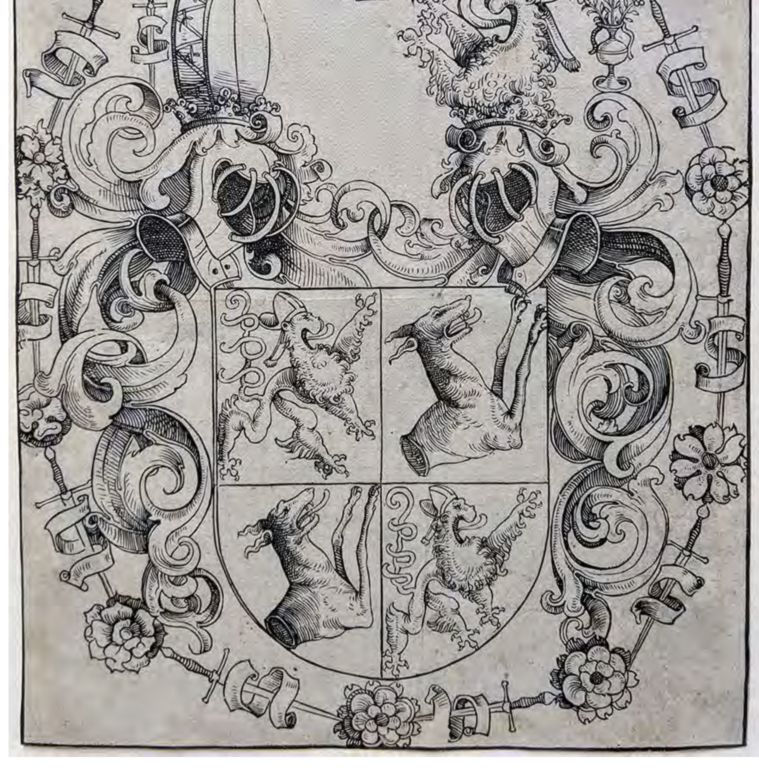
C. G. BOERNER
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
12 June 2020

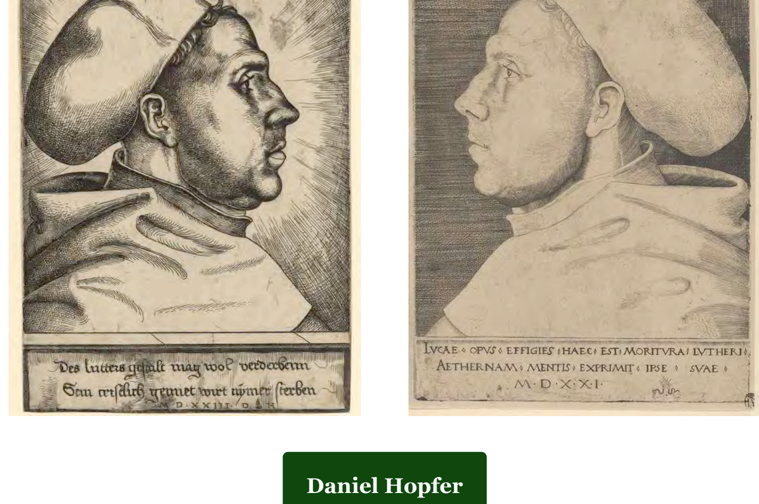
Even we print lovers—whether scholars, curators, collectors, artists, or dealers—often forget, or are simply unaware of, the purpose specific kinds of prints had through the ages. They have become "collectibles," catalogued since the time of Adam von Bartsch, organized in albums, first by subject matter and later by artist's name, ultimately affixed to mats and stored away in solander boxes. This practice of safeguarding prints—protecting them from the elements, vermin, and light exposure—has also effectively incapacitated them and more often than not obscured their original function.

It is necessary, therefore, to try to reconstruct their original use. Take, for example, the German *Wappenholzschnitt* (woodcut depicting a coat of arms). Otto Hupp, arguably the greatest specialist on these prints, observed in his standard survey of 1929 (this is one of those areas where scholarship since the early part of the twentieth century has been pretty much negligible) that "since these woodcuts are hardly ever mentioned in contemporary sources, we know virtually nothing about their use." He further notes that: "Woodcuts depicting coats of arms were such a minor matter, their use so widespread, that there was just simply no point in writing about the subject." This is a notion probably all too familiar to historians of quotidian culture. Hupp continues: "We would not know anything about these prints were it not for a sickly Frenchman who travelled to the spas of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy in order to closely observe and describe the effects that the different waters had on his bladder. He tells us in an aside how things were with those coats of arms in the Germanic lands." He is referring here to Michel de Montaigne, who kept a diary of his *Travels to Italy via Switzerland and Germany in 1580–81*, a manuscript that was only rediscovered in 1770 by Abbé Joseph Prunis in an old trunk in the Chateau Montaigne. Here we read: "The Germans are great lovers of coats of arms, and the travelling noblemen leave a host of them behind on the walls of the inns where they have been staying; even the windows are littered with them." As a result, these woodcuts, which must have been printed in huge quantities, were simply used up and count today among the rarest to survive, often merely in one or two impressions, in all likelihood the specimen copies kept tucked away in large books by their owners.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Coat of Arms of Degenhart Pfeffinger*, after 1511, one of only two known impressions, private collection (the other is in Vienna's Albertina Museum); Pfeffinger was council to Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony and an avid collector of antique coins.

Semiotically speaking, a coat of arms also functions as a stand-in for a person from whom all elements of physical likeness have been removed—presupposing that said person was allowed to carry such a sign and hence belonged to the nobility. It is hardly surprising that these prints were at their most popular during the first flourishing of the secular portrait during the first half of the sixteenth century. Needless to say, the demand for actual portraits in printed form was equally robust. Until then, portraits had generally shown biblical figures and saints, or real people, usually of noble birth. In the later fifteenth century, a newly sanctified saint would occasionally be represented in printed form but such images remained an isolated phenomenon. North of the Alps, this changed with the appearance of Martin Luther and his public protest against the Roman Church's practice of handing out indulgences in return for money. Only three years after Luther had nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Lucas Cranach engraved the first two lifelike portraits of the Augustine monk in 1520. The following year, Cranach added a third engraving showing the bust of the reformer as an imposing profile in the classical manner. This, in turn, was copied in an etching by the Augsburg printmaker Daniel Hopfer in 1523.

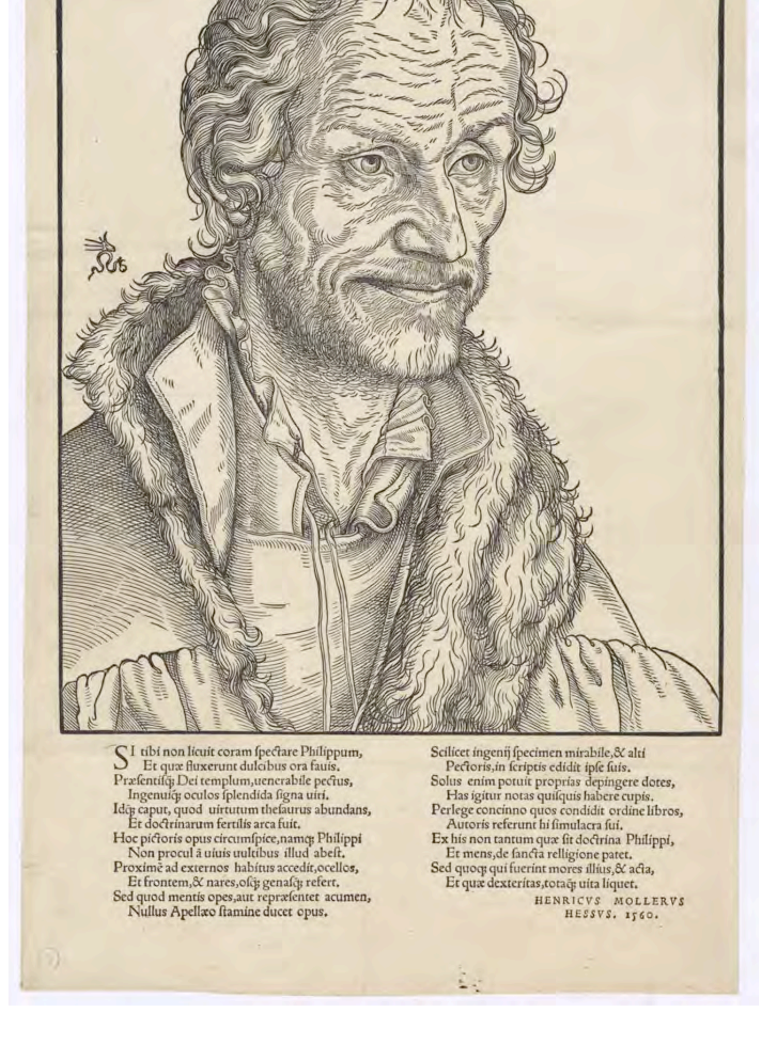


Daniel Hopfer

Again, the familiarity of these images allows us to take them for granted. It is important, though, to remember that they represent nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in the art of portraiture. Luther was a common man, and it was the notoriety of his ideas and his steadfastness against the still-almighty Roman Church that made him *bildwürdig* (worthy of an image) and created an ever-growing demand for portraits of him.

In the following decades, the circle of scholars "ennobled" through artistic portraiture widened. The *Gelehrtenporträt* (portrait of a scholar) was now added to the previously existing types of portraiture. Dürer had already engraved his portrait of Erasmus in 1526. Hans Holbein designed a woodcut of the humanist scholar in 1538, expanding the new category of images even further by showing the figure of Erasmus in full length. The death of Luther in 1546 increased demand for images, both memorial portraits and those needed for an iconographic campaign that could demonstrate the continuity of the Reformation movement. This resulted in the creation of portraits of scholars from Luther's inner circle, most notably Philipp Melanchthon and Johannes Bugenhagen.

Similar visual campaigns occurred after the deaths of Bugenhagen in 1558 and Melanchthon in 1560. They were facilitated by a graphic medium that allowed for reprints of existing blocks, including those for the Luther portraits dating back to the 1540s. That such timely responses to current events need not preclude technical sophistication and artistic creativity is evidenced by the large woodcut portrait of Melanchthon that is arguably the graphic *chef-d'oeuvre* of the younger Lucas Cranach.

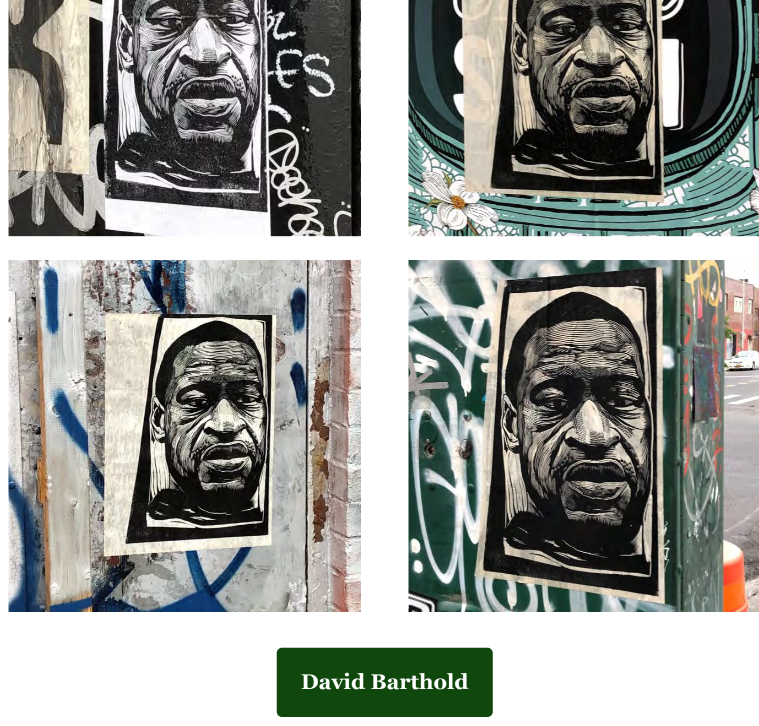


In early impressions, this print shows an astonishing delicacy in the linework, transposed onto the woodblock by an unknown block cutter with such mastery that it is unlikely to have been executed by the workshop's resident *Formschneider* Jörg. The woodcut shows none of the graphic abbreviations nor the undifferentiated areas of parallel hatching that characterise most of the other portraits associated with Cranach's studio at the time. The cutter at work here preserved the liveliness of the *Riss* (Cranach's design drawn onto the woodblock), which can be best appreciated in a truly early impression such as the one shown here, pulled merely two years after the block was cut in 1558 (only my recent discovery of a previously undescribed unique impression in Weimar established that his impressive woodcut is not, in fact, a memorial portrait but an *Altersbildnis* of the scholar, made when he was still alive at the age of 61).

Cranach the Younger

It has been amazing to observe over recent weeks how the power of images still prevails. When, for example, the president and his enablers, petrified by the Black Lives Matter protest rallies all over the country, resorted to calling in the army and sealing themselves behind giant fences backed by big concrete barriers, this chilling but ultimately pathetic attempt at a show of force only made them look even more like a third-rate dictatorship. And even fuddy-duddy printed images still serve their purpose: as Andrew Robison described it to me from Washington, "The powers seem to have forgotten that a nice big chain-link fence is the perfect backing for attaching posters; so yesterday I saw a riot of homemade messages fixed on it, all passionate, many humorous, none violent."

In a similar vein, New York printmaker David Barthold created a contemporary version of a memorial print with his portrait of George Floyd, murdered in broad daylight by a Minneapolis police officer while three of his colleagues were looking on. The screen print was printed at Bushwick Print Lab and sells for $28.25 (incl. shipping), with 100 percent of the proceeds going to causes that can be chosen from David's website—and can already be seen popping up all over the city.



David Barthold

But the last word today should go to my friend, the Providence artist, teacher, and master printer Julia Samuels, who recently wrote me about how she has been grappling with her role as an artist and what the relevance of that role might be in these precarious times: "I am working to find resolve in an idea I try to instill in my students: Printmakers are actors, practitioners, defenders of the First Amendment. We cannot enjoy our rights without defending and ensuring them for everyone. So, I'm going to go now, fire up the letterpress and print some 'Black Lives Matter' greeting cards that hopefully find their way into the hands of senators and sheriffs across the country. What else can I do?"

Julia Samuels

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