French satire and its 300-year bite: Art
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Boilly's 'The Newspapers' 1826 (above); detail from Cham's 'Electric Telegraph' 1870 (right)

Photos of cartoons by O. E. Nelson

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"France is the country of moral philosophy; its literature is a search for the right life," observed Paul Mocsanyi, director of the Art Center at the New School of Social Research at the opening of "Three Centuries of French Satire 1614-1914." The exhibition of approximately 100 prints admirably illustrates not only the moral penchant of the French but their incisive wit, which combined to produce some of Europe's most trenchant satire.

Art

According to Mr. Mocsanyi the show is the first in the United States to survey the "continuous flow" of French satire from the beginning of the 17th century to World War I. As noteworthy as the exhibition's historical contribution is its source, the venerable Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, which is as renowned for the quality of its treasures as its reluctance to lend them. The prints were selected by Michel Melot, curator of print collection at the Bibliotheque, who also wrote the comprehensive and unusually entertaining notes, which deserve to be published in catalog form.

Another point of interest is that exhibition epitomizes the Art Center's humanistic exhibition policy, which forms a unique contrast with the aesthetic approach of most museums. Formulated by Mr. Mocsanyi, a Hungarian intellectual who like many European exiles gravitated to the New School after the war, the policy predicates that "Art should be concerned with the human condition. I try to choose exhibitions that show the nobility of man or attack his failings. . . . I am convinced that Western civilization can only survive if it goes back to the traditional moral values that made it great and made its art great. As Machiavelli said, if the army is in disarray the only thing to do is assemble around the flag. . . . Art is only great when it is in service of something higher than itself, whether it be religious, political, or humanistic ideals, and it disintegrates when it becomes preoccupied with itself and its technical problems."

Mr. Mocsanyi described what he felt to be the particular significance of this exhibition: "Contemporary satire is vigilant about the sins and shortcomings of government. But in these prints we also see satire of daily life and ordinary people. There is a lesson here: Unless we, too, are innocent and decent and good, how can we expect to have leaders who are so?"

This show sheds light not only on the evolution of the satiric genre but also the civilized mind. The 17th-century etchings by Jacques Callot, Jean le Pautre, and anonymous artists derive, as M. Melot explains, from 16th-century Italian burlesque and caricature. Moral messages on allegorical and political subjects prevail, but despite their satiric intentions the prints are frequently too cruel to edify and too grotesque to amuse, with the exception of a few delightful parodies on occupations.

The 18th-century is meagerly represented by two frivolous Watteau prints, which in M. Melot's words reflect the "courtly and libertarian themes" typical of French humor at that time. Apparently even the satirists succumbed to the superficiality of the regency period, and it was not until the 19th-century that French satire matured sufficiently to rival its English counterpart, which Hogarth had given such biting brilliance.

More than half the prints in this exhibition date from 1800, for it was in this later period that the rising middle class imbued the French sensibility with its iconoclastic point of view. It is as if the French Revolution broke down an intellectual as well as a social barrier, and all the suppressed perceptions of the wrong and ridiculous burst forth in boisterous bourgeois wit. Moreover, the proliferation of newspapers stimulated satire by giving it a vital new market.

The democratization of satire inspired a great diversity of expression. Subjects were not only the political scene but also the manners and mores of the population on every social level, from the humblest to the most aristocratic. Fashions, new inventions, institutions, relations between the sexes, were favorites, and the artists treated them with a greater subtlety and facility of wit than they had in the past. Moreover, toward the end of the century and into the 20th a dawning social consciousness became apparent, an awareness of and compassion for the poverty-stricken and oppressed, and a more sincere attack on the "enemies of the people" within or without the country's borders ensued. The egalitarian spirit of the age seemed to sharpen the artists" powers of perception as well as their skills.

The exhibition, which will continue through June 7, also impresses one with the genre's durability and in some respects its immutability. The great cartoonists and satirists of our own age, David Levine and Edward Sorel, for example, carry on not only the values but also some of the techniques of their predecessors, such as the classic device of portraying a person as the animal he most resembles.