

PRESS INFORMATION

# BEFORE DÜRER: THE ENGRAVING BECOMES ART

28 SEPTEMBER 2022 TO 22 JANUARY 2023

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Press preview: 27 September 2022, 11 am

**Frankfurt am Main, 6 September 2022.** The Städel Museum is devoting an exhibition to the engraving in its early days as an artistic pictorial medium. From 28 September 2022 to 22 January 2023, the show will present some 130 important German and Netherlandish engravings of the fifteenth century, and thus retrace the development of the medium from its simple beginnings to ever more sophisticated creations. Outstanding prints by Martin Schongauer, Wenzel von Olmütz, and Israhel van Meckenem, but also by anonymous early engravers such as the Master ES, the Master with the Banderoles, and the Master b(x)g will be on view. A selection of early engravings by the great German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer will round out the presentation.

The engraving is one of the oldest techniques used in Europe to print images. An intaglio printing method, it developed around 1430/1440 out of the art of metal engraving in goldsmith workshops. On the Upper and Lower Rhine, and not long afterwards in Italy as well, goldsmiths and painters began engraving religious and secular depictions on copper plates from which they then printed them on paper. Thus reproduced, the compositions served purposes of private devotion or as models, not only for other engravers, but also for painters, stained-glass makers, and sculptors. A new pictorial world gradually evolved and spread in the form of prints. This imagery owes its special appeal—which is as strong as ever today—to its simple but nonetheless effective graphic pictorial language, its immediacy, and its fascinating narrative qualities.

Philipp Demandt, director of the Städel Museum, comments about the show: 'The extremely rare early engravings not only offer insights into the world of the Late Middle Ages but—as printed, reproduced, and circulated images—also play a highly consequential role in art history in general. Thanks to Johann David Passavant, the first head of the Städel collection, the museum today has superb examples in its possession. Our exhibition vividly illustrates how the engraving evolved to become an

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innovative and dynamic pictorial medium and thus later helped Albrecht Dürer, the greatest artist of the German Renaissance, to fame.'

'When Dürer founded his workshop in Nuremberg in the final years of the fifteenth century, he was able to draw on an already established tradition. The Master ES had created engravings in large numbers and established their production as a trade in its own right and Martin Schongauer had elevated the medium to a new artistic level that potentially equated it with painting. The Master of the Housebook had introduced an inventive and spontaneous aesthetic to the engraving, and Israhel van Meckenem had developed its innovative and economically promising potential to new heights. They and a number of other gifted engravers further enriched pictorial production in the last quarter of the century', Martin Sonnabend, head of the Department of Prints and Drawings before 1750, adds.

It was Johann David Passavant, the head of the collection in the mid-nineteenth century, who was primarily responsible for amassing the Städel Museum's early engravings. The holdings today encompass some 260 works, of which Passavant acquired about half in the years between 1840 and 1861. Himself a painter and, in his youth, a member of the Nazarene circle in Rome, Passavant viewed fifteenth-century engravings through a Romanticist lens. In the simple, modest images based on Christian subject matter and thus apparently created 'for everyone', he detected an affinity to the Nazarenes' artistic aspirations. This perspective was mirrored in the twofold character of the early engravings as (for the most part) religious 'images of everyday use' and as 'artworks' that also met certain aesthetic standards. Passavant's merits lie not only in his collecting activities, but also in his comprehensive cataloguing and assessment of engravings previously little known, if at all. He thus introduced professional scholarly investigation as the foundation of the museum's work.

## **The sections of the exhibition**

### **Early engravings and the Master ES**

Originally printed in no more than a few copies each, the earliest engravings are extremely rare today. They were executed in the workshops of goldsmiths or painters. The engravers used burins to incise their motifs in metal plates and, to create volume, shaded some areas with dense clusters of strokes of the kind also found in pen drawings of the time. Initially the images were printed by laying the

paper on the inked plate and rubbing it with strong pressure. The artists usually copied the motifs from existing images.

In addition to the *Apostles* by the Master of John the Baptist (active ca. 1440–1460? on the Upper Rhine, Basel?) and the *Passion* engravings by the Master with the Banderoles (active ca. 1450–1470 in the Eastern Netherlands), the exhibition also features examples by the Master ES, among them the *Small Virgin of Einsiedeln* and the *Knight and Lady with Helmet and Lance*. The Master ES was the first ‘professional’ engraver. Active ca. 1440/1450–1467 on the Upper Rhine, possibly in Strasbourg, he had probably trained as a goldsmith. Early in his career he developed a systematic graphic language with the aim of rivalling the quality of painting. He produced as many as 500 engravings, of which some 300 have come down to us. They bear a strong relation to painting and sculpture made in Strasbourg in his day, but also Franco-Flemish illumination and panel painting, and not least of all the paintings of Rogier van der Weyden, which contributed substantially to shaping the image of the time.

Because they were not considered valuable artworks, early engravings were not carefully preserved. They initially served above all religious purposes: figures of saints, for example, might be glued to walls or furniture, touched, prayed to, or kissed. The majority of the prints by the Master ES were lost in connection with these various forms of private use, and those that survived are thus all the rarer.

### **Martin Schongauer**

Unlike the engravings by the Master ES, many of those by Martin Schongauer (Colmar ca. 1445–1491 Breisach or Colmar) have come down to us in relatively large numbers (between 25 and 80 copies each). Schongauer is considered the most prominent engraver of the fifteenth century. The son of a goldsmith and thus intimately acquainted with metalworking, he decided to train as a painter. He set up his own workshop around 1470 and, in addition to his painted works, produced a printmaking oeuvre encompassing more than 100 engravings. Schongauer was the first to use a standardized monogram as a signature.

The exhibition features, among other works, scenes from his *Life of Mary*, the *Virgin and Child in the Courtyard*, and the *Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons* as well as secular motifs, heraldic images, and ornamental works bearing a relation to goldsmithery, for example the *Censer*. Rather than working from existing images, Schongauer engraved exclusively his own inventions. He perfected his graphic language and produced masterworks highly advanced in terms of technique and

artistry alike. He was a master at orchestrating the interplay between the black line and the white paper in such a way as to achieve a rich, painterly effect. Space, light, bodily volume, and different surface textures unite in his depictions to form a coherent whole. A distinctive feature of his engraved images are studies of nature observed with the utmost precision and rendered with great sensitivity. His works were known and copied all over Europe, in engravings but also in paintings and other pictorial media.

### **German engravings 1470–1500**

The engravings of Martin Schongauer set new standards in the late fifteenth century. Most engravers of that period were painters or goldsmiths who produced prints on the side. Few of them are known by name, but—after Schongauer’s example—they did sign their works with monograms or logo-like symbols. The Masters BM (active ca. 1480–1500 in Southern Germany, Upper Rhine) and AG (active ca. 1475–1490 on the Upper Rhine and in Franconia, Würzburg) belonged to the immediate circle around Schongauer; others such as the Master BR with the Anchor (active ca. 1480–1490 on the Lower Rhine, possibly in Cologne) were familiar with his engravings and imitated them.

The so-called ‘Master of the Housebook’—active on the Middle Rhine in the last third of the fifteenth century, possibly in a court environment—was likewise an influential artist. He scratched inventive and entertaining motifs into soft metal and printed only a few of each. His drypoint etchings became known through copies such as those by the Master b(x)g (active ca. 1470–1490 on the Middle Rhine [Frankfurt am Main?]), Israhel van Meckenem, and Wenzel von Olmütz (active ca. 1475–ca. 1500 in Olmütz/Olomouc, present-day Czech Republic), a goldsmith specialized in engravings of other artists’ inventions.

Towards the end of the century, engravers occasionally emphasized the character of their prints as artworks in their own right. The Master LCz (active ca. 1470–1500 in Franconia), for example, produced a number of sheets that, in terms of pictorial effect, easily measure up to paintings. Mair von Landshut (active ca. 1500 in Freising and Landshut), for his part, printed his engravings on coloured paper and used a brush to develop them into masterful chiaroscuro compositions.

### **Israhel van Meckenem and Netherlandish engravings 1470–1500**

The most productive and economically most successful engraver of the fifteenth century was Israhel van Meckenem (in or near Bonn ca. 1440/1445—1503 Bocholt), a Lower Rhenish goldsmith who worked in Bocholt near the present-day Netherlands.

Active from around 1470 onwards and highly accomplished in the engraving technique, he focussed on already existing images that promised to earn him a profit. He copied engravings by the Master ES, Martin Schongauer, and the young Dürer, but also had artists like Hans Holbein the Elder and others supply him with pictorial material composed especially for that purpose. He thus introduced new motifs to the market, in particular images depicting the everyday life of his time which held a direct appeal for his audience. Examples are the *Morris Dances*, urban Carnival amusements that had never before appeared in images, and above all his *Scenes from Everyday Life*.

The latter fifteenth-century Netherlandish engravers featured in the exhibition alongside Israhel van Meckenem were primarily active not in centres of painting such as Bruges and Ghent but along the Lower Rhine. They produced sophisticated engravings that, in terms of technique, reveal a familiarity with the oeuvre of Martin Schongauer. In addition to motifs adopted from contemporary Netherlandish painting, their works also encompass some unusual and innovative depictions.

### **Albrecht Dürer**

Like Martin Schongauer, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was the son of a goldsmith and thus familiar with metalworking from childhood on. During his training as a painter in his native town of Nuremberg, he had been so impressed by Schongauer's engravings that he stopped in Colmar on his travels as a journeyman. No encounter took place, however, as the master had passed away shortly beforehand. When Dürer founded his own workshop in Nuremberg around 1495, he took on only a small number of painting commissions and concentrated on printmaking instead. Within just a few years, thanks in part to his distinctive monogram, this medium made him famous all over Europe. Already his early engravings were so successful that Israhel van Meckenem, Wenzel von Olmütz, and others lost no time in copying them. Dürer developed the possibilities of graphic expression in engraving to a level of quality unattained by any of his forerunners.

He also used the engraving medium for programmatic pictorial statements of his self-conception as a modern artist. A case in point is *Adam and Eve*, his masterwork of 1504. It vividly exemplifies an oeuvre of engravings that, although they were reproduced and widely disseminated, also claimed a new status as autonomous artworks. Dürer's *Adam and Eve* accordingly brings the exhibition to a close, while at the same time receiving visitors on the wall at the entrance —as an invitation to get to know the history and rich diversity of the engraving 'before Dürer'.

## The Department of Prints and Drawings

The collection of the Städel Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings encompasses more than 100,000 drawings and prints ranging in date from the Late Middle Ages to the present. Thanks to the high quality of its holdings, it is one of the most important collections of its kind in Germany. The highlights include examples by Dürer, Raphael, and Rembrandt, Nazarene drawings, French works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, images by Max Beckmann and the German Expressionists around Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, as well as post-1945 American artists. The holdings are presented in special exhibitions and made available for individual viewing in the study room during special opening hours.

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**Exhibition dates:** 28 September 2022 to 22 January 2023

**Curator:** Dr Martin Sonnabend (Head of the Department of Prints and Drawings before 1750, Städel Museum)

**Location:** Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

**Information:** [www.staedelmuseum.de/en/](http://www.staedelmuseum.de/en/)

**Visitor services:** +49(0)69-605098-200, [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

**Opening hours:** Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am–6 pm, Thu 10 am–9 pm

**Special opening hours:** For information on special opening hours, see [www.staedelmuseum.de/en](http://www.staedelmuseum.de/en)

**Opening hours of the Department of Prints and Drawings Study Room:** Wed, Fri 2–5 pm, Thu 2–7 pm.

Please book in advance by e-mail to [graphischesammlung@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:graphischesammlung@staedelmuseum.de), stating the date, arrival time, and length of your stay.

**Tickets and admission:** Tickets can be purchased in advance online at [shop.staedelmuseum.de/en](http://shop.staedelmuseum.de/en).

Special price through 16 October: 10 EUR. The special price is a reduced admission fee effective during the installation of a new colour and lighting scheme of the Modern Art Collection. The special price applies to all visitors, including school pupils, students, vocational trainees, unemployed persons, and visitors with a 50-per-cent or higher degree of disability. Starting 18 October: 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR. Admission free for children under 12.

**Digital Collection:** The works in the exhibition are available for viewing in the Digital Collection.

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**Städel Blog:** Background, stories, and more about the collection and the special exhibitions at [blog.staedelmuseum.de](http://blog.staedelmuseum.de) / Don't miss a post; subscribe to [blog.staedelmuseum.de/blog-abonnieren](http://blog.staedelmuseum.de/blog-abonnieren) (in German)