

Medieval Woodcuts

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Art reflects the time that it is made in. The middle ages were strewn with uncertainty; information about sanitation was unknown, the plague wiped out millions and without the aid of penicillin one could die from a small cut. The woodcut prints from this era reflect people's relationship with God and the saints and their belief in religion as a way to obtain security and survival in a forbidding world. The medium of woodcut printing was "largely unrecognized in its own time," making the story of its birth hazy and often conjectured (Parshall, VII).

Woodcuts in the middle ages were steeped in religion. The middle ages, also known as the medieval era spans roughly from 1300 to 1500, although woodcut were not seen until the late 1300s. The vast majority of prints made during this time functioned as devotional tools. "The world was perceived as a minefield in which the aid of the saint must be enlisted at every step"(Hults,29). Owning a small woodblock print of a particular saint was thought to grant protection, give indulgence, or aid in ones salvation(Driver, 2).

St. Dorothy was a popular saint in the middle ages. She is depicted in a 1410/1420 woodcut print, hand clasped in the Christ child's, on her way to being burned at the stake. As a Christian martyr, St. Dorothy was thought to be the patron of woman in labor, gardeners and those faced with death. When her image was hung in the home it was thought to protect from fire and theft(Parshall, 129). The belief that a saint had a

particular realm of protection was common. Saint Sebastian protected from the plague; gazing at St. Christopher's image would assure the viewer that they would "not die a terrible death that day," and St. Dionysius would be invoked against insanity (Parshall, 155) (Mongan, 38). Consumed by a pious audience, these prints illustrate the belief that if one was attentive and devout, God's guidance and help could become available to them (Hults, 30).

In this religious climate woodcuts served as pilgrim souvenirs, mementos and devotional icons, as well as personal altars (Hults, 21). The image, *The Fourteen Auxiliary Saints*, demonstrates the collectable nature of these religious prints. The image, depicting 14 separate pictures of saints, was sold as a whole sheet with the intention that the individual saints would be cut out and pasted in prayer books (Mongan, 38). Prints serving as indulgences were a fundamental part of religious devotion. Indulgences could be bought from the church, they represented the years that would be taken off of one's time in purgatory. Purgatory was a place where, in Roman Catholic belief, a person who has died in grace goes for a limited time to endure torture as reparation for sins. Indulgences usually had suggested actions and prayers; they were meant to inspire repentance through meditation that would shorten one's time in limbo and lead towards salvation. Indulgence images were often accompanied by text; the print, *The Wounds of Christ with Symbols of the Passion* made in 1490 states that,

Whoever recalls this image with due devotion shall be preserved from sudden death." And, "This is the length and breadth of the wound that was inflicted in Christ's side. Whoever recalls this image with repentance and pity as well as with devotion shall have, for each occasion, seven years' indulgence from Pope Innocent. (Hults, 26)

Another indulgence, *The Mass of Saint Gregory* says even more implicitly what you

must do.

Whoever, regarding the suffering of our Lord, shall truly repent of his sins, and shall thrice repeat the *Pater Noster* and the *Ave Maria*, shall be entitled to fourteen thousand years indulgence, which have been granted to him by Pope Gregory, as well as by two other popes and forty Bishops. This has been done so that the rich as well as the poor may try to secure this indulgence. (Hind, 77)

Although studying this claim in the 21st century fills the viewer with incredulity, the cultural climate in medieval times was one of such religious devotion that these prints were used to inspire and intensify private piety. Devotional prints were inexpensive, allowing anyone to own an image that was thought to aid in their salvation. As the use of devotional prints continued and profits went to increasing the church's wealth, social unrest and discontentment also increased, eventually sparking the Reformation of 1517.(Hults, 26)

Although prints speak overwhelmingly of religious thought and practices of the medieval era, woodcuts were also created for secular use. Playing cards, illustrations for books, political commentary, allegories and satires were made from woodblock prints(Hults, 22)(Driver, 2). Non-religious subject matter became increasingly popular in the latter half of the 15th century, paralleling the growing discontentment with the church.

Before woodcut prints, painting was the common method for depicting an image. The birth of woodcut images in Europe is uncertain, perhaps originating in the 14th century. Much information, historians warn, overreaches what can be deduced from the existing prints that serve as the primary evidence. "We don't know for sure when, where, and how printing was invented" (Parshall, 21).

The rise of woodcuts is directly connected to the increase in the availability of quality paper(Stewart). With a supply of paper, printing became an efficient means for reproducing images in mass. While printing on textiles first occurred in Asia, woodcut

prints on paper became popularized in Europe, serving as the first image printed in quantity on paper(Parshall, 20). As a medium, woodcut prints flourished due to the low expense of materials, this made patronage less important(Driver, 2). With the advent of an inexpensive art, people of varying social classes could own their own image(Dodgson, 2). Woodcuts were a “simplification of a higher art purposely reconceived for the folk”(Parshall, 2).

The construction of woodcuts in the 15th century was a multi-faceted process. Often there would be a different craftsman at each stage of the process; a designer, cutter, printer and sometimes even a different person to hand color a print would often be engaged(Stewart)(Hults, 21). The division of labor within woodcuts was due to the strict rules of the guild system found during the middle ages. Woodcut was considered a lesser art than drawing and painting. As a result woodcutters were banned from the painters’ guild, joining instead with the carpenter’s guild(Driver, 2)(Stewart). The lowly status of woodcutters is perhaps why designers, often painters, didn’t cut their own blocks. Pressure from the painter’s guild also lead to the government “making it difficult to copy pictures”(Stewart). This stigma against woodcuts resulted in people appreciating prints that didn’t appear to be woodcuts(Driver, 2).

Woodcut prints, evolving in a climate that underestimated their value, have had very little documentation. No historic printing presses or manuals exist; the only clues as to what Medieval print workshops were like are found in prints of studios themselves(Driver, 163). Printed images’ “very abundance worked against their preservation.”(Hults, 22) Prints were apparently so common that, unlike a painting it was not thought necessary preserve them. The surviving Medieval prints were found glued

inside books in monastery libraries, pasted in boxes and personal books and sewn into clothing(Parshall, 207)(Hults, 22). Other prints reached the eyes' of historians through personal collections. Christopher Columbus's son, Ferdinand Columbus, had a large collection of woodcut prints, gathered during his travel in Europe in the 1500s(Driver, 2). There are said to be only about six-dozen medieval woodcuts left in existence (Parshall, 20). The origin and creator/s of these prints are mostly unknown; the estimated dates of images can vary 40 years; a print used to prove one theory often contradicts the same. It is through this scanty assemblance of images that the history of woodcuts has been conjectured, creating more of a mystery than an accurate historical account.

If the images themselves are the only direct evidence remaining in the story of woodcut prints, it is their characteristics that offer the only concrete information. Medieval woodcuts have been broken up into three stylistic phases by historians, 1400-1440, 1440-1470, and 1470- 1500. 1400- 1440 marks the appearance of the first images printed on paper in Europe. The prints during this time are marked by heavy black borders, thought to have been used to stabilize the woodblock. The images contain graceful lines, they expand and contract, typically ending in eyelets or tapering off. The figures are slim and supple, their dress styled from draperies. No shadow, light, text or settings usually exists behind the religious figures that dominate most medieval prints. The figures shown are typically saints and are rarely seen depicted alone. There is a concentration on the Passion of Christ, in these images Christ is shown on the cross and figures stand or kneel to either side of him. Sacraments and redemption were also popular themes during the early portion of printmaking.(Parshall, 20). The technique of cross-hatching appeared in the 1420s(Hults, 22).

Vast increases in print production mark the period 1440- 1470. A reduction in the average size of an image occurred, some even about palm size, and were often bordered or weighted by text(Parshall, 20). The figures became “small and clumsy,” lacking the flow and rhythm seen in earlier prints(Dodgson, 21). Lines became thinner and more angular. (Hults, 22)

1470- 1500: Prints were designed to accompany pages of black text(Parshall, 20). A wider range of figures, gestures and surroundings appeared, aiding in the growing pictorial complexity of prints. Cross-hatching became abundant for shading and lines appeared closer together(Hults, 29). The themes depicted also broadened, evolving into more open social commentary; statements of dissent against the church grew more common(Hults, 27). The *Satire on Emperor Friedrich III and Pope Paul II* remarks on the turbulent relationship between the Holy Roman Empire and the church in the 1460s(Parshall, 207). The image contains many political allusions, marking a shift in subject matter away from strictly devotional material to prints that comment on social issues.

The techniques used to produce woodcuts evolved along with the characteristic of the images carved. Woodcuts were at first printed by stamping the block face down on paper. After 1425 the paper was placed on the block and hand burnished. This allowed the ink to be more evenly spread, this method however, also embossed the paper, making it difficult to print on both sides as needed for use in a book(Stewart). The adaptation of the printing press in the 1450s enabled printing to become more efficient and consistent(Hults, 21). The designs were transferred by placing paper on the block and greasing it for transparency; drawing directly on the block was not common until the

1500s(Stewart). Colors were common in prints and were highly valued attributes to an image. The colors were stenciled on, usually in a very sloppy way, sometimes even obscuring the figures. People's taste was for color prints, the emphasis on the vivid colors more than actual image(DeVinne, 70). Despite this occasional obscuring most images clearly show skill and care.

Although many years have elapsed between medieval times and the present day, these techniques have evolved very little. Today, looking back on the minimal collection of surviving medieval woodcuts the story that comes through depicts a culture that viewed art and religion in a very different manner than is seen today. These small pieces of paper, where they were found, what the images contain and even the very lack of surviving prints all contribute to the story that comes through for us.

1. DeVinne, Theo, L. The Invention of Printing. Gale Research Company, 1969
An in-depth study of the beginning of printmaking. There is mention of indulgences, an

indulgence image and woodcuts used for playing cards.

2. Dodgson, Cambell. Woodcuts of the Fifteenth Century. University Press Oxford
A catalogue of woodcut prints with discussion on origin, techniques used and historical context.
3. Driver, Martha, W. The Image in Print. British Library, London, 2004
The history of printing in general with sections focusing on woodcut.
4. Hind, Arthur, M. History of Woodcut. Boston and New York Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935
A detailed overview of the beginning of print history
5. Hults, Linda, C. The Print in the Western World. University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1996
A description of early woodcuts, with a focus on indulgence images. There are also examples of indulgence prints.
6. Mongan, Elizabeth. Schniewind, Carl, O. The First Century of Printmaking. The Lakeside Press, R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Chicago, 1941
A catalogue of images with their descriptions divided by their place of origin
7. Parshall, Peter. Schoch, Rainer. Origins of European Printmaking. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2005
A series of essays on medieval woodcuts. A catalogue of prints with descriptions of their context and historical importance.
8. Stewart, Alison, G. "Early Woodcut Workshops."
An essay describing early woodcut workshops, the guild system and the art community's response to woodcuts in the middle ages.