

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Bann, Stephen. *Distinguished Images: Prints and the Visual Economy in Nineteenth-Century France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 264. ISBN: 9780300177275

Shauna Sorensen, CUNY Hunter College

Stephen Bann's *Distinguished Images* examines various modes of reproduction and print-based media in an age when Daguerre had begun a revolution. Bann poses the rhetorical question: "Is lithography an art?" alluding to an 1899 study by critic Robert de la Sizeranne titled "Is Photography an Art?" In his quest to answer this question, Bann surveys the field of printmaking as a whole, looking closely at several artists and phenomena to create a new view of this time period and the role of printmaking. He forgoes the lens of "Modernism" through which prints are usually viewed, focusing instead on prints in their own context apart from painting and photography. *Distinguished Images* details the vibrant history of printmaking in nineteenth-century France.

France has been the focus of a great amount of work on Modernism in the visual arts, but the study of printmaking, especially reproductive prints, has often been neglected in favor of painting. Bann's book focuses specifically on nineteenth-century French material and understudied artists working at this time. The idea of a "visual economy" is an overarching theme, referring to the means of production available, as well as the means of dissemination, also called an "economy of sharing." At a time when modes of visual representation were evolving quickly and often displacing the previous method, as in the case of lithography displacing burin prints, Bann draws attention to the different forms of printmaking and their own particular strengths, histories, and politics.

Bann's examination of *Mona Lisa* reproductions and their contributions to the popularization are particularly interesting. Understudied artists created reproductions of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting that cast light on the role of authorship and artistic interpretation in reproductions. Lithography was a medium used widely because of its ability to reproduce distinctive styles of draughtsmanship, an invaluable tool for reproductive prints (29). Replication of styles and techniques was integral to a faithful representation that can preserve the magic of the original Da Vinci painting. Luigi Calamatta and Hyacinthe Aubry-Lecomte's engravings of the masterpiece exemplify the potential and power of lithography as a reproductive medium. Examination of the factors that contribute to the idea of "visual economy" highlight how the conjunction of images, artistic criticism, and publications, such as the *Gazette des Beaux-arts*, a major nineteenth-century journal, could quickly skyrocket a painting's celebrity even before its first reproduction in photographic form, as in the case of the *Mona Lisa*.

Familiar images, as well as artists, are examined in a new light. Bann looks at Nadar's visual work and his art criticism in light of developments in printmaking at the time. Bann asserts that Nadar's work in photography was overshadowed by the notion of "photographic exceptionalism," an idea where photography could only be understood as distinct from other visual media (89). The comparison of photography and prints comes up time and time again, but the differences between the two require them to be evaluated on their own terms. In contrast to La Sizeranne's claim that the greatest strength of the photograph was not in its sharpness, but in its imprecision and suggestive abilities, Bann chooses to emphasize the precision and minute details of which prints are capable (121).

The sharpness and retouching that the lithographic medium allows for, as well as the collaborative nature of printmaking, raise questions about authorship in lithography. Godefroy Engelmann is taken up as the case study to examine authorship in printmaking and its history of neglecting collaborators. Engelmann is credited with revising the lithographic technique to allow draughtsmen a greater role in the artistic process. Previously, draughtsmen would leave work at an early stage for the lithographer, a different artist, to finish (122). With Engelmann's modernization of lithographic process, the inclusion of two collaborators on a single image created questions about the significance of each collaborator's creative input and challenged ideas about the role of the artist.

Bann's case studies, connected to familiar images, serve to highlight the untold stories of both famous figures, and those neglected in art history. By examining the relationships among different printmaking techniques, as well as their relationship to academic painting, Bann shows how individual artists used different methods to achieve different ends, ranging from reproduction to innovative visual art. Early on in the book, *Distinguished Images* successfully answers Bann's question: his examination of prints and printmaking methods on their own terms confirms printmaking as an art in its own right, and not simply a step on the evolutionary ladder of reproductive art that leads to photography.