

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
7 September 2021

When, nearly a quarter century ago, I started to work at C.G. Boerner in Düsseldorf, the place felt a bit as if encased in amber.



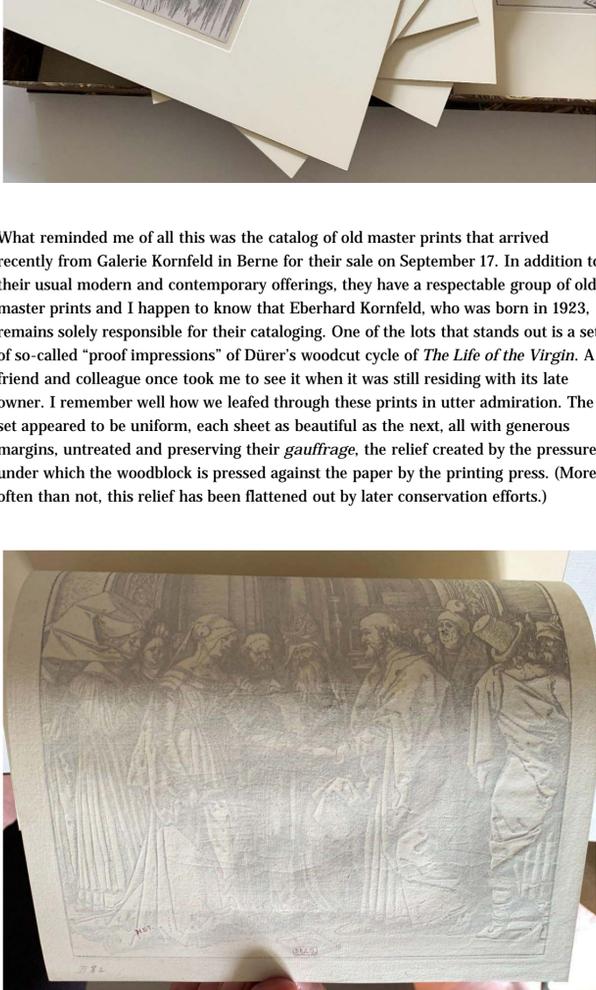
The gallery in Düsseldorf's Kasernenstrasse in 1954.

Granted, the *Raucherecke* (smokers' corner) with armchairs and cigarette case plus ashtray on the table no longer existed, but the old hierarchies were still very much in place. There was the *Altgeschäftsführerin* Frau Muthmann who had worked at the firm since the late 1940s, the warm and wonderful Frau Dr. Küffner who quickly became "Marianne" and my mentor and guide, and various assistants. One of them was much beloved but prone to silly little mistakes, like when she typed (yes, they still used typewriters then) an invoice for a print by "Alfred Dürer"—much to Frau Muthmann's annoyance.

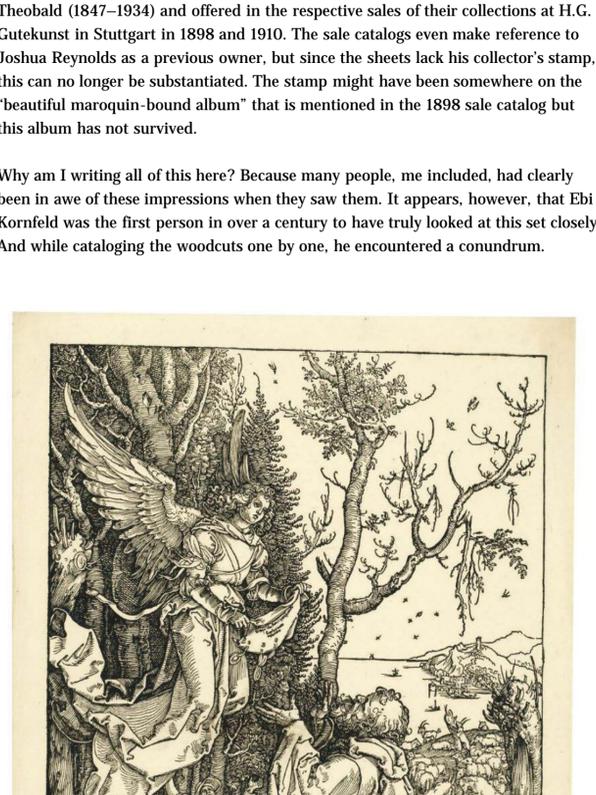
She got annoyed by many other things, too, such as making more than one phone call a day across the Atlantic to our New York office, or when anyone dared to use the *Chefklo*, the toilet adjacent to the director's office and reserved solely for the latter. However, nobody occupied the room at the time since the firm had previously been sold to the London dealership of Artemis Fine Arts. Despite the vacancy, Frau Muthmann sat demonstrably at the packing table while expecting me, the new *Geschäftsführer*, to sit in the same room as her albeit at a proper desk, greeting whoever came in, mainly the mailman. But I am digressing . . .

Said part-time administrative assistant was a great admirer of Frau Muthmann and once dared to ask her how it comes that she knows so much about old master prints; how could she so easily recognize the quality of an impression, and always remember which detail would tell her if a certain Rembrandt etching had been printed during the artist's lifetime or posthumously? "If you had looked at prints for 50 years, you would know as well!" was Frau Muthmann's curt answer.

Not very friendly, I thought, and also rather preposterous. As if connoisseurship were some secret cult, accessible only to the initiated. Hadn't I studied art history for a (far too) long time and shouldn't this enable me to take on her role as Boerner's expert in charge? Needless to say, I had no idea.



What reminded me of all this was the catalog of old master prints that arrived recently from Galerie Kornfeld in Berne for their sale on September 17. In addition to their usual modern and contemporary offerings, they have a respectable group of old master prints and I happen to know that Eberhard Kornfeld, who was born in 1923, remains solely responsible for their cataloging. One of the lots that stands out is a set of so-called "proof impressions" of Dürer's woodcut cycle of *The Life of the Virgin*. A friend and colleague once took me to see it when it was still residing with its late owner. I remember well how we leafed through these prints in utter admiration. The set appeared to be uniform, each sheet as beautiful as the next, all with generous margins, untreated and preserving their *gauffrage*, the relief created by the pressure under which the woodblock is pressed against the paper by the printing press. (More often than not, this relief has been flattened out by later conservation efforts.)



I put "proof" in parenthesis here because these *Marienleben* prints are not "working proofs" in the modern sense but rather de-luxe printings that Dürer pulled without any text on the back. His various woodcut sets were all conceived as books, but he also clearly catered to sophisticated collectors who were first and foremost interested in the artistic quality and technical brilliance of these prints and wanted to own them in the finest possible impressions. Printing a separate edition without text allowed Dürer to choose a much finer paper that brought out even the tiniest detail of the block cutting. (The regular text edition, on the other hand, required thicker paper to avoid the letters showing through. The downside was that some of the most subtle details could easily get lost. Joseph Meder, in his still definitive *Dürer-Katalog* of 1932, was aware of the inadequacy of the term *Probedruck* and qualified it by speaking of "so-called proofs"—but it was too tempting a term not to be adopted by the art market.)

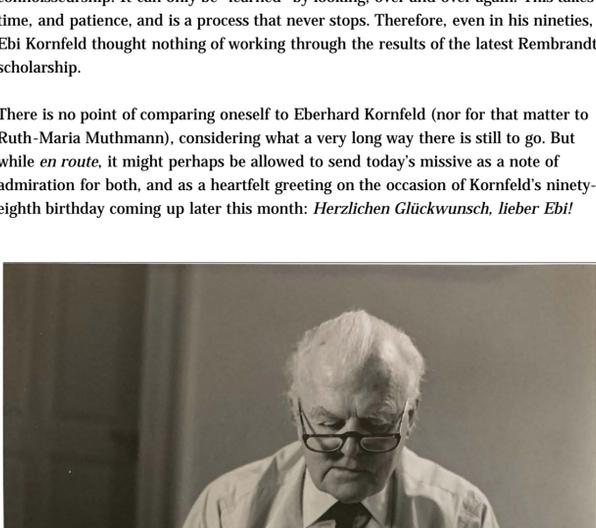
The set now coming up for auction in Berne can also boast an esteemed provenance, having been previously owned by Dr. August Sträter (1810–1897) and Henry Studdy Theobald (1847–1934) and offered in the respective sales of their collections at H.G. Gutekunst in Stuttgart in 1898 and 1910. The sale catalogs even make reference to Joshua Reynolds as a previous owner, but since the sheets lack his collector's stamp, this can no longer be substantiated. The stamp might have been somewhere on the "beautiful maroquin-bound album" that is mentioned in the 1898 sale catalog but this album has not survived.

Why am I writing all of this here? Because many people, me included, had clearly been in awe of these impressions when they saw them. It appears, however, that Ebi Kornfeld was the first person in over a century to have truly looked at this set closely. And while cataloging the woodcuts one by one, he encountered a conundrum.



The scene shows the apocryphal story of an angel appearing to Joachim, the Virgin Mary's father, to announce that his wife, Anna, will bear him a daughter.

The third plate in the series, Joachim and the Angel, is printed on paper with a watermark that doesn't quite "fit." It is not one of the marks one would expect for such an early set: high crown, bull's head, or scale inscribed in a circle. Instead, it shows the coat of arms of Württemberg, a paper that was made in the Württemberg town of Urach and dates from the end of the sixteenth century. Nobody, not the catalogers for the Sträter and Theobald sales nor me or my friend, had noticed this before.



It took an impassioned connoisseur, paying attention and making a judgement not blinded by his or her endorsement of others but that based solely on what he or she sees with his or her own eyes, to find this out. That takes time, and humble dedication, and that Ebi Kornfeld is willing to devote all of this to his material, I had already learned a few years earlier when discussing a group of Rembrandt prints with him that I was planning to consign. When he met me, he carried all five volumes of the recently published *The New Hollstein* reference books on Rembrandt under his arm and I quickly realized that *all* of them had been carefully annotated throughout—by none other than Ebi himself! He knew, of course, that one could hardly absorb all the new findings the two authors Erik Hinterding and Jaco Rutgers had made in their decade-long research by delegating such a task to some summer intern.

Thinking about all of this, I now realize that my judgement of Frau Muthmann's remark was not fair. She was not referring to some secret science unobtainable to the uninitiated. Her message was far simpler: there is just no shortcut for developing connoisseurship. It can only be "learned" by looking, over and over again. This takes time, and patience, and is a process that never stops. Therefore, even in his nineties, Ebi Kornfeld thought nothing of working through the results of the latest Rembrandt scholarship.

There is no point of comparing oneself to Eberhard Kornfeld (nor for that matter to Ruth-Maria Muthmann), considering what a very long way there is still to go. But while *en route*, it might perhaps be allowed to send today's missive as a note of admiration for both, and as a heartfelt greeting on the occasion of Kornfeld's ninety-eighth birthday coming up later this month: *Herzlichen Glückwunsch, lieber Ebi!*



PS: The descriptions of this set of *A Life of the Virgin* in the Gutekunst sale catalogs list the watermarks as they are called for by Meder for early impressions before the text: bull's head, high crown, circle with scale. Yet they also mention a mark called *Frauentasche* (woman's bag) that can be found in Bernhard Hausmann's catalog of Dürer's prints, the first systematic attempt to include states and watermarks, published in 1861. Hausmann illustrates this mysterious mark as no. 22. It did not make it into Meder's catalog, and I believe Meder was right to omit it since it seems merely to be an awkwardly traced variant of his own nos. 169–170 showing "scale in a circle" marks. This would be my one small correction to the cataloging of Kornfeld who suggests that the Württemberg mark found by him "could be interpreted as a 'Frauentasche.'" But in his defense, I would say that Ebi could just not imagine that nobody, not even the catalogers back in 1898 and 1910, ever looked at each print in this nonetheless wonderful set of the *Marienleben* as closely as he did.



Albrecht Dürer, "Das Marienleben"

