

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Octavo®

Giovanni Battista Braccelli

Bizzarie di Varie Figure

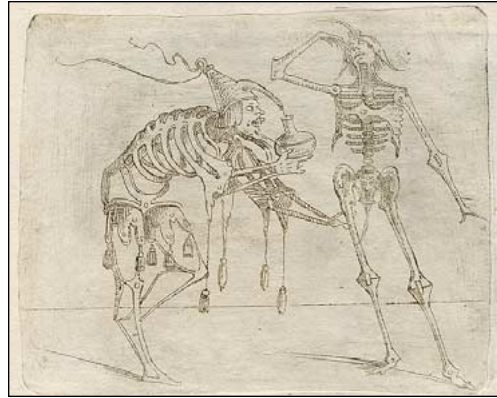
Livorno, 1624

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Bizzarie di Varie Figure

Commentary by Sue Welsh Reed

THE FIFTY PLATES of the *Bizzarie di varie figure* (Oddities of various figures), issued in Livorno in 1624, are the liveliest and most original etchings of a highly creative, if little known, Florentine artist, Giovanni Battista d'Antonio Braccelli (active 1616–49).¹ The *Bizzarie* exhibit characteristics of the artistic style called Mannerism, which originated in Italy in the sixteenth century. The term derives from the Italian word *maniera*, meaning style. It is applied to a way of working that was developed to oppose the idealized naturalism of the Renaissance as practiced by Raphael and others. Mannerist artists made art without literal fidelity to nature and they chose to exaggerate elements, for instance, elongating the human body to make it appear more graceful and elegant.



Alchemist or physician and patient, from *Bizzarie di varie figure*.

Many artists who served royalty elected to work in a Mannerist mode to create works of art that would puzzle, amuse, and entertain rulers and the members of their courts.

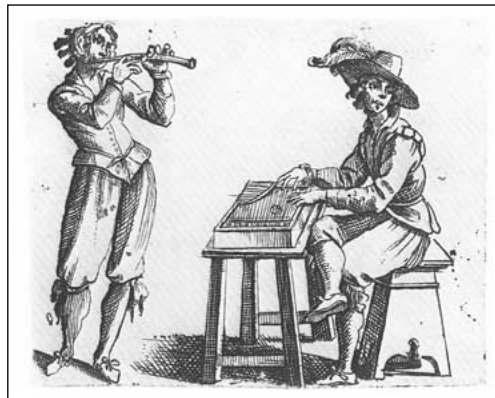
Shortly after 1600, Mannerism began to appear outmoded and the energetic Baroque style, with its renewed observation of nature, triumphed throughout much of Italy. In Florence, a return to naturalism had already begun in the late 1500s. Mannerism did not entirely disappear, however, and artists still used features of the style when it was useful to do so. While what little we know of Braccelli's painting style indicates that he painted figures in a naturalistic way, it is clear that he created the posturing couples in the *Bizzarie* with knowledge of the work of several Mannerist artists. These include the theatrical scenes and sprightly figures designed by Giulio Parigi (1571–1635) or those drawn and etched by Jacques Callot (1590–1635) for their patrons at the Medici court in Florence. Braccelli also responded to the fantastic anthropomorphic inventions of Giuseppe

1. The artist's name occurs in multiple forms (e.g., Giovanbatista; Bracelli; Braccielli) within his own work and secondary sources, and this volume's title is also sometimes rendered "*Bizarie*"; the styles used by the Library of Congress have been adopted for this Octavo Edition.

Arcimboldo (1527–93), a Milanese artist who worked for the court of the great cultural patron Rudolf II (1552–1612) at Prague.

The details of Braccelli's life are few, and have been confused by the fact that early writers conflated his biography with that of a Genoese painter of the same name. To further complicate matters, Braccelli was also called by the last name Brazzè and referred to by his nickname "il Bigio" (the gray one), as he is said to have habitually worn that color. He was trained as a painter in Florence in the early years of the seventeenth century and is recorded on the membership records of the *Accademia del Disegno* (Academy of Drawing) from 1619 to 1635. Braccelli studied with the popular painter Jacopo da Empoli (1551–1640), a skilled draftsman who encouraged his students to draw from nature, a practice revived in reaction

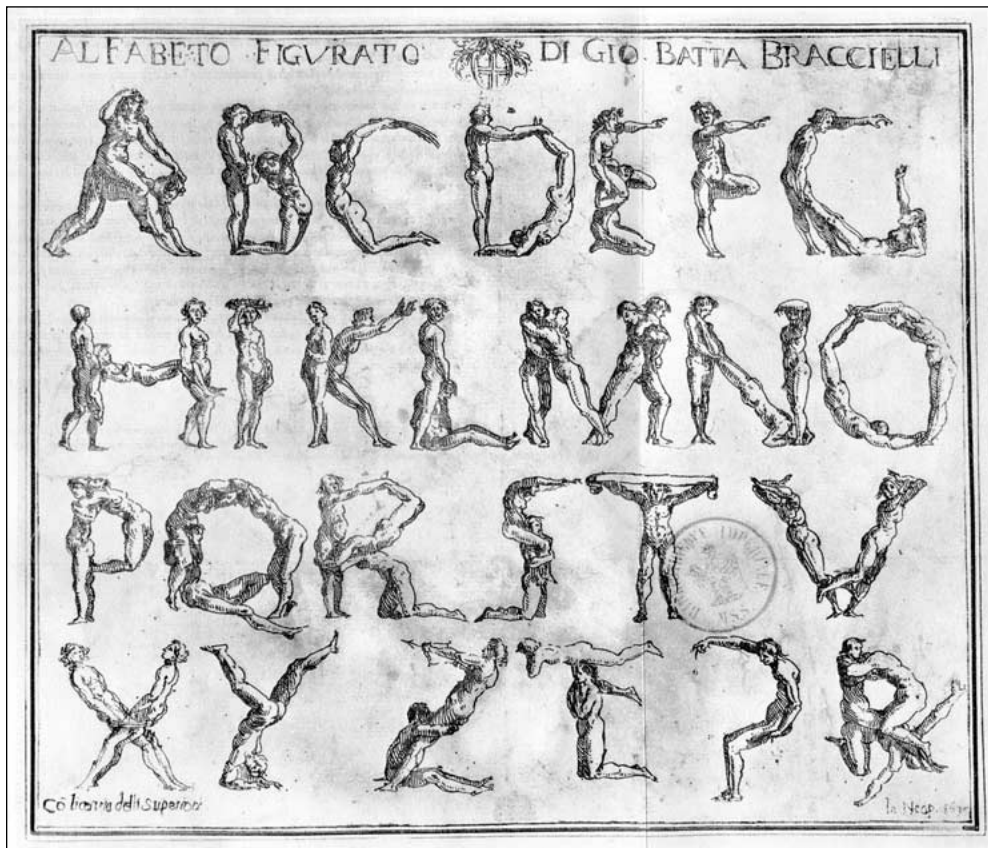
to Mannerism (Filippo Baldinucci, the seventeenth-century chronicler of Florentine artists, remarked that Jacopo had a school full of young men enthusiastically drawing from nature). Along with other young painters, Braccelli assisted Jacopo with the decorations of a room in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence from 1616–17; the figure of *Honor* he painted on the ceiling may still be viewed today. Braccelli continued



Braccelli. *A Pair of Musicians*, etching, from *Figure con instrumenti musicali e boscarecci*. Rome, ca. 1630.

to work with his master from 1619 to 1623 on decorations for the cathedral in Livorno, which was designed in 1594 by Bernardo Buontalenti (1531–1608), an architect highly favored by the Medici. In the following year he produced the *Bizzarie* in that city. From this point on, we know of him only from the eighty-eight etchings he made from 1624 to about 1649. From inscriptions, it is clear that some prints were made in Rome. No work of Braccelli's is known after 1649, and the date and place of his death remain mysteries.²

2. The most complete biography of Braccelli is by Anna Mariani, in *Il Seicento fiorentino: Arte a Firenze da Ferdinando I a Cosimo III* (Florence: Cantini, 1986), 3:42–44. Volumes 1 and 2 of that work illustrate one painting and a drawing attributed to Braccelli. The painting *Honor* in the Casa Buonarroti is illustrated in Adriaan W. Vliegthart, *La Galleria Buonarroti: Michelangelo e Michelangelo il Giovane*, trans. Giorgio Faggini (Florence: Istituto Universitario Olandese di Storia dell'Arte, 1976).



Braccelli. *Alfabeto figurato*, etching. Naples, 1632.

From the little we know, it would appear that Braccelli's paintings reflect the influence of his teacher and were executed within the context of larger, group efforts. None shows the individualistic side of his personality manifest in the *Bizzarie*. In the few paintings attributed to him, Braccelli's naturalistic figures, with their rounded facial features and gentle expressions, resemble works by his master, whose style was more idealized and less dramatic than Caravaggio's. To get an idea of Braccelli's figure style, one can examine the pairs of musicians in his one other extended work, a set of thirty-one etchings from about 1630 entitled *Figure con instrumenti musicali e bosca-recci* (Figures with instruments musical and sylvan), the title page for which is inscribed with the artist's name and "pittore Fiorentino in Roma" (Florentine painter in Rome). The figures recall Braccelli's Florentine training and are reminiscent of the many etchings by the painter Antonio Tempesta (1555–1630), who was born in Florence and remained popular there, although he worked in Rome. Whereas a few of Braccelli's musicians are depicted in Asian or exotic garb, most are in contemporary European dress. Braccelli also designed and etched an *Alfabeto figurato* (Figural alphabet), in which the letters are composed of

acrobatic nudes. Marked “la Neap. 1632,” this is the only known print by Braccelli that was published in Naples. Its lighthearted, playful nudity probably prohibited it from being issued in sedate papal Rome.³

Braccelli’s remaining etchings were made in Rome and date from 1626 to about 1649. Six of these prints reproduce sculpture from Saint Peter’s Basilica. These include Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s (1598–1680) famous baldacchino with twisted columns (1626); four colossal statues of saints by Bernini and others (1640);⁴ and a relief



Braccelli. *Saint Longinus*, etching after Bernini. Rome, 1640.

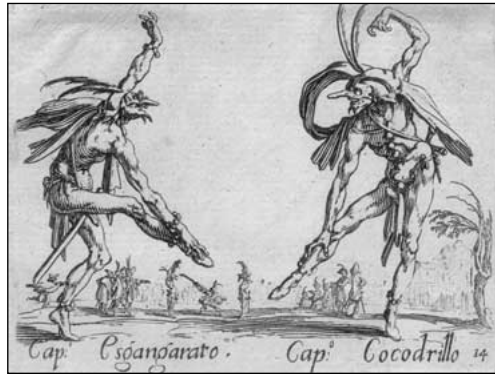
(1595–1654) representing Attila halted at the Gates of Rome by Pope Leo the Great (about 1649). This print is also signed “Braccellus Flo[rentis]. Pi[ctor].” (Braccelli, Florentine painter). A Roman procession (1629) based on a drawing by the Florentine painter Agostino Ciampelli (1565–1630) and an undated bacchanal complete Braccelli’s etched oeuvre.

Braccelli served in the Tuscan army, not an unusual occupation for artists of the period. He was stationed in Livorno after his work for the cathedral in that city was completed. Lacking an established reputation, the young artist probably had a meager income, and military service guaranteed food and shelter. While there was no outstanding conflict at the time, there was a need for a military presence in the port city for the purpose of civil peacekeeping. The grand dukes had designated Livorno as the principal port of Tuscany in the 1570s and promoted its growth by offering tax breaks to merchants

3. Nearly all of Braccelli’s prints are reproduced in Maxime Préaud, *Bracelli: Gravures* (Paris: Chêne, 1975). *The Procession to S. Giovanni della Nazione Fiorentina in Rome* is reproduced in Paola Bellini and Mark Carter Leach, ed., *Italian Masters of the Seventeenth Century*, The Illustrated Bartsch, vol. 44 (New York: Abaris Books, 1983), 268.
4. To *Saint Longinus* (Bernini) and *Saint Veronica* (Mochi), both reproduced in Préaud 1975, can be added *Saint Andrew* (Duquesnoy) and *Saint Helena* (Bolgi) from a group of four on the market in 1987, kindly brought to my attention by James A. Bergquist.

and encouraging a tolerant attitude toward foreigners. The population rose from some 5,000 inhabitants in 1609 to nearly 9,000 in 1622, and more than doubled by the end of the century. Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici (1590–1621) continued the plans of his predecessors to enlarge the facilities of the port by deepening and protecting the harbor. He also continued to patronize artists who executed commissions for Livorno, including the monumental sculptural ensemble of his father (Grand Duke Ferdinand I) and four slaves that decorated the harbor front.⁵

Like many aspiring artists, Braccelli dedicated the *Bizzarie* to a prominent and influential individual, in this instance Pietro di Pietro de' Medici (1592–1654), who was a grandson of Grand Duke Cosimo I (1519–74), and whose own father, Pietro de' Medici (1554–1604) had fought in wars against the Turks. Like his father, the younger Pietro was a military man and served as governor



Jacques Callot. *Captain Esgangarato and Captain Cocodrillo*, etching, from the *Balli di Sfessania*. Nancy, 1622.

of Livorno from 1619 to 1635.⁶ Cosimo II, who suffered from tuberculosis, delegated many of his government responsibilities to members of the Medici family.

Cosimo II's taste may well have influenced the fantastic *Bizzarie*. He frequently commissioned entertainment of various sorts, often involving elaborate costumes and props, which were shared with the court and the populace. Whereas spectacles might be produced to promote the Medici dynasty, celebrate weddings, or entertain foreign visitors, “the personal taste of Cosimo II for pageantry, the comic, and the bizarre and his almost insatiable desire to be entertained are factors not to be underemphasized. In the absence of any special occasion, Cosimo II was often inclined to order entertainment for the sheer fun of it, as a detailed court diary ... documents.”⁷ His death in

5. For information on Cosimo II and the port of Livorno, see his biography in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 30 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1984), 48–54.
6. For images and brief biographies of the Medici family, see Karla Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici*, 3 vols. (Florence: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1981–87), especially vol. 2, nos. 100 (Pietro) and 101 (Pietro de' Pietro).
7. Information and quote from Jeffrey Blanchard's essay “Theater,” in *Jacques Callot Prints & Related Drawings* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1975), 60.

1621 marked a decline of patronage in Tuscany and almost certainly caused Callot to leave Florence. This left the way clear for Braccelli to produce lively, playful prints comparable to the highly successful sets of Callot. Braccelli was not, however, a professional printmaker; his somewhat eccentric prints were far less widely distributed than those of Callot at the time of their creation, and are consequently much rarer today. Beginning in the 1630s, Braccelli's work became overshadowed by the amusing images of two fellow Florentine artists, Stefano della Bella (1610–64) and Baccio del Bianco (1604–56). Their plentiful etchings and drawings of children and dwarfs at play met the continuing demand for this type of entertaining image. Interestingly enough, Della Bella and Del Bianco became friends when they, too, worked in Livorno.

The *Bizzarie* reflect Braccelli's knowledge of Callot's *Balli di Sfessania*, a series of twenty-four small etchings, each depicting a pair of posturing actors from the Italian comedy (*commedia dell'arte*). The *Balli* etchings were issued in 1622, immediately after Callot returned to Nancy, his birthplace and the capital of the duchy of Lorraine. It is highly likely that Callot prepared the drawings for the *Balli* in Florence and equally certain that the finished prints were sent back to that Italian city, where Callot had made his reputation. Without any doubt, Braccelli was familiar with these images. Whereas Callot depicted traditional actors in easily recognizable attitudes, Braccelli presented a range of tumblers, acrobats, duelists, tennis players, and composite and metaphorical figures in a strange and capricious fashion. In his designs for the *Bizzarie*, Braccelli adapted the conceit of paired actors from Callot's *Balli*, but did not imitate the elder artist's neat and highly controlled calligraphic etching technique. Although Braccelli used stipple and short hatching to create texture and to soften forms, he made simple, one-bite etchings that were not as sophisticated in their technique as Callot's. However, the playful, witty character of these unique images more than compensates for the simplicity of the printmaking method.

The Rosenwald copy of the *Bizzarie di varie figure* is the best preserved of only two known complete copies, and the only one in North America.⁸ Using small copper plates to create impressions ranging in height from $3\frac{1}{8}$ to $3\frac{15}{16}$ inches and in width from $3\frac{5}{16}$ to $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches, Braccelli etched three introductory texts and forty-seven pictorial images. The title page incorporates a frame of the type of Mannerist ornament called strapwork, which appears

8. The other copy, with the plates sequenced differently, is in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and is reproduced in Préaud 1975.

to represent flexible segments cut from leather. The strapwork frame encloses the etched title, date (1624), and a dedication to “S[ignor] Don Pietro Medici.” Two human figures crouch under the weight of its curling elements, their legs extending to become abstract segments of the frame itself. A wispy-haired youth, flanked by smoking lamps, regards an open book. Draperies and masks complete this ornamented gem. The general shape of the frame, the figures, and the lettering appear to be based on the title page of Callot’s *Capricci di varie figure*, a set of prints published in Florence in 1617 that contains fifty miniaturized compositions of figures and landscapes depicted in a generally naturalistic manner, with little of the theatrical élan of Callot’s later series, the *Balli di Sfessania*.

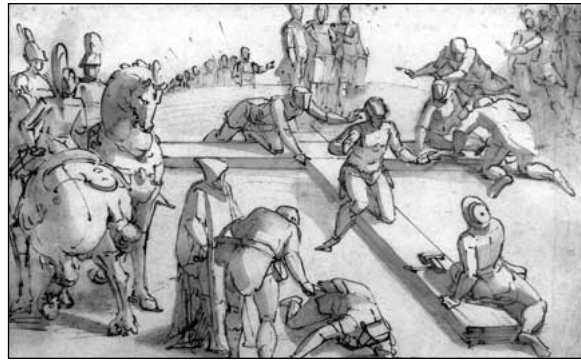
There follows a print dominated by the Medici coat of arms surrounded by military trophies—shields, lances, cannon, and so forth—appropriate to the profession of Pietro de’ Medici, whose name appears beneath. This print also contains tiny letters that spell out the artist’s name and Livorno as the place of publication. Then comes a page of etched text in which Bracelli dedicates the prints to “Don Pietro Medici,” using a flowery style and somewhat difficult language:

To the Most Illustrious Lord DON PIETRO MEDICI
It was a most ancient and praiseworthy custom, most illustrious lord, to sacrifice first fruits to the gods, who thus received the heart of the offerer and the birth of the victim. I, respecting such a usage, and having formed a flock of various caprices from the depths of my mind, offer the choicest, your most illustrious lordship, as first fruits, with which, like the imitators of the gods, my heart will be found pleasing along with the work, like a first born. And just as their welcome sacrifices were perfected with fire, so I hope that with the fire of your highness’ love and might this, my victim, will obtain a pleasing conclusion, and the incense of my love for your highness will complete the sacrifice; and that thence it will be granted me to remain your devoted servant in grace. Meanwhile I wish for it the compliment of your highness’ every greater thought.
Your Most Illustrious Lordship’s

Humblest Servant,
Giovanbatista Bracelli

The forty-seven pictorial plates are not numbered or marked; indeed, each of the two complete copies is bound in a different sequence. In the Rosenwald copy, as one turns the pages, the images seem to unfurl at random, producing an overall sense of surprise and capriciousness. The renowned English art historian Sir Kenneth Clark, who owned a partial set of the prints and was the first to write about them, categorized the images into three general groups: anthropomorphic figures composed of natural objects and elements; composite figures made up of recognizable inanimate objects; and abstract mechanical figures made of various materials.⁹ Most

of the images in the *Bizzarie* depict this last category, and consist of pairs of dynamic figures constructed from fabricated elements, such as wooden boxes or frames, square and round metal links, metal plates, cylindrical containers, braided hair, wooden screws, twisted wax tapers,



Luca Cambiaso. *The Raising of the Cross*, pen and bistre wash. Genoa, ca. 1560.

and so forth. Their poses are suggestive of tumblers, acrobats, contortionists, dancers, duelists, sportsmen, and actors. The bodies constructed of cubic forms recall the amazingly abstract drawings of the sixteenth-century Genoese painter Luca Cambiaso (1527–88). Some of the most imaginative poses are impossibly contorted and bring to mind deceptive stunts or magic tricks—bodies gliding through themselves or each other.

The Rosenwald copy of the *Bizzarie* begins with a series of anthropomorphic figures. First, Painting, in the form of a winged easel, rests its arms on the figures of Sculpture and Architecture, each composed of the appropriate materials and tools of its trade. Next, the four elements appear. The first pair consists of Earth, a woman constructed of trees and vegetation; she is accompanied by Air, a female figure fabricated from clouds, her hair blowing in the wind. On the following page appear bearded masculine figures representing Fire (with flames and lightning bolts) and Water (dripping liquid and incorporating aquatic creatures). Next we see trees metamorphos-

9. See Kenneth Clark, “The ‘Bizarie’ of Giovanbatista Braccelli,” *The Print Collector’s Quarterly*, 16 (1929): 310–26.

ing into human figures (or vice versa); two of them represent Adam and Eve, and flank a female-bodied serpent. The remainder of the *Bizzarie* contains only three additional anthropomorphic images: One is a fantastic boat, its hull and masts entirely fabricated from human bodies, recalling the imaginative vessels designed by Giulio Parigi for nautical festivals conducted to entertain the Medici court. An anthropomorphic view of the port of Livorno depicts towered city walls, a long jetty, and a steep hill in an image that may also be read as a reclining figure with one knee raised and arms akimbo. A similar conceit presents rows of houses formed into a figure with its arms stretched out and its knees raised.



Remigio Cantagallina. *Boatful of Musicians Representing the Sea God Glaucus and Tritons*, etching after Giulio Parigi, from *Battaglia Navale rapp. in Arno*. Florence, 1608.

Another type of Braccelli image is reminiscent of the marvelously imaginative allegorical heads that Giuseppe Arcimboldo composed of fruits, flowers, vegetables, and the tools of the sitter's trade—for example, books or farming implements. Drums, arms, and armor create a pair of helmeted soldiers. Two assemblages of inanimate objects stand side by side: on the left is a male figure made of pavement layer's materials and equipment—his torso is a rectangular, pockmarked paving stone of the sort still used in Florence today, and his limbs are shovels, a pick, a plumb line, and a trowel. His bucket head is inclined toward a female figure holding out a bowl: her legs are scissors, while a shawl and bundles of fibers arranged as hair suggest that she is a

needlewoman, although the presence of several metal vessels may broaden her association to the household arts in general. Another pair, perhaps representing servants, one male, one female, are constructed of domestic utensils including kettles, spoons, and a pair of bellows. Two duelists made of what appear to be segmented shoe frames fight over an animal skin, using cobbler's tools.

Some images have a literary context or suggest further content.

An alchemist or physician pours liquid into a bottle from a retort that at the same time serves as his hat. A number of plates involve figures whose bodies are composed of lozenges similar to the black-and-white diamonds that adorn the costume of Harlequin, the *commedia dell'arte* character. Indeed, these figures often prance extravagantly and gesticulate as if they were appearing on stage or as actors in one of Jacques Callot's *Balli* series.

The inventiveness and fantasy of the *Bizzarie di varie figure* have attracted passionate collectors over the years, including Horace Walpole (1717–97), the eccentric English man of letters, who wrote in his copy “the artist seems to have had a wild imagination.”¹⁰ In the twentieth century, Surrealist and Dada artists paid tribute to the prints; the poet Tristan Tzara, who wrote a commentary on them, perceived the images as representing serious games—courtship dances and preludes to love: “It is in an elegant way, proper to the seventeenth century, that Braccelli envisioned the manifestations of eroticism. Games of love have become social games. Seen, however, from the angle of this sort of amorous dramaturgy, these games will not overstep the cultural bounds of manners and customs.”¹¹ It is not difficult to understand why Braccelli's witty and original etchings engaged the imagination in their day, and continue to entertain in ours.



Niccolo Nelli. *Agriculture*, etching after Giuseppe Arcimboldo. Venice, 1567.

10. Quoted in Clark 1929, 323.

11. Tzara's essay appeared in a limited-edition facsimile of the Rosenwald copy, *Braccelli: Bizzarie* (Paris: Alain Brioux, 1963), and was reprinted in Préaud 1975 (from page 16 of which the quotation is taken).

Sue Welsh Reed is Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She has been a member of the curatorial staff of the department of prints and drawings since 1959 and has participated in planning, selecting, and installing many exhibitions, ranging from Karolik 1962 to *The Age of Rembrandt* 1981. She is a contributing author to numerous books and exhibition catalogues, including *French Prints from the Age of the Musketeers* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1998), *Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), and *The French Renaissance in Prints in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Los Angeles: Grunewald Center for the Graphic Arts, 1994). She has curated several exhibitions featuring masters of the print medium, including Braccelli and Tempesta from Renaissance Italy and Callot and Stella from Baroque France.

FURTHER READING

Braccelli: Bizzarie, propos sur Bracelli par Tristan Tzara; l'aventure d'une livre et notes bibliographiques par Alain Brieux, editeur (Paris: Alain Brieux, 1963). Reproduces the Rosenwald copy.

Clark, Kenneth. "The 'Bizarie' of Giovanbatista Braccelli," *The Print Collector's Quarterly*, 16 (1929): 310–26.

Faust, Wolfgang Max. *Giovanni Battista Bracelli: Bizzarie di varie figure*. Nördlingen, Germany: Verlag Dr. Alfons Uhl, 1981. Facsimile of the Rosenwald copy.

Il Seicento fiorentino: Arte a Firenze da Ferdinando I a Cosimo III. 3 vols. Florence: Cantini, 1986. For works of art and biographies of Braccelli and other Florentine artists of the period.

Préaud, Maxime. *Bracelli: Gravures*. Paris: Chêne, 1975. Reproduces the Bibliothèque Nationale de France copy of the *Bizzarie* and nearly all of Braccelli's other prints.

Reed, Sue Welsh, and Richard Wallace. *Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989. For information on prints and printmakers of Braccelli's era.

Vliegenthart, Adriaan W. *La Galleria Buonarroti: Michelangelo e Michelangelo il Giovane*. Translated by Giorgio Faggin. Florence: Istituto Universitario Olandese di Storia dell'Arte, 1976.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Pair of Musicians and *Saint Longinus*, from *Bracelli: Gravures* by Maxime Préaud (1975). Photographs by H. Paulmann and Oscar Savio.

Alfabeto figurato from *Bracelli: Bizzarie* (1963). Courtesy Librairie Alain Brieux, Paris.

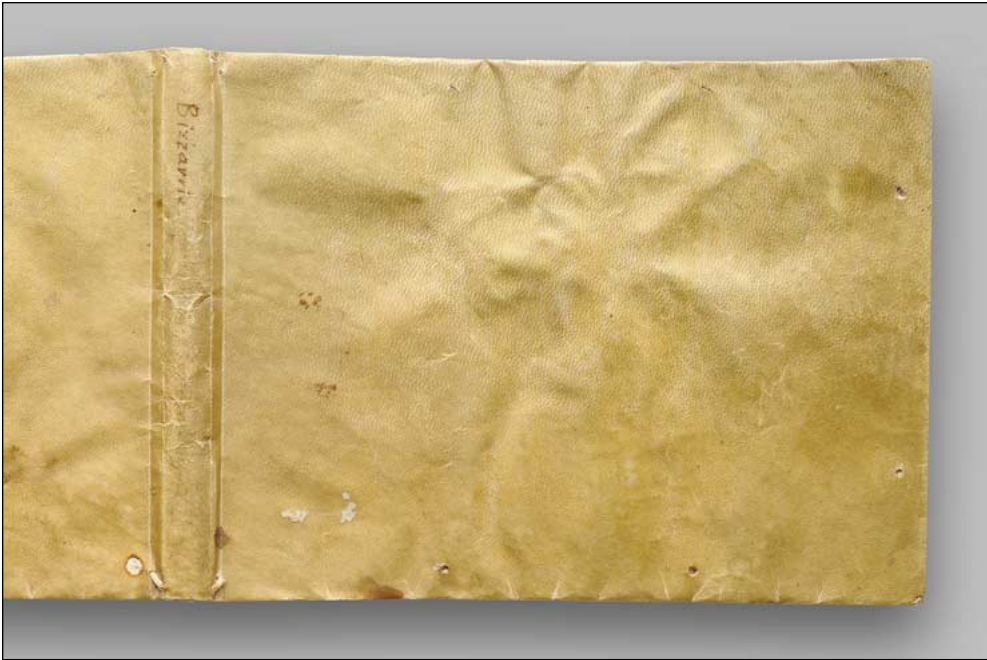
Captain Esgangarato and *Captain Cocodrillo* by Jacques Callot; *The Raising of the Cross* by Luca Cambiaso; and *Boatful of Musicians* by Remigio Cantagallina. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. ©2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Agriculture by Niccolo Nelli. Private collection. Photograph courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Binding & Collation

Binding: *Bizzarie di varie figure* is bound in full contemporary vellum, lacking ties, with the title hand lettered on the spine. It measures 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (180 x 250 mm).

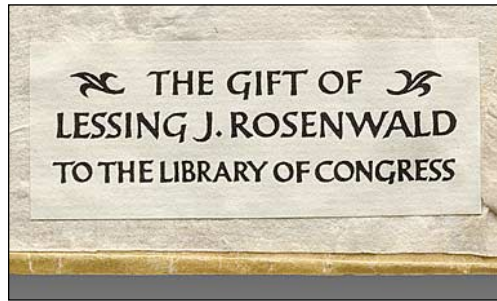
Collation: Oblong 8°. Fifty etched plates including title page and dedication pages to Pietro de' Medici.



Provenance

What little is known of the history of this particular copy of the *Bizzarie* is best told in reverse: the omega of Washington, D.C., is known, but alpha is unreachable. Lessing J. Rosenwald bought this copy from the New York bookseller H.P. Kraus (1907–88) in 1957. Kraus had bought it from the leading Italian dealer of his generation, Carlo Alberto Chiesa (1926–98) of Milan. No more is known, although it can be assumed that the book came from the library of Ugo Ojetti (1871–1946), an eclectic and prolific critic and journalist, specializing in artistic and literary subjects, who is now almost entirely forgotten.

Ojetti is known to have owned the



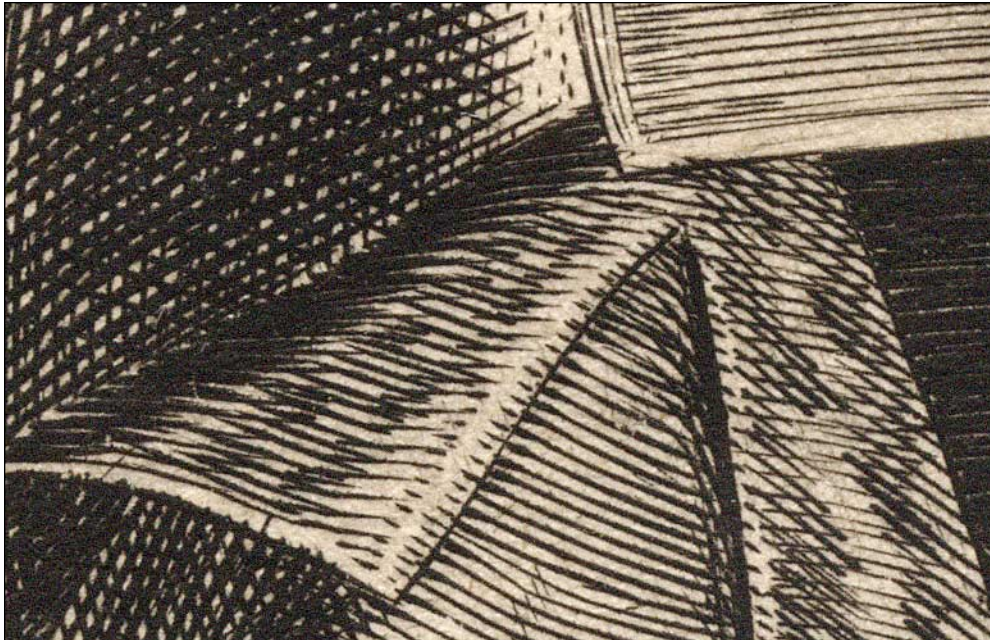
Lessing J. Rosenwald's gift label.

only complete copy in private hands as early as 1929, when Sir Kenneth Clark published an article on Braccelli in *The Print Collector's Quarterly*. Unless the Ojetti copy has disappeared and a new, equally complete copy has been discovered, it may safely be assumed that the Rosenwald *Bizzarie* was once his. Chiesa's artistic connections—his father was a celebrated artist, founder of the design group “Fontana Arte”—as well as his distaste for publicity and inclination to private purchase and sale (in this the very reverse of Kraus, who delighted in terrorizing the auction rooms) make an undocumented purchase of a celebrated artistic rarity entirely probable.

Etching

Essay by David Pankow

THE ART OF ENGRAVING, or otherwise sinking a design into some surface, dates to the very earliest period of recorded human history, and, in fact, specimens of symbols and images scratched into rock from the Paleolithic period are not uncommon. Indeed, the Old Testament book of Job (19:24) contains the lament, “Oh that my words were ... engraved in rock forever!”



Detail from a seventeenth-century metal engraving showing a range of tones.

In more recent times, the terms “engraving” and its close counterpart “etching” have come to denote printing processes in which certain portions of highly polished plates of metal (usually copper) are removed by the artist to form an image below the surface. In an engraving, a sharp tool known as a burin is used to incise the lines of a design into the plate by removing slivers of metal; in an etching, the lines of a design are “bitten” into the surface by the action of a corrosive acid. These recessed areas are filled with ink and the plate is then brought into contact with paper under tremendous pressure using a cylinder-style press. Both techniques are part of a larger family of printmaking processes called *intaglio* (from the Italian *intagliare*, to cut in), since the image is lower than the non-image area. A copperplate engraving or etching can generally be worked with a higher level of detail than a woodcut or a wood engraving, and is capable of showing a wider tonal range.

The first known modern use of intaglio printing from a metal surface was an engraving produced in 1446 showing a Flagellation of Christ. The use of engravings as illustrations in books did not become popular until late in the sixteenth century, because a different kind of press was required to print them; text type required a relief press, while an engraved illustration required an intaglio press. The greater detail-holding virtues of an engraving, however, were sufficiently appealing that, despite the greater cost, engraving became the reproduction process of choice for finely illustrated books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

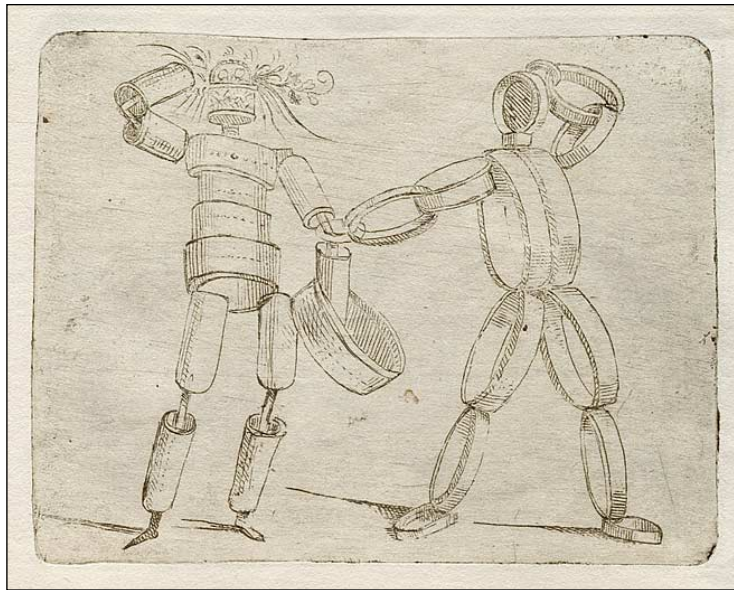
The first use of etching as a printing process cannot be reliably dated before about the year 1500, though it had for some time been employed in the decoration of arms and armor. The first experiments in producing prints are thought to have been made early in the century by Daniel Hopfer of Augsburg, an armorer, though the earliest dated print came from the hand of the famous Basel artist Urs Graf in 1513. Albrecht Dürer also experimented with the new process, producing in brilliant fashion such prints as his *Agony in the Garden*. Remarkably, given their sophistication, all of these early etchings were made on iron, not the easiest of metals to manipulate, especially where work with the graver was required; not long thereafter, artists turned to copper, a far less stubborn metal.

If engraving found a small but secure niche as an illustration process for the book trade, etching—because its execution more closely simulated the act of drawing—would eventually find greater favor for the production of fine art prints. Not so at first, however. Robert Dossie in *The Handmaid to the Arts* (1764) notes that because the process was “considered as a counterfeit kind of engraving, and therefore inferior to the other, it was cultivated in a very confined manner . . . This servile confinement of the art of etching to the imitation of the original kind of engraving, was a great cause of retarding its advance toward perfection.”¹ Whatever its initial reputation as an imitative process, the centuries that followed the invention of intaglio etching saw some of the world’s most famous artists explore its potential, including Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Castiglione, Tiepolo, Goya, Millet, and Whistler. It is not without reason, therefore, that etching has sometimes been declared as the greatest of all printmaking processes. Though it offers the artist an almost unlimited range of expression, etching also demands

1. Robert Dossie, *The Handmaid to the Arts*, 2d ed. (London: Printed for J. Nourse, 1764), 2:45.

an intuitive mastery of technique, a close understanding of the action of mordants (that is, acids), the resistant ability of a ground, and the degree to which a metal plate yields its exposed surface to what the artist Méryon called the “traitorous liquor.”

The process begins with a smoothly polished copper plate to which must be applied a thin layer of ground, that is, an acid-resisting compound. There have been many recipes for etching-grounds, both hard and soft, utilizing various compounds of wax, oils, resins, and varnishes. The ground may be dabbed, rolled, or poured onto the plate, so long as it is applied in an evenly thin, nonporous layer. Because the ground—at least in the early years of the process—was apt to be almost colorless, the plate was often “smoked,” that is, held over a sooty flame in order to blacken its surface. Thus prepared, the



The depression made by the edge of the copper plate is clearly visible on this page from Braccelli's *Bizzarie*.

artist then takes a needlelike tool and draws or sketches a design onto the surface of the plate, just barely displacing the ground or scratching through to the bright metal below. An etcher's line has been described as having “a nervous, muscular tremor,” a feature that distinguishes it from the more forceful line made by the engraver's burin, which must be pushed through the metal. The etcher's needle provides the artist with extraordinary freedom of expression, but he must also remain mindful that the bright lines of his design against the black plate will, when printed, appear dark against the white paper. In addition, the resultant image will be laterally reversed. Even

so great a master of the process as Rembrandt occasionally forgot to reverse his signature on the plate, so that his name appears backward on the final prints.

After the design has been drawn onto the plate, it is ready to be etched. Traditionally, a rim of wax was built up around the plate, forming a tray into which the mordant could be poured; alternatively, the back of the plate can be painted with a protective layer of ground so that the entire plate may safely be dipped into a corrosive bath. Regardless of the method used, the result is the same: acid eats or bites into the plate only where the ground has been scratched away with the needle. The most frequently used mordants have been aqua fortis (nitric acid), nitrous acid, or hydrochloric acid, each of which has its own unique “biting” properties. After sufficient exposure to the mordant, the plate is rinsed and the ground dissolved off or otherwise removed. The plate may now be printed.

Rarely, however, is the process so simple. Often an artist will etch a plate for a period, remove it from the bath and stop out (or cover up with etching ground) those portions of the drawing that only need to print lightly. The plate is then returned to the bath so that the lines of the design still exposed will be bitten again. The more deeply a line is etched, the more ink it will hold and the darker it will print. An artist might selectively stop out a plate four to ten times before achieving the desired tonal values.

Few etchings, however, are only that. In many cases, an artist finds it necessary to engrave additional lines with a burin, or employ a technique called drypoint. Here, a sharpened steel point, held like a pencil, is used to scratch lines into the surface of the metal, throwing up a burr along the edges. Because it is the burr with its raspy and uneven tooth that later holds most of the ink, the drypoint line is not sharply defined but raggedy and full of character. It is also fragile, since the burr is easily worn down when the plate is wiped, as well as by the action of the press, leaving ever lighter lines with each impression. Almost all great etchings contain some drypoint or engraving, but in the best of them these techniques are so deftly employed that even the connoisseur is pressed to distinguish one from the other. In discussing this very issue, the great



Detail from the *Bizzarie* showing etched lines, the plate edge, and a slight ink haze left from incomplete wiping of the plate.

print curator William J. Ivins, Jr., noted that “process, being only a means to an end, is and should remain an entirely secondary thing, a matter to be considered seriously, if at all, only by those who are themselves engaged in the making of pictures—a proposition embraced in Whistler’s axiom to the effect that art in its refinement requires the concealment of its means.”²

When the plate is ready for printing, it is placed on the bed of a cylinder-style press designed to exert great force—far more, in fact, than the presses used to print relief images. The plate is covered with ink and then wiped, so that only the recessed lines of the design still hold ink. A sheet of dampened paper is then carefully laid over the plate, followed by a layer of blankets. The whole assemblage is then passed under the cylinder, which exerts such enormous pressure that every fiber of the paper is brought into contact with the plate and draws the ink out of the deepest recesses. Unlike the lines in prints made by means of a relief process—in woodcuts, for example—the inked lines of an intaglio image lay slightly above the surface of the paper, their thickness in direct proportion to the depth to which they were engraved or etched into the plate. A further identifying characteristic of an etching or engraving is the plate mark, the faint, embossed depression in the paper made by the edges of the plate.

One last subtlety of the etching bears note. From the very earliest days of the process, artists realized that when the surface of the plate was wiped perfectly clean, the resulting prints often seemed dull and uninteresting. But, if the artist left a haze of ink on carefully selected areas of the plate, the print was enhanced with additional tonality and—in the hands of a genius like Rembrandt—an almost unearthly beauty and luminosity.

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2. William J. Ivins, Jr., *Prints and Books: Informal Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 176.