Van Dyck the Engraver
Art of the Portrait

The Cabinet des Dessins, the Chalcography and the Edmond de Rothschild Collection at the Musée du Louvre bring together an exceptional grouping of works forming one of the finest series of engraved portraits by a painter: the Iconography of Antoine van Dyck. Inviting the public to discover first-state etchings as well as a number of preparatory drawings and copper plates used to create the Iconography, this exhibition offers an unprecedented view into the genesis and development of this singular series.

A passion for portraiture and prints

This exhibition retraces Van Dyck’s especially close relationship with the engraver’s art from the early days of his apprenticeship in Rubens’ studio (1610–1614). Just 11 years old at the time, he already had a hand in the reproduction on copper plate of his master’s renowned works. Drawings by Van Dyck, corrected by Rubens, are thus paired with the corrections that Van Dyck himself would later make to the work of his assistants—Vosterman the Younger and Paul Pontius—by heightening with wash or underscoring in black chalk.

After this first experience with engraving, Van Dyck established himself as a freelance painter in 1615 and was named a master in the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke in 1618. He traveled to Italy in 1622, where for six years he studied the Italian masters, especially Titian and Veronese, and there began his successful career as a portrait artist. The exhibition closes with two masterpieces reflecting Van Dyck’s fully Italian conception of etching: his Ecce Homo, of which the Louvre possesses the original copper plate as well as two lovely proofs, and a first state of Titian and His Mistress from the Edmond de Rothschild collection, the only one annotated in the hand of Van Dyck in brown ink. Handled in a free manner, these two typically unfinished works reveal the Roman legacy of Van Dyck’s years in Italy.

Upon returning to Antwerp, Van Dyck received several major commissions for religious subjects and served as court painter to the Archduchess Isabella from 1628 to 1629. In 1632, at the invitation of Charles I, he left for London, where he would be knighted by the king, becoming the English monarch’s court painter. During this period, he painted numerous portraits of the king and his family, but also of other illustrious personages of the court, himself and his own family. Antoine van Dyck was laid to rest in Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London in 1641.
Genesis of the Iconography
The first mention of the Iconography dates back to March 11, 1632, in the guise of a letter in which Huygens thanks Van Dyck for his portrait engraved by Pontius, after the work signed by the master. Thus as early as March 1632, there existed a substantial collection of engraved portraits of illustrious contemporaries of the painter and engraver. Indeed, this series, which had been passed from hand to hand for several months was commonly titled “engraved portraits of celebrated men by Antoine van Dyck”. This set would receive the title Iconography only on the occasion of a later republication in the 18th century.

The first edition of the collection was published in Antwerp by Martin van den Enden. It consisted of eighty-four portraits divided into three folio volumes: Princes, Statesmen and Scholars and Artists and Patrons. At the very moment when this first publication was in preparation, Van Dyck was completing a series of etchings (including his celebrated Self-Portrait) which would only be added to the collection posthumously, as part of the edition published by Gillis Hendricx in 1645–46. In spite of the success of the Iconography, the one hundred twenty-four copper plates acquired by the Second Republic on behalf of the Louvre have not lost their bloom or their suppleness. As copper plates of such delicacy have not been manufactured since the 19th century, some of these plates will be displayed in order to be viewed from both sides allowing visitors to appreciate their exceptional quality. Similarly, the condition of the engravings themselves is remarkable.

An art of engraved portraiture
Van Dyck’s supreme talent as a portrait artist in his paintings was revealed in minute detail when, transferred to the medium of engraving, it gave birth to the Iconography. Conceived by its creator as a way to perpetuate his body of work, this collection of engraved portraits bears witness to an exacting conception of the engraver’s art quite particular to Van Dyck.

He demonstrated a genuine concern for the harmonization of the engraved reproductions of his portraits, as evidenced by the grisailles executed as preparatory studies for the works executed by his engravers. It is Van Dyck’s etchings, which originally were not intended to be included in the Iconography, that best exemplify his singular spontaneity and fluidity. Van Dyck’s Self-Portrait, the embodiment of this approach, has become one of the best known prints by the artist. Three renderings—the copper plate, the first state and the second state (appearing as the frontispiece of the 1645 edition)—are presented in this exhibition, allowing the visitor to appreciate the manner in which, from the spontaneous stroke of genius of the engraved self-portrait, a mode of representing celebrated figures as living, unique and singular subjects was born that would hold sway over all the academism of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Related events and publication
Publication

In the Auditorium du Louvre
Art on Stage, Wednesday, January 23 at 12:30 p.m., focusing on the Self-Portrait by van Dyck: La naissance d’une estampe, la fortune d’un genre, by Pascal Torres, Musée du Louvre.