

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
17 April 2020

A few years ago, Kristin Spangenberg, curator of prints at the Cincinnati Art Museum, kindly invited me to look through the museum’s rich holdings of prints by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). I came across a fine, early impression of *Christ in Limbo*, a print from Dürer’s *Engraved Passion*. Dürer had started work on this series in 1508. *Christ in Limbo*, like the majority of plates from the *Engraved Passion*, is dated 1512, the year the set was completed.



Examining Cincinnati’s *Christ in Limbo*, I noticed a fingerprint in the lower-right corner of the sheet—an intriguing discovery if one supposes that Dürer printed his intaglio prints himself.



When printmaking developed during the early decades of the fifteenth century, it allowed, for the first time, the easy multiplication of images. Visual ideas could now be mechanically reproduced and distributed far beyond the places of their origin. For the artists, however, this meant that they became more removed from the products of their work than ever before. To counter this, printmakers began to add marks that would function as recognizable signs of their authorship. This was a new development that one only rarely encounters in paintings or sculptures from before 1500. To give one example: whereas all of the engravings by Martin Schongauer, arguably the most influential Northern printmaker before Dürer, show his monogram MS (with the two letters divided by a cross-shaped device), none of his panel paintings do.

As a printmaker, Dürer accepted—and to a certain extent probably expected—the appropriation of his compositions by other artists and in different media (imitation, after all, is the sincerest form of flattery). When Marcantonio Raimondi made engravings after 17 of the woodcuts from Dürer’s *The Life of the Virgin*, the latter’s complaint was therefore not that Raimondi had repeated the compositions but that he had copied them WITH Dürer’s monogram. The iconic “AD” was by then already well established as the Nuremberg master’s trademark. Similar to the marks used by goldsmiths, it not only was a sign of authorship but also guaranteed the quality of the product—with the material value now substituted for an aesthetic one.

With this groundwork laid—and a captive audience out there thanks to the ongoing pandemic lockdown (I am referring here to the few readers that I haven’t lost in what is now already the fifth paragraph)—perhaps a concluding and hopefully amusing flight of speculative fancy is allowed. Is it a coincidence that Dürer’s fingerprint is found precisely on the tabature bearing the artist’s monogram? Could this perhaps prove the “inseparability of the [artist’s] self from its works” that was observed in Dürer’s art by Joseph Leo Koerner? Does it reinforce Dürer’s “proprietary relation to his art”? Might it be further evidence of the “monologic presence” of an artist who is “defining his intellectual property and protecting it from usurpation or disfiguration by lesser talents”? (All quotes are from Koerner’s seminal *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, 1993) – Or did Albrecht just fail to properly wipe the plate, leaving the imprint of his ink-stained finger in the lower-right corner?

Where a contemporary master printer might have blushed and deemed this impression a “makulatur” to be relegated to the wastepaper basket, many generations of discerning and admiring collectors clearly did not mind this blemish. How else could the print have otherwise survived for over 500 years? So, in the end, the beautifully printed impression—fingerprint or not—won the day!

Explore the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum

More on Dürer

