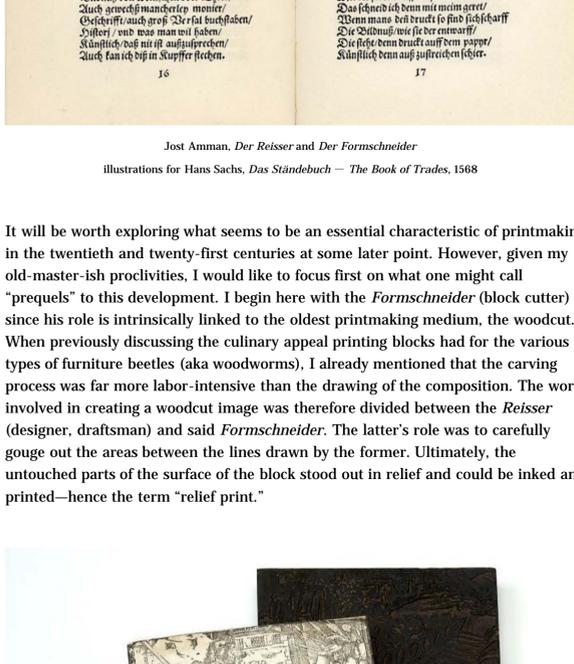


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
18 August 2021

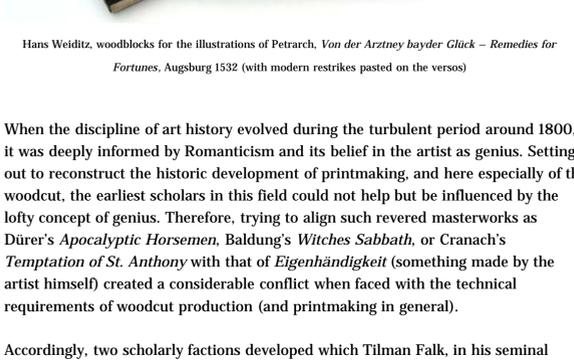
The figure of the “master printer” seems to occupy a twilight zone within the art world. Even those with a special interest in contemporary printmaking rarely focus on the technical accomplishments of the individuals or teams of printing specialists that work for the many publishers out there and apply their astonishing skills to help transform the artists’ ideas into a matrix that can then be imprinted and multiplied onto a (more often than not paper) support to create what we refer to as “a print.”



Jost Amman, *Der Reisser* and *Der Formschneider*

illustrations for Hans Sachs, *Das Ständebuch* – *The Book of Trades*, 1568

It will be worth exploring what seems to be an essential characteristic of printmaking in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries at some later point. However, given my old-master-ish proclivities, I would like to focus first on what one might call “prequels” to this development. I begin here with the *Formschneider* (block cutter) since his role is intrinsically linked to the oldest printmaking medium, the woodcut. When previously discussing the culinary appeal printing blocks had for the various types of furniture beetles (aka woodworms), I already mentioned that the carving process was far more labor-intensive than the drawing of the composition. The work involved in creating a woodcut image was therefore divided between the *Reisser* (designer, draftsman) and said *Formschneider*. The latter’s role was to carefully gouge out the areas between the lines drawn by the former. Ultimately, the untouched parts of the surface of the block stood out in relief and could be inked and printed—hence the term “relief print.”



Hans Weiditz, woodblocks for the illustrations of Petrarca, *Von der Arzney bayder Glück* – *Remedies for Fortunes*, Augsburg 1532 (with modern restrikes pasted on the versos)

When the discipline of art history evolved during the turbulent period around 1800, it was deeply informed by Romanticism and its belief in the artist as genius. Setting out to reconstruct the historic development of printmaking, and here especially of the woodcut, the earliest scholars in this field could not help but be influenced by the lofty concept of genius. Therefore, trying to align such revered masterworks as Dürer’s *Apocalyptic Horsemen*, Baldung’s *Witches Sabbath*, or Cranach’s *Temptation of St. Anthony* with that of *Eigenhändigkeit* (something made by the artist himself) created a considerable conflict when faced with the technical requirements of woodcut production (and printmaking in general).

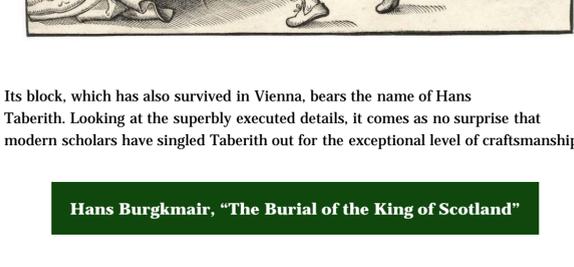
Accordingly, two scholarly factions developed which Tilman Falk, in his seminal entry on “Formschneider, Formschnitt” in the *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, distinguished as “idealist” versus “practical.” The “idealist” argument, under Romanticism’s spell, was that only the artist who was the inventor could also be responsible for the transfer of his idea on, or rather *into* the wooden matrix. Only then “will the artist be able to express his own spirit into its most noble and finest form” writes the polymath Carl Friedrich von Rumohr, a man with many interests whose most popular book was his *Geist der Kochkunst* (The Essence of Cookery, 1822)—admittedly a reference that adds nothing to the argument and is solely made in honor of those matrix-munching woodworms.

“The Edible Matrix”

While Rumohr was arguably the idealists’ most important spokesperson, Adam von Bartsch could quickly refute such claims since, as the keeper of the Royal Court Library in Vienna, he was able to examine the surviving woodblocks for the ambitious memorial print projects of Emperor Maximilian I. Among them was the *Triumphal Arch* which was created based on an overall design by Dürer. Given its deployment of 195 blocks printed on 36 sheets, in this instance even parts of the printing needed to be farmed out to other artists (Albrecht Altdorfer, Hans Springinklee, and Wolf Traut). Hieronymus Andreae is credited for the cutting, but one must assume a larger workshop with sufficient assistants helped bring this truly monumental project to completion.



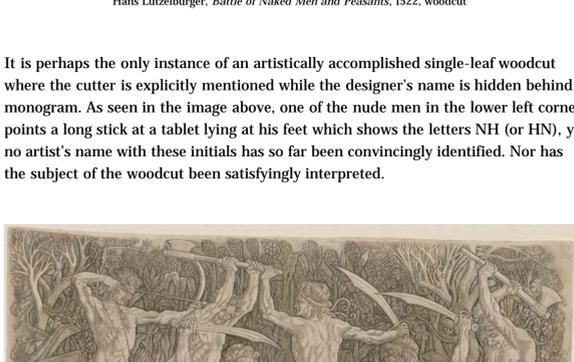
Further names are documented on blocks for Maximilian’s other projects such as the *Triumphal Chariot* and the *Weisskunig*, to which this woodcut by Hans Burgkmair belongs:



Its block, which has also survived in Vienna, bears the name of Hans Taberith. Looking at the superbly executed details, it comes as no surprise that modern scholars have singled Taberith out for the exceptional level of craftsmanship.

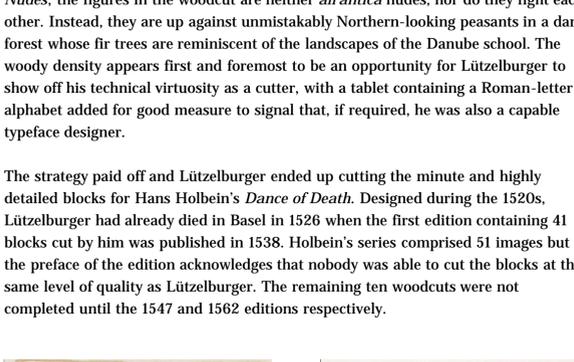
Hans Burgkmair, “The Burial of the King of Scotland”

The most intriguing among the woodcutters of this period was Hans Lützelburger. After the death of the Emperor on January 12, 1519, brought the production for all of Maximilian’s “paper monuments” to a sudden halt, most of the highly skilled artisans working on the project were no longer needed. Lützelburger decided to leave Maximilian’s former production center in Augsburg and move southwest to Basel. Around that time, in 1522, he cut the block for a broadside that might be best described as an advertising flyer for a *Formschneider* looking for a new job.



Hans Lützelburger, *Battle of Naked Men and Peasants*, 1522, woodcut

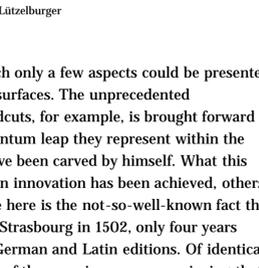
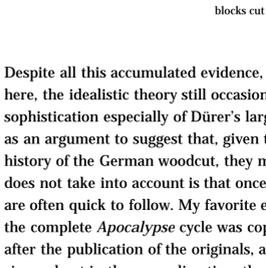
It is perhaps the only instance of an artistically accomplished single-leaf woodcut where the cutter is explicitly mentioned while the designer’s name is hidden behind a monogram. As seen in the image above, one of the nude men in the lower left corner points a long stick at a tablet lying at his feet which shows the letters NH (or HN), yet no artist’s name with these initials has so far been convincingly identified. Nor has the subject of the woodcut been satisfyingly interpreted.



Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the Nudes*, engraving

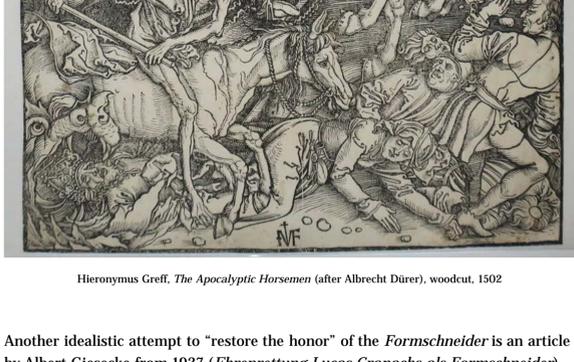
While the composition might show a faint echo of Pollaiuolo’s famous *Battle of the Nudes*, the figures in the woodcut are neither *all’antica* nudes, nor do they fight each other. Instead, they are up against an unmistakably Roman-looking peasant in a dark forest whose fir trees are reminiscent of the landscapes of the Danube school. The woody density appears first and foremost to be an opportunity for Lützelburger to show off his technical virtuosity as a cutter, with a tablet containing a Roman-letter alphabet added for good measure to signal that, if required, he was also a capable typeset designer.

The strategy paid off and Lützelburger ended up cutting the minute and highly detailed blocks for Hans Holbein’s *Dance of Death*. Designed during the 1520s, Lützelburger had already died in Basel in 1538. Holbein’s series comprised 51 images but the preface of the edition acknowledges that nobody was able to cut the blocks at the same level of quality as Lützelburger. The remaining ten woodcuts were not completed until the 1547 and 1562 editions respectively.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Countess* and *The Doctor* from *The Dance of Death*, ca. 1526, published 1538
blocks cut by Hans Lützelburger

Despite all this accumulated evidence, of which only a few aspects could be presented here, the idealistic theory still occasionally resurfaces. The unprecedented sophistication especially of Dürer’s large woodcuts, for example, is brought forward as an argument to suggest that, given the quantum leap they represent within the history of the German woodcut, they must have been carved by himself. What this does not take into account is that once such an innovation has been achieved, others are often quick to follow. My favorite example here is the not-so-well-known fact that the complete *Apocalypse* cycle was copied in Strasbourg in 1502, only four years after the publication of the originals, also in German and Latin editions. Of identical size and cut in the same direction, the quality of these copies was so convincing that impressions from this set survive where the monogram of the copyist, Hieronymus Greff, was removed by a skillful paper restorer who then drew-in Dürer’s “AD” by hand, enabling those sheets to pass as originals centuries later.



Hieronymus Greff, *The Apocalyptic Horsemen* (after Albrecht Dürer), woodcut, 1502

Another idealistic attempt to “restore the honor” of the *Formschneider* is an article by Albert Giesecke from 1937 (*Ehrenrettung Lucas Cranachs als Formschneider*). While scholarly hardly worth more than a footnote, I found it interesting that one of Giesecke’s arguments is that artists working in his (Giesecke’s) own time would clearly want to cut their own blocks. Here, he must have been thinking of such German Expressionists as Kirchner, Nolde, or Pechstein who indeed approached the woodcut in a way that historically predates the Dürer period and refers back to the so-called *Briefmaler* of the earlier part of the fifteenth century. Working in small workshops, sometimes perhaps even without a proper printing press, those “sheet painters” might indeed have gauged out their compositions from wooden planks before transferring them by rubbing the paper onto the matrix with a spoon and then coloring the images, often with the use of stencils, by hand (hence the term *Maler*).

Ultimately, the idealistic argument thereby reveals itself as presentist. Realizing its limits and pitfalls can serve as a helpful lesson, especially at a time when presentism seems to be more and more dominating our own discourse, and the art of the past is expected to be viewed solely through the lens of our (political) present.

