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La Salle University Art Museum

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The Enduring Legacy
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La Salle University Art Museum
October 1 - November 24, 1991
Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), German

Beginning with the artist's own writings, the life, complex personality, profound intellect and unrivaled artistic talent of Albrecht Dürer has been exhaustively documented. Thus, this essay merely seeks to touch upon his pre-eminence in the graphic arts. The selection of prints on exhibition will hopefully provide adequate evidence of that stature.

In his own lifetime, Dürer was a recognized master painter, draftsman, watercolorist and author of treatises on artistic theory, measurements and human proportions. But it is his woodcuts and engravings, twenty-four of which are on view here from the La Salle Museum collection as well as others generously lent by private collectors, that enable one to trace the transition in the graphic arts from a late Gothic to a thoroughly Renaissance style. For it was through his graphic expression that Italian Renaissance conventions were introduced to northern Europe. Undoubtedly the foremost printmaker of the Renaissance as well as the most
imaginative and influential in the history of graphic arts (with the possible exception of Rembrandt), Dürer was able to balance a sense of medieval mysticism and allegory with Renaissance classicism and realism in much of his graphic oeuvre. For he believed that artistic creation is a mystery inspired by God but that its application must be grounded in reason and a thorough knowledge and observation of the natural world.

His rich visual imagery has influenced artists throughout the centuries and there are traces of his legacy even in recent times. One has only to look at the monsters in the woodcut seen here, Christ in Limbo to realize the inspiration behind some of the creatures in the Doctor Seuss book illustrations.

Although this small exhibition barely touches the tip of the iceberg in revealing the extent of Dürer's prints (300 woodcuts, 96 engravings, 6 etchings and 3 drypoints), one can gain an additional insight into the incredible diversity and complexity of his visual imagery by leafing through the complete catalogues of his prints on the table here.
It is not surprising that religious subjects dominate Dürer’s graphic works for he wrestled constantly with the spiritual conflicts and issues engendered by the Renaissance and the beginning of the Reformation. However other subjects in his art include portraits of friends and fellow humanists such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Philip Melanchthon, and Willibald Pirckheimer, mythological, allegorical and literary themes as well as lower class figures engaged in everyday activities.

The religious subject in Dürer’s prints was portrayed in a decidedly northern manner, the event often set in a common domestic scene, the figures in contemporary clothing and with everyday expressions and gestures. By contrast, the religious event in Italian Renaissance prints was usually in a formal, classical setting where the individual characters were often idealized and dressed in classical costume.

The majority of prints in this exhibition are woodcuts for book illustrations for *The Life of the Virgin* and *The Small Woodcut Passion*. The engravings here, though often concerned with similar
themes, were usually conceived as independent art works. They were more psychologically complex and took advantage of the subtle rendering which the medium could provide.

Dürer’s prints have been more thoroughly catalogued and illustrated than any other graphic artist’s. The most thorough reference work, listing all states and known distinct editions, was written by Joseph Meder in 1932 (see bibliography). More recently Walter L. Strauss has translated this work, giving additional historical commentary for each print. In assessing the quality of a particular Dürer impression the condition of the printing surface (woodblock, copperplate), the inking and printing process, the watermark, and overall condition of the paper need to be considered. For further discussion of each of these topics see Richard Field’s, Albrecht Dürer: A Study Exhibition of Print Connoisseurship on the table here.

Because of Dürer’s unparalleled stature, many of his works have continued to be printed throughout the centuries either from the original, though often re-worked, plate or woodblock, by
carefully copying his works, or, towards the end of the 19th century, by replicating them through photo-mechanical means. The last technique became a highly refined and deceptive process with the result that scores of Dürer prints have been reproduced, some even on old paper bearing a watermark that Dürer would have used. These fakes have made it virtually impossible in some cases for even the most informed curator to judge accurately, and thus, "buyer beware" is the rule whenever acquiring a Dürer print.

The iconography of much of Dürer's work is rich, often dense with layers of meaning and much of it continues to be challenging if not controversial for scholars today. But even without deciphering the symbolism, most every piece is immediately stimulating to the eye in terms of brilliant technique, intricate integration and movement of figures within the composition, wealth of detail, vivid individualism of each character, and beautiful conception of the whole.

We hope this exhibition will give the viewer the chance to reflect upon the value of these prints in their time: an easily
affordable source of spiritual reflection, intellectual stimulation, and aesthetic pleasure. While they are certainly no longer "easily affordable," his prints continue to offer us these same values.

Caroline Wistar Curator
CHECK LIST

The date of each print listed here refers to the year Dürer made and first printed the woodcut or engraving not to the date of the particular impression on exhibit here. The designs throughout the text are watermarks frequently appearing on the paper of Dürer's prints.

Much of the text for the entries has been quoted with kind permission from the following sources:

(B) Sayre, Eleanor A. and Loeb, Stephanie E. *Albrecht Dürer: Master Printmaker* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1971)


1. "Creation of the World"

From *The Nuremberg Chronicle (Liber Chronicarum)*, 1493, text by Hartmann Schedel, printed by Anton Koberger, Nuremberg, Germany

Woodcut (hand colored by a later hand)

At age 15, Dürer became an apprentice in the workshop of Michael Wolgemut who provided many book illustrations for works which were later published by Dürer's godfather, Anton Koberger. It is thought that the angels in this woodcut were designed by the young Dürer.
2. *The Holy Family with the Butterfly* 1495-96

Engraving

"The earliest of his engravings to carry a monogram. The still somewhat Gothic form of this signature and the relative lack of experience discernible in the handling of the burin place this print among Dürer's very first works in the medium. His technical immaturity is particularly evident in the rendering of the intricate folds of the drapery." (N, 112)

3. "The Vision of the Seven Candlesticks" c. 1498

From the *Apocalypse* series (1496-1498)

Woodcut with Latin text

"After Dürer published his fifteen large woodcuts of the *Apocalypse*...neither the woodcut as a graphic medium nor the imagery of St. John's Revelation could ever again be regarded as before. Dürer elevated both beyond all expectations warranted by his antecedents. His compositions, not simply a set of illustrations in the abstract, gave the seer's visions a convincing visual existence. The style and technique he evolved for the woodcut medium was capable of creating lines having the vitality and descriptive capacity to realize this and unlike any previous publication, the *Apocalypse* is entirely the work of a single artist [i.e, illustrator and publisher]." (N, 164)
4. *Saint Eustace*  c. 1501

Engraving


"This print, Dürer’s largest and technically most ambitious engraving, depicts a miracle related in the legends of both St. Eustace and St. Hubert. That Dürer intended the former is known by several references to the ‘Eustachius’ in his Netherlandish diary. While on a hunt before his conversion, St. Eustace, then a Roman general by the name of Placidas, was chasing a large stag when he noticed a cross and image of Christ between its antlers. Then he heard God’s voice spoken by the animal: ‘O Placidas, why pursuest thou me?...’ Like Saul, he fell from his horse and became a Christian." (N, 127)

5. Copy after Dürer

*St. Eustace*  Late 18th century

Engraving

Given by Dr. Henry R. Marasse
6. *Coat of Arms with a Skull* 1503

Engraving

Lent by The Yoshida-Sherwin Collection

[One of Dürer's earliest engravings] "portrays Death as a horribly emaciated ghoul struggling with a plump hausfrau who stubbornly resists his efforts to violate her. In this splendid heraldic composition of 1503, Dürer returns to the theme, revising it to create a poignant *Memento Mori*. The shrewish-looking woman is replaced by a festively costumed young maiden in the prime of her life. Standing behind [the young maiden] is one of the shaggy wild men of medieval lore. His true identity is revealed by the coat of arms which he supports; he is a gentler emissary of the same dread power whose violent aspect was the subject of the earlier print. Yet at this moment the responsive girl has glimpsed neither her lover nor the face of his shield.

"It is not surprising that Dürer was attracted to this theme in 1503, a year in which he witnessed a number of strange and unsettling events in Nuremberg. A comet, the traditional omen of evil, appeared, and a mysterious and frightening rain of crosses fell on the city, staining people's clothes, according to Dürer's own testimony, with the sign of the crucifix. One of the recurrent outbreaks of epidemic disease followed soon afterwards, and although in Nuremberg this 'plague' did not attain crisis proportions for another two years, many, including Dürer, were already afflicted." (N, 130)
Benedictus Chelidonius composed Latin verses based on Dürer's prints that served to explain the various scenes from the Virgin's life. Dürer did not execute the [nineteen] prints in the sequence in which they were bound. There is a great stylistic diversity among the woodcuts owing to the long span of time during which they were created...During the years (1500-1505), Dürer was mastering the Renaissance science of linear perspective; this interest is reflected in the varied and very inventive architecture that provides a frame or a setting for the action. Dürer pushed the woodcut medium to the limits of its ability to describe a multitude of textures and to suggest color. These prints testify to the extraordinary skill of the professional cutters who carved out Dürer's ideas." (B, 86) [It is thought that some of Dürer's woodblocks were cut by skilled artisans though scholars are not in agreement on this point.]

7. Joachim and the Angel  c. 1504

Purchased with funds from the Marjorie M. and Irwin Nat Pincus Fund for Prints and Drawings.

8. Joachim and Anna Meeting at the Golden Gate  1504

9. The Birth of the Virgin  c. 1503-04
10. *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*  c. 1502-03

11. *The Nativity*  c. 1502-04

12. *Christ Among the Doctors*  c. 1503-04

13. *Christ Taking Leave from His Mother*  c. 1503-04

14. *Glorification of the Virgin*  c. 1500-01

"The crowding of the figures and the diffusion of interest owing to such anecdotal details as the playful putti in the foreground testify to the earliness of the composition. Panofsky suggests that the print...was originally conceived as a devotional image. Because of the prominence of the curtained bed...the two blank heraldic shields held by the putti, and the various other symbols, he thinks that the print was intended to be given to a bride and groom at the time of their marriage." (B, 113)

15. *Death of the Virgin*  1510
16. Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin  1510

[In these two later prints in the Life of the Virgin series,] "the forms are described in terms of parallel shading or modeling lines of relatively uniform width, accompanied by a greater clarity in spatial relationships. The tonal range is more limited and more carefully gradated and textures are more generalized than in the earlier subjects of the series." (B, 183)

17. Adam and Eve  1504

Engraving
  ii/iii (second state of three?)

This engraving reveals Dürer's ideal of the perfectly proportioned male and female nude based on the classical statues of Apollo Belvedere and Venus, and on a thorough knowledge of anatomy. And it is one of the earliest pieces in northern art to celebrate rather than deny the beauty of the nude.

The rather heavily inked and somewhat worn quality of this second-state impression, the heavy striations in the upper right corner, and the five-millimeter discrepancy in height are just some of its unique qualities that still present an unresolved problem to connoisseurs. After microscopic examinations by curators and conservators at Harvard, Yale, the National Gallery in Washington, DC, and the Albertina in Vienna, conclusions ranged from its being an undeclared state, coming between Meder's second and third and final state, to its being a highly deceptive photo-engraving dating from between 1890 and 1910. This controversy among experts
demonstrates, if nothing else, the complexity of print authentication. The iconography, so often a rich, didactic part of Renaissance art, alludes here to the four temperaments of man’s constitution, in perfect balance before the Fall, and to the transgression of God’s law that is about to occur. "The mountain ash which Adam grasps...signifies the Tree of Life...the parrot, symbolizing the virgin birth of Christ, is the antidote to the diabolical serpent, whose guile precipitates the Fall...the goat, or ibex, perched atop the cliff at the right, is a traditional symbol for the unbelieving and thus aptly characterizes the human pair, the first to transgress a divine commandment. [As representatives of the four temperaments;] the elk denotes melancholic gloom, the rabbit sanguine sensuality, the cat choleric cruelty, and the ox phlegmatic sluggishness." (N, 132)

18. Nativity 1504

Engraving

Lent by The Yoshida-Sherwin Collection

"...Panofsky has explained that...Nativities of the fifteenth century...developed a special technique of hiding symbolical meanings under the veil of ‘realistic paraphernalia’. [In this print] the Romanesque style and dilapidated state of the buildings, and the vegetation sprouting from ruins signify the birth of the New Dispensation amidst the decay of the Old: the draw-well and broken pitcher allude at once to the purity of the Virgin, the waters of Paradise and the Sacrament of Baptism." (N, 131)
19. *Saints Nicholas, Ulrich and Erasmus* c. 1505

Woodcut

Lent by The Robin Collection of Donglomur

Woodcut illustrations from the *Small Passion* (1509-1511)

"Around 1509 Dürer began work on his most encompassing graphic cycle...which appeared in book form in 1511. The book consists of a frontispiece and thirty-six narrative plates with a Latin poem...written...by Benedictus Chelidonius. In contrast to the *Engraved Passion* and in keeping with the medium of woodcut, these compositions are less complex structurally and more direct in their presentation of the events. They emphasize narrative and the human side of the Passion." (N, 183-184)

20. *Betrayal of Christ*

Given by Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Feld

21. *The Mocking of Christ*
22. Christ Carrying the Cross  1509

23. Lamentation

24. Resurrection

Given by Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Feld

25. Doubting Thomas

Lent by The Robin Collection of Donglomur

26. Ascension

Lent by The Robin Collection of Donglomur
Engravings from the *Engraved Passion* (1507-1512)

Compared to the *Small Woodcut Passion*, the *Engraved Passion* of fifteen prints is more intricate and refined, revealing a more subtle gradation of tone, and a greater psychological expression of the characters. (N, 140)

27. *Christ Before Pilate* 1512

Given by Dr. and Mrs. William K. Sherwin

28. *Flagellation* 1512

29. "*Christ in Limbo*" 1510

From the *Large Passion* (c. 1497-99-1511) with Latin text by Benedictus Chelidonius

[In comparison to the seven earlier designed prints in this series the four remaining scenes of the *Large Passion* series] "represent the culmination of a technical and stylistic development which followed [Dürer's] second sojourn to Venice...Indifferent to the menacing demons, Christ reaches for the extended arms of a man next to St. John the Baptist...Adam, at the left, holds the fruit...and the Cross...an allusion to the legend that the tree from which the Cross was made grew from a sapling of the Tree of Life... Eve, her back turned to us, stands to his right." (N, 177)
30. Copy after Dürer

*Christ in Limbo*

Photo-mechanical reproduction of the original print

It is immediately obvious that this is a reproduction of the original for it has been printed on heavy wove paper that Dürer never used.

31. *Adoration of the Magi* 1511

*Woodcut*

In comparison to Dürer's earlier "Adoration" print in the *Life of the Virgin* series, this print reveals the development Dürer achieved in the clarity of structure and precision of the whole which he now brought to his compositions. (N, 183)
32. *St. Peter and St. John at the Gate of the Temple* 1513

*Engraving*

Lent by The Yoshida-Sherwin Collection

This print is related to those of the *Engraved Passion* series in format and style but the subject is taken from the *Acts of the Apostles* (3:1-10).

33. *St. Jerome in his Study* 1514

*Engraving*

Lent by The Yoshida-Sherwin Collection

The linear perspective, expressive light and meticulous detail of this warm domestic interior helps to create a mood of tranquility, and divine presence that is perhaps unequalled in any other artistic presentation of St. Jerome. "The old medieval notion of the divine and the secular, according to Panofsky, is here reinterpreted in the light of sixteenth-century ideals: the *St. Jerome*, when compared with *The Melancholia* [see National Gallery Catalogue #59] 'opposes a life in the service of God to what may be called a life in competition with God--the peaceful bliss of divine wisdom to the tragic unrest of human creation.' The *St. Jerome*...is perhaps the greatest technical masterpiece among Dürer's engravings." (N, 147)
34. *Christ on the Mount of Olives*  1515

Etching

Lent by The Yoshida-Sherwin Collection

35. Copy after Dürer by Jerome Wierx (1553-1619), Flemish

*St. Paul*

Engraving
Unless otherwise mentioned all of the items in the book cases are graciously lent by The Robin Collection of The Donglonur Foundation.


37. Albrecht Dürer, *Underweysung der Messung, mit dem Zirckel und richtschev... (Teaching of Measurement with Compass and Ruler...)*
1st edition (Nuremberg, Hieronymus Formschnyder, 1525)

38. *Johannes Gerson, Secunda pars operom* (Nuremberg, Georg Stuchs), 1 August 1489

This illustration of Jean Charlier De Gerson, Chancellor of The University of Paris, is thought by several scholars, including Panofsky, to be an early Dürer woodcut.
39. *Epistolare beati Hieronymi* (Lyons, Nicolaus de Benedictis, 1513)

The woodcut illustration of St. Jerome extracting the thorn from the lion's paw, is a copy after the earliest print ascribed to Dürerand which appeared only in the 2nd edition of this book (1492).


A Latin edition of unknown date.

40. "The Procrastinator" (The Crow Fool)

"Who like a crow caw caw forever cries
remains a fool until he dies his cap
growing constantly in size"

41. "The Fire Fighter Fool"

"Who helps put out his neighbor's fire
the while his own is growing higher
he's suited to join the fool's chair"