

Die neunundtreyßigst figur



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The Woodcuts and Woodblocks
of Albrecht Dürer:
Inspiration, Standardization,
and Reformation of an Art

THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPHS form as much a report as an essay. Daniel De Simone asked me to devise a lecture that would serve as an introduction to this woodcut symposium and focus primarily on the achievements of Albrecht Dürer. We decided that the talk would consist of three parts. The first delineates the development of Dürer's incomparable woodcuts, quickly reviewing the variety of his approaches but also noting the emergence of a standardized workshop technique that would serve as the touchstone for woodcut production during the next 350 years. The second offers a few comparisons with woodcuts by Dürer's contemporaries, not simply to manifest the impact of the master's formulations but also to suggest the highly creative languages of a few of his gifted contemporaries. The final section offers a recapitulation of the first, but this time through an examination of the woodblocks that were responsible for the printed images. This represents the beginnings of an investigation that my colleague Shelley Fletcher and I intend to develop into a detailed study of surviving fifteenth-century woodblocks. My remarks touch upon a subject that was hotly debated from the late eighteenth through the middle of the twentieth century: did Dürer cut his own blocks?

I.

Many of the characteristic qualities of the best German woodcuts of 1460–80—the generation preceding Albrecht Dürer's—are represented by a Flagellation from the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett.¹ The overwhelming impact of this work is one of direct communication, a bare-bones relationship between the viewer and a familiar subject. Little is here that does not serve the ghoulsh perversity of Christ's tormentors. Despite the curving contours, the image is composed of lines that delineate angular and

Fig. 1. Michael Wolgemut. Christ Healing the Sick, woodcut from Stephen Fridolin. *Schatzbehalter*. Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1491 (Rosenwald Collection 154, Library of Congress, Washington).



Fig. 2. Michael Wolgemut. Christ Healing the Sick, detail of the original woodblock for Stephen Fridolin. *Schatzbehalter*. Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1491 (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY).

aggressive forms and features. The action is formulaic, with no passages describing subtleties of light, texture, setting, movement in space, or nuances of facial expression. Together with the emphatic framing and shallow space, the lines themselves are conditioned by the flat plane of the original surface of the block, reinforcing not just the anti-illusionistic and anti-realistic qualities of the woodcut, but its immediacy of meaning, its "foregrounding."²

During this period, however, the woodcut became much more descriptive, especially as it sought to depict more ambitious narratives with greater realism. This was accomplished through the addition of repeated short strokes that tend to blend with one another. Such systems of hatchings are more optical in nature than the simple, descriptive contours. A typical, if not particularly gracious, example is the woodcut Christ Healing the Sick, a page from Stephan Fridolin's *Schatzbehalter*, printed in 1491 by Dürer's godfather, Anton Koberger. Now the long contours—which Erwin Panofsky called "descriptive lines"—are accompanied by whole systems of shorter hatchings, Panofsky's "optical lines."³ Both sets of lines are still marked by a pronounced angularity more appropriate to the portrayal of a crowded, agitated, and miraculous narrative than to pictorial grace. In this example, the technique of cutting yielded effects akin to the quick and unsubtle strokes of a pen, as in the beards, sleeves, and even faces. The hatching evokes some sensation of shading but hardly the "optical" pictorialisms of a sophisticated drawing. In works such as these, the application of color could still be crucial to distinguish larger passages, organize the entire image, and even suppress Late Gothic emotionalism, as a comparison with a hand-colored page from the *Schatzbehalter* demonstrates.

Although Dürer was involved in the designing of woodcuts during his years in Basel and Strasbourg (1491–93), he neither attempted radical changes to the medium nor worked closely with those who cut his blocks. On his return from his first trip to Italy in 1495, however, he was charged with the ambition to introduce the grace and rationality of Italian figure drawing into the traditional German woodcut. This demanded a hitherto unknown technical complexity and initiated a major reformation of the expectations of the medium. Dürer's *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* of ca. 1496, which depicts the forced death of Roman troops who had been converted to Christianity, is a great leap forward in harnessing the woodcut to pictorial ends. Not only are the basic contours curvilinear and spatial instead of angular and flat, but they are no longer bound to the planar qualities of the wood, having been set free to determine both the shapes and the edges of volumes. The contour is now a dynamic instrument, swelling and tapering as in the man with the scourge in the middle ground. A new organic and systematic handling of the hatching informs the multitude of nudes



Fig. 3. Albrecht Dürer. Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand, woodcut, 1496–97 (Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington). See Fig. 8 for original woodblock.

and articulates the hollowing out of draperies. Even more impressive is Dürer's construction of textures through the shaping of individual lines—the legs of the standing executioners at the lower right—and through the massing of a variety of optical lines, as in the highly decorative rendering of the Emperor's Turkish garments. Nonetheless, the composition remains crowded and busy, filled with action, gesture, and speech at the expense of overall organization. Since the artist's main attention is directed to the character of line, he has only begun to recognize that the white of the paper can serve as tone. One has the impression of an overly ambitious work; in fact, Dürer wrote that the theme itself would provide a perfect opportunity to represent the human form in all manner of positions.⁴

At about the same time that he was finishing the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, Dürer began to design his most innovative work, the *Apocalypse*, which, when completed in 1498, consisted of fifteen large images printed together with a continuous text. In its rendering of Saint John's visions, it surpassed all earlier printed versions in both imagination and execution. It achieved so perfect a balance between description and abstraction that it has persisted over the centuries as the most moving evocation of the text.⁵ In the *Apocalyptic Woman and the Seven-Headed Beast* (Revelations 12:1–16) of 1496–97, Dürer began to recast the woodcut in terms of the nuances of the tonal and descriptive potential of copperplate engraving. Comparing the edges of the woman's wings with those in Martin Schongauer's engraving of the *Angel of the Annunciation* from the mid-1480s reveals how massed, fine lines provide a sense of soft and palpable rounding in space as well as convincing darkness, as in the deep crevices of the draperies. Dürer, himself already a master engraver, has fused the descriptive and optical functions of the woodcut vocabulary; line imparts volume, texture, tone, movement, and emotion to an extent that is clearly more technically advanced than in the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*. Nevertheless, in its crowding, incessant graphic activity, and awkward white spaces of unprinted paper, the *Apocalyptic Woman* still reveals the insistent hold of the Late Gothic spirit. Over the next thirteen years the trajectory of Dürer's woodcuts would describe a stream of solutions aimed at dampening such excesses through a gradual simplification and rationalization of both style and technique.

Contemporaneous with the *Apocalyptic Woman* is the *Entombment* (or *Deposition*), an early work from Dürer's *Large Passion*. Contributing significantly to a clearer organization of the picture space is the enlargement of the main protagonists. Though the picture surface is still filled, it is less cluttered; a similar attempt to provide more breathing space also informs the larger interstices between hatchings and cross-hatchings. The white areas of the image are less haphazard and better integrated into