

Albrecht Altdorfer in Renaissance Regensburg

Part I: Prints of Nature and Artifice

ALBRECHT ALTDORFER (c.1482/5-1538) spent most of his life in the south German city of Regensburg, then an independent city within the Holy Roman Empire. He was employed as an architect and in common with leading artists in other German cities he established himself as an important member of the community and played a part in the political life of the city. He became a member of the city council in 1517 and was offered (and refused) the position of mayor in 1528. He received commissions from important patrons outside of Regensburg, including Duke Wilhelm IV of Bavaria in Munich and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, whose printmaking projects were organised from Augsburg, where the Imperial Council was located.

Today Altdorfer is principally known as a painter and printmaker of the 'Danube School', comprising artists working in the towns of Regensburg, Passau and Vienna around the river Danube. They were influenced by the work of the Saxon artist Lucas Cranach (1472-1553), who probably travelled up the Danube to Austria and in 1501-5 worked in Vienna. It was primarily Cranach's expressive and exuberant style that left its mark on Altdorfer's work, although Altdorfer also based certain compositions on specific prints by Cranach.

This exhibition is the first of a two-part survey of the Fitzwilliam Museum's Altdorfer collection:

Part 1 (until 2 July) concentrates on Altdorfer's prints of secular subjects, with particular focus on his groundbreaking use of the new medium of etching.

Part 2 (11 July to 5 November) will concentrate on religious subjects and examine Altdorfer's use of woodcut (a few religious prints appear in Part 1 for comparison).

Etching and landscape

Etching was first used to make designs on printing plates in the early years of the 16th century. It involved covering an iron plate in a waxy ground, drawing through the ground with a needle, then immersing the plate in acid that etched grooves in the metal where it was exposed by the drawing. It could then be printed in the same way as an engraved plate (a plate engraved with lines by cutting directly with a v-shaped gouge).



Around 1520, Altdorfer used etching to make the first pure landscape prints in the history of European art. He would have known Albrecht Dürer's etched *Landscape with a Cannon* of 1518, but whereas Dürer's print had prominent figures, Altdorfer's were entirely dominated by landscape. The delicate line and free handling recall contemporary pen drawings by artists associated with the Danube School. In particular, they share an affinity with a group of drawings made by Wolf Huber (c.1485-1553). Altdorfer's innovation was to realise the possibility of etching to convey the spirit of this new style of drawing.

The influence of these prints helped to establish landscape as an independent genre. Around the same time Altdorfer also made some of the first pure landscape paintings in Renaissance art, but the prints could travel further and exert a wider influence. Even though they were probably seen as experimental and printed only in small number for a handful of friends and colleagues, their influence soon spread among artists. Today they are very rare: the group of six in the Fitzwilliam is the third largest in the world.

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Etching and metalwork

The exhibition also includes another rare group of Altdorfer etchings: 21 of the series of 23 prints of goblets, pitchers and urns. Their purpose was probably to provide designs that appealed to collectors but could also be used by goldsmiths as models. Elaborate vessels very similar in form were realised (two less-closely related vessels are shown in the central case to give an idea of how similar forms translated into three dimensions).

The technique of etching iron plates for printmaking was itself derived from techniques for decorating metalwork such as armour. Iron proved to have disadvantages for printing plates, especially its propensity to rust easily, which spoilt plates for additional print runs. This was solved when methods of etching copper were developed, as the biting was slower. Later etchers like Augustin Hirschvogel (1503-1553) gained greater control in copper by covering some of the lines and etching others for longer, thus achieving lines of varying depth and width to help with the effect of aerial perspective in landscapes.

The Renaissance in miniature

Another problem of etching iron was the lack of control over the range of marks in comparison with engraving. Altdorfer made a virtue of the limited range in his landscape prints, and got round the lack of control by keeping the lines sparse and etching them very lightly; but the supremacy of engraving for finely-wrought work can be seen very clearly in the little prints of figures.

In his small mythological engravings, Altdorfer was evidently influenced by Italian 'nielli' (small decorative silver or copper plates engraved and inlaid with black, which were sometimes printed on paper). He owned a collection of Italian engravings and presumably referred to them when adapting classically derived figures from engravings by leading Italian contemporaries such as Marcantonio Raimondi (c.1480-1526/35), reducing them in scale for his miniature works.

Altdorfer's small-scale prints set a fashion among other German printmakers, notably the followers of Dürer known as the 'Little Masters'.

NOTE OF PRINTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Most of the prints derive from an album transferred to the Fitzwilliam Museum from Cambridge University Library in 1876 (AD.5.22). This contained an extensive collection of Altdorfer's work, including one of the world's largest holdings of the rare etchings of metal vessels and landscapes. The bulk of the collection may have come from the library of Bishop John Moore (1646-1714) given to the University by George I in 1715; 3 prints bear the collector's mark of J. B. von Ehrenreich (1733-1806) of Hamburg and were probably added to the rest in the early 19th century.

This list of prints included in Part 1 of the exhibition refers in the first column to catalogue numbers in Ursula Mielke, *The New Hollstein German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts 1400-1700: Albrecht and Erhard Altdorfer*, Rotterdam 1997. The second column gives the accession number.

ALBRECHT ALTDORFER	ERHARD ALTDORFER
e.19	AD.5.22-119
e.30	AD.5.22-77
e.31	AD.5.22-82
e.32	AD.5.22-81
e.33 II	P.2105-R
e.36	AD.5.22-94
e.37	AD.5.22-89
e.38	AD.5.22-80
e.39	P.2107-R
e.40 I?	P.2108-R
e.42	P.2104-R
e.44 I?	AD.5.22-111
e.45	P.2106-R
e.46	P.2109-R
e.50	P.2133-R/P.2134-R
e.51	AD.5.22-87
e.54	AD.5.22-75
e.55	AD.5.22-76
e.61	AD.5.22-102
e.62	AD.5.22-103
e.64	AD.5.22-110
e.65	AD.5.22-108
e.66	AD.5.22-104
e.70	AD.5.22-98
e.72	AD.5.22-78
e.73	AD.5.22-95
e.80	AD.5.22-151
e.85	AD.5.22-122
e.86	AD.5.22-125
e.87	AD.5.22-126
e.88	AD.5.22-128
e.89	AD.5.22-123
e.90	AD.5.22-127 (pen and ink drawing on verso)
e.93	AD.5.22-68
e.94	AD.5.22-72
e.95	AD.5.22-66
e.96	AD.5.22-67
e.97	AD.5.22-73
e.98	AD.5.22-129
e.99	AD.5.22-130
e.100	AD.5.22-135
e.101	AD.5.22-133
e.102	AD.5.22-134
e.103	AD.5.22-136
e.104	AD.5.22-137
e.105	AD.5.22-140/141
e.106	AD.5.22-139
e.107	AD.5.22-145
e.108	AD.5.22-149
e.110	AD.5.22-146
e.111	AD.5.22-147
e.112	AD.5.22-148
e.113	AD.5.22-144
e.115	AD.5.22-138
e.116	AD.5.22-142
e.117	AD.5.22-143
e.118	AD.5.22-131
e.119	AD.5.22-132
w.47	AD.5.22-60
w.57	P.2131-R
w.75	AD.5.22-57
w.76	AD.5.22-49
w.87	AD.5.22-50
w.88	AD.5.22-51
w.90.35	P.466-1943