

Collection Highlight: Elisabetta Sirani's The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist around 1650-1660

Transcript: "A striking variety of line"

Speaker: Rebecca Cowan, Artist, Kingston

I'm Rebecca Cowan, I'm an artist, primarily printmaking but also book arts, here in Kingston. I have been printmaking for over thirty years. And I actually had no idea what an etching was when I started art school. And I took an etching class, and I just fell in love with it.

I thought I would start out by just taking a minute to talk about how an etching is made. A copper plate is coated with a resist or ground. Originally these resists were mostly wax but in 1645 a French artist, Jacques Caillot, published a manual of etching that recommended using the kind of varnish that instrument makers used. Once coated, a sharp tool or needle scratches lines through the resist to create an image. And there are a variety of different needles that you can use and they give you a different thickness of line. You can also vary the pressure to change the thickness of your line. The plate is then placed in a bath of Dutch mordant, which is a mixture of potassium chloride and hydrochloric acid. Any mark on the plate that is not covered with the ground is etched and creates a line. This process can be repeated more than once. And finally, the plate is cleaned off of all the resist, and inked, and printed using damp rag paper on an etching press. And the reason that damp paper is used so that the ink goes right into the fibers of the paper.

The first thing that struck me was really the variety of line. So I wondered if she used different needles, or if she put the plate into the acid more than once. Or if it is a combination of both. So I suspect it is a combination of both. Because there are very fine lines in the foreground of the image, for example Mary's feet and the pillow. And also very fine lines in the background. And then the lines of the drapery and the babies and of course Mary and St Elizabeth are much darker. So, I can only imagine this if I were doing this etching. I would probably start with a very fine needle and do an initial etch of basically where I want everything to be. I would etch it, take it out of the acid, clean it off, maybe run a proof, and then recoat it. Now the great thing is that the resists that Elisabetta was using were transparent. So she could see the lines she'd already created. So I think then she would go back and redraw the lines that she wants to be darker. Of course the other option is she may have simply been such an adept draughtsman that she was able to control the pressure she used on her tools as she was using them.

One of the things I would say about when you are etching in black and white like this, there is a constant tug, when you are creating images like this, between the foreground and the background. I think that the stairs were added afterwards with a very light etch to push the image of Joseph further into the background. If it had been a light background he would have

taken more prominence. It seems to me like the two women and the little pillow, everything we really would consider foreground, was done first. And then you would start working on the darks adding more lines where you want the darks and that might be a second etch. That would include of course all these crosshatching of the shadows and I noticed that Mary's neck is very dark and the outline of her face is very dark. If Elisabetta wanted to add something in the background but felt that the foreground was complete, she would simply have to make sure her varnish was very heavy there, was very thick so that the acid would not go into it.

What I love the most about etching is that you never know exactly what is going to happen in the acid bath. I mean you have a plan, but the acid strength varies depending on the temperature, how many plates have gone in the acid, how long you leave it in the acid, you know, and so you can think that you have a certain image, and then when you clean off your plate and you print it, it might not be what you had planned. So I always feel like I'm in a conversation when I'm making an etching, I'm not working alone. And when I'm teaching in my own studio, I sometimes think that I would like to have a little recording of a fanfare that happened [laughing] you know [laughing] after—after somebody has pulled something. Because so often people pull a print and they're like "wow I didn't think it would look like that!" or "oh my god that's horrible!" [laughing] you know but more often happy, right, because you don't— even if you are very experienced there are always surprises and that is one of the fun things.