IV

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The Unfinished Eighteenth Century

Although it is risky to make blanket statements about countless thousands of prints by any number of painters, I will hazard two basic generalizations in the following overview. First, etchings by eighteenth-century painters (as opposed to etchings by professional printmakers) tend to be technologically unadventurous. Two major exceptions proving this rule, Gainsborough and Goya, will be dealt with at the end of this essay. Second, eighteenth-century etchings by painters tend to be implicated in an aesthetics of *non finito,* exhibited in both subject matter and style. Here, too, there are exceptions— including Canaletto and Stubbs, at least on the level of style—as one would expect with so many different artists. To put this overview into its proper perspective, I will open with some remarks on advanced reproductive etchers, who provide a crucial point of reference for the rather different agenda of master painter-etchers.

Etching's range of expressive possibilities, combined with the speed and ease of the technique as compared with engraving and woodcut, led to its increasing predominance throughout the eighteenth century. In order to properly understand etchings by painters in this period, we need to recognize the important developments by professional printmakers who were mainly involved in reproductive work.[1] The masters of reproductive etching include the Englishman Arthur Pond (1701–1758), the Dutchman Cornelius Ploos van Amstel (1726–1798), and the Italian Francesco Bartolozzi (1727–1815), as well as the Frenchmen Gilles Demarteau (1722–1776) and Louis Marin Bonnet (1736–1793).[2] Many of the etching techniques favored by these artists—including crayon manner, stipple, aquatint, and soft-ground etching—were developed to help reproductive printmakers imitate paintings and drawings.[3] Along with mezzotint, these tonal techniques were placed in the service of single or multiplate color printing, thus securing the place of etching as the reproductive medium of choice. Specialized practitioners were soon able to reproduce drawing in any number of techniques (pen and wash, chalk, pastel), and even oil paintings, with extraordinary accuracy.
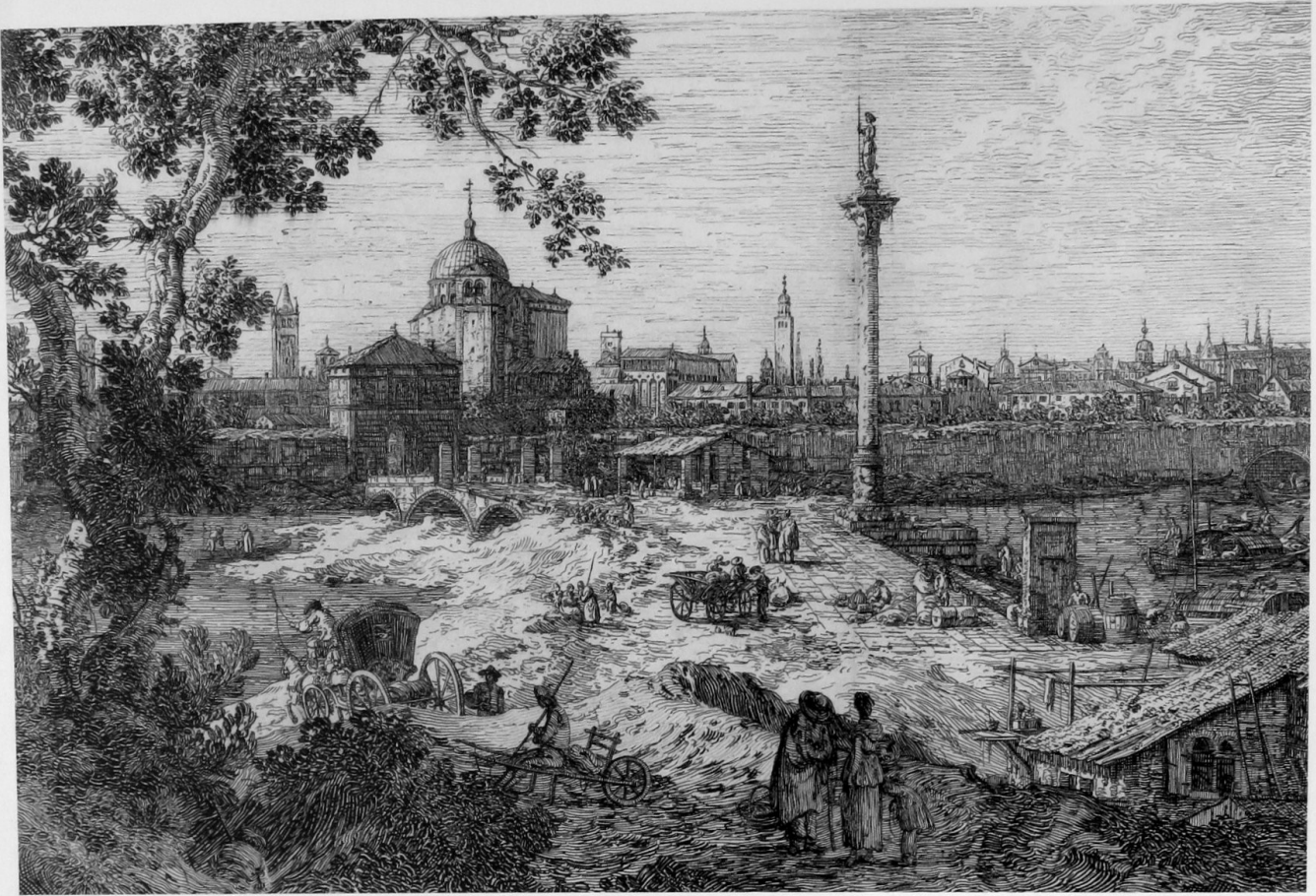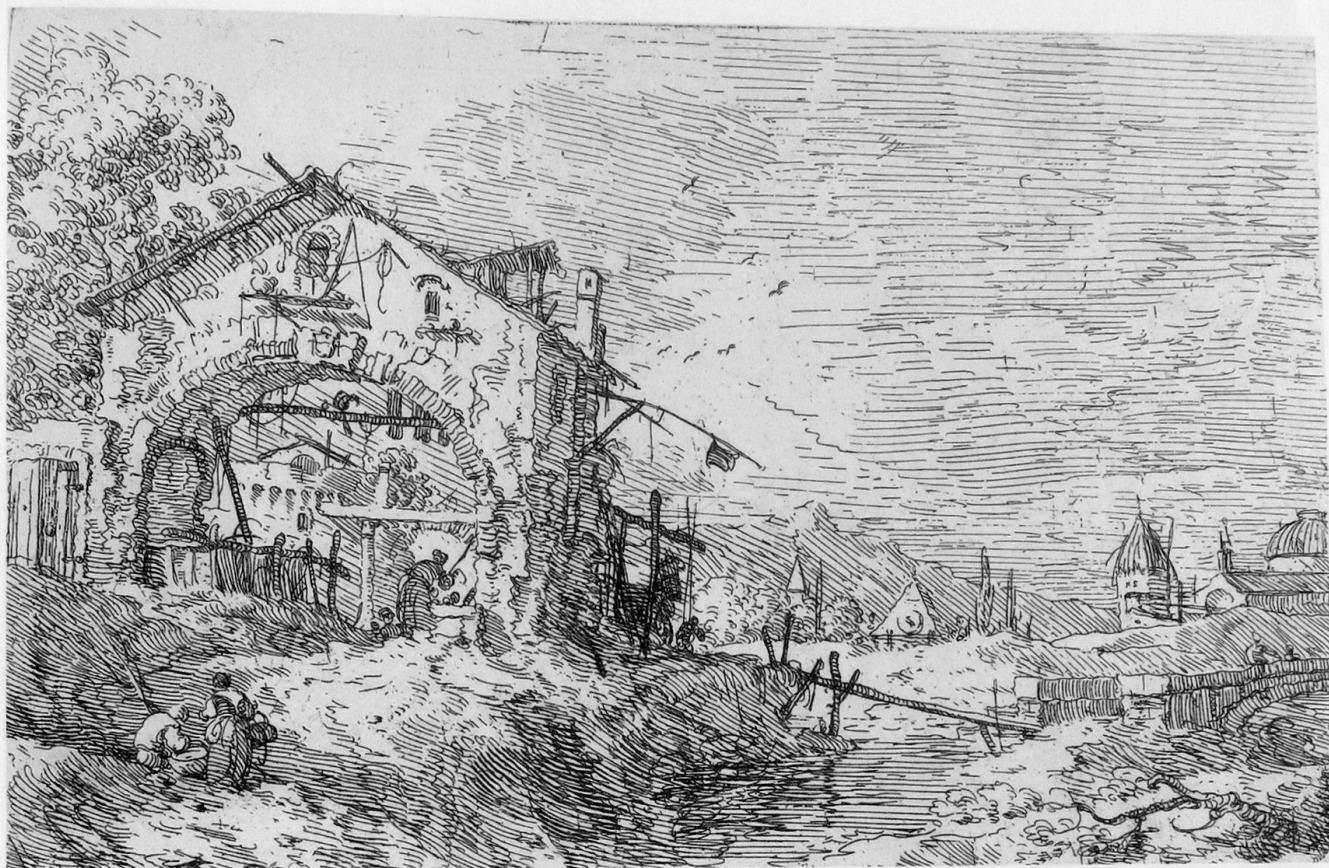
Detail of Fig. 55

The triumph of technically innovative reproductive etching sets into relief the painter-etcher's general preference for a traditional straight etching technique. While a few major painter-etchers did employ new and elaborate tonal techniques such as soft-ground etching and aquatint toward the end of the century, these departures are exceptional.[4] The majority continued to etch in a more traditional, more drawinglike, less labor-intensive manner, using uniform black lines on white paper.

Some eighteenth-century painter-printmakers, such as the Venetian Giovanni Antonio Canal, called Canaletto (1697–1768) and his nephew Bernardo Bellotto (1721–1780), etched in a style that approaches the thoroughness and finesse of reproductive etching. Significantly, the etchings of both artists tend to be equivalents of their painted work, if not outright copies of paintings. Canaletto's printed views mainly date from the 1740s—probably for financial reasons.[5] As a rule, these etchings are models of compositional rigor, in which the plate is painstakingly covered with a flexible system of lines of varying thickness. Many of his prints leave the impression that the artist would no sooner leave a significant portion of the plate unworked than leave part of a canvas unpainted. In his prints this allover effect is accomplished by means of a restrained yet highly varied combination of thick and thin hooking lines—a technique most evident in the peculiar obsessiveness with which he completes his skies. Most of the lines in these prints are what contemporaneous French commentators would call *rangé,* which is to say decorously ranked, ordered, or disposed.[6]

Canaletto inherited many of the compositional devices of seventeenth-century viewmakers such as Jacques Callot (1592–1635) and Israël Silvestre (1621–1691), including the use of a complete tonal range to produce aerial perspective and to infuse even the most densely hatched areas with direct or reflected light. Like the Callot of the *Large Hunt,* Canaletto orchestrated his foregrounds with dark repoussoir foliage made up of thick, billowy lines, and reinforced his aerial perspective with carefully-

placed people and dogs establishing the scale at every distance.[7] In addition to extensive burnishing, he employed a range of straight, squiggly, and hooking lines to create differences in shade and texture. Seen from a suitable distance, the lines blend to produce subtle atmospheric effects and something analogous to the coloristic variety in his paintings.[8]

For all their systematicity, Canaletto's prints always reveal a light, varied touch, and tend to be full of improvisatory details, as when obsessively straight lines depicting the blue of the sky eddy into cloud forms. The combination of compositional rigor and gentle wit again points to the inspiration of Callot and Silvestre. While he does produce such impulsively handled prints as the *Portico with a Lantern* (cat. 53), a more finished style is the norm.

While Bellotto's printed and painted views owe an evident debt to his uncle's authoritative example, the nephew also produced some robust etchings in which the lines are arranged with a woodcutlike density and coherence—a style more in keeping with the prints of the celebrated landscape painter (and gondolier murderer) Marco Ricci (1676–1730).[9] Despite their finished style, the landscapes of Bellotto feature contingency in their very choice of subject. His interest in ruins comes to the fore in his etchings of Dresden's destroyed Kreuzkirche (1765) and Pirna suburbs (1766) following following the ravages of the Seven Years' War.[10] Like many landscape painters of his day, Canaletto, too, foregrounds such decrepit or chaotic features as ramshackle buildings, overgrown stone walls, and uneven, muddy pathways. More subtly, he privileges the contingent and fragmentary by depicting foreground figures from oblique perspectives, and lesser figures at a distance great enough to obscure their features.[11]

For other painter-etchers in this period, the taste for the conditional is manifested in style as well as subject matter. Indeed, sketchy, open handling increasingly became the norm for most painter-etchers throughout the century. While such free etching dates back at least as far as the radical

Vue des Débris de la Tour de S.ᵗᵉ Croix, qui s'écroula le 22 . . . de Juin 1765. dans le tems qu'on commençoit à relever l'É...
glise, laquelle avoit péri par le Bombardement de la Ville de Dresde en 1760 . . . Vüe de Dresde, selon le pan de Mur qui demeura sur pied, haut de 120 ᵖⁱᵉᵈ...
Dedié, a Son Altesse Royale, Madame . . . l'Electrice Douairiere de Saxe
Se vend se de presse, du Cabinet de M. . . . l'Intendant Ariémontique. Docteur, de Conde . . . par Son très Jumane Serviteur Bern. Belotto de Canaletto Mem. de l'Acad. Elec. des Arts 1765.

experiments of Parmigianino (1503–1540), it tends to be more closely aligned with the graphic vocabulary of mid-seventeenth-century artists such as Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609–1664), Stefano della Bella (1610–1664), and Salvator Rosa (1615–1673).[12] Eighteenth-century writers, in turn, increasingly favored the relatively sketchy work of these artists over the fine engravinglike etching style of Callot or Claude Mellan (1598–1688).[13]

The line from Watteau through Boucher to Fragonard indicates the continuity of the aesthetics of the sketch throughout the century and the careful attention of painters to each others' graphic work. Around 1710 Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) rendered his seven *Fashionable Figures* (*Figures de Mode*) in spirited, broken lines, recalling the chalk drawings on which they are based.[14] Between 1726 and 1728 the painter François Boucher (1703–1770) produced over a hundred etchings after Watteau drawings for Jean de Jullienne's massive *Oeuvre d'Antoine Watteau,* in a section subtitled "Figures de différents caractères." Most of the

drawings seem to have been executed in red chalk, and the etchings aim to translate these drawings' fresh, vivacious manner into black and white.[15] For the same publication Boucher etched two frontispieces, one an allegory and the other a portrait of Watteau clearly based on a *trois-crayons* drawing in the Musée Condé that has variously been ascribed to Watteau and Boucher.[16]

In turn, the enormously gifted Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) made a spirited etching after his master Boucher's black chalk sketch of *An Angel Bringing Food to a Hermit,* and went on to produce original etchings in a variety of styles.[17] Fragonard's *Armoire* is a big, ambitious print that rewards careful scrutiny, yet also reads well from a distance. Such a boldly pictorial work, in which the working varies in density from the heaviest hatching to the most understated outlining, could easily be framed and hung in a cabinet, as it no doubt was.[18] By contrast, the same artist's delicate *Bacchanales ou Jeux de Satyres,* in which the smallest strokes approach the fineness of dust or

iron filings, is of a scale and handling that can only be brought into focus at very close range. For all their debt to Castiglione or Stefano della Bella, Fragonard's etchings have an unprecedented airiness that distinguishes them from these seventeenth-century precursors. His prints are especially noteworthy for their erotically charged white spaces representing flesh, marble, or something in between. Another artist in this tradition is Fragonard's contemporary Hubert Robert (1733–1808), whose *Soirées de Rome* employ something of Rosa's disciplined sketchiness, as well as the gauzy craquelure developed by Castiglione to render the indistinctness of forms in half light.

Among the low-tech painter-etchers of the eighteenth century, Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770) arguably developed the most distinct graphic language.[19] Whereas many of his contemporaries strove for a chalky indistinctness of form, his etchings often exhibit the resolute linearity of his vivacious, delicate pen-and-ink sketches, alongside various linear equivalents of chalk and wash tonalities. Boundlessly surprising in both subject matter and style, these witty works elude rational interpretation. The exotic protagonists of the *Scherzi* and *Capricci* are as indolent as the handling is hyperbolic. As in many works by Laurent de La Hyre (1605–1656), his figures tend to huddle into graphically and psychologically intense knots, in stark contrast to the empty expanses around them.[20] By crowding toward the picture plane, these compressed and fragmented forms read all the more emphatically as patterns of ink, causing the spatially-ambiguous surround to be read as the white of the page.

The sense of surface play in the elder Tiepolo's prints is strongest in those passages where the marks directly recall forms of handwriting. As in works by La Hyre or della Bella, writing sometimes takes the form of a barely-illegible inscription on a decaying monument.[21] Elsewhere it appears more distinctly as a set of initials or a signature, written backward or forward in a deadpan, deskilled manner, contrasting with the virtuosity of the marks around it. In still other places, the artist's endless repertory of representational hatchings and scratchings begins to unravel into real or fantastical writing forms. There is a knowingness in this shuttling between representation and arbitrary sign; on one level it is an eminently sociable style, recalling the celebrated *sprezzatura* of Tiepolo's decorative works. And yet

the oddly private, often-inscrutable graphic language of the prints also contains hints of an uncivil regressiveness—an automatism or autism that would be out of place in a grand decorative scheme. In his highly personal combination of virtuosity and willed awkwardness, Tiepolo the printmaker is a worthy successor to Rembrandt.

Giovanni Battista's eldest surviving son, Giovanni Domenico (1727–1804) rapidly became a painter-etcher in his own right, producing almost two hundred etchings.[22] He learned his trade at a young age by copying his father's drawings and etchings; at twenty he painted a remarkably ambitious and personal series of the Stations of the Cross for the oratory of the Crucifix in San Polo, Venice. He

FIGURE 58
Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), after François Boucher (1703–1770), *Hermit Saint in the Desert*, ca. 1752–56. Etching on laid paper, 9 15/16 × 6 11/16 in. (24 × 17 cm). Montreal, National Gallery of Canada; gift of Phyllis Lambert, 1972 (no. 17139)
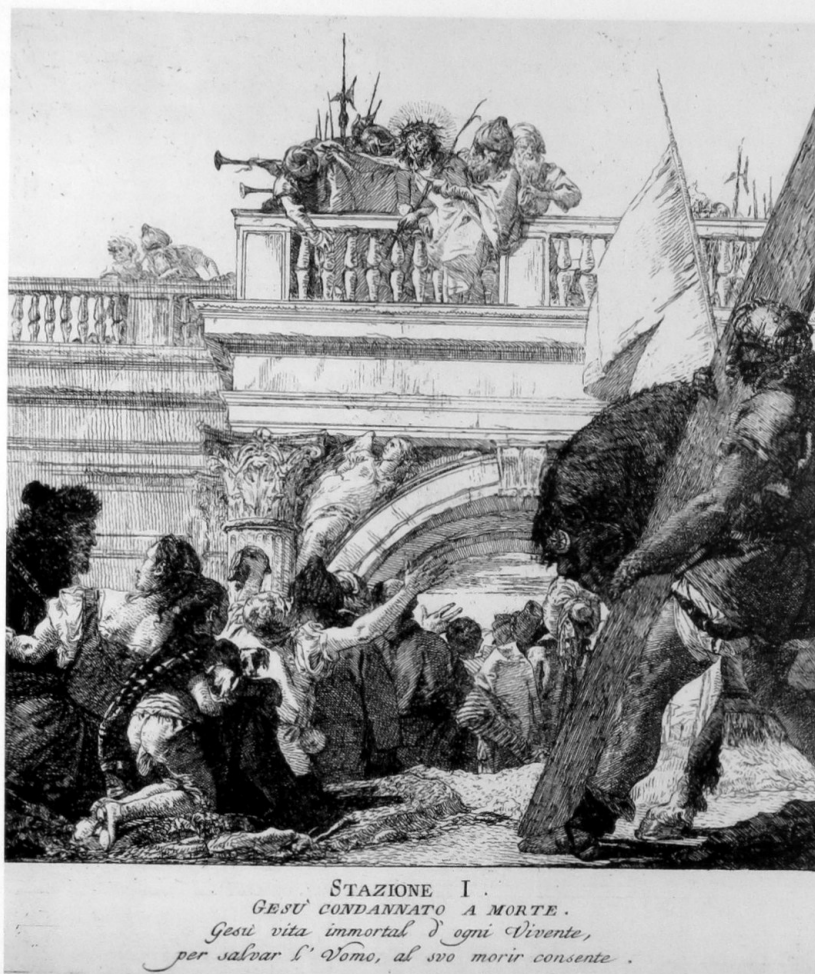
C.B.Tiepolo

STAZIONE I.
GESÙ CONDANNATO A MORTE.
Gesù vita immortal d'ogni Vivente,
per salvar l'Uomo, al suo morir consente.

published the series as etchings in the form of the *Via Crucis* (1748–49)—compositions that share the swanky obstreperousness of his father's prints, yet renounce their sketchlike qualities in favor of a far more scrupulous coverage of the copper plate.[23] Like an Eisenstein *avant la lettre*, the author of the printed stations uses stagy, defamiliarizing ruses (audacious cropping, tonal extremism, exploitation of surface geometry) to make the black of the ink and the white of the page into his real protagonists. His *Flight into Egypt* (Würzburg, 1750–53) extends a similar style to an independent series of twenty-two varied and vigorous prints.[24]

In the same years other talented painter-etchers began experimenting with more advanced and intricate printing techniques. Between 1768 and 1774 Boucher's pupil Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (1734–81) made what he called wash prints (*gravures au lavis*). These are highly accomplished etchings with aquatint, produced by "a painstaking process of biting, stopping out, and rebiting his plates multiple times in order to re-create the visual effect of richly varied wash drawings."[25] Around the same time in England the draftsman and painter Paul Sandby (1731–1809) pioneered the process known as lift-ground or sugar-lift etching, with similar results.[26] Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88) soon followed in his footsteps, producing prints that look remarkably like his chalk drawings.[27] By 1781 he planned to publish three soft-ground etchings on colored paper, further indicating his ambition to make drawing facsimiles in the manner of the most advanced reproductive etchers.[28] Francisco de Goya's famous *Caprichos* (1799) likewise achieve washlike tonalities by means of the chemically and mechanically induced granular patterning of aquatint.

For Goya and others, lithography (the planographic technique developed by Alois Senefelder
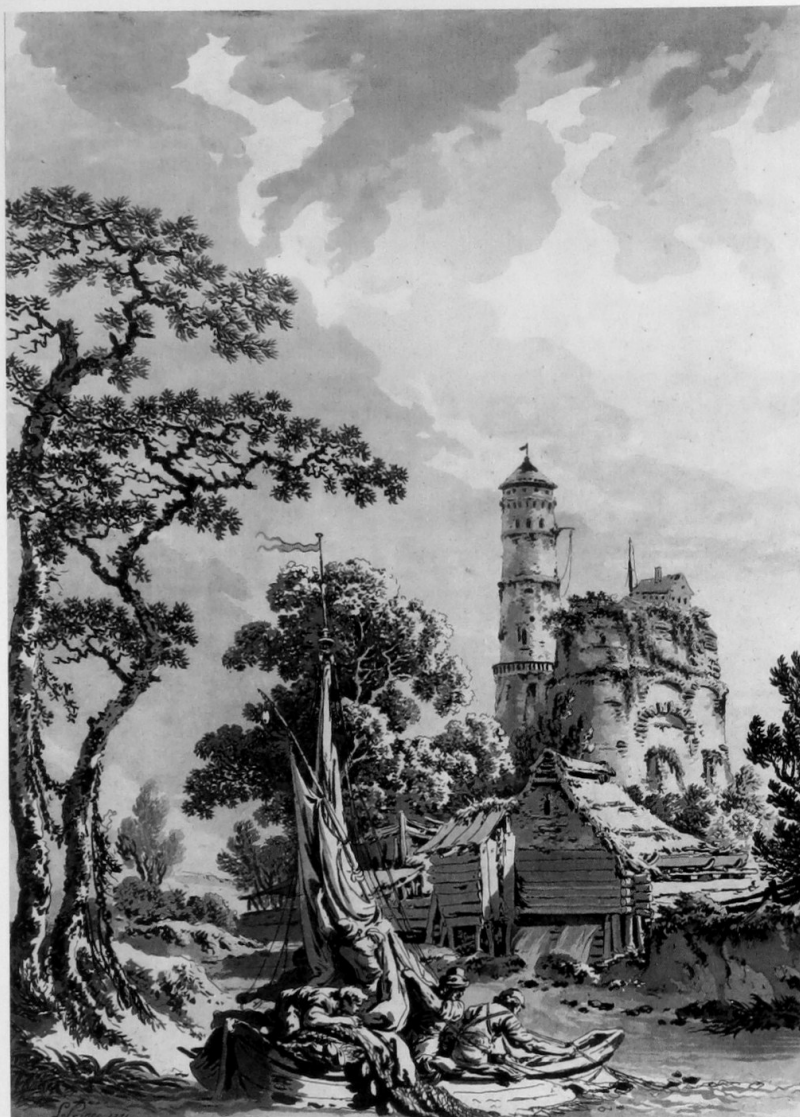
FIGURE 61

Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (1734–1781), *Les Pêcheurs (The Fishermen),* 1771. Etching and aquatint in brown on laid paper, 13½ × 9½ in. (32.2 × 23.2 cm). Washington, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1990.134.5 (Photo © 2005 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington)

between 1796 and 1799) ultimately became the most simple and effective way to convey shadow, by spontaneously producing the blurred effects of chalk and pastel.[29] One can only wonder what the prints by painters from Watteau to Gainsborough would have looked like if lithography's combination of spontaneity and *vaghezza* had been available a century earlier. Later in the nineteenth century etching was eventually revived, as signaled by the formation of the Société des Aquafortistes (Paris, 1862) and the Society of Painter-Etchers (London, 1880).[30] While it is by no means inseparable from the eighteenth-century styles championed by the Goncourt brothers, this revival is a relatively selective and archaizing affair, indebted above all to Rembrandt's commanding realism.[31]

1. For a recent overview, see Zorach and Rodini, *Paper Museums*. In addition to the bibliography listed there, see especially Gramaccini and Meier, *Die Kunst der Interpretation*.

2. For color printing in general, see Rodari, *Anatomie de la couleur;* for France in particular, see Grasselli, *Colorful Impressions*. In addition to etchers, see the work of color mezzotinters including Jacob Christoph Le Blon (1667–1741). A rather exceptional figure is Philibert-Louis Debucourt, who begins his career as a painter, then moves to making color etchings after his works, and ends up making original etchings that effectively function like paintings. For further biographies and bibliographies, see the *Dictionary of Art*.

3. In addition to the publications cited, see Gascoigne, *How to Identify Prints,* for a more general discussion of techniques.

4. See the remarks on Le Prince, Gainsborough, and Goya at the end of this essay.

5. See the remarks in Binion, "Canaletto," 598: "In the early 1740s Canaletto gave up painting Venetian *vedute* almost entirely and devoted himself mostly to drawing and, probably for the first time, to etching. The change was largely due to the decline in English patronage after the outbreak of the War of the Austrian Succession (1741), which made travelling hazardous and sending paintings to England risky." For an overview of Canaletto and his contemporaries, see Succi, *Da Carlevarijs ai Tiepolo*.

6. In his 1611 *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues,* Randle Cotgrave translates *ranger* as "to range, ranke, order, array, set, sort, place, dispose of, ordaine unto."

7. For the *Large Hunt,* see Lieure, *Jacques Callot,* cat. 353. Lieure reasonably dated the print to around 1619.

8. Compare the remarks on coloristic equivalencies in prints from Rubens's workshop in Mariette, *Abécédario,* V, 63. This publication is a modernized amalgam of various manuscript notes in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Estampes, Réserve, Ya 4).

9. See, for instance, Ricci's remarkable *Hermits,* reproduced in Calabi, *La gravure italienne,* plates V and VI. For his biography, see the entry in the *Dictionary of Art*.

10. Rizzi, *Bernardo Bellotto,* cats. I 25 and I 26.

11. For all its incipient neoclassicism, the title page for the frontispiece of Canaletto's *Vedute, altre prese da i Luoghi altre ideate* is manifestly indebted to della Bella. See the illustration in Succi, *Da Carlevarijs ai Tiepolo,* fig. 67.

12. As I note below, the earthier experiments of Rembrandt are also a factor, but his status as the preeminent etching master is only assured during the nineteenth-century etching revival.

13. Edmé François Gersaint defends his preference for della Bella over Callot in *Catalogue raisonné des*

bijoux, 256–61. Similarly, Charles-Nicholas Cochin notes that the Callotesque use of hard-ground etching imitating engraving leaves him cold, and recommends instead "the pure etchings of Painters who have made prints" including Castiglione, Rembrandt, and Nicolaes Berchem (introduction to Bosse, *De la Maniere de Graver à l'eau forte et au burin,* xxiv).

14. The prints were touched up in later states by Thomassin *fils.* For the series, see Carlson et al., *Regency to Empire,* cat. 1. For the Thomassin family, see Grivel, "Thomassin," 746. Compare the 1715 series of etchings after Watteau, the *Figures Françoises et Comiques,* discussed in *François Boucher et l'art rocaille,* cat. 4.

15. For illustrations of many of the drawings and the accompanying prints by Audran, Caylus and others, see Rosenberg and Prat, *Antoine Watteau,* cat. 13 and passim.

16. For illustrations of the printed portrait, including a proof state reworked with brush and wash, and for a discussion of Julienne's publication as a whole, see Carlson et al., *Regency to Empire,* cat. 13. The portrait drawing and the second frontispiece (*The Three Graces at the Tomb of Watteau*) are reproduced in Jacoby, *François Boucher's Early Development as a Draughtsman,* fig. I.C.1 and comparative fig. 2.

17. Boucher's drawing is now in the National Gallery of Canada, along with an example of Fragonard's print. For a discussion and reproductions of both works, see Couturier, *French Drawings,* cat. 20.

18. Kristel Smentek quotes the remarks of Jean-Charles François (1717–1769) on the "wall power" of certain graphic works in "An Exact Imitation Acquired at Little Expense: Marketing Color Prints in Eighteenth-Century France," in Grasselli, ed., *Colorful Impressions,* 16.

19. The etching style of Giambattista Piranesi (1720–1778) is hardly less distinctive, but he is not a painter.

20. Compare La Hyre's *Conversion of Saint Paul,* illustrated in Reed, *French Prints,* 184.

21. Witness the fountain with faux-Greek writing in La Hyre's remarkable little suite of six landscapes, which I discussed in Reed, *French Prints,* 135–37.

22. Rizzi, ed, *The Etchings of the Tiepolos,* cats. 39–221.

23. Ibid., cats. 39–54.

24. Ibid., cats. 67–96 (including prefatory material and three rejected plates).

25. Grasselli, *Colorful Impressions,* 73 (with fine color illustrations).

26. After etching the outline of his design, he would then clean the plate and apply a solution containing sugar, and finish by grounding, lifting and etching the plate like an aquatint. See Ad Stijnman's entry on lift-ground etching in the *Dictionary of Art,* and Gascoigne, *How to Identify Prints.*

27. Gainsborough "learn[ed] the technique from Sandby and went one step further: he first painted all the outlines with special ink, lifted and etched them; he then proceeded as Sandby." Stijnman, *Dictionary of Art.*

28. The drawings in question, published in 1797 by Boydell, are *Wooded Landscape with Two Country Carts and Figures; Wooded Landscape with Peasant Reading Tombstone, Rustic Lovers and Ruined Church;* and *Wooded Landscape with Herdsman Driving Cattle over a Bridge, Rustic Lovers and Ruined Castle.* See Hayes, *Gainsborough as Printmaker,* 62–77.

29. For a description of the development of lithography, with bibliography, see the unsigned entry for "Lithography" in *The Dictionary of Art.*

30. For the etching revivals in France and England, respectively, see Bailly-Herzberg, *L'eau-forte de peintre au dix-neuvième siècle,* and Chambers, *An Indolent and Blundering Art?*

31. McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt.*