

The Museum of Modern Art

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A NOTE ON THE PRINTS - SYMBOLISM, SYNTHETISM AND THE FIN-DE-SIECLE

In the 1890s, renewed interest in the woodcut and in lithography revitalized printmaking in Europe. Lithography, which was first invented in 1796, permitted large-scale designs and colorful painterly effects. The importation of exotic Japanese woodcuts had awakened artists to the possibilities inherent in the use of the wood block to achieve the simple, bold images, the essential "primitive" forms with which they were preoccupied.

These techniques inspired them to rework motifs they had previously explored in painting. Artists such as Odilon Redon, Eugène Carrière, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Edvard Munch made their most significant and technically innovative contributions in the graphic arts. Much favored were the dramatic effects of black and white and chiaroscuro; the use of subjective color added another dimension to the interpretation of subject matter.

With the spread of Art Nouveau, artists began to frame their compositions with geometric or irregular patterned borders, and added gold and silver paint to their prints and drawings. Illustrated books and posters of the period integrated text and image in single, fluid compositions. Book illustrators, although taking inspiration from the text, would generally give imagination free rein, and the plates did not necessarily depict actual sequences in the writing.

Many of the prints in this exhibition were commissioned by art dealers and publishers, such as André Marty, Ambroise Vollard, and the Nathanson brothers for their publications: L'Estampe originale, L'Album des peintres-graveurs, and La Revue Blanche. The enthusiasm of these men encouraged painters to become involved with the graphic media. Their publications were instrumental in furthering the artists' reputations and in setting the scene for fin-de-siècle expression.

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