

Print by Print: Series From Dürer to Lichtenstein

Baltimore Museum of Art show pays homage to prints made in series



Plate 24 from Sonia Delaunay's "Compositions, Colors, Ideas"



Scene five from Andrew Raftery's "Open House: Five Engraved Scenes"

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Print by Print: Series From Dürer to Lichtenstein

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Printmaking lends itself to *series* in part because prints are, for both artist and buyer, a relatively cheap enterprise. The Baltimore Museum of Art's new exhibition, *Print by Print: Series From Dürer to Lichtenstein*, highlights this tendency, with more than 350 prints from the museum's permanent collection, forming 29 different series. (More than half of the works on view have never been displayed at the museum.)

The show draws from both American and European artists working in series from the late 15th through the 21st centuries, but is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather than proceeding chronologically or, say, by printmaking technique, the show is broken up into six somewhat amorphous categories: Imagination, Narrative, Design, Places: Real and Imagined, Appropriation, and War. The impression one gets of the show as a whole has little to do with these categories, particularly because many of the series could have as easily been placed under one as another. But print series have served numerous functions, and that point is well taken. Early on, they often acted as a form of narrative—as with the ribald 18th-century etching and engravings that make up "A Harlot's Progress," by William Hogarth—or to complement a written narrative. But series have also allowed artists to dabble with variations on a theme, to explore obsessions—as with Giovanni Battista Piranesi's 18th-century "Imaginary Prisons," 16 moody, intricate etchings of dungeons—to hammer home a point when one image will not do, to mimic an actual series—as with Johann Theodor de Bry's 16th-century rendition of the alphabet—and to make money, as with a set of late 18th- or early 19th-century playing cards and an ill-fated foray into toy-making by Marcel Duchamp.

The exhibition opens—though you can enter from either end—with several series that are both modern and experimental. (The official category here is Imagination.) In this exhibition, the back-story is often as interesting as the work itself. Such is the case with Yukinori Yanagi's 1997 "Wandering Position," a set of five abstract red etchings, each one a quadrilateral shape inscribed with wiggling lines that overlay one another and thicken at the edges. The lines are distributed through the interior of the shapes and proceed organically, never in a straight line. Read the label and this visually pleasing, minimalist series becomes something wondrous: In creating each piece, Yanagi used an etching needle to painstakingly follow the trajectory of an ant as it traveled across a wax surface.

The method behind Ed Ruscha's 1970 series "News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, and Dues" inspires a similar delight. The six color screenprints each feature one of the words from the title, in gothic lettering, but they are mixed-media in a most unusual sense. The "inks" are different in each case, and made of ingredients like caviar, mango chutney, axle grease, Hershey's chocolate syrup, and squid ink.

Experimentation in printmaking is nothing new. Another series that could easily have hung here but ended up in the Places category is a fascinating one by 19th-century French artist Ludovic Napoléon Lépic, titled "Views From the Banks of the Scheldt." It consists of 20 large prints, which upon inspection prove to have a good deal in common. They are, in fact, all created with the same etching, but 19 of them have been modified into monoprints by the addition of ink and/or other substances. The original image—a pastoral scene of the marshy banks of a river, a small human figure, and a boat, with windmills in the distance—takes on a strikingly different mood in each case, ranging from ominous and shrouded in what appears to be black smoke to peaceful, as in the image of a snowfall. (Lépic used rosin on the surface of the plate to create the illusion of snow; if you look closely, you'll notice the paper is pockmarked.)

Older works dominate the Narrative section of the exhibition, and the crown jewel of them all—really, of the whole show—is "The Apocalypse," a set of 15th-century woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer. The prints illustrate scenes from the Book of Revelation and represented a new level of sophistication in printmaking. They are mind-bogglingly intricate and as phantasmagorical as the text, to which they are quite faithful. In one image, an angel with fiery pillars for legs hands St. John the book, which he willingly devours. Nearby, the famous "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" race, tails flying, crushing paupers and kings before them. (A neighboring take on the subject, Odilon Redon's mild-mannered 1899 lithographic series "The Apocalypse of Saint John," suffers by proximity.)

John Martin's luminous mezzotints, "Milton's 'Paradise Lost,'" beckon from a nearby wall. Vast landscapes composed in deep velvety blacks loom over the tiny figures within them, lending a fierce, operatic quality to Milton's epic. In this case and others, excerpts from the text would have been welcome, particularly as each print indicates which book and line it is illustrating. (And here, as in other cases, the dense arrangement of works means that those prints that are hung high are impossible to examine closely.)

The blending of time periods in the exhibition is often welcome, providing some respite for the eye. But it makes it easier to pass over series like Hans Collaert's 16th-century "Designs for Pendants"—small, intricate prints that served as patterns for goldsmiths and require some patience to absorb—in favor of colorful abstract prints, like those of Sonia Delaunay, a 20th-century artist whose pieces were often transformed into fabrics. Yet several modern artists manage to bridge the gap between older and newer forms, creating a pleasant resonance within the exhibition. In creating "Open House: Five Engraved Scenes," a process that took four years, Andrew Raftery constructed three-dimensional scale models of the rooms he intended to depict, so as to properly understand the perspectives and shadows therein. The result is a striking series that depicts a mundane ritual of modern life—the open house—with the meticulous stroke of a work by Hogarth. Replete with angles and depth, the topic is clearly best covered in a series. One becomes gradually more uncomfortable with the scenes of strangers wandering through the house, an unease that culminates in the final scene, which takes place in the bedroom.

Another series that plays with blending a modern subject with a traditional form is Fabius Lorenzi's 1918 series "World War I Infantry Scenes in Japanese Fans." Eight beautiful color woodcuts in the shape of fans draw the viewer in, and the stylized landscapes and carefully balanced compositions recall traditional Japanese woodcuts. But the

subject matter here is war, in all its gruesome reality. In one scene, stretcher bearers search for wounded. In another, a battle rages. The juxtaposition of style and subject is both jarring and effective.

A number of the other series that depict war serve a quasi-journalistic function. Augustin Coppens and Richard van Orley's "Views of the Ruins of the City of Brussels" were created in part to broadcast how devastated the city was by the 1695 French bombardment. Crumbling walls loom over vast piles of rubble, through which tiny figures pick their way. **A modern example of this same reportorial function can be found in a haunting series of drypoints by Daniel Heyman, titled "The Amman Project."** Heyman traveled to Amman, Jordan, to observe interviews between American lawyers and former detainees from Abu Ghraib. He originally intended to simply create portraits but the detainees' accounts of their ordeals affected him so greatly that he began including them in his pieces. To do so, Heyman had to write backwards. The resulting child-like quality of the writing, which often runs over the clothing of the subject, weaves between chair legs, and otherwise threatens to take over the page, adds to the poignancy of the stories. (Occasionally, apparently distraught, the artist forgot to write backwards.) The portraits themselves are imperfect, but beautifully so, like missives from prison themselves.

Print by Print inspires some yawns here and there, and the organizational strategy is not always effective. (It is, however, forgivable: The show is the result of a collaboration between the museum and students from the Museums and Society program at Johns Hopkins University, who selected the works and themes with the aid of a curator.) But within each series is a story, one with more plot points—or at least clues—than a single work can possess. It is an exhibition that beckons you to return.

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