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The Early Modern Painter-Etcher (review)

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Michael W. Cole, ed. *The Early Modern Painter-Etcher*.

University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006. viii + 190 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$50. ISBN: 0-271-02905-6.

Beginning with its somewhat oxymoronic title, this publication suffers from the well-known liabilities ascribed to projects resulting from committee endeavor, in this instance with the participation of five contributors. Essentially an exhibition catalogue for three venues, *The Early Modern Painter-Etcher* is a monograph devoted to a relatively neglected subject. Since this book began as an exhibition catalogue, there is considerable difficulty in relating the illustrative material in the back (as opposed to the figures accompanying the essays) to the essays themselves. Over- and underambitious, the project loses in focus whatever it may gain in scope. With several authors, the chapters are often, and necessarily, somewhat repetitious. Nowhere is etching's official (if not actual) founder, Parmigianino, dealt with in a thoroughly satisfactory fashion.

By its attempt to translate and transpose the somewhat useful French term *peintre-graveur* into the medium of etching, the publication is already in trouble, since some fine etchers were seldom, if ever, painters. Do the coiners of this odd title imply a limitation to the non-reproductive etching? If so, this does not work either. Some of the essays deal with the issue of etching as drawing, an aridly academic *topos* since etching is intrinsically a drawing-like process, produced by scratching through a wax surface over a copper or other metal plate. These grooves are then filled with acid to bite lines into the plate below.

Dürer's relatively few etchings present a singularly difficult, elusive subject and the essay devoted to this complex and very possibly insoluble area by Susan Dackerman, "Dürer's Etchings: Printed Drawings?", does not prove too illuminating. Commendably the book gives almost equal play to both north and south, making for much stimulating illustrative content in this handsomely designed and well illustrated publication. Its ambitious perspective is best represented by the provocative essay of Michael Cole and Larry Silver, "Fluid Boundaries: Formations of the Painter-Etcher" and by another written by Madeleine Viljoen on "Etching and Drawing in Early Modern Europe."

The book might well have ended with the key period of etching's revival under Seymour Hayden, Whistler, and Legros, but this issue is seemingly ignored. An illustration of early etched armor should have been included as well. One can only hope for a more cohesive, logically developed, rationally organized, and truly comprehensive exhibition and publication on the same too-often-neglected and key subject in the graphic arts. One thinks of such exemplary, related publications as that of Sue Welch Reed and Richard Wallace, *Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque* as the way to go.

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