

the needle and acid have done their work—and the plate is ready for printing from.

This is etching proper, differing essentially from the "dry-point," which is a method in itself, though often used on the etched plate to obtain special effects. In "dry-point" only copper is used, on the burnished surface of which the artist works with needles of varying shapes—those having triangular or chisel edges being most useful. The whole work is produced without the aid of acids, but great dependence is placed on one characteristic feature of this process—the "burr." When a plough moves over the surface of a field the ploughshare casts up on one side a mound of earth, extracted from the furrow. Much the same happens when a strong steel point or chisel-edge is forced across the polished surface of the copper; and in printing, this mound of "burr" gives, at certain places where it is retained, a certain beautiful velvet quality, which can be approached by no other medium. Unfortunately, the "burr" is only temporary, and soon becomes worn and flattened out in the process of printing; hence only a very few proofs of the first quality can be obtained from "dry-point" plate.

Mezzotint is in some respects allied to the "dry-point," in that no acid is used. The serrated edge of a special tool, called a "rocker," is worked across a polished plate of copper till every trace of "shine" is lost. Such a plate, if inked and printed in the ordinary way, would show a proof of a peculiar rich black, like pile-velvet. To form the picture the artist scrapes away all the "burr" raised by the "rocker" at that part of the plate which he desires to print white. Like the dry-point the mezzotint-plate can only yield a limited number of proofs. This, of course, applies in a sense to all etching, but to a much greater extent to the last two processes.

The method of printing from each of these plates is much the same. The plate is carefully inked by a "dabber," which forces the thick ink into the lines of the plate, and it is then cleaned off, leaving the ink in the furrows made by the acid. The proof is taken in an ordinary copper-plate press.

This, in brief, is the method pursued in the production of an etching. But every master makes variations to suit his fancies and idiosyncrasies. So, besides being something of a chemical—something of a mechanical—and something of an artistic process, it is also

in a very great degree a very risky process.

There is no guarantee, even to the very greatest of masters, that effects aimed at will be achieved—that the acid will do exactly what is expected, that the atmospheric temperature will not cause inimical variations. But supposing that each of these results satisfactorily, there is, above all, no surety that the artistic effect will be successful. With all these disadvantages, however, the process is, to those who have the necessary talents, extremely fascinating; the very limitations have in themselves a charm that a more positive medium too often lacks.

But the chief charm of etching to the artist lies in the vitality and absolute freedom of its lines. Etching is by far the freest of all the fine arts, and best adapted for the spontaneous sketch.

The needle, guided by the hand, glides over the plate, and keeps pace with all the impulses and fleeting visions of the artist's mind. It is as personal as hand-writing, and exhibits to the full the very spirit of the subject it records.

Sir Francis Seymour Haden, the great English etcher, writes:—

"What, then, is the amount and kind of skill and previous knowledge required by the etcher? It is an innate artistic spirit, without which all the study in the world is useless. It is the cultivation of this spirit, not arduously, but lovingly. It is a knowledge that is acquired by a life of devotion to what is true and beautiful; by the daily and hourly habit of weighing and comparing what we see in Nature, and thinking how it should be represented in Art. It is the habit of constant observation of great things and small, and the experience that springs from it. It is taste, which a celebrated painter once said, but not truly, 'is rarer than genius.' The skill that grows from these habits is the skill required by the etcher. It is the skill of the analyst and of the synthesist—the skill to combine and the skill to separate; to compound and to simplify; to detach plane from plane; to fuse detail into mass; to subordinate definition into space, distance, light, and air. Finally, it is the acumen to perceive the near relationship that expression bears to form, and the skill to draw them, not separately, but together."

Some of the very greatest men in the Art world of Europe are identified with etching, and some of the greatest gems of Art—Rembrandt's "Three Trees," "Christ Preaching," and "The Raising

of Lazarus," Whistler's "Thames Warehouses," "Wharf Interior," "Black Lion Wharf," "Thames Police," Van Dyck's portraits of himself and of Francis Frank, Seymour Haden's "Shere Mill Pond" or "Morning at Egham"—to name only a few—are samples of work which, if suddenly removed from the world's galleries, would leave a blank too great to be bridged over.

For an etching to be effective in an Art sense, every line laid down should show (a) artistic thought of what can be adequately interpreted by etching; and (b) the power of selecting and rejecting essentials and non-essentials; and (c) lastly, the work must show a distinct individuality on the part of the etcher. The capacity to draw or paint very well is not necessarily a proof that the artist can produce even a third-class etching. The late Sir J. E. Millais, P.R.A., is a case in point, and the etchings published by the Etching Club in the middle of last century, by J. C. Hook, R.A., Cope, Redgrave, and others, are noticeable for nothing but mediocrity. On the other hand, Charles Meryon, who immortalised in his etchings old Paris and the Cathedral

of Notre Dame, was a singularly incompetent painter. Wedmore tells of having seen a pastel by him, "and the sea was red and the sunset sky was green," for Meryon was colour-blind. As a matter of fact, the etcher largely depends for his success on his freedom from restraint and on the intensity of his feeling, which, of course, is more or less transient. Whereas, the more methodical painter often finds his very training an incubus (in etching), from which he cannot free himself. Hence the latter class failing to appreciate the peculiar difference here indicated, only succeed in producing, not a rendering, but a representation of Nature, and the result is failure.

Rembrandt is the supreme master in etching. Of modern times, Whistler is his greatest rival, and some authorities have even asserted that he is superior to Rembrandt. Whistler certainly was marvellously adept with the etching needle, and it must be admitted that some of his etchings quite equal anything that Rembrandt ever did, but on the whole Rembrandt is the greater master.—By "Aqua Fortis," in "The Lone Hand."



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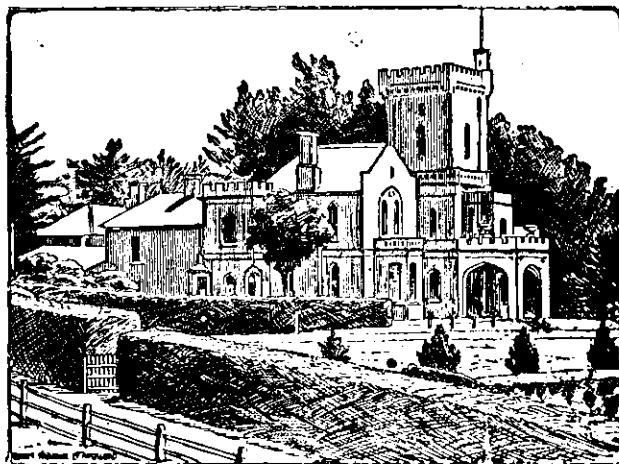


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