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# Albrecht Durer's Life of the Virgin

La Salle University Art Museum

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**Albrecht Dürer's**  
*Life of the Virgin*

**Winter 2002-2003**  
**La Salle University Art Museum**



## Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

Beginning with the artist's own writings, the life, complex personality, profound intellect and unrivaled artistic talent of Albrecht Dürer have 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, fourteen of which are on view here from the La Salle Museum collection, 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 works 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 medieval mysticism and allegory with Renaissance classicism and realism. 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. Although this small exhibition only hints at the extent of Dürer's prints (300 woodcuts, 96 engravings, six etchings and three drypoints), one can gain an additional insight into the diversity and complexity of his visual imagery by leafing through the complete catalogues of his prints on the counter here.

It is not surprising that religious subjects dominate Dürer's graphic works. He wrestled constantly with the spiritual conflicts and issues of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Reformation. However, he also did portraits of friends and fellow humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam, as well as, mythological, allegorical and literary themes and lower class figures engaged in everyday activities.

The religious subject in Dürer's prints, as seen in his Life of the Virgin series here, was portrayed in a decidedly northern manner. The event is 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.

Dürer's prints have been more thoroughly catalogued and illustrated than those of any other graphic artist. The most thorough reference work, listing all states and known distinct editions, was written by Joseph Meder in 1932. 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 counter here.

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, individuality of characters, intricate integration and movement of figures within the composition, wealth of detail, 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," Durer's 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, (though all here are from 16<sup>th</sup> century editions) not to the date of the particular impression on exhibit here. 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)

(N) Talbot, Charles W., Ravenel Gaillard F. and  
Levenson, Jay A.

*Dürer in America: His Graphic Work*

(Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art)

Thus, Sayre and Loeb indicate that "Benedictous Chelidonium 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.

Scenes or allusions to incidents mentioned in the Gospels are treated in five ( 6 — 10 ) of the prints here. Other subjects are legendary (e.g. "The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 4) or reflect devotions of the church ("Glorification of the Virgin," 14). In comparison to Durer's other woodcut series (*The Apocalypse*, the *Large and Small Passion*), we feel the *Life of the Virgin* is the most finely rendered with regard to variety of figures all with expressive faces and all placed in a very realistic space within a unified composition.

## 14 Woodcut Illustrations from the *Life of the Virgin*

1. *Joachim and the Angel* c. 1504

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

2. *Joachim and Anna Meeting at the Golden Gate* c.1504

3. *The Birth of the Virgin* c. 1503 — 1504

4. *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*  
c. 1502 —1503

5. *Betrothal of the Virgin*, c. 1504 — 1505

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

" Since Mary had vowed perpetual  
virginity and was at an age to leave the  
temple, the high priest looked for a man  
who would protect her and be her  
husband in name only. An elderly

carpenter, Joseph, whose wife had died, was chosen through a miracle and betrothed to her. The figure of the woman at the right with the great winged headdress is based on a watercolor drawing of 1500..., inscribed by Durer 'so does one go to church in Nuremberg" (B,96).

6. *The Visitation* c. 1504
7. *The Nativity* c. 1502 — 1504
8. *The Circumcision*, 1505

Purchased with funds from the  
Marjorie M. and Irwin Nat Pincus Fund  
for prints and drawings.

The Virgin, experiencing the  
first of her seven sorrows passes  
almost unnoticed in the crowd  
on one side of the room.

9. *Flight into Egypt* c. 1504

Purchased in memory of  
Catharine E. Doran.

The prominence in this print of the stately date palm at the left is explained by a traditional literary and artistic motif associated with The Flight Into Egypt. *The Book of Infancy* relates that when the Virgin wished to eat some of the fruit, the tree bowed down to her. The subject gave Dürer the opportunity to create one of the most beautiful landscapes. (B, 104)  
Can you find the stag, bird and rabbit in this print?

10. *Christ Among the Doctors* c. 1503—1504
11. *Christ Taking Leave from His Mother*  
c. 1503—1504
12. *Death of the Virgin* 1510
13. *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 graduated and textures are more generalized than in the earlier subjects of the series." (B, 183)

14. *Glorification of the Virgin*  
c. 1500 — 1501

"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)

