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Topics in Baroque  
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Agostino Carracci, the Printmaker

The Carracci family was a powerful influence in the Baroque art movement, which lasted throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Not only were they great artists, but also they shared their wealth of knowledge through establishing an Academy. Agostino was the least famous of the three, hidden from the spotlight because of his major pursuit in printmaking, primarily in engraving. Many of his lesser-known works, including *Mercury and the Three Graces*, originally by Tintoretto, were highly skilled reproductions of other artists' works. Agostino became a master in this craft, in which a majority of his work is devoted to. Though his work was indeed technically impeccable, it was not regarded as highly as those of his brother, Annibale, possibly of Agostino's lack of personal creativity. On the other hand, Agostino's prints were subtle indicators of social virtues of the period, and most importantly, they made important art pieces accessible to the public.

Agostino was born to the Carracci family in 1558 in Bologna. Agostino was a learned man, though, "distracted by his delights of learning, he gave somewhat late evidence of his efficacious spirit in painting".<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate that Agostino did not realize his true talents because they were held back by his scholarly pursuits and personal insecurities. In his early education, "he was diligent in their practice in order to make himself proficient in what was resolved principally by imitation,"<sup>2</sup> which may have led to

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Bellori, *The Lives of Annibale and Agostino Carracci*, Pennsylvania State University Press, First Editions, June 1, 1967: 92.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

his muted career in print media, particularly in engraving. It was also his father, who could not afford to support a frustrated and impatient painter, that pushed Agostino to apprentice with an engraver. Even with all of these occupations, he kept with his scholarly interests, which led him to help organize an academy of design in Bologna. He collaborated on some commissions with Annibale, such as the frescoes at the Palazzo Farnese, though his brother received most of the acknowledgement. Later in his career, Agostino worked on more engraving in Venice, making masterful copies of paintings, sometimes even better than the originals.<sup>3</sup> These glorious prints, however, held back all of Agostino's potential as a great Baroque artist. One of his prints, *Mercury and the Three Graces* was originally a painting by Venetian painter, Tintoretto. This engraving was produced during one of Agostino's numerous trips to Venice, where "he could have been very well satisfied by his own inventions, [but] he subjected himself to the inventions of others. He did not continue because of the small opinion he had of himself and of his own knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

In this period, the Carracci aimed to create a school of aesthetic based on practice and preparation. Agostino's prints, most notably his engravings, showcased his incredible talent for drawing. This medium allows for the great flexibility and spontaneity that drawing does.<sup>5</sup> Early engravings were within the domain of goldsmiths and metalworkers. They were mainly used to incise armor, liturgical objects, and jewelry. In Italy, *nielli*, or small decorative plaques, were produced by filling in grooves of incised silver plates with a black substance. Some of these metalworkers began to print

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<sup>3</sup> Bellori: 92

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 97

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kimmerlman. "Italian Etchers Sing a Siren Sing in Boston," *New York Times* (New York), Feb 12, 1989.

impressions of their designs onto paper, and thus engraving was born. Engraving enabled more people to access designs and compositions and met the growing demand for reproductions.<sup>6</sup> However, it was highly restricted because of its materials: the burin and copperplate. For this reason, engravers relied heavily on linear construction to convey images as realistic as possible, and each artist had his own distinct system. These techniques were also very accessible to professional printmakers, like Agostino, as well as painters, such as Guido Reni and Rembrandt, and it has not changed to this day. This medium is defined by its nature of shared technical knowledge passed among artists, which rapidly spread throughout Europe.<sup>7</sup> The adaptability of the medium allowed for it to serve numerous purposes, like casual portraiture, landscapes, and diagrams, and they were not just for the many religious commissions of the papacy or royal courts.<sup>8</sup>

Though the subject of *Mercury and the Three Graces* is not typical of Italian Baroque subjects—which were mostly based on imagery of the church or of nobility—the engraving itself marks the values of art and society at the time. Many of the works influenced by the Carracci paid homage to classical subjects, like *Mercury and the Three Graces* does. However, unlike artists of the Renaissance, who depicted idealized figures and scenes, artists of the Baroque created works that were more realistic. Artists wanted to challenge the viewer’s emotions by creating an illusion of realism, even if the image was of an old Roman myth. The artist, Tintoretto, in which this engraving of *Mercury* is based, strived to create this illusion “of realism based on the not strictly classic, North

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<sup>6</sup> Emily J. Peters, *The Brilliant Line*, Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art, 2009: 13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kimmerlan.

Italian striving towards a closer contact with life.”<sup>9</sup> In Agostino’s composition of *Mercury and the Three Graces*, he is able to capture contrast and motion, although it is notably less realistic than Tintoretto’s painting. By expanding the scene horizontally, and including more landscape, Agostino’s print changes the interaction between the viewer and the image. He sacrifices tension in exchange for special clarity. It is less intimate than Tintoretto, which includes the viewer as a participant of the scene. In the engraving, Agostino has balanced the figures and background, which in turn reduced “tension of the forms...elongated the figures and hardened their contours, thus solidifying their movement in contrast to the fluidity of movement in the original.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, most of Agostino’s more notable engravings, he is saluted as the most tactile and technical engraver at the time. For example, he engraved a replication of *The Crucifixion* by Tintoretto, one of Agostino’s most elaborate works. It was so popular that Tintoretto himself thought it equaled the original, though it literally never saw the same light of day as Tintoretto’s paintings, as prints were often stored in acid free boxes or bound into albums.

It is also important to note that many artists of this time were vying to be recognized as intellectuals, not just artisans or craftspeople. The task of engraving was something one must study rigorously. It is often an overlooked, yet logical fact that the main audience for prints was printmakers themselves, especially in the case of engraving.

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<sup>9</sup> Detley Baron Von Hadeln, “Early Works By Tintoretto,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 41, No. 236 (1922): 217. Accessed 18 Mar. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/861713>

<sup>10</sup> Diane DeGrazia Bohlin, *Prints and Related Drawings by the Carracci Family*, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1979: 254-260.

Each engraving “carried visual information about the maker’s formulas of line.”<sup>11</sup> This art form was a study of line systems passed down through generations. It is possible that Agostino, the learned man that he was, chose to pursue engraving because of its intense means of study. The linear structure was important in distinguishing styles, and this was important in the art market. People who commissioned engravings were usually painters, who wanted to expand their network of patrons and fame through inexpensive reproductions.<sup>12</sup> In Venice, Tintoretto had numerous reproductions made by the hand of Agostino. Tintoretto revered Agostino’s engravings, but he had the intention to catalogue his work and protect his compositions from piracy, as most influential painters of the time did.<sup>13</sup> Works, like *Mercury and the Three Graces*, were pasted into albums to allow for close study, much like museum catalogues of today. In the market, these print folios were highly valued, and caught the eyes of important figures of the time.

*Mercury and the Three Graces*, one of Agostino’s earlier works, though not very impressive visually, is a great example of printmaking in that time period. It showcases Agostino’s evolving linear structure, which he developed through rigorous study and apprenticeship. Many notable people, such as Peter Paul Rubens and Cardinal Scipione, admired Agostino and his skill. As an incredibly talented engraver, he was in high demand for these patrons, and thus was not given the opportunity to let his own artistic genius in other mediums flourish. In the end, however, his engravings were highly influential, though overlooked merely because of its media type.

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<sup>11</sup> Peters: 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid: 37

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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