LONDON: Small exhibitions sometimes raise major questions, albeit rarely by design. "David Teniers and the Theatre of Painting," on view at the Courtauld Institute until Jan. 21, and the book that comes with it deal with a fine point of art history — the production of the first illustrated catalogue of Old Master Paintings in the West. David Teniers the Younger, who was court painter to Leopold Wilhelm von Habsburg while the archduke resided in Brussels, ran the project, and the monumental volume in which 243 plates reproduce Italian paintings from the archduke's collection was printed in 1660.

What makes the undertaking infinitely more gripping than a footnote to the history of cataloguing is the light that it sheds on our perception of art — which is not mentioned in the exhibition book. Were it not for Teniers the Younger, the project might have only led to the publication of a fine album with high quality etchings reproducing paintings of which many survive to this day.
But Teniers did not proceed as was usual at the period when producing illustrated catalogues. Instead of executing preparatory sketches to be used as models for the plates, the Flemish artist proceeded to paint in oil small size copies of the works due to be reproduced. The etchings were executed after these copies, many of which have been preserved, including 14 in the Courtauld Institute collection currently in the exhibition.

The book production is otherwise largely shrouded in mystery. Whether the archduke took part in the selection of the paintings to be illustrated is not known — Teniers, who played a role in the building up of the collection, may have steered that selection. The extent of the archduke's involvement in the book production is equally unclear. After he moved from Brussels to Vienna in 1656, the archduke's interest declined. True, a Flemish painter who had followed him to Vienna produced preparatory drawings for another 27 pictures to be included in the catalogue selection, presumably at the collector's request.

However, Teniers notes in the introduction to the book that the archduke's departure from Brussels interrupted the publication process. The artist himself financed the publication, and while he celebrates the archduke on the title page as a great collector of Italian paintings, the painter refers to the book as "this work of mine."

The publication was apparently seen by Teniers as a commercial venture. In some copies of the first edition, the title page and the introductory texts are printed in Latin, Spanish, French and Dutch. In others, these appear in two languages or simply in one. This suggests an attempt to suit the distinctive preferences of potential customers.

The book was so successful that a second edition was printed in 1662, later followed by others. Within two years of its publication, the catalogue was acknowledged in contemporary sources as a work of great renown.

By contrast, not a word was said about the painted models executed by Teniers. Nor is much information available about the circumstances in which he painted large views of the archduke's gallery displays. One of these, dated 1651, is on loan from Petworth House. It shows an entire wall, perhaps five meters, or 16 feet, high, covered with paintings arranged in staggered rows. Great attention is brought to the precise rendition of the paintings and to the recording of their authors, all named on the lower section of each frame. Miraculously, the majority have come down to us. Their absence from a show intelligently conceived but evidently put together on a shoestring is deeply to be regretted.

The opportunity of a truly fantastic show that should be staged someday was missed here. It would be crucial to compare, for example, two large paintings shown resting on the floor, propped against some invisible pieces of furniture with the surviving originals now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. These are "Esther before Ahasuerus" by Paolo Veronese and "Saint Margaret," nowadays considered to be the work of Raphael "and studio assistants." When depicted in the 1651 gallery view by Teniers, this was held to be an unqualified Raphael gem, as shown by the name on the frame.

Two other famous pictures also in Vienna, "Il Bravo" and "La Violante," both by Titian, are shown leaning against a chair. Teniers portrayed himself standing by and steadying Annibale Carracci's Pietà.

Nearby, the archduke proudly points his stick at a picture propped against the chair, the "Portrait of a Man with Book" by Vincenzo Catena — the collector who had obviously just acquired the piece is showing it to a crony who also bought paintings, Bishop Anton Triest.

Over 40 Italian pictures of the 16th and early 17th century instantly identifiable thus provide a pageant of what a high-powered collector of the mid-17th century most admired in late Renaissance art from Italy.
Other views of the gallery displays by Teniers add a few more to the number of pictures that adorned the archduke's collection 350 years ago and are known to this day.

Gazing at these gallery display views, visitors experience the eerie feeling of being shown around a 17th-century private museum by a reporter of the period who happened to be a painter.

If the originals were there too, it would be possible to measure and understand how the Italian pictures were looked at by the painter "reporter," particularly after comparing these with the small-sized copies.

Actually, "copies" is not quite the word. "Interpretations" would be more appropriate. In Teniers's version of "Saint Margaret," the young woman has lost the sculptural crispness that Raphael gave the slender figure. A pale luminous blue, retained by Raphael for the tunic and robe to match the patch of clear blue sky in the top corner, is likewise gone. The dominant tonality is brownish, possibly owing to the alteration of the pigments. How far the remake of Renaissance art went at the hands of late Flemish painters may best be gauged from the copy of Giorgione's "Three Philosophers," which also hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum — some time after the second edition of the book came out, the philosophers' outfits were reworked in order to give them the appearance of Flemish boors.

Most striking in the reinterpretation of Italian art by Teniers is the tendency to sentimentality. Was this some attempt at recasting Italian Renaissance art into the more realistic mold of daily life?

In the likeness of a sculptor by Giovanni Battista Moroni, the sitter (who is none other than the well-known Alessandro Vittoria), holds himself erect as he presents a small marble torso held with both hands. Vittoria gives the viewer a searching look as if to check whether the ignorant philistine has an inkling of the splendid rarity to which he is being treated. In the Teniers's studio copy of Moroni's portrait, Vittoria's eyes have become watery, lost in distraught reverie. Small veins have burst on the skin of his face, betraying inconsiderate addiction to the bottle. The energetic sculptor has given way to a bibulous wretch.

The transformation of Palma Giovane's dignified "Saint John the Baptist" (now in the Iris and Gerald B. Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University), while more subtle, is just as striking. In Teniers's interpretation, Saint John looks at the sheep with knitted eyebrows and a troubled expression. His shoulders are more rounded, as if bent by the burden of grief. No trace remains of the contained power suggested by Giovane.

Yet, Teniers was capable of occasionally turning out ravishing work, his small-size interpretations included. His "Aeneas Fleeing Troy," painted after a picture by Andrea Schiavone which was preserved in Graz, Austria, and has remained untraced since it was sold in the 1950s, is done with exquisitely evocative sketchiness. The mood anticipates some of Goya's early work in the following century.

In short, the pale interpretations of Italian Renaissance art by Teniers do not so much betray his aesthetic ineptitude as his deluded search for a proletarian realism that could not have been further removed from Titian or Giovane's endeavors. Never did a show so glaringly reveal our distorted perceptions of the art of the past on which we invariably project the social concerns and aesthetic fashions of the moment.