

Tonal Range

Mezzotint & Aquatint

Like the print methods engraving and etching, mezzotint and aquatint are both intaglio techniques. Intaglio, an Italian term (pronounced *in'talyō*), refers to any method that carves into the printing plate—historically this was usually copper.

Intaglio prints were rendered almost entirely in lines until the invention of mezzotint and aquatint in the 17th and 18th centuries. These innovations made it possible for the first time for prints to capture a complete range of tonal values, from subtlest silver to richest black and everything in between. This revolutionized the production of replicated images, because prints could be representationally complex with far less time and energy expended.

Mezzotint and aquatint significantly widened the field of prints that were both original and reproductive (copied from other images), hence creating conditions for the proliferation and dissemination of visual culture and a broadening of visual communication and literacy. *Tonal Range* presents an overview of these techniques and their history by highlighting notable examples from the 18th century to the 20th century in the Museum's collection.

Mezzotint

Mezzotint was developed in Amsterdam in the mid-16th century, but it really took hold in London in the later 16th century. By the 17th century it dominated English printmaking so much so that the French referred to it as *la manière Anglaise* (the English manner). The term mezzotint is an Anglicized version of the Italian *mezzatinta* (pl. *mezzetinte*), which translates as half-tint or half-tone.

With mezzotint clusters of marks are made on the copper plate with a tool called a rocker (see illustration). The miniscule teeth and curved shape of the rocker were designed so that rocking the tool on the plate creates a uniform pattern of stipples. The roughened texture of the copper—called burr—held the ink variably during printing: the rougher the burr the darker, the smoother the plate the lighter. The texture of the rocker can relatively quickly fill in entire areas of a design—something that with engraving and etching has to be done by repetitive hatching, crosshatching, and stipples. Mezzotint is a mechanical process that dimples, dents, and cuts into the surface of the copper plate, depending on the frequency and force of the applications of the rocker.



Antonio Baratta (Italian, 1724–87)
After a design by A.-J. De Fehrt (French, 1723–74)
Detail of Gravure en Maniere Noire, 1771/1779
From *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*
D. Diderot, ed. vol. 4, pl. VII
Engraving, etching, and mezzotint on laid paper
Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund (1996.20.8)
Image in the public domain

Aquatint

Through experimentation by various artists in the 18th century, aquatint was developed as a means to create effects like wash and watercolor in etching. First in the Netherlands and France and later in England, printmakers invented not only their own recipes and methods for aquatint but also other related etching techniques, such as lavis, spit bite, and sugar lift.

Unlike the mechanical process of mezzotint, aquatint is purely a chemical technique—true etching. Aquatint involves the application of a granular resin to the copper plate. When the resin dries or is heated, it shrinks and cracks exposing the copper below in a relatively even, minutely grained pattern. The plate is etched wherever the copper is exposed. Even more than mezzotint, aquatint can efficiently cover large areas of a plate. The use of varnish to stop out areas of the design together with repeat etching create the possibility for remarkably subtle tonal variations. Like mezzotint, aquatint can also be scraped and burnished, and some artists used aquatint to work from dark to light. Aquatint does not produce lines and is therefore often used in combination with line etching, drypoint, or engraving and sometimes also with its precursor mezzotint.

Some Mnemonic Tips

Intaglio : Carve **Into**

Mezzotint : **Mechanical**

Aquatint : **Chemical**



Elisha Kirkall (English, ca. 1682–1742)
After a painting by Willem van de Velde II
(Dutch, 1633–1707)

A Ship Firing on Another Further Offshore, ca. 1725–1730
Mezzotint on laid paper

Acquired with funds donated by Museum Associates and Tom and Alice Payne
(2012.4)

Some artists approached their mezzotints as an additive technique, building up tone from light to dark by applying the rocker more and more. Kirkall mastered this method reproducing Dutch paintings and achieved remarkably subtle tonal gradations in his prints. The atmospheric effects of his technique are enhanced in this seascape by printing with blue ink.



Thomas Frye (Irish, 1710–1762)

Maria Gunning, Countess of Coventry, 1761

Mezzotint on laid paper

Gift of Museum Associates, purchased during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020
(2020.2.1)

Some artists realized that they could develop mezzotints from dark to light, covering large areas or the entire plate with a dark tone and then scraping and burnishing out areas to make them smoother and therefore lighter. Artists utilized this method to create dramatic nocturnal and candlelit scenes as well as dark backgrounds as in this portrait. Frye worked both from light to dark and from dark to light as evidenced in this stunning example.



Richard Earlom (English, 1743–1822)
After drawings by Claude Lorrain (French, 1604–1682)
Number 34 from *Liber Veritatis (Book of Truth)*, volume I, 1774
Etching and mezzotint on paper
Published by John Boydell, London
Gift of Esther Randolph in memory of John Randolph (86.88)

Claude Lorrain's *Liber Veritatis* is a book of drawings he made to record his entire oeuvre of paintings for the sake of documenting and authenticating them. Earlom masterfully translated Lorrain's ink and wash drawings into etching and mezzotint prints in a three-volume set. His use of mezzotint is so refined that these prints are sometimes mistaken for aquatints. The landscapes of Claude, as he was affectionately called in England, had a major influence on British landscape painting as well as landscape and garden design; most people saw his work as interpreted in Earlom's prints.



Richard Earlom (English, 1743–1822)
After a drawing by Claude Lorrain (French, 1604–1682)
Number 36 from *Liber Veritatis (Book of Truth)*, volume I, 1774
Etching and mezzotint on paper
Published by John Boydell, London
Gift of Esther Randolph in memory of John Randolph (86.93)



Richard Earlom (English, 1743–1822)
After a drawing by Claude Lorrain (French, 1604–1682)
Number 87 from *Liber Veritatis (Book of Truth)*, volume I, 1774
Etching and mezzotint on paper
Published by John Boydell, London
Gift of Esther Randolph in memory of John Randolph (86.92)



Jean Claude Richard de Saint-Non (French, 1727-1791)
After a drawing by Hubert Robert (French, 1733-1808)
Gardens with a Classical Fountain, 1767
Aquatint and etching on blue-gray paper
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (90.127)

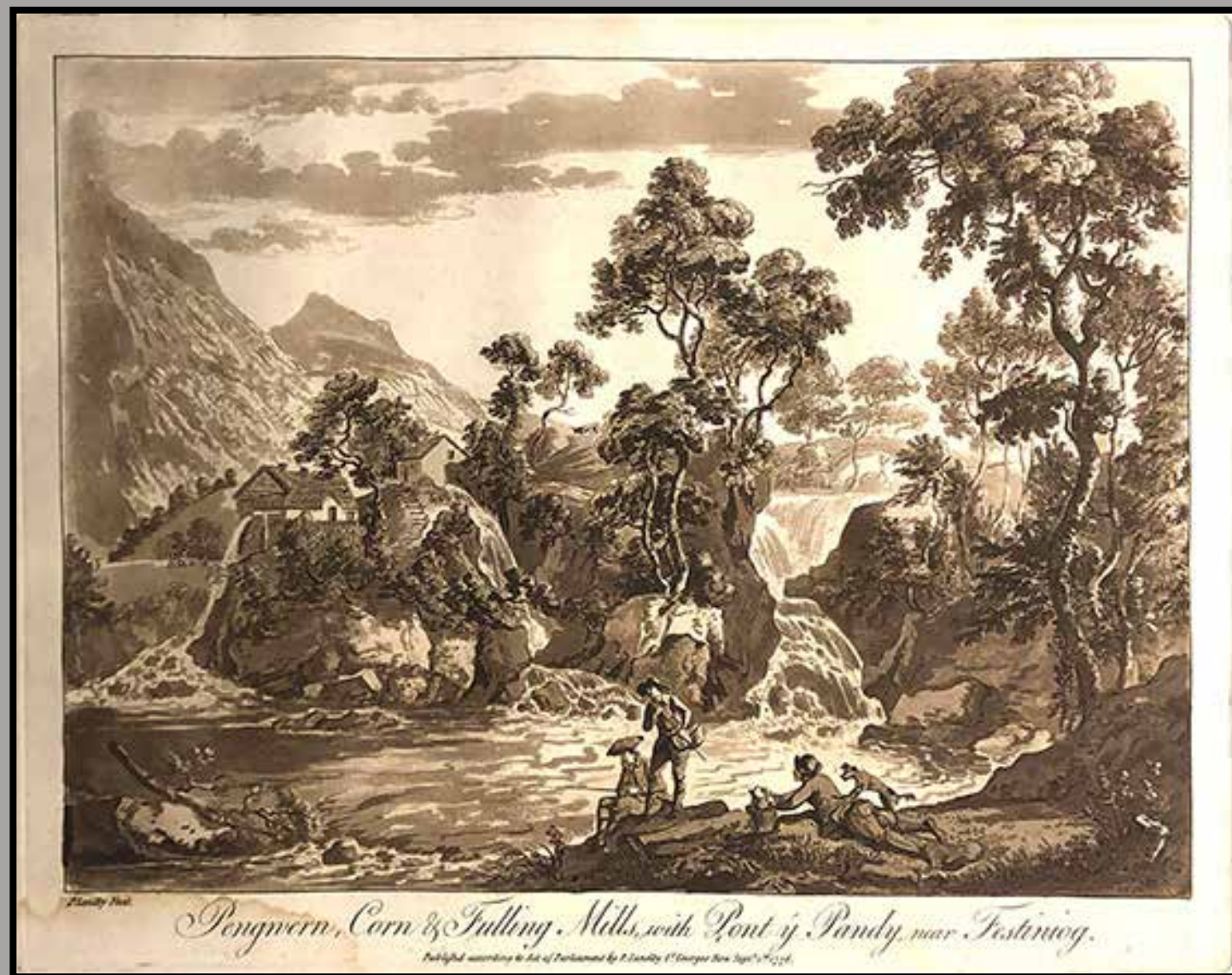
From a noble family, Saint-Non was an amateur artist and copyist as well as an important early user of aquatint. Around 1766 he devised a method he may have adapted from the experiments of another Parisian printmaker, François-Philippe Charpentier (1734-1817).



Paul Sandby (English, 1725–1809)
*View up Neath River from the House at Briton Ferry
in Glamorgan Shire, 1775*

Etching, aquatint, and mezzotint on paper
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2020.1.4)

Some of the most successful early experiments in aquatint were by Sandby, an accomplished etcher and mezzotinter, who clearly had an avidly curious mind. His print displayed here contains both mezzotint and aquatint on the same plate, allowing us to compare their effects.

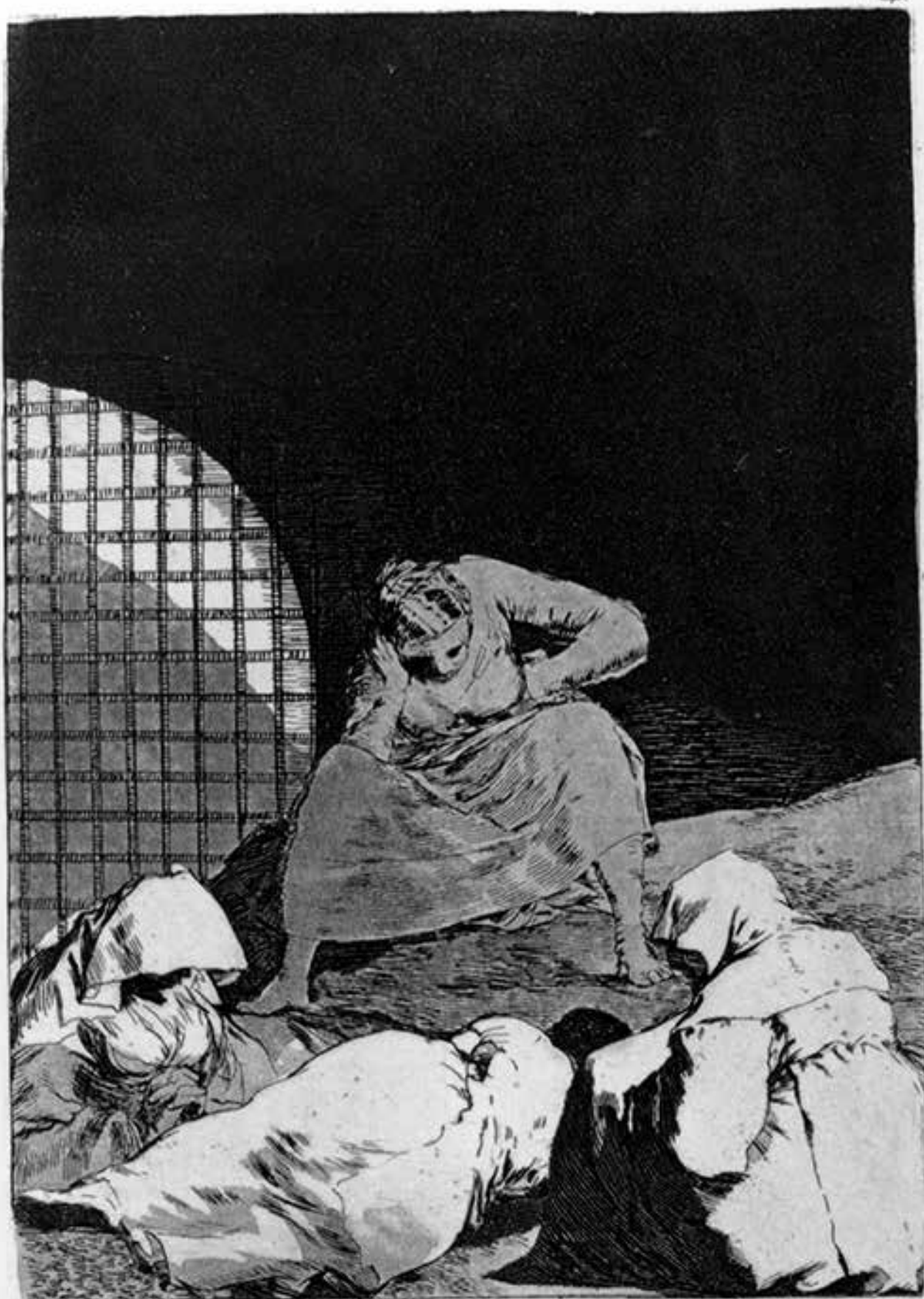


Paul Sandby (English, 1725–1809)

*Pegnern, Corn & Fulling Mills, with Pont y Pandy, near
Festiniog, 1776*

Etching and aquatint in sanguine on ivory laid paper

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2020.1.5)



Las rinde el Sueño.

Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828)

Las rinde el Sueño. (Sleep overcomes them.), 1799

Number 34 from the series *Los Caprichos (The Caprices)*

Etching and burnished aquatint on paper

10th edition, printed 1918–1928

Printed at Calcografía Nacional, Real Academia de San Fernando, Madrid

Gift of Mrs. Renato Monaco in memory of Alexander and Elsa Mohr (91.294.33)

Goya made numerous prints in four series: *Los Caprichos (The Caprices; 80 prints)*, *Los Desastres de La Guerra (The Disasters of War; 82 prints)*, *La Tauromaquia (Bullfighting; 33 prints)*, and *Los Disparates (The Follies; 22 prints)*. His work conveys the anxieties and horrors of the revolutionary and war-filled period through which he lived. He was able to generate so many prints because of the efficiency of aquatint to render the kinds of dramatic tonal variations that he envisioned for his macabre and violent scenes. Indeed, he became an exemplar for printmakers for generations to come, and some argue his accomplishments have yet to be matched. Many of Goya's copper plates were steel-faced and continued to be editioned into the 20th century.

46.



Corrección.

Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828)
Corrección. (Correction), 1799
Number 46 from the series *Los Caprichos (The Caprices)*
1st edition, printed 1799
Etching and burnished aquatint on paper
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (92.61)

54.



El Vergonzoso.

Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828)

El Vergonzoso. (The shamefaced one), 1799

Number 54 from the series *Los Caprichos (The Caprices)*

Etching and aquatint on paper

10th edition, printed 1918–1928

Printed at Calcografía Nacional, Real Academia de San Fernando, Madrid

Gift of Mrs. Renato Monaco in memory of Alexander and Elsa Mohr (91.294.50)

71.



Si amanecemos ; nos vamos.

Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828)

Si amanecemos; nos vamos.

(*When day breaks we will be off.*), 1799

Number 71 from the series *Los Caprichos* (*The Caprices*)

10th edition, printed 1918-1928

Etching, burnished aquatint, and burin on paper

Printed at Calcografía Nacional, Real Academia de San Fernando, Madrid

Gift of Mrs. Renato Monaco in memory of Alexander and Elsa Mohr (91.294.65)



Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828)

Por qué? (*Why?*), 1810–1820

Number 32 from the series *Los Desastres de la Guerra*
(*The Disasters of War*)

1st edition, printed 1863

Etching, lavis, drypoint, burin, and burnisher on wove paper

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2011.5)



Daniel Havell (English, 1785–1826)
After a watercolor by Henry Salt (English, 1780–1827)
Calcutta, 1809
Number 3 from the series *Twenty-four Views Taken in St.
Helena, the Cape, India, Ceylon, Abyssinia, and Egypt*
Hand-colored aquatint on paper
Published by William Miller, London
Gift of Mr. Stuart Borchard (63.32.6)



John Bluck (English, active 1791–1819)

After a watercolor by Henry Salt (English, 1780–1827)

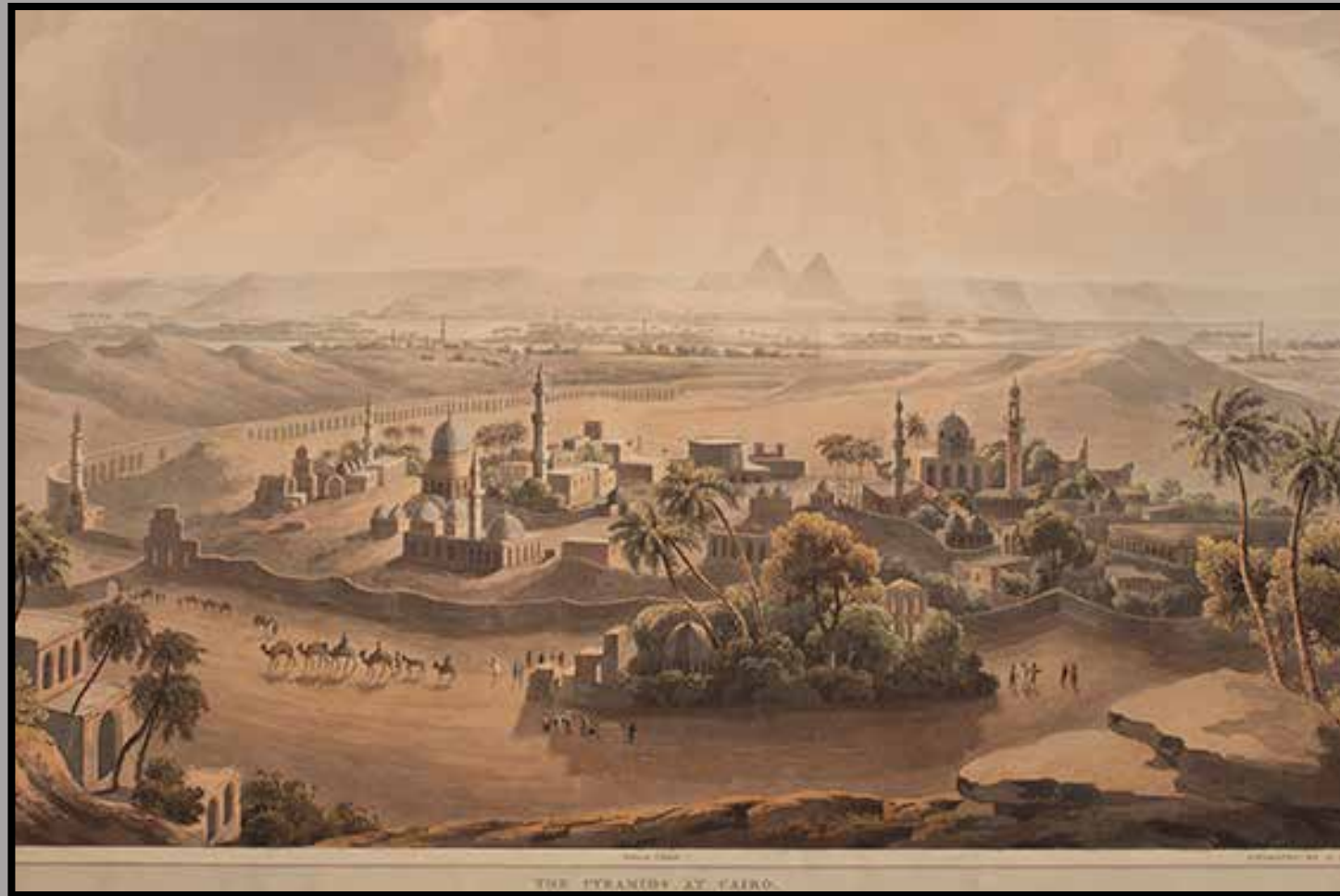
Pagoda at Tanjore, 1809

Number 10 from the series *Twenty-four Views Taken in St. Helena, the Cape, India, Ceylon, Abyssinia, and Egypt*

Hand-colored aquatint on paper

Published by William Miller, London

Gift of Mr. Stuart Borchard (63.32.9)



Daniel Havell (English, 1785-1826) and
Samuel Rawle (English, 1775-1860)
After a watercolor by Henry Salt (English, 1780-1827)

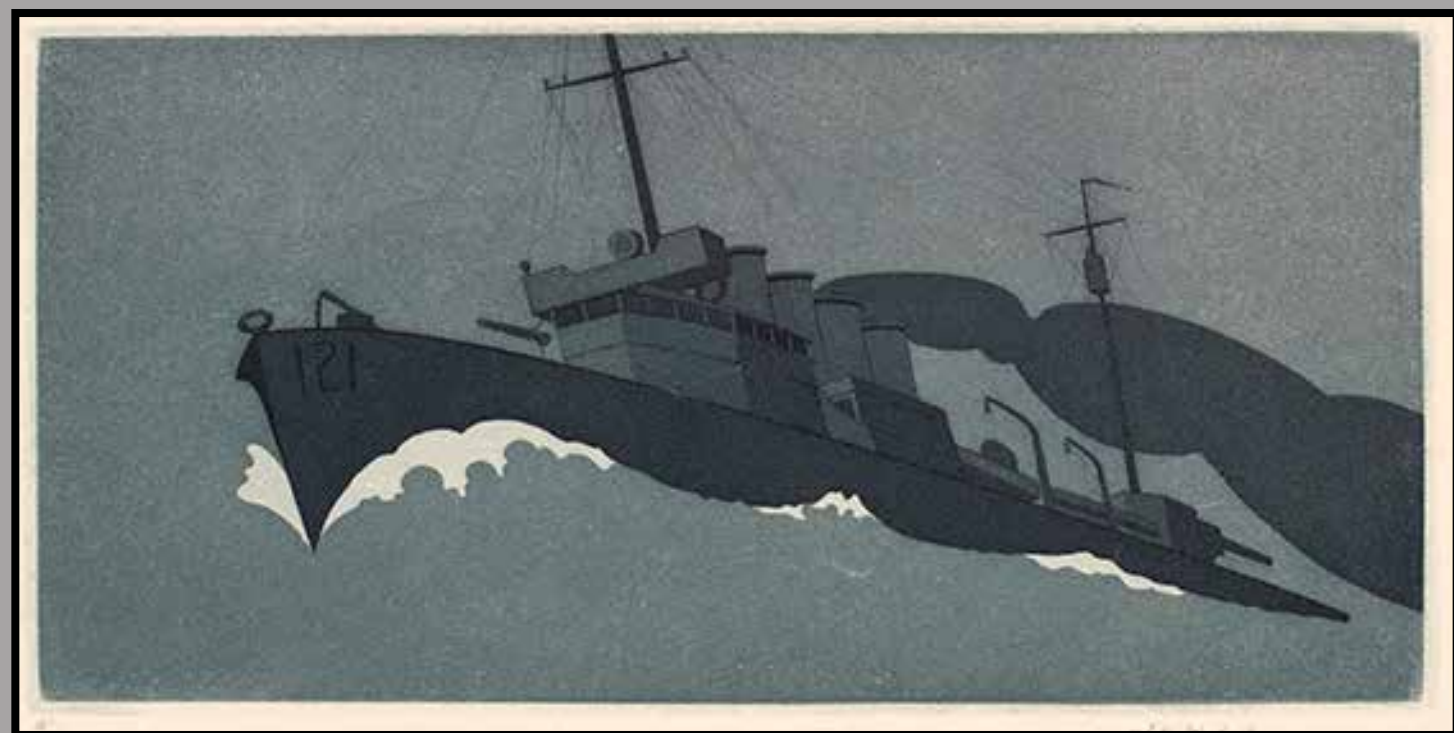
The Pyramids at Cairo, 1809

Number 24 from the series *Twenty-four Views Taken in St.
Helena, the Cape, India, Ceylon, Abyssinia, and Egypt*

Hand-colored aquatint on paper

Published by William Miller, London

Gift of Mr. Stuart Borchard (63.32.7)

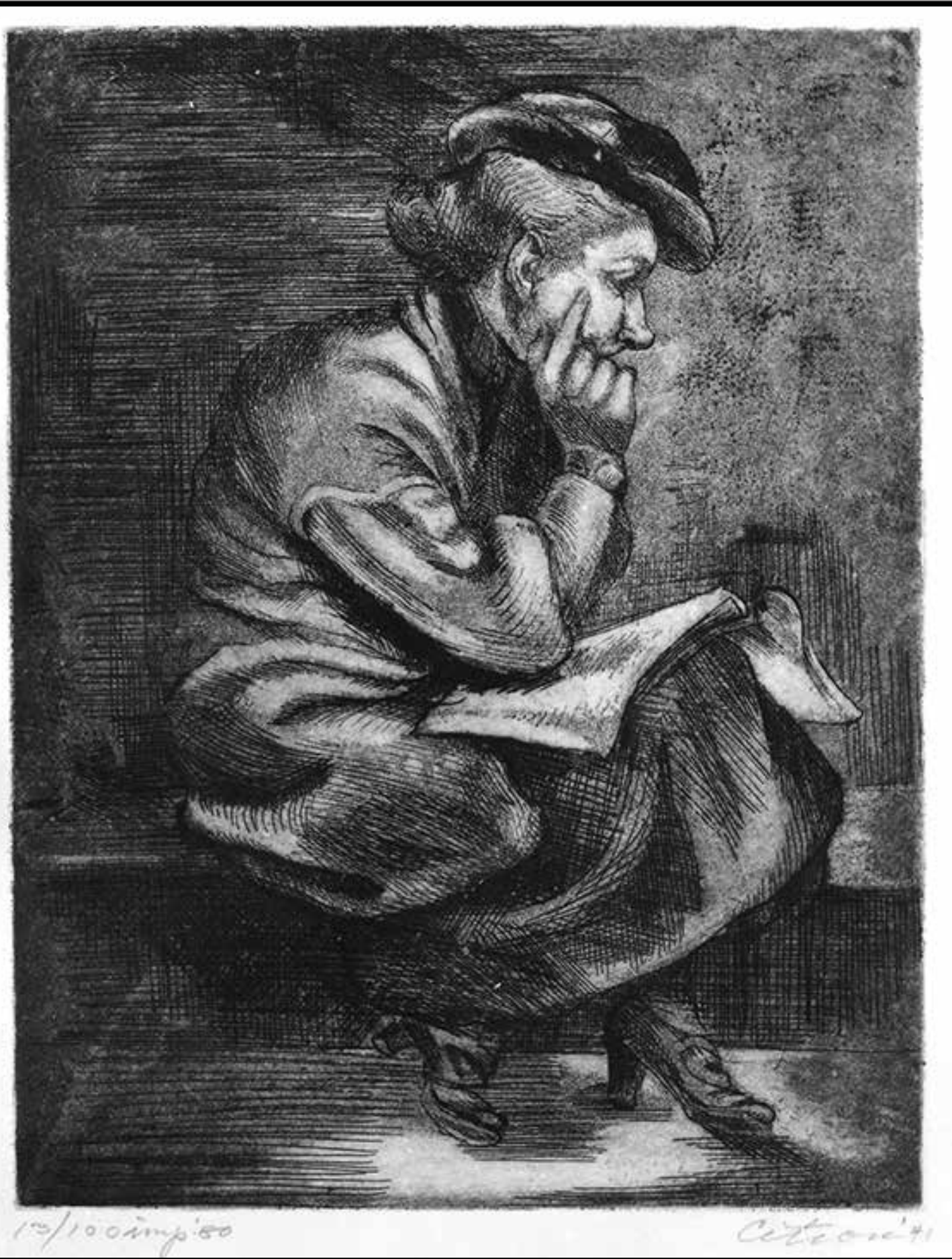


John Taylor Arms (American, 1887-1953)

Thirty Knots or Better, 1920

Etching and aquatint on paper

Gift of Doreen Canaday Spitzer in memory of Ward and Mariam Canaday (76.119)

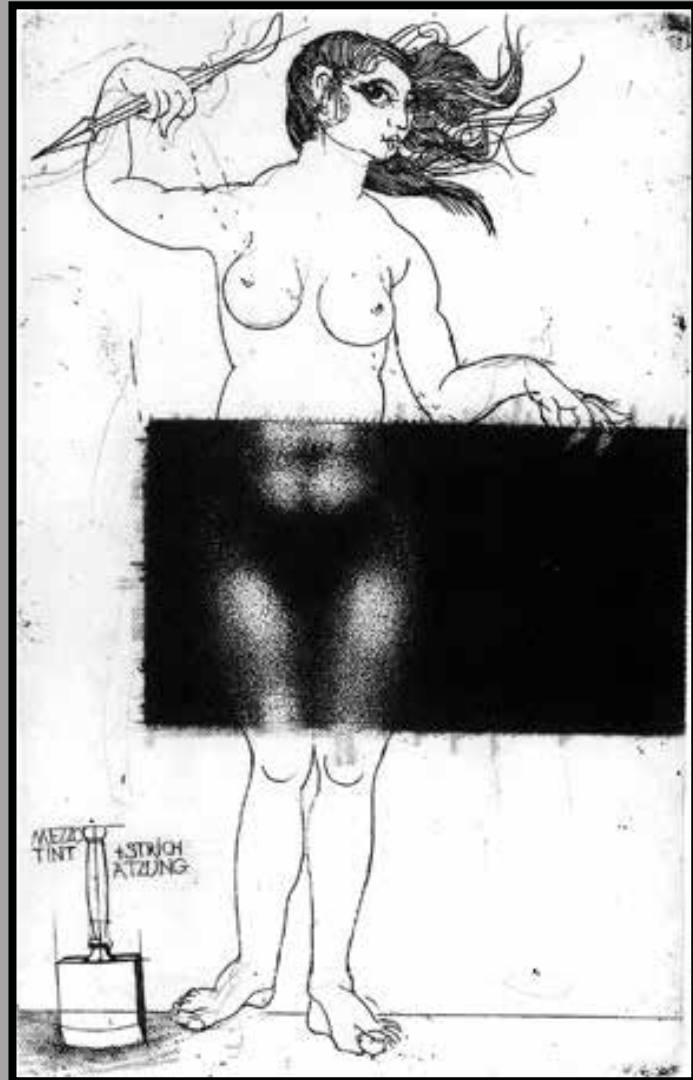


Minna Wright Citron (American, 1896-1991)

Lady with Program, 1941

Etching and aquatint on paper

Gift of Dr. Harry B. Cohen (84.86)



No. 3



No. 6

Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942-2012)

No. 3, 1976

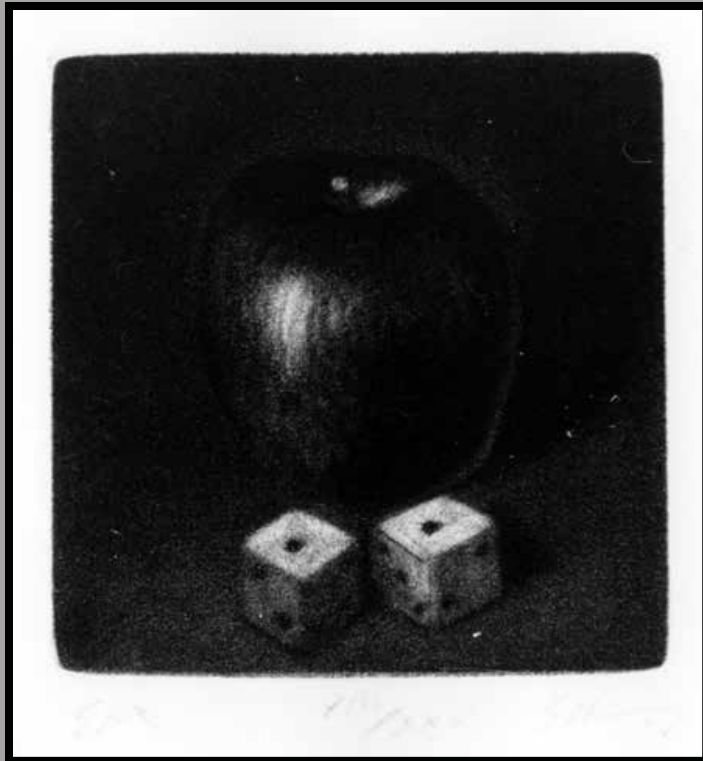
Mezzotint and etching on paper

Gift of the Artist (77.244.3)

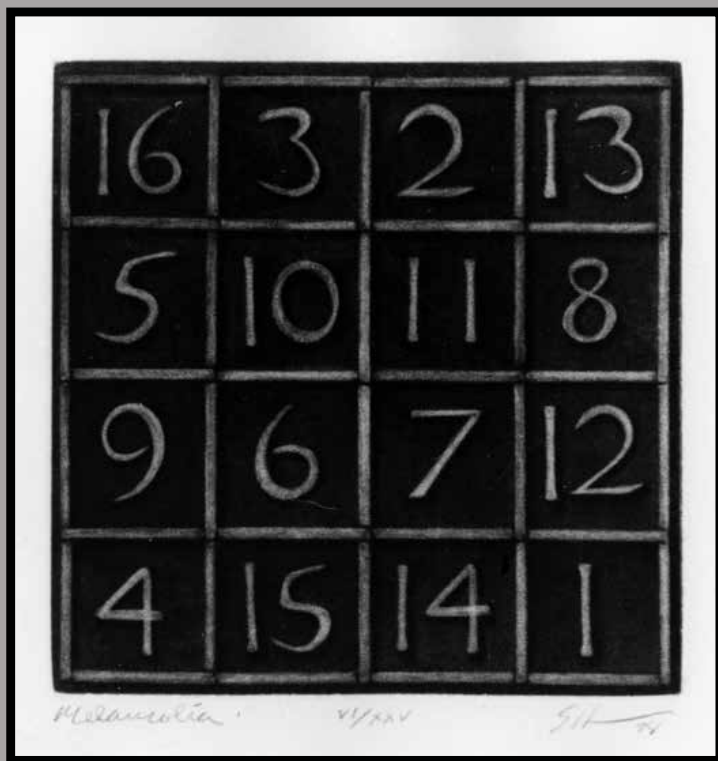
No. 6, 1976

Aquatint on paper

Gift of the Artist (77.244.6)



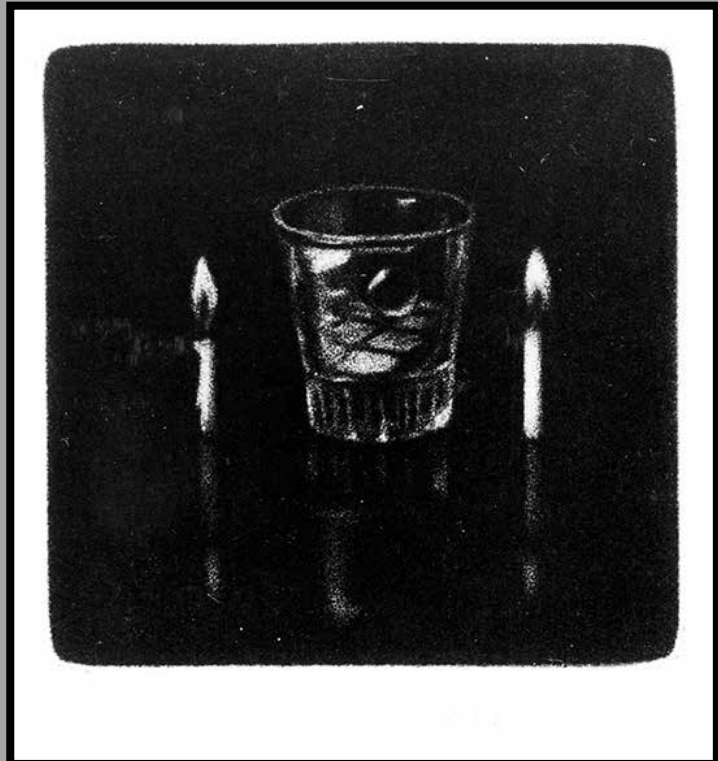
Eve (80.18)



Melancholia (80.19)



Dark Glasses 1 (80.20)



Dark Glasses 2 (80.21)

Robert Ecker (American, b. 1936)
Mezzotint on paper, 1978
Printed by R.E. Townsend Inc., Georgetown, MA
Published by Lakeside Studio, Lakeside, MI
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick P. Nause



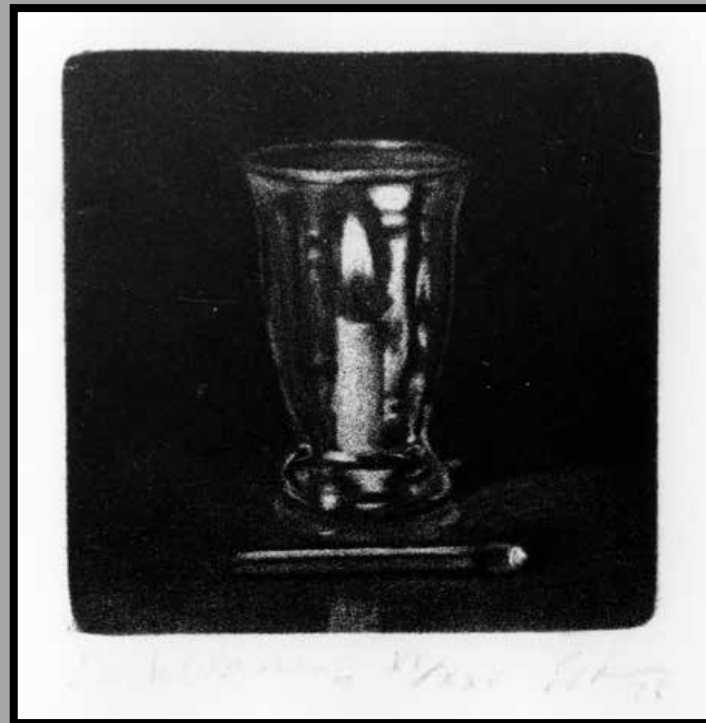
Dark Glasses 3 (80.22)



Dark Glasses 4 (80.23)

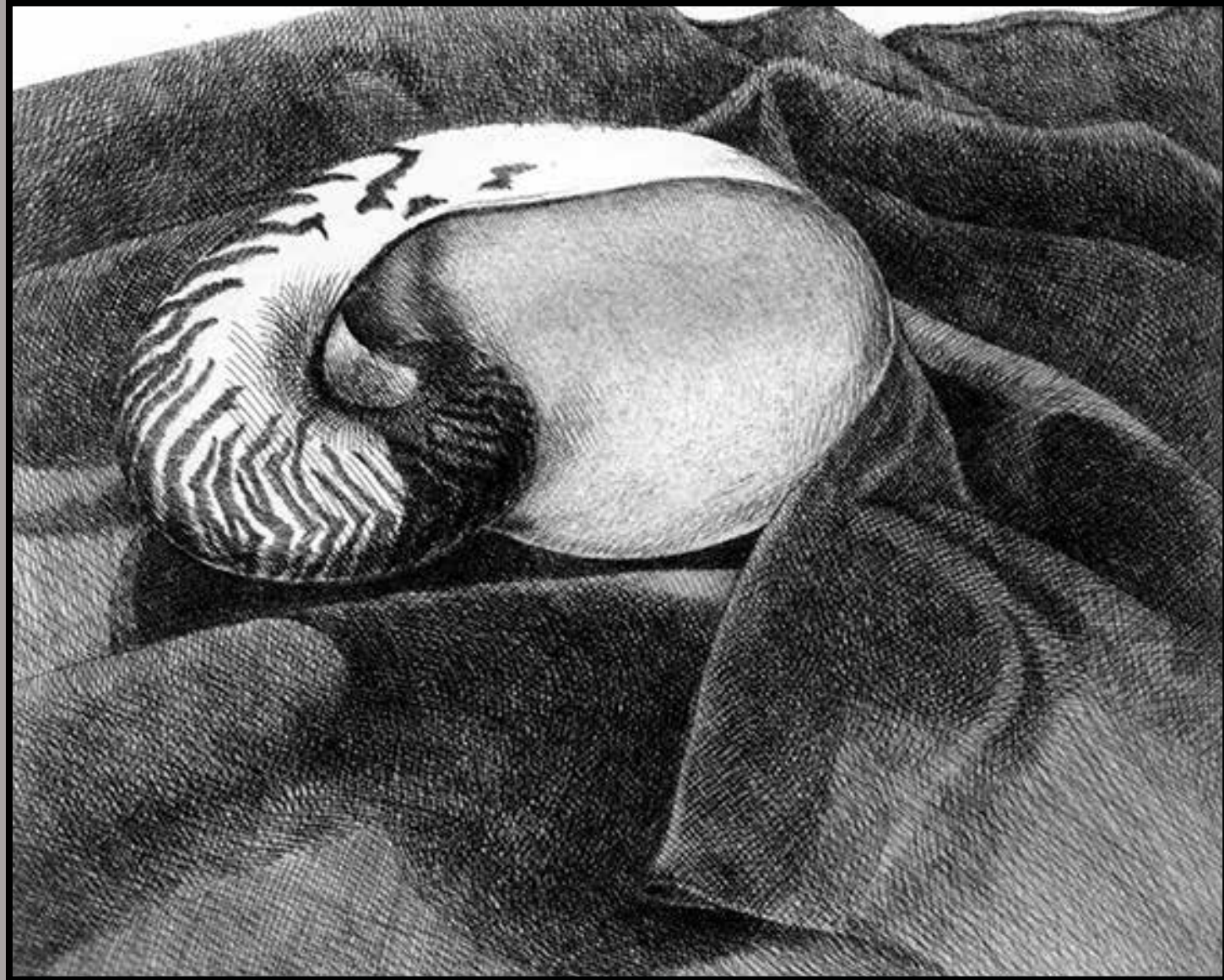


Dark Glasses 5 (80.24)



Dark Glasses 6 (80.25)

Robert Ecker (American, b. 1936)
Mezzotint on paper, 1978
Printed by R.E. Townsend Inc., Georgetown, MA
Published by Lakeside Studio, Lakeside, MI
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick P. Nause



Pat Hardy (American, b. 1940)

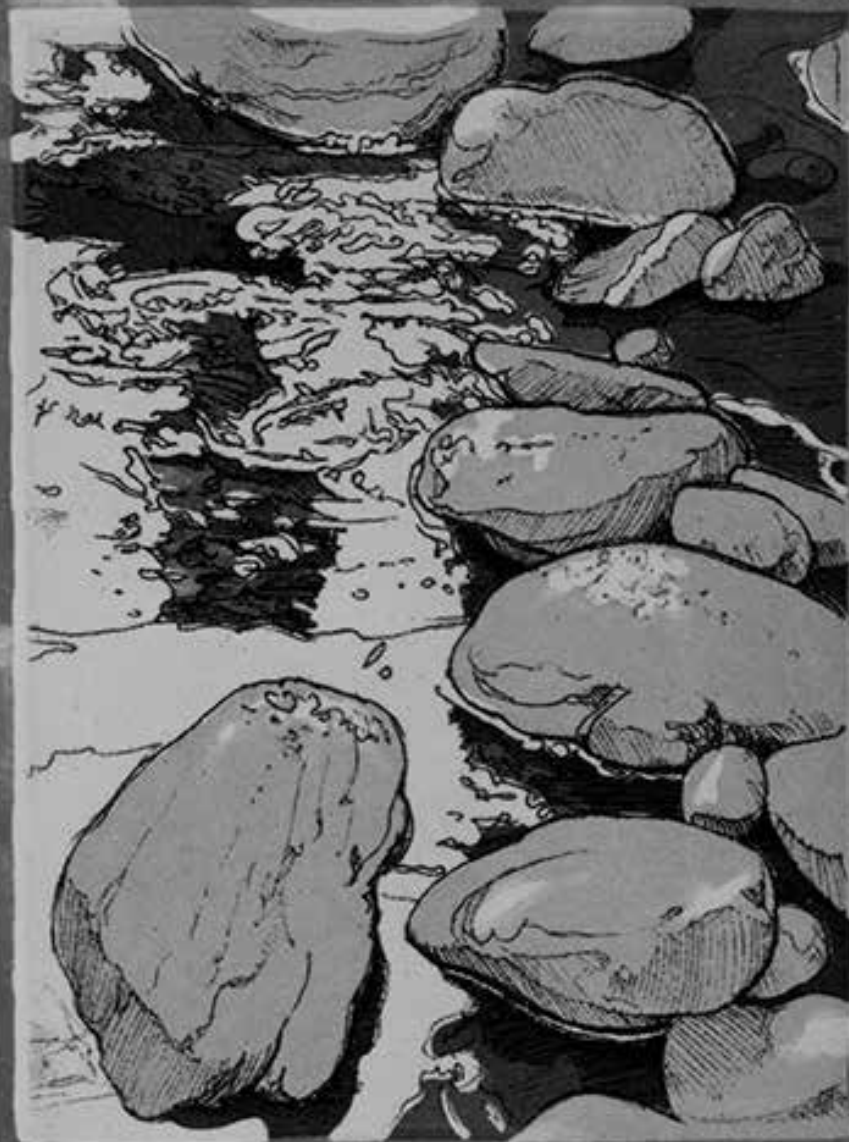
Nautilus I, 1977

Etching and aquatint on paper

Printed by Paul M. Maguire, Inc., Boston, MA

Published by Lakeside Studio, Lakeside, MI

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Christopher A. Graf (78.212)



Still water a7

XV Carl E. Schwartz

Carl E. Schwartz (American, 1935-2014)

Still Water a7, 1977

Color soft ground etching and aquatint on paper

Printed by R. E. Townsend, Inc., Georgetown, MA

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Christopher A. Graf (78.221)



Étienne Ret (French-American, 1900-1996)
Untitled artist proof, mid-20th century
Color aquatint on paper
Gift of the Betty Parsons Foundation (85.119)