that contented public image also knew something of what lay behind it. The somber reality reflected in Émile Zola’s novels, the etched fantasies of Charles Meryon, the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, and the dark tales of Edgar Allan Poe told another story. This was the post-romantic world as reconceived by Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Jean-Martin Charcot, and later Sigmund Freud, in which the human condition came to be defined in material terms, and the prospect of change was no longer spiritual but psychological, social, and political.⁴ Sensuality was expressed openly, often indecently, and society was seen to be an agent of isolation as much as community. Illness was understood as a mental as well as physical condition. Above all, death was vivid and ever present, and resurrection an unlikely outcome. Whether consciously aestheticized or not, whether artificial or genuinely felt, the pictorial vocabulary of this period betrays an uncertain and often distressed worldview. Our intent is not to illustrate that culture but to re-create something of its circumstances and sensations through the introspective nature of its imagery.

ETCHING: AN AUTHORIZED ART

Of the many objects collected in the late nineteenth century, prints were among the most common and most often written about. They were, moreover, the defining art of privacy. Much was said about the aesthetics of the print, and its promotion across the major cities of Europe was a public affair conducted at a high level by critics of various stripes largely in the pages of periodicals and newspapers.⁵ The so-called etching revival in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Austria in the 1860s through the 1880s

and, later on, in the United States, was the result of a movement by artists, critics, and, most important, print publishers to encourage the acquisition of original works of art, to support amateur drawing and printmaking, and along the way to elevate public taste.

Such ambitions lay at the center of a critical discourse over what was then and is often still termed the “original print”—that is, a print of original composition executed by the artist responsible for its design. This primarily meant etching but sometimes included lithography, both in effect techniques of drawing. Such prints were touted as genuine works of art in contrast to the labor-intensive and costly engravings that reproduced masterpieces of painting and sculpture, the type of print that dominated the market and claimed the attention of critics in reviews of the annual salons. It was a battle for position in a hierarchy of prestige, and the skirmish over the issue of originality soon established a second front to defend against the successes of photography. This eloquent campaign enlisted some of the most articulate and highly regarded writers of the period, and it may be that in the long term the writing generated by the revival proved more influential than the art itself.⁶

The initial declaration of the rebirth of etching as an artistic medium was delivered by Charles Baudelaire in his landmark essay “Peintres et aquafortistes,” published in 1862, the year of the founding of Cadart’s Société des Aquafortistes.⁷ Though he praised etching as the ideal medium for the expression of deep artistic sensibility, Baudelaire nevertheless feared that the relative ease and accessibility of the technique would foster a deluge of amateur work, as he saw happening in England. Indeed, he pointedly resisted the taint of popularity fostered by the revival. As he put it: “A little unpopularity is a sort of consecration.”⁸ In contrast to the aspirations of print publishers, Baudelaire was an unapologetic elitist.

The debate surrounding the “original print” in the second half of the nineteenth century is thus curiously hyperbolic, which surely betrays a certain defensiveness about the print’s secondary status in the hierarchy of media. In retrospect, the revival of the original print is a notable instance of co-optation in which publishers sponsored a rhetoric in support of their ambition. The writers who proclaimed the virtues of the original print in newspapers and periodicals were the same critics who wrote the prefaces to the annual portfolios of the etchers’ society.⁹ The commercial value of prints had long been a concern, and in the face of increasingly sophisticated techniques of reproduction, the various contrived means of inflating the worth of an impression were much discussed. Again Charles Blanc makes the crucial point: “An etching, as we understand it, is purely a drawing... but it is also

a design with a number of copies, and—especially bizarre—in the world of the *curious*, where all value is augmented by rarity, a plate from which one can pull a fairly large number of impressions is often more esteemed than a unique drawing. It is certain that the most beautiful wash drawing by Rembrandt has never fetched as high a price as an impression of the *Hundred Guilder Print* or the *Burgermeister Six*.¹⁰ But Rembrandt was a different case. The British art critic Philip Gilbert Hamerton, close enough to the situation to be right about it, could not understand how his contemporaries made any money from their prints, even given the facility of the technique and the newly developed advantage of steel-facing.¹¹ In fact, within five years Cadart’s operation faltered and went under for a time. Perhaps the best of these artists did indeed etch mainly for love.

The view still persists that the official or institutional etching revival contributed little of lasting significance to the more creative dimensions of late nineteenth-century art. Yet, most critics writing in support of the revival were drawn by seemingly incompatible ideas: a program in favor of bourgeois enlightenment and an investment in the more arcane, self-revelatory capacities of the medium. Baudelaire not only declared that etching glorifies the artist, but also asserted that the technique itself makes it “difficult for an artist not to describe his most intimate personality on the copper.”¹² Here in the urgent defense of the technique is the curious implication that an etching is in some essential way more revealing of its author than a pen or watercolor sketch. It is as if incising the etching ground and committing the plate to acid somehow entailed a sense of finality that required an uncommon degree of artistic integrity.

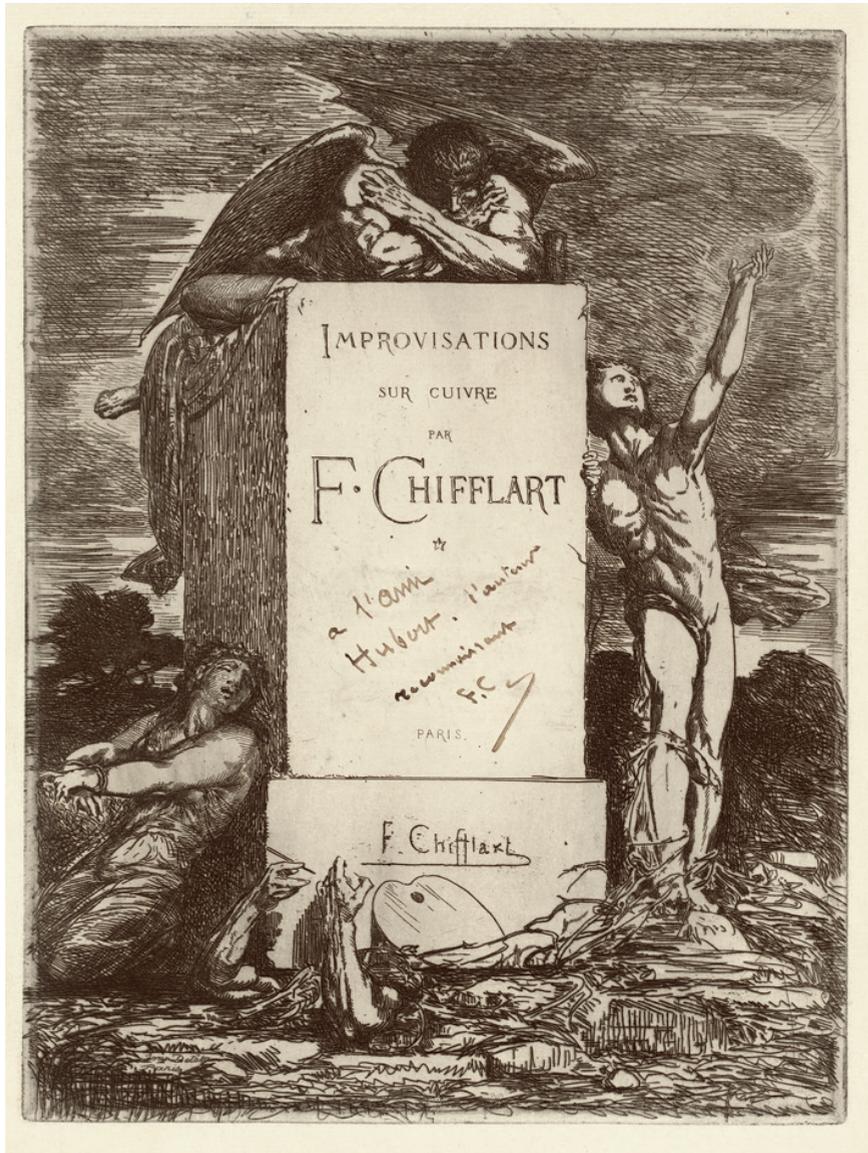
An etching was thus perceived to be at its most compelling as a mode of confession (precisely the sense of the epigraph to this essay). A print is something to be “savored a little as one would a confidence.” In a self-congratulatory claim, Baudelaire closed the circle of initiates even more tightly. Etching, he wrote, “is really too *personal*, and consequently too *aristocratic*, a genre to enchant people other than those who are naturally artists.”¹³ The inherently private character attributed to etching was an attempt to separate that medium from the mechanical aspect of printmaking and associate it with a basic romantic idea: the experience of an object as a means of direct communication with the artist. That this might best be achieved in a replicated medium is an odd shift in the inherited sense of the power of the original, or what has come to be referred to as the “aura” of a work of art.¹⁴ Whether consciously heretical or a straightforward declaration of faith, in retrospect Baudelaire’s extraordinary claims for the etching medium seem remarkably postmodern.



1 Albert Besnard, *Morphine Addicts*, 1887, etching, 23.7 × 37, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection



2 Odilon Redon, *This Is the Devil*, 1888, lithograph, 25.1 × 20, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund



3 François Nicolas Chiffart,
title page for *Improvisations on
Copper*, 1865, etching, 32 × 24,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Ailsa Mellon
Bruce Fund 2002.136.1

4 Félix Bracquemond,
Top of a Barn Door, 1852,
etching, 28 × 38.3, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Rosenwald Collection



5 Adolphe Appian, *Ar Valomey*, 1868, etching with drypoint, 10 × 19.1, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Gaillard F. Ravenel and Frances P. Smyth-Ravenel

6 Félix Hilaire Buhot, *The Spirits of Dead Cities*, 1885, etching, roulette, drypoint, lift ground, aquatint, scraping, and burnishing, 28.8 × 39, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

THE DARKER THEME

The culture of printmaking has always been ecumenical. Because it is an art form of the open market, it is less subject to the strictures of convention, and therefore artists, and by extension collectors, are freer to invade unfamiliar territory in their choice of style and subject. Throughout its history there have been times and local circumstances wherein various forms of official and unofficial censorship have restricted the publication of images. But given its prospective mobility and scale of production, printing is inherently difficult to control. Accordingly, printed images, like printed texts, have always had a high potential for transgression, and throughout the nineteenth century they carried on a background conversation shadowing the more public discourse of competing academic movements and aesthetic ideologies. This had been true before. In the Renaissance, in seventeenth-century Holland, and in Bourbon Spain, for example, prints regularly breached expected standards of decorum in religion, politics, and everyday life. The same was true from the 1860s onward, when lithography, wood engraving, photography, and especially etching became newly vital territories of invention, entrepreneurship, and the exchange of ideas.

A good example is the now little known academic painter Albert Besnard (1849–1934), a student of Alexandre Cabanel and a recipient of the Prix de Rome, who gained recognition as a society portraitist and painter of murals for civic and commercial buildings from the 1880s on.¹⁵ Whereas his paintings are for the most part regarded as sophisticated banalities, inflecting a saccharine academicism with elements of impressionist style and an occasional whisper of symbolist allegory, in his off-hours Besnard made etchings of often remarkable and disturbing subjects, such as two fashionably attired morphine addicts in a state of delirium (fig. 1). For him the discreet nature of the medium lifted the constraints of etiquette that governed his paintings and especially his commissioned work. Etching not only exercised Besnard's skill as a draftsman, but it also drew him into the domain of dark and light in both senses. His successful career as a painter has largely been written out of the history of modern art,¹⁶ yet his early etchings done in the 1880s explore marginal subjects in often unsettling ways that both evoke the brooding novels of Zola and presage the art of expressionism.¹⁷

When Rembrandt began making his radical sketch plates in the 1630s, he initiated the print as a brilliant medium for informal improvisation. This potential was given new implication by the vigorous promotion of etching and lithography as distinctly autograph techniques with a license to experiment. Prints might operate as a form of poetry and be allotted all the tolerances of obscurity, nonconformity, and loucheness that poetry allowed.

It became a medium suited to playing out an idea in a suite of images, an old format invested with new possibility. The lavishly designed portfolio containing a group of prints became a regular scheme for publication during the second half of the nineteenth century. Often these suites were improvisations in the proper sense: loosely connected if not random groups of images intended for sampling rather than reading in sequence. Odilon Redon's two series of lithographs based on Gustave Flaubert's unfinished episodic dialogue *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (fig. 2) is a cycle that cannot hope to capture more than a few fleeting and unrecollectable passages of the text. Max Klinger's several compilations of etchings—each given the indeterminate title “Opus”—sometimes form a tightly coherent sequence and sometimes do not. They are at times consistent in scale and orientation, and at times not. François Nicolas Chiffart's suite entitled *Improvisations on Copper* (fig. 3) is likewise a mélange of compositions embracing a variety of themes, moods, and settings—in short, an invitation to respond as if leafing through a volume of Mallarmé, pausing here and there to read a stanza or savor a line.

For the most part, prints of this kind remained offstage in the exhibitions and salons, being a less public repertoire issued for a discrete clientele with literary inclinations.¹⁸ Thus, in print shops, printing studios, and artists' ateliers one could discover, at a modest price and with no commitment to a public expression of taste, the art of realists, academics, impressionists, and symbolists, many of them invading one another's territory. Baudelaire classified Edouard Manet as a realist. Academic painters like Besnard and Chiffart etched subjects of a more disturbing nature than their paintings. Félix Bracquemond, among the most celebrated masters of etching in the period, was an animal specialist whose images range from the conventional to the unnerving (fig. 4). “Rembrandtists” such as Seymour Haden, Barbizon artists such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Adolphe Appian (fig. 5), and impressionists such as Félix Buhot (fig. 6), Max Liebermann (Hertel, fig. 2), and James McNeill Whistler (fig. 7) were prolific etchers. Gustave Doré, the great storyteller and most imaginative of illustrators, generated absorbing images in the late romantic mode (fig. 8). In many respects the most print-centered of all were the symbolists, including Klinger, Redon, and James Ensor (fig. 9).¹⁹ And there are the many who through their choice of direction elude conventional labeling: the realist-fantast Charles Meryon, probably the most widely collected printmaker of the period; the academic impressionist James Tissot (Clayson, fig. 10); the social realist-expressionist Käthe Kollwitz (Hertel, fig. 9); and the naturalist-symbolist Félicien Rops.

Of the original prints made in this period the vast majority were destined not for framing on the wall but for portfolios. Among those images

best savored in chosen moments of leisure were many obscure subjects, allegories either learned or whimsical, mild and not so mild erotica, political and social satire, and innumerable explorations of strained states of mind and social circumstance that would have disrupted the decorum of the proper bourgeois interior. In the same category were bound volumes of etchings, lithographs, and wood engravings, and the suites of etchings issued between fashionably designed covers, often series of landscapes or city views but also explorations of lofty philosophical and literary topics. Print collecting had a broad compass, including subjects ranging from erudition to impropriety. The practice of collecting came along with the promotion of the print as fine art, and inevitably the one had to be joined to the other. From this followed the necessary decision to make a place for keeping prints, and thereby a place for the private and occasional diversion of consulting them.

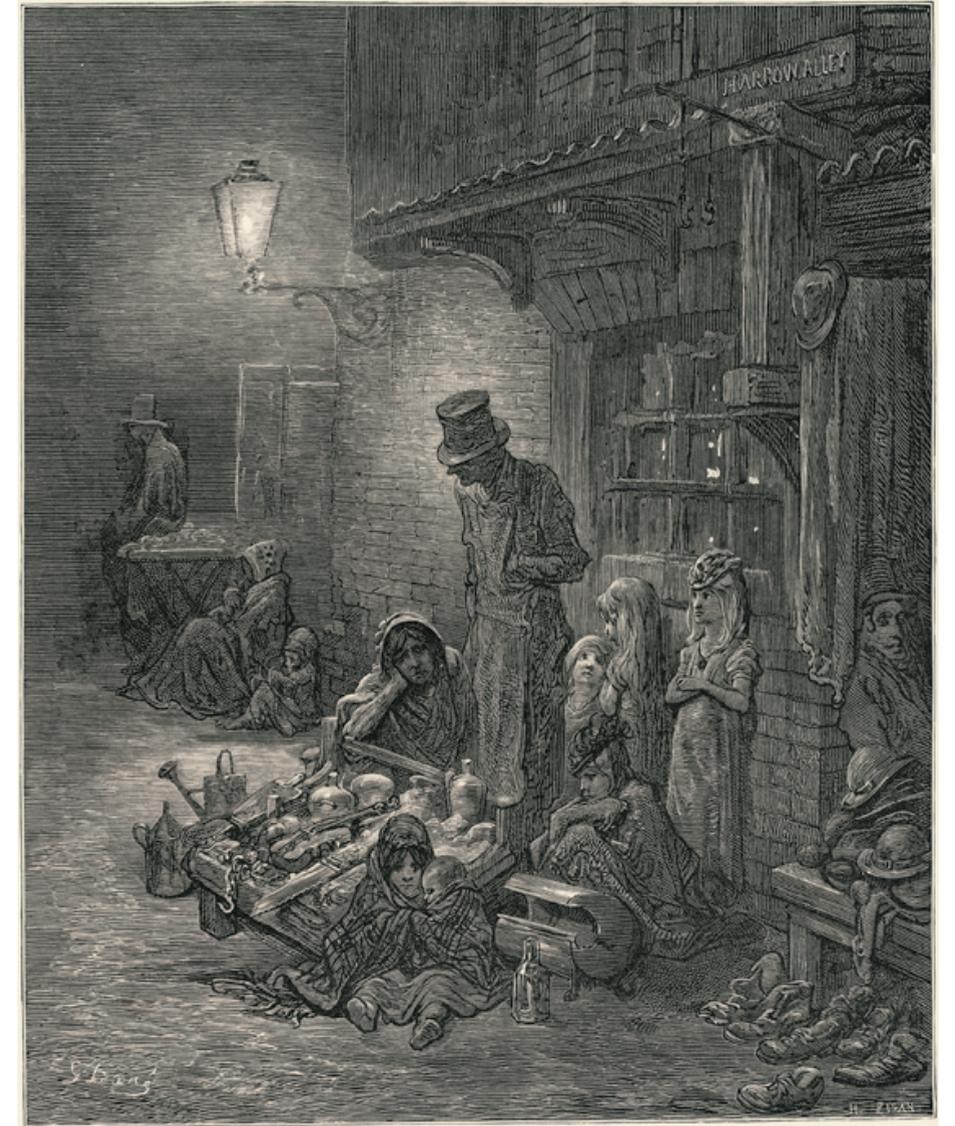
THE GENDERING OF PRIVACY

What were the parameters of privacy in private collecting? Collecting works of art had by this time become a bourgeois more than a princely activity and therefore something to be advised, written about, and occasionally mocked. It is a standard assertion that the modern concept of domesticity in Western culture evolved in the nineteenth century, and that its essential symptom was the woman's assumption of responsibility for the household. This applied not only to the daily running of the house but also to determining its interior appointments—that is, the arena for the expression of taste. In its particular manifestations this shift cannot have been uniform across cultures and class boundaries, and certainly it varied by wealth and social custom. It also varied according to available housing. For example, middle-class urban families in London aspired to live in individual, vertically arranged houses with gardens, whereas in Paris and other European capitals they customarily lived in apartments. Nonetheless, the self-proclaimed tastemakers were in broad agreement about the need for a well-supervised domestic environment, not just as an expression of social and moral well-being but as a requirement for maintaining it. They also agreed on how such a household should look.²⁰

In 1871, Jacob von Falke published a widely read study on the history of the house from antiquity to the present. The concluding chapters offer instructions for designing an interior, and the last, entitled “Women's Aesthetic Mission,” considers the special qualifications of these newly assigned guardians of domesticity. Falke's conception of the woman's role and his definition of taste are very much of the period. The understanding of higher beauty—art—is exclusively the prerogative of men, yet below this, “there is still a wide-spread domain which is governed by beauty, and in which the



7 James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne*, 1878, lithotint with scraping, 17.1 × 25.7, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection



8 Gustave Doré, "Houndsditch," 1872, wood engraving, from Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage* (London, 1872), National Gallery of Art, Washington, William B. O'Neal Fund

beautiful and the useful are united.” This he terms “the realm of taste,” the true province of a woman and “natural to her sex.”²¹ The home is her proper place, and her particular synthetic intuition (implicitly not her intellect) qualifies her by nature to create and preside over those precincts that both reflect the family’s privacy and present its fashionableness to society.

The investment of money and effort in the domestic interior was usually meant to be obvious. This was the age of the period room, of bibelots, fabric walls, wainscoting, and the overly laden tables and cluttered mantels that we associate with Victorian taste. By the 1880s the interior was likely to be a jungle of objects that required a guide, and there were guides aplenty,



9 James Ensor, *The Cathedral*, 1886, etching, 23.5 × 17.6, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

from a spate of new illustrated magazines to books like Falke’s. Women were among the regular visitors to art exhibitions and browsers in furniture stores, print shops, and art galleries that cropped up to serve the passion for decor. This, too, reflected a change in socially respectable conduct. There had been a time when a woman’s presence before the windows of a print shop provoked comment. In 1804, the English moralist John Corry wrote that “girls often go in parties to visit the windows of print shops, that they may amuse themselves with the view of prints which impart the most impure ideas.”²² Although Corry’s concern doubtless lived on in some minds, images of print shops later on in the century indicate that women had become the preferred customers. This is certainly suggested by the many posters showing interested clientele published by Parisian lithography studios. Indeed, the old prejudice is given a mocking turn in Georges Bottini’s depiction of a well-dressed woman looking disapprovingly at a lithograph of a prostitute displayed in a print shop window (fig. 10).²³

Instructions on how to select, frame, and place pictures in the house were readily available, and the tastemakers generally agreed on what should go where, and why. In his *Hints on Household Taste*, the interior designer Charles Locke Eastlake discusses the choice of wallpapers, including what is suitable as a backdrop for paintings, watercolors, and prints.²⁴ An avid proponent of the Gothic Revival, Eastlake is nevertheless indisposed to clutter and knickknacks, especially in the sober context of a library, where plaster casts of classical busts should be preferred to “modern rubbish.” Oil paintings ought to be grouped in a drawing room or a dining room so as not to distract from delicate watercolors, which are best hung in plain frames. For those of lesser means, metal engravings, wood engravings, and photographs are appropriate for sitting rooms or a library and suit the intimacy of these spaces.²⁵

The rough plan was that paintings, if one could afford them, should be hung in social spaces. Watercolors were also suitable there and, in a pinch, prints, preferably landscapes and portraits. The comtesse de Bassanville proposed that engravings of “serious subjects, severely framed” should be hung in the *cabinet de monsieur*, but neither prints nor paintings in an antechamber.²⁶ Edith Wharton, however, deemed the entrance hall especially good for mythologies and architectural views—Piranesi, for example—but nothing requiring “thought and study,” such as the symbolic complexity of an Albrecht Dürer engraving.²⁷ In Henri Béraudi’s jaundiced opinion, the average household was too often burdened by prints of sententious historical subjects installed everywhere from the antechamber to the children’s bedrooms.²⁸ A glaring exception to these stipulations, which would seem to prove the conventional rule, occurs in Joris-Karl Huysmans’ infamous



10 Georges Alfred Bottini, *Sagot's Lithography Gallery*, 1898, color lithograph, 28.9 × 18.6, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

novel *À rebours*, in which the main character, Jean Floressas des Esseintes, describes the entryway to his house as densely hung with prints by Redon and Rodolphe Bresdin (fig. 11), one case described as “dreamt up by an opium-befuddled mind.”²⁹ It has been remarked that the brothers Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, model aesthetes in their art-packed house, the *Maison d’Auteuil*, were the joint inspiration for *Des Esseintes*.³⁰ It is certainly not coincidental that in both of these self-conscious departures from bourgeois convention the perpetrators are unattached men. Taste required discretion and care so as not to assert, much less offend.

Overall the patterns are consistent: try to display each medium separately. See that the content reflects the character of the room and the activities going on in it. Works of art hung on a wall or placed on a table or a bookshelf should serve as background, not centerpieces. Although they might provide occasions for conversation, they should not make much noise on their own. Or, if arranged in an overfurnished period manner, they should make sufficient noise to drown one another out. Managing these negotiations successfully was what constituted good taste, and good taste was regularly being held up for judgment. So far as contemporary art was concerned, the portfolios being issued by Cadart and etching societies elsewhere likely served in part as a guide to what was proper. The predominant blandness of the genre scenes and city views and the often narcotic picturesqueness of so many of the landscapes made for safe territory.

The manuals of Falke, Eastlake, and Wharton, like the endeavors of the etching societies, were addressed to an aspiring bourgeoisie seeking a guarantee of good taste. They were pitched at a level that both implied aspiration and accommodated beginners. Thus, while presuming to be social prescriptions for the educated professional classes, such handbooks were also fit for the attention of the lower end of the urban middle class and for provincial households such as that of Emma Bovary. Providing for those who could not afford fine watercolors and expensive reproductive engravings were the lithographic presses of Goupil, turning out inexpensive reproductive prints in color as well as black and white, often of usefully instructive subjects and often available framed.³¹

Although it must have involved just as much scouting and discrimination, interior decoration was not accorded the same rank as collecting *per se*. This venerable pastime was still regarded as the superior purview of the male. Men were seen to collect objects, whereas, as Falke saw it, women surrounded themselves with them. This is a principle that could be extended to the proposition that a household, including its mistress, constituted a kind of collection in itself, acquired and supervised by the master.³² But within

the domestic sphere there were retreats reserved for each: the boudoir and the study. In his book on the proper design of a residence, published in Paris in 1884, Henry Havard drew the distinction. “If the boudoir is, par excellence, the sanctuary of the mistress of the house, the *cabinet de travail* is the sanctuary of the master of the dwelling—but a sanctuary considered in a more elevated sense . . . and with a purpose altogether less trifling.”³³ With the transfer of responsibility for the household to the mistress, the study, or *cabinet de travail*, was defined in opposition as a male preserve.



II Rodolphe Bresdin, *Comedy of Death*, 1854, lithograph, 21.8 × 15, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection 1958.8.22

The literature on interiors describes the study as a relatively intimate space, not so cluttered as to be unsuitable for work and often, as in a drawing room, with a large table in the center, sufficient natural light, and bookcases if necessary. An independent library was a luxury found only in grander houses, more often in England. Books meant to be kept away from women and girls would have been in locked cases or placed on the top shelves in the drawing room. The study was for silent reading, contemplation, and managing one’s affairs, for receiving close acquaintances or people on business. In contrast to the salon or drawing room, it was not a space normally given over to the run of the family. The *cabinet de travail* constituted the antithesis of the street and the public experience of Baudelaire’s much-discussed “flâneur.” Here was where a serious print collector leafed through his portfolios, either alone or in consort with invited family or friends.³⁴

PRACTICALITIES

How did the print collector collect? The ways of acquiring prints, drawings, and books in the nineteenth century were many. The stalls along the quays of the Seine had long purveyed inexpensive books and prints. Booksellers, stationers, and art dealers included prints in their inventories, and of course, there were the auction houses.³⁵ There were also the independent print publishers like Cadart, who had an art gallery in Paris. He regularly issued prints by subscription, adopting a practice that had earlier produced income for clubs of amateur printmakers such as the Society of Painter-Etchers in London and similar groups in Berlin, Vienna, and Brussels.³⁶ Newly released single prints and suites of prints available over the counter or by subscription were announced in periodicals and newspapers, by the societies themselves, and by small publishers and dealers.³⁷

Etching societies and print publishers supplied a significant portion of the market for fine prints, and at least in England and probably elsewhere, both men and women were among the subscribers.³⁸ An etching by Adolphe Martial Potémont advertising Cadart’s Paris gallery shows a group of well-dressed couples staring avidly at the prints displayed in the windows, an indication that shopping could be a family affair (fig. 12). And throughout the Belle Époque, the highpoint of popular lithographic production, women are represented as connoisseurs evaluating the proverbial *belle épreuve*. The ubiquity of this motif suggests that they were indeed regular purchasers of prints and that for promotional purposes they were being recruited in their traditional supporting role as muses.³⁹ Private collecting was not altogether the male’s exclusive province.



12 Adolphe Martial Potémont, *Seat of the Society of Etchers, 79 rue de Richelieu, 1864*, etching, 25 × 36, Baltimore Museum of Art, The George A. Lucas Collection, purchased with funds from the State of Maryland, Laurence and Stella Bendann Fund, and contributions from individuals, foundations, and corporations throughout the Baltimore community 1996.48.2436

Seeking out prints was likely to have been a frequent, if not feverish activity carried on in less rarified conditions than would have been true for more highly priced objects such as paintings and furniture. Acquiring prints demanded a lot of time and active ferreting; the discovery of a particular state or impression amid the piles of dross must have been a matter of special satisfaction. The daily comings and goings of the American collector and agent George Lucas, who lived in Paris from 1857 to 1909, illustrates the situation vividly. For example, on Thursday morning, November 3, 1887, Lucas went first to Georges Petit's gallery and then to the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. He drew cash from his accountants, bought spectacles, and proceeded to a print publisher, probably Delarue fils, where he bought animal studies (etchings?) by Félix Bracquemond for fifteen francs (see fig. 4) before heading to the auction house Hôtel Drouot. Two days later Lucas visited the photographer Nadar to order photos for the collector Frank Frick, with whom he had been spending time, and proceeded to the quay along the river in search of prints. He made three more calls and then went elsewhere for engravings after François Boucher. Next Lucas stopped by an exhibition of Léon Lhermitte, and after that he went to see a painter about etchings by Jules Ferdinand Jacquemart. He made two more calls before buying three etchings and two statues for a hundred francs from the printmaker Charles Courtry, after which he continued to the Hôtel Drouot in search of more etchings. Some days later he records visiting the collector, painter, and printmaker Léon Bonnat, going on to a bookseller and then to the print publisher Sagot (see fig. 10) to look at etchings, then to the art dealer Dupont to give a commission for three Meryon etchings (see figs. 16, 19) that were coming up for sale at Drouot's, where he went next and purchased a single lot of eighty etchings for forty francs.⁴⁰ Such busy days were by no means atypical. Lucas visited many artists, buying prints and drawings from them directly. His connections with dealers and publishers were obviously extensive, and he seems rarely to have been idle, except for the recorded days off to soothe his recurrent headaches. Although we should note that Lucas was an agent first and a collector second, his peregrinations give us a clear sense of what the paper chase could be like in the capital of European printmaking.

Advice to those interested in establishing and storing a collection of prints could be found in treatises written early on by collectors for collectors and later by curators and professional printmakers. This had begun in the seventeenth century with John Evelyn's landmark treatise *Sculptura*, composed for the Royal Society in London, and continued in an unbroken tradition through the nineteenth century.⁴¹ These histories and handbooks touch on topics ranging from detailed accounts of technique to disquisitions



13 Félicien Rops, *Gaspard de la nuit: Fantasies in the Manner of Rembrandt and Callot*, 1868, etching and aquatint, 14.2 × 8.7, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

on the aesthetic properties of each medium, the importance of states and condition, and worries about forgery.⁴² They often include short accounts of significant collections, always those on a grand scale that were unlikely to offer the reader a viable model, and they typically recommend artists whose works they deem worthy of purchase. Rarely do these treatises mention buying current work, confining themselves instead to the secure territory of the old masters.⁴³ In this respect they provide a conservative backdrop to the wider practice of collecting in the nineteenth century, which, judging from the remarkable level of production, must have been vigorous.

These manuals, along with pictorial evidence, collectors' diaries, and magazine advertisements, detail how prints were kept. Those not meant for the wall were stored mainly in portfolios and possibly, at a more advanced stage of collecting, in specially designed solander boxes. Noting the risks of keeping and studying prints in portfolios, experts encouraged mounting and matting for conservation. Exposure to light was an acknowledged problem.⁴⁴ There is occasional advice about furniture, for example, making provision for cabinets with deep storage for portfolios and supplying artificial light to study the works. In all of this an association between a print collection and the engagements of the library is implicit.⁴⁵ Literary culture provided a climate fully consistent with the growing enthusiasm for acquiring prints. The parallels between the act of reading and the study of prints are self-evident, and in theory as well as practice the historical relation between them merits further attention.⁴⁶ Collecting art was presumed to be a part of the life of a cultivated middle-class family, and prints were the most available art to collect.

THE ODDITY OF PRINT COLLECTING

Privacy brings with it unspecified latitudes for indulging in oddity, and print collectors accordingly have long been singled out for their eccentricity. The reasons for this dubious honor are worthy of consideration. Among the proclivities associated with print collecting are an obsession with classification, an often fetishistic pursuit of rarity, and a temptation to achieve completeness in a chosen category. Each tendency relates to how prints came to be valued as collectible objects on the European art market. Once Adam von Bartsch published the twenty-one volumes of *Le Peintre-graveur* in 1803, collectors could identify and describe most old master prints with reference to an authoritative source.⁴⁷ By implication they could also determine whether a print remained undescribed and thus whether an impression was rare, perhaps unique. Last, because prints were made in multiple impressions, the hope of acquiring a particular work could be sustained indefinitely.⁴⁸ Each of these factors arises from the nature of the print as a replicated object and the resulting imperative



14 Max Klinger, *Siesta I*, 1879, etching and aquatint, 8.6 × 11.4, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Epstein Family Collection

15 Max Klinger, *Moonlit Night*, 1881, etching and aquatint, 36 × 26, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Epstein Family Collection



to compensate for its secondary status in a culture devoted to the exceptional. Rarity in prints differs from rarity in most other media.

The first substantial print collections—those running into the thousands—were formed in the Renaissance. They were generally compiled in albums and ordered by subject: mythological, historical, and scriptural subjects, ancient and modern architecture, ornaments, and so on.⁴⁹ In this respect they were not print collections per se but rather collections of printed images usually accumulated to serve as pictorial encyclopedias or reference books. Although this topical system of organization persisted in some cases until the nineteenth century, by the early seventeenth century portfolios and albums of prints were more likely to have been arranged by artist and national school, the scheme later recommended by most advice books and still followed in most museum print rooms.⁵⁰ Thus, for three centuries the system for organizing a private collection of prints has been art-historical, based on formal, chronological, and geographical rather than topical criteria.

With the shift from the encyclopedic motive for print collecting to the desire to acquire the canon of great masters, connoisseurship and the pursuit of rarity emerged as primary criteria for acquisition. Print collecting became like other kinds of collecting, which paradoxically led to a reputation for unconventionality. Already in the seventeenth century print collectors were pilloried by the French satirist Jean de La Bruyère for their obsession with rare states and impressions, and by the eighteenth century printmakers and print publishers were devising ingenious and sometimes outright fraudulent schemes to satisfy it.⁵¹ Rarity began to be controlled artificially, and in the second half of the nineteenth century signing individual impressions by hand, and dedicating them to a friend or a patron, became common practices.

Printmakers' antics in search of their quarry were often a joking matter, and from the time of the romantics printmaking has been repeatedly associated with mischief. In Félicien Rops' frontispiece to the fantastic poetry of Aloysius Bertrand, the fumes rising from a spilled bottle of acid conjure a legion of demons who ride off into the night; printmaking is conceived as a form of alchemy and the etcher's acid bath becomes Pandora's box, ready to spread trouble throughout the world (fig. 13). The collector's obsession, by contrast, was more often regarded as merely risible. For example, in his novel *The Woman in White* (1859), Wilkie Collins caricatures the infirm Mr. Fairlie in silent repose in his secluded room, trembling feverishly over his album of Rembrandts, a pathetic old fool lost in his private pursuits.⁵² We might take the lampooning of print collectors as little more than hyperbole were it not that the follies described are precisely those being fed by the market and simultaneously warned against in the books on collecting. Hamerton



16 Charles Meryon,
Ministry of the Marine, Paris,
1865, etching, 14.1 × 13,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Gift of Mrs.
Harold Ober



17 François Nicolas Chiffart,
Cholera in Paris, 1865, etching
with drypoint, 22.7 × 31.3,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Ailsa Mellon
Bruce Fund

characterized the syndrome as a degeneration into “curiosity madness,” in contrast to the genuine passion of the “amateur,” who seeks out art for the sake of art.⁵³ For him the Mr. Fairlies were a stain on the noble tradition of “the curious,” those venerable men of means who in their pursuit of knowledge had founded the great scientific academies and antiquarian societies of Europe. These men understood that curiosity was properly motivated not by an object but by what could be learned from it.

If this manner of collecting was in many ways a world unto itself, it was also a shared experience. Medals, coins, bronzes, and often prints were among the first significant collections of art and antiquities to be formed in early modern Europe. The earliest known document recording a collector’s engagement with a print comes from a letter written in 1520 by the Nuremberg humanist Johann Cochläus reporting a visit from the mayor of Frankfurt. It tells how the two carried on a discussion of Dürer’s master engravings *Melencolia I* and *Saint Jerome in His Study*.⁵⁴ Private or otherwise, collectors had long formed associations, and behind their concern with competition for exceptional impressions there lay another, perhaps equally important sensation peculiar to owning a replicated object. Possessing a print or a cast medal carries with it the presumption that somewhere someone else possesses it, too. That awareness in itself constitutes a silent fraternity related to but different from the affiliation of learning that arises from having read the same book or having stood before Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden. The print collector’s sense of affinity need not have been just competitive; it was also rooted in the mutual possession of an object. The community of Renaissance humanists was built in part on this understanding of a collection, and nineteenth-century bourgeois pride of ownership may not have been so distant from it.

THE NEO-ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY

Historians typically approach the modern concept of privacy as an aspiration of the bourgeoisie, defining it first as a social condition and then as a matter of individual experience. The experience of privacy, however, is best described by those who construct it for themselves, and here artists and writers provide the most eloquent testimony. Certain of the more recurrent themes adopted by the artists of interest to us here carry over a romantic sensibility, but it is a sensibility inflected by a secular redefinition of the world very much in terms of a new generation. The image of nature is no longer that of the terrible sublime but something closer to a mechanism out of which the human species emerges as an eventual product. Nature is perceived anthropomorphically and sometimes ironically, for example in Max Klinger’s witty portrait of two crabs perched like a pair of *Majas* resting on



18 Edouard Manet,
Civil War, 1871, lithograph,
39.4 × 50.7, National Gallery
of Art, Washington,
Rosenwald Collection

19 Charles Meryon,
The Clock Tower, Paris, 1852,
etching with engraving,
25.5 × 18.2, National Gallery
of Art, Washington, Gift
of R. Horace Gallatin



a balcony after their midday meal (fig. 14). This blurring of boundaries also surfaces in Klinger's parodies of romanticized classicism, such as the wistful image of a centaur couple resting on a bluff and admiring the magnificent mountain valley (fig. 15).

Klinger put forward a concept of integrity to medium that portends high modernist theory and assigns all that we might consider flights of the bizarre and fantastic to species of the real. In his lengthy discourse on drawing published in 1891, Klinger insistently condemns fantasy, allegory, and the novelistic as diversions from the essential artistic task of addressing reality.⁵⁵ This position at first appears radically inconsistent with the bizarre and fanciful elements that pervade his work. It is a question not only for the art of the symbolists. Baudelaire likewise regarded fantasy and caprice as unsuitable forms of digression from the experience of modern life, but he was nonetheless a great proponent of Meryon, who depicted the Ministry of the Marine in Paris being assaulted by a flotilla of Hieronymus Bosch-like monsters (fig. 16). The truth of these phantasms lies in the integrity of the artist's vision—in the working of Meryon's imagination, both witty and paranoid, but free of capricious invention. In essence, Baudelaire's argument, like Klinger's, is rooted in the proposition that art must remain true to the mind of the artist, admitting no reference external to itself, and that content should arise naturally out of the artist's own formal language.⁵⁶

Introspection, rapture, abjection, and a preoccupation with death became familiar themes in the neo-romantic repertoire of printmaking. In one of Edgar Degas' obscure black monotypes of a low-lit interior, a nude woman is curled up tightly on a couch reading a book, a vision of privacy that overturns the conventions of brothel imagery in a covert challenge to unwanted prurience (but see Clayson, fig. 10). Alongside the daily bustle of the streets and evenings at the café concert and the circus, a darker vision of the city surfaces in Chiffart's vision of the cholera epidemic of 1865 (fig. 17), Manet's blunt acknowledgment of the carnage resulting from the rise of the commune in 1871 (fig. 18), Buhot's vision of a city of spirits (see fig. 6), Meryon's renderings of scaffolded buildings that were admired by Baudelaire for their "paradoxical and arachnean beauty" (fig. 19).⁵⁷ And there are images of abjection in extremis such as Besnard's suicide balanced on the railing of a bridge, the psychologically drifting young men and women in Edvard Munch's prints, and the gentle pathos of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's confounded figure of a village madman (fig. 20). Subjectivity was everywhere being given a social context.

Much of this imagery is rooted in conflict and meant for something other than what passes under the rubric of entertainment. Although far from



20 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Madman*, 1895, lithograph, 24.3 × 14.5, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection



21 Fernand Khnopff, *Memory of Flanders: A Canal*, 1904, conté crayon over graphite, 25 × 41.5, Hearn Family Trust

a new range of subject matter for the visual arts, images like these with their deromanticized emotional texture, their social indictments, and their pathos are very much of their time. It was a language of black and white evolved to generate an ambivalent and compromised world of gray. The critical rhetoric that churned up around the promotion of the original print was initially engaged with its potential as an unfiltered mode of individual expression, a creative ideal inherited from the romantics and especially invested in intimate content. This was Baudelaire's ambition for the etching revival. By the 1880s the status of the original print was well established, and the writing in support of it was turning rapidly to a more conventional aesthetics of beauty: the enshrinement of the *belle épreuve*, the perfectly tailored product of a finely printed etching plate or lithographic stone. Claims for the print as a medium of subversion able to violate the expectations of public conformity had begun to fade. Nonetheless, the more adventuresome printmakers continued to follow the pathway that had opened to them.⁵⁸ The later stages of symbolism and then expressionism were the inheritors of this ferment. Among the deepest and most mesmerizing realizations of this aesthetic are drawings such as Fernand Khnopff's nostalgic visual meditations on the embalmed medieval city of Bruges (fig. 21).

Of course, print collecting did not comprise a culture entirely unto itself, nor should it be seen in opposition to the more retrospectively privileged artistic movements at this pivotal stage in the history of European avant-gardism. In much the same way, the metaphor of light and dark should not be overstressed, nor should the divide between public and private be seen as absolute. Nonetheless, the importance to modernism of the culture that evolved around the original print has been underestimated. The aura of privacy and the experience it was meant to evoke offered an arena for artistic experiment specific to the moment: avant-garde subjectivity had a distinctively private world as well as a public one. It is arguable, however, whether this manner of bourgeois collecting survived the self-conscious triumph of modernism in the twentieth century. Eventually the limited edition suite of prints and the artist's book became well-staged events, and the collectors for whom they were intended bore a more formal and also less eccentric stamp. In this respect, the terms of aesthetic experience cultivated by these late nineteenth-century printmakers and enacted by their clientele composed the final chapter in a long history of private collecting as an endeavor of pure seclusion.