

Graphic Arts Collections in Renaissance Europe

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ABSTRACT

Drawings and engravings became collector's items in the late fifteenth century, although it was not until the early sixteenth that the first major graphic arts collections were born. They were part of a broad geography stretching from Spain and Italy to the Holy Roman Empire, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and France. Their content was European, for it most often consisted of collections and bundles combining Italian, German, Flemish, and French works, in accordance with a canon that gradually emerged during the sixteenth century. Considered as evidence of the creative abilities of great artists, drawings and prints took their place alongside paintings, statues, and antiques in private and princely art collections. These ensembles, which were closely connected to humanism, also contributed to scientific knowledge, and served as documentary resources.



Carpaccio (circle of Luca Signorelli?), Allegorical Scene, pen drawing with grey-brown ink, mount in pen and brown ink, with brown wash, over black chalk by Giorgio Vasari, over a woodcut mount by Cristoforo Coriolano 57.1 x 44.2 cm on paper, 1456–before 1574 (London, British Museum, 1895,0915.807). Source : research.britishmuseum.org - Non-commercial use authorized (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Beginning in the Middle Ages, European artists set about conserving the drawings needed for their activity and gathering them in model books. These collections, which were intended for utilitarian purposes, survived past the Renaissance. Artists expanded them with prints beginning in the 1440s, thereby introducing numerous works executed by others into workshops. While initially restricted to workshops, this taste for the graphic arts slowly spread to the public. One of the first known collectors was Felice Feliciano (1433-1480), a humanist from Verona who possessed at least twelve drawings. During approximately the same period, the notary Jacopo Rubieri (c. 1430-c. 1500) in Venice and the doctor Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514) in Nuremberg also began collecting engravings to paste inside manuscripts or books.

During the sixteenth century, graphic collections, which could include thousands of works, began to be organized rationally, as well as to be valued for their esthetic aspects. The terminology nevertheless remained loose, and contemporary inventories rarely made a distinction between drawings (single works produced by hand) and prints (multiple works obtained by printing from an engraved matrix). Engravers actually preserved this ambiguity by developing new techniques imitating the effects of drawing. This was true for both etchings—produced using a plate covered in varnish on which the artist superficially incised his composition with a draughtsman’s gestures—and chiaroscuro engraving, which produced hues similar to wash drawings. The rise of prints of interpretation, intended to reproduce the paintings and drawings of great masters, should also be included in this growing taste for graphic works, which were seen at the time as privileged traces of an artist’s creative process and personality.

The First Art Lovers

Among the great lovers of art was the Sevillian Fernando Columbus (son of Christopher, 1488-1539), who gathered 3,200 engravings during the diplomatic missions he conducted in Italy, the Netherlands, the German states, and Switzerland. Many art lovers followed suit, especially in Italy. For instance, the Venetian patrician Gabriele Vendramin (1484-1552) possessed 1,000 prints and 800 drawings conserved in collections, either bundled together or framed. In Bologna, Paul von Praun (1548-1616), a merchant from Nuremberg, acquired 6,000 engravings of European masters and 600 Italian and German drawings. In Florence, the painter Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) constituted a highly renowned *Libro de’disegni* (book of drawings), which according to estimates included between 500 and 2,000 drawings produced by the best Italian artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This appreciation of *disegno*, understood as both drawing (mastery of the line) and design (intellectual effort of creation), can also be felt in his writings, especially in the biographies of artists in his *Vite*, which he published in 1550. It was also in this work that he forged a canon for the first time—which is to say a catalog—of artists whose works should be sought by art lovers.

Essentially consisting of Italian artists (Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, and many others), this list was not entirely satisfactory for the art lovers of Northern Europe, who had to wait for the publication of Karel van Mander’s *Book of Painters* in 1604 for a canon that also included the Flemish and German artists they admired. There were also major collectors of the graphic arts north of the Alps, notably the lawyer from Basel Basilius Amerbach (1533-1591), who owned 3,900 prints and 1,900 drawings primarily by German (Martin Schongauer,

Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Altdorfer, etc.), Dutch, Italian, and French artists. In Paris the major figure was the apothecary Nicolas Houël (c. 1524-1587), who owned enough drawings and prints to fill twenty crates. In Antwerp, the cartographer Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598) had a passion for geographic maps and the works of Dürer, which were particularly appreciated at the time for their minute attention to detail. The artist's native city of Nuremberg had a number of major graphic collections, including that of Willibald Imhoff (1519-1580), which also focused on Dürer, and that of Melchior (1520-1579) and Julius Ayser (1555-1612), which appears to have numbered 20,000 works.

German and Habsburg Princes

Private individuals were not the only ones to take an interest in drawings and engravings during the Renaissance. From the 1560s onward, the graphic arts played an important role in *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*, the cabinets of curiosities of encyclopedic intent constituted by the princes of the Holy Roman Empire. In Dresden and Munich, Augustus I of Saxony (1526-1586) and Albert V of Bavaria (1528-1579) had collections of drawings and prints compiled to enrich and document their collections of artworks, curiosities, and scientific instruments. The subjects of these graphic works covered all fields of knowledge and the arts, such that geographic maps and astronomical plates sat side by side with works by great masters from Italy and the North, decorations, and *livres de fête*. The *Kunstammer* of Ferdinand II Archduke of Austria (1529-1595) in Ambras, near Innsbruck, also included a graphic section conserving numerous collections of Germanic drawings and 7,000 German, Flemish, Italian, and French engravings. Upon his death the collection was bequeathed to his nephew, Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, who constituted his own graphic collection in Prague, one of the first to adopt classification by school. His uncle Philip II of Spain (1527-1598) endowed the Escorial monastery with a rich collection of 7,000 prints intended for study.

The Learned

Graphic works were also collected for reasons other than pure esthetic pleasure. Many scholars during the Renaissance established image libraries to document their research. This was especially true in the fields of botanical and zoological science, in which the naturalists Conrad Gessner (1516-1565) in Zurich and Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) in Bologna had numerous drawings of specimens executed to support their research or for use as illustrations in their treatises. This practice also existed among antiquarians, who either commissioned tracings of the latest discoveries and objects from distant collections, or arranged to have them sent via letters. It was also present among the learned who wanted to chronicle their time—such as the clergyman Johann Jakob Wick (1522-1588) from Zurich Cathedral, the Parisian magistrate Pierre de L'Estoile (1546-1611), and the Heidelberg law professor Marcus zum Lamm (1544-1606)—who compiled a great number of visual and textual accounts of contemporary events.

As we have seen, the first collections of drawings and engravings were connected to the curiosity that men of the Renaissance had for the arts and sciences. Their geography overlaps with that of humanism, stretching very far in space and including not only major intellectual and artistic centers, but also the margins of Europe. Due to the material characteristics of works on paper, as well as the establishment in the sixteenth century of transnational sales networks through merchants and agents, the content of these collections included works of varying provenance quite early on.

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