

OBSERVATIONS OF LIGHT FOUND IN
BLACK AND WHITE IMAGERY

Submitted by
Joseph Scott Hickel
Department of Art
AR 695
Independent Study

In partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Summer 1989

M.F.A. CANDIDATES CLEARANCE FOR SPECIALIZATION WRITTEN
RESEARCH PAPER

I have completed and filed the original written research
project for AR 695 - Independent Study, taken Fall 1986
in the Art Department office. I have given two copies to
the chairman of my graduate committee or area, one of which
will be filed with the thesis.

Student Steve Vukel

Instructor James J. Doerner

Adviser [Signature]

Date 7/11/89

Grade on Paper A

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Jean-Francois Millet - <u>The Washerwomen</u> . Black crayon, 1857-58.	19
2	James McNeill Whistler - <u>The Balcony</u> . Etching, 1879-80.	20
3	Edward Hopper - <u>East Side Interior</u> . Etching, 1922.	21
4	Edward Hopper - <u>Evening Wind</u> . Etching, 1921.	22
5	Georges Seurat - <u>Artist's Mother</u> . Conté crayon, 1883.	23
6	Scott Hickel - <u>The Guitar Never Tuned; The Art Never Compromised</u> . Etching, 1988.	24
7	Georges Seurat - <u>Troncs d' Arbres Reflétés dans l'Eau</u> . Conté crayon, 1883.	25
8	Scott Hickel - <u>Three Plants</u> . Etching, 1988.	26
9	Edgar Degas - <u>After The Bath</u> . Monotype, 1880-85.	27
10	Edgar Degas - <u>La Chevelure</u> . Monotype, 1884.	28
11	Scott Hickel - <u>Interior Bathed in Morning Light</u> . Etching, 1988.	29
12	Rembrandt Van Rijn - <u>Christ With the Sick Around Him Receiving Little Children</u> . Etching, drypoint, engraving, 1649.	30
13	Rembrandt Van Rijn - <u>Christ at Emmaus</u> . Lg. plate. Etching, drypoint, engraving 1654.	31
14	Rembrandt Van Rijn - <u>Christ Preaching</u> . Etching, drypoint, engraving, 1652.	32

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
15	Rembrandt Van Rijn - <u>Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves</u> . Drypoint, engraving, 1653.	33
16	Rembrandt Van Rijn - <u>Faust in His Study, Watching a Magic Disk</u> . Etching, drypoint, engraving, 1652.	34
17	Odilon Redon - <u>Luminous Profile</u> . Charcoal, 1875.	35
18	Odilon Redon - <u>The Haunted House</u> . Lithograph, 1896.	36
19	Edvard Munch - <u>The Sick Girl</u> . Drypoint, 1894.	37
20	Rodolphe Bresdin - <u>The Comedy of Death</u> . Lithograph, 1854.	38
21	Pablo Picasso - <u>Minotaurmachy</u> . Etching, 1935.	39
22	Pablo Picasso - <u>Guernica</u> . Oil, 1937.	40
23	Scott Hickel - <u>Resurrection Plate: Portion of Figure Reclining</u> . Etching, 1988. . . .	41

OBSERVATIONS OF LIGHT FOUND IN
BLACK AND WHITE IMAGERY

Over the years, many artists have perceived light as being a major factor in their images. In combination with other design elements, the portrayal of light becomes important in creating form. Talented artists have rendered light with such strength and expression that the light itself takes on the most important role in a given work of art. I am personally attracted to the emotional effects connected with specific depictions of light rendered. In my two-dimensional work, the objects, figures, and environments that I translate, in combination with the light, become less significant than the light itself. Not only does the placement of light and dark move the viewer's eye throughout the piece, but it also evokes a specific emotion depending upon the atmospheric light portrayed.

During this paper I will include early philosophies, from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, on the treatment and definitions of the different portrayals of light used in two-dimensional art in combination with my personal philosophies. I decided to limit this paper to black and white imagery because I work mainly in black and white and thought I could obtain a better understanding of the subject of light by not including color.

Few scholars, philosophers, and artists prior to the Renaissance have written in any length about the theory of light in art. This is due mainly to the fact that the few writers who did provide manuscript treatises researched the subject in length and the majority agreed and accepted their opinions. Only a few later philosophers on this subject, one example being Lomazzo, introduced radical ideas concerning the accepted theory of light. I have concerned myself mainly with the theories of Leonardo da Vinci's Treatise on Painting, in which his writings expand on the earlier writings of Cennini, author of Libro dell' arte, and Alberti, author of Della Pittura. Both the Libro and the Della Pittura were written in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. I also added one consideration of light from Lomazzo's Trattato, which Leonardo did not include in his writings. These writings were only found in manuscript until the nineteenth century. I support each theory of light discussed with an example of work by an artist or artists of my choosing.

Leonardo discusses at length four types of light, Lomazzo adds one, and I include a sixth type. I personally feel these six different varieties of represented light are common in most two-dimensional art. They may be described as universal, specific, reflected, transparent, symbolic, and structural.

The first type of light Leonardo introduces is what he calls a "universal" light. "Universal" light is found within

an external environment and creates an overall distribution of light in the atmosphere and a brightening effect. One example of this type would be a bright, overcast day conveying softness and gracefulness of form with a soft relief, thus, no harsh shadowing. The Barbizon painters of the latter nineteenth century were noted for depicting this type of light in their work. Specifically, Corot in his landscape etchings and ink drawings, and also Millet with his images dealing with aspects of the peasant's life, as revealed in The Sower (Lithograph 1851) and The Washerwomen (Black crayon 1857-58) (Fig. 1). Corot delighted in working from nature at dusk and dawn when the sun was below the horizon, therefore, he didn't have to deal with deep, flattening shadows. Brueghel and Rembrandt were masters of this light, which is evident in their soft handling and understating of the receding, distant horizons in combination with the higher contrast created in the more defined foregrounds. The American artist, James MacNeil Whistler, often depicted this specific treatment of light within his prints and drawings. One example would be The Balcony (Etching 1879-80) (Fig. 2), in which he depicted an overall distribution of light wrapping itself around and enveloping the form of the objects represented.

The next characterization of light Leonardo included is called a "specific" or "direct" light. He also referred to it as "restricted" light. The light is described as usually coming from one direction and strikes the object directly

along the shortest path, producing intense light and deep shadow.¹ Within a landscape, the source would be direct sunlight. However, it is most commonly found in interiors where the light comes from a window or an open door.

"Specific" light can also be a result of an artificial light, such as an open fire, a lamp, or a candle. This type of light can enhance definition, detail, and evoke dramatic effects, as do stage lights during a theatrical performance. However, "direct" light can also create a dramatic quality within an environment that is not dramatic. Leonardo went on to elaborate on "restricted" light by stating the following: "As in everything, extremes are faulty; too much light makes for crudeness, while too much darkness does not allow anything to be seen, the median is good."² Many artists who frequently used "direct" light include Edward Hopper, Edgar Degas, and Georges Seurat. In the etchings, East Side Interior (1922) (Fig. 3) and Evening Wind (1921) (Fig. 4), Hopper represented "specific" light entering through the window. Degas' many monotypes of the female bather and Seurat's conté crayon drawings, which include the image of the Artist's Mother (1883) (Fig. 5), fall into this category of light. Seurat drew from candlelight most of the time because he disliked the use of line and was interested in achieving definition, or the lack of, through the application of tone. Drawing from life in these darkened environments enabled him to achieve high contrasts with softened edges, which convey a very quieting

effect along with the enhanced drama of the isolated figure. In my etching, The Guitar Never Tuned; The Art Never Compromised (1988) (Fig. 6), I purposely use an internal "specific" light in combination with a "universal" light to try to create an effective transition between the two. The "direct" light, in this case, illuminating the propped guitar and chair, is seen coming in through what appears to be a window, but which also implies an intentional ambiguity, thereby raising the question, is it a window allowing light to enter, or is it a painting on the wall?

The third type of light I shall discuss is what Leonardo described as "reflected" light. This light is self-explanatory and involves any object or density of air that would reflect an original source of light, thus, becoming a secondary source. For example, a "direct" light may enter through a window striking a metallic object or reflective substance, such as water, in turn, the object will have a higher degree of illumination because of its reflective quality.

Previously, reference was made to the "universal" light which Whistler captured in his etching, The Balcony (Fig. 2); He also depicted a "reflected" light within this same image. This is revealed in his expression of the wet sidewalk and pavement in front of the structure. Degas also explored this type of light in many of his compositions, especially those dealing with bathers or figures in dimly lit rooms. Furthermore, Seurat occasionally used this type

of light to accent what could easily have become dull, uninteresting areas within his primarily dark compositions. These accents enhance the light and dark structure and often provide a sense of balance in his motifs. This compositional balance attained through Seurat's handling of "reflected" light is displayed in the 1883 conté crayon drawing, Troncs d' Arbres Reflétés dans l'Eau (Fig. 7). In a later drawing of his studio, Le Fourneau (conté crayon 1887), "reflected" light is introduced to imply the shiny, metal surfaces of a cast iron stove and a full-bellied pot upon the stove, made of copper or tin. The bright light reflecting from the pot suggests a "direct" light coming from across the room, however Seurat's unnatural rendering of this light not following the form of the vessel implies this reflective, metallic surface. In my etching, Three Plants (1988) (Fig. 8), "reflective light is subtly brought to the viewer's attention within the glass panes of the window which serve a purpose similar to Seurat's intentions. These intentions being the use of subtle accents suggesting repetition and a sense of balance. In this particular print, the "reflected" light is used with a "specific" light coming from an artificial source within the room, yet beyond the picture plane.

"Transparent" light is the fourth and final type of light Leonardo discusses in his Treatise on Painting. This type is defined as any light that shines through a translucent material, such as cloth, paper, smoke, or fog. The simple act of holding a sheet of paper up to a light, thus,

illuminating the paper supports this theory of light. Light shining through a substance that is transparent, such as glass or clear water, would not be considered a "transparent" light, but rather a "specific" light, as mentioned earlier. This particular light is not used as frequently as the three previously discussed types. Leonardo's theory on light was documented in a hierarchial form and "transparent" light being established as one of the minor and less important types of light. "Universal" light being the most prestigious in this hierarchy, followed by "direct", then "reflected", and finally "transparent". Amazing as it may sound, this hierarchy was established by the brilliance and luminosity of light revealed in nature. "Transparent" light being the less brilliant of these four types of light mentioned. In the monotype, After The Bath (1880-85) (Fig. 9), Degas introduced a "transparent" light glowing softly through the translucent drapes covering the window. He used, in combination, three of the examples of light Leonardo wrote about. The first light being "transparent", the second being "direct" light illuminating a high contrast relief (especially on the figure). The third, "reflected", which calls attention to the metal faucet fixtures on the bathtub. Degas occasionally utilized a "transparent" light in his bath interiors as portrayed in the monotype from 1884, La Chevelure (Fig. 10). I frequently depict "transparent" light within my work by diffusing the light through translucent, sheer curtains within my interior images. One such

example is my etching, Interior Bathed in Morning Light (1988) (Fig. 11), which depicts a "direct" light being softened and subdued by the texture of the curtain material, thus, softening the forms within the room.

During the late sixteenth century, Lomazzo wrote the Lombard Art Treatises, commonly called the Trattato, which reflected the Milanese theory of art during this period. Lomazzo is the first author who introduced a theory pertaining to the symbolic significance of light into a treatise on art.³ However, he drew his conclusions from a wide range of literary sources.⁴ Other previous authors of art theoretical treatises conceived of light essentially as a practical problem for the artist to face in his actual work.

"Symbolic" light, the fifth type of light worth mentioning, is an implied light with underlying meaning, suggesting astrological, cosmological, theological, or psychological beliefs of the artist or of the time frame he is working within. What I refer to as "symbolic" light, Lomazzo entitles "second primary" light. He describes it as having nonrational, radiant qualities that do not define form but rather have iconographic implications. Furthermore, he provides his theory with the heading "The Book of Lights" and breaks up the different types of light into three primary categories. Similar to Leonardo's theory, these types of light were established in a hierarchical order. "First primary" light being at the highest level,

which he describes as the universal light of the sun.

"Second primary" light being the next important kind, and is a radiant, divine light emanating from that which is of God. Followed by "third primary" light which results from an artificial light.⁵ His remaining theory on light consists of lesser types referred to as "secondary" lights.

It would be difficult to measure and establish the brilliance of Lomazzo's "second primary" or "symbolic" light. Oddly enough, Lomazzo determined it to be the second most important light by researching the brilliance and luminosity of "symbolic" light through the history of painting. Many masters used the "symbolic" light of the halo in biblical imagery. Nonetheless, Rembrandt took this spiritual iconography and rendered it in various ways which result in similar meanings. For instance, he would draw rays of light emanating out from Christ's head implying a radiant glow which can be viewed in "The Hundred Guilder Print", titled Christ With the Sick Around Him Receiving Little Children (etching, drypoint, engraving 1649) (Fig. 12) and Christ at Emmaus (etching, drypoint, engraving 1654) (Fig. 13). Rembrandt also placed an oval floating slightly above Jesus Christ's head signifying a halo in Christ Preaching (etching, drypoint, engraving 1652) (Fig. 14). Also, in this same image a suggested pillar directly behind the figure of Christ takes on an ambiguity of its own. On one hand, the vertical structure can be interpreted as a pillar. On the other hand, it suggests a divine ray of glorified light descending on

Christ from heaven above. This "symbolic" light descending from above is also visible in Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves (engraving, drypoint 1653) (Fig. 15). The final way Rembrandt symbolized the spiritual realm is rendered in Faust in His Study, Watching a Magic Disk (etching, drypoint, engraving 1652) (Fig. 16). The disc object of that vision has a general resemblance to the magic circles found in conjuring books of this time period, and its religious character is indicated by the clearly defined monogram of Christ in its center.⁶

Rembrandt had a great respect for his mother. She spent a good portion of her time meditating on biblical Scripture. Her religious beliefs definitely had some impact on Rembrandt, which helps explain why his biblical images possess so much spiritual symbolism, intensity, and honesty. He has been documented as revealing two basic artistic realizations concerning the spiritual within the visual image. First, the spiritual content can only be suggested. Second, the most flexible and intangible elements of the visual world, such as light, shade, and atmosphere, are best suited for the suggestion of this spiritual content.⁷

During the late nineteenth century, symbolist Odilon Redon created drawings and lithographs which support these realizations expressed by Rembrandt. For instance, in Luminous Profile (charcoal 1875) (Fig. 17) and Profile of Light (lithograph 1875), both images of the same subject matter, Redon creates a radiant light emanating from a

woman's face, thereby symbolizing the essence of God or a supernatural entity deep within the woman. He may have received his vision for these images from a passage in the New Testament, since he is noted for obtaining many of his narrative ideas from literary works. Redon may have been inspired by the descriptive light in the passage from II Corinthians 4:6 which states: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."⁸ Later in Redon's career, he created a lithograph, The Haunted House (1896) (Fig. 18), that also uses a "symbolic" light to imply a visitation from a specter or spiritual entity. This sensitive, subtle handling of light could easily be interpreted as a diffused, "direct" light which strikes recently stirred up dust particles floating in mid air within this dark, ominous room. However, he provides us with the descriptive title along with a caption that reads, "I saw a large pale light."⁹ These literary descriptions, which Redon introduces along with most of his images, enable the viewer to interpret the symbolic meaning he has intended. Edward Munch worked extensively with psychological overtones in his art that concern themselves with a "symbolic" light on occasion. Present in The Sick Girl (drypoint 1894) (Fig. 19), the pale and washed out face of the subject implies not only her physical illness but also the psychological strain that illness places on her strength and will.

The final type of light that is represented in visual art is what I shall refer to as a "structural" or "compositional" light. The sole purpose of this light is to enhance the structural composition and motif. In other words, it serves to move the eye, abstract shapes or objects, and possibly to balance the composition for aesthetic purposes. This type of light is not actually represented in nature. However, an artist may take the liberty to juxtapose and combine the light from more than one actual view within nature. This type originates from the artist's mind and communicates the emotional, atmospheric, or pattern-like qualities he intends to express. Many artists have utilized this "structural" light, such as Rembrandt, Mauricio Lazansky, Georges Seurat, Edgar Degas, and Odilon Redon. Redon's teacher and mentor, Rodolphe Bresdin, would render a "compositional" light frequently in his prints. Two examples are his 1861 etching, Forest of Fontainebleau and the lithograph, The Comedy of Death (1854) (Fig. 20). Many non-objective artists explored this light and its qualities in a more abstracted fashion. Some include Gabor Peterdi, William Stanley Hayter, and Jacques Villon. Picasso uses the light present in his images for compositional gain, especially in Minotaurmachy (etching 1935) (Fig. 21) and the monumental black and white mural painting titled Guernica (1937) (Fig. 22). In both of these images, Picasso not only uses an artificial light to create a sense of "specific" light, but also he compositionally arranges and alters light

and dark shapes and objects throughout the painting for directional and harmonious reasons. In the past year or two I have worked extensively with a "structural" light. This type enables me to search my soul and mind, thus, exploring more aesthetically interesting compositional arrangements. In the etching, Resurrection Plate: Portion of Figure Reclining (1988) (Fig. 23), I use this "structural" light to achieve specific, spatial qualities and subtleties that I could not obtain by relying on what I actually visualize in nature.

For myself, researching the origins of light and it's uses has provided me with a better understanding of how I can achieve and capture certain emotional effects within a two-dimensional image. This is dependent on the type of light utilized, whether it be "universal", "specific", "reflected", "transparent", "symbolic", or "compositional". I strongly feel that one light is not better or more important than another, and I do not support the hierarchy that the early authors on light theory reflect. Each particular light has it's place depending on what the artist wishes to communicate. Using any combination of these types of light together in any given composition can create intriguing effects and results, thus, incorporating more questions and ideas for the viewer to consider.

Light in a black and white image can be used as an element that compliments the subject matter, or it can be the major subject itself. Each type of light, whether it

be "universal", "direct", "reflected", "transparent", "symbolic", or "structural", can communicate a powerful, visual message. This message may concern itself with the simple notion of how shadows fall across a grassy field or possibly a complex, abstract, emotional feeling implied by a subtle, atmospheric portrayal of light. The element of light within black and white imagery not only describes form, but also can enhance the spatial depth, move the viewer's eye throughout the image, suggest symbolic meaning, and imply atmospheric qualities.

ENDNOTE

¹Moshe Barasch, Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art, (New York University Press, New York, N. Y., 1978), p. 67.

²Ibid., p. 71.

³Ibid., p. 144.

⁴Ibid., p. 145-147.

⁵Ibid., p. 148-153.

⁶Jakob Rosenberg, Rembrandt: Life and Work, (Phaidon Press Limited, 5 Cromwell Place, London S W 7, 1964), p. 270.

⁷Ibid., p. 175.

⁸The NIV/KJV Parallel Bible, (Zondervan Bible Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49506, 1983) KJV, p. 1477.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barasch, Moshe. Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art. New York: New York University Press, 1978.
- Bouret, Jean. The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting. Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973.
- Goodrich, Lloyd. Edward Hopper. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971.
- Hind, Arthur M. A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings. New York: Da Capo Press, A Division of Plenum Pub. Corp., 1967.
- Hobbs, Richard. Odilon Redon. London, England: Studio Vista, A Division of Cassell and Collier Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1977.
- Lochman, Katharine A. The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, in Association with the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984.
- Janis, Eugenia Parry. Degas Monotypes: Essay, Catalogue, and Checklist. Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1968.
- Peterdi, Gabor. Printmaking Methods Old and New. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959.
- Reed, Sue Welsh and Shapiro, Barbara Stein. Edgar Degas: The Painter as Printmaker. Medford, Mass.: Ame Printing Co., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1984.
- Rosenberg, Jakob. Rembrandt: Life and Work. London, England: Phaidon Press Limited, 1964.
- Russell, Frank D. Picasso's Guernica: The Labrynth of Narrative and Vision. Montclair, New Jersey: Allanheld, Osman and Co., 1980.
- Russell, John. Seurat. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., Publishers, 1965.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Rembrandt: Experimental
Etcher. New York: Hacker Art Books Inc., 1969.

The NIV/KJV Parallel Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan:
Zondervan Bible Publishing, 1983.

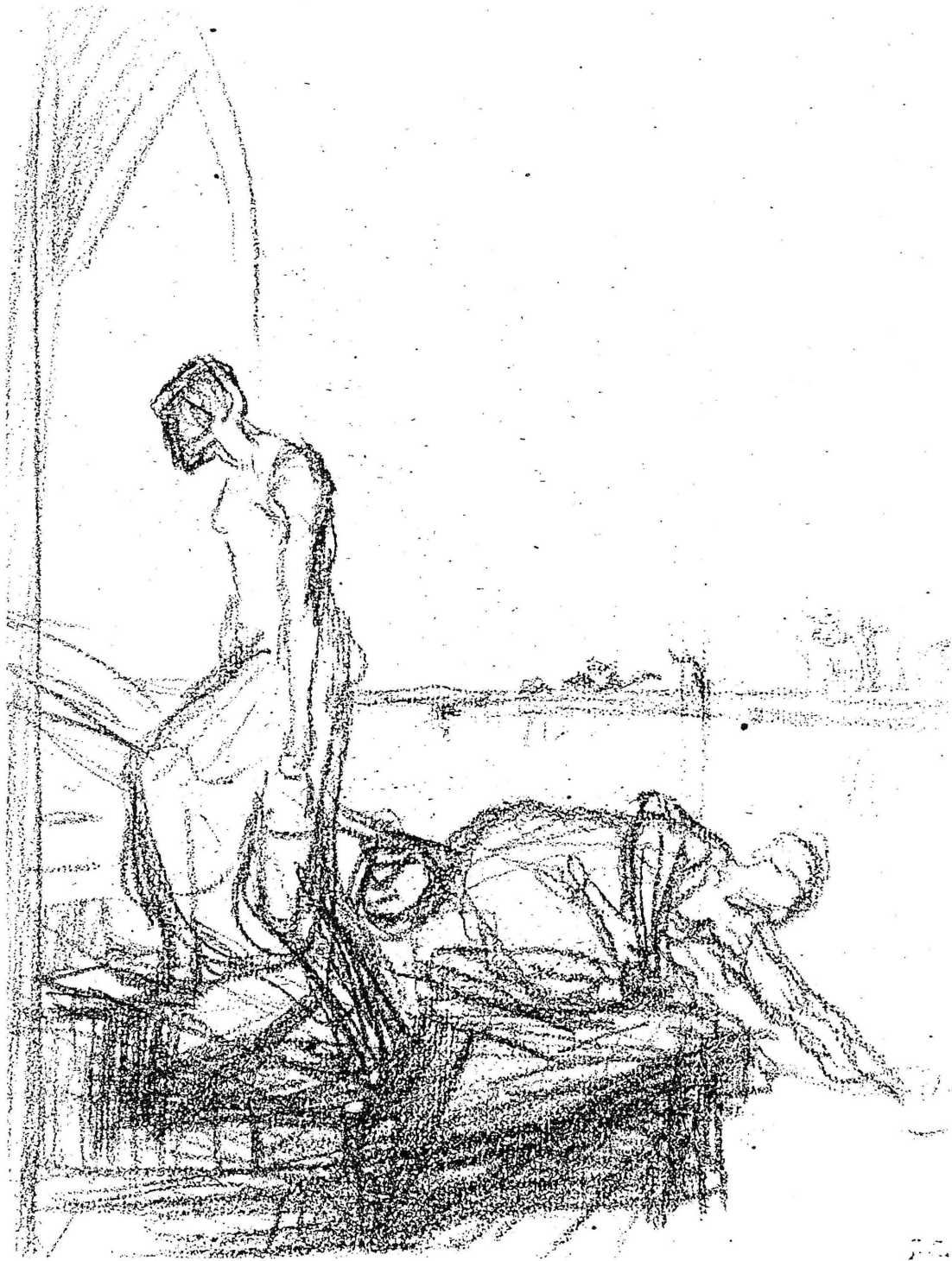


Fig. 1. Millet - The Washerwoman. Black crayon
1857-58

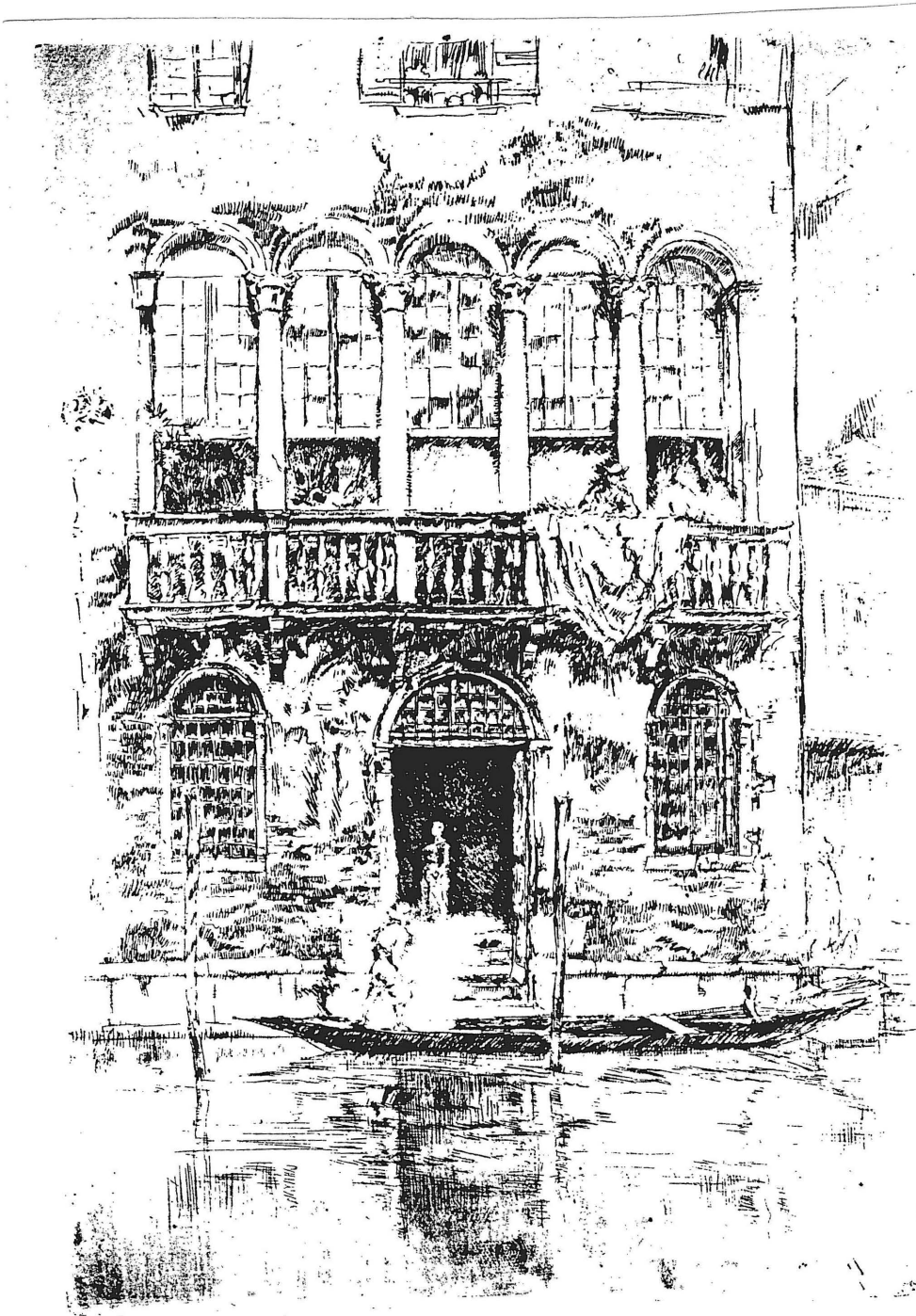


Fig. 2. Whistler - The Balcony. Etching 1879-80



Fig. 3. Hopper - East Side Interior.
Etching 1922



Fig. 4. Hopper - Evening Wind. Etching
1921



Fig. 5. Seurat - Artist's Mother. Conté
crayon 1883



Fig. 6. Hickel - The Guitar Never Tuned; The Art Never Compromised.
Etching 1988

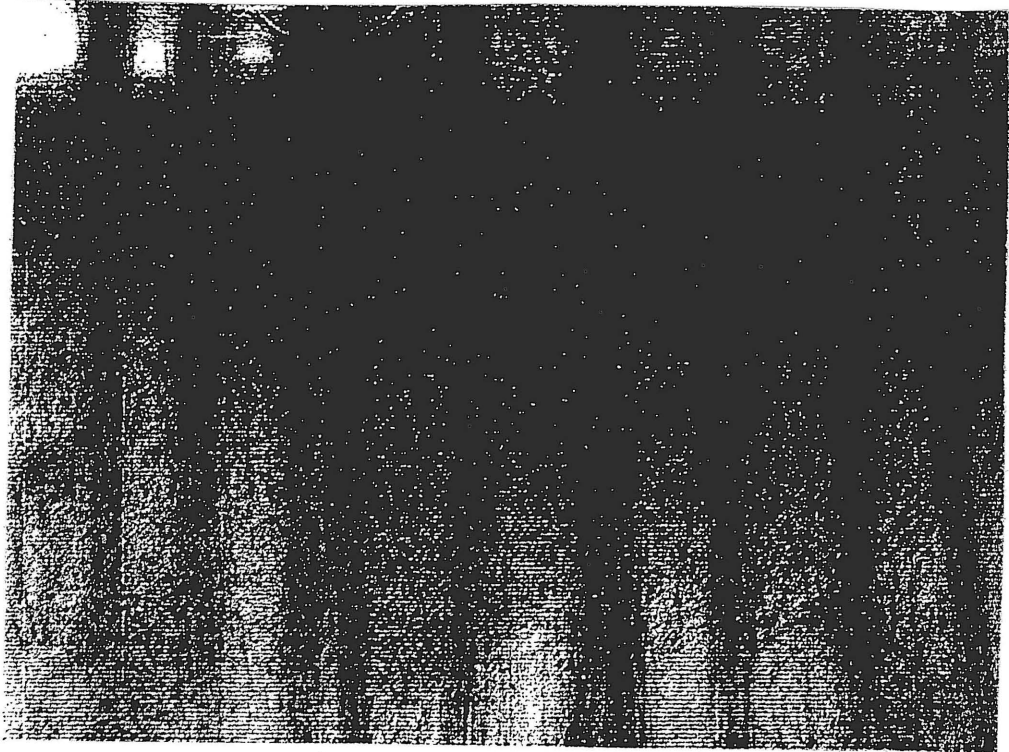


Fig. 7. Seurat - Troncs d' Arbres Reflétés
dans l'Eau. Conté crayon 1883

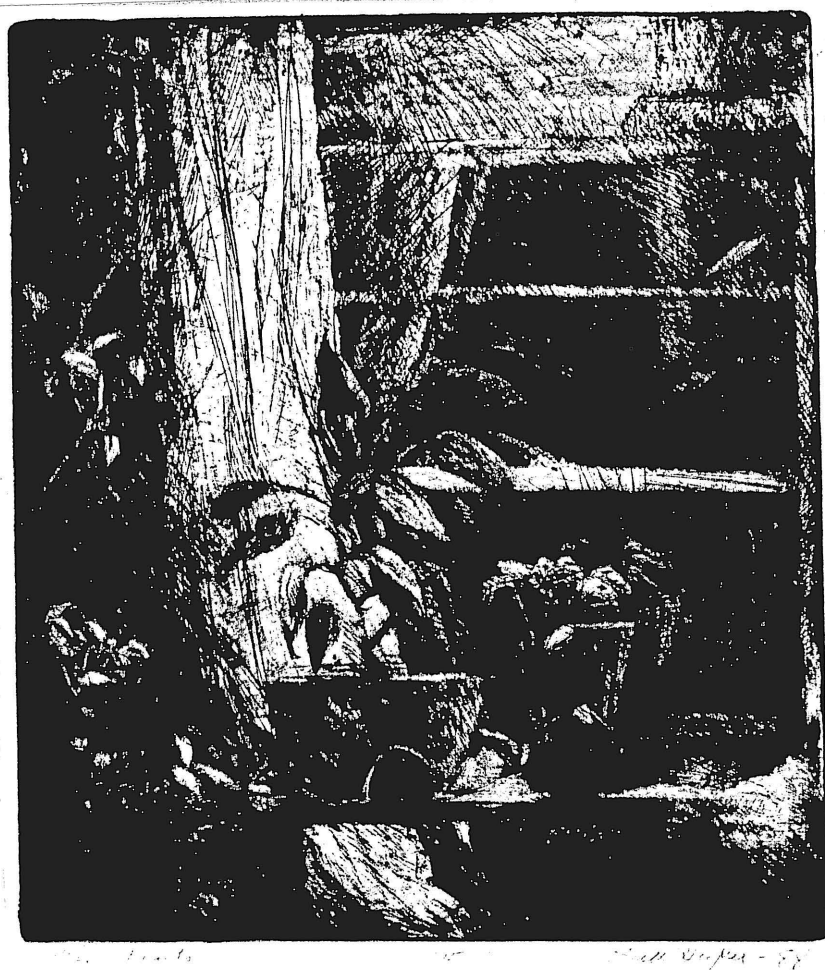


Fig. 8. Hickel - Three Plants.
Etching 1988



Fig. 9. Degas - After The Bath. Monotype 1880-85



Fig. 10. Degas - La Chevelure.
Monotype 1884



Interior Bathed in Morning Light

Fig. 11. Hickel - Interior Bathed in Morning Light.
Etching 1988



Fig. 12. Rembrandt - Christ With the Sick Around Him Receiving Little Children. Etching, drypoint, engraving 1649



Fig. 13. Rembrandt - Christ at Emmaus.
Lg. plate. Etching, drypoint,
engraving 1654



Fig. 14. Rembrandt - Christ Preaching. Etching, drypoint, engraving 1652

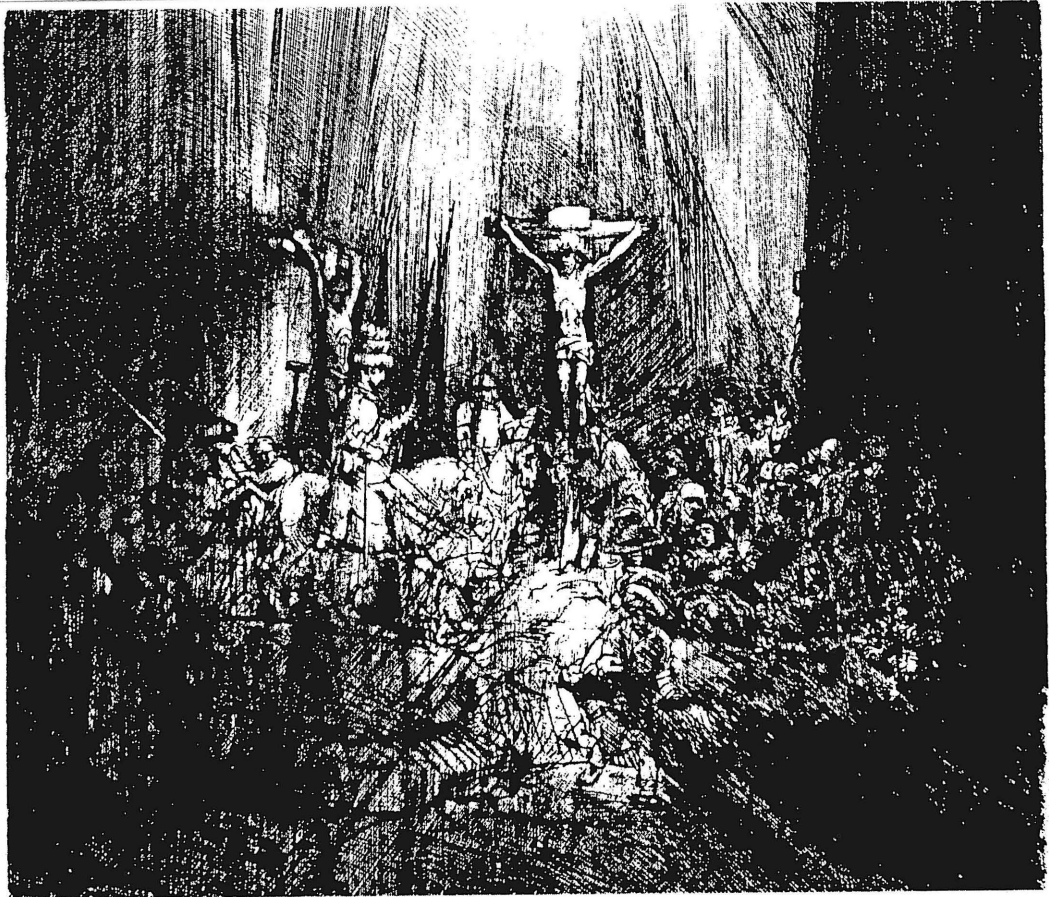


Fig. 15. Rembrandt - Christ Crucified
Between the Two Thieves.
Drypoint, engraving 1653



Fig. 16. Rembrandt - Faust in His Study, Watching a Magic Disk. Etching, drypoint, engraving 1652



Fig. 17. Redon - Luminous Profile.
Charcoal 1875



Fig. 18. Redon - The Haunted House.
Lithograph 1896

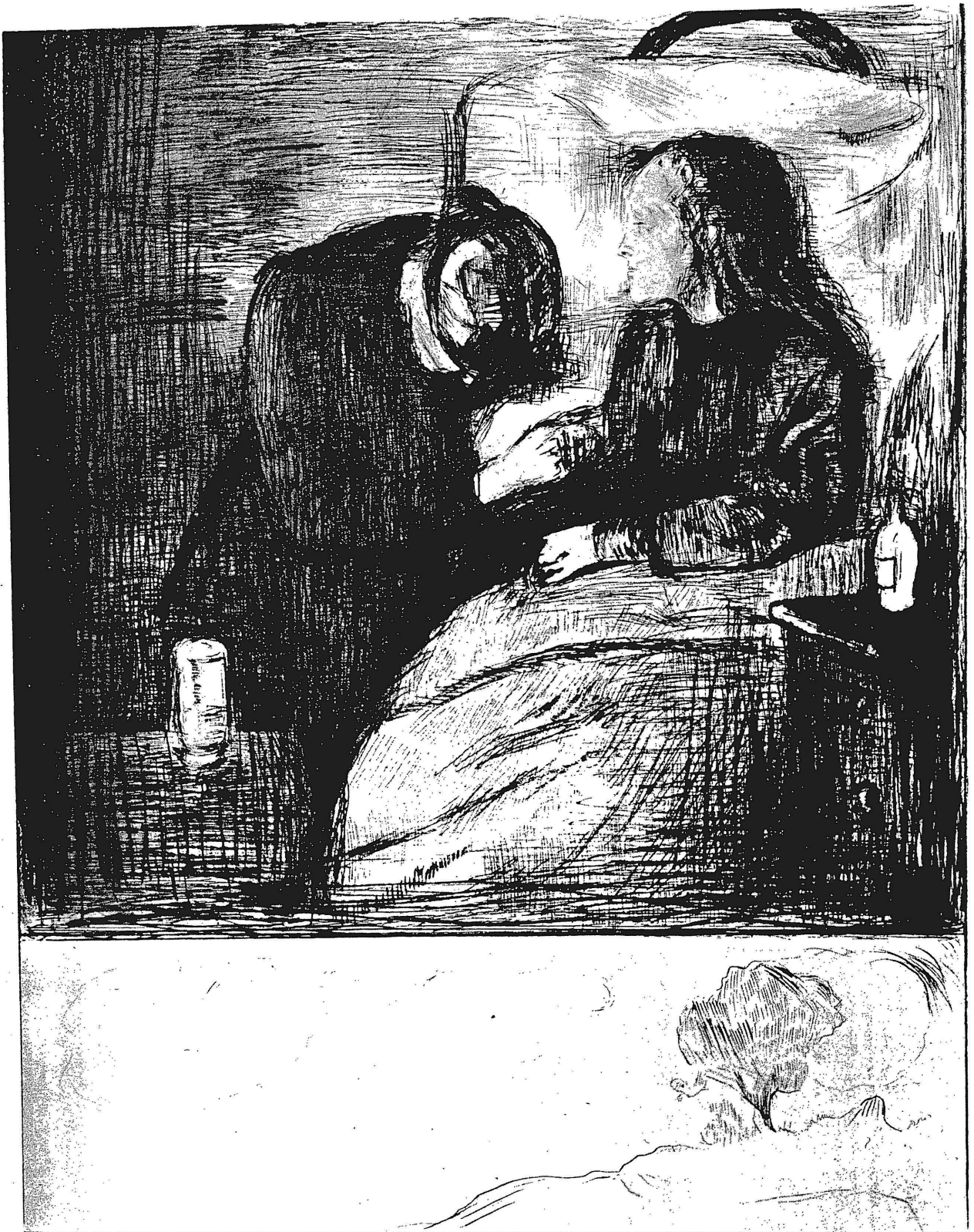


Fig. 19. Munch - The Sick Girl. Drypoint 1894

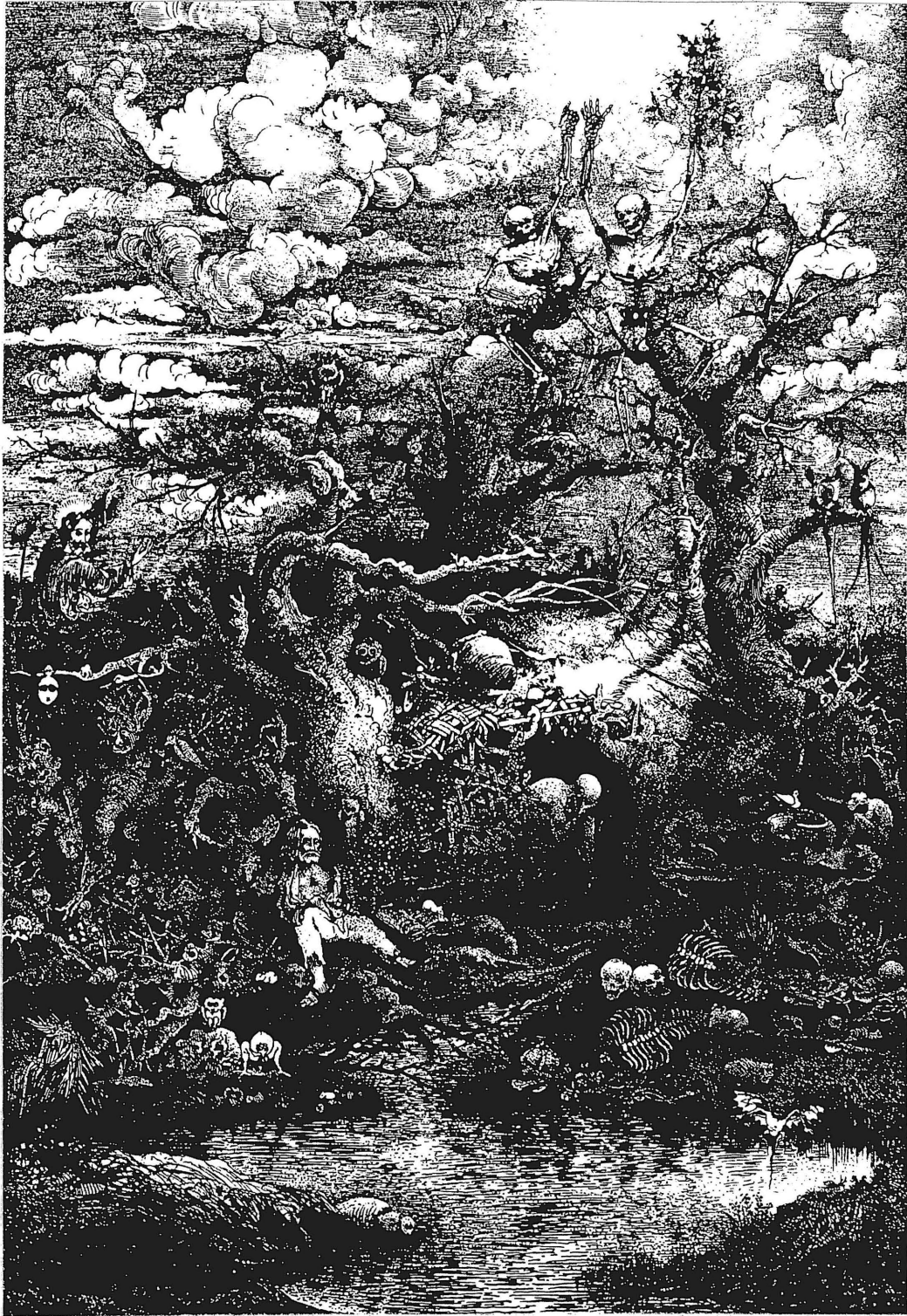


Fig. 20. Bresdin - The Comedy of Death.
Lithograph 1854



Fig. 21. Picasso - Minotaurmachy.
Etching 1935



Fig. 22. Picasso - Guernica. Oil 1937

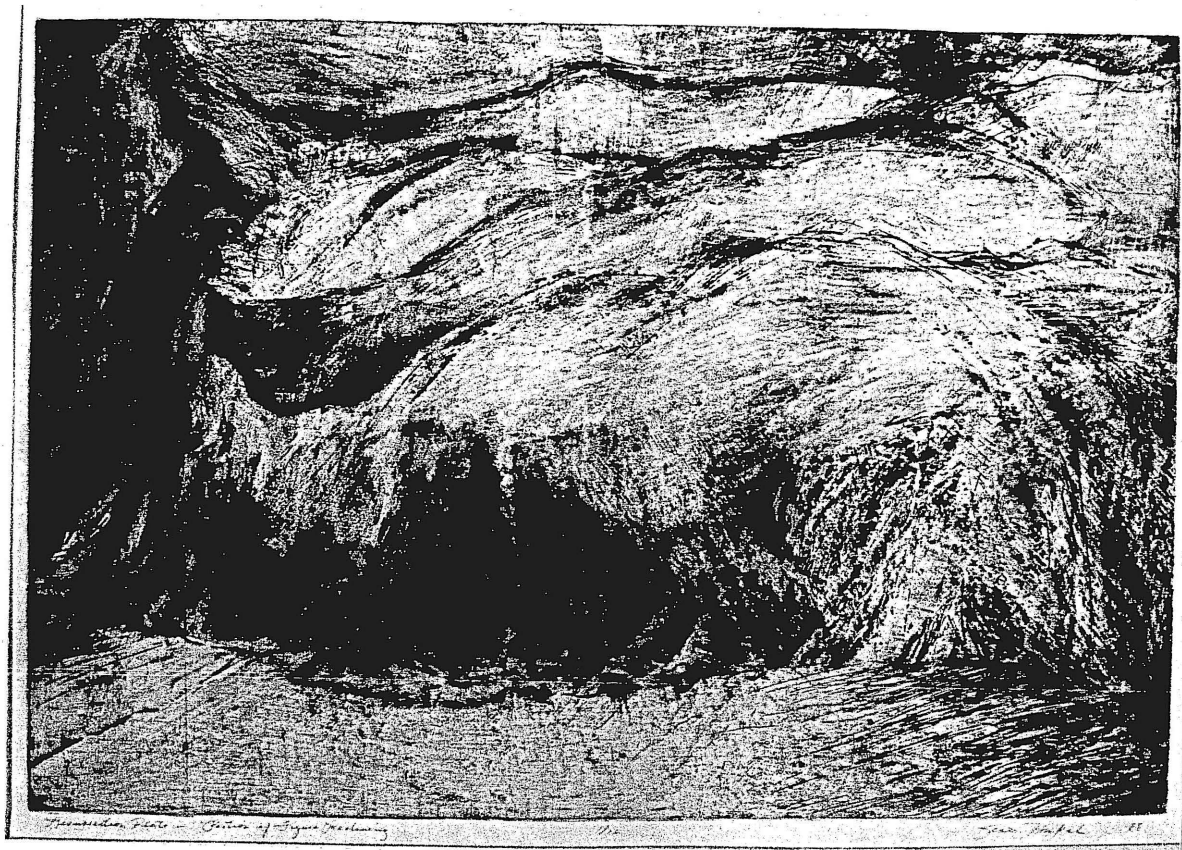


Fig. 23. Hickel - Resurrection Plate: Portion of Figure Reclining. Etching 1988