

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
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Sand has long served as a metaphor for the transience of all things. One might think of the ever-present hourglass in allegories of time. Also transient are those images one draws into the sand when there is nothing else to do while sitting on the beach and listening to the sounds of the ocean. Michel Foucault refers to this famously in the last sentence of *The Order of Things*, his attempt at what one might describe as a negative anthropology. He observes that “Man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem human knowledge has ever been confronted with.” He describes the concept of Man as an “invention” caused by “a change in the fundamental dispositions of knowledge.” He then speculates that, if those dispositions were to be thrown in doubt, “Man would disappear like a face drawn in the sand on the shore.”

Diagrams drawn in the sand were also what the Greek philosopher Archimedes focused on when his hometown of Syracuse was overrun by the Romans in 212 BCE—so much so that he admonished the sword-wielding Roman soldier: “Don’t disturb my circles!” Those ended up being his last words.



Rembrandt, *Christ Preaching (La Petite Tombe)*, ca. 1657, printed on chine

This brings us to a well-known print by Rembrandt that shows Christ standing on what appears to be a square rock and preaching to an attentive crowd of people of all ages. Probably made in 1657, the etching revisits the theme of the celebrated *Hundred Guilder Print*, created about a decade earlier. While stylistically different, both prints have an evenly balanced composition in common that is built around the central figure of Christ. When looking at an impression of *Christ Preaching* years ago with the artist and collector Joseph Goldyne, he alerted me to the small child lying on the ground right in front of Christ. Joseph has since written a sensitive essay about this detail of “the timeless child,” explaining how it introduces an element of everyday life into the depiction of a spiritual moment that still speaks to the contemporary viewer (*Art in Print*, vol. 5, no. 5, Jan–Feb 2016).



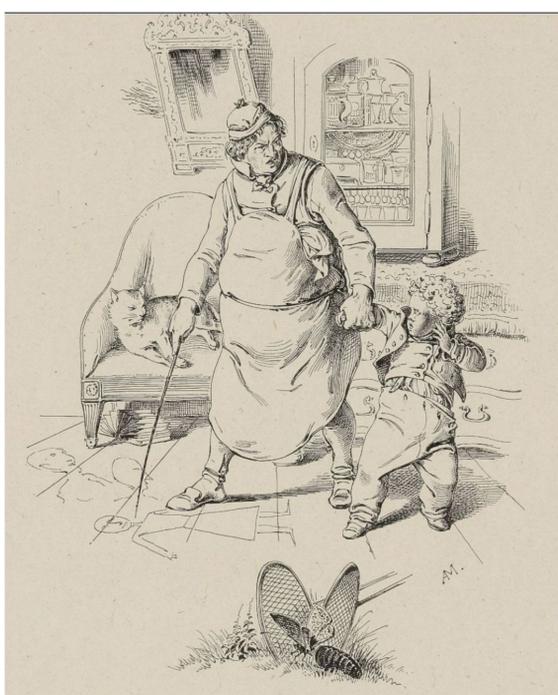
I would like to expand a bit more on what this little boy is actually doing. He is the only figure that has turned away from Christ. He has stopped playing with the ball of string that lies next to him and focuses as intently as only small children can on drawing with his finger on the ground before him. Drawing in the sand is apparently something children and ancient philosophers have in common, not least as a way to remain oblivious of all impending doom and the anxieties that come with it—or so one hopes for the sake of the children.

Jesus himself appears to occasionally inhabit this blissful state of mind, as we learn from an episode told in the Gospel of John. Jesus was teaching one morning at the temple, when the Pharisees brought a woman to him who was caught committing adultery. They asked him if she should be punished according to Mosaic Law. “Jesus bent down and wrote/drew with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And once again he bent down and again wrote/drew on the ground” (John 8:6–8). The Bible does not tell us what Jesus wrote or drew (depending on how one translates the Greek word *εγραψε* [égraphen]). This, of course, initiated a long tradition of biblical interpretations. The most influential one was put forward in the fourth century by Saint Ambrose of Milan, who claimed that the words Jesus wrote on the ground were *terra terram accusat* (earth accuses earth), obliquely referencing the famous verse from Genesis —“for dust you are and to dust you will return” (3:19)—which also still faintly echoes in Foucault’s erased face on the ocean shore.



The story of the adulterous woman had gained great popularity during the Reformation. A famous depiction by Pieter Bruegel the Elder was reproduced in prints that Rembrandt clearly knew, since he painted his own version in 1644 (National Gallery, London). In a related drawing, he even depicts Christ in the moment of bending down. This brings us back to the little boy in our print of *Christ Preaching*. Would it be going too far to interpret the figure as more than merely a doodling child? Could it be seen as Rembrandt’s way of representing the state of innocence and grace that we, as grown-ups, have lost? And could it even be, as Wilhelm Valentiner suggested back in 1905, that the motif of the drawing child is supposed to tell us what Christ is preaching about here? This would link the moving little detail to yet another theme that was widely popular in post-Reformation Europe—that of Christ blessing the children, “for of them is the kingdom of heaven.”

So, little boy, please doodle on and just ignore whatever those grown-ups are saying!



- Rembrandt, "Christ Preaching (La Petite Tombe)"
- Adolph Menzel, "Künstlers Erdenwallen" (1834)
- Joseph Goldyne on Rembrandt's "La Petite Tombe"

