

Another French Engraver

Claude Robert Ernest Durrens 1921-2002



The hand is the tool of the mind. That insight propelled Claude Durrens through art school in Toulouse, not far from his home town of Bordeaux. Mentors guided him toward engraving, and he took first prize before leaving school in 1940.



Cognac 1961

After WWII, Durrens continued his art training in Bordeaux, then won a grant to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where his teacher was Robert Cami. The Prix de Rome came in 1952, along with its three-year tenure at Villa Medici. He flourished in the art world — even found his wife there — Janine, a fellow artist.

Back in France, the couple became prominent figures in the arts. Claude focused on wood engravings and began engraving stamps with the French PTT team in 1958. His “rookie” service producing stamps only for the francophone territories lasted less than a year. By 1961 he was taking on assignments for what would become some of France’s prettiest landscape stamps. For decades he continued as a productive philatelic artist, and is credited with some 400 French stamps; also, a few banknotes.

Durrens’ interpretation of Cognac (above) is strikingly original — a cubist construction of fields, highway and cityscape. The blue and green palette softens the edges.

The St. Flour landscape (right) has a light touch in which white becomes a color. The composition is inspired, the coloring cool and harmonious if a bit wan and predictable. The lively skyscape reminds me of Decaris. (see link: <https://mancrymf.files.wordpress.com/2022/07/albert-decaris-master-engraver.pdf>)



St. Flour 1963



Chateau de Joux Doubs 1965

For his depiction of the ruins of Joux castle in 1965 (left), Durrens won the Grand Prix de l'Art Philatelique. The stamp beautifully conveys the ancient fortress that seems grow out of the rock it stands on. The forbidding landscape is warmed by a muted palette of browns. You may not have realized it — I didn't for a while — but even the sky is brown.

Here is what a biographer said about the two stamps, below, with modernistic landscape engravings: "He did get to design and engrave a few rather remarkable Tourism stamps ... While these are normally quite realistically depicted scenes, Durrens created two very different ones: a stamp from 1974 depicting Salers and one from 1980 depicting Cordes. Both stamps are more of a stylistic interpretation of these towns, and through a sparse color distribution of his engravings, Durrens managed to perfectly capture the uniqueness of these places." OK, I'll take your word for it, though it sounds like a somewhat

awkward translation from the French. *En tous cas*, call me old-fashioned, but I prefer the "quite realistically depicted scenes."

After the French Post started issuing stamps with engravings of famous works of art, Durrens complained that the French Post was too focused on reproducing art, rather than letting engravers create their own designs.

TO BE CONTINUED

