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Demonstrating the dramatic power and new possibilities of the black-and-white woodcut, Albrecht Dürer revolutionized the form of biblical illustrations.

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE from the APOCALYPSE series (1498). Woodcut, 15 ¼" x 11". British Museum, London. Photo: © The Trustees of The British Museum / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Apocalyptic Visions in Black and White

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

When Albrecht Dürer self-published his collection of fifteen woodcuts, *The Apocalypse* (1498), he drew their remarkable imagery from passages in the Book of Revelation. This work continues to influence how artists employ the woodcut technique and how believers interpret the apocalyptic visions of Scripture.

Woodcut is a relief printing technique in which the intended image is created in reverse on a block of wood. The artist must cut away the negative spaces, leaving the printing surface raised above other portions of the block. Since this design will be reversed left-to-right by printing, it must be the mirror reverse of the intended image. Previously, the woodcut technique had been used to produce outlines of objects that were filled in with colors applied by hand. Instead, Dürer used hatching to create a variation in tonal values that gave texture and depth to the objects. He created “color” with line and design. This elevated the woodcut as a method of printing equal to engraving.¹



In one of his most famous woodcuts, the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (p. 68), Dürer compresses these apocalyptic images into one scene:

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts

of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

Revelation 6:1-8

The far horseman, drawing his bow, represents Pestilence. The second, wielding a sword, represents War. The third, swinging the empty scales of justice, represents Famine. In the foreground, Death with a pitchfork is sweeping citizens and a king (or bishop) into the mouth of Hades.² Dürer conveys the riders' swift and terrible movement through their windblown draperies and the recoiling humanity about to be trampled by their horses.



St. Michael and the Dragon (p. 71) depicts the archangel leading an angelic army to conquer the dragon, symbolic of the Devil and Satan:

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world--he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God."

Revelation 12: 7-10

Michael, who is one of seven archangels mentioned in Scripture, traditionally is depicted as the defender of the Church. His feast day on September 29, called Michaelmas, has been celebrated since the sixth century. In Italian art, Michael is usually depicted as a youth, but here Dürer depicts the archangel as a mature man stabbing the dragon while other angels fend off demonic creatures.



Albrecht Dürer was apprenticed to his father, a goldsmith in Nuremberg, at age thirteen or fourteen. At the completion of this training, he told

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Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), ST. MICHAEL AND THE DRAGON from the APOCALYPSE series (1498). Woodcut, 15 ¼" x 11". Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. Photo: © Giraudon / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

his father that he wanted to be a painter. So, his father arranged an apprenticeship with the Nuremberg painter Michael Wolgemut (1434-1519), whose workshop was on the same street as the Dürer shop. In Wolgemut's shop, Dürer learned the fundamentals of painting and draftsmanship. He especially favored copying the engravings of Martin Schongauer (c. 1448-1491), and was strongly influenced by the style of Wolgemut's book illustrations, which treated the woodcut much like a painted composition.

When Dürer completed his painting apprenticeship at age eighteen and became a journeyman, like most contemporary artists he traveled to study the art of the northern Netherlands. He looked forward to meeting Schongauer in person, but the famous printmaker had just died. Schongauer's brothers provided an introduction to a fourth brother living in the Swiss city of Basel, the center of academic and literary publishing, and a hotbed of

humanistic thought. The young artist quickly became popular for creating woodcuts depicting saints, peasants, grotesque human follies, and moral tales in the new style that he had learned in Nuremberg.

Returning to his hometown of Nuremberg in 1494, Dürer married Agnes Frey. Soon he began to experiment with Italian classicism, and traveled to Venice briefly to study the human figure (draped and nude) and the figure's relationship to space and movement in a composition. The influence of this Italian sojourn was profound in Dürer's religious and secular scenes. He created a series of Greek mythological subjects executed with exquisite nudes and a careful drawing from nature.³

It was at this time that Dürer produced three woodcut series of religious subjects: *The Apocalypse* (1498), a *Large Woodcut Passion* cycle (c. 1497-1500), and the *Life of the Virgin* (begun c. 1500), which was based on the Gospel of Luke and apocryphal writings.

Many art historians consider Albrecht Dürer to be the greatest German artist because of his many contributions to painting, drawing, woodcut, and especially the printmaking techniques of engraving. Dürer selected his media in regards to subject matter, doing most secular subjects (ancient mythology or contemporary genre) in engraving, and producing all of the devotional series in woodcut. He was considered a genius as a child, and his wide-ranging accomplishments are often compared to those of his great Italian contemporary, Michelangelo (1475-1564).

NOTES

1 Katharina Mayer Haunton, et al., "Woodcut," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed November 20, 2009), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T092165.

2 Some scholars interpret *The Apocalypse* as the artist's commentary on corruption in pre-Reformation Europe. See David Price, "Albrecht Dürer's Representations of Faith: The Church, Lay Devotion and Veneration in the *Apocalypse* (1498)," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 57 Bd., H. 4 (1994): 688-696.

3 Peter Strieder, "Dürer," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed November 20, 2009), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T024180pg1.



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