

Frank Brangwyn's 'tragically impressive' *Street near Taormina*

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British artist Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) is represented in the Baillieu Library Print Collection by three etchings: *The swineherd*,¹ *Mostar*² and *Street near Taormina* (illustrated opposite). Upon initial viewing, the unassuming, small-scale and apparently picturesque depiction of the exotic street scene in *Street near Taormina* does not seem to reflect the 'inimitable sense of grandeur' associated with this artist.³ Yet an exploration beyond the scale and superficial effects of the etching reveals the tragic realities of the subject, and a more thoughtful consideration of man's relationship with nature.

Already a successful painter, Brangwyn began etching just before the turn of the 20th century, a time when there was a resurgence of interest in the medium.⁴ Although printmaking had previously been regarded as mechanical and reproductive, a new emphasis on originality and on etchings produced by artists from life or developed from original sketches meant that these works were becoming highly valued. Contrary to the orthodoxy established by earlier printmakers, Brangwyn pushed conventional etching techniques to the limit, working on 'offensive' large scale, deeply incising his lines and aggressively over-biting his plates with acid.⁵

Street near Taormina is a typical example of Brangwyn's etching style, with heavily bitten lines and liberal inking, trademarks of his dramatic mode of expression. Produced as part of a series, the etching records the aftermath of a major earthquake that devastated part of the Italian coast on 28 December 1908. It occurred in the Messina Straits, the narrow passage between the eastern tip of Sicily and the southern tip of Calabria. The towns of Messina and Reggio Calabria, located on opposite sides of the strait and only 50 kilometres from Taormina, were almost completely destroyed. The violent earthquake was said to have been felt up to 400 kilometres away and in the days following the initial shock the region was ravaged by fires.⁶ Reportedly, waves up to 12 metres in height inundated the coastal towns.⁷

Although the exact numbers were never accurately recorded, at least 80,000 people died and the combined casualties from Messina and Reggio Calabria alone numbered more than 100,000, making the disaster the deadliest earthquake Europe had ever experienced.⁸ The scale of the tragedy struck a chord throughout Europe and Britain.⁹ Within months several funds and charities had been established to aid those affected, including a relief concert at Royal

Albert Hall, attended by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra.¹⁰

Brangwyn travelled to Taormina, approximately 50 kilometres away from the most severely earthquake-affected areas, in 1909 and 1910, the years immediately following the event.¹¹ His purpose was to visit his friend and patron Robert Kitson, who commissioned the artist to design and produce the interior decorations for the dining room of his Italian villa, Casa Cuseni. British-born Kitson was also an artist and had studied under Brangwyn at the London School of Art. The pair remained close friends throughout their lives and Brangwyn went on to design furniture for Kitson's Italian villa.¹²

During his stay, Brangwyn and Kitson undertook numerous artistic excursions together throughout the surrounding region, recording the destructive wake of the earthquake in sketches, watercolours and ultimately etchings.¹³ The eventual set included seven works illustrating the near-demolished town of Messina, and two depicting sites in and around Taormina. The Baillieu Library's *Street near Taormina* was etched on the spot in Letojanni, a town less than ten kilometres from Taormina.¹⁴

Following Brangwyn's return to England, the Messina set was



exhibited at the Fine Art Society galleries in New Bond Street, London, in November of 1910.¹⁵ Although the exhibition was advertised as watercolours and etchings of France, Italy and Sicily, it was the compelling Messina etchings that attracted the most attention in the reviews that followed.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the artist endured a difficult relationship with British art critics. His works frequently evoked

opposing reactions, influenced more by the author's own predisposition towards the artist than by an objective evaluation of the works themselves. Reviews were regularly riddled with generalisations, expressing either fervent support for Brangwyn or impassioned hatred, with little discussion of the works in question. This was certainly the case with the English reception of Brangwyn's Messina etchings, and the tragic

subject matter was eclipsed by controversy over Brangwyn's etching style and technique. While the reviewer for *The Athenaeum* criticised Brangwyn's inability to 'tone down' his work, arguing that although the etchings were clever, they were also 'monotonous',¹⁷ the writer for *The Studio*, a long-time advocate of the artist's work, regarded the series as a technical triumph:

This collection was specially remarkable for its expressiveness; for the way in which it set forth an artistic conviction that is exceptionally logical and consistent, and for the knowledge that was displayed in it of the management of technical processes. Mr. Brangwyn's splendid decorative sense and wonderful control over devices of craftsmanship give dignity and significance to everything he produces, whatever may be the medium he employs.¹⁸

The tragic subject of the series was not addressed until two years later when the works were exhibited at the George Petit Galleries in Paris. Art critic Roger Marx reflected in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*:

Only he [Brangwyn] dared to tackle the horror of the calamity, to render the desolation of devastated Messina, the collapsed ground, the disembowelled houses, to raise two vast sections of wall towards the sky, gleaming in the sun, while their shadows descend and cut across, a gaping wound like a black hole amongst clear flesh.¹⁹

Marx's words strongly resonate with the Baillieu Library's *Street near Taormina*. Although the site portrayed was some distance from the areas of greatest devastation, thus lacking the sheer destruction depicted in the other Messina etchings, a similar sense of quiet tragedy remains. Discussing the set, Walter Shaw-Sparrow stated most aptly that it revealed 'what a tragedian artist feels when he stands among awful ruins thronged with death by one of Nature's convulsions'.²⁰

Brangwyn had been immediately struck by the destroyed Italian landscape, and in 1941 recalled: 'Messina was fine and impressive ... after the earthquake. It was lighted up with the great electric lights, and the deep shadows with the deep night sky was wonderful with the fires of the encampments of the homeless and the soldiers it was grand'.²¹

Despite Brangwyn's romantic account of the 'grand' disaster site and his evident delight in experimenting with the dramatic effects of *chiaroscuro*, his etchings also betray a more sober sentiment, attuned to the scale of the tragedy. Although two years had passed and life had continued in Messina, Brangwyn's scenes of desolate streets

and abandoned, crumbling churches do not suggest a community reborn, but one still suffering and struggling to rebuild after such a loss of human life.

Initially the cityscape of *Street near Taormina* appears deserted, devoid of people, the emptiness interrupted only by remnants of collapsed walls. Eventually however, faces materialise within the rubble. Dark profiles line the streets, cowering in the shadows of the fragile buildings that dwarf them. The decorative effect of the braces propping up the city walls and casting shadows across the barren ground is subordinated by memory of the disaster that had put them there. The few human figures represented are insignificant in scale when compared to the towering structures and scaffolds that threaten to crumble down around them. Their almost imperceptible presence serves to further highlight the void left by those who are forever missing.

In 1919 Shaw-Sparrow wrote, 'it is imperative that painters, like other historians, should gather from disaster all that Brangwyn learnt both of nature and of human nature amid the wreckage, grand and mean, at Messina'.²² The artist's depictions of the aftermath of an

earthquake, which had captured the attention of the Western world, showed that regardless of humankind's achievements and advancements, man remained powerless in the face of natural disaster. The 'tragically impressive' Messina series, including the Baillieu Library Print Collection's *Street near Taormina*, is an apt visualisation of this understanding and a poignant memorial to those affected by the disaster.²³

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The Baillieu Library Print Collection is available for research and the catalogue can be explored online; see www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints/.

- 1 Frank Brangwyn, *The swineherd (Le porcher)*, 1923, etching and drypoint, 30.5 x 39.0 cm (plate). Reg. no. 1959.2365, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
- 2 Frank Brangwyn, *Mostar*, 1924, drypoint, 15.1 x 14.9 cm (plate). Reg. no. 1997.2009, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

- 3 Walter Shaw-Sparrow, *Frank Brangwyn and his work*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911, p. 203. Brangwyn worked prolifically as a painter, printmaker and decorator. He was particularly well known for his mural paintings, which undoubtedly contributed to the sense of 'largeness' in his work.
- 4 Martin Hopkinson, 'Brangwyn's first etchings', *Print Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2007, p. 162. Brangwyn began exhibiting paintings in the late 1880s and began etching professionally towards the end of the century (Rodney Brangwyn, *Brangwyn*, London: William Kimber, 1978, p. 43; Libby Horner, *Frank Brangwyn: A mission to decorate life*, London: Fine Art Society, 2006, p. 115).
- 5 In his 'Propositions' Whistler famously wrote a list of stylistic and technical guidelines concerning etching. His fifth proposition was often quoted in criticisms of Brangwyn's etchings: 'the huge plate, therefore, is an offence—its undertaking an unbecoming display of determination and ignorance—its accomplishment a triumph of unthinking earnestness and uncontrolled energy—endowments of the "duffer"'. (James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The gentle art of making enemies*, London: Heinemann, 1890, available at Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24650, accessed 20 March 2012.)
- 6 Nicola Alessandro Pino and others, 'The 28 December 1908 Messina Straits earthquake (Mw 7.1): A great earthquake throughout a century of seismology', *Seismological Research Letters*, March 2009, p. 1.
- 7 Libby Horner and Gillian Naylor, *Frank Brangwyn 1867–1956*, Leeds Museum and Galleries, 2006, p. 194.
- 8 Pino and others, 'The 28 December 1908 Messina Straits earthquake', p. 1.
- 9 The earthquake was reported as far away as America where writers painted a devastating picture of the event: 'This roaring voice of the earth was succeeded by a strange and horrible silence after Messina had fallen in ruins, after the houses had toppled, the barracks and churches had crashed to the ground, the hotels had buried their inmates.

- There was a silence, and then all over what had been a sleeping city broke forth the shrieks of the wounded, the yells of those who had suddenly gone mad, the frantic prayers of women, curses from many men, the fierce howling of dogs.' Robert Hichens, 'After the earthquake', *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, no. 77, 1909, pp. 928–9.
- 10 *The Times* [London], Thursday 4 February 1909, p. 6.
 - 11 Horner, *Frank Brangwyn: A mission to decorate life*, p. 232.
 - 12 Horner and Naylor, *Frank Brangwyn 1867–1956*, p. 135.
 - 13 University of Leeds, Website of the University Art Collection, www.leeds.ac.uk/gallery/highlights-drawings.htm, accessed 26 September 2011.
 - 14 William Gaunt, *The etchings of Frank Brangwyn, R.A.: A catalogue raisonné*, London: The Studio, 1926.
 - 15 Fine Art Society, *One hundred years of exhibitions at the Fine Art Society Ltd. Centenary 1876–1976*, London: The Fine Art Society, 1976, n.p.
 - 16 Advertised in *The Athenaeum*, no. 4333, 12 November 1910, p. 600; *The Times* [London], Saturday 26 November 1910, p. 4.
 - 17 'Mr Brangwyn's paintings and etchings', *The Athenaeum*, no. 4333, 12 November 1910, pp. 600–1.
 - 18 'Studio talk', *The Studio*, no. 213, December 1910, pp. 226–8.
 - 19 Roger Marx, 'L'oeuvre gravé de M. Frank Brangwyn', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1st semester, 1912, p. 41 (translated by Rebecca Edwards).
 - 20 Walter Shaw-Sparrow, *Prints and drawings by Frank Brangwyn with some other phases of his art*, London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1919, p. 155.
 - 21 Frank Brangwyn, Letter to Elinor Pugh, 29 November 1941, quoted in Horner, *Frank Brangwyn: A mission to decorate life*, p. 233.
 - 22 Shaw-Sparrow, *Prints and drawings*, p. 240.
 - 23 Malcolm Salaman, *Modern masters of etching: Frank Brangwyn R.A.*, London: The Studio, 1925, p. 6.