

The market for woodcuts in the 16th century

Albrecht Dürer's *Life of the Virgin*

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Book scholar Harold Love described print culture as a 'contexture of social and industrial relationships arising from, on one hand, the everyday activities of printing, publishing and distribution, and on the other, the consumption of printed materials by their users'.¹ Twenty-first-century viewers, who experience early modern prints either framed behind glass, or as individual sheets presented separately in conservation mounts, are distanced from the original contexts of the prints' production and use. Focusing on Albrecht Dürer's *Life of the Virgin* series held in the Baillieu Library Print Collection at the University of Melbourne, this article explores Dürer's woodcuts from a commercial perspective: as objects produced in specific formats, for specific markets.

The Baillieu Library Print Collection at the University of Melbourne contains over 50 graphic works attributed to the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), and includes six woodcuts from his series collectively known as the *Life of the Virgin*. Completed between c. 1502/4 and c. 1510/11, the series illustrates key events in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus.² The earlier woodcuts for *Life of the Virgin* were initially distributed as single sheets; nearly a decade later, in 1511,

the series was first released together as a book, accompanied by specially composed Latin verses by humanist monk Benedictus Chelidonium (also known as Schwalbe).³

Art-historical scholarship has traditionally focused on the iconography of the *Life of the Virgin*; the copying of the images by Italian printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi (c. 1470/82–1527/34); and on Dürer's accomplished depiction of architectural perspective.⁴ In comparison, scholars of the economics of visual culture and book history have emphasised the commercial significance of Dürer's graphic work. In recent decades, Dürer's activities have been viewed as merely representative of the artistic, social, technical, economic, intellectual and cultural climate in which he worked, rather than as evidence of his 'unique Renaissance genius'.⁵ The study of both the aesthetic and commercial aspects of Dürer's print production considerably enhances our knowledge of the prints' original use, context and intended target market.

Comments in Dürer's surviving letters and business journals demonstrate that he was well aware of the potential of his graphic works for commercial gain and for publicity.⁶ Whilst Dürer's graphic

practice also included engraving and etching, it was primarily the woodcut—specifically manifested in book form—that provided Dürer with greater visibility as an artistic entrepreneur across a large and lucrative geographical area.⁷ By the late 1400s, woodcuts were a significant part of the trade in illustrated books, a trade that flourished following the publication by Anton Koberger (Dürer's godfather) of the folio *Weltchronik* of 1493, known as 'The Nuremberg chronicle'.⁸ Dürer's fame was assured through the 1498 publication of *Apocalypse*, which showcased his mastery of the woodcut technique. By the 1500s, woodcuts had become a powerful vehicle for communication in Germany, and books that incorporated woodcut illustrations were a significant part of the overall production of printed books. Dürer's expansion of his graphic practice into book production capitalised on these developments.

Woodcuts also had a number of production advantages over the other print techniques used by Dürer. Firstly, pearwood or boxwood blocks had a long usable lifespan, compared with the metal plates used for engraving, so more woodcuts could be produced from the same block.

Secondly, using a printing press, it was easy to print a woodcut in conjunction with text, thus allowing rapid and cost-effective reproduction of multiple impressions containing both words and images. By way of comparison, engraved (and later, etched) images were printed by a different process using a different style of press, which meant the combination of intaglio prints and text in books was a good deal more expensive than using woodcuts.⁹ In addition, Dürer engaged a team of specialist woodcutters—*Formschneider*—thereby increasing his potential production output.¹⁰

Whether in the form of individual prints, or as part of printed books, woodcuts appealed to a cross-section of potential buyers. Broadly speaking, early 16th-century printed images can be categorised into two groups, each linked with a specific target customer group. Mass-produced woodcut sheets were bought by middle-class customers as devotional objects and for other domestic purposes such as wall decorations.¹¹ The second market was for higher-quality 'artist' prints and books, with superior aesthetic and technical characteristics, sought by collectors and the social elite: humanists and intellectuals, wealthy merchants and aristocratic patrons.¹²



Albrecht Dürer, *Glorification of the Virgin*, c. 1502, woodcut, sheet (trimmed to image): 29.1 × 20.9 cm. Reg. no. 1959.2096, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Produced as both a series of single sheets and as a book, *Life of the Virgin* appealed to both customer groups, particularly as the imagery related to a significant contemporary cultural and religious figure. A cycle of Marian festivals punctuated the liturgical year, and the tradition of extra-liturgical, private devotion to Mary resulted in the mass production of religious images and objects specifically designed for domestic worship. The two earlier woodcuts from the *Life of the Virgin* series held in the Baillieu Library, *The Annunciation* of 1503 (illustrated on page 37) and *Glorification of the Virgin* of 1502 (illustrated right), feature domestic imagery, and it is likely that Dürer's 17 *Life of the Virgin* images produced and distributed before 1505 as individual sheets were sold to this domestic devotional market.¹³

Dürer's *Life of the Virgin* imagery was already familiar to potential buyers. Print cycles featuring the life of Mary—with representations of key themes similar to Dürer's—were already popular. Martin Schongauer's engraving *Death of the Virgin* (c. 1470–5), which inspired Dürer's woodcut of the same name, was highly valued by contemporary collectors, and Israhel van Meckenem the younger (c. 1440 – 1503) had



also produced a series of 12 large engravings on the same subject (after Hans Holbein the elder) between 1490 and 1500. Van Meckenem, like Schongauer, tailored his imagery to ‘the mental horizons of the burgher class’ and set Mary’s life in perspectival domestic spaces.¹⁴

Ten years after he had produced the first images for *Life of the Virgin*, Dürer capitalised on the expanding market for higher-value works—and his reputation for mastery of the art of woodcut—by repurposing decade-old, single-sheet images into an integrated thematic group, which could be sold together as a book. Dürer added three new sheets to his earlier work: a title page, two further images (*The Assumption* and *Death of the Virgin*—(illustrated on page 41) as well as Latin text by Benedictus Chelidoniumus. Dürer took charge not only of the images and their production, but also of the texts that accompanied them, by appointing Chelidoniumus himself.¹⁵ Chelidoniumus based his verses for *Life of the Virgin* on an already popular Marian epos, *Parthenice prima sive Mariana* (1488), and his original poetic work complemented the mood of Dürer’s woodcuts.¹⁶ The verse was printed on the verso (left-hand) page, with the woodcut image on the recto (right-hand) page,

allowing simultaneous contemplation of text and image. The addition of Latin verses broadened the works’ potential appeal to an international, educated readership, one for whom the formal analysis of text and image was a ‘principal force behind intellectual life’.¹⁷ Unfortunately, none of the Dürer impressions in the Baillieu Library displays a combination of both image and text.

In 1511 Dürer published his three series of prints—*Large Passion*, *Apocalypse* and *Life of the Virgin*—in a unified, folio-size series of books, which came to be known as the ‘Three great books’ (*Drei große Bücher*). This large-format, high-quality and higher-priced series appealed to a wealthy clientele. Although the woodcuts for the *Apocalypse* and *Large Passion* were slightly larger than the *Life of the Virgin*, they were all printed on paper of identical size, allowing them to be bound together. A rare copy of all three books bound as one volume is held at the National Gallery of Victoria.¹⁸ Dürer confirmed the continuity of the group by matching the designs of the title pages across the works, drawing the three books into a unified set—a useful marketing tool that encouraged collectors to acquire all three.¹⁹ Dürer used a Gothic Koberger typeface in two

text columns in the 1511 reprint of *Apocalypse*, but *Life of the Virgin* was printed by Hieronymus Höltzel with a single text column in Roman typeface, the favoured style for humanist scholarship, therefore connecting the work with another potential audience.²⁰ The volume of *Life of the Virgin* was dedicated to Caritas Pirckheimer (1467–1532). Caritas, sister of Dürer’s friend Willibald Pirckheimer, was the abbess of the Convent of St Clare—the ‘Poor Clares’—and was reputedly one of the most learned women of her time. Dürer may also have used this connection to make the work more appealing to members of other religious orders as well as to nuns, for whom Mary and Caritas were role models.²¹

The re-publication of the three volumes in the same format was also a highly practical production strategy. The ease and efficiency with which multiple series of prints could be produced at one time is clear from a surviving sheet held in the British Library, where Dürer’s title pages for *Life of the Virgin* and *Large Passion* appear printed together.²² Print scholar Mark McDonald surmises that contemporary collectors of Dürer’s work, such as the bibliophile and biographer Ferdinand Columbus (son of Christopher Columbus),

could have purchased images printed in this format—that is, with several images printed on a large sheet.²³

Dürer's production decisions were integral to his success. Through study of *Life of the Virgin*, we have a greater understanding of how Dürer developed his commercial enterprise in different market segments and made the best use of the woodcut medium. By repurposing a selection of single-sheet woodcuts, some nearly a decade old, into a series and a book, he developed a new product range from existing resources, allowing him to expand his target market. The addition of Chelidonium's Latin verses made the work appealing to a diverse and educated audience as well as to an emerging group of wealthy collectors. Dürer maximised the advantages of the woodcut for himself as an artist, producer and publisher.

Dürer's career development followed the 'archetypal patterns of early media businessmen in the post-Gutenberg era': his prints were goods purposefully fashioned for profit.²⁴ Whether Dürer's business skills were developed through his astute observation of other successful artistic practices, or were the result of entrepreneurial savvy, good fortune or opportunism, his early commercial activities connected with works such as *Life of the Virgin* may be viewed

as antecedents to contemporary arts management, marketing and production-planning principles. The investigation of the commercial development and target market for *Life of the Virgin* brings 21st-century viewers closer to the prints' original contexts of production and use.

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Researchers are welcome to use the **Baillieu Library Print Collection**; they can first search the catalogue online at www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints/.

- 1 Harold Love, 'Early modern print culture: Assessing the models', in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (eds), *The book history reader* (2nd edn), London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 79.
- 2 Woodcut is a print technique created by cutting into a block of wood, leaving the design in relief. The block is inked, and the image appears, reversed, on the paper.
- 3 At this time a 'book' was a collection of integrated single sheets or quires with assembly being the responsibility of the recipient. See E.P. Goldschmidt, *The printed book of the Renaissance: Three lectures on*

type, illustration and ornament, Cambridge University Press, 1950, pp. 10–11.

- 4 For example, Erwin Panofsky, *The life and art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 97 and 100–5. A 1532 copy of Dürer's theoretical treatise on perspective, known as *Unterweisung der Messung*, is held in Baillieu Library Special Collections (*Albertus Durerus Nurembergensis Pictor Huius ætatis celeberrimus ... Lutetiae* [Paris]: Christianum Wechelum, 1532).
- 5 Daniel Hess and Thomas Eser (eds), *The early Dürer* (exhibition catalogue), Nuremberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, and London: Thames and Hudson, 2012, p. 14.
- 6 For example, letters from Dürer to Willibald Pirckheimer (1506) and Dürer's diary of his journey to the Netherlands (1520–1).
- 7 Peter Schmidt, 'Why woodcut? Dürer in search of his medium and role' (trans. Martina Stöckl), in Hess and Eser (eds), *The early Dürer*, p. 158.
- 8 Baillieu Library Special Collections at the University of Melbourne holds two copies of Hartmann Schedel, *Lib[er] cronicarum, cu[m] figuris et ymagi[ni]bus ab inicio mu[n]di* (The Nuremberg chronicle), Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 12 July 1493.
- 9 Antony Griffiths, *Prints and printmaking: An introduction to the history and techniques*, London: British Museum Press, 2010, p. 18.
- 10 Arthur M. Hind, *An introduction to the history of woodcut* (1936), reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1963, p. 29.
- 11 Mark P. McDonald, *Ferdinand Columbus: Renaissance collector (1488–1539)*, London: British Museum Press, 2005, p. 16; Schmidt, 'Why woodcut?', p. 147.
- 12 McDonald, *Ferdinand Columbus*, p. 16.
- 13 The interior, domestic architectural theme is continued in *Death of the Virgin* (see opposite).
- 14 Till-Holger Borchert (ed.), *Van Eyck to Dürer: The influence of early Netherlandish painting on European art, 1430–1530* (exhibition catalogue), London: Thames and Hudson, 2010, p. 336.

Albrecht Dürer, *Death of the Virgin*, 1510,
woodcut, sheet (trimmed to image):
28.8 × 20.6 cm. Reg. no. 1959.2097, gift of
Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library
Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

- 15 Angela Hass, 'Two devotional manuals by Albrecht Dürer: The "Small Passion" and the "Engraved Passion": Iconography, context and spirituality', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2000, p. 181.
- 16 Alexandra Kess, 'Andachtsliteratur als Künstlerbuch—Dürers Marienleben (Devotional literature as art book—Dürer's Life of Mary)', *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, February 2006, p. 95.
- 17 McDonald, *Ferdinand Columbus*, p. 67.
- 18 Book 21 in the National Gallery of Victoria Collection.
- 19 Dagmar Eichberger, 'Dürer and the printed book', in Irena Zdanowicz (ed.), *Albrecht Dürer in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria* (exhibition catalogue), Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1994, p. 66.
- 20 E.P. Goldschmidt, *The printed book of the Renaissance: Three lectures on type, illustration and ornament*, Cambridge University Press, 1950, pp. 14–16.
- 21 Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Dürer*, London: Phaidon Press, 2012, p. 212; Hass, 'Two devotional manuals', pp. 227–9.
- 22 Stephen Coppel, 'William Mitchell (1820–1908) and John Malcolm of Poltalloch (1805–1893)', in Antony Griffiths (ed.), *Landmarks in print collecting: Connoisseurs and donors at the British Museum since 1753*, London: British Museum Press, 1996, p. 165.
- 23 McDonald, *Ferdinand Columbus*, p. 82.
- 24 Hess and Eser, *The early Dürer*, p. 15.

