

CARD 2021 Poster Session Transcript **Georgia Brabec**

In the last decade of his career, sixteenth century Sieneese artist Domenico Beccafumi turned his attention from painting and sculpture to the art of printmaking. Though his more notable projects include the marble inlays at the Duomo di Siena and his fresco series and the Palazzo Pubblico, I'd like to highlight his small but exceptional oeuvre of chiaroscuro woodcuts. But why would a well-established humanist artist shift his attention from the then reputable, intellectual mediums of drawing, painting and sculpture to the reproductive craft of printmaking? By analyzing these prints, I argue that Beccafumi sought to elevate the status of humanist printmaking from an *arte minore* or low art to an *arte maggiore* or high art, and by extension, to highlight his own status as an intellectual, divine maker on par with the greatest artists of the Renaissance.

The first chiaroscuro woodcuts in Italy are attributed to Venetian printmaker Ugo da Carpi, who received a Papal privilege for the style in 1516, about 30 years before Beccafumi adopted the medium. The technique itself emerged in present-day Germany at the end of the fifteenth century, though the term *chiaroscuro* was not applied to printmaking until Vasari's later sixteenth-century artist's biography of Beccafumi. Nevertheless, Ugo developed the technique and created a lucrative market for chiaroscuro woodcuts. His compositions were wholly borrowed from artists like Titian, Raphael, Parmigianino, and more, reproduced in a different stylistic manner.

Although Ugo's work conveyed technical mastery, it lacked the intellectual design and innate wit that served to advance the status of humanist artists in the Renaissance. By reproducing the designs of others, he perpetuated the conception that printmaking was

merely a reproductive craft. Within the context of contemporary debates regarding the merits of different media (particularly painting and sculpture), printmaking existed as an auxiliary art form, treated more as a means for reproduction than as a means to create something expressive or unique. According to art historians David Landau and Peter Parshall, it was only during the first half of the sixteenth century with artists like the great German printmaker Albrecht Dürer that “the evolution of print production, and along with it the emergence of new notions about what it was that constituted a work of art, drew the print increasingly to the center of sophisticated interests.”

And the print did, in fact, capture the interest of Beccafumi. His body of prints, securely dated within the 1540s, demonstrates the artist’s ability to create original designs using inventiveness or *inventio* and his innate wit or *ingenium*. Unlike Ugo, Beccafumi devised of his own compositions for the sole purpose of printmaking. His prints were not reproductions of paintings or sculptures but rather pieces of full-fledged, experimental artistic expression that were meant to stand on their own.

On my poster are three iterations of his composition *Two Nude Men in a Landscape*. On the left we see his original preparatory design in red chalk; shading and blending convey the illusion of light and three-dimensionality.

In the center, we see the drawing reversed in an *intaglio* print with minor compositional changes: the contours of this engraving are gestural like the drawing, but lack the depth made possible by the drawing’s shading.

And on the right, we see the final iteration of the print, this time with the engraving layered over two tonal woodblocks in light and medium gray ink. The final woodblock

additions breathe new life into the engraving; the flexibility of the figural contours in the red chalk drawing is better conveyed by the softened outlines. The light and dark contrasts heighten the scene's three-dimensionality and make the now painterly figures appear more sculptural. The chiaroscuro woodcut print, it seems, can engage the merits of drawing, painting, and sculpture together in a new medium. Like drawing in ink or graphite, it presents even softer outlines in a way that engravings cannot. Like painting, it employs color and form as a way to enliven a work and create highly personalized and idealized representations. And like sculpture, it captures the depth and three-dimensionality of a figure or object by engaging the tonal qualities of light and shadow.

This innovative, experimental, and ultimately intellectual approach to printmaking is a manifestation of Beccafumi's humanist *ingenium*. His ambition to elevate the reproductive art of printmaking from the work of skilled artisans to a vehicle of original, high-minded artistic expression helped to expand what eventually constituted "high" art from a Renaissance humanist perspective. Beccafumi's unique and engaging chiaroscuro works ushered in a new era of skillful and intelligent printmaking that bridged the most respected artistic mediums of the period, changing humanist conceptions of what art could be and elevating both the art of printmaking and the role of the printmaker.