

CHECKLIST

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, Dutch, 1606–1669  
*Ephraim Bonus, Jewish Physician*, 1647  
Etching and drypoint on laid paper, state ii/II  
Gift of Helena Mein Wade in memory of her husband,  
Alfred Byers Wade

*Jan Cornelis Sylvius, Preacher*, 1646, state ii/II  
Etching, drypoint, and engraving on laid paper  
Gift of Jean K. Weil in memory of Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935

*Woman Sitting Half Dressed Beside a Stove*, 1658  
Etching and drypoint on laid paper, state iii/VII  
Gift of Jean K. Weil in memory of Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935

Egidius Sadeler II, Flemish, 1570–1629, after Titian  
*The Beautiful Slave*, about 1595–1629  
Engraving on laid paper, state iv/IV  
Purchased through a gift from the Prospero Foundation

Bernard Picart, French, 1673–1733, after Roger de Piles  
*Roger de Piles*, 1704  
Etching on wove paper  
Gift in memory of Mrs. Harvey Fisk by her children

Issac Becket, English, 1653–1719  
*Henry Compton, Earl of North Hampton*, 1681–1688  
Mezzotint on laid paper, state iii/IV  
Gift of Robert Dance, Class of 1977

Pieter Schenck, Dutch, 1660–1718  
*Europa, Africa, Asia, and America from The Four Continents*,  
about 1700  
Mezzotint on laid paper, unique states  
Purchased through the Jean and Adolph Weil Jr. 1935 Fund

Wallerant Vaillant, Dutch, 1623–1677, after Annibale Carracci  
*The Holy Family with the Infant St. John the Baptist*,  
mid-17th century  
Mezzotint, only state  
Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund

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Wallerant Vaillant, *The Holy Family with the Infant St. John the Baptist*, mid-17th century, mezzotint on laid paper. Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund, 2008.56.3.

## THE QUEST FOR PRINTED TONE

### The Origins of Mezzotint in the Seventeenth Century

*Nothing, except paint, can express flesh more naturally, or the flowing of hair, or the folds of drapery, or the catching lights of armor.*

—William Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints*, 1781



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Ephraim Bonus, Jewish Physician*, 1647, etching and drypoint on laid paper. Gift of Helena Mein Wade in memory of her husband, Alfred Byers Wade, PR.950.12.32.

Mezzotint is sometimes called the “black art,” which refers to the fact that the artist begins with a completely dark image and makes changes to the plate to add the lighter areas. The burnishing process that the artist uses to lighten the plate leads to the creation of the smooth and velvety tones for which mezzotints are famous. The mezzotint was the first printmaking process that allowed the artist to create true tonal nuances, rather than cross-hatching of various densities.

It was invented in the 1640s by Ludwig von Siegen (1609–1680). Prince Rupert of the Rhine (1619–1682) learned the process in the

1650s and taught it to Wallerant Vaillant (1623–1677), the first professional mezzotint artist. Vaillant did most of his work in Amsterdam and was, along with Abraham Blooteling (1640–1690), one of the artists responsible for the growth of the mezzotint in the Low Countries. Blooteling was also at least partly responsible for introducing the new technique to England, where it eventually found widespread popularity, leading to its identification on the European continent as *la manière Anglaise*.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, nearly a century prior to the advent of the mezzotint, the two most popular printmaking methods were engraving and etching. The first of these is made by incising neat, V-shaped lines into a copper plate with a burin, or graver. This results

in even, strong lines. Engraving is particularly unsuited for shading, as the artist has little freedom with which to create subtleties. The lines are either there or they are not, and when they do exist they are almost uniform in strength. This is particularly evident in the engraving of *The Beautiful Slave* (about 1595–1629) by Egidius Sadeler II (1570–1629), after Titian’s painting *Laura dei Dianti* (about 1520). Tiziano Vecelli, or Titian, was the leading painter of the Venetian school of the Italian Renaissance in the sixteenth century. While Titian’s original painting is rife with varying colors, both bright and muted, and subtle lighting changes, the distinctive characteristic of Sadeler’s engraving is the sharp—almost harsh—contrast between light and dark. Although the print is striking in its own right, as a reproduction it fails to do justice to Titian’s genius.

Etching, on the other hand, gives the artists far more freedom with which to work (and rework) their magic. While the engraving process involves the direct altering of the plate, in etching the plate is first coated with a protective ground that is resistant to acid. The artist then draws on the plate with a needle, with much the same ease and technique as pencil on paper, faintly removing some of the ground. The plate is then exposed to acid, which bites into the plate where the ground has been removed by the needle. By exposing different areas to acid for varying lengths of time, a range of line widths can be created, offering more variety than engraving. The undisputed master of etching was Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669). His famed search for subtle tones led him to create beautiful etchings often referred to as “hand-drawn mezzotints” that echoed the tonal variety of the new mezzotint medium.

Rembrandt’s ability to create printed tone from etching is quite apparent in the prints *Ephraim Bonus* (1647) and *Woman Sitting Half Dressed Beside a Stove* (1658). Both etchings feature very dimly lit backgrounds that bring the features of the human subjects to the forefront of the viewer’s focus. The effort spent on darkening the surroundings while leaving identifiable and realistic items visible makes the prints even more powerful. In the depiction of the woman, it is the darkened alcove that highlights her white skin, while in the portrait of Ephraim Bonus it is the dark wall and his even darker clothing. The realistic shadows that darken the rooms and highlight the features of the sitters demonstrate Rembrandt’s incredible ability, as well as the superiority of etching over engraving in depicting subtle tonal variations. Even the genius of Rembrandt’s etching, however, was no match for pure technological invention.

By far the best intaglio printmaking process for the representation of delicate and continuous tones is the mezzotint. The process is much

more complex than that of either engraving or etching: the plate is first roughened in a crisscrossing pattern using a rocker with serrated edges, pitting the entire surface; then a scraper or burnisher is used to smooth away the desired areas to produce tones that are lighter. If printed without any burnishing, the plate would produce a completely black image; if an area were smoothed completely, no ink would be held and the area would print as white. Because the artist can control the level to which he burnishes the pitted areas of the plate, every conceivable tone from white to black can be produced. This makes the mezzotint ideal for replicating tonal variations in painting, and, as William Gilpin’s praise for the medium suggests, for printing portraits.

Early mezzotints—for example, Pieter Schenck’s (1660–1718) *The Four Continents* (about 1700), Issac Becket’s (1653–1719) *Henry Compton, Earl of North Hampton* (about 1681–88), and Wallerant Vaillant’s (1623–1677) *The Holy Family with the Infant St. John the Baptist* (mid-seventeenth century)—all demonstrate the strengths of the nascent medium. Vaillant was able to emulate the subtleties of lighting and folds of fabric with greater accuracy and detail than Sadeler could with his engraving. Becket uses the smooth tones available to him to give the bishop’s stole a velvety, realistic look and create a uniquely lit background. Schenck’s series of allegories for the continents is demonstrative of the power of the mezzotint when the light source is emphasized and controlled. By controlling the lights and shades of the image, the mezzotint artist is able to create much more realistic and powerful shades and tones than an engraver or an etcher, no matter their level of skill.

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Issac Becket, *Henry Compton, Earl of North Hampton*, about 1681–88, mezzotint on laid paper. Gift of Robert Dance, Class of 1977, PR.2001.30.