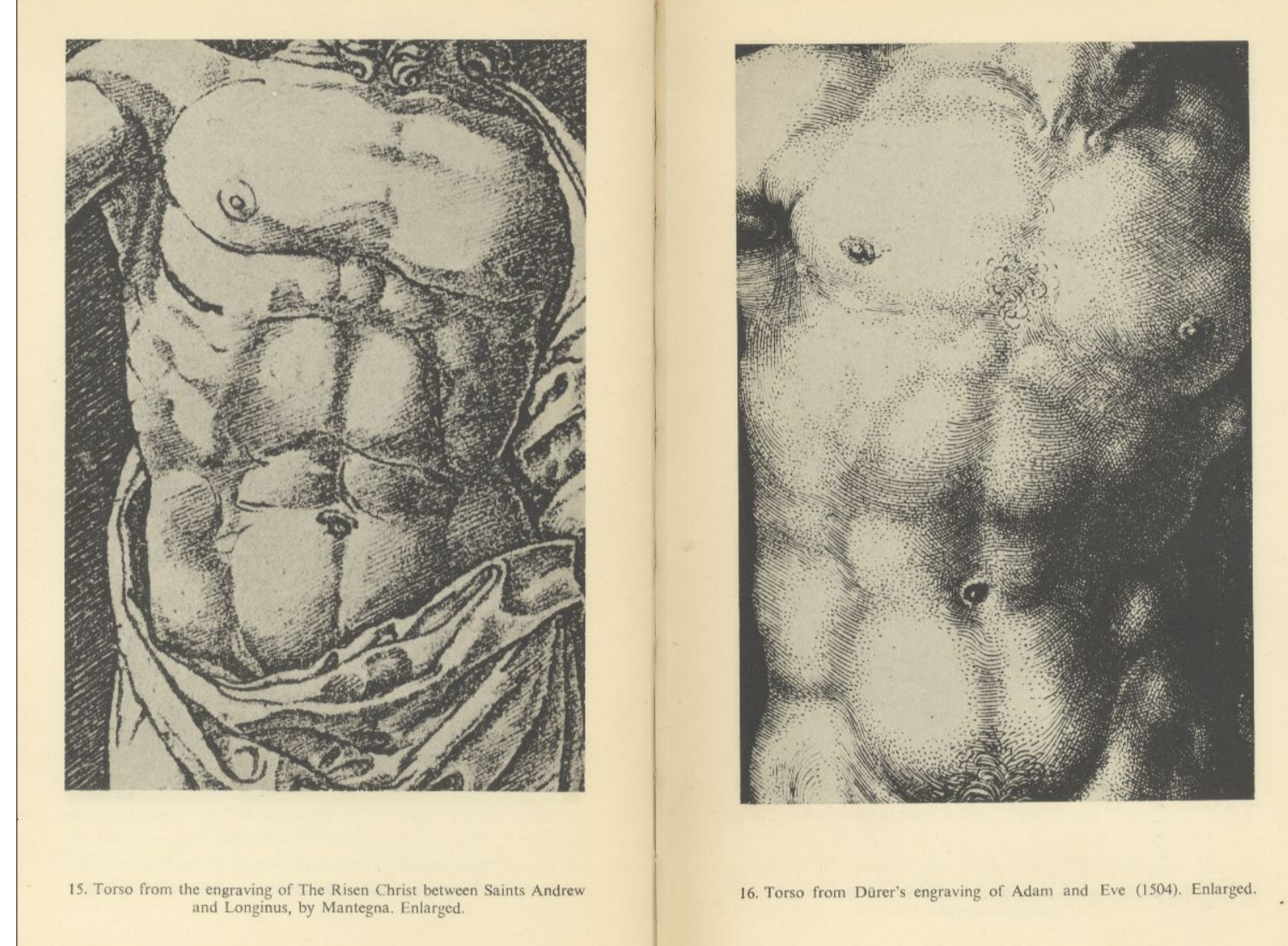


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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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In his 1953 classic *Prints and Visual Communication*, William M. Ivins, Jr., former print curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, presents a metahistory of prints. While the book is chronological in its structure, the main subject is what is now often called the “iconic turn”—the fundamental impact that the multiplication of “pictorial statements” had on the arts as well as the sciences, especially on those that relied on “visual statements to give their verbal statements intelligibility.” Yet there is a parallel theme that runs through Ivins’s argument. He refers to it as the “syntax” of prints. While he addresses it throughout, the most intriguing statements on this subject are actually provided in the superb sequence of plates that illustrate the book, thereby only affirming Ivins’s thesis that images can take precedence over text. The juxtaposition of plates 15 and 16 gave me the idea for today’s *Distraction*:



Ivins writes about this pair of images: “Pollaiuolo and Mantegna drew firm carefully considered outlines, and shaded by using almost parallel lines running tilted from right to left without regard to the direction of the outlines. . . . In Germany the artists, true to their calligraphic habit of drawing, shaded with lines that had a tendency to follow the shapes.” While Ivins’s further musings on German versus Italian likes and dislikes remain too general and ultimately questionable, it is this intriguing visual juxtaposition that I remembered when recently looking at prints by Hans Burgkmair, the dominant artist in the Southern German town of Augsburg during the first decades of the sixteenth century. I wondered why Burgkmair’s prints look so distinctly different from everything else produced in the German lands during this period.



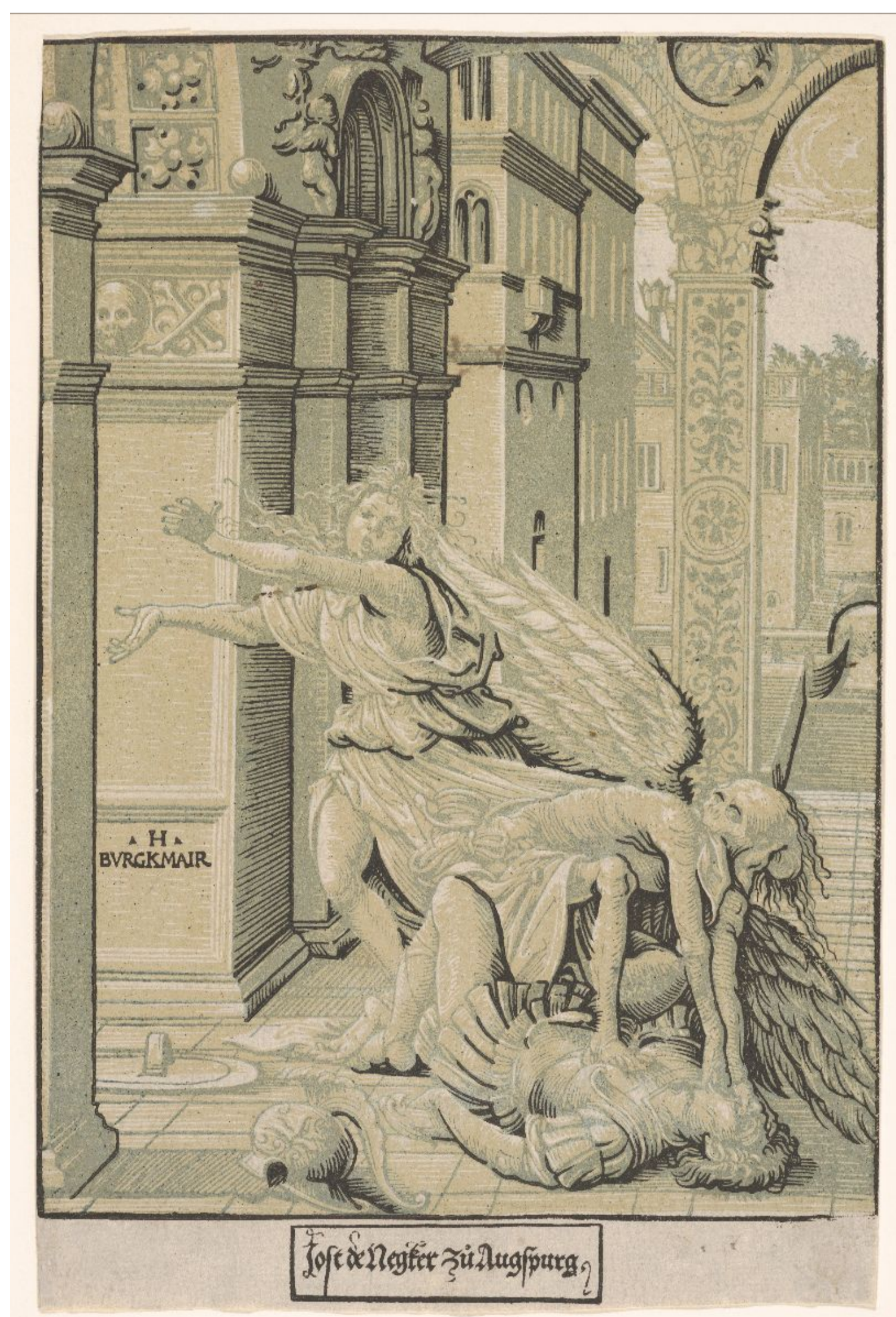
Hans Burgkmair, *The Virgin in an Arbor*, ca. 1507, woodcut

Burgkmair’s woodcuts (he never engraved and made merely a single etching) often show the same preference for areas of parallel hatching that Ivins observed in Italian engravings. How come? Nothing comparable can be found in the other two major printmaking centers of the period, Nuremberg and Wittenberg. For all their differences, both Albrecht Dürer and Lukas Cranach adhered to a syntax in their woodcuts that is free of such parallel shading lines superimposed on the external and internal contours of the figures.

What I would like to propose here is that the reason for Burgkmair’s woodcut style has less to do with some national trait (as in German versus Italian) than with his background as a painter. Dürer was trained as a goldsmith and is perhaps the last of the *orfèvre-graveurs*, the Northern engravers of the fifteenth century who mostly came to the print medium after having practiced incising lines in gold and silver. And while we know hardly anything about Cranach’s origins, recent scholarship tends to take literally what Matthias Gunderam, a close family friend and his earliest biographer, wrote in 1556, merely three years after the artist’s death: “a patre artem graphicam didicit” (learned the graphic arts from his father). Whereas both Dürer and Cranach had, therefore, acquired a visual vocabulary inductive to printmaking, Burgkmair was primarily a painter and draftsman. He did make designs for woodcuts when working early on for the Augsburg printer Erhard Ratdolt, but he was clearly not concerned with the intricacies of translating linework onto a woodblock.

One could argue that Burgkmair’s relationship to printmaking prefigured the way in which the medium is approached by most artists today, after the advent of Pop Art. Nowadays, artists often come to a printshop with the hope that the resident master printer can help them to appropriately realize their visual ideas in the medium of print. That this more hands-off approach is expected of artists became apparent to me when a master printer, whom I deeply admire for his astonishing versatility in a wide range of techniques, once confessed: “I prefer to work with artists who have no printmaking background.”

As for Burgkmair, his *Risse*, the designs he drew on the woodblocks, hardly took their graphic translation into account. He was working with a *Formschneider* who was a reliable artisan, able to follow the drawn lines when cutting the blocks, but not more. This all changed when the Antwerp *Formschneider* Jost de Negker arrived to Augsburg in 1508. He had the vision and the skill to develop a graphic syntax to match Burgkmair’s pictorial ideas and, even more astoundingly, could do so in color! The two quickly teamed up and created woodcuts that are not only free of parallel shading but rightly count as the most technically sophisticated prints of their time. Equally unusual for the period, de Negker was fully credited by being allowed to add his name or signature tablet to the prints.



The brief period between 1508 and 1513 was all it took for the German chiaroscuro print to be developed and perfected. Cranach made two such prints at about the same time as the earliest ones made in Augsburg (1508/9); Hans Baldung and Hans Wechtlin both contributed equally important works in Strassbourg in 1510–1513. But only the Burgkmair/de Negker team (as well as the less-known Wechtlin) produced prints in which the tone block provided more than merely background color and accented highlights. The breakthrough was the technical tour de force *Lovers Surprised by Death* of 1510, a small, gemlike allegorical composition printed from three interdependent blocks. Whereas the line blocks of the prints by Cranach and Baldung in each case show the complete image (and were therefore later also printed without the color additions), the Burgkmair/de Negker prints can only be coherently read when all blocks are printed together. They represent the culmination of the Northern chiaroscuro print but were, ironically, also its endpoint, with, at least in Germany, no direct succession (Dürer, for one, never made a single chiaroscuro print).

So if there ever was a paragone between Germany and Italy, in this one the German team (with help from Brabant) would come in first. This, of course, did not stop Ugo da Carpi from filing a petition to the Venetian Senate on July 24, 1516, asking for protection of what he claimed was “a new technique to print in *chiaro et scuro*, a new invention never before made.”

