

## *Introduction*

*I* would have liked to underline the human element in my title by taking the early printer as my “agent of change.” But although I do think of certain master printers as being the unsung heroes of the early modern era, and although they are the true protagonists of this book, impersonal processes involving transmission and communication must also be given due attention. In the end, practical considerations became paramount. I decided that cataloguing would be simplified if I referred to the tool rather than the user. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, xv.

This book examines the full range of print activities of Abraham Bosse during the years 1622–1676 within the broad context of the milieu of printing in early modern France. Bosse is well known as a printmaker and book illustrator and as the author of books and pamphlets on a variety of subjects. A consummate print professional, he was, in fact, more or less unique at the time in his persistent and sustained interrogation of the seemingly endless possibilities of print – independent prints on single sheets combining image and text, broadsides, placards, almanacs, theses, book illustrations, and books and pamphlets – based on the same and similar models followed by other publishers of books and of “job printing” or ephemera, of the aforementioned and related publications such as petitions, certificates, jest-books and plays. He was, not least of all, a publisher who also sold prints and books. His was a user of print, in other words, grounded in a shared consciousness of the possibilities enumerated by Elizabeth L. Eisenstein in her foundational study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (1979).

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To be sure, printed texts were the principal outcomes of these technologies, and although Eisenstein reminded us that images were other such “agents of change” she examined texts more or less exclusively.<sup>1</sup> Focusing attention on “impersonal processes” – “the tool rather than the user” – she also bypassed the contributions of the individual agents involved.<sup>2</sup> With few exceptions, print culture scholars have done the same, concentrating on print technology and the impact of the “printed word.” That technologies as such are not cultural practices, nor the relationship between technologies and texts one of simple cause and effect, Eisenstein made clear; the scope of her book, she said, was the result of “practical considerations” in attempting to bring a vast amount and variety of material under control.<sup>3</sup> In this spirit and in light of the continued importance of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, the present study returns to the original project as envisaged by Eisenstein, enlarging on her work by shifting attention to one extraordinary “user” and the hows and whys of his uses of print.

That the aforementioned ephemera constituted the most ubiquitous printed matter was also underscored by Eisenstein.<sup>4</sup> The ephemera of her discussion consist, however, of texts of from one to four pages long or, if images, of crude woodcuts. Such ephemera are, by definition, short-lived; serving immediate needs, they are quickly discarded or destroyed. Tessa Watt recently has noted that the survival rate of sixteenth-century English ballads is perhaps one in ten thousand copies and one in ten editions. She cites Folke Dahl’s estimate of 0.013 percent of English news books surviving from 1620 to 1642.<sup>5</sup> The rate of survival of other such ephemera, of broadsides, almanacs, pamphlets, placards, and so on, is not significantly greater. Etchings and engravings such as were produced by Bosse, by contrast, were preserved in substantial numbers and eventually collected for being of “timeless” interest. As such, they have remained for the most part the exclusive purview of art historians/printmaking specialists applying the principles of connoisseurship, its scope recently extended by archival research; they have been studied, in other words, as the rough equivalents of paintings. Questions of how such prints were received and interpreted, of what differences they made, and of the roles they played in culture and everyday life have rarely been asked.<sup>6</sup> The differences are striking and would seem to be those between types of ephemera and works of graphic “art,” so that to invoke ephemera in a study of Bosse’s skillfully executed etchings and engravings would seem to go against the very meaning of that term.

But how real were these differences? How do we determine what was ephemeral? Did printmakers such as Bosse deliberately intend their images to last? An obvious answer is that it was the viewer/reader rather than the printmaker who decided. Bosse created images, for example, for one of the most ubiquitous of ephemera, the almanac, with observations about planets, predictions of the weather, and so on, all for a specific year and therefore

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completely useless once that year had ended. And so these particular almanacs were obviously regarded and discarded – except for the etchings that were cut from the sheets and preserved. Similar acts of individual agency were evidently behind the preservation of other of his images made for a variety of ephemera – broadsides, placards, and so on. But while acknowledging the importance of the responses of different readers, the encounter between reader/viewer and text/image, my argument will not be about such responses – or not primarily – anymore than it will be about the iconography of printed images in some absolute sense.<sup>7</sup> The crucial point is that the almanacs with Bosse’s etchings, as other print products including his etchings, were by their very nature ephemeral and fall within the same discursive frames and practices as other types of ephemera.

The notion of discursive practices evoked here is that of Michel Foucault, who has suggested that such practices are not reducible simply to ways of producing discourse but are rather “embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them.”<sup>8</sup> The discourses of Bosse’s prints thus understood would not be restricted to their linguistic equivalents and associations, but rather expanded to include technical, social, institutional, and pedagogical processes and changing paradigms, as reflected in types of more widely accepted verbal and visual ephemera, which, in turn, as recent research has shown, must be considered not as marginal but rather integral to our understanding of the cultural role of print.<sup>9</sup>

The prints themselves provide valuable testimony as to their more specific conceptual and cultural frameworks.<sup>10</sup> Given that the images are accompanied by inscriptions, usually in the vernacular, it is obvious that Bosse was addressing an audience with basic reading skills. Literacy having increased during this period, extending down the social scale, that potential audience would have been large and diverse, from artisans and tradesmen to merchants, and perhaps also up to civil servants and lawyers. The latter two groups would have constituted a more limited public for the prints with Latin inscriptions, although these are usually hybrids, with Latin deepening the sense of the vernacular, and so would have been accessible at least in part to those with less traditional educational backgrounds. One exceptional print contains only texts in Latin and Greek and therefore has been clearly addressed to a literate elite capable not only of reading these languages but also understanding the use of rhetorical figures and exempla and familiar with the major classical authors. Not surprisingly, this image is of the king, its primary audience no doubt high-ranking civil servants and members of the court. Bosse’s prints, in sum, would have been accessible to a large and growing audience, much of it newly literate, with a range of tastes and values, many of them different from those catered to by painters and by the authors of learned books. (Of course, there was nothing to prevent the barely literate placed by Tessa Watt on the

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“fringes of literacy” from responding to, and interpreting, the images in many different ways, according to different levels of education and comprehension.)<sup>11</sup>



While I have been expressing my admiration for Elizabeth L. Eisenstein’s book, in recent discussions of print culture studies a contrast is often drawn between that book and Adrian Johns’ critique of it in his *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*.<sup>12</sup> Printing did not foster the advance of learning as Eisenstein claims, Johns argues, but in fact, as the result of too little oversight, undermined its stability. But Johns’ investigation, in turn, has been seen as unnecessarily polemical and too narrow in scope, concentrating on England at the expense of the rest of Europe. As my discussion to this point should have suggested, I have nevertheless taken to heart Johns’ insistence on the importance of differences between print cultures, with readers reacting in different ways to the same texts. From this perspective, print is recognized as a thoroughly social and cultural practice contingent on reception and interpretation; individual agents could “open” and change any specific print product in different and unpredictable ways, although these will always be limited by historical circumstances. I make use equally of the insights of both Eisenstein and Johns, in sum, examining Bosse’s varied print output within the broad framework described by Eisenstein with the aim of contributing to what Johns has heralded as a “new historical understanding of print.”<sup>13</sup>

I will argue, too, that even though all of the print materials discussed in this book were produced in France during roughly the first half of the seventeenth century, their evidence – particularly of single-sheet prints – should be of broader relevance. For these prints circulated widely, finding homes in England, the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain, their familiar, time-honored subjects resonating far and wide. For this reason, the following study should throw interesting new light on print culture around Europe as much as in early modern France.<sup>14</sup>



Some of the previously mentioned possibilities were intimated in the pioneering two-volume study of Bosse that André Blum published in 1924.<sup>15</sup> The first volume is little more than a list of the prints, some illustrated, but the second is a discussion of Bosse’s print activities within a broad cultural context, as what we would call “agents of change.” Blum touches on Bosse’s etchings, book illustrations, art theory, theory of etching/engraving, and also books and pamphlets. Most suggestive is a seminal chapter discussing Bosse’s prints within the context of social and economic conditions represented across a range of discourses. In this relatively brief chapter, in sum, Blum laid the foundation

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for what should have been many years of fruitful research into Bosse's role in early modern print culture. But it was not to be.

One reason that it was not was the excessive weight attached to Bosse's art theory. André Fontaine had called attention to this theory before the publication of Blum's study (1909) and writers who followed Fontaine during the next years, through the reorientation in the study of seventeenth-century French art and art theory that took place after 1960, maintained the same focus.<sup>16</sup> But if Fontaine's negative opinion was later reversed by Jacques Thuillier and others, Bosse the print professional described earlier remained remote and ultimately unavailable. Far from disavowing this single-minded interest in Bosse's art theory, they – myself included – embraced it. Similarly, in her recent monograph (2004), the first since Blum's, Marianne Le Blanc adds to the store of factual knowledge about Bosse's life and art but lavishes attention principally on his art and perspective theories.<sup>17</sup>

A seemingly different approach taken by the organizers of the recent quarter-century exhibition celebrating Bosse's birth (2004) turned out to be surprisingly similar.<sup>18</sup> The catalog accompanying the exhibition opens with a series of brief essays touching on Bosse's varied activities, followed by the catalog proper. The essays rarely venture into the print world from which Bosse's works are inseparable, however, and this failure to do so is still more striking in the catalog, which focuses attention on the images to the virtual exclusion of everything else, most notably the inscriptions. Ignored, so to say, is the collaborative nature of print production, channeling the contributions of publishers, printmakers, authors, editors, proofreaders, and others, the exigencies and mechanisms of the print world to which Bosse was responsive and that this study will address.



The historical Bosse has remained an elusive and much misunderstood figure, in no small part because of the unusual range of his print activities.<sup>19</sup> The bare bones of a biography, to be fleshed out during the course of this book, are as follows. He was born in Tours, into a Calvinist family, the son of a tailor – and not, as one might have expected, a printer or printmaker! – in 1602 according to a death certificate of 1676 giving his age as 74, or in 1604 according to his 1620 certificate of apprenticeship to the engraver and publisher Melchior Tavernier, another Calvinist who was one of his publishers from then until Tavernier's death in 1665. Other printmakers who seem to have played roles in his formation, either directly or indirectly, were the Dutch Simon Frisius, the Swiss Mathieu Mérian, and, most of all the great and innovative Jacques Callot, with whom he collaborated in 1628–1630.

In 1632, Bosse married Catherine Sarrabat, the marriage resulting in many births, only four children living past childhood, however, two boys and two

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girls, one of the latter cited by contemporaries for the excellence of her drawing skills. His name appears several times as godfather on birth certificates and a few official documents concerning the business of printing, to be discussed during the course of this study.

Bosse's first dated prints appeared in 1622. Beginning in the 1630s, during a period of expansion in the French print market, he produced his most original single-sheet prints and other print ephemera and also his most ambitious series of book illustrations. In 1645, he published a treatise on etching and engraving that was the first of its kind, went through two further French editions, and was translated into English and several European languages. Still earlier, in 1643, he authored what became the first in a series of books applying the discoveries of the mathematician Girard Desargues to practices in a variety of crafts and in the art of painting, culminating in a treatise on perspective published in 1648. Just as he had used Desargues' discoveries to his own purposes, so, too, had he organized his treatise on etching and engraving around a technical innovation of Jacques Callot. Bosse's own contributions were secondary, in other words, dissemination rather than invention being the common denominator across these books.

In 1648, shortly after the publication of the treatise on perspective, Bosse was invited to teach perspective in the newly created Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, with the title "membre honoraire," because at that time the academy did not admit artisans such as those in the print professions. The academy's choice proved disastrous for both parties, and Bosse was formally expelled in 1661 — an act that has received an inordinate amount of attention in Bosse studies.<sup>20</sup> That year marks the beginning of his most intense and sustained activity as author, printer, and publisher, particularly of further books on perspective and architecture.

Such are the basic facts, except for the extraordinary record of his publications. Modern catalogs of his prints conservatively list some 1,500 items of the different kinds mentioned earlier; it has been estimated that he illustrated at least 120 books. In his role as author-publisher-bookseller, he issued a catalog in 1674 advertising the books and pamphlets he authored. Seventeen titles are listed with summaries of the contents of each and promise of the future publication of "three or four" others: on drawing and on enameling gold, copper, and glass, on the proportions of the human body, on the cutting of stones, and still another treatise on architecture, none of which saw the light of day, however, before his death in 1676.



On a personal note, let me say that Bosse has been on my mind for more than four decades. He was an important figure in a master's thesis that I wrote in

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1962 and the PhD dissertation that I defended in 1966. I published essays on his art theory and role in the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture with some regularity during the following decades. I planned eventually to tackle his prints and to this end I would regularly leaf through the Bosse albums in the Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, only to come away each time baffled and confused. Every conceivable type of print product was included in these albums, the single-sheet narrative prints for which he has been best known constituting only a small part of the whole. I had the feeling, too, that even the single-sheet prints were eluding my grasp. According to received opinion, these prints are transparent images, recording the appearances and manners of the people of early modern France – an opinion, it is to be stressed, based on the images alone. Their accompanying texts, it was agreed by print specialists, were not of his invention and therefore irrelevant for an understanding of his “intentions.” Discussions of his prints tended to begin and end, therefore, with a straightforward description of the images, with comments about the dress of the figures, the settings and so on – no more, no less. It was as though the texts did not exist.

When I studied the same images, however, I found many of them anything but transparent, and the texts only further complicated matters. Most surprising were those that seemed to me traceable to the learned discourse of the period, to Neoplatonic philosophy, Petrarchan love poetry, and so on. Was it conceivable that a *mere* craftsman whose images have seemed antipathetic to intellectual activity actually participated in this activity? A colleague specializing in the art of the period to whom I put this question thought not, that the suggestion was so farfetched as to be ludicrous. How, then, are these echoes of learned discourse to be explained? And were such utterances intentionally “learned?” I had realized early on that the answers to these vexed questions were not to be found in the art historical literature on printmaking. As my investigation became increasingly interdisciplinary in scope, I was drawn to the interpretive framework of print culture studies. Slowly but surely the pieces of the Bosse puzzle began to fall into place. I realized that a more useful and accurate way of thinking about Bosse was as a member of a team of print professionals responsible for the different stages of production, another member of the team being the poet entrusted with writing a text articulating and amplifying the meaning of the image – or the other way around, the image conveying the sense of an existing text. The extent to which Bosse himself believed in the ideas expressed in these texts is naturally difficult to pinpoint. What is abundantly clear, however, is that this conception of a dynamic relation between image and text developed within the distinctive context of early modern print production.



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The book opens with a distinction between different printmaking materials and techniques, with attention called to copperplate engraving. More versatile than the older woodblock technique and woodcut, engraving was made possible by a demanding technology and so this technology, developed parallel to that of printing with movable type, is discussed in detail. The discussion revolves around a printmaking manual published by Bosse in 1645 both for what it tells us about this technology and also for its description of an innovative technique combining etching and engraving that, Bosse argues, is superior to that inherited from the previous century and that did, indeed, help alter the course of printmaking during his and the following centuries.

In this chapter, I also aim to counter persistent assumptions about the definitiveness of a print that rule out redactions and appropriations. I begin with a key distinction made by Bosse between “original” and “copy” that would seem to deny the whole purpose of printmaking as mechanical production, namely the creation of many “copies” of an “original.” Bosse’s distinction, however, is between “copies” printed from one and the same plate etched or engraved by the printmaker whose name most usually appears on it and “pretend copies” pulled from plates on which other printmakers reproduced that image. His is the familiar complaint of a print professional about how others are infringing on his “property rights,” with – paradoxically, I argue – mechanical production contributing to a sharpened focus on the *hand* of the artist/printmaker. This discussion then opens onto an examination of the competing and conflicting impulses inherent in collecting prints, when this phenomenon was in its infancy.

A related question is of the relation of a print to the drawing of which it is a copy. Is it that and nothing more, an exact copy intended for mechanical production, or can a claim be made for its originality as a print? I argue the second, that creating an etching or engraving entailed translating a drawing into another language different from that of drawing and unique among the graphic arts. At several such removes, too, are prints reproducing paintings and sculptures by Marcantonio Raimondi, Agostino Carracci, and a small army of anonymous printmakers.

These reproductive prints, in turn, help bring out the very different status of Bosse’s single-sheet prints, which originate not with the history of art but rather the same discursive field as other types of print ephemera. His prints are steeped in the world he inhabits rather than works of art by the masters, in other words, but that world as filtered through the print culture of early modern France. Some final observations on the questions of original-copy-reproduction are occasioned by a series of prints made as forgeries, and when eventually exposed as such, designated “original forgeries,” only slightly less valuable than actual originals by the printmakers so misused.

As well as enlarging on print technologies, engraving had wide-scale cultural ramifications that are evident in the broad dissemination of prints. Engravers



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and their publishers moved easily from one European capital to another, the same prints circulating freely between England, France, Spain, Flanders, and so on, making the engraved image, I argue, a model of internationalism, a kind of visual lingua franca and template of European unity.

From Chapter 2 on, I reconsider prints by Bosse and others as cultural production. I begin by focusing attention on images representing life in the early modern city, the city as such, followed by representations of street vendors, hawkers, and tradesmen, which have been accepted at face value as celebrations of the street and marketplace. In early modern France, however, the very meanings of street and marketplace were being transformed by the proliferation of print in its various forms, the majority of them belonging to the category of ephemera. I argue that images of the inhabitants of the city by Bosse and others are dependent and contingent on this production of print ephemera. More obviously ephemeral still were “fashion plates,” images picturing the latest fashion that quickly became *passé* and not worth preserving. That many were eventually to be gathered into print cabinets does not change this fact.

In Chapter 3, I examine other of the many discourses of prints by calling attention to Bosse’s images of the contemporary stage and of popular actors. I then turn to print series that, I argue, belonged to the ubiquity of dramatic ephemera that existed alongside actual play-texts and that included ballads, broadsheets, and printed dialogues. The focus of a key such series is the “woman question” or *querelle des femmes* that had been revived in fifteenth-century France, raged during the following century, and continued to be a battleground of gender relations. Other of Bosse’s images of women are also rich and largely untapped resources for a historical understanding of the Quarrel as dynamic and ongoing, within a society in flux and these, too, are discussed. Beginning with a discussion of Bosse and the theater, then, this chapter acknowledges the central preoccupation in Bosse’s oeuvre with anxieties – and fantasies – about the role of women in early modern culture.

Additionally, Bosse draws on other theatrical models, from the Neoclassical to the religious. The results were visual-verbal narratives with rich possibilities that were exploited by such printmakers as Hogarth during the following centuries. Bosse’s “print dramas” are essentially compatible, too, with the notion of the *Theatrum Mundi* or “theater of human life,” which was virtually an emblem of the early modern world.

Some of the prints discussed in this chapter as well as Chapter 2 inevitably raising the issue of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque celebrating the natural body, that relationship is also explored. The lesson is of the instability and changing valence of such images within the context of early modern culture.

The mainstay of printmaking as of the print profession more generally was religion, and Chapter 4 addresses the vexed question of competing post-Reformation attitudes toward imagery that is regularly invoked in discussions of “the Calvinist printmaker Bosse.” The question is vexed, for one, because

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the Protestant church rejected imagery of all kinds as idolatrous; on the other hand, Calvin accepted religious images as helpful and sanctioned their use in the homes – if not churches – of the faithful. It is conceivable, therefore, that the “Calvinist printmaker Bosse” did create images for a specifically Calvinist public. Not so, I argue. With possibly one exception, all of his religious images are consistent with those produced in the pre-Reformation church, some, indeed, with a particularly post-Tridentine turn, my observation supporting those of others about how Protestants and Catholics were not so widely divergent in their thinking about the usefulness of different types of images.

Second only to religion as subjects for printmakers were the nonstop military campaigns that began with a civil war and continued through France’s involvement in the Thirty Years War. Images of new weaponry, particularly artillery and muskets, proliferated, as did topographical views of sieges and, ultimately, victories. Such news was spread by “newspapers,” pamphlets, and placards, the last among Bosse’s print vehicles.

No less a construct than the previously mentioned are Bosse’s images of the new *bourgeoisie*, whose rise he has frequently been understood as documenting. These provocative images are examined next in relation to others in the literature of the period.

Among modern disciplinary formations, none is more closely associated with printing than modern science, which I discuss next and again in Chapter 6 on book illustrations. The focus here is a print by Bosse seemingly endorsing the “new science” of Galileo but that, I argue, was more likely read within the context of the old esoteric philosophy. Produced at a time when the methods of the new experimental sciences were deeply contested, this image is a reminder of the conflict and instability that accompanied the Scientific Revolution.

To be sure, not all the images discussed in these first four chapters would qualify as Elizabeth Eisenstein’s “agents of change.” Like others in the print professions, Bosse and his publishers were opportunists who most often resorted to tried and tested favorites. But forward-looking or not, all these prints contribute, to say it again, to a historical understanding of print in its various forms.

Royal images are examined next, beginning with iconic portraits of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria that would seem to have little relevance to the challenges facing the monarchy at this time. I argue that these challenges are nevertheless invoked, even if only implicitly. Among these images are several apparently integral to almanacs but preserved while the outdated sheets were discarded. One royal image is of particular interest. A single-sheet print of *Louis XIII as the Hercules Gallicus*, it is initially baffling and must have seemed all the more so to a public unable to read its inscriptions in Latin and Greek. Clearly intended, or intended primarily, for the literate elites, it brings home