

# **THE ETCHER'S HANDBOOK**

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The Etcher's Handbook by Philip Gilbert Hamerton

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**PHILIP GILBERT HAMERTON**

**THE ETCHER'S  
HANDBOOK**



THE  
ETCHER'S HANDBOOK.

BY

PHILIP GILBERT HAMERTON,

AUTHOR OF "ETCHING AND ETCHERS."

*Giving an Account of the Old Processes, and of Processes  
recently discovered.*

ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR.

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"What, then, is the amount and kind of previous knowledge and skill required by the etcher? It is an innate artistic spirit, without which all the study in the world is useless. It is the cultivation of this spirit, not arduously but lovingly. It is the knowledge that is acquired by a life of devotion to what is true and beautiful—by the daily and hourly habit of weighing and comparing what we see in nature, and the thinking of how it should be represented in art. It is the habit of constant observation of great things and small, and the experience that springs from it. It is taste, which a celebrated painter once said, but not truly, is rarer than genius. The skill that grows out of these habits is the skill required by the etcher. It is the skill of the analyst and of the synthesist—the skill to combine, and the skill to separate—to compound and to simplify—to detach planes from plane—to fuse detail into mass—to subordinate definition to space, distance, light, and air. Finally, it is the acumen to perceive the near relationship that expression bears to form, and the skill to draw them—not separately, but together."—*Fine Arts Quarterly Review*.



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## PREFACE.



ALTHOUGH the new processes in etching may be expected in a great measure to supersede those which have been handed down to us by our predecessors in the art, I have thought it best, for several reasons, to give an equally full account of all of them.

It happens, in the first place, that the most revolutionary of these processes is a discovery of my own, and as inventors are always liable to be suspected of undue partiality to their own inventions, the best way to escape suspicions of this kind seemed to be that of treating all processes which have at any time led to good results on a footing of strict equality. Again, although some etchers may like the new processes, others with equally good reason may prefer to remain faithful to the old ones. This is a matter to be decided by the temperament of each practitioner for himself, and the writer of a handbook on the art fulfils his duty best in offering his readers the widest

possible range for choice. And the same etcher may find it convenient to resort to different processes at different times, according to the need of the occasion. The student will therefore do wisely to choose his process according to his taste and temper, and also according to the need of the hour. And let him be assured of this, that unless he really likes the process that he uses, and heartily enjoys the work whilst he is doing it, there is not the faintest chance, whatever his knowledge and ability as an artist, that he will produce a good etching, or anything resembling a good etching. All cold or dull, or business-like etching, however clever and scientific it may be, bears the same relation to the real thing that verse-making does to poetry. And just as a poet, when he sits down to write a lyric ought not to be bothered with ink and pons of a kind which do not suit him, and are likely to fret him and put him out of temper, so every etcher ought studiously to avoid those varnishes and acids whose operation does not seem to him convenient.

The reader to whom etching is a new subject is especially warned not to judge of the capabilities of the art by the general mass of modern production, which is quite unworthy of his attention. There are a few good living etchers, but very few; and out of

the quantities of etchings which are published every year, nine out of ten are not only valueless, but a nuisance, doing much harm by propagating and confirming the false conceptions of the art which are generally prevalent. The majority of amateurs seem to imagine that drawing and chiaroscuro of a degree of badness which nobody would tolerate in a picture, somehow become allowable in an etching; that because good etchings are usually free, an etcher is at liberty to set at defiance all the known laws of nature and of art; that the mere act of drawing on varnished copper implies of itself a mysterious cleverness, elevating the practitioner above the common canons of art-criticism. On the other hand, those of our artists who could really etch if they liked are so busy making fortunes with the brush that they have hardly any leisure for a less remunerative pursuit.

I would ask the reader to think of etching simply as a kind of highly-concentrated drawing, subject to the same laws as any other kind of point-drawing,\* but more difficult to execute because complicated

\* Except that more artistic feeling is expected from an etcher than from any other artist, because the best etchers have always concentrated so much passionate expression in their work with the etching-needle.