Document généré le 24 avr. 2024 20:19

Vie des arts

Vie des arts

Mannerism and the Art of Our Times

Jean Duvet et Jacques Bellange

Numéro 58, printemps 1970

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58091ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (imprimé)
1923-3183 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Duvet, J. & Bellange, J. (1970). Mannerism and the Art of Our Times. *Vie des arts*, (58), 42–43.

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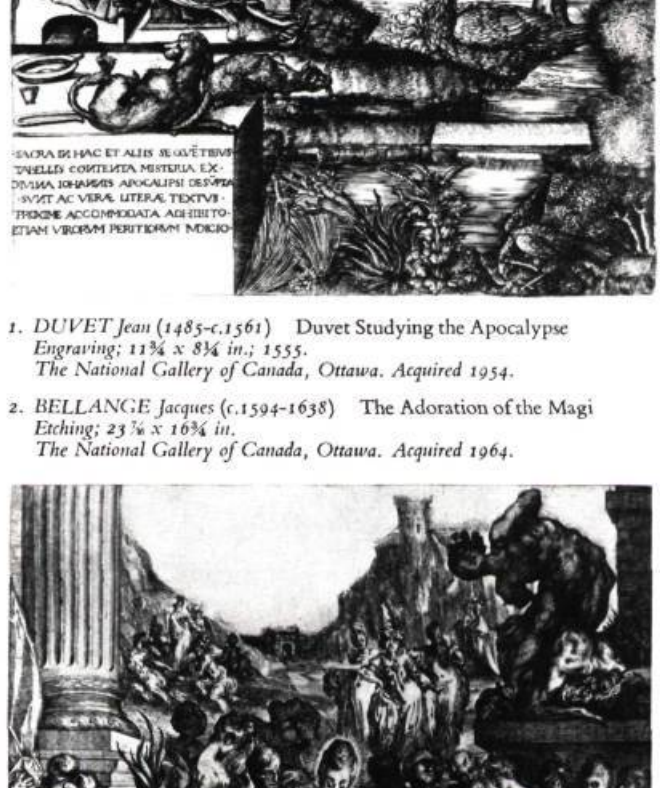
Mannerism and the

1. *DUVET Jean* (1485-c.1561) Duvet Studying the Apocalypse
Engraving; 11¾ x 8¼ in.; 1555.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Acquired 1954.

2. *BELLANGE Jacques* (c.1594-1638) The Adoration of the Magi
Etching; 23 7/8 x 16¾ in.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Acquired 1964.



by Pamela Osler DELWORTH
Acting Curator of Prints

Mannerism, until recently that much disparaged style of the 16th century, has become the focal point of a renewed interest in the post-Renaissance period. While Mannerism first appeared in Italy it quickly became an international phenomenon, establishing itself firmly where it developed a flavour of its own within the brilliant, glittering atmosphere of the court of Francis I and Henri II at Fontainebleau, between about 1530-60. Although the School of Fontainebleau is not directly represented in the National Gallery collections, the Gallery can point to examples by two artists, Jean Duvet (1485-c. 1561) and Jacques Bellange (1594-1638) whose work is related to, yet remained independent of the influences of Fontainebleau. An impression of the engraving *Duvet Studying the Apocalypse* was acquired as early as 1922 at a time when he was of little interest even to the collector. It was exchanged in 1954 for yet a better impression (plate 1). Bellange's etching of *The Adoration of the Magi* (plate 2) and the drawing of *St. John Preaching* (*Vie des Arts*, No. 57, p. 19 and plate 3) are recent acquisitions which have already attracted considerable attention.

Little is known of Duvet's life. No more than a few archival references and some seventy-eight or nine engravings which have come down to us, yet he holds an important place in the history of engraving in France as the first to practice the art of burin engraving on copper; his earliest dated plate is an *Annunciation* of 1520. In the first plate of his *Apocalypse figurée* (plate 1) one of the Latin inscriptions reads: "Jean Duvet goldsmith of Langres 70 years of age has completed this work in 1555."[1] The twenty-four plates of the *Apocalyps* constitute his major work bu like his other engravings the are not well known, partly be cause of the scarcity of im pressions and partly becaus they have never been widel appreciated. Only one othe impression from this series c engravings, that of *St. Michae and the Dragon*, is in the Nationa Gallery.

The first plate, *Duvet studyin the Apocalypse*, in some respect suggests the final scene of St John on the Island of Patmos It is generally supposed, how ever, that despite the appearanc of an energetic man in his prime Duvet treated this plate as title-page and portrayed him self in the figure of the bearde man who is not writing bu pondering the mysteries of th Apocalyptic visions. The iden tification with St. John is n doubt intentional. A man o sensitivity and imagination suc as Duvet could not remain im pervious to the vicissitudes o the religious wars or to the nev and daring teachings of Luthe and Calvin which were bring ing about radical changes in th familiar, established world. T Duvet, troubled by the con flicts within and around him the words of the prophet, " John, who also am your brothe and companion in tribulation" must have held a particula immediacy. Further hidden allusions to Duvet are in the swan "l'oiseau à duvet", as well as i the "duveteuses" plants and th bird whose under plummage o "duvet" is exposed as the eagl tears out the feathers. It is thi sort of recherché jeu-de-mo that artists of the School o Fontainebleau delighted in and deliberately sought out as a form of individual expression At the superficial level they were mere witticisms but they

Art of Our Times —

Jean DUVET and Jacques BELLANGE

1. *BELLANGE Jacques (c.1594-1638)* St. John Preaching
Black chalk and reddish-brown wash on cream-coloured paper, traced with a stylus; 11⅞ x 12⅝ in.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Acquired 1969.

also served as a mask and their use often underscored a deep personal involvement. The swan bearing an arrow in its beak, having broken the chain that bound it to the lifeless tree trunk, swims triumphantly towards Duvet. It is the symbol of Duvet's victory: MENS RESTAT / VICTRIX + GRA / DEQ SVADET / OPUS; a reaffirmation of his faith at a time of spiritual upheaval.

Although Duvet enjoyed the patronage and protection of Francis I and Henri II as orfèvre du roi, religious oppression in France made it difficult for a man of his liberal tendencies to work as he wished. He therefore lived in self-imposed exile in Geneva from 1540-1556 and it was there that he worked for ten years on his illustrations to the Apocalypse, completing them in 1555. A Royal privilege that extended for twelve years was granted in the following year but he waited until 1561 before publishing them in Lyon. It has been suggested that the delay may have been due to the difficulty of finding a text that would be palatable to Catholic and Protestant alike, since some of the imagery was highly unorthodox. What place for instance have the Three Fates in the context of the Book of Revelation or in Catholic Christian iconography? Was this Duvet's semi-obscure allusion to the doctrine of Predestination around which raged an agonizing controversy for every thinking man of the time?

Duvet's intense fervour is communicated through his unique manner of composing and of handling the burin. While the crowded composition, the confused, spatial perspective, and the crude draughtsmanship stem from native Gothic tendencies, there is nothing of the naive copyist in his handling of the various elements within the picture plane. Despite his borrowings from such disparate sources as Dürer (cf. *Apocalypse* of 1498), Mantegna and Michelangelo (anti-classical, distorted configuration of human forms), he creates something quite different. It is an attempt at a synthesis but since it is not quite resolved the effect on the spectator is one of discord and tension. The unsystematic handling of the burin, moving in all directions and cutting back on itself, contributes to the frenzied mood that becomes even more evident in the succeeding plates of the *Apocalypse*. For Duvet (who was trained as a goldsmith and not unfamiliar with the technical perfection of the engravings of Dürer and Marcantonio) the burin was surely no more than an instrument of expression and what we have been inclined to regard as technically backward is instead the deliberate cultivation of a particular and personal mannerism.

Bellange, at a much later date in the early 17th century, was to treat the new process of etching in an equally cavalier fashion, concerning himself less with its perfection than with its use as a form of expression that was peculiarly suited to his nervous, agitated line. In contrast to Duvet, Bellange is more highly mannered. Evidence of this "maniera" is reflected in the elongated forms, the small oval heads and the attenuated gesticulating fingers, stylizations which characterize the second generation of the School of Fontainebleau and of late international Mannerism. The extremely decorative, eccentric nature of Bellange's work is seen here in one of the finest impressions of his etching of *The Adoration of the Magi* (plate 2) and in the rare black chalk drawing of *St. John Preaching* (plate 3). The drawing is probably later in date than the etching since the figures are slightly less bizarre and more softly rounded and Baroque in character. But in both there is a feeling of unreality as though players with exaggerated gestures are enacting some theatrical scene for their own amusement irrespective of the audience. The sense of unreality in both is heightened further by the irrational, uptilted and overcrowded composition. Bellange the man remains hidden behind the façade of his witty line and almost defies the spectator to interpret such obscure images as that of the two struggling figures in the *Adoration*. Clearly the symbolism is of struggle and triumph, probably spiritual, but the relationship of this symbol to the main theme of the composition remains an elegant riddle. Beyond the eighty or so drawings, the forty etchings and a handful of dubious paintings, little is known of Bellange who was court painter to the Duke of Lorraine from 1602-1616 at Nancy.

It has been suggested that "mannerism marked one of the deepest breaks in the history of art, and its rediscovery implies a similar break in our own day".[2] Certainly the growing sense in our own times of the alienation of the individual from his social environment, the radical challenges to established authority and values, and to the accepted way of looking at things, the creative quest for new and imaginative answers and interpretations, leading to the irrepressible urge to recreate the total environment, are symptomatic of present-day anxieties and reflect the interplay of deeply rooted psychological, social and cultural tensions. Against the background of these contemporary concerns, it is not mere chance that the interests of the present age should be directed towards, and find new significance in, work of art from a period whose development in many respects parallels our own.

1. Duvet was actually born in Dijon but the family came from Langres and Duvet himself married there, claimed citizenship and executed many works for the town.
2. Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism, the Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art.* London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, p. 3.

(Traduction française, p. 80.)