



Introduction

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Leonardo da Vinci's *Bust of a Warrior* (pl. 47), executed in the late 1470s in Florence, is one of the most widely admired drawings in the history of art. Drawn with a silver stylus on specially prepared paper, this study provides an unforgettable demonstration of the subtlety and precision offered by silverpoint, the most common type of metalpoint.¹ The artist placed each arrow-straight hatching line with such accuracy that from a few inches away the parallel lines create the impression of soft flesh. The delicate modeling of the face forms a striking contrast to the calligraphic handling of the warrior's armor and the crisp contour of the profile, strengthened as the artist reinforced the pure line of silverpoint by tracing over it multiple times.

Likely drawn a decade or so before the *Bust of a Warrior*, a silverpoint study of *Saint Mary Magdalene* (pl. 9) from the circle of Rogier van der Weyden reveals a different approach. The artist used a complex system of parallel and cross hatching to model the cheek, define the flow of hair, and indicate the reflection of light onto eyelids and jaw line. He lavished attention on the detailed description of facial features and emotion, employing a sharp stylus to delineate the knitted brow and brimming eyes. The viewer who contemplates the illusionistic treatment of the tears may simultaneously marvel at the artist's skill and participate in the Magdalene's pain.

Even to curators and conservators with years of exposure to this admittedly rather straightforward medium, these drawings seem almost miraculous. Part of our awe stems from our understanding of the medium's limitations.² Silverpoint, like all metalpoints except leadpoint, can be difficult or impossible to erase, depending on the type of ground and the heaviness of the line. Compared to many other media, such as chalk, silverpoint produces a relatively restricted range of tones. A draftsman using pen or chalk can vary the thickness or darkness of a stroke by bearing down on his instrument, but a stylus responds less readily to pressure, leaving a fairly uniform line. Although artists have developed innovative methods for creating tone with metalpoint, a stylus is an inherently linear drawing tool that forces the draftsman to model with hatching. Some artists have embraced these limitations, viewing silverpoint as a challenge and a means of honing their skills: certainly the *Bust of a Warrior* gave the young Leonardo an opportunity to demonstrate his

precocious facility with the medium. Others have chosen silverpoint mainly for its aesthetic properties, such as its matchless precision and subtlety. Its shimmering line is simultaneously firm and delicate, appearing almost evanescent despite its clarity. Metalpoint had practical advantages as well as aesthetic ones, attributes that rendered it indispensable in many workshops. This exhibition, the first to chart all six centuries of metalpoint's history, reveals regional and historic variations in function, technique, and assumptions about its use.

While we now tend to view metalpoint's permanence as a limitation, it was also a benefit for many early artists: when applied to a correctly prepared ground, metalpoint resists smudging, a significant advantage for drawings intended for years of workshop use. This was an important consideration for the draftsman of the *Mary Magdalene*, which reproduces a figure in a painting.³ This type of meticulous copy often saw sustained use in a workshop, where it might have provided a model for figures in future paintings, a sample of the master's style for prospective patrons, and an example for young artists to copy as they learned to draw. The recording of finished works of art was a major function of metalpoint for Netherlandish artists throughout the fifteenth century. Artists in Germany and Italy used metalpoint for the same purpose, although surviving examples suggest that Italian artists in particular did so less frequently (pls. 21 verso, 23, 26, 38). Similarly, metalpoint was ideal for model books, bound repositories of motifs that could be consulted repeatedly for a variety of purposes. This tradition was notably strong in northern Europe, where artists sometimes used wood as a support for additional durability (pl. 1 and p. 65, fig. 3).

Metalpoint's permanence was matched by its convenience and portability, as an artist using a metal stylus need not carry an inkwell or pause frequently to sharpen his implement. These qualities made it a natural choice for sketchbooks, which were especially popular with early sixteenth-century German artists. Metalpoint sketchbooks were particularly useful to travelers, and "metallic notebooks," their nineteenth-century successors, were still marketed for this purpose three hundred years after Dürer used a silverpoint sketchbook on a journey through the Netherlands (pls. 29, 30, 31 and p. 192, fig. 3). Artists also used silverpoint sketchbooks closer to home. German draftsmen, such as Dürer and the Holbein family, used them to make informal portraits of friends and family (pl. 25 and p. 68, fig. 7). This type of personal use of silverpoint recurs in the sketches of Dutch artists such as Hendrick Goltzius and Rembrandt (pl. 61 and p. 157, fig. 10) and, more or less self-consciously, centuries later in the drawings of William Holman Hunt, Otto Dix, and Avigdor Arikha (pls. 81, 95, 99).⁴

Although Italian artists sometimes used metalpoint outside the studio (pl. 48), surviving evidence suggests that they were far less likely than their northern counterparts to exploit its portability. Metalpoint use in Italy appears instead to have been centered in the workshop, where it was used above all for figure studies. While these figures were sometimes intended for direct use in paintings (pl. 44), more often their function blurs the distinction between preparatory study and studio

exercise, as artists practicing skills in life drawing simultaneously created a stock of figures for later use. The Florentine Renaissance provides some of the most compelling evidence of metalpoint's utility as a teaching tool.⁵ Fifteenth-century painter and writer Cennino Cennini advised students to draw with metalpoint on specially prepared vellum tablets or on panels. Both allowed beginners to obliterate clumsy novice efforts, avoiding the waste of expensive paper.⁶ Similarly, an aspiring Dutch artist practiced drawing in a notebook of *tafeletten*, the northern version of the tablets described by Cennini, erasing some of his less successful efforts (pl. 65).⁷ A student learning to draw with metalpoint mastered the task of conveying volume and the passage of light through modulations in hatching as he coped with the medium's linearity, an aspect of the medium that rendered it invaluable in artistic training from the Renaissance workshop to the Slade School in late nineteenth-century London and beyond.

Wherever it was in use, metalpoint played a role in the preparatory process, not only in studies for paintings (pls. 52, 79) but also in designs for decorative arts (pls. 17, 77). In general, artists throughout the first centuries of metalpoint's history evidently considered it better suited to recording than to imagining, as figure studies and portraits outnumber early preliminary studies or rough compositional sketches. Characteristically, Leonardo was among the exceptions to this rule, followed by Raphael. The flow of ideas uninterrupted by the need to sharpen or refill their instruments, both artists made rapid sketches exploring a variety of poses (pls. 51, 56). Printmakers were especially inclined to use metalpoint preparatory drawings. Some of these studies are incised for transfer of the design to the plate (pl. 13), but the precise role of other preparatory studies for prints remains unclear. The metalpoints of Hendrick Goltzius and Jacques de Gheyn II, for instance, often correspond closely to engravings (p. 149, fig. 2 and pl. 66) but bear no evidence of direct transfer. More generally, metalpoint's linearity likely appealed to printmakers, who were accustomed to working with methodical systems of hatching: a striking number of accomplished Northern metalpoint draftsmen—from the Housebook Master to Otto Dix—were also printmakers.

Patterns in metalpoint use evolved in tandem with preferences for specific materials and techniques, such as regional tastes for different types of ground. By the mid-fifteenth century, Italian artists were far more likely than northerners to use tinted grounds. This predilection probably relates to artistic styles and the purposes of the drawings. Italians valued the volumetric effects they achieved with the combination of colored ground, metalpoint, and white heightening, while Netherlandish artists sought clarity and detail, using a fine point on a less abrasive, carefully burnished ground for their precise records. Some Netherlandish artists removed extraneous lines from their typically white or cream-colored ground, scratched through heavily worked areas they wanted to lighten, and carved out highlights, all practices that would have led to different results on colored ground.⁸ Over a century later, Goltzius chose smooth *tafeletten* for his miniature portraits.⁹ These specially prepared sheets

were generally used in notebooks and in that capacity were intended to be erased and reused multiple times.¹⁰ Although Goltzius sometimes made alterations, he evidently avoided repeated reuse of the page.¹¹ The disruption to the surface caused by multiple reworkings would have made it impossible to achieve the remarkable details that make his tiny drawings so breathtaking.

Understanding regional variations in materials and techniques can sometimes aid in attributions, as demonstrated by several examples discussed in this catalog. Technical examination, as part of a scientific research project linked to the exhibition, has revealed a close connection between two drawings from the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden (pls. 8, 11), while other reattributions have emerged through the fresh perspective offered by the examination of metalpoint throughout history (pls. 34, 68, 69).¹² Scientific analysis proceeding in museums all over Europe and North America will enhance our understanding of artistic preferences: the discovery of touches of goldpoint in two drawings from the circle of Jan van Eyck, for example, offers an intriguing but so far unaccountable glimpse into artistic practice.¹³ Analysis of more drawings from Van Eyck's orbit may eventually offer an explanation for the use of this material, which was apparently rare before the late nineteenth century.

Although metalpoint was most widely used during the first century of its history, its practical advantages helped to keep it alive during the years of waning use that followed. Its utility as a writing material ensured a proliferation of metalpoint notebooks throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while a few miniaturists and portraitists used it in a subordinate role into the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, as the following chapters will reveal, the medium's history has been sporadic and limited to rather brief flowerings in specific regions. Metalpoint's resulting rarity, particularly in American museum collections, has made it a somewhat unfamiliar material even to many art historians. This has led to the misidentification of drawings in other media as metalpoints. Examples include a brush and wash copy of a Dürer silverpoint by Hans Hoffmann (p. 64, fig. 1) as well as a number of late seventeenth-century Dutch drawings.¹⁴ Accounts of the history of silverpoint often mention examples from Renaissance-inspired nineteenth-century artistic movements—namely the Nazarenes in Germany (pl. 75) and the Pre-Raphaelites in England—as well as artists such as Edgar Degas, Frederic Leighton, or Pablo Picasso. On closer examination, however, their use of silverpoint has been rare or the claims of its use have been based on a false identification of graphite or lead. The case of Leighton's *Lemon Tree* (Private Collection) provides a striking example of this phenomenon: although the study was exhibited as a graphite drawing multiple times during Leighton's lifetime, later generations assumed on the basis of its delicacy and meticulous detail that it was a silverpoint. The misidentification was repeated for more than a century.¹⁵ Silverpoint's patchy history has also lent it an air of archaism. No other drawing medium is so closely linked with the Renaissance or so strongly compels artists to recall the draftsmen who used it centuries earlier.

Together with aesthetic considerations, these historic associations provided the main impetus for Victorian artists to revive silverpoint after its lull during the eighteenth century. With the exception of the metalpoint sketchbook or notebook, now mass-produced and touted for its “ever-pointed” stylus and resistance to smearing, other media had replaced metalpoint in most of its practical roles. While we can speculate that Goltzius was inspired by Dürer to experiment with silverpoint, nineteenth-century artists such as William Dyce (pl. 76), Edward Burne-Jones (p. 193, fig. 4), and Alphonse Legros (pl. 82) leave us in no doubt of their deliberate emulation of the Renaissance drawings they studied in the British Museum and elsewhere. During the twentieth century, the link to historic tradition could be poignant. Otto Dix, for example, reached a peak of silverpoint activity in the years leading up to and including the outbreak of World War II. Although his drawings present a dramatic contrast with their old master predecessors in their size and bold approach, the references to Renaissance art in his landscape silverpoints (pl. 97) suggest that he saw the medium as a link to a part of Germany's past that must have seemed especially distant.¹⁶ His dealer, Karl Nierendorf, may have seen these historic associations as a means of making Dix's art more acceptable after the Nazis declared the artist “degenerate.” In the single exhibition held of Dix's work during these years, more than half the works Nierendorf selected were silverpoints.¹⁷

As in earlier centuries, materials and techniques of later periods are intimately linked to artistic expectations. The late nineteenth century's preoccupation with silverpoint's refinement, for instance, was probably shaped in part by the widespread availability of smooth, commercially prepared paper, which provided the perfect surface for an exceptionally fine, unbroken line, while the concurrent obsession with the medium's limitations likely developed as a result of the greater range of alternative media. As artists chose metalpoint increasingly for aesthetic rather than practical reasons, they experimented with new effects, finding, for instance, that goldpoint resisted oxidization and remained a pale gray (pl. 83). Twentieth-century artists in particular tested long-held assumptions about silverpoint. Joseph Stella's silverpoint *Self-Portrait* vividly demonstrates that a material celebrated for its delicacy can also create powerful lines legible from across a room (pl. 92). Some, such as Ivan Albright, Susan Schwalb, and Jasper Johns, have challenged our conception of metalpoint as an exclusively linear medium, experimenting with unusual tools to create surprising tonal effects and exploring coloristic variations in metals (pls. 100, 102, 103).

The wide range of drawings examined in this catalog demonstrates that metalpoint is a more versatile medium than twenty-first-century audiences sometimes assume. Although artists' priorities and reasons for choosing metalpoint have changed in the six centuries of the medium's history, the basic process of making a metalpoint drawing remains constant, uniting draftsmen across time. As artists continue to experiment with metalpoint, they will expand our view of the medium, in turn helping promote a fresh perspective on the drawings of the past six hundred

years. At the same time, a closer look at the practices and techniques of centuries of metalpoint may influence the ways artists of the future will approach this varied and endlessly fascinating medium.

Notes

Note to the reader: For reasons of expediency throughout the following essays, the authors have used the term “silverpoint” when context and appearance strongly suggest that the metal used was silver. Only technical analysis, however, can confirm the presence of a specific metal in a metalpoint drawing. Medium descriptions in the checklist and plate captions adhere to more precise terminology: “metalpoint” is noted with the most likely type indicated in parentheses, unless analysis or the artist has confirmed the presence of a particular metal.

- 1 See Schenck, pp. 9–23.
- 2 For an in-depth discussion, see Schenck, pp. 18–21.
- 3 See Hand, p. 32.
- 4 Arikha noted the profound influence of Dürer’s silverpoint sketchbook on his own work. See Mordechai Omer, *Avigdor Arikha, Drawings* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1998), 166.
- 5 Chapman, pp. 103 and 107–110.
- 6 Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell’arte: The Craftsman’s Handbook*, trans. Daniel V. Thompson Jr. (New Haven, 1960), 4–5.
- 7 The sketchbook attributed to Aegidius Sadeler II (p. 147, fig. 1) bears erasures on an otherwise blank page and partially removed traces of part of a figure after Michelangelo on another sheet. A similar metalpoint book, probably German and made around 1580, now in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, (V.a. 480) features amateurish figures and multiple erasures.
- 8 See Schenck, pp. 18–19 and Russell et al., p. 265.
- 9 See Schenck, pp. 14–15 and Van Camp, pp. 146–147.
- 10 Writing tablets sometimes included instructions for erasure and reuse. See, for instance, Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, J. Franklin Mowery, and Heather Wolfe, “Hamlet’s Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 382, and Cennini 1933, 4–5, note 1.
- 11 See Van Camp, p. 150.
- 12 See Russell, et al., p. 266; Bartrum, p. 73; and Van Camp, pp. 153–154.
- 13 See Hand, p. 29.
- 14 See Bartrum, p. 63 and Van Camp, p. 160.
- 15 For bibliography and exhibition history, see Christopher Newall in Philippa Martin et al., *A Victorian Master: Drawings by Frederic, Lord Leighton* (Leighton House Museum, London, 2006), cat. 2.8.
- 16 Similarly, see the silverpoints made by German artist Karl Hagedorn, at the Eastern Front in World War II (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2008.237.3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14). We are grateful to John Ittmann for bringing these to our attention.
- 17 Wilko von Abercron, ed., *Franz Lenk, 1898–1968: Retrospektive und Dokumentationen* (Cologne, 1976), 15. The authors would like to thank Austeja Mackelaite for her research on Dix.

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