

Alessia Del Bianco

“A Selection of Works by the Finest Modern Masters of *Bianco e Nero*”: The Print Rooms at the Venice Biennale, 1899-1901

Abstract

In 1901, Vittorio Pica praised the organisers of the Venice Biennale for devoting “one or two small rooms” to “a selection of works by the finest modern masters of *bianco e nero*”. The exhibitions organised in 1899 and 1901 presented—for the very first time in Italy—some of the leading names in European graphic art, building on the success of the sizeable exhibit of Dutch etchers in the 1895 and 1897 iterations, as well as of prints by James McNeill Whistler and Vittore Grubicy de Dragon. The sections dedicated to prints and drawings, starting in 1895, played a key role in sparking an interest in prints—and the international Etching Revival—in the Italian art world of the early 20th century.

This article attempts to outline the story of the graphic arts sections in the exhibitions of 1899 and 1901, examining the background, proposals, organisation, and selection of artists, as well as the artistic reception. An analysis of archival materials from the ASAC in Venice and of correspondence between Vittorio Pica and Secretary General Antonio Fradeletto helps identify their strategies and approach—which paralleled Pica’s activity as a critic—to promoting the development of printmaking and public familiarity with the art. It sheds light on the pioneering role played by these first few Biennales in building critical knowledge of intaglio as an original language in modern Italian art, and in introducing a range of practical and aesthetic concepts that reflected the latest currents in contemporary printmaking. These early Biennales marked a turning point in the history of Italian graphic art, introducing an exhibition model that grew in popularity, spreading knowledge and appreciation of prints.

Keywords

Venice Biennale, Vittorio Pica, History of Printmaking, Exhibition Studies, *Bianco e Nero*

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“A Selection of Works by the Finest Modern Masters of *Bianco e Nero*”: The Print Rooms at the Venice Biennale, 1899-1901

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Introduction

The fourth *Esposizione Internazionale di Venezia*, which opened on April 22, 1901, brought a significant new development in the field of the graphic arts. “After a rather long period of scornful indifference” that ignored all the work coming out of the Etching Revival, the Biennale decided to devote two rooms to international prints and drawings.¹ Vittorio Pica’s pleasure at seeing these sections included in the show can be clearly felt in his presentation of them:

Prints, both black and white and in colour, are once again being embraced by the general public in both Europe and America, while also sparking the enthusiasm of sophisticated connoisseurs and collectors [...] This rekindled esteem for printmaking and this ever more promising revival and dissemination of it ought to be helped along in every way, especially in Italy [...] The organisers in Venice should thus be commended for deciding that in every biennial exhibition, one or two small rooms should contain a selection of works by the greatest modern masters in this field: Israëls and Whistler, Zorn and Raffaëlli, Köpping and Cameron, Liebermann and Bauer, Maréchal and Storm’s Gravesande, Klinger and Baertsoen, Redon and Ryssleberghe, Vogeler and Chahine, Rassenfosse and Witsen, Greiner and Zilcken, Nordhagen and De Los Rios, Conconi and Grubicy.²

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Vittorio Pica, *L'Arte Mondiale alla IV Esposizione di Venezia* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano di Arti Grafiche, 1895), 164.

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“Dopo un periodo abbastanza lungo di disdegnosa indifferenza, le stampe sia in bianco e nero sia a colori, ottengono di nuovo, così in Europa come in America, la simpatia del gran pubblico, riaccendendo in pari tempo gli entusiasmi dei buongustai raffinati e dei collezionisti[...] Tale ritorno di favore verso la stampa artistica e tale sempre più interessante rinnovazione e sempre crescente divulgazione di essa meritano di essere aiutate in tutti i modi, specie in Italia [...] Non è dunque da considerare come un merito trascurabile degli organizzatori veneziani quello di aver voluto che, in ogni mostra biennale, una o due piccole sale contenessero una scelta di opere dei maggiori maestri odierni del bianco e nero, da Israëls a Whistler, da Zorn a Raffaëlli, da Köpping a Cameron, da Liebermann a Bauer, da Maréchal a Storm's Gravesande, da Klinger a Baertsoen, da Redon a Rysselberghe, da Vogeler a Chahine, da Rassenfosse a Witsen, da Greiner a Zilcken, da Nordhagen a De Los Rios, da Conconi a Grubicy”, Pica, *L'Arte Mondiale alla IV Esposizione di Venezia*, 164.

In the Italian art world of the early 20th century, the first event entirely focused on the graphic arts—and the only one of its kind—was the *Prima Esposizione Internazionale del Bianco e Nero* held in Rome in 1902, yet the earliest harbinger of a reawakened interest in prints was instead the Biennale, which from its very first exhibition introduced a new field that would attract growing attention over the years.

The *bianco e nero* (“black-and-white”) rooms presented at the Biennales of 1899 and 1901—which, by convention, grouped together both prints and drawings—were initially limited to small spaces such as corridors or the veranda. Nonetheless, they were the only showcases in Italy that suggested a growing appreciation of the graphic arts. In those early years, the rooms came to play a crucial role in launching the revival of etching as an original language, in a milieu that was not yet up to date with what was happening across the Alps. The “successful example” of Venice, as Pica emphasised in an article he wrote for *Emporium* about the 1902 exhibition in Rome, familiarised these oblivious Italian viewers with the most creative and talented American and European artists working in intaglio, even “convincing” the board of the Società di Amatori e Cultori to mount a major international exhibition in Rome dedicated to modern prints, drawings, books, and illustrated magazines.³

Although there have been many studies of the Venice Biennale, its *bianco e nero* section, which I am looking at here specifically in regard to prints, has never been the subject of a systematic investigation. Examining these rooms in the two iterations of 1899 and 1901—that is, when Pica became involved in organising them—along with their underlying ideas, strategies, and proposals allows us to reflect on the Biennale’s fundamental contribution to building critical knowledge of the graphic arts in Italy and fostering a sphere of public collection, as well as introducing an exhibition model that enjoyed growing success up to the eve of World War I.⁴

The organisers’ decision to devote one or more rooms of each Biennale to *bianco e nero* can be ascribed in large part to the efforts of Vittorio Pica, a cosmopolitan intellectual who was an active literary critic and art critic, and wrote for many magazines in Italy and abroad.⁵ He was also a connoisseur and collector of prints, which were unquestionably one of his main interests. Etching—that eminently aristocratic form of intaglio—was in Pica’s view “the best testing ground for measuring an artist’s modernity and ability to experiment, so it is not subordinate to painting, but intrinsically tied to its deepest concerns”.⁶ Even before he became

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Vittorio Pica, “L’Esposizione di Bianco e Nero a Roma”, *Emporium* 16, 91 (July 1902), 22. *Catalogo della Prima esposizione internazionale di Bianco e Nero: Roma, aprile-maggio 1902*, Società degli amatori e cultori di belle arti in Roma (Rome, 1902). The story of the exhibition in Rome has already been thoroughly examined by Emanuele Bardazzi, “*Bianco e Nero*” *alle Esposizioni degli Amatori e cultori 1902-1929* (Rome: Galleria Campo dei Fiori, 2001); See also Emanuele Bardazzi, “Le sezioni di Bianco e Nero alla Secessione romana e altre vicende nella grafica primo novecentesco”, in Jolanda Nigro Covre, ed., *Secessione romana 1913-1916: Tempi e problemi* (Rome: Bagatto, 2013), 112-136.

4

Emanuele Bardazzi, “La civiltà delle riviste e lo sviluppo della grafica”, in Carlo Sisi, ed., *Motivi e figure nell’arte toscana del XX secolo* (Ospedaletto: Pacini, 2000), 56. There is no specific study of prints and the Biennale. The topic is introduced, and examined in some detail, in Martin Hopkinson, *Italian Prints: 1875-1975* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2007), 17-19, and Giorgio Marini “Emporium, le Biennali di Venezia e l’incisione”, in Giorgio Bacci, Miriam Fileti Mazza, eds., *Emporium: Parole e figure tra il 1895 e il 1964* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2014), 243-265.

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Pica is a figure whose importance has been reappraised of late by scholars. Regarding the figure of Vittorio Pica (1862-1930), see the latest studies in Davide Lacagnina, ed., *L’officina internazionale di Vittorio Pica: Arte moderna e critica d’arte in Italia (1880-1930)* (Palermo: Torri del Vento, 2017); Davide Lacagnina, ed., *Vittorio Pica e la ricerca della modernità: Critica artistica e cultura internazionale* (Milan and Udine: Mimesis, 2016). See also the information related to Pica in the CAPTI database (<http://www.capti.it>), in addition to the pioneering studies by Maria Mimita Lamberti, “Vittorio Pica e l’impressionismo in Italia”, in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa: Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, series III, V, no. 3 (1975): 1149-1201; Ugo Piscopo, *Vittorio Pica: la protoavanguardia in Italia* (Naples: Cassitto 1982); Mariantonietta Picone Petrusa, *Il manifesto. Arte e comunicazione nelle origini della pubblicità* (Naples: Liguori, 1994) and Nicola D’Antuono, *Vittorio Pica: Un visionario tra Napoli e l’Europa* (Rome: Carocci, 2002).

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“il banco di prova più alto su cui misurare modernità e capacità di sperimentazione di un artista, non dunque in subordine alla pittura ma in maniera connaturata alle sue più intime ragioni”, Davide Lacagnina, “Così ardito artista e così sagace critico d’arte”: Vittore Grubicy De Dragon e Vittorio Pica”, in Lacagnina, *Vittorio Pica e la ricerca della modernità*, 50.

deputy secretary in 1912, Pica's work as a critic and cultural advocate played an indispensable role in fostering a more open-minded approach to artistic choices at the Biennale.⁷ From the very start of the exhibition, he was actively involved in encouraging new approaches and promoting certain artists, whose names repeatedly turn up in his correspondence with Secretary General Antonio Fradeletto.⁸ These many letters—and recent studies examining the figure of Pica as a populariser of graphic arts—round out and bring into focus the ideas expressed in his articles, shedding light on certain key themes and overall tastes, and helping to explain some of the exhibition choices regarding prints.⁹ After 1901, the print rooms became a regular feature of the Biennale and constituted pivotal steps toward developing a system of *bianco e nero* exhibitions: no longer as a sporadic initiative, but as an ongoing phenomenon.

A “*Véritable Révélation*”: Context and Proposals Regarding Prints at the Early Biennales

The decision to set aside one or two rooms of the 1899 and 1901 Biennales for the greatest contemporary masters of *bianco e nero* was prompted by the success of previous experiments. The room of Dutch prints (*Sala di Acqueforti Olandesi*) presented at the first exhibition in 1895 proved quite popular in terms of both attendance and sales;¹⁰ Alfredo Melani, in *Emporium*, called it “very interesting and educational” and said “the impression it made on me as a whole was quite extraordinary”.¹¹ The first exhibition did not initially envision a room of prints. The Biennale regulations speak of paintings and sculptures; with regard to the graphic arts, they do mention drawings and various kinds of prints, but merely to note that “only superior works will be accepted, for the most part original ones”.¹² This wording does not call for *bianco e nero* works to be either excluded or included, nor does it suggest specific guidelines for an overall commissioner for this area. The credit for the idea goes to Philippe Zilcken, who was appointed commissioner for etchings in

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Vittorio Pica was appointed deputy secretary of the Venice Biennale for two iterations (1912-1914) and secretary general for four iterations (1920-1926); see Davide Lacagnina, “Pica, Vittorio”, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. LXXXIII (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2015), 122-127.

8

Pica's relationship with the Biennale has been examined in Paola Zatti, “Le prime Biennali veneziane (1895-1912): il contributo di Vittorio Pica”, *Venezia Arti*, no. 7 (1993): 111-116 and in Giuliana Donzello, *Arte e collezionismo: Fradeletto e Pica segretari alle Biennali veneziane 1895-1926* (Florence: Firenze Libri, 1987).

9

Vittorio Pica's efforts to promote graphic arts have been studied by Davide Lacagnina, “Vittorio Pica, Art Critic and Amateur d'estampes”, in Rosina Neginsky, ed., *Symbolism, Its Origins and Its Consequences* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 455-480; see also Hopkinson, *Italian Prints*, 19; Giorgio Marini, “L'incisione Europea dalle Pagine di Emporium: Vittorio Pica e la divulgazione per la diffusione della grafica del 'bianco e nero' nel primo Novecento”, *Grafica d'Arte* 20, no. 80 (Oct.-Dec. 2009):12-17; Marini, “Emporium, le Biennali di Venezia e l'incisione”, 243-265. The article by Marini (2014), highlights the relationship between Pica's activity as a writer in *Emporium* and the parallel development of the *bianco e nero* rooms in Venice.

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The *Sala di acqueforti olandesi* is examined in Alessia Del Bianco, “Il bianco e nero alla prima Esposizione Internazionale di Venezia, 1895. Philippe Zilcken e la Sala di acqueforti olandesi”, in Laura Fanti e Giorgio Marini, eds., *Noir & Blanc: La gravure belge et néerlandaise en Italie au début du XXe siècle* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 79-97.

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Alfredo Melani, “Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'arte della città di Venezia”, *Emporium* 2, no. 7 (1895): 72. See also Marini, “Emporium, le Biennali di Venezia e l'incisione”, 243 and Del Bianco, “Il bianco e nero alla prima Esposizione”, 90.

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“non saranno ammesse che delle opere superiori e principalmente degli originali”, *Lavoro preliminare per le esposizioni veneziane 1894-95*, in Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts of the Venice Biennale, *Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee* (ASAC), Serie Scatole Nere (SN), b. 1.

the Netherlands.¹³ In an effort to promote Dutch art, Zilcken suggested a room of prints to the organising committee; to guarantee the success of such an exhibition at the Biennale, he proposed modelling it on the ones he had organised for the *Nederlandsche Etsclub* in The Hague, Paris and New York. Allocating a room to the graphic arts was not a standard practice—actually, it was unheard of. Ugo Ojetti noted that “Exhibitions of black-and-white works are an unknown phenomenon in Italy”, in contrast to what had been happening abroad, with the *Black and White Exhibition* and the *Salon en Noir et Blanc*.¹⁴

Yet Zilcken promised Riccardo Selvatico, mayor of Venice, “To my great joy, I will have the honour and pleasure of organising a section of Dutch etchings, as I did in Paris in 1889. I can assure you that this section will be an enormous success with connoisseurs, and I feel certain that in Italy it will come as a true revelation that this great national art of yore can flourish anew in our century”.¹⁵ The *véritable révélation* that Zilcken evokes more than once in his correspondence sums up the extraordinary importance of the theoretical and practical exploration of graphic art that was taking place in the international Etching Revival.¹⁶ In Italy, however, the revival took a bit more time. A 19th-century decline in the technique had led intaglio to be seen as a discipline of reproduction and an academic exercise that was on its way out; chairs for etching instructors were eliminated in 1873, due to both a lack of students and the steady advance of lithography and photography.¹⁷

Aside from one brief, limited attempt in 1875 to promote printmaking in Turin (*Società degli acquafortisti*), the artform was only slowly regaining a foothold at the end of the century, through scattered initiatives in Veneto, Tuscany, Piedmont and Lombardy.¹⁸ Although with some delay compared to similar manifestations of interest spearheaded by Théophile Gautier and Charles Blanc in France, the Biennale joined what was by 1895 an unmistakable wave of fresh enthusiasm for the creative potential of this technique, and agreed to the proposed room of Dutch

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Charles Louis Philippe Zilcken was a painter, printmaker and writer who played a key role in promoting Dutch culture abroad, as Biennale commissioner for the Dutch sections. For a biographical profile, see Annie-Paul Quinsac, *Vittore Grubicy e l'Europa: Alle radici del divisionismo* (Milan: Skira, 2005), 294-295; and Jeroen Giltay, “De Nederlandsche Etsclub (1885-1896)”, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (NKJ), *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 27 (1976): 91-125.

14

Ugo Ojetti, *L'Arte Moderna a Venezia* (Rome: Voghera, 1897), 213. On this subject see also Catherine Meneux, “Les Salons en noir et blanc”, *Histoire de l'art*, no. 52 (June 2003): 29-44.

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“C'est avec le plus grand plaisir que j'aurai l'honneur et le plaisir d'organiser une section d'eaux-fortes hollandaises, comme je l'ai fait à Paris en 1889. Je puis vous assurer qu'auprès des connaisseur cette section aura un vrai succès, et je crois être certain qu'en Italie elle sera la révélation qu'un très grand art national d'autrefois re-fleurit en notre siècle”, letter from Zilcken to Selvatico, November 11, 1894, *Mostra speciale di acqueforti 1894-95*, Venice, ASAC, SN 1; See Del Bianco, “Il bianco e nero alla prima Esposizione”, 79.

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The phenomenon of the international Etching Revival has been addressed in Elizabeth Helsinger, *The "Writing" of Modern Life: The Etching Revival in France, Britain, and the U.S., 1850-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and, with specific reference to Britain and the US, in Emma Chambers, *An Indolent and Blundering Art? The Etching Revival and the Redefinition of Etching in England 1838-1892* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). See also the recent book by Christian Rümellin, *L'eau fort est à la mode, 1840-1910* (Geneva: Pagine d'Arte, Musée de l'art et d'histoire de Genève, 2020).

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This was part of post-Unification reform of Italian art schools by the Ministry of Public Education in 1873; as noted in the report presented to the ministry, “Dei nove istituti soli cinque hanno scolari, due ne hanno cinque, due ne contano tre, e uno ne ha un solo. Questa scarsità di studenti dimostra abbastanza la superfluità delle nove scuole”. The nine schools had only seventeen students, costs were excessive, and “Quanto alla materia di questo insegnamento essa per varie ragioni, e specialmente pei progressi fatti dalla litografia e dalla fotografia, non ha nell'arte quell'importanza per la quale più non si bada alla spesa e al numero dei cultori”, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Roma, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Consiglio Superiore della Pubblica Istruzione, Atti del Consiglio, Prima serie (1849-1903), b. 77, *Giunta per le Belle Arti*, “Firenze, riordinamento e regolamento dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze”; see Alessia Del Bianco, “La cattedra di Incisione e i suoi maestri nel primo Novecento: Emanuele Brugnoli, Giovanni Giuliani e Virgilio Tramontin” in Sileno Salvagnini, *Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia: Il Novecento* (Crocetta del Montello: Antiga, 2016), 205-228.

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For a survey of Italian printmaking in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Giorgio Marini, “La renaissance de l'eau-forte en Italie (1870-1920): Entre régionalisme et ouvertures internationales”, in Rümellin, *L'eau fort est à la mode*, 33-59. See also Hopkinson, *Italian Prints*, 8-23.

etchings.¹⁹ In this Biennale, in addition to the seventy-five Dutch prints in *Sala L*, a collection of original etchings was also shown by Vittore Grubicy de Dragon. The only Italian to present a series of prints, he was as interested as his fellow *peintres-graveurs* north of the Alps in exploring the potential of this art form. Grubicy, like Pica and Zilcken, played a leading role in fostering curiosity about intaglio techniques, and after a period spent in The Hague, had become an ambassador for the many innovations of the Belgian and Dutch art scenes. It is no coincidence that his 1895 essay *L'Acquaforte nell'Arte Moderna* was published during this period of fervid interest in the graphic arts and that it seems to have been initially written for the Biennale catalogue as an introduction to the Dutch etching room.²⁰

Recent studies focused on the important role of Belgian and Dutch graphic arts in the early 20th century have shown that the presence of prints from these cultures—starting with the first Biennale, and increasing in subsequent iterations—proved fundamental in rekindling interest in the graphic arts in Italy, as well as in shaping the taste and style of Italian artists.²¹ The international dialogue sparked by the Dutch exhibit heralded the beginning of print rooms as an ongoing feature of subsequent Biennales. In 1897, the organisers once again allocated a room to etchings and lithographs from the Netherlands; alongside these, there were prints by Max Liebermann, Otto Greiner, Riccardo Los Rios, Albert Welti, nine etchings by James McNeill Whistler [fig. 1] and three lithographs by Odilon Redon, *Buddah, Des peuples divers habitent les pays de l'Océan and Oannès* [fig. 2] which “come from a series of wildly inventive drawings”.²² The only Italians were Luigi Conconi and Giuseppe Miti Zanetti, who exhibited some framed etchings.²³

Yet despite the initiatives aimed at showcasing prints in the first two exhibitions, Pica was quick to point out that certain names were still missing. In two reports on the first and second Biennale, the critic made a series of suggestions aimed at giving future exhibitions an element of “particular originality” that would make it “have a salutary influence on our artists” and offer the public “a more complete and detailed idea of what art is now and what it is on the verge of becoming”.²⁴ He proposed making room for the decorative arts, book design and illustration, and also urged the Biennale to show “frontispiece etchings by Felicien Rops, Fantin-Latour, Minne, Khnopff, or Toorop”; the “macabre, fanciful, or satirical lithographs of Redon, De Groux, Sattler, Wilette, or Forain”; and drawings by Raffaelli, Toulouse-

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As Théophile Gautier wrote, underscoring the aims of the *Société des Aqua-Fortistes*, “la Société des Aqua-Fortistes s’est fondée précisément pour combattre la photographie, la lithographie, l’aquatinte, la gravure dont les hachures recroisées ont un point au milieu; en un mot, le travail régulier, automatique, sans inspiration qui dénature l’idée même de l’artiste, et qu’ils ont voulu dans leur planches parler directement au public, à leurs risques et périls. Le succès a prouvé qu’ils n’avaient pas eu tort: le texte est toujours préférable à la traduction”. Théophile Gautier, “Aqua-Fortistes: Un mot sur l’eau-forte”, in *Société des Aqua-Fortistes, Eaux-fortes modernes* 1, no. 1 (September 1, 1862).

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Regarding Grubicy see Lacagnina, “Cosi ardito artista e cosi sagace critico d’arte”, 33-72; see also Quinsac, *Vittore Grubicy e l’Europa*; Flavia Pesci, “Certi effetti di sonorità misteriose e profonde: Teoria e tecnica nelle incisioni di Vittore Grubicy de Dragon”, in Claudio Zambianchi and Ilaria Schiaffini (eds.), *Contemporanea: Scritti di Storia dell’Arte per Jolanda Nigro Covre* (Rome: Campisano Editore, 2013), 83-90.

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Laura Fanti and Giorgio Marini, eds., *Noir & Blanc: La gravure belge et néerlandaise en Italie au début du XXe siècle* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021). This book brings together various articles about the activity of Belgian and Dutch printmakers in Italy and in relation to Italian culture. Regarding the massive presence of Belgian and Dutch printmakers in this country, see also Giorgio Marini, “Incisori belgi e olandesi alle mostre del ‘Bianco e Nero’ del primo Novecento”, in Mari Pietragiovanna, ed., *Scritti in onore di Caterina Viridis Limentani* (Roma: Campisano editore), 265-271.

22

“appartengono a una serie di disegni di un’invenzione stravagante”, *Vittorio Pica, L’arte mondiale a Venezia* (Napoli: Pierrò, 1897), 146.

23

Seconda Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia: Catalogo illustrato (April 22 - October 31, 1897), exh. cat. (Venice: Carlo Ferrari, 1897), 35-40.

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“abbia una salutare influenza sui nostri artisti” and offer the public “un’idea più completa e più precisa di ciò che sia presentemente l’arte e di ciò che essa si prepara ad essere”, *Vittorio Pica, “Lasciando Venezia”*, in *L’arte europea a Venezia* (Naples: Pierrò, 1895), 186-88. See also Marini, “*Emporium*, le Biennali di Venezia e l’incisione”, 252.

fig. 1
James McNeill Whistler,
Traghetto, First Venice Set,
1879-1880. Etching / drypoint,
23,5 × 30,2 cm. *Seconda
Esposizione Internazionale
di Venezia, 1897* "Sala
Internazionale - Passaggio
attiguo alla Sala B"
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
© courtesy of Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam

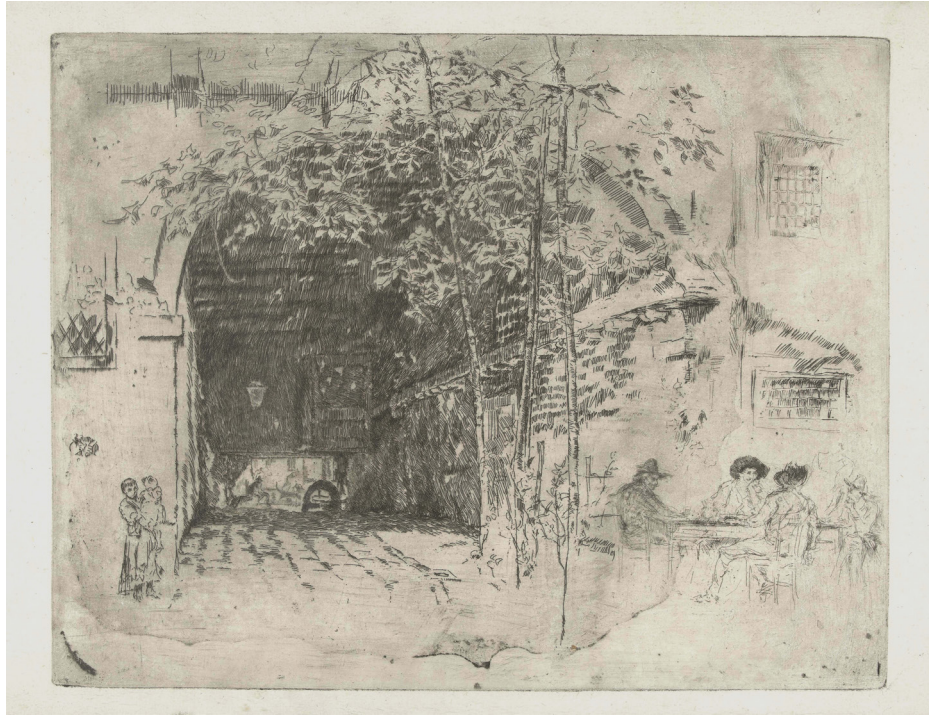
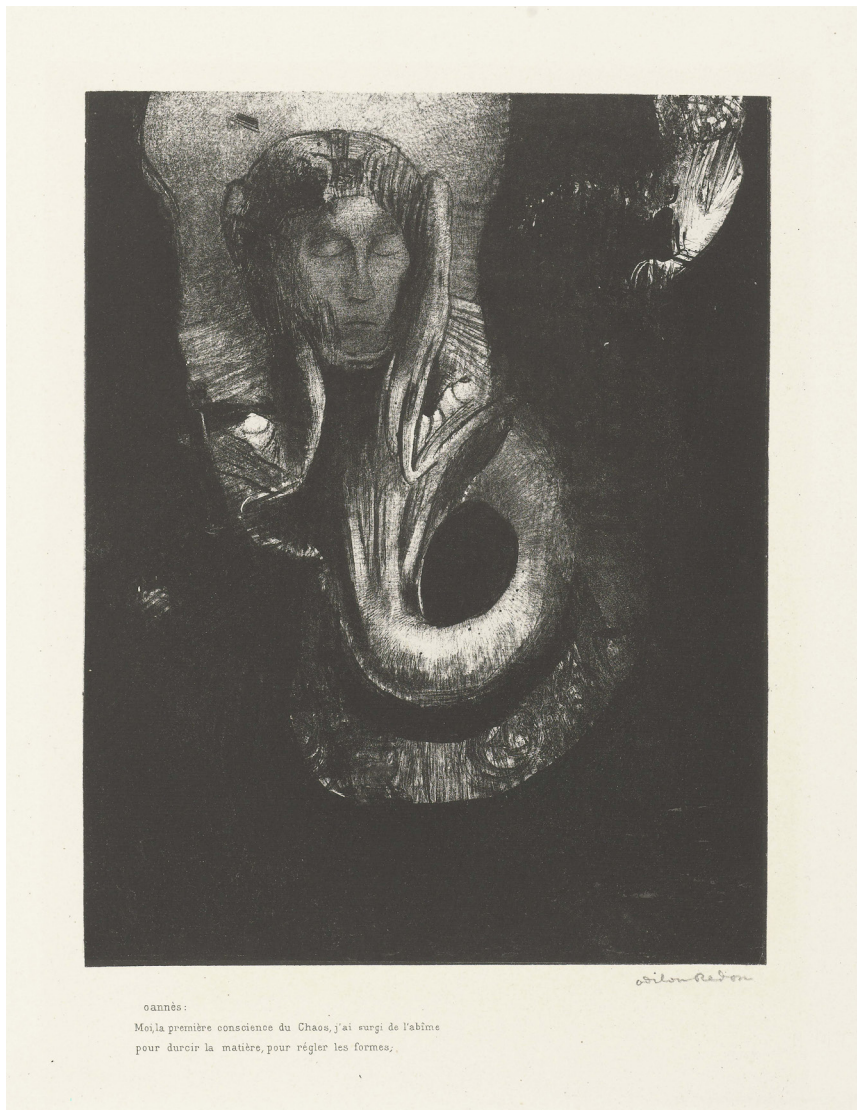


fig. 2
Odilon Redon, *Oannès: Moi,
la première conscience du
Chaos, j'ai surgi de l'abîme
pour durcir la matière, pour
régler les formes*, 1896. Print
(lithography), 27,9 × 21,7 cm,
*Seconda Esposizione
Internazionale di Venezia, 1897*
"Sala Internazionale - Sala M"
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
© courtesy of Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam



Lautrec, Ibels and Legrand.²⁵ He pointed in particular to Belgium, where the art of etching had been “roused from its slumber” in the 19th century by the “highly original and highly skilled” Felicien Rops.²⁶ Pica continued, claiming “A truly deplorable flaw in this section is the utter lack of works that represent the entrancing art of the burin”, and arguing that it should include Costantin Meunier’s lithographs and James Ensor’s “bizarre, caustic” etchings, as well as work by François Maréchal and Armande Rassenfosse.²⁷ Also missing was the Swedish artist Anders Zorn and the most original representatives of the noble art of printmaking in Germany: Max Klinger and Joseph Sattler.²⁸

Pica’s comments reveal his predilection for French, Dutch, and Belgian prints, which can also be seen in a series of articles he penned, starting in 1896, for a special section of *Emporium: Attraverso gli albi e le cartelle (Sensazioni d’Arte)* and later *Taccuino dell’amatore di stampe*. Centered on Symbolism and the graphic arts, in the dark, decadent vein of “macabre artists”, they introduced readers to Odilon Redon, Fernand Khnopff, Henry De Groux and Felicien Rops; this is in keeping with an overall interest in Belgian modern art that turns up throughout Pica’s work, from his first infatuations with Symbolist literature, to prints, to painting.²⁹ On other occasions, he examined posters, children’s books, or Dutch etchings from the pages of *Il Marzocco*.³⁰ It was precisely due to Pica’s efforts to promote and publicise them that the work of many Symbolist painters and printmakers reached Italian artists and the general public.

In 1897, Pica’s dream of a room presenting the very latest in European graphic art had not yet come true, but from his notes one can already guess who would be featured in the *bianco e nero* sections in years to come. Pica’s many letters to Fradeletto, echoes of which can be found in his articles for *Emporium*, also indicated those artists he would work to promote.³¹

Vittorio Pica and the International *Bianco e Nero* Rooms: Strategy and Organisation

In November 1898, Vittorio Pica wrote to Antonio Fradeletto, “I do hope you will devote a couple of large rooms to the fascinating art of *bianco e nero*, entrusting their arrangement to a person with special expertise as you did the first time, and as you would be wrong not to do the second time”.³²

25

Pica, *L’arte europea a Venezia*, 188-189.

26

Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV Esposizione di Venezia*, 167.

27

Its “risvegliatore” was the “originalissimo e sapientissimo” Felicien Rops. “Davvero deplorabile in questa sezione è la completa mancanza d’opere che rappresentino la seducente arte del bulino”, Pica, *L’arte mondiale a Venezia*, 186.

28

Pica, *L’arte mondiale a Venezia*, 120.

29

Regarding Pica’s relationship with Belgian and French Symbolism and its offshoots in Italy, see the studies by Lacagnina, “Vittorio Pica, Art Critic and Amateur d’estampes”, and by Laura Fanti, “La gravure symboliste belge dans les revues et expositions italiennes (1895-1911)”, in Fanti, Marini eds., *Noir & Blanc*, 15-36. See also Margherita Cavenago, “Au-delà des limites géopolitiques et linguistiques: la critique francophone de Vittorio Pica (1862-1930)”, in Marie Gispert, Catherine Méneux, eds., *Critique(s) d’art: nouveaux corpus, nouvelles méthodes* (Paris: HiCSA, 2019), 157-187.

30

Vittorio Pica, “Attraverso gli albi e le cartelle: (Sensazioni d’arte), I. Redon-Rops-De Groux-Goya”, *Emporium* 3, no. 14 (1896): 123-140; Vittorio Pica, “L’arte mondiale a Venezia, III: I pittori e gli acquafortisti Olandesi”, in *Il Marzocco* 2, no. 17 (May 30, 1897); see also the column “Attraverso gli albi e le cartelle. (Sensazioni d’arte)” in various issues of *Emporium* from 1896 to 1898.

31

Vittorio Pica’s efforts to promote printmaking in *Emporium* have been studied by Giorgio Marini: see the studies cited above in footnote 9.

32

“Spero poi bene che consacrerete un paio di sale grandi alla così affascinante arte del bianco e nero, affidandone l’ordinamento a una persona di speciale competenza come faceste il primo anno e come avete il torto di non fare il secondo anno”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, November 4, 1898, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*. This letter is reprinted in Zatti, “Le prime Biennali veneziane”, 113.

While the international sections were overseen at the time by a foreign commissioner, after Zilcken no one had been appointed to handle the printmaking sections, and this may have been due to the scant critical attention that this art received in Italy; it thus comes as no surprise that in these early years, the *bianco e nero* rooms seemed to be an unclaimed territory where conventional channels could be bypassed in order to debate and dialogue with new ideas. Pica, who hoped that the Biennale would become more open to less “official” figures, offered his input as a critical conscience,³³ as the very person with the “special expertise” to ensure that “in every biennial exhibition, one or two small rooms should contain a selection of works by the greatest modern masters” of *bianco e nero*. The critic embarked on a dogged, ongoing campaign to promote printmakers, both as a writer on the subject in the pages of *Attraverso gli albi e le cartelle* and *Emporium*, and as an advisor to the Biennale, yielding an intricate web of connections and echoes between the articles and the invitations that sometimes makes it difficult to establish which came first.³⁴ We can see this from the many suggestions that he made in his correspondence with Fradeletto, whether or not they came to fruition:

In addition to the Dutch, who are the most impressive of all, you should not forget the Spaniard Vierge, the Swede Zorn, the Norwegian Munch, the Dutchman Toorop (these two should also be invited as painters), the Belgians Maréchal, Rassenfosse and De Groux (Constantin Meunier’s drawings are also beautiful, and have been turned into lithographs I believe by his nephew), the Frenchmen Fantin-Latour, Braquemond, Legros, Redon, Steilen, Willette, Legrand, Toulouse-Lautrec, etc. I take the liberty of reminding you of these names because with all you have to think about, as the true force behind this amazing periodic art exhibition, some might accidentally slip your mind, and that would be too bad. As for Italian etchers of talent, aside from Signorini, Conconi, Turletti, Grubicy, the young Fortuny and Martini, I don’t know who to suggest.³⁵

In the months leading up to the opening he reminds Fradeletto:

Two outstanding Belgian etchers are Rassenfosse and, above all, Maréchal: if you think it is a good idea and we are still in time, I could write to both. Just as I could perhaps obtain some paintings and etchings from Edouard Munch, the Norwegian painter who is the talk of Berlin and Paris. And has the Dutch artist Toorop been invited? People wrote to me from Vienna a few months ago that the collection of etchings by Zorn shown in the Secessionists’ show was remarkable, and I can believe it, because I have had the opportunity to see several of this valiant Swede’s beautiful etchings first-hand. I think you would have no trouble obtaining this collection for the show in Venice [...] Have you thought about doing an entire section of etchings, lithographs, colour lithographs and so forth? [...]

33

Leo Lecci, “Un *tambourineur* per la Biennale: Vittorio Pica e gli artisti francesi alle prime esposizioni internazionali di Venezia (1895-1914)”, in Lacagnina, *Vittorio Pica*, 174. See also Zatti, “Le prime Biennali veneziane”.

34

Marini, “*Emporium*, le Biennali di Venezia e l’incisione”, 254-255.

35

“Oltre agli Olandesi, mirabili fra tutti, ed ai Tedeschi, non dimenticate lo spagnolo Vierge, lo svedese Zorn, il norvegese Munch, l’olandese Toorop (questi due andrebbero invitati anche come pittori), i belgi Maréchal, Rassenfosse e De Groux (bellissimi anche i disegni, litografati credo dal nipote, di Constantin Meunier), i francesi Fantin-Latour, Braquemond, Legros, Redon, Steilen, Willette, Legrand, Toulouse-Lautrec ecc. Mi permetto di ricordarvi questi nomi, perché nella quantità di cose a cui dovete pensare voi, che siete la vera anima di codesta mirabile periodica mostra d’arte, qualcuno potrebbe involontariamente sfuggirvene e sarebbe male. Di acquafortisti italiani di qualche valore, oltre il Signorini, il Conconi, il Turletti, il Grubicy, i giovani Fortuny e Martini non saprei chi ricordarvi”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, November 4, 1898, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*.

2nd P.S. For Munch, Meréchal, and Rassenfosse you can ask our friend Bezzi, to whom I showed an interesting collection of their etchings when he was in Naples just now.³⁶

In 1899, at the third Biennale, the print section was housed in the *Sala U-Veranda*, though it was not yet called *bianco e nero*, as it would be in the iteration that followed.³⁷ The considerable number of Dutch etchers in preceding exhibitions had been reduced, to Pica's "great chagrin", to just Zilcken and Bauer.³⁸ The only Belgian was Albert Baertsoen, with prints of the Zeeland landscape [fig. 3]. The French artist Jean-François Raffaëlli showed twenty-five colour drypoints and was presented by Pica as one of the few truly new and interesting artists, who always ventured "bold innovations, aimed at capturing more clearly the manifold spectacles that the city and countryside offer the eyes of this keen observer".³⁹ There were also the Germans

fig. 3
Albert Baertsoen, *Vieux pont*,
1897. Etching / drypoint, 22
× 25,8 cm. *Terza Esposizione
Internazionale di Venezia, 1899*
"Sala internazionale - Sala U"
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
© courtesy of Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam



36

"Due acquafortisti belgi valorosissimi sono il Rassenfosse e specialmente il Maréchal: ad entrambi, se voi credete e se si è ancora in tempo, potrei scrivere io. Come forse potrei ottenere qualche quadro e qualche acquaforte da Edouard Munch, il pittore norvegese tanto discusso a Berlino ed a Parigi. E l'olandese Toorop è stato invitato? Da Vienna un paio di mesi fa mi scrivevano che la collezione di acquaforti dello Zorn esposte alla mostra dei Secessionisti, era mirabile ed io ci credo di leggiero perché ho avuto occasione di avere tra le mani varie bellissime acquaforti dell'ardimentoso Svedese. Credo che vi riuscirebbe facile avere tale collezione per la mostra di Venezia [...] Avete pensato a fare tutta una sezione di acquaforti, litografie, cromolitografie ecc.?[...] 2° P.S. Del Münch, del Meréchal e del Rassenfosse potete domandare all'amico Bezzi, a cui ho mostrato un interessante collezione di loro acquaforti, ora che è stato a Napoli", letter from Pica to Fradeletto, March 28, 1899, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*.

37

Terza Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia: Catalogo illustrato (April 22 - October 31, 1899), exh. cat. (Venice: Carlo Ferrari, 1899), 88-92.

38

Terza Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 83-92, Bauer showed twelve etchings of "Oriental" scenes; Zilcken showed a series of reproductive etchings.

39

"sempre innovazioni ardite, atte a riprodurre con maggiore evidenza gli svariati spettacoli che la città e la campagna presentano ai suoi occhi di acuto osservatore", Vittorio Pica, *L'arte mondiale a Venezia nel 1899: Numero speciale dell'Emporium* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano di Arti Grafiche, 1899), 60.

Henrich Voegler, Richard Muller and Max Klinger, an artist with “such a powerful and tragic imagination, though he is not represented here by his most characteristic prints”, Pica noted, but rather by eleven plates from his series *Dramen*.⁴⁰ The Italians Enrico Vegetti and Giuseppe Miti Zanetti presented samples of their etchings.

Pica’s many suggestions to include avant-garde printmakers (such as Munch and Zorn) had been ignored and even though Klinger, Raffaelli, Baertsoen, as well as a few Dutch artists were displayed, their presence was not enough to assuage the critic’s desire for the Biennale to present a significant, cosmopolitan overview of the latest in graphic art.⁴¹ Not coincidentally, in a note in the issue of *Emporium* devoted to the exhibition, he expressed his wishes for the next *bianco e nero* section: “Ensor’s etchings and De Groux’s lithographs are of the greatest originality and I hope to find them alongside those of Rassenfosse, Maréchal, Donnay, and Berchmans at the Venetian exhibition of 1901, in a separate room bringing together all the most interesting printmakers of our time”.⁴² In June 1899, Pica again asked Fradeletto, “And what can you tell me about the etching room? Have you been considering the names I suggested to you?”.⁴³ The question of prints also had to be settled in the regulations, so he proposed adding the words “lithographs, colour lithographs, and intaglio on wood and steel” to the second paragraph of article I.⁴⁴ As one can see from the correspondence, Pica never received an actual appointment to organise the section of prints. His only assignment at the time was to help select works by French artists. Hence, if some of the artists he suggested to Fradeletto were left out, it was probably because Pica was only an “advisor” to the Biennale and would remain so until 1912. In one of Pica’s many letters to Fradeletto, he proposed names, urging that new approaches be explored; he also contacted artists and arranged the acquisition of several works.⁴⁵ His suggestions, as we can see in the case of some of his favourite Italian and French artists, were not always accepted by the secretary general and his associates, and sometimes ran up against practical difficulties.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Pica’s proposals are the only indication of the parameters of taste being followed with regard to the graphic arts. Demonstrating his authority in the field, they made the print rooms one of the most original areas of investigation at these early Biennales.

In 1901, the fourth *Esposizione Internazionale di Venezia* included the *bianco e nero* rooms he had hoped for. This must have been no easy achievement for Pica, who put considerable effort into bringing it about. A few months before the opening, he wrote:

40

Pica, *L'arte mondiale a Venezia nel 1899*, 95.

41

Munch was included in the 1902 *bianco e nero* exhibition in Rome, but reached Venice only in 1910, with one lithograph.

42

“Le acqueforti di Ensor e le litografie di De Groux sono della più grande originalità ed io spero di trovarle insieme con quelle di Rassenfosse, Maréchal, Donnay e Berchmans alla mostra veneziana del 1901, in una sala a parte, in cui vengano convocati tutti i più interessanti incisori contemporanei”, Pica, *L'arte Mondiale a Venezia nel 1899*, 67. See also Laura Fanti, “Vittorio Pica: l'incontro con l'opera di Henry de Groux e James Ensor”, in Lacagnina, ed., *L'officina internazionale*, 159-182.

43

“E della sala delle acqueforti cosa mi dite? Avete tenuto conto dei nomi da me consigliatevi?”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, June 7, 1899, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*.

44

“litografie, cromolitografie ed incisioni in legno in legno ed acciaio”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, June 7, 1899, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*.

45

As one can infer from the letters, though we have only those sent to Fradeletto and not vice versa; it is well established that the critic’s papers have been scattered, see Davide Lacagnina, “Vittorio Pica à neuf! Un progetto di ricerca, un archivio virtuale, una raccolta di saggi”, Lacagnina, *Vittorio Pica*, 16-18.

46

See Lecci, “Un *tambourineur* per la Biennale”, 173-185; see also Zatti, “Le prime Biennali veneziane”, 111-113.

Dear Fradeletto, I do hope that you are not planning to suddenly give up on the exhibit of prints, which promises to be one of the finest attractions at the next Venice exhibition. I would look quite the fool, after the many letters I have written high and low, which all received a positive reply from the artists in question. Such reversals are the kind of thing one expects from the usual government and academic despots, not from you and the other members of the committee in Venice.⁴⁷

He expressed his vexation again a few days later:

No bitterness in my words, dear Fradeletto: I have too much affection and admiration for you, my friend, as the peerless organiser of an art exhibition that has done so much and can do so much more for our country. Some chagrin, however, at seeing such a fine dream go up in smoke, when everything made me think it was on the point of coming true: the dream of a rich, carefully selected section of modern prints, which would, in my view, have been among the finest attractions—for the most cultivated, sophisticated visitors, of course—at the next exhibition in Venice. If you have decided, at the last minute, that it must be sacrificed in homage to Whistler—a great painter who is also an amazing etcher!—then you must have had good reason and so it had to be. I will therefore take a step back and return, without any useless and unseemly recriminations, to my job as *tambourineur*.⁴⁸

These fears proved groundless—the two rooms that were supposed to be allocated to Whistler never came about (the American artist was nowhere in the 1901 biennial, though the archival documents do not reveal why)—and so the section that was to be among the “finest attractions” of the Biennale was indeed presented. From an organisational standpoint, the room did not have its own commissioner, and the “many letters” Pica wrote to ensure its success suggest he was the one who first reached out to the artists, with Fradeletto only contacting them at a later point. This can be seen from the acceptance letters of Theo Van Rysselberghe and James Ensor, and subsequent correspondence with Armand Rassenfosse, Edgar Chahine and François Maréchal regarding the sale and shipment of artworks.⁴⁹

47

“Caro Fradeletto, spero bene che non vorrai, d’un tratto, rinunciare alla mostra di stampe, che dovrebbe essere una delle maggiori attrattive della prossima esposizione di Venezia. Bella figura che ci farei io, dopo tante lettere scritte dovunque e che tutte sono state accolte dall’assenso degli artisti ai quali mi sono rivolto. Fare e disfare è cosa degna dei soliti sopraccio governativi ed accademici non già di te e degli altri componenti del comitato veneziano”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, November 22, 1900, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*. This letter is reprinted in Lecci, “Un *tambourineur* per la Biennale”, 171-172.

48

“Nulla d’acerbo, mio caro Fradeletto, nelle mie parole: ho troppo affetto e troppa stima per l’amico impareggiabile organizzatore di un’esposizione d’arte che tanto bene ha fatto e tanto bene può fare ancora all’Italia nostra. Un po’ d’amarezza sì, per vedere sfumare di un tratto il bel sogno, che tutto faceva credere prossimo a realizzazione, di una sezione scelta e ricca d’incisioni moderne, che doveva, a parer mio, riuscire una delle maggiori attrattive – naturalmente per la parte colta ed elevata del pubblico – della prossima mostra di Venezia. Se tu, all’ultima ora, hai creduto di doverla sacrificare in omaggio a Whistler, un gran pittore che è anche un mirabile acquafortista! - avrai avuto le tue buone ragioni per farlo e così andava fatto. Io rientro nelle file e vado, senz’altre inutili ed importune recriminazioni, a rioccupare il mio posto di *tambourineur*”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, November 30, 1900, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*. This letter is reprinted in Lecci, “Un *tambourineur* per la Biennale”, 171; See also Zatti, “Le prime Biennali veneziane”, 113; Zatti’s article suggests however that the project fell by the wayside and was carried out only two years later.

49

Esposizione Bianco e Nero: elenco dei partecipanti, Venice ASAC, SN b.15. The folder contains only correspondence with the listed artists; one finds no other information about the organisational process.

From the catalogue, we learn that the organisers put aside two spaces for the graphic arts: the room *I Saletta Internazionale: Bianco e Nero*, which was a corridor, and the *Sala U-Veranda*.⁵⁰ The most significant group of printmakers was from Belgium. Armand Rassenfosse—a follower of Rops—showed six etchings “that certainly are not his best nor his most characteristic, except for a delightful little Salomé dancing with veils”,⁵¹ while François Maréchal was better represented by a series of drypoints of the Belgian landscape and Théo Van Rysselberghe by ten etchings of seascapes.⁵² The Belgians also included Henri Meunier, with *The Angelus, The Night, The Dawn* and “his idealistic etching *Night and the Poet*, in which one senses a whisper of Puvis de Chavannes’s austere inspiration”. Fernand Khnopff, whom Pica called one of the foremost figures in the group of avant-garde artists leading the modernist movement in Belgium, showed *An Offering* and *Golden Ball*, which “are noteworthy for their exquisite grace in depicting mysterious, symbolic images of women”.⁵³

James Ensor, like De Groux, was among the artists who sparked Pica’s enthusiasm, and one should not forget that this invitation to show his prints marked the very first of many appearances at the Biennale.⁵⁴ On the veranda, Ensor exhibited eleven etchings that drew attention for their “very original whimsy”, and “particularly evocative among them are *The Cathedral* [fig. 4], *Death Pursuing the Human Horde* and *Christ’s Entry into Brussels*, in which the comic and macabre are fancifully mixed with a touch of caricature and distortion, to pillory the sordid and ridiculous habits of humankind”.⁵⁵ Anders Zorn contributed eight engravings of “male and female figures that almost seem”, according to Pica, “to spring to life under our lingering gaze”.⁵⁶ Alongside Zorn but differing in “inspiration and talent”, Pica praised French-Armenian Edgar Chahine’s “unique talent, which immediately earned him a place of honour among the printmakers of today”. Pica singled out his series of the drypoints, arranged in two frames, of seductively elegant portraits of women, to “the main types among the lower classes, artisans, beggars, peddlers, and the Parisian army of vice”.⁵⁷ Among the French artists, we once again find Raffaëlli, with two colour drypoints, and among the Germans, Friedrich Kallmorgen and Oscar Graf, as well as the Norwegian Johan Nordhagen.

The *bianco e nero* sections were a great success, as we can see from the records of public acquisitions. Starting with the 1899 Biennale, the City of Venice regularly purchased works for its Galleria Internazionale d’Arte Moderna, as did the Ministry of Public Education at a later point for the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. The Ca’ Pesaro museum thus came to hold one of the

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Quarta Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia: Catalogo illustrato (April 22 - October 31, 1901), exh. cat. (Venice: Giardini di Castello), 82-89, 166-170.

51

Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 167; “non certo delle sue migliori né delle sue più caratteristiche, eccezion fatta per la deliziosa figurina di *Salomé* danzante tra i veli”.

52

Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 167.

53

Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 172-173; “si raccomandano per una grazia alquanto preziosa nella figurazione d’enigmatiche immagini simboliche di donna”; See also Giuseppina Dal Canton, “Fernand Khnopff alle Biennali di Venezia 1897-1920”, in Leo Lecci, Paola Valenti, eds., *Studi di storia dell’arte in ricordo di Franco Sborgi* (Genova: De Ferrari, 2018), 327-377.

54

Fanti, “Vittorio Pica”, 159-182.

55

Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 173; “fra cui in particolar modo suggestive sono *La Cattedrale, la Morte perseguitante il gregge umano* e *Entrata di Cristo a Bruxelles*, nelle quali così fantasticamente il comico ed il macabro si mescolano ad un deformatore senso caricaturale per mettere alla gogna le laidezze e le ridicolaggini dell’umanità”.

56

“figure di uomini e di donne, che a noi sembra proprio di sentir vivere sotto l’insistenza dei nostri sguardi”, Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 175.

57

“più significativi umili, artigiani, mendicanti, venditori ambulanti, e del parigino esercito del vizio”, Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 173.

fig. 4
James Ensor, *La Cathédrale*,
1886. Etching, 31,9 x 25 cm.
*Quarta Esposizione
Internazionale di Venezia, 1901*
"Sala U -Veranda"
Civica Raccolta delle Stampe
Achille Bertarelli, Castello
Sforzesco, Milano.
© courtesy of Civica Raccolta
delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli,
Castello Sforzesco, Milano



world's most significant collections of modern graphic art, with a predominance of international works, due in part to Vittorio Pica's presence on the acquisitions panel. Among the works that were purchased from these Biennales, one should note Klinger's *Dramen* and etchings by Whistler, Bauer, Zilcken, Baertsoen, Ensor, Chahine, Zorn, Van Rysselberghe, Maréchal and Meunier.⁵⁸

This iteration also included a small group of Italians, although their juxtaposition "with such powerful, original masters of *bianco e nero* could not help but be to the disadvantage of the Italian etchers, especially because their numbers did not include Fattori, Conconi or Grubicy".⁵⁹ Yet Pica had words of praise and encouragement for Emanuele Brugnoli, with his *Scene Veneziane*; for Giuseppe Miti Zanetti, with a series of etchings of Venetian alleyways and canals; Cesare Laurenti, with a portrait; Edoardo De Albertis, with four etchings in one frame; Telemaco

58

Registri delle vendite 1895-1901, Venice, ASAC. Pica was on the acquisition panel along with Ojetti, Pisa and Levi; see Flavia Scotton, ed., *I disegni e le stampe: Catalogo generale, Ca' Pesaro, Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), 7-8.* Acquisition policies regarding Belgian and Dutch prints in the early Biennales have been examined by Giorgio Marini in "Presenze nordiche. Politiche espositive e acquisizioni pubbliche di stampe beghe e olandesi in Italia all'alba del Novecento", in *Noir & Blanc*, 51-77.

59

"Con simili possenti ed originali maestri del *bianco e nero* non può certo non risultare dannoso al gruppo di acquafortisti italiani, tanto più che tra essi non ritroviamo né Fattori né il Conconi, né il Grubicy", Pica, *L'arte mondiale alla IV*, 177.

Signorini, with etchings of Florence; and Francesco Vitalini, with colour prints”.⁶⁰
In this regard, Pica observed:

This return to vogue of printmaking, with the ever more promising revitalisation and ever growing dissemination of the art, should be helped along in every way, especially in Italy, where only in recent years have foreign models found a few courageous imitators, who struggle with still limited success against the sceptical indifference of an apathetic public, which has forgotten our country’s glorious artistic traditions.⁶¹

The direct encounter with international graphic art had piqued a new curiosity about etching among Italian artists. For instance, Cesare Laurenti and Emanuele Brugnoli, who built upon the legacy of Whistler, used the technique to explore the theme of Venice.⁶² The city became the first hub of the Etching Revival in Italy, where the American artist’s presence from the autumn of 1879 to the winter of 1880 played a fundamental role in helping Venetian artists rediscover the various forms of intaglio.⁶³ In 1899, Giuseppe Miti Zanetti became one of the first Italians to exhibit a series of prints at the Biennale, with views of Venetian alleyways that were also inspired by the work of Whistler and Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo.⁶⁴ Other examples include Francesco Vitalini, who showed an affinity with the Dutch etchings and with Grubicy’s monotypes, or Luigi Conconi, whose prints seem to parallel coeval ones by Klinger.⁶⁵

At the turn of the century, the substantial contributions of Belgian and Dutch artists to the Biennale—along with the influence of Whistler—not only offered a touchstone, but proved essential to reawakening interest in the graphic arts among Italians.

“The Successful Example of Venice”: The Reception and Exhibition of Prints in the Italian Art World after 1901

The “successful example of Venice” was followed by the *Prima Esposizione Internazionale del Bianco e Nero*, organised by the *Società degli Amatori e Cultori* in Rome; this was the first event exclusively focused on the graphic arts, and would remain such for at least a decade, until the *Esposizione Internazionale di Bianco*

60

Quarta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 166-170.

61

“Tale ritorno di favore verso la stampa artistica e tale sempre più interessante rinnovazione e sempre crescente divulgazione di essa meritano di essere aiutate in tutti i modi, specie in Italia, dove soltanto da qualche anno gli esempi stranieri trovano qualche coraggioso imitatore, lottante, con successo ancora mediocre, contro l’indifferenza scettica del nostro pubblico indolente e dimentico delle patrie gloriose tradizioni d’arte”. Pica, *L’arte mondiale alla IV*, 177.

62

Regarding the prints of Emanuele Brugnoli and Cesare Laurenti, see Alessia Del Bianco, “La rinascita dell’acquaforte a Venezia”, in Sergio Marinelli, ed., *Aldèbaran III: Storia dell’arte* (Verona: Scripta, 2015), 217-242; Del Bianco, “Nota per Cesare Laurenti Incisore” in Sergio Marinelli, ed., *Aldèbaran V: Storia dell’arte* (Verona: Scripta, 2019), 179-196.

63

See Giorgio Marini, Maria Malni Pascoletti, Cristina Bragaglia Venuti, eds., *Una novella patria dello spirito: Firenze e gli artisti delle venezie nel primo Novecento - Opere dal Gabinetto dei disegni e delle stampe degli Uffizi* (Gorizia: Fondazione Coronini Cronberg, 2013); Del Bianco, “La rinascita dell’acquaforte a Venezia”. Regarding Whistler in Venice see Margaret F. MacDonald, *Palaces in the Night. Whistler in Venice* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries 2001) and Alastair Grieve, *Whistler’s Venice* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2000).

64

Giovanni Nascimbene, “Artisti contemporanei: Giuseppe Miti Zanetti”, *Emporium* 50, no. 298 (1919): 188-198.

65

The two works I am referring to here are Klinger’s frontispiece for *Neuen Tannhäuser* (1885) and Luigi Conconi’s *L’onda* (1896), see Giorgio Marini and Francesco Parisi, eds., *I Futuristi e l’Incisione: Il segno dell’Avanguardia* (February 23 - April 15, 2018), exh. cat. (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2016), 33.

e Nero in Florence in 1914.⁶⁶ The show in Rome, held in April and May of 1902, presented a vast collection of works on paper by French, Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, British, Scandinavian, Swiss, American and Russian artists for the first time, with a selection of cutting-edge prints, drawings, books and illustrations. The room included works, to list just a few names, by Klinger, Ensor, Toulouse-Lautrec, Vallotton, Khnopff, Chahine, Munch, Zorn and Rassenfosse. The Italians, once again, were put at a disadvantage, since their prints did not yet reflect the latest trends of the time—an observation that Pica had already made at the 1901 Biennale—and were simply reproductive works from the Regia Calcografia in Rome.⁶⁷

At the 1903 Biennale, part of *Sala Internazionale H* and the small room next to the roofless corridor were put aside for the *Mostra di Bianco e Nero*.⁶⁸ These spaces once again housed a considerable number of etchings by Chahine, Baertsoen, Storm van's Gravesande, and Khnopff; the Italians included Fattori, Grubicy and Vitalini. It was a significant iteration, which showed continuity in its ideas and its selection of artists, yet suffered from comparison with the sizable Roman exhibition.⁶⁹ Though the show's success was less than clear, even in terms of its impact on Italian artists, in 1904 Francesco Vitalini published *L'incisione su Metallo*.⁷⁰ This book, for which Pica wrote a foreword providing a broad overview of contemporary European and American graphic art, was meant to serve as an initial guide to the new currents of theory and practice in intaglio, “a technical exploration of etching” spurred by artists keen to discover this overlooked branch of art; it is reminiscent of what Maxime Lalanne had already done in France with his *Traité de la gravure à l'eau-forte*.⁷¹

Though the *bianco e nero* rooms may not yet have constituted an established exhibition model, they spread familiarity with the most interesting work being done in the field; up until 1914—the last iteration before World War I—the Biennales were an excellent opportunity for visitors to learn more about international printmaking. The spaces allocated to the graphic arts gradually grew in prominence, becoming unmissable appointments every two years, due in part to Pica's constant proposals. The critic took every opportunity to remind Fradeletto that “There is so much still to be done with prints. As always, I am at your disposal”.⁷² A sampling of artists exhibiting at the Biennales from 1905 to 1914—necessarily a limited one, in this context—includes French, Belgian, Dutch, German, British and Scandinavian printmakers; it shows continuity in the selection criteria, with a slant that reflects Pica's suggestions for the first shows, revealing that in the absence of a commissioner for that room, the Neapolitan critic remained the most authoritative voice in the field. In this period and parallel to it, Pica intensified his efforts to popularise the medium in the pages of *Emporium*. A quick sampling of the various articles

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See the studies cited in footnote no. 3.

67

Catalogo della Prima esposizione internazionale di Bianco e Nero: Roma, aprile-maggio 1902, Società degli amatori e cultori di belle arti in Roma (Rome, 1902).

68

Quinta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia: Catalogo illustrato (April 22 - October 31, 1903), exh. cat. (Venice: Giardini di Castello, 1903), 59.

69

“I would advise the administration to do away with it in years to come [...] All the things that seem best here already appeared at the exhibition in Rome”, in Mazzini Beduschi, ed., *Arte contemporanea* (Venice: Rosen, 1903), 249-250.

70

Francesco Vitalini, *L'incisione su Metallo* (Rome: Danesi, 1904).

71

Maxime Lalanne, *Traité de la gravure à l'eau-forte: Texte et planches* (Paris: Cadart et Luquet Editeurs, 1866).

72

“Quanto ci sarebbe da fare in fatto di stampe. Io sono come sempre a tua disposizione”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, August 29, 1906, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*.

reveals his opinion on “outstanding artists” like Ensor and Munch. Still others laud Dutch and Belgian printmaker, and the *Artisti contemporanei* section devotes attention to Zorn, Chahine, Zilcken, Raffaëlli, Khnopff, Toorop and Brangwyn.⁷³

In 1905 we once again find prints by Baertsoen, Rassenfosse and Rops and a collection of Dutch prints collected and curated by Zilcken: a room quite reminiscent of the first successful one in 1895. The “curious and very original artist” Toorop also exhibited ten drypoints, Felix Vallotton presented woodcuts, and the Swedish artist Zorn had a collection of etchings.⁷⁴ The shows that followed showed a growing attention toward the graphic arts: in 1907 the British room housed a small collection of prints, including the section’s commissioner, Frank Brangwyn’s etchings and Joseph Pennell’s prints of Toledo and London, while the international room included Chahine’s *Impressions d’Italie*.⁷⁵ Between 1909 and 1910, international participation grew, with over a hundred prints by Besnard, Charlet, De Groux, Rops, Goff, Haden, Helleu, Israëls, Klinger, Kollwitz, Liebermann, Raffaëlli and Rodin, and a series of lithographs by Whistler, Munch, Nolde and Pechstein.⁷⁶ This expansion is perhaps most apparent in the extensive selection of prints in the new Belgian pavilion, an initiative that pleased Pica. He wrote to Fradeletto, “I am delighted that, as Fierens-Gevaert tells me, you have decided to devote more space this year to *bianco e nero* from Belgium, and I hope you will do the same for the other nations”.⁷⁷ As a matter of fact, starting with this iteration, there were numerous prints not only in the Belgian pavilion but also in the newly created pavilions of Germany, Hungary and Great Britain, the latter having a section devoted to etchings, drawings and prints. In 1910, the Belgian pavilion displayed over sixty prints while the *Société des peintres-graveurs français* offered a collection of French graphics. Two years later, in 1912, a room was set aside for the lithographs from the Senefelder Club of London, in which both Brangwyn and Pennell showed their work. During this period, a series of solo exhibitions were organised: Zorn had one in 1909, the following year Pennell’s etchings *Paesi Vecchi e Paesi Nuovi* were showcased, and in 1912 it was Chahine’s turn.

The *bianco e nero* rooms at the early Biennales struggled to find a foothold, yet their early presence in first two decades of the 20th century eventually pried open space for a consistent, large graphics display in later years. One should keep in mind that at the same time, several *bianco e nero* exhibits were presented at the *Famiglia Artistica* in Milan, at the *Società degli Amatori e Cultori* in Rome—where the selection of artists seems to echo the canons of taste established by Pica—and, in 1913, at the first exhibition of the Roman Secession, which had sections for Italian and international graphic arts.⁷⁸ The spread of international “models” of printmak-

73

Marini, “L’incisione Europea dalle pagine di Emporium”, 255-265. See for instance Vittorio Pica, “Artisti contemporanei: Fernand Khnopff”, *Emporium* 16, no. 93 (1902): 172-188; Pica, “Artisti contemporanei: Jean-François Raffaëlli”, *Emporium* 15, no. 88 (1902): 244-260; Pica, “Arte contemporanea: acquafortisti olandesi”, *Emporium* 18, no 103 (1903): 2-18; Pica, “Artisti contemporanei: Anders Zorn”, *Emporium* 22, no. 129, (1905):166-187; and Pica, “Artisti contemporanei: Edgar Chahine”, *Emporium* 22, 128 (1905): 85-108.

74

Sesta Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia: *Catalogo illustrato* (April 22 - October 31, 1905), exh. cat. (Venice: Carlo Ferrari, 1905), 38-63.

75

Settima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia: *Catalogo illustrato* (April 22 - October 31, 1907), exh. cat. (Venice: Carlo Ferrari, 1907), 70.

76

See the catalogues *Ottava Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia: Catalogo illustrato* (April 22 - October 31, 1909), exh. cat. (Venice: Carlo Ferrari, 1909); *Nona Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia: Catalogo illustrato* (April 22 - October 31, 1910), exh. cat. (Venice: Carlo Ferrari, 1910).

77

“Sono lieto che, secondo quanto mi annunzia Fierens-Gevaert, ti sia deciso a dare un maggiore spazio, quest’anno, al *bianco e nero* del Belgio e spero che farai lo stesso per le altre nazioni”, letter from Pica to Fradeletto, October 4, 1908, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Vittorio Pica*.

78

For a look at Italian exhibitions devoted to the graphic arts in the early 20th century see Emanuele Bardazzi, *La Mostra del Bianco e Nero a Pistoia del 1913 e la rinascita dell’Incisione in Italia nel primo Novecento in Cultura figurativa tra le due guerre, Pistoia e la situazione italiana*, Carlo Sisi, ed., (Florence: IRRSAE, 1998), 31-52.

fig. 5
Lino Selvatico, *Signora del Manicotto*, 1910
drypoint, 502 x 347 mm,
Civica Raccolta delle Stampe
Achille Bertarelli, Castello
Sforzesco, Milano
© courtesy of Civica Raccolta
delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli,
Castello Sforzesco, Milano



fig. 6
Edgard Chahine, *Mademoiselle Lily*, 1905. Drypoint, 57,8 x
42,5 cm. *Quarta Esposizione
Internazionale di Venezia, 1905*
"Sala internazionale - Sala XVII".
Civica Raccolta delle Stampe
Achille Bertarelli, Castello
Sforzesco, Milano
© courtesy of Civica Raccolta
delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli,
Castello Sforzesco, Milano



ing through exhibitions and publications⁷⁹ had encouraged Italian artists not only to rediscover the value of these techniques, but over the years helped build an early-20th-century graphic culture in Italy that, in relatively recent times, has attracted considerable interest from scholars.⁸⁰

One example of this influence, among many, can be found in the Italian artist's references to Symbolist graphics. In the late 1880s Gaetano Previati made a series of works on paper inspired by the tales of Edgar Allan Poe; critics have noted their affinity with the work of Fantin-Latour, Klinger, Rops, Redon and other Symbolists, most of whom the artist was familiar with by that time.⁸¹ Previati, after all, had his own room at the 1901 Biennale, with a large group of drawings including his *Via Crucis* series and the *Racconti* of Poe. Symbolist prints by Redon, Rops, Khnopff, Toorop and Ensor also served as a model for Alberto Martini.⁸² He, too, tapped into Poe's popularity in Italy, making a famous series of illustrations for a collection of the author's stories. Martini brought both together in his drawing series *Conversazione di Eiros e Charmion* and *Hop Frog*. Pica favored the artist's innovations and thus displayed his work at the 1897 Biennale.

Additional evidence of this international dialogue, during the brief span from 1907 to 1910, can be found in the work of Umberto Boccioni and of Luigi Russolo, and their affinity with Belgian and French Symbolist graphics.⁸³ Or one might consider Pica's 1907 article *L'Italia nelle stampe dei moderni incisori stranieri*, an overview of "the etchings and lithographs that Italy has inspired in many of the greatest foreign printmakers of today".⁸⁴ They included analyses of prints by Whistler, Chahine, Graf and Zilcken, who were already regular exhibitors at the Biennale; nor should one overlook the powerful etchings by Brangwyn, which influenced an entire generation of artists. Roberto Papini, in an overview of the Florentine exhibition of 1914 for *Emporium*, identified Whistler and Brangwyn as the two landmark figures in etching from whom the entire concept of the contemporary landscape print had evolved, inspiring private, romantic scenes on the one hand and epic, dramatic vistas on the other.⁸⁵ These formal influences fundamentally shaped the development of a landscape and cityscape genre of etchings in Italy. To cite the handful of Italians in these Biennales, and a few other names, one should note the work by Francesco Vitalini, Bruno Croatto, Carlo Casanova, Giuseppe Graziosi, Fabio Mauroner, Guido Balsamo Stella, Umberto Moggioli, Benvenuto Disertori and

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In this regard see Nicole Mocchi, "Canali di diffusione del simbolismo internazionale in Italia: esposizioni ed editoria d'arte tra 1890 e 1910", in *Stati d'animo. Arte e psiche tra Previati e Boccioni* (March 3 – June 10, 2018), exh. cat. (Ferrara: Ferrara Arte 2018), 292-305.

80

These studies focus in particular on Veneto and Tuscany; see Marini, Bragaglia, Venuti, eds., *Una Novella patria dello Spirito and Bardazzi*, "La civiltà delle riviste", 55-102; Alessia Del Bianco, "Incisori Italiani alle Biennali veneziane di Vittorio Pica, 1920-1926", in Giuseppina Dal Canton and Babet Trevisan, eds., *Quaderni della Donazione Eugenio Da Venezia* no. 23 (Venice: 2020), 217-235.

81

Flavio Fergonzi, "Gaetano Previati disegnatore", in Fernando Mazzocca, ed., *Gaetano Previati 1852-1920. Un protagonista del simbolismo europeo*, exh. cat. (Milano: Electa 1999), 76-83. See also Alessandro Botta "Il fantasma sorge immediato e potente. I disegni di Gaetano Previati per i Racconti di Edgar Allan Poe: genesi e fonti", *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte*, no. 41 (2017): 194-221.

82

Alessandro Botta, *Illustrazioni incredibili. Alberto Martini e i racconti di Edgar Allan Poe* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017).

83

Alessandro Botta, "Fonti vive per Luigi Russolo Incisore, 1908-1910", *Ricche Miniere*, no. 3 (2015): 105-122 and Marini, Parisi, *I Futuristi e l'Incisione*, 37, 42, 47.

84

"le acqueforti e le litografie che l'Italia ha suggerito a parecchi dei maggiori incisori stranieri dell'ora attuale"; Vittorio Pica, "L'Italia nelle stampe dei moderni incisori stranieri", *Emporium* 25, no. 147 (1917): 200-219. See also Marini, "Emporium, le Biennali di Venezia e l'incisione", 258.

85

Roberto Papini, "L'incisione moderna alla I Esposizione di Bianco e Nero di Firenze", *Emporium* 50, no. 238 (1914): 264-279, 268-269; See also Bardazzi, "La civiltà delle riviste e lo sviluppo della grafica", 61.

the many prints coming out of Tuscany, as well as Lino Selvatico's [fig. 5] elegant drypoint portraits, influenced by Chahine [fig. 6] and Paul César Helleu.⁸⁶

This progressive advancement of the graphic arts—concretely demonstrated by the foundation of the first two etching schools in Florence and Venice in 1912⁸⁷—can also be seen in a letter from Ojetti to Fradeletto that mentions an *Associazione Internazionale per il Bianco e Nero*, which he hoped to launch at the Biennale.

In London, Pennell told me that he, Zilcken, and others were planning to found an International Association of Black and White, and asked me to inquire whether you would allow this [illegible] association to make its Italian debut with three rooms in Venice in 1914.⁸⁸

Though it was never carried out, the very existence of this plan is significant, showing the desire to create an international mechanism to receive and relay contemporary developments in European graphic art. In 1914, the Biennale instead presented, in addition to the usual international artists, an exhibition organised by the *Corporazione Italiana degli Xilografi*.⁸⁹ In the same year, the *Prima Esposizione Internazionale di Bianco e Nero* in Florence successfully brought together over a thousand Italian and international prints and drawings, striving to offer a more comprehensive vision of contemporary graphic art.⁹⁰ The Florentine exhibition marked the culmination of a rich period of dialogue between different visual cultures that had begun more than a decade before, in the *bianco e nero* section in Venice. In the years separating the 1901 Biennale from the 1914 show in Florence, these rooms provided an important opportunity for dialogue and discovery that aided the emergence of contemporary printmaking in Italy.

86

Giorgio Marini, "Il ritratto nell'incisione del primo Novecento", in Sergio Marinelli, ed., *Il ritratto nel Veneto, 1866-1945* (Verona: Banco popolare di Verona e Novara, 2005), 157-170 and the studies cited above in note 74. See also Sergio Marinelli, "Per un'altra mostra su Lino Selvatico", in Cristiano Sant, ed., *Lino Selvatico. Una seconda Belle Epoque* (May 14 – July 31, 2016), exh. cat. (Milano: LSWR GROUP 2016), 30-35.

87

Regarding the foundation of etching schools, see Del Bianco, "La cattedra d'incisione".

88

"Pennell a Londra mi ha narrato che con Zilcken e con altri stanno pensando a un'Associazione Interazionale di Bianco e Nero, e mi ha pregato di chiederti se tu accetteresti che la prima prova in Italia questa [illegible] associazione la facesse a Venezia nel 1914 in tre sale", letter from Ojetti to Fradeletto, November 10, 1912, Venice, ASAC, *Carte Antonio Fradeletto*.

89

Giuseppe Virelli, "Ettore Cozzani e la Corporazione Italiana degli xilografi", in *Ettore Cozzani: arte e letteratura* (Lugano, AGORÀ & CO., 2020), 21-56.

90

Catalogo della I Esposizione Internazionale di bianco e nero (May 10 - June 20, 1914), exh. cat. (Florence: Spinelli, 1914); the exhibition is examined at length in Rossella Campana, ed., *Il colore dell'ombra: Dalla mostra internazionale di Bianco e Nero: Acquisti per le Gallerie* (Florence: Sillabe, 2014).

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