

Noir

The Romance of Black

in 19th-Century French Drawings and Prints

“Black is the most essential color.”

—Odilon Redon

During the Industrial Revolution, particularly around 1850, the range and availability of black drawing materials exploded in France. Previously limited to simple materials like natural black chalk, mined from the earth, artists began experimenting with man-made black media such as conte crayon and fabricated black chalk. At the same time, improvements in the use of fixative, with its capacity to permanently adhere the powdery, fugitive charcoal crystals to the surface of the paper, enabled charcoal drawing to come into its own.

These developments progressed in tandem with the rise of the tonal painter-print (*peintre-gravure*) in the techniques of etching, lithography, aquatint, and monotype. It is impossible to say which came first or took precedence, but what followed, especially in France, was a graphic exploration of darkness that constitutes an important early chapter in the history of Modernism.

The inspiration artists drew from their dark materials and their exploration of the depths of blackness, with all its imaginative and narrative associations, form the story lines of this exhibition.



Prelude: Dark Romanticism

From 1850 to 1900, the period represented in the main section of this exhibition, French artists made black prints and drawings with increasing concern for the properties and effects of their materials. The meanings and significance of the color black also played large roles as artists searched for a new world of subject matter.

These developments had strong beginnings in the art of earlier decades, a period called "Romanticism," whose artists tended to explore the very darkest recesses of the human condition. The uninhibited artistic investigation of evil, cruelty, and death gave rise to dark dream imagery of unprecedented power.



Realism

Realist artists turned to black media for their own expressive purposes. In their hands, charcoal and black chalk were used to portray the rusticity of rural existence and the gritty, shadowy spaces of urban life. The hardscrabble lives of the mostly working-class figures, which formed the Realists' subject matter, could be palpably evoked by the thick deposits rendered with the blending, hatching, and wetting of chalk and charcoal, or with the textured, choppy lines drawn on lithographic stone.



Landscape, Charcoal, and the Etching Revival

By about 1860, landscape had become a primary subject for creative printmakers, especially etchers. Around the same time, artists were increasingly turning to charcoal as a drawing medium with impressive properties and working methods all its own. Known in French as *fusain*, charcoal, with its floating, powdery qualities, was perfectly suited to capturing landscape scenes in all their ethereal effects—dappled sunlight, placid water, feathery leaves. Many of the artists who specialized in charcoal landscapes also made landscape etchings remarkably similar in style to their drawings. In Paris and London such etchings and drawings were frequently shown in so-called “Black and White” exhibitions, where they sold briskly to eager collectors.



Fantasy and Dreams

As the brutal realities of the Industrial Revolution and political repression encroached upon urban and country life, many French artists reacted by retreating into the interior, unfettered, immaterial world of the psyche. Some believed that the truths presiding in the subconscious world of dreams might be more compelling than those experienced in waking life. Going back to the art of Goya (see Gallery 104 in this exhibition), black was associated with nocturnal, phantasmagoric dreams and the dark expanse of the cosmos.

Later, Odilon Redon used the floating quality of charcoal to draw inchoate cosmic landscapes and aqueous environments populated by fishy-insect-humanoid hybrids. Employing black lithographic crayon, he could render equivalents of his so-called noir drawings as lithographic prints.

Lithography began with a drawing made either directly on a stone or a piece of paper that could be transferred to stone (a video on the technique of lithography can be seen on the iPad nearby). Other artists such as Rodolphe Bresdin and Henri Fantin-Latour also freely translated black drawings of fantasies and dreams into the replicable print medium of lithography.



The Optics of Shadow

The explosion of black media during the late nineteenth century prompted artists to explore the interpenetration of light and shadow both indoors and out. Imagery of this sort reminds us that, in the age before interior electric lighting, murky shadows broken up by the light of the moon, candles, or gas lamps were a fact of nighttime life. While draftsmen in this vein did not ignore powdery charcoal and its floating quality and attendant manipulations such as lifting and blending, they also turned to the somewhat harder and less erasable medium of conte crayon, with which one could produce, without an array of tools, a wide range of effects, from fine light lines to dense opaque shading.



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