

Fantastically French!

Design and Architecture in 16th- to 18th-Century Prints

4: Stefano della Bella

It might strike you as strange to find the work of an Italian artist in an exhibition about French prints. Stefano della Bella was born in Florence, but he lived in Paris for ten years. While he was there, he produced the majority of the more than 1000 prints he made in his lifetime. Della Bella's designs were very popular and had a large influence on the French decorative style.

The three etchings in front of you feature inventive grotesque designs. Today, the word grotesque means something that is comically or repulsively ugly or distorted, but the term actually comes from the Italian word *grotto* and refers to the style of painting discovered in ancient Roman ruins during the Renaissance. Grotesque ornament is characterized by hybrid combinations of foliage, animals, and human figures. The motifs in these three prints range from the whimsical to the macabre.

In the print at the far left, we see an owl, which is a symbol of death. In its beak is a bell, whose chime signals the end of a life. Above, the emaciated figure of Death bangs a drum and displays a banner showing earthly riches -- all of which become meaningless when Death comes to call.

The print at center is more lighthearted. Camel bodies sprout from scrolling acanthus leaves, with necks of foliage transitioning seamlessly to fur-covered heads.

At the far right, angelic winged infants known as "putti" playfully blow bubbles, which are also symbols of the transience of life. In a sight familiar to Austinites, a bat hangs suspended, wings outstretched, from the putti's plant-like tails. Such ornamental designs provided sources for artisans making everything from wall panels to table fountains.

The combinations of naturalistic foliage with realistic animals and half-human figures in Della Bella's prints anticipate the stylistic developments of the Rococo, which is characterized by greater emphasis on naturalism, graceful lines and curves, and whimsical fantasy, which we see in the works on the other side of this gallery.