

Braccelli's fanciful figures frolic in a rare masterwork that anticipated surrealism

Giovanni Battista Braccelli, *Bizzarie di Varie Figure*. Livorno: , 1624. 7 1/8 inches x 9 7/8 inches (181 x 251 mm), 100, 50 plates.

One of the rarest and most mysterious etching suites of Renaissance Italy, the *Bizzarie di varie figure* (Oddities of various figures) languished in near-total obscurity until it was rediscovered in the twentieth century as an astonishing precursor of the radically imaginative works of Dada and Surrealist artists. Although it bears some relation to the capricious art of Mannerism, a contemporary art movement that indulged in playful and often grotesque exaggerations of the human form, the *Bizzarie* can rightly lay claim to being a prime exemplar of the artistic enigma—a work truly without precedent or explanation beside itself. The creation of an almost unknown Florentine painter and engraver, it survives in fewer than ten known copies, only two of which are complete.

The fame of the *Bizzarie* derives from its imagery, which occupies a dreamlike space between thought and form. In some plates, everyday objects—tools, household items, militaria—are used to compose whimsical and outlandish figures. In others, geometric solids, mechanical bric-a-brac, and decorative shapes are combined in startling ways to create oddly suggestive yet puzzling forms whose precise significance remains disputed.

The *Bizzarie* has long been renowned among a select stratum of artists and bibliophiles, including author Horace Walpole (1717–97), who noted on the flyleaf of his copy that “the author seems to have had a wild imagination.” The great art historian Sir Kenneth Clark (1903–83), who was instrumental in the rediscovery of Braccelli's exotic masterpiece in the twentieth century, observed that in its fanciful mechanical conceits, the work “reflects, in an unconscious, trivial way ... some of the great intellectual achievements of its period.” Poet Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) drew parallels between the fantastic imagery of the *Bizzarie* and the highly inventive techniques of cubism, dadaism, and surrealism.

This is the finest extant complete copy, from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress. It is bound in full contemporary

vellum, lacking ties, with the title hand lettered on the spine. The history of the book's ownership is largely a mystery: the first known owner is Carlo Alberto Chiesa (1926–98), the leading Italian book dealer of his generation.