

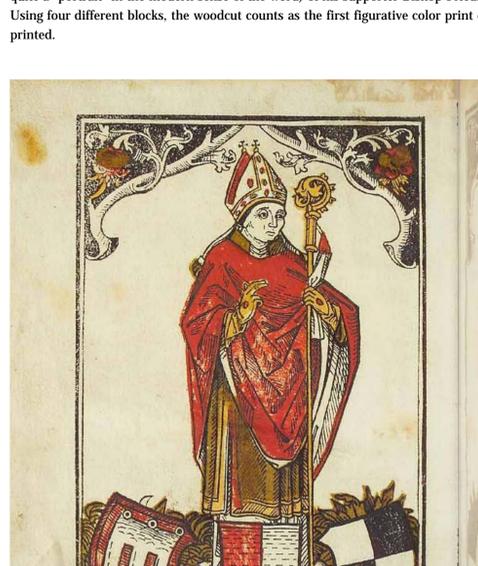
C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
14 September 2021

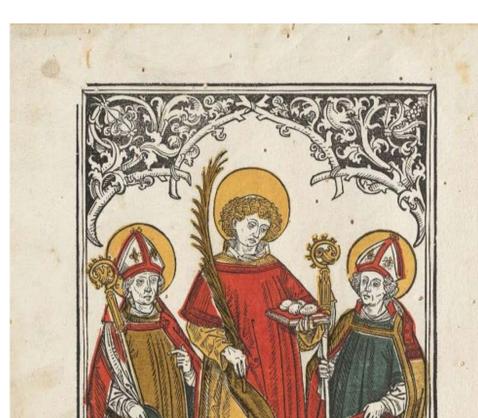
My first "prequel" to the history of modern and contemporary master printers dealt with the fact that the oldest form of printmaking, the woodcut, had quickly developed a division of labor between the designing artists who drew the composition on the block (the *Reißer*) and the *Formschneider* or cutter who carved the image into the smooth surface of the woodblock.

Around the year 1505, color was added to the mix and things got a little bit more complicated. One of the pioneers in this venture was the Augsburg printer Erhard Ratdolt (1442–1528). Born in this Imperial City which was perhaps the most important center north of the Alps for the trade with Italy, he had early on traveled to Venice. When he visited the *Serenissima* a second time in 1475, he stayed for eleven years, founded his own printing house, and made a name for himself as a specialist for astronomical and mathematical books. His 1485 edition of Johannes Sacrobosco's *Sphaera Mundi* was the earliest book to contain diagrams printed in three colors.



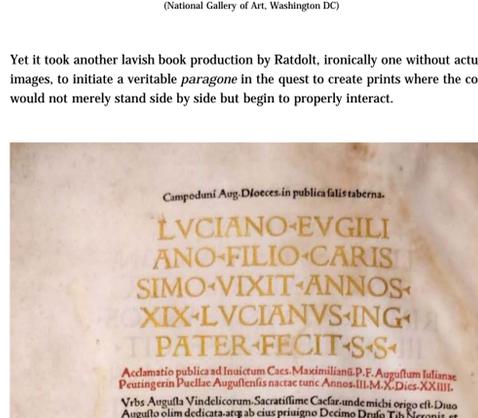
Johannes de Sacrobosco (John Holybush), *Sphaera Mundi*, Venice: Ratdolt 1485
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

In 1487, the Augsburg bishop Friedrich von Zollern managed to lure Ratdolt back to his hometown where he now expanded his range with liturgical titles. His first Augsburg book, the *Obsequiale Augustense* of 1487, contained an image (it is not quite a "portrait" in the modern sense of the word) of his contemporary Bishop Friedrich. Using four different blocks, the woodcut counts as the first figurative color print ever printed.



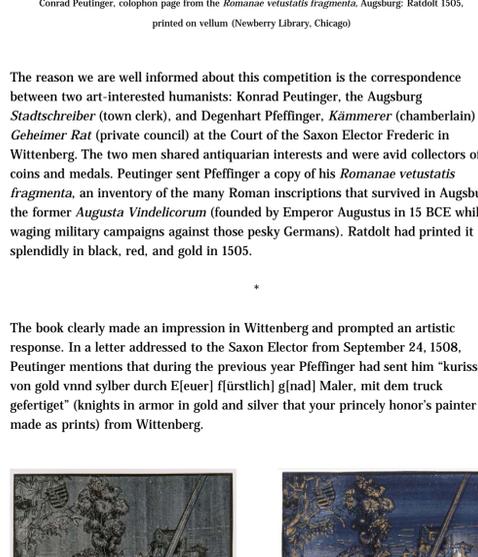
Friedrich II, Count of Zollern and Bishop of Augsburg
frontispiece for *Obsequiale Augustense*, Augsburg: Ratdolt 1487
(Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel)

Another *Augsburger*, Hans Burgkmair (1473–1531), was clearly aware of the ways Ratdolt was sprucing up his books to stand out in the much-contested market for liturgical books. It is believed that the young Burgkmair was the *Reißer* for some of the full-page woodcuts used as frontispieces or as so-called canon sheets (an image of the Crucifixion that precedes the Easter liturgy in a *missale* or mass book). The color in all of these woodcuts was implemented similar to the way it is done in a coloring book, solidly filling in certain parts with different colors. It goes without saying that registering the blocks and making the color fields align to the outlines of the key block required considerable skill and experience from the printer.



Hans Burgkmair, *Saint Valentine, Saint Stephen, and Saint Maximilian - The Patron Saints of Passau*, frontispiece for *Missale Patavense*, Augsburg: Ratdolt 1488
(National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

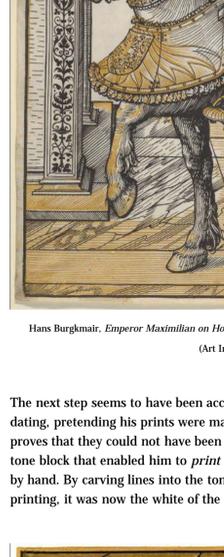
Yet it took another lavish book production by Ratdolt, ironically one without actual images, to initiate a veritable *paragone* in the quest to create prints where the colors would not merely stand side by side but begin to properly interact.



Conrad Peutinger, colophon page from the *Romanae vetustatis fragmenta*, Augsburg: Ratdolt 1505,
printed on vellum (Newberry Library, Chicago)

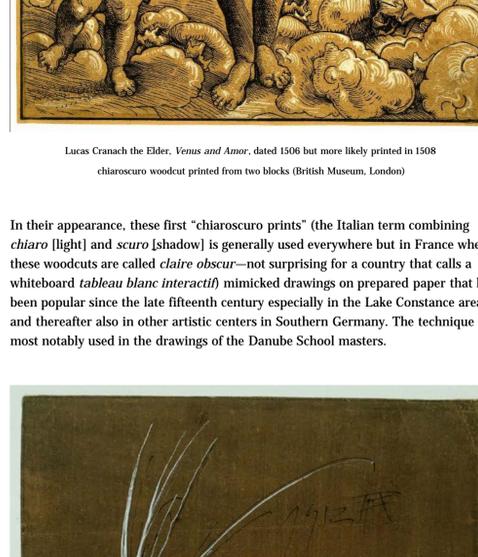
The reason we are well informed about this competition is the correspondence between two art-interested humanists: Konrad Peutinger, the Augsburg *Stadtschreiber* (town clerk), and Degenhart Pfeffinger, *Kammerer* (chamberlain) and *Geheimer Rat* (private council) at the Court of the Saxon Elector Frederick in Wittenberg. The two men shared antiquarian interests and were avid collectors of coins and medals. Peutinger sent Pfeffinger a copy of his *Romanae vetustatis fragmenta*, an inventory of the many Roman inscriptions that survived in Augsburg, the former *Augusta Vindelicorum* (founded by Emperor Augustus in 15 BCE while waging military campaigns against those pesky Germans). Ratdolt had printed it splendidly in black, red, and gold in 1505.

The book clearly made an impression in Wittenberg and prompted an artistic response. In a letter addressed to the Saxon Elector from September 24, 1508, Pfeffinger mentions that during the previous year Pfeffinger had sent him "kurisser, von gold vnd silber durch El[eu]er] fürstlich] g[e]n[e]d] Maler, mit dem truck gefertiget" (knights in armor in gold and silver that your princely honor's painter had made as prints) from Wittenberg.



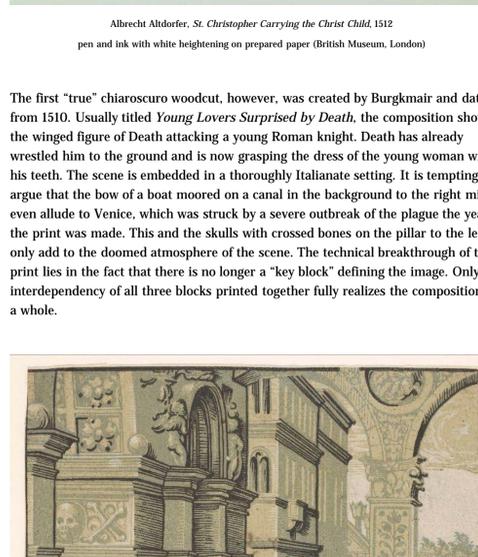
Lucas Cranach the Elder, *St. George on Horseback*, ca. 1507, woodcuts printed from two blocks on prepared paper
(left: Kupferstich-Kabinett, Dresden; right: British Museum, London)

Two impressions of these *kurisser* have survived, both of them printed with a second block that now no longer merely adds areas of solid color but instead creates accents and highlights. The underlying tone was brushed onto the sheet by hand before printing. Burgkmair's *Emperor Maximilian on Horseback* was one of the two prints (the other was also an image of *St. George on Horseback*) created in response to Cranach's *St. George*. Sending them along with his letter, Peutinger explains: "While I had to finance them myself, I nonetheless had knights in gold and silver printed on vellum which I am enclosing here to ask your honor to tell me if they are printed well or not."



Hans Burgkmair, *Emperor Maximilian on Horseback*, 1508, woodcut printed from two blocks on vellum
(Art Institute of Chicago)

The next step seems to have been accomplished by Cranach (although he fudged the dating, pretending his prints were made in 1506 whereas the use of his coat of arms proves that they could not have been printed before 1508). He introduced a so-called tone block that enabled him to *print* the underlying color rather than brushing it on by hand. By carving lines into the tone block, which then remain un-inked during the printing, it was now the white of the paper that added highlights to the composition.



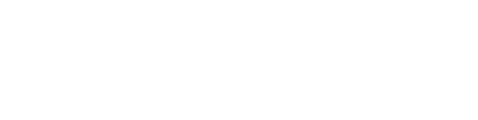
Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Venus and Amor*, dated 1506 but more likely printed in 1508
chiaroscuro woodcut printed from two blocks (British Museum, London)

In their appearance, these first "chiaroscuro prints" (the Italian term combining *chiaro* [light] and *scuro* [shadow]) is generally used everywhere but in France where these woodcuts are called *claire obscur*—not surprising for a country that calls a whiteboard *tableau blanc interactif*) mimicked drawings on prepared paper that had been popular since the late fifteenth century especially in the Lake Constance area and thereafter also in other artistic centers in Southern Germany. The technique was most notably used in the drawings of the Danube School masters.



Albrecht Altdorfer, *St. Christopher Carrying the Christ Child*, 1512
pen and ink with white heightening on prepared paper (British Museum, London)

The first "true" chiaroscuro woodcut, however, was created by Burgkmair and dates from 1510. Usually titled *Young Lovers Surprised by Death*, the composition shows the winged figure of Death attacking a young Roman knight. Death has already wrestled him to the ground and is now grasping the dress of the young woman with his teeth. The scene is embedded in a thoroughly Italianate setting. It is tempting to argue that the bow of a boat moored on a canal in the background to the right might even allude to Venice, which was struck by a severe outbreak of the plague the year the print was made. This and the skulls with crossed bones on the pillar to the left only add to the doomed atmosphere of the scene. The technical breakthrough of this print lies in the fact that there is no longer a "key block" defining the image. Only the interdependency of all three blocks printed together fully realizes the composition as a whole.



Hans Burgkmair, *Lovers Surprised by Death*, 1510, chiaroscuro woodcut printed from three blocks
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

In a previous *Abwechslung*, I had discussed the "painterly" style of Burgkmair's printmaking and highlighted the important role Jost de Negker, a journeyman *Formschneider* from Antwerp who settled in Augsburg toward the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century, undoubtedly played to translate his designs into print.

Burgkmair's "painterly" woodcuts

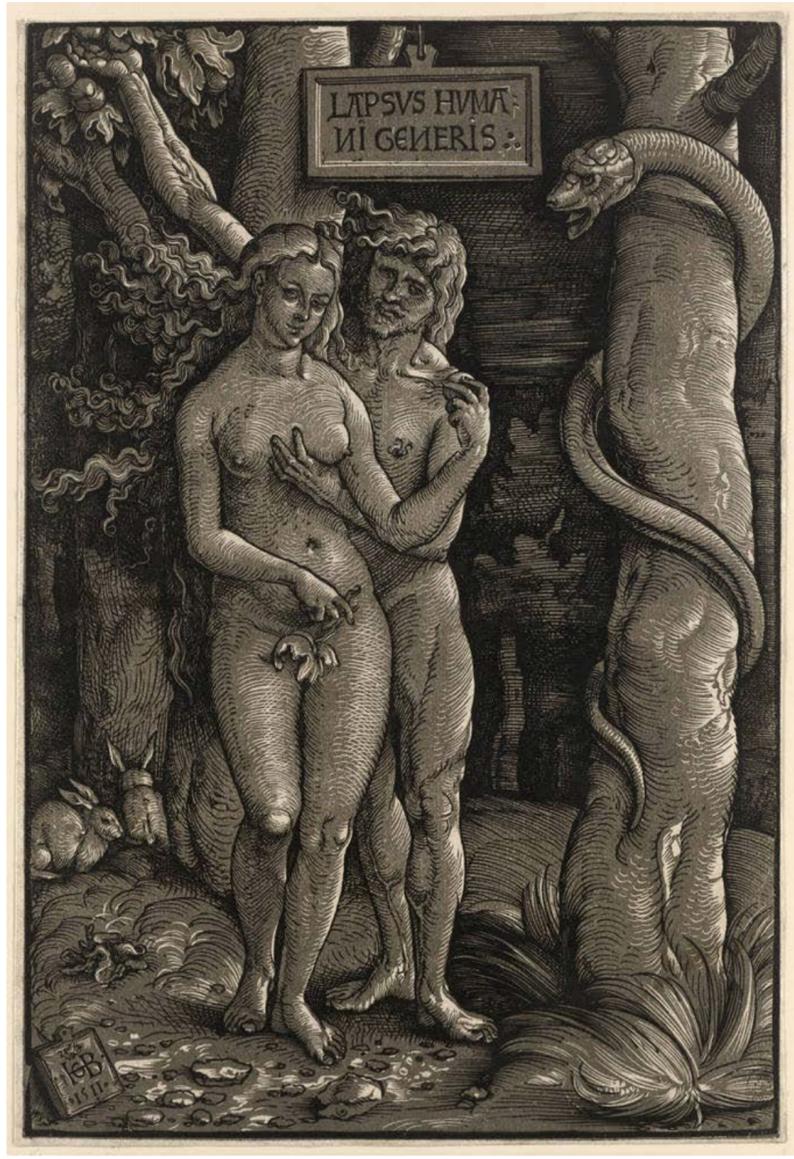
It is therefore hardly surprising that de Negker's name features far more prominently in Augsburg than, say, that of Hieronymus Andreae (who usually signed as Hieronymus Formschneider), Dürer's most important cutter, ever did in Nuremberg. Two of the three "editions" of the *Young Lovers Surprised by Death* mention him explicitly either within the composition or, as seen above, in flourishing letters on a tablet below. It is hardly an exaggeration to state that Burgkmair's pictorial ideas were only fully realized, at least in printed form, through the cutting skill and, even more importantly, the graphic syntax of de Negker.

There lies, however, a conceptual relevance in the fact that de Negker's name tablet is often trimmed off in the surviving impressions: the focus remained on the image and its designer Burgkmair—no later collector would ever have cut off the monogram of Dürer even if it were situated *below* the actual composition. On the contrary, as I pointed out in another of my previous postings, his iconic "AD" was often *added* by later publishers who owned his blocks to suggest authorship and thereby marketability of their restrikes.

Dürer's monogram as trademark and sale incentive

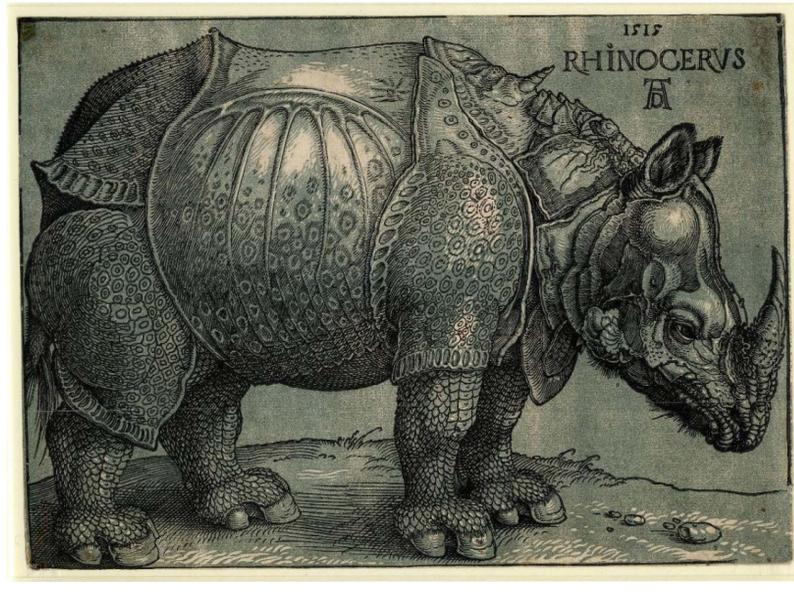
Anyone interested in technical aspects of early Northern printmaking or, beware, in old-fashioned connoisseurship, usually has to resort to German reference works that mostly date from the first third of the twentieth century. It is therefore refreshing to be able to report here on the new research of British art historian Elizabeth Savage. By stepping beyond the limitations of a solely art-historical perspective and by not only looking at glossy reproductions in books but at the actual objects (sadly more the exception than the rule these days), she was able to shed new light on those *anni mirabiles* of the German woodcut, the short time span between 1508 and 1513 which was all it took to develop and perfect the new way of printing in color.

Defying academic trends, Savage incorporates several such disciplines as bibliography and printing history. Most intriguing is her account of what was happening in Strasbourg when Hans Baldung arrived in 1509.



Hans Baldung, *Adam and Eve*, 1511, chiaroscuro woodcut printed from two blocks (Kupferstich-Kabinett, Dresden)

Baldung soon created chiaroscuro prints that count among the great masterworks of the medium, and this without any previous experience and practice. He had been a master pupil of Dürer in Nuremberg, but chiaroscuro was the one technique Dürer never tried his hands on (chiaroscuro impressions of his *Rhinoceros* and the *Portrait of Ulrich Varnbühler* were printed by Willem Jansz. Blaeu in Amsterdam in the 1620s).



Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, 1515, woodcut, the tone block added ca. 1620 (British Museum, London)

In her examination of what was going in the printing of books at the time, Savage observes that between 1509 and 1518, “four printers in Strasbourg produced multicolor-printed images like Baldung’s in their books.” She then discusses the output of Reinhard Beck, Johann Grüninger, Johann Knobloch, and Johann Schott.

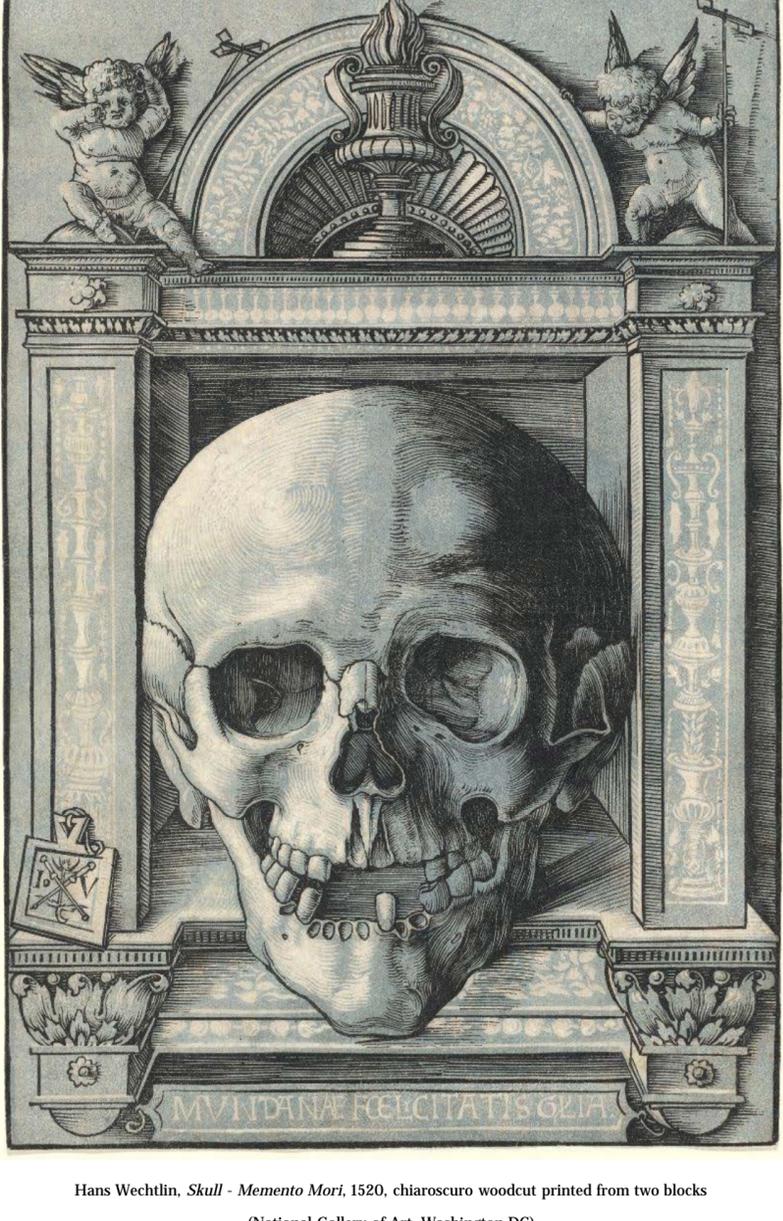


title borders used by Strasbourg printers, clockwise from top left:

Reinhard Beck (1513), Johann Schott (1511), Johann Knobloch (1519), and Johann Grüninger (1518)

I can only summarize her far more detailed argument here, but suffice to say that Savage ultimately singles out Johann Schott as the most likely printing shop where Baldung’s works were created. Schott “might have been the first to use the technique [of using a tone block to create highlights which in turn balance the black hatchings and help define three-dimensional forms] after Burgkmair and Cranach”—and he does so exactly around the time of Baldung’s first chiaroscuro woodcuts of 1510.

Her principal thesis, that the technical know-how of highly-skilled book printers served as a prerequisite for the creation of these works, is further supported by the chiaroscuro woodcuts of Hans Wechtlin. Unlike Baldung, Wechtlin was merely an early-career journeyman when he made these prints. He could hardly compete with Baldung on an artistic level but his prints show nonetheless the same level of sophistication and technical perfection.



Hans Wechtlin, *Skull - Memento Mori*, 1520, chiaroscuro woodcut printed from two blocks (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

Formschneider appear to have been persons intrinsically linked to the creation of the matrix (note: I am using the German word in its plural form here since it was pointed out to me that there were also *Formschneiderinnen* like Geronima Parasole—special thanks are due here to Evelyn Lincoln!). And if one identifies, as Elizabeth Savage does in her groundbreaking research, a printing house as the driving force behind the production of chiaroscuro woodcuts in Renaissance Germany, one may indeed describe such an *Offizin* as the one run by Johann Schott in Strasbourg as a legitimate ancestor of today’s print shops with their master printers.

