

Bacon. For example, the dates of many of his works, especially those found in the studio, are unknown. Conclusive dating of them would not only give us a better understanding of Wirth-Miller's development as an artist, but could also help establish the direction of influence between him and Bacon. The same applies to Wirth-Miller's underexplored working methods and their relationship to his iconography, exemplified by his collection of source material, consisting of books, magazines and loose pages torn from a range of such publications, some of which are included in the exhibition.

Overall, *Denis Wirth-Miller: Landscapes and Beasts* is a success in providing a well-deserved platform for a gifted, but largely forgotten artist. Putting such an emphasis on the relationship with Bacon, however, is a double-edged sword. Establishing any connection with the infinitely more famous, popular, expensive and critically acclaimed Bacon is guaranteed to attract attention, but risks that this attention will be directed at such aspects of Wirth-Miller's life and art alone. Searching for parallels to Bacon distracts from studying and appreciating Wirth-Miller's work in its own right. Due to their obvious similarities, contemporaneous criticism assessed Wirth-Miller's dog paintings in comparison to Bacon's, and David Sylvester criticised them as derivative and inferior in quality.⁶ It appears that even posthumously and as the subtitle of Turner's biography of Wirth-Miller and Chopping – *In Francis Bacon's Shadow* – suggests, there cannot be any Wirth-Miller without Bacon. In this sense, the exhibition is a missed opportunity to let Wirth-Miller step into the light.

1 Catalogue: *Denis Wirth-Miller: Landscapes and Beasts*. By James Birch, Andrew Wilson, Rachel Joyce and Jon Lys Turner. 120 pp. incl. 113 col. ills. (Firstsite, Colchester, 2022), £20. ISBN 978-0-948252-49-5.

2 J.L. Turner: *The Visitors' Book. In Francis Bacon's Shadow: The Lives of Richard Chopping and Denis Wirth-Miller*, London 2016.

3 See S. Shaw: 'Foreword', in *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.7–8, esp. p.7.

4 Reviewed by Rebecca Daniels in this Magazine, 164 (2022), pp.399–401.

5 R. Alley and J. Rothenstein: *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné and Documentation*, London 1964, pp.58–59.

6 See D. Sylvester: 'Round the London galleries', *The Listener* (17th May 1956), p.648.

Vor Dürer: Kupferstich wird Kunst

Städel Museum, Frankfurt
28th September 2022–
22nd January 2023

by ARMIN KUNZ

'The Städel's rich holdings can hardly be counted among the *smaller* collections', emphasised Max Lehrs in his survey of fifteenth-century German and Netherlandish prints in smaller collections, which was published in forty-two instalments in the *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* between 1888 and 1894.¹ Given that the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, founded as the Städel'sches Kunstinstitut in 1815 and one of the few private museums in Germany, easily counts among the country's best and most respected in terms of both the quality and range of its collections, it is surprising that Lehrs included the Städel in his survey. Yet Lehrs was focusing on works of which few museums can claim large holdings. In fact, early prints were already rare and sought after during the lifetime of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), whose graphic oeuvre marked the end of the first century of this new artistic medium. More than 130 years after Lehrs's publication, the exhibition under review presents 120 prints (and one drawing) from this period, a little less than half of the Städel's total of 260 early Northern engravings. It has been judiciously organised by Martin Sonnabend, the recently retired curator and head of the Städel's graphic collection up to 1750.

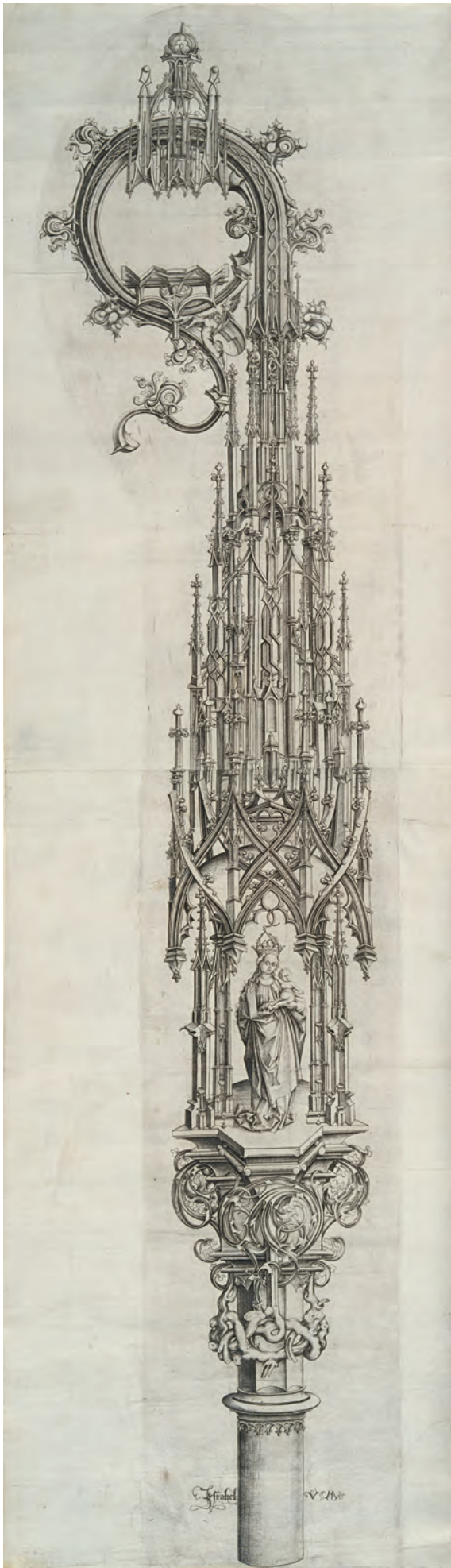
On entering the exhibition, the visitor first encounters Dürer's engraving *Adam and Eve (the Fall of Man)* (1504; cat. no.121). It is presented here as the culmination of the development referred to in the exhibition's subtitle: how the new technique of repeatedly impressing inked-up images engraved on copper plates onto sheets of paper became perfected and was ultimately recognised as an art form. In the sections that follow Sonnabend presents his material along a more or less chronological timeline, beginning with the earliest work on show, a

depiction of St Wolfgang made by an anonymous printmaker c.1440–60 (no.1). Although the image appears to have been printed from a highly worn plate, its somewhat faint lines suggest that it was in fact produced without the use of a press, which may have been typical of the earliest printed images. Gold- and silversmiths, in whose workshop the technique originated, quickly learned to employ roller presses, to engrave the lines sufficiently deeply and to prepare inks with the right balance of fluidity and tackiness to sit sharply on the paper's surface and not dissolve along the edge of the line.

In the exhibition, eleven prints by Master ES (active c.1440/50–c.1467; nos.8–18) represent this next phase. It remains unclear whether the letters 'E' or 'ES', which appear on eighteen of the plates attributed to the same hand on stylistic grounds, refer to the name of the maker in the same way that the monograms 'MS' and 'AD' later did in the case of Martin Schongauer (c.1445–91) and Dürer. The identity of Master ES, who was active in the Upper Rhine region, remains therefore enigmatic yet his oeuvre comprises nearly 320 prints,

4. *Samson and Delilah*, by Mair von Landshut. c.1500. Engraving with heightening in various colours on prepared paper, 22.8 by 27.1 cm. (Städel Museum, Frankfurt).





which suggests that engraving must have already been an important if not the main element of his artistic practice. Among them are devotional prints, such as the three depicting the *Engelweihe*, the mystical consecration of the abbey church of Einsiedeln by Christ and the angels in 948 (the Städel owns one of them, the so-called *Small Madonna of Einsiedeln* from 1466; no.15). When, in 1466, Pope Paul II granted the Benedictine monastery a general indulgence, these engravings could be offered to pilgrims on their way to the Benedictine monastery on the occasion of the annual feast day of the event. Master ES also produced playing cards and prints illustrating motifs to be used in artists' workshops. Heavy use of inherently fragile paper inevitably often led to the deterioration and discarding of such sheets. As a result, nearly half of this prolific master's works survive in only one or two impressions, often by accident, in most cases by having been pasted into books.

Given the poor survival rates of early prints, the Städel's holdings are surprisingly comprehensive. They provide a fairly representative overview of the history of early intaglio printmaking and boast many outstanding impressions and rarities. It was in large part thanks to Johann David Passavant (1787–1861), the curator of the Städel from 1840 until his death, that the collection was 'systematically augmented according to the available means'² during the nineteenth century. Coincidentally, the period of growth in this field came to an end at the time Lehrs published his catalogue of the Städel's holdings in 1891. Sonnabend references merely four noteworthy acquisitions in the twentieth century, with the two most recent ones a gift from 2000, *St Margaret* by Master BR (no.71), known in only three impressions, and a purchase from 2008, a unique impression of *St Catherine reading* by Master WAH (no.64).

A good example of the high quality of the collection is Mair von Landshut's engraving *Samson and Delilah* (no.78; Fig.4), printed on a sheet of prepared, greenish-grey paper and carefully highlighted with pen

and brush in white, yellow, orange and blue. Of the six surviving impressions of this print, five are embellished in a similar fashion, emulating drawings on coloured paper, which were much sought after by early collectors. None of the other impressions, however, shows the same delicacy in handling as the Städel's sheet. Equally rare is the *Judgment of Solomon* by Master BM (no.59; Fig.6). Its size, 29.4 by 42.1 centimetres, is astonishingly large for the period, equalling *Christ carrying the cross* (no.25) by Schongauer, to whom it is also indebted stylistically. Schongauer's print is remarkable for its compositional complexity, which is particularly evident in the way that the densely populated scene is embedded into a panoramic landscape. Master BM's engraving, on the other hand, is characterised by a monumentality of the individual figures that is unrivalled among early northern European prints. A drawing of similar size in the *Graphische Sammlungen der Klassik Stiftung Weimar* shows the composition in reverse. Attributed to Schongauer in the nineteenth century, it is now considered to be a copy after a lost work by the master.

This relationship between drawing and print raises the more general question of how individual motifs were transmitted. In the carefully researched catalogue, which includes extensive, footnoted entries summarising the relevant scholarship for each print, Sonnabend discusses this and many other overlooked aspects.³ Whereas the exhibition presents a history of the medium in its first century, the catalogue complements this narrative with an account of the historiography. Sonnabend rightly challenges the paradigm of the artist as genius that underlies modern art history, including the study of early prints. In particular, he questions the traditional distinction between 'masters' and 'monogrammists'; the former are credited with the ability to innovate whereas the latter are considered mere copiers. Thus, Master BM, who created the impressive *Judgment of Solomon*, was relegated to the rank of a 'monogrammist'. Sonnabend

Opposite
5. *A bishop's crozier*, by Israhel van Meckenem. c.1485–95. Engraving, 78.8 by 23 cm. (Städel Museum, Frankfurt).

6. *Judgement of Solomon*, by Master BM. c.1480–1500. Engraving, 29.4 by 42.1 cm. (Städel Museum, Frankfurt).

argues that this distinction is flawed since the use of models and templates was always an essential element of late-medieval workshop practice. Although reconstructing the transmission of motifs is unquestionably important, it is also necessary to look into the ways such appropriations are used by artists and to define the innovative elements that can be found within every process of copying. This allows a re-evaluation of the technical bravura of works that have too often been relegated to the merely imitative or reproductive.

Accordingly, throughout the exhibition and catalogue all artists are described as 'masters'. Furthermore, equal space is given to Martin Schongauer and Israhel van Meckenem (c.1440/45–1503), whom Lehrs had considered as a 'meagre copyist'.⁴ The prints by these two artists occupy corresponding sections on each side of the main gallery space. Visitors can thus examine the ways in which Van Meckenem adopted Schongauer's motifs and, in many cases, attempted to outdo his rival. Schongauer's depiction of the top of a bishop's crozier, for example, measures 28.6 by 12.8 centimetres (no.57). In Van Meckenem's version, the subject has been expanded and turned into an example of elaborate

micro-architecture, printed from two plates on two sheets, so that its overall height amounts to 78.8 centimetres (no.101; Fig.5). Van Meckenem also adopted the composition of Schongauer's *Large Crucifixion* (cat. fig.66), but set the scene against a dark background, created by an elaborately engraved web of dense crosshatching (no.86). As Sonnabend argues in the catalogue, this demonstrates the technical prowess of Van Meckenem, who was able to create subtle values within the picture plane that appear painterly but nonetheless never deny the metallic character of their engraved source. Towards the end of the exhibition, one is reminded of the important transitional role occupied by Van Meckenem, who emulated the creations of his contemporaries as well as of earlier masters, but also lived long enough to take note of the work of Dürer, who was a generation younger. When copying Dürer's mysterious print *Four nude women* (1496; no.117), Van Meckenem showed off his mastery of the burin by rendering subtle passages of shading that are notably different from Dürer's more linear handling of forms (cat. fig.84); and whereas Dürer thought it sufficient to inscribe his trademark monogram on the print, Van Meckenem signed the plate

prominently below the image with his name and origin – 'Israhel V.M. tzu boeckholt' ('Israhel van Meckenem from Bocholt') – thereby proudly and confidently advertising his authorship.

Having opened the exhibition with Dürer's *Adam and Eve*, Sonnabend closes it with further examples of Dürer's printmaking up to 1504. The new technique of creating and multiplying images fixed on sheets of paper had now established itself as an autonomous artistic medium. This new art form could be used for the recording of motifs, patterns and pictorial inventions in model books, a task for which drawing had previously been used. Drawing was thus slowly liberated and could be used to capture ideas and to play freely with the possibilities offered by the light touch of the pen on paper – as demonstrated by the delicacy of the linework in the sole drawing that Sonnabend could clearly not resist including. *Woman holding a flowery branch* (c.1470–80; cat. fig.8) is a pen and ink drawing that has often been attributed to Master ES but is described here more cautiously as the work of an anonymous artist from the Upper Rhine valley. Exploring this process of emancipation further, however, would have needed to be the subject of another exhibition.⁵



1 M. Lehrs: 'Der deutsche und niederländische Kupferstich des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts in den kleineren Sammlungen', *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 14 (1891), pp.384–409, at p.384 (emphasis in the original); Lehrs incorporated this survey into his fundamental *Geschichte und kritischer Katalog des deutschen, niederländischen und französischen Kupferstichs im XV. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 1908–34.

2 Lehrs 1891, *op. cit.* (note 10), p.384.

3 Catalogue: *Vor Dürer. Kupferstich wird Kunst: Deutsche und niederländische Kupferstiche des 15. Jahrhunderts aus der Graphischen Sammlung des Städel Museums*. By Martin Sonnabend. 312 pp. incl. 221 col. ills. (Sandstein Verlag, Dresden, 2022), €49.90. ISBN 978-3-95498-707-8.

4 M. Lehrs: *Der Meister mit den Bandrollen: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des ältesten Kupferstiches in Deutschland*, Dresden 1886, p.31.

5 For the Städel's collection, this was examined by S. Buck: *exh. cat. Wendepunkte deutscher Zeichenkunst: Spätgotik und Renaissance im Städel*, Frankfurt 2003–04. Still useful as a concise general overview of the development of drawings from model sheet to free sketch is U. Jenni: 'Vom mittelalterlichen Musterbuch zum Skizzenbuch der Neuzeit', in A. Legner, ed.: *exh. cat. Die Parler und der schöne Stil 1350–1400: europäische Kunst unter den Luxemburgern. Ein Handbuch zur Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums in der Kunsthalle Köln*, Cologne (Museum der Stadt Köln) 1978, III, pp.139–41.