

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

Washington, D. C. November 29, 1967. The largest exhibition of early engravings ever seen in this country will open Sunday (December 3 through January 7) for showing during the holidays at the National Gallery of Art, it was announced today by Director John Walker.

Selected entirely from holdings of the National Gallery, the exhibition will include 261 northern European engravings from the 15th century, the dawn of printmaking. All but nine are from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection.

Alan Shestack of the National Gallery staff has written a detailed and fully illustrated catalogue for the exhibition which will eventually serve as volume two in a series documenting the National Gallery's entire print collection. The first volume appeared in 1965 as the catalogue for an exhibition of woodcuts and metalcuts from the 15th century in Europe.

Director Walker said that the collected volumes for these exhibitions will form "a panorama of printmaking from its beginning to the present and an art reference work which does not exist in the English language today."

In addition to more than 200 prints by two of the leading

engravers of this early period, Schongauer and Meckenem, there will be shown 13 examples by Master E.S., the first known engraver to sign his prints. The signature "E.S." appears on 18 known works, most of which are dated 1466 and 1467. Of 317 universally accepted E.S. engravings, 50 exist in only two known examples and 95, such as The Visitation in this exhibition, are unique. Of the 12 other Master E.S. prints to be seen, one of the most unusual is The Knight of Men, a medieval playing card equivalent of our contemporary jack.

In contrast to the shadowy Master E.S., Martin Schongauer, the most influential graphic artist in northern Europe in the last quarter of the 15th century, comes through as a definite historical personality. Even his features are known through a painted portrait in Munich. A goldsmith like his father before him, Schongauer was born about 1450 and entered the University of Leipzig in 1465. It is ironic that his great fame today rests on engraving, a medium that he probably considered minor. Only a few of his paintings are known while all 116 of his engravings have survived. Among the large body of 82 Schongauer prints to be seen in this exhibition are A Foolish Virgin, which may be his very last, and a number of important suites, such as The Life of the Virgin and Twelve Scenes Illustrating Christ's Passion.

At the time Schongauer was active in the Upper Rhine Valley, another prolific master engraver was at work in the Lower Rhine region. Israhel van Meckenem also began his career in the workshop of his father, an engraver who is now thought to be the Master of the Berlin Passion and who is represented in the

exhibition by three prints, St. James, St. Peter, and The Trinity. After 1465 young Meckenem traveled to the south of Germany, probably to seek out Master E.S. More than 200 of Meckenem's prints from this early period are literal copies of E.S., giving rise to a theory that Meckenem was working with E.S. at the time of the master's death and thereby inherited his plates. As time passed, Meckenem developed his own artistic characteristics; most of the exhibited engravings are representative of the later, independent style. Notable is the first self-portrait in the history of printmaking, in which Meckenem depicts himself with his wife in totally unidealized form. Another late Meckenem print of particular interest is The Dance at the Court of Herod in which the artist draws upon a biblical subject to portray a patrician social event.

The overwhelming majority of early engravings were intended as souvenirs of shrines or as devotional images to be sold to the public. In the 15th century little value was placed on artistic originality, and none of the very earliest engravers bothered to sign their work by name. Excepting Schongauer, Meckenem, and the painter-engraver Mair von Landshut, all the identified artists of this exhibition are listed by a series of intriguing code names based upon either their monogram, such as masters I.A.M., MZ, FVB, or their best or most characteristic work, such as the Master of the Boccaccio Illustrations. One of the rarest prints in the exhibition, Two Peasants Fighting, was engraved by an artist of the 1470's who is known only as The Master of the Housebook. There is only one other impression of this informal genre scene, which until recent times was thought to be religious in character.

An example in the exhibition of what may have been a medieval

fashion advertisement for knights is by the Master BM, and The Jack of Parrots, from one of the few round sets in the history of playing cards, is by Master PW.

The only French engraving in the exhibition is also the only history scene. The imposing The Battle of Fornovo (409 x 629 mm.) was executed by an unknown soldier-artist in the retinue of the French king Charles VIII. It depicts in exquisite detail a 1495 military action that almost resulted in the destruction of Charles and his army at the Taro River in Italy. By luck, Charles was able to slip away with only a few casualties.

The Rosenwald Collection of more than 20,000 prints and drawings was given to the National Gallery over a number of years. Most of the collection will remain at Alverthorpe, the Rosenwald gallery in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, during the donor's lifetime.

In his preface to the catalogue, Mr. Rosenwald writes of his 40-year quest for quality: "Occasionally the collector has the very good fortune of obtaining what he knows to be the very best; that no matter how long he lives he will never get a better impression."

He notes that the two highest examples of this sort in the collection are The Temptation of Christ by the Master LCz and The Angel by Schongauer. The former is described as the richest known impression of LCz's greatest work, while the latter represents Schongauer's final style, "the late Gothic in Germany, at its ripest but also at its most lucid."

Catalogues and black-and-white photographs are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. 20565, Area Code 202, 737-4215, ext. 225.