

## The Livre d'Artiste

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IT IS OVER NOW, but in the first half of April there was an exhibition in the Heffer Gallery of work by the French engraver Krol. The brightly-coloured engravings on the walls had a natural attraction, and the spectator may also have paused to look at Krol's illustrated books—they were on show in two glass cases, perilously balanced on a narrow table. In some of the plates, Krol's fascination with geometry had created elaborate patterns and little else. But the animals in his *Bestiaire* were arresting. Much of their 'presence' came from a quality of the line, which had the firmness that comes from having to cut through metal, and yet moved with a fluid and graceful naturalness. There were few lines, but as they ran and curled they gave, quickly and authoritatively, tangled hair and feathery down, or gnarled skin hanging loose, and taut skin flowing smoothly over muscle. This beautiful clear calligraphy might strike us as the art the burin was invented for.

However, an English spectator might have been puzzled to know just what kind of books these were—of unusual proportions, unbound, without boards (though with paper covers and rich cases). For the French *livre d'artiste* has no English equivalent, though it has a long and distinguished history across the Channel. A *livre d'artiste* is, in effect, a portfolio of separate sheets, folded once, the text being illustrated with original etchings, lithographs, or similar prints. The first ventures of the kind—Toulouse Lautrec's *Histoires naturelles* (1899) and Bonnard's *Parallèlement* (1900)—sold very slowly, but the taste has grown, and there are now many bibliophile societies in France that commission *livres d'artiste* for their members. They are also produced by galleries, and it is now even feasible for an artist to publish his *livres* himself—as Krol has his *Bestiaire*. Patrons have been admirably ready to commission work by young artists, but there are also books by Braque, Picasso, Chagall, Derain, Matisse, and Henry Moore. Often an established artist will be invited to assist a new artist's first venture by contributing a frontispiece (as Zadkine has for Michel Giraud's *La Nuit et ses Prestiges*). Almost all the *livres* have appreciated in value

since they appeared, and some of them are now extremely expensive—Picasso's *Histoires naturelles* stands at over £2,000—but at publication a small *livre* might cost between £15 and £30, while a large one might come to £100.

It is remarkable that this genre should have had so little written about it, either in French or in English. The only article I know on the subject as a whole is that by W. J. Strachan in the *Encyclopaedia of Antiques*, produced by *The Connoisseur* in 1959 (Vol. IV, p. 217). Mr. Strachan has shown me his large collection, and many of the fine works in it will be on show in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in July. He has written on individual artists in *The Studio* and *The Connoisseur*, and is preparing a book, which should become the standard work: the subject needs one. In the meantime, the present note may serve as an introduction to the genre for those who do not know it. In preparing this note, I have been indebted to the kindness, interest and information of Mr. Strachan in more ways than my thanks, here, can do justice to.

The *livres* use pure rag paper, perhaps hand-made, like the beautiful *auvergne* paper often used. Processes employed range from the sumptuous and velvety mezzotint work of Avati to the experiments by Louttre with the intaglio treatment of wood (a process that is the opposite of normal wood-engraving, where anything cut away prints white). The printing, done on hand presses, may involve elaborate and repetitive work. For colour woodcuts, a separate block is needed for each colour, unless—as Derain did with his *Pantagruel*—one separates the different areas of the block with grooves, and has each one painted by hand. None the less, the printing is meticulous. I once had the chance to visit the printing works of Lacourière, and found the printers in an agitated and passionate conference because the red they were using came out in two slightly different shades at different printings.

Perhaps this summary suggests a concern with the precious refinements of the Book Beautiful, where the sense of luxury is what one pays for. But a style of quality publication that can make such a bold and natural use of the *art brut* of Dubuffet is not obviously precious, while the burst of radiant colour offered by many of these books would stagger a sophisticated English taste. It is a school of quality book-production in which the artist is obliged, by the standard of his rivals, to be intensely a craftsman, and at the same time vigorously alive, in his manipulations. The artist J. J. Rigal, who is at present etching some plates for a collection of

poems by Grosjean, *herbier*, also has a reputation as a printer of engravings.

In some of the *livres*, the text is written by hand, but usually it is printed. The size and weight of the type are carefully balanced with those of the illustrations, and the type is specially cut for the book. It is hard Founder's Type, rather than the soft Monotype alloy, and as a result the text has a sharpness and strength one seldom sees. For a fantasy, an extravagant type may be used, but in general the printers of the *livres* work within the range of types normally used by French printers. As this is narrower than the English range, and as the type is likely to be a good deal larger than the print one normally reads, it may seem, to an English taste, somewhat plain. But the *livres* usually avoid the main danger with an assertively beautiful type: that it may fix the words on the page as though they belonged on paper, when they belong off it. All our literature is speech to the mind (whether the vocal chords are fully engaged or not) and one wants a type which—like the large, clear, and non-committal print of the *livre d'artiste*—simply concentrates attention on the words there. It is the best tribute to literature, for it is a tribute of real confidence: the words are very exposed.

There is also evidence, in many of the *livres*, of a strong sense in the artists that it is a book they are working for, not simply a portfolio (even, or especially, when the text is written for the occasion, as in Flocon's *Perspectives* or Friedlaender's *La Saison des Amours*). It is surprising to find so many artists so ready to put their art within the conventions of the book, and in close relation to a text, at a time when the word 'literary', applied to art, carries such an obnoxious charge. Art has never before been supposed to be so exclusively a matter of visual and formal considerations as it is now. For many artists, the freedom from non-visual obligations has been the most important precondition of their development. But in others one can trace a reaction away from this freedom that sometimes seems desperate. Some of these reversals—into figuration, story, and even the written word—may seem wild, and unlikely to be more than decorative after all. But one might suggest that many different artists, whatever their commitment in this respect, have found the *livre* a satisfying form to work in because of the way in which it gives free visual creation a more than visual point. This is not to suggest either that the resulting works of art are subordinate to their texts, as illustrations are supposed to be, or that

the text has still been primarily a springboard for visual acrobatics. A different kind of relation between text and picture is possible, and we see it, for instance, in Georg's *Fleurs du Mal* and Gromaire's *Macbeth*; the text has been lived with and pondered, and the art has come from some depth.

It is not possible, here, to reproduce any prints in a way that would do justice to their sensitive texture, so one cannot go into detail. In any case, what one wants primarily to do is to refer the reader to the books, though it is not easy to see them in England (there are some in the Victoria and Albert Museum however). And though this note has been written with a strong sense of the pity it is that England has nothing to compare with this French institution, one must admit that even if enlightened patrons were to commission such books here, they could not be produced. We haven't the experienced craftsmen, at all stages of book production, that one must have if such an undertaking is to be more than an experiment. Not that one supposes English printers have less natural endowment than French—the difference comes because, on the one hand, the massive apparatus of photo-mechanical reproduction has such authority here that it crowds out every other possibility, and on the other because we have not any powerful fostering discipline such as the French have, localized in the *ateliers*. Many *livres d'artiste* are commissioned by bibliophile societies like the *Impénitents*, and it is clear that the complementary effect of such a tradition has been to give bibliophilia a strong and creative character, productive in the present, such as it seldom enjoys here, where it may be contentedly whimsical.

Here, of course, the French are reaping the rewards of that national dedication to the visual arts which, for all the wars that have waged within and around it, has been so fruitful in the last two hundred years: in its abundant generation of classics it compares with the fostering of music in Germany. It has created both the means to produce these books, and the demand for them, and when we look through them and see how many imposing talents there seem to be, all alive at one time, we may almost feel it has created the genius as well. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this effect, coming from a school that combines so sensitive a devotion to the medium and 'technique' with such liberal encouragement for the unique bent of each artist's spontaneity; in any case, Paris absorbs a good deal of foreign talent. But, whatever its concomitants, the range of this French achievement is a tribute