

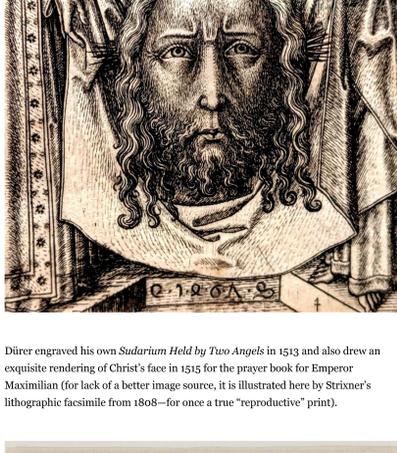
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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
13 October 2020

Among the supposedly "authentic reliquaries" relating to the life of Christ that were kept in the chapel at the Palace of Constantinople was the *Mandylion* (cloth image), which showed the "true portrait" of Jesus. After the sack of the city at the hands of the devout crusaders in 1204, it was lost. However, the desire for such a *vera icon* (true image) inspired the cult of the *Sudarium* (sweat cloth), the veil that Veronica handed to Christ on the way to Calvary to help him dry off his face, thereby creating an imprint of his face made by sweat and blood. (Note the anagram in Veronica/vera icon.) It was, therefore, in all likelihood, more than merely a coincidence that Veronica's veil began to be venerated in Rome around the same time the Byzantine *Mandylion* had disappeared.

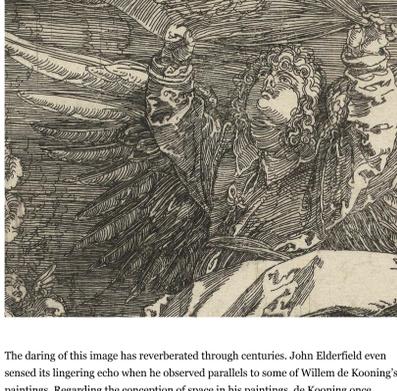
Images of the *vera icon* were ubiquitous throughout the fifteenth century, and Dürer was clearly familiar with them. One of the most stunning and haunting examples is an engraving by the Master E.S. from 1467.



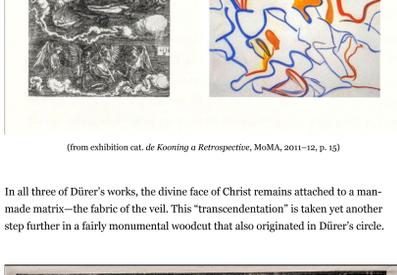
Dürer engraved his own *Sudarium Held by Two Angels* in 1513 and also drew an exquisite rendering of Christ's face in 1515 for the prayer book for Emperor Maximilian (for lack of a better image source, it is illustrated here by Strizner's lithographic facsimile from 1808—for once a true "reproductive" print).



Yet Dürer's most spirited depiction of Veronica's veil is undoubtedly his 1516 etching *The Sudarium Held by One Angel*. Here, he defies, at least indirectly, the established pictorial tradition of showing Christ's face in the strict frontality derived from Byzantine icons. The veil floats in the sky in a way that led Panofsky to describe it as "a feverish vision, with the pace of the needle accelerated to an allegro furioso." The glance of the angel who holds the billowing cloth aloft in the sky guides our view to the face of Christ which Dürer's virtuoso draftsmanship has captured in an acutely foreshortened angle.

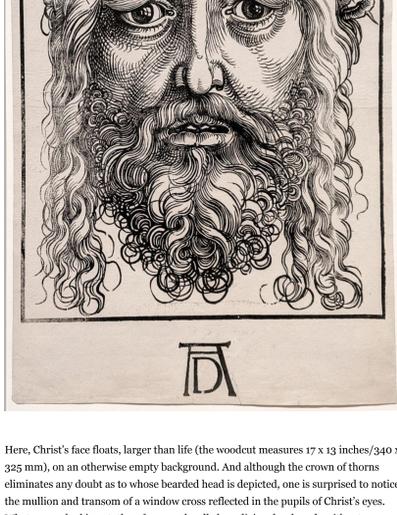


The daring of this image has reverberated through centuries. John Elderfield even sensed its lingering echo when he observed parallels to some of Willem de Kooning's paintings. Regarding the conception of space in his paintings, de Kooning once remarked that his aim was to evoke "a wind blowing across the surface." The comment reminded Elderfield of Dürer's etching, "whose shallow space is both encouraging of intertwining, to bind the parts, and allowing of dispersal, where the intertwining is halted."



(from exhibition cat. *de Kooning a Retrospective*, MoMA, 2011–12, p. 15)

In all three of Dürer's works, the divine face of Christ remains attached to a man-made matrix—the fabric of the veil. This "transcendentalism" is taken yet another step further in a fairly monumental woodcut that also originated in Dürer's circle.



Here, Christ's face floats, larger than life (the woodcut measures 17 x 13 inches/340 x 325 mm), on an otherwise empty background. And although the crown of thorns eliminates any doubt as to whose bearded head is depicted, one is surprised to notice the mullion and transom of a window cross reflected in the pupils of Christ's eyes. What we are looking at, therefore, can hardly be a divine decal made without any human intervention. Instead, what we see is a portrait that betrays its origin in an artist's studio.

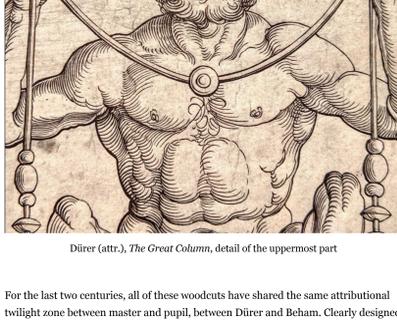


Framed with long curls and sporting a well-coiffed beard, the face shows an undeniable resemblance to Dürer's famous christomorphic *Self-Portrait* painting of 1500. (For those immune to digital vertigo, a reminder of this *Jahrhundertbild* can be found at this link.)

Albrecht Dürer, Self-Portrait, 1500

In the woodcut, the combination of image and disproportionately large monogram below the borderline begins to set a complex set of allusions into play. But first a proviso has to be made. We know of no contemporary impression of this print where the margins have not been trimmed off. And of the known impressions that survive on the full sheet, as the one shown here, none were printed before the middle of the sixteenth century. Adding Dürer's monogram to an existing woodblock was an often-encountered practice of later German publishers—since the Nuremberg master's fame, unlike that of Baldung, Burgkmair, or Cranach, never subsided, and the "AD" trademark would definitely help the salability of the print. Here, however, the "AD" is positioned so prominently and is so unusually large, that one does begin to wonder if this could perhaps signify more than merely a publisher's ploy. Seen together with the closely observed realism of the reflecting window, the floating head seems to move away from its religious origin and situate itself in the here and now of its creation: the artist observing himself in the enclosure of his own studio. Could it be a (self-)portrait of the artist as Christ?

That, of course, leads us to the question of authorship. Adam von Bartsch hesitated with an attribution to the master himself and listed the print merely in the appendix to his catalogue of Dürer's prints. Today it is usually attributed to Dürer's pupil Sebald Beham. However, there is hardly an example among Beham's more pedestrian woodcuts that shows a comparable sophistication of linework or a similar finesse in the cutting of the block. It might, therefore, be worth considering questions of modality and format that are rarely taken into account by traditional print (and drawing) connoisseurs. One needs to be aware that a large design calls for a different linear language than the intricate linework of a smaller print, which can be appreciated in close-up. If one then starts comparing *The Face of Christ* with such woodcuts as *The Great Column* of 1517 (which measures 1600 mm or 63 inches in height) and *Two Wallpaper Designs* with fauns (each measuring 535 x 325 mm or 21 x 12 3/4 inches), one senses that the similarities between them begin to outweigh the differences.



Dürer (attr.), *The Great Column*, detail of the uppermost part

For the last two centuries, all of these woodcuts have shared the same attributional twilight zone between master and pupil, between Dürer and Beham. Clearly designed to be easily readable from a distance, they have a boldness but also fluidity of linework in common that should allow us to at least consider the attribution of their design to the master himself.

Postscriptum:

Dürer was highly proprietorial regarding the use of his authorship. He had successfully established it as a trademark that was not only a sign of his authority but also a guarantee for the quality of the "product." As I recently learned when posting the woodcut depicting Christ's face with a crown of thorns on Instagram, his branding efforts remain effective even five centuries later.



For the first time in all my posting activity, I received an alert to "tag your business partner in this branded content post" since "telling your followers who you're working with makes Instagram a more trusting and transparent community." Another message told me that "if your post is a paid partnership, tag your business partner to meet our branded content policies." I am still not sure if Instagram's product search function stumbled upon those iconic intertwined letters "AD" or if it was Facebook's face-recognition program that identified the bearded gentleman. In any case, ever eager to comply with Mark Zuckerberg's requests, I immediately sent off a courier to Nuremberg's Zistelgasse but have, at least so far, not heard back. And I am also still waiting for another message regarding those cross-windows reflected in the eyes—don't they look awfully like subversively distorted Microsoft logos?

workshop of Albrecht Dürer, The Face of Christ

