

# At the Library of Congress

## *Research breathes new life into Renaissance prints*

by *Monica Soladay*

**A**t the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., a rare album containing centuries-old Italian Renaissance prints is shedding new light on the evolution of art and early print-making techniques.

During the 1500s, a number of Italian artists experimented with printing to mimic the appearance of drawings and push the boundaries of artistic expression. Prints were made by carving patterns into a series of fruitwood blocks, coating the relief patterns of each block with a different ink usually from a related color palette, and then pressing each block onto a sheet of paper, creating layers of color.

Many of these prints hailed from Venice and Rome, which were centers of book production during the Renaissance; this form of printing - called "chiaroscuro" from the Italian words for "light" and "dark" - was one method of creating early woodcut-illustrated books. The prints were more commonly marketed as single sheets. Although chiaroscuro flourished during the Renaissance, it was later set aside due to developments in printing technology.

Far from Italy, England's fifth Earl of Pembroke, Philip Herbert, developed a fascination for these works. Although he died in 1669, his son Thomas, the eighth Earl of Pembroke, continued his father's work, collecting such Renaissance prints until his death in 1733 and ultimately combining them into 16 themed albums.

In 1918, the Library of Congress acquired one and referred to it as the "Pembroke Album" in honor of the earls; other albums assembled by Thomas Herbert can be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Although each album is a unique example of historic book-making in its own right, the art contained in these albums is even more fascinating.

The Library of Congress's 90 prints depict primarily religious, historic and mythological subjects, "all typical subject matter for Renaissance artists," notes Katherine Blood, fine prints curator for the library's division of Prints and Photographs. And, she adds, "Many are stunningly beautiful."

The collection contains works by Domenico Beccafumi, Ugo da Carpi, Antonio da Trento, Niccolò Vicentino, Andrea Andreani, Alessandro Ghandini, Girolamo Bolsi, Bartolomeo Coriolano, and others. Many are Renaissance artists known today for their paintings and other works; some are names only recently known through the existence of these prints.

Six decades after being purchased by the Library of Congress, the Pembroke Album received renewed interest in 1969 when academics published a paper about its prints. Since ➤



Curator Linda Stiber Morenus displays one of the Renaissance prints housed at the Library of Congress as part of the Pembroke Album. A Kluge Fellow, Morenus is spending the next year studying the prints in an attempt to learn more about Renaissance-era printing techniques. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Background: The Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.



Inset: The Library of Congress's collection includes Renaissance-era prints by Bartolomeo Coriolano, Ugo da Carpi, and Girolamo Bolsi among other artists.

then, the prints have been a subject of research and debate; some were recently featured in an exhibit at the National Gallery of Art. "They're centuries old, but we're still getting new insights into them," Blood said.

Most recently, Library of Congress paper conservator Linda Stiber Morenus received a year-long Kluge Fellowship to study the Pembroke Album's prints. Her work began in October and, she notes, "My entire year is geared toward understanding how [these] color print-making techniques were employed to express the artists' particular style and aesthetics."

Morenus is carefully studying the history of that era's print-making techniques and ink formulas, as "you can not fully appreciate the prints outside their historical context."

Additionally, she plans to work with local artists and colleagues at Maryland printing studio Pyramid Atlantic to reproduce the

chiaroscuro process - the first time such a project has been attempted. A local wood-cut artist plans to carve the shapes seen in one of the Renaissance printing blocks represented in the "Pembroke Album." The goal is "to actually teach ourselves...what the variables are that went into creating these prints," Morenus says. "So in the end I will have a set of models that emulate a select print that is in our collection."

A conservator with training in chemistry, Morenus also plans to analyze the physical features of the Pembroke Album's colored inks and recreate early ink recipes. "Some of the inks are very shiny; they sit very high on the paper and have their own relief if you will," Morenus says. "Others are very matte, more like a wash, and tend to be slightly embedded in the surface of the paper."

Morenus hopes that her year of research will yield exciting new revelations about the prints and

their history, in addition to printing techniques of the Italian Renaissance, for the Library of Congress. In the interim, she encourages visitors to view the prints in person, adding, "When you see them, you'll see that they are quite thought-provoking."▲

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