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Review Of "French Popular Lithographic Imagery, 1815-1870, Vol. 1: Lithographs And Literature" By B. Farwell

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French Popular Lithographic Imagery 1815–1870. Vol. 1: Lithographs and Literature by Beatrice Farwell
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French sources. Professor Habib and his students have already established a firm methodology for continuing studies of that kind.

LOREN MICHAEL*


The proliferation of imagery, in forms as diverse as photojournalism and advertising, cartoons, postcards, product packaging, family snapshots, art facsimiles, and television, together with the nature of that imagery, constitute a fundamental, though still not fully appreciated, characteristic of the modern era. The perfecting of photography and photomechanical reproductive processes accelerated this development. But it was the invention and commercial application of lithography that inaugurated the revolution. Lithography has hitherto been studied—in historical surveys, exhibitions, monographs on individuals like Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec, and technical explanations—almost exclusively as a medium of aesthetic accomplishment, a means used by a small number of acknowledged masters to create works of art which subsequently were collected by elite connoisseurs and conserved in museum print rooms. Now Beatrice Farwell, in a publication focusing on France from 1815, when lithography was introduced, to 1870, when it was superseded commercially by other processes, provides the foundation for undertaking a major reassessment of lithography’s importance and role in the evolution of modern culture and society.

Lithographs and Literature is the first of a planned twelve-volume series in which Farwell will make widely accessible for the first time an awesome sampling of lithographs from the unusual holdings of the Cabinet des estampes at the Bibliothèque nationale (Paris), which because of copyright laws became the repository not only of works of accepted artistic merit but also of the ephemera mass-produced for a bourgeois and working-class market. It is this “popular” imagery on which Farwell concentrates, using subject and numerical representativeness, rather than aesthetic quality or the fame of the designer, as the criteria for selection and organization. Originating as newspaper caricatures and prints published and sold individually or in sets and then frequently framed and hung on walls, such lithographs encom-

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pass reproductions of art, political satire, pornography, scenes of ordinary life, and depictions of historical events and exotic lands. They may be clumsily executed by anonymous artisans and conventionally sentimental, vulgar, or even offensive in content. But as they "visually record the dreams and realities" (p. vii) of their 19th-century audiences, they offer historians an exceptional resource.

The author, an art historian, has been a pioneer in exploring the "media explosion" (p. 2) and its significance for 19th-century art; she is one of a growing number of scholars who have turned to popular imagery in several media as a source for paintings by artists like Courbet, Manet, and Degas. Farwell is more concerned here, however, with demonstrating the relevance of popular lithography to other fields, among them literature and social history. The 492 lithographs reproduced in this first volume include illustrations to plays, operas, poems, and novels by great writers ranging from La Fontaine, Lesage, Molière, and Shakespeare to contemporary romantics like Hugo, Dumas père, Walter Scott, and George Sand. Numbers, though, reveal that literature like the serialized novels of Eugène Sue, the Napoleonic songs of Béranger, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin was even more favored by the public. In addition, Farwell presents abundant lithographs of environments, interests, and customs paralleling those described by 19th-century French authors, notably Baudelaire, Balzac, and Flaubert, together with portraits and caricatures of celebrated writers and images that reflect current attitudes and such preoccupations as the nature of educated women, the bohemian life-styles of writers, and the controversy between classicism and Romanticism.

Farwell says explicitly that this project is not a definitive study but rather is intended to provide a research tool for others, and her essay prefacing the catalog specifications is accordingly a brief twenty-seven pages, classifying and surveying the lithographs. She is nonetheless provocative in bringing forward larger topics, for example, the relationship between "high" literature and that of lesser quality but greater circulation; the relevance of economic, social, and industrial changes that fostered popular art and literature; and the extent to which lengthier descriptions in literature dealing with contemporary life were stimulated by the exposure of authors to prints detailing their subjects.

Future volumes in the series will deal with the themes of portraits and types, urban and military genre, the city, the country, piety and the family, love and courtship, contemporary events and caricature, historicism and exoticism, tourism and travel, pin-ups and erotica, and lithography in art and commerce. Ultimately some 5,000 lithographs will be presented—and at relatively modest cost, since the high-quality reproductions of each work are in microfiche form (usefully accompanied by B.N. negative numbers and instructions for photo orders). Though specialists will still need to journey to Paris to
examine the material of which Farwell is publishing but an estimated 5 percent, her ambitious achievement will indeed establish an indispensable resource for anyone working on 19th-century history.

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