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Sebald Beham & Barthel Beham

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Beham [Behem; Beheim; Bohm; Peham].

German family of artists. The brothers (1) Sebald Beham and (2) Barthel Beham, whose œuvre consists mainly of prints, belonged to the third generation of this Nuremberg family and were among the artists known as Little Masters because of the diminutive size of many of their engravings and etchings. They were much influenced by the work of Albrecht Dürer and are often referred to as his “pupils,” though it is unclear if the contact was solely through his prints rather than personal. Sources of inspiration included the work of artists such as Raphael and Marcantonio Raimondi, then widely available in engraved form. Following these Italian models Sebald and Barthel Beham often depicted subjects previously peripheral in German art, such as scenes from Classical mythology, history and everyday life. They and Georg Pencz, a colleague of their early years, shared the radical views on religion and government held by the reformers Andreas Karlstadt (c. 1477-1541) and Thomas Müntzer (c. 1490-1525), in which connection they were all three expelled from Nuremberg on 26 January 1525. At their trial these “godless painters,” as they were called in contemporary documents, asserted that they did not believe in baptism, Christ or transubstantiation; Barthel also refused to recognize the city council as the highest temporal authority (Vogler). However, on November 16 of the same year they were allowed to return to Nuremberg. Barthel soon departed to work for the Bavarian court in Munich; Sebald was based in Nuremberg, though frequently working elsewhere, until c. 1531, when he settled in Frankfurt am Main. Attempts to link the artists’ radical politics with their art (Zschelletschky) remain unconvincing, and have been soundly refuted (Moxey, 1989). Nevertheless, subtle links with Sebald’s brother-in-law, the spiritualist Sebastian Franck, are under investigation (Stewart, in preparation).

(1) Sebald [Hans Sebald] Beham

(b. Nuremberg, 1500; d. Frankfurt am Main, 1550). Engraver, etcher, designer of woodcuts and stained glass, painter and illustrator. In contemporary documents and prints (B. 73, 140, 254) he was nearly always identified as Sebald Beham although since the 17th century (Sandart) and into the early years of the 20th he has mistakenly been called Hans Sebald Beham on the basis of his monogram: HSP or HSB. This reflects S[ebald] Peham/Beham with the P (Nuremberg pronunciation) changing to B c. 1531, when he appears to have moved to Frankfurt. Sandart’s biography of him is illustrated with a printed portrait similar to Sebald’s painted Self-portrait in his David panel in the Louvre; around the Sandart portrait is an inscription identifying him as painter and engraver. Only one of Sebald’s panel paintings has survived (the Story of David, 1534; Paris, Louvre), though documents cited by Hampe and Vogler refer to him as a journeyman for painting in 1521 and as having his own journeyman—i.e. running a workshop—in 1525. Sebald is best known to posterity, however, for his prints, of which he produced a prodigious quantity: approximately 252 engravings, 18 etchings and 1500 woodcuts, including woodcut book illustrations. Biographical information is scant; Sandart alleged that he was trained by Barthel and opened a tavern, the bad reputation of which derived from his own dissolute life. Unquestion-
ably, however, he was industrious and meticulous artistically. He began producing prints in quantity in 1519, though a few date to before then: a woodcut of Lust from a series of the Ten Commandments (Hollstein, no. 246)—a youthfully naive work produced in 1512 when Sebald was 12—and a sheet of sometimes awkwardly drawn pen-and-ink studies of male and female heads on red prepared paper (1518; Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Mus.). His first engraving (B. 204), dated 1518, is a diminutive Portrait of a Young Woman.

The works from Sebald’s early years in Nuremberg show the influence of Albrecht Altdorfer, the most senior of the Little Masters, and of Dürer. Two landscape drawings attributed to Sebald (both Nuremberg, Ger. Nmus.) and published by Zink are indebted to the Danube School and possibly Altdorfer. In composition and dramatic tone, Sebald’s etching of the Annunciation to Joachim (1520; B. 66) demonstrates the influence of Altdorfer’s woodcut of the same theme from c. 1513 (B. 4). Dürer’s quieter style inspired some designs for stained glass done during these years, including an Imperial Coat of Arms (Nuremberg, Ger. Nmus.) and the Coat of Arms of the Elector of Saxony (Munich, Julius Bohler, 1961), subjects that bespeak important patrons. Some two dozen circular designs for stained-glass roundels of scenes from the Passion may date to 1522 (e.g. Berlin, Kupferstichkab.; Frankfurt am Main, Städel. Kstinst. & Städt. Kstinst. & Städ. Gal.; London, BM; Oxford, Ashmolean). Other early works demonstrate his interest in representing scenes from peasant life: for instance, some small-scale drawings relating to engravings of 1520, including Peasant Man Holding a Jar and Peasant Woman Carrying a Jug (both Malibu, CA, Getty Mus.) and Old Peasant Man Standing under a Tree (Washington, DC, N.G.A.). These, in contrast to the more systematic and refined works he engraved in his later Frankfurt years, are free and exuberant in style, employing wiry, energetic lines.

After his expulsion from Nuremberg and his return in late 1525, Sebald Beham worked there intermittently for several years, incurring censure from the city council again in 1528 for publishing a book on the proportions of horses (Pauli, nos 1262-9), which was believed to plagiarize Dürer’s manuscript on the same theme. Once more he had to leave Nuremberg. Around 1530 he was in Munich, making a commemorative woodcut of Emperor Charles V’s Entry into Munich (B. 169). He also illustrated at that time a prayer-book (completed 1531; Aschaffenburg, Schloss Johannisburg, Hof- & Stiftsbib.) for Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg (1490-1545), Archbishop of Mainz. It was for Cardinal Albrecht that, in 1534, he made his only surviving painting: the Story of David. It was executed on panel as a table top and includes a portrait of the Cardinal with the artist at the lower right of the side depicting David and Bathsheba. Preparatory drawings for each of the four sides have also survived (1531; Paris, Louvre) and demonstrate Sebald’s interest in Renaissance architecture and perspective. Together with the inclusion of portraits, these elements indicate that he was a more self-conscious Renaissance artist than his prints alone would suggest. A second important supporter in Frankfurt was Christian von Egenolff (1502-55), for whose publications Beham provided many woodcut illustrations (e.g. B. 1-73).

The subjects of Sebald’s prints were various: traditional scenes from the Old and New Testaments and from lives of the saints, portraits, allegories, secular and historical subjects and Classical themes and motifs. In form they range from tiny and simple woodcut illustrations depicting scenes from Genesis (Hollstein, p. 167) to expertly crafted and finely engraved scenes from Classical antiquity, which often exploit the erotic potential of the subject (e.g. Cimon and Pero, 1520-25; Pauli, nos 76-7; see fig.). His small engravings are highly accomplished and may have been collected even in his lifetime. He also designed prints of extremely large size and fine craftsmanship, for example the Fountain of Youth (1531; P. 1120) and the Large Village Fair (1535; P. 1245), each of which measures 305 × 914 mm and features peasant and festival subjects (for illustration see Stewart 1989 and 1993). He also made more utilitarian prints to serve as ornament and decoration of various kinds: on playing cards, title-pages, wallpaper, coats of arms, and as patterns for use by architects, metalworkers and other craftsmen.

Sebald Beham: Cimon and Pero, etching, diam. 50 mm, 1520-25 (Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina)
Barthel Beham: Duke Ludwig X of Bavaria-Landshut, oil on panel, 960 × 710 mm, 1530 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek)
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———: Feasting and Spinning: The Popular Festival Prints of Sebald Beham in Reformation Nuremberg [in preparation]

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