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Early Woodcut Workshops

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Fig. 1 Jost Amman, Draftsman and Block Cutter, woodcuts from *Jost Amman and Hans Sachs. Ständebuch [Book of Trades]*, 1568. Vienna, Albertina.



Fig. 1

Little is known about the workshops of the earliest print masters. The size of these shops, as well as the names and wages of the individuals involved, has often just not come down to us. Furthermore, division of labor varied so widely from shop to shop that the meanings of specific terms denoting the different professions are sometimes unclear. Yet throughout the first 150 years of the history of the woodcut—ca. 1400 to 1550—its greatest period, the division of labor common in workshop production was also standard for the production of woodcuts. That division included the separation of designer, cutter, and sometimes also printer (**Fig. 1**). Through a discussion of early woodcut production, division of labor, and the woodcut audience, this article will address the problems of the identity of the hands, the nature of the work, and the approaches involved in woodcut production.

Prints were first produced in the late



Fig. 1

fourteenth century in northern Europe, after paper became available in good supply. It is believed that textile printers and other craftsmen took advantage of that availability by cutting rather simple designs and printing them onto paper. These craftsmen were required to belong either to the *Formschneider*, the woodcutters' guild, or, where no woodcutters' guild existed, to the carpenters' guild.

In the early fifteenth century, monks expanded their normal scribal duties beyond manuscript illumination to include woodcut design and possibly even cutting. Religious themes predominated in these early woodcuts, and their audience was the pious on pilgrimage routes and in towns. The Tegernsee *Crucifixion* (**Fig. 2**), with the coat of arms of the Tegernsee monastery in Upper Bavaria, is a well-known example of these early religious woodcuts.

Such woodcuts were probably cut by

itinerant craftsmen or by craftsmen working within monastery walls. Itinerant craftsmen were exempt from guild regulations because they did not fulfill the guild prerequisite of holding citizenship in the town in which they worked. Those working within monastery walls were also exempt from government regulations that often made it difficult to copy pictures. Pressure for such regulations came from the painters' guilds, whose members felt threatened by competition from the new woodcut medium. Woodcuts, such as the Tegernsee *Crucifixion*, were often hand-colored or stencilled, which made them resemble painting and especially manuscript illumination.¹

To what extent were the needs of religion responsible for the production of early woodcuts? Were there other craftsmen, such as painters, who also designed early woodcuts? Were woodcuts sold in towns only at churches or also at fairs, as they were at the turn of the century? Were early fifteenth-century workshops important centers of production, whose records have just not come down to us, or did monasteries at that time also serve as print workshops?

The manner in which woodcuts were printed during the first half of the fifteenth century, whether in monasteries or elsewhere, influenced the quality of impression and perhaps even the price and the market as well. Woodcuts that date from 1400 to 1425 were hand-printed by placing the block face down on a sheet of paper. The result: uneven inking that was too heavy in some areas, too weak in others. From about 1425 to 1475, however, the paper was placed on top of the block and rubbed by hand with a wooden implement. Be-

cause greater pressure was used, the printing was more even, but it created embossed lines on the back of the paper, making printing on both sides of the sheet—which was required for book illustrations and text—impossible. During the second and third quarters of the fifteenth century woodcut lines became thinner and hatching was introduced, changes made possible in part by improvements in the woodcutting technique.²

By 1450, about the time movable type was invented, professional woodcutters were important enough to demand that only members of their guilds or the carpenters' guilds be allowed to cut woodblocks for book illustrations. In 1468 in Augsburg, for example, the printer Günther Zainer had difficulty after his arrival from Strasbourg in getting his work under way because of guild pressure and the jealousy between the older trades and the new printing industry. It seems that he had not agreed to use guild woodcutters, possibly because he cut his own blocks.³ Was Zainer

Fig. 2 Anonymous German artist, Tegernsee Crucifixion, woodcut, ca. 1420-40. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum.



Fig. 3 Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen, 1497-98, woodcut. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Junius S. Morgan, 1919.



Fig. 3 one location?

The method employed for transferring the design is also problematic. The design could have been flopped onto the block and then greased for transparency, or the drawing could have been transferred to the block by pouncing. It seems probable that Dürer's *Apocalypse* woodcuts of 1497-98 (**Fig. 3**) were cut from detailed drawings that were glued to the blocks. Later, for his *Coat of Arms of Michael Behaim*, of about 1510-11 (**Fig. 4**), Dürer probably drew directly onto the block, as he implies he did in a letter to Behaim that is located on the back of the block.⁵ Drawing directly onto the woodblock was not common until the sixteenth century when woodcuts were apparently turned out with increased speed. Prior to direct drawing, whether the designer or the cutter was responsible for transferring the design onto the block is not known.

The relation of the drawing to the finished print is difficult to determine because of the scarcity of extant drawings. Were drawings general, showing only outlines and rough schema, or specific, including elements such as space, light and

shade, relief, and small details? Would any of these elements have been indicated through diagonal shading or through a specific graphic language that was understood by both designer and cutter? Was the woodcutter given freedom to interpret and vary the design, or was he responsible for producing an exact copy? Did the generalized drawing give way to the detailed as woodcut compositions and design became more complex during the course of the fifteenth century?

A systematic study of extant fifteenth- and sixteenth-century woodblocks could yield important information about drawing procedure, the signing of woodblocks (which was often done on the back of the block), differences in cutting and design (if the drawing still exists), and differences in cutting procedures for individual blocks. Was the cutting of a block divided between cutters—master and pupil, for example—or was one hand responsible for an entire block? Did the cutting of woodblocks become more regular with the wider use of professional woodcutters in the sixteenth century?

The information about woodcutters that

Fig. 2 resisting the general trend towards greatly enlarged workshops by cutting his own blocks and shunning guild woodcutters?²⁴

A host of related questions come to mind. Where were woodcuts normally printed? Did monks as well as textile printers and cutters print and cut woodblocks? Is it possible that textile printers and craftsmen *always* cut and printed their works whereas monks designed and only *sometimes* did the cutting and printing? Did monks take their designs to specialists who did the cutting for them or did the cutters and printers come to the monks? How did the introduction of the printing press, which is stationary because of its large size, affect the production of woodcuts after 1475? In other words, how many individuals were involved in the cutting and printing of a woodblock, and did the process take place in one or more than

Fig. 4 Albrecht Dürer,
Coat of Arms of Michael
Behaim (Councillor of
Nuremberg), ca.
1510-11, woodblock.
New York, The Pierpont
Morgan Library.

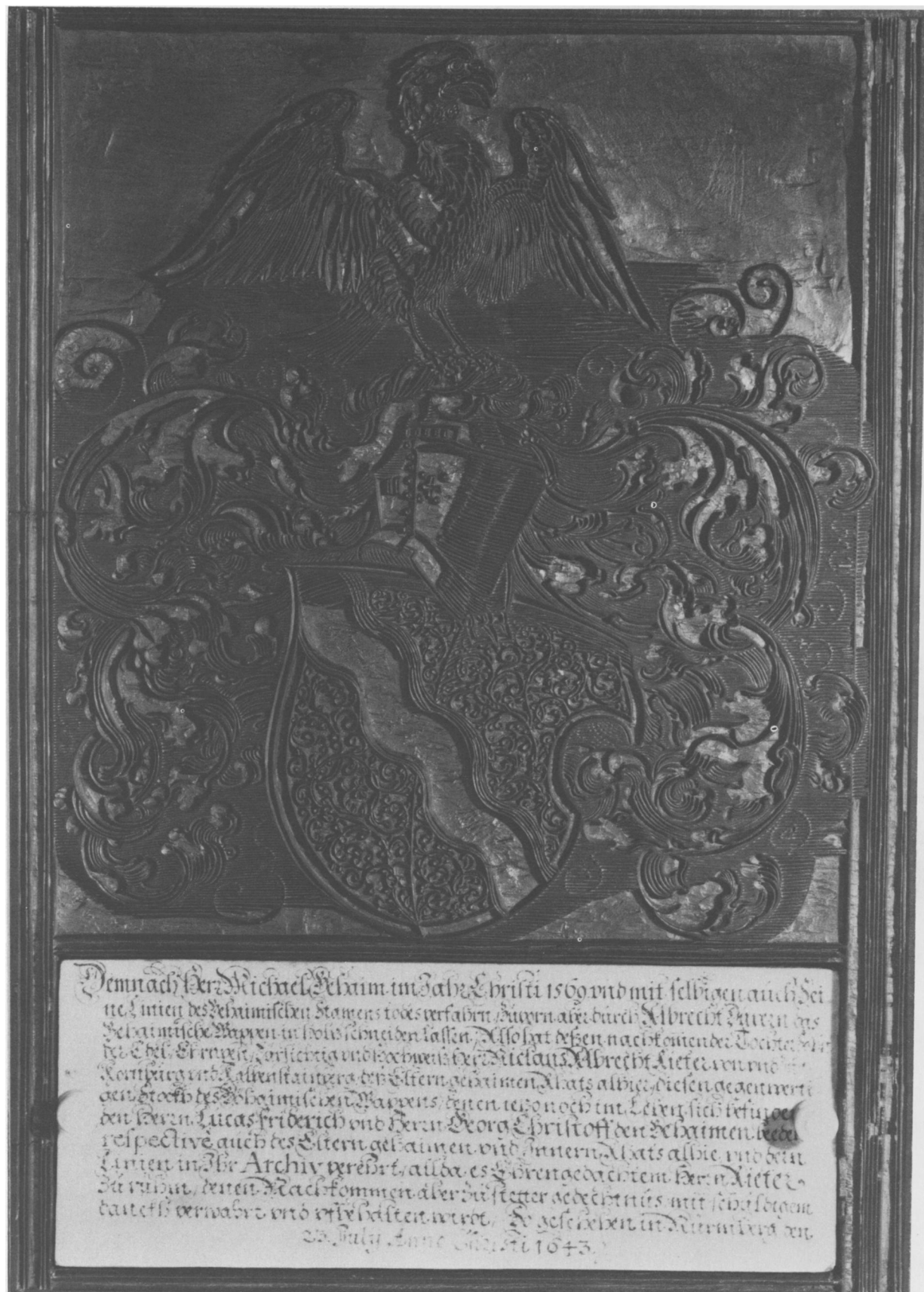


Fig. 4

has come down to us is also problematic. The marks, initials, and names included on more than 150 fifteenth-century woodcuts refer to designers, printers, or, most probably, woodcutters. Not until the late fifteenth century did the full name, rather than the familiar name or monogram,

become common. **Maria**sterre** (Mariastern was a monastery near Gouda) as well as *Hanns spoerer* and *Wolfgang hamer*, names of men who were active in Nuremberg in the second half of the century, are a few examples.⁶ Hamer was probably one of the cutters for Michael Wolge-

mut's *Schatzbehalter*, issued by Anton Koberger in 1491, one page of which is signed *Wolfgang* in the margin. A cutter named Caspar, active in the late fifteenth century in Regensburg, still signed only his first name to his *St. Florian* (Fig. 5).⁷ In Nuremberg, no documents from the fif-

teenth century mention painters who were active as woodcutters, probably because the Nuremberg branch of the woodcutters' guild was not officially established until 1498.⁸

Might the training of woodcutters be illuminated in part by an investigation of work contracts, notices of payment, and reports about legal disputes? Was a woodcutter's training similar to that of a painter's, which consisted of a two-to-six-year apprenticeship after which came the *Wanderjahre*, or journeyman years?⁹ Were woodcutters apprenticed under the same roof with other artisans, such as painters, or only with other woodcutters? Because woodcutting and carpentry did not belong to the liberal arts as did goldsmithery, the guild to which painters often belonged, there may have been a considerable physical and psychological distance between woodcutters and painters. The exclusion of woodcutters from the liberal arts may explain in part why painters as a rule did not cut their own blocks. It is

he had room in his printing shop for 100 craftsmen and twenty-four presses as well as space for storing and correcting the woodblocks.¹²

The *Chronicle* was probably produced in much the same manner as a contemporary Nuremberg publication that, though never printed, has a contract dating from 1496, which lists seven payments: for proofreading, copying the exemplars or layouts, buying the paper, designing the illustrations, buying the blocks, drawing the illustrations onto the blocks, and cutting the blocks. Thus four or five craftsmen may have worked as designers and blockcutters on the *Chronicle* project. The 645 woodcuts for this book required hundreds of finished drawings, such as the one dated 1490 (Fig. 6). Whether by Wolgemut or the young Dürer, whether an original or a copy after the original design, the drawing has been associated with the *Nuremberg Chronicle's* frontispiece woodcut, which is decidedly less fine in design and execution.¹³ The difference in quality between

the drawing and woodcut points to the problems involved in early print studies; even when what is apparently a drawing for a woodcut exists, which is rare indeed, it is difficult to know how to interpret the relationship between the two. Does the difference in quality mean simply that it was easier at that time to produce a fine drawing than a fine woodcut, which was certainly the case? Or does it mean that there was a difference in the hands involved?

Much more information about late-fifteenth-century printmaking has come down to us than about that of the early part of the century, and many more names of woodcutters are known. No documents or literary sources have come down to us, however, that might verify the identity of the cutter of Dürer's *Apocalypse* series of 1497-98. Did Dürer design, print, publish, and also cut the fifteen large blocks for the series himself? Because the woodcuts of the *Apocalypse* are extremely large and of unsurpassed quality, the opinion that Dürer

Fig. 5 Anonymous German artist, St. Florian, late fifteenth century, woodcut. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of James Clark McGuire, 1931.



Fig. 6 Michael Wolgemut (?), God the Father Blessing, 1490, pen drawing in brown ink. London, British Museum.



Fig. 5 possible that they considered woodcutting demeaning.¹⁰ Yet sculptors in the fifteenth century were often included in the painters' guild; therefore, the cutting of wood for woodcuts and for sculpture at that time must be differentiated.¹¹

The designer did not usually cut his own blocks. Wolgemut, for example, headed a large workshop and was the leading painter in Nuremberg in the late fifteenth century. He was also a woodcut designer, but probably not a woodcutter. Dürer was apprenticed to Wolgemut from 1486 to 1490, when he most likely learned woodcut design but not cutting. Wolgemut worked as the artistic head of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, which was printed by Anton Koberger in 1493. Assisting in the project were Dürer, who was Koberger's godson, and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, who was Wolgemut's stepson. Koberger had begun his printing career in 1470, and by 1491, the date of the *Chronicle's* contract,

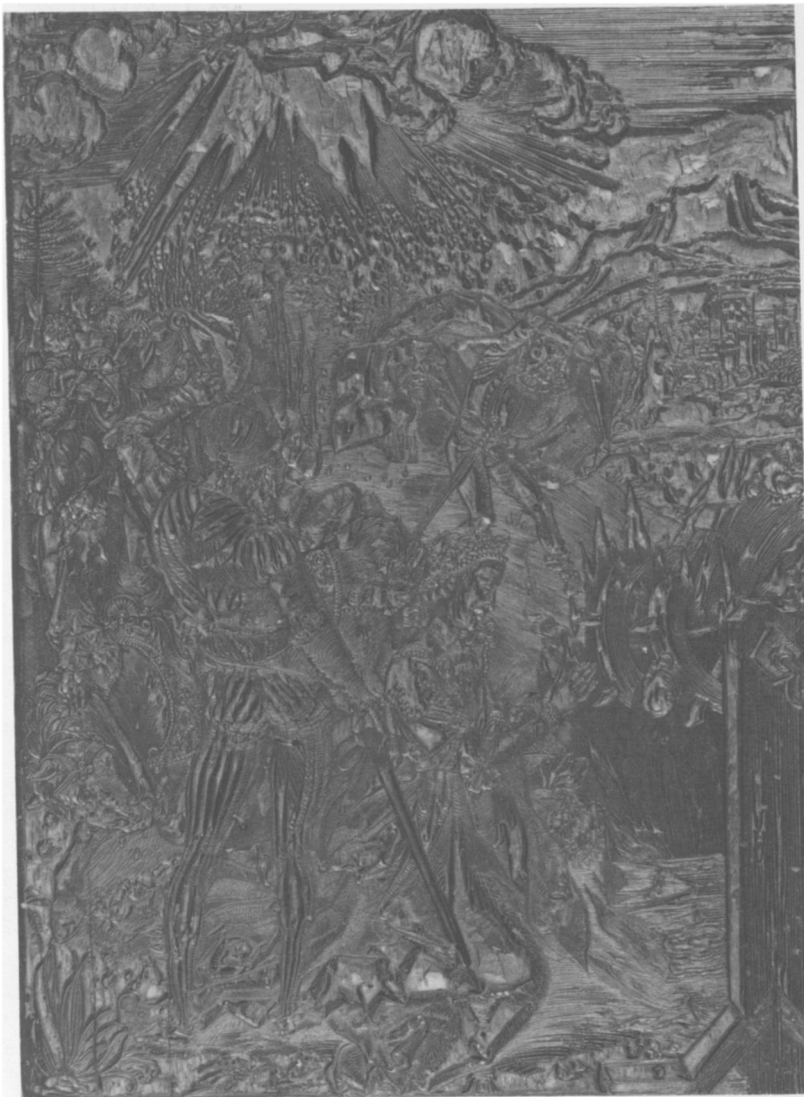


Fig. 7 Albrecht Dürer, *Martyrdom of St. Catherine*, ca. 1497-98, woodblock. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1919.

Fig. 8 Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Duchess*, woodcut from the *Dance of Death*, 1538.

worked in Nuremberg, were the leading woodcutters of the time.

Hans Lützelberger was the woodcutter responsible for forty-two of the illustrations of Hans Holbein the Younger's *Dance of Death*, which was published in book form in 1538. Holbein's designs were made in Basel in or before 1526, the year he left for the court of Henry VIII and the year in which Lützelberger died.¹⁸ Lützelberger prominently signed the scene representing the *Duchess* (Fig. 8). This clearly marks a change in attitude towards the woodcutter and shows recognition of the importance of his skill in the successful rendering of the artist's design.

The sixteenth century saw famous artists and highly skilled craftsmen designing and systematically signing their woodcuts, a practice begun by Dürer in the 1490s. Whereas the signatures of earlier woodcutters and designers were less obvious and less common, skilled woodcutters of the sixteenth century such as Lützelberger signed their blocks prominently and fre-



Fig. 8

quently and increasingly worked with unquestioned skill and solid identities for an expanding market. The large painting shops of Cranach in Saxony and Pieter Coeck in Antwerp, which produced numerous variations on a limited number of subjects, appear to be responses to this broad audience. This also seems to be the case with the Christopher Plantin printing house in Antwerp, which housed sixteen printing presses that produced 1,500 to 2,000 titles at the height of Plantin's career about midcentury.¹⁹ Woodcuts also were designed by the greatest German painters of the time and were produced in large quantities.

The beginning of a modern, competitive art market, in which artists respond to popular taste, appears therefore to have arisen in the early sixteenth century. That popular taste was taken into consideration by artists of the time is suggested by the many woodcuts designed by anonymous Nuremberg artists from about 1525 to

probably cut the blocks himself is not uncommon.¹⁴

The arguments for Dürer's authorship state that no woodcutter of the time was technically proficient enough to reproduce Dürer's new style and that had the block been cut by professional woodcutters that particular style of cutting would have continued, which it did not until about 1511, when Dürer is known to have used woodcutters. The other side of the argument has it that Dürer would have required extensive training as a woodcutter and would not have had the time for his painting, engraving, and other woodcut projects if he had cut the blocks himself.¹⁵ William Ivins added new fuel to the pro-Dürer argument when he observed differences in the cutting of Dürer's blocks made at the time of the *Apocalypse* and of those made during the years when Dürer is known to have employed professional woodcutters. In early works such as the *Martyrdom of St. Catherine* of 1497-98 (Fig. 7), Ivins accounts for the liveliness of the prints by pointing to the blocks and the varying height of the relief of the woodcutting. Dürer's more mature works, such as the *Behaim Arms* of about 1510-11 (Fig. 4),

in contrast, are skillfully though routinely cut, thus suggesting the hand of a professional cutter. Dürer also produced his *Small Passion* series about the same time as the *Behaim Arms*. Published in book form in 1511, that series includes thirty-seven woodcuts attributed to at least four woodcutters.¹⁶

During the first half of the sixteenth century, under Dürer's influence, woodcut production was characterized by experimentation and by increasing skill and professionalism. The association of woodcuts with learned and wealthy circles, such as those of the humanists and Emperor Maximilian, was also not unusual. Experimentation with chiaroscuro woodcut began about 1507 when Lucas Cranach's *St. George* and Hans Burgkmair's *St. George* and *Maximilian*, which were influenced by the Cranach woodcut, were printed from separate tone blocks on hand-colored papers.¹⁷ Burgkmair's *St. George* was cut at least in part by his fellow Augsburg Jost de Negker, whose name has been associated with the invention of the chiaroscuro woodcut. Further research is needed, however, before this can be confirmed. Negker and Jost Andreae, who

1550, as well as by the presence of popular subjects, such as peasants and lansquenets, in prints by Sebald Beham and other Little Masters. Woodcuts grew less important in the second quarter of the century as south German cities, such as Nuremberg, declined in importance and wealth. Printers moved to the richer north German cities about midcentury, after which woodcuts were essentially replaced by engravings.

Woodcut was the cheapest art form available during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This was due in part to the ease of its production—inking and printing requiring only hand pressure and no press. The audience for woodcuts was broad relative to that of other art forms. Because woodcuts were inexpensive, they reached an audience somewhat lower on the social scale than that patronizing panel paintings, manuscripts, or even engravings. Woodcuts decorated the walls of what appear to be middle-class homes, such as the one with the *St. Christopher* seen in the copy of the center panel of the *Merode Altarpiece* in Brussels.²⁰ As the quality of woodcut printing improved during the second quarter of the fifteenth century, resulting in more refined and better-printed images, the woodcut audience probably expanded to include the more discriminating. Earlier, the simple character of woodcuts precluded their appealing to the wealthy.

It would be interesting to learn more about fluctuations in the price of woodcuts during the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Was there a significant difference in price, and therefore audience, between the early cuts, those of Dürer, and those made during the first half of the sixteenth century? Dürer's woodcuts seem to have sold for no more than one-half to one-quarter of the price of engravings.²¹ Was that also the case with other woodcuts produced during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? Were Dürer's *Apocalypse* woodcuts more expensive than the anonymous contemporaneous woodcuts and were they more expensive than his later woodcuts, which we know were cut by professional cutters? How would any Dürer woodcut compare in price with Holbein's fine book illustrations cut by Lützelberger, or with the rougher, popular subjects produced in Nuremberg in the second quarter of the sixteenth century?

Another area worthy of further investigation is the method of payment—lump sum or installments?—for commissioned prints such as Dürer's *Coat of Arms of the Behaim Family* (Fig. 4). Books printed in Italy in the 1470s cost the equivalent of \$30 to \$80. Such prices obviously limited books to an audience of means, even though these prices were certainly far below those of manuscripts, which took nearly six months to produce by hand.²²

Do these prices suggest that a woodcut cost the equivalent of only a few dollars? If early printed books averaged editions of 200 to 1,000,²³ it is possible that woodcuts were produced in editions of similar size. Günther Zainer's printing firm in Augsburg produced 36,000 books during the late fifteenth century when the population of Augsburg was about half that number and when Nuremberg's population totalled about 20,000. These figures imply that printers of books, and by extension woodcutters, geared their production to a wide-spread audience, one that extended far beyond the home town.²⁴ That was certainly the case with Dürer, whose prints are believed to have been distributed all over Europe. In addition to being wide-spread, the audience for woodcuts must have been large and diverse to include buyers attracted to the elegance of Dürer and Holbein and also to the simplicity of popular satirical and folk subjects. The prices of woodcuts surely reflected the popularity, quality, subject, and artist of the work.

So many questions about the price, market, and audience of early woodcuts remain unanswered, as do questions about the location of the early woodcut workshops and the division of labor and procedures employed. This is in part owing to the lingering medieval spirit of the time, which fostered a communal rather than an individualistic ethos. The numerous questions raised in this article, it is hoped, will stimulate new research and investigation that might help to clarify the picture of early woodcut workshops. **End**

Notes

- 1 See Arthur M. Hind, *An Introduction to a History of Woodcut: With a Detailed Survey of Work Done in the Fifteenth Century*, 1, New York, 1963, 107, 108, 90.
- 2 For methods of printing in the fifteenth century, *Die Frühzeit des Holzschnitts*, intro. Dieter Kuhmann, exh. cat., Munich, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, 1970, xi.
- 3 Hind, *History of Woodcut*, 1, 91.
- 4 Hans Huth, *Künstler und Werkstatt der Spätgotik*, Darmstadt, 1967, 28.
- 5 For an English translation of the letter, William Martin Conway, *The Literary Remains of Albrecht Dürer*, Cambridge, 1889, 75.
- 6 Wilhelm Ludwig Schreiber, *Handbuch der Holz- und Metallschnitte des XV. Jahrhunderts*, vi, Leipzig, 1928, 93-114.
- 7 Hind, *History of Woodcut*, 1, 388, 389.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 1, 378; see also Fritz Eichenberg, *The Art of the Print: Masterpieces, History, Technique*, New York, 1976, 78.
- 9 Huth, *Künstler und Werkstatt*, 10, 11.
- 10 Hind, *History of Woodcut*, 1, 90.
- 11 Huth, *Künstler und Werkstatt*, 82, 8.
- 12 Koberger also had international business

relations in bookselling and printing. Adrian Wilson, *The Making of the Nuremberg Chronicle*, Amsterdam, 1976, 175-76.

- 13 *Ibid.*, 200, 193, 195, 78.
- 14 See Charles W. Talbot, ed., *Albrecht Dürer in America: His Graphic Work*, notes by Gaillard F. Ravenel and Jay A. Levenson, exh. cat., Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 1971, 165.
- 15 Max J. Friedländer, *Der Holzschnitt*, ed. Hans Möhle, 4th ed., Berlin, 1970, 56; William M. Ivins, Jr., "Notes on Three Dürer Woodblocks," *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, 11, 1929, 109; Eduard Flechsig, *Albrecht Dürer, sein Leben und seine künstlerische Entwicklung*, 1, Berlin, 1928, 115.
- 16 Ivins, "Three Dürer Woodblocks," 109.
- 17 Correspondence between the Augsburgers Konrad Peutinger, who had received impressions of the Cranach print, and Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony confirms the influence of Cranach's woodcut on Burgkmair. Dieter Koeplin and Tilman Falk, *Lucas Cranach: Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Druckgraphik*, 1, Basel, 1974, 63.
- 18 *The Dance of Death by Hans Holbein the Younger*, intro. by Werner Gundersheimer, New York, 1971, x.
- 19 Sandra Hindman and James Douglas Farquhar, *Pen to Press: Illustrated Manuscripts and Printed Books in the First Century of Printing*, exh. cat., College Park, University of Maryland, and Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, 1977, 195.
- 20 See Lorne Campbell, "Robert Campin, the Master of Flémalle and the Master of Mérode," *Burlington Magazine*, cxvi, 1974, 640, fig. 12.
- 21 Talbot, *Dürer in America*, 15; Alison G. Stewart, *Unequal Lovers: A Study of Unequal Couples in Northern Art*, New York, 1979, 119.
- 22 For prices see Florence Edler de Roover, "New Facets on the Financing and Marketing of Early Printed Books," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Review*, xxvii, 1953, 222; for manuscript production time see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of Modern History*, xi, 1968, 2.
- 23 Eisenstein, "Impact of Printing," 2; see also Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols., New York and Cambridge, 1979, which the author learned about (gratefully from Keith Moxey) too late to include here.
- 24 Eisenstein, "Impact of Printing," 7, n. 15; Stewart, *Unequal Lovers*, 102.

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