

Albrecht Altdorfer in Renaissance Regensburg

Part 2: Prints of Allegory and Devotion

ALBRECHT ALTENDORFER (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. He became a member of the city council in 1517 and was offered (and refused) the position of mayor in 1528. Presumably he would have been involved in the decision to expel the Jews from Regensburg in 1519, which had repercussions that affected the subjects of prints in this exhibition. 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

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

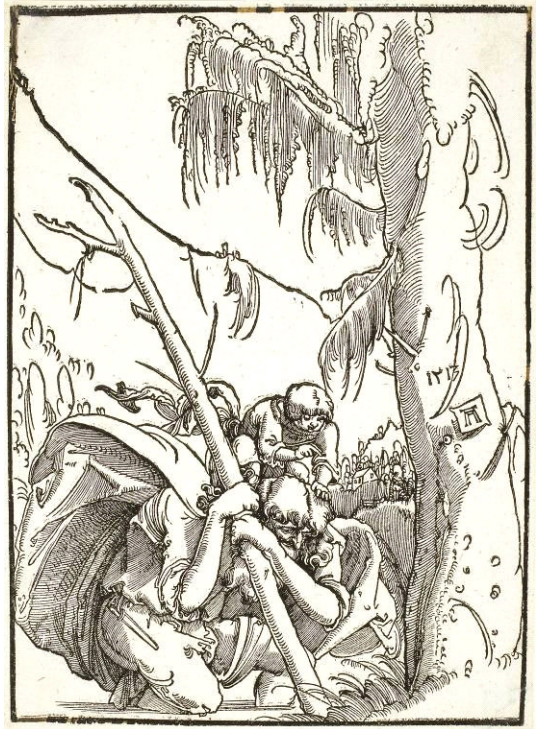
Part 1 concentrated on secular subjects, and the use of the new medium of etching.

Part 2 (11 July to 5 November) concentrates mainly on religious subjects and Altdorfer's use of woodcut.

Woodcut and the wider market

Woodcuts were produced by cutting with a knife or chisel into wooden block taken from a plank of wood. The artist drew the design on the block in ink; a professional craftsman would then cut away the wood around the lines, leaving the artist's drawing standing in relief. The block was then printed on the sort of press used to print text for books or broadsheets. The relatively light pressure needed to print a design that stood in relief meant thousands of impressions could be printed, even if later ones showed signs of wear and cracking in the block. This made woodcut the best medium for mass communication of images and text.

Altdorfer first woodcuts were dated 1511, the year that Dürer's great religious cycles of woodcuts were issued as an ensemble. Altdorfer responded by producing his own religious woodcut cycle, *The Fall and*



Redemption of Mankind, which is the centrepiece of this exhibition. Its prime function was probably as a set of illustrations that could be inserted into devotional texts, but its formal, technical and intellectual innovations also attracted collectors as buyers.

At the other end of the market were certain woodcuts produced in association with the cult of a Byzantine icon of the Virgin in Regensburg. These varied in quality, and the simplest were cheap souvenirs for thousands of pilgrims flocking to the city. Altdorfer made a range of prints of the icon, including his only colour woodcut, a relatively crude image that went through numerous editions for a mass audience.

Printmaking and piety

Currents of religious reform were in the air in the early sixteenth century, but the Reformation was not introduced into Regensburg until 1542. In 1520 Martin Luther condemned the popular cult and pilgrimage in Regensburg, and Dürer expressed the same view at

The Fitzwilliam Museum

this time:

‘this spectre has arisen against the Holy Scripture in Regensburg and is permitted by the bishop because it is useful for now. God help us that we do not

revere as people prayed to the Virgin or Saint to intercede in their petition to God. The most refined of Altdorfer’s prints could also serve a devotional purpose, and in certain cases they illustrated the use of images in prayer and served as models of piety.

Although some religious prints followed Bible texts closely, others derived their narrative and imagery from alternative sources, such as the *Golden Legend* (*Aurea Legenda*), a medieval book combining apocryphal gospels and legends of the saints, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine around 1260. Early sixteenth-century humanists such as Erasmus brought greater scepticism to bear on the histories of the figures portrayed, but it was still the widespread basis for art and devotion.

The Renaissance in miniature

Altdorfer started to engrave small metal plates for printing in 1506. Using a v-shaped gouge, the lines were cut into the metal and then filled with ink for printing in a heavy press. The pressure wore down the plates, so engraving could print fewer impressions than woodcut, but it enjoyed the advantage of producing finer lines. Altdorfer took advantage of this to engrave miniature prints, under the influence of Italian ‘nielli’ (small decorative silver or copper plates engraved and inlaid with black, and sometimes printed on paper). He collected other Italian engravings, and used them as a source of classical figures, reducing them in scale when adapting them for his miniature prints.

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

dishonour the worthy mother of Christ in this way but [honour] her in His name.’

Continuing veneration of the Virgin and popular Saints meant that prints played a large part in private devotion. Popular prints provided images of

NOTE OF PRINTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Most come from an album transferred to the Fitzwilliam Museum from Cambridge University Library in 1876. This album (AD.5-22) contained an extensive collection of Altdorfer’s work, mostly in fine, early impressions. 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; a few prints (nos. 6, 65 and 84) bear the mark of J. B. von Ehrenreich (1733-1806) of Hamburg and were probably added to the rest in the early 19th century. The rest of the prints (except no. 90) were collected by Thomas Kerrich (1748-1828) and were bequeathed by his son Richard Edward Kerrich in 1873.

This list of prints included in Part 2 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

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 <i>verso</i>)

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

Produced to accompany an exhibition at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 11 July to 5 November 2006

Image on front page: *Saint Christopher carrying the Infant Christ Child*, woodcut, 1513 (AD.5.22-55)

© Text and photograph copyright The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 2006