

Release Date: August 12, 2005

## First International Exhibition of the Earliest European Prints on Paper Premieres September 4 at the National Gallery of Art



Austrian (?), *Saint Jerome Removing a Thorn from the Lion's Paw*, c. 1430  
color woodcut  
Albertina, Vienna  
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Washington, DC—**Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-Century Woodcuts and Their Public** is the first major international exhibition to be devoted to

the earliest images printed on paper in the Western world. On view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from September 4 through November 27, 2005, this exhibition of 146 early woodcuts, books, printed textiles, and other related objects examines the role of replicated images in late medieval culture. After Washington, the exhibition will travel to Nuremberg, where it will be on view at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum from December 14, 2005, through March 19, 2006.

Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, the exhibition draws upon the strength of each museum's outstanding collection of early prints. Their contributions are joined by a number of important works from other individuals and institutions, including the Historisches Museum Basel; the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Art Institute of Chicago; the British Museum, London; the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Albertina, Vienna.

**“Origins of European Printmaking** provides a basis for rethinking a remarkable phenomenon in the history of Western culture, the replication of printed images, which actually predates Gutenberg's replication of printed texts,” said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. “We believe the exhibition sets a new standard of scholarship in the field, and we are grateful to the many distinguished museums, libraries, and private lenders who have contributed to this effort.”

### **Exhibition Support**

Air transportation is provided by Lufthansa.

The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

### **The Exhibition**

The exhibition centers on the “single-leaf” woodcut, a relief print made to circulate on its own rather than one designed for a specific purpose or location, such as a book illustration. Relief prints were the earliest efficient means of reproducing a complex

image in large numbers, and a major objective of this exhibition is to demonstrate the many ways in which individuals made use of this new technology: how they adapted replicated images for particular purposes, inscribed them with prayers, incorporated them into objects of daily use, and turned to them to satisfy both personal and spiritual needs.

Since the majority of early relief prints owe their survival to the practice of pasting woodcuts into books and objects of domestic use, many works in the exhibition are presented in their original contexts. Among these is the *Ecce Homo in a Coffret* (cat. 42), one of several early woodcuts adorning the interiors of small coffers, or boxes. There are also several examples of prints exhibited in the manuscripts in which they were inserted by their earliest owners. The most famous of these is the *Buxheim Saint Christopher* (cat. 35), once considered the earliest dated woodcut in existence.

Printmaking in Western Europe emerged during the first quarter of the 15th century out of the gradual adaptation of existing materials and techniques. **Room I** of the exhibition, **Techniques of Replication**, presents various examples of works created by stamping, impressing, molding, and casting, such as lead pilgrim badges, leather bindings, woodblocks, colored woodcuts, and engravings. Among them are actual 15th century woodblocks including *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (cat. 4), shown alongside a hand-colored woodcut printed in the 15th century from this very block.

Only a few dozen woodcuts appear to have survived from the earliest stages of the medium. **Room II: Traces of an Early Style** brings together several of those first woodcuts, characterized by a flowing linear style descended from late Gothic art. The exhibition contains the most notable examples, including *Christ before Herod* (cat. 25), one of the largest and most impressive, as well as *Saint Dorothy and the Christ Child* (cat. 27), and *Saint Jerome Removing a Thorn from the Lion's Paw* (cat. 30), both among the first known printed images of these subjects and two of the most admired. The style of such early woodcuts was studied and emulated by artists such as William Morris, founder of the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement, and the German expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

While the overwhelming majority of the earliest replicated images portray religious

subjects, several unusual examples of secular works are presented in **Room III: New Markets**. Among them is the late 14th century *Legend of Oedipus* (cat. 2), a grand and brilliantly colored fabric that may be the earliest known textile block-printed in Europe. *Christ Child with a New Year's Wish* (cat. 53), intended as a gift or token of good will, marks the historical introduction of the greeting card. Other examples include *Household Goods* (cat. 60), meant to instruct the betrothed about their domestic needs; *A Human Skeleton* (cat. 61), the earliest printed medical illustration of this subject; and *Apes Performing on Horseback* (cat. 63), in which two acrobats can be rotated to switch roles, the oldest surviving example of a “transformable picture.”

Most of the early woodcuts that survive were kept in monasteries or were privately owned. **Room IV: The Uses of Early Woodcuts** presents woodcuts of religious subjects in the context of the many ways they were used: as objects of veneration, aides to piety, personal gifts, or makeshift illustrations for devotional texts. Prints and related objects depicting the story of Christ and his sufferings, and images of the Virgin Mary, were intended to encourage the visualization of sacred events and instill piety in the devout.

Among the most extraordinary surviving examples is a woodcut printed on vellum showing the *Lamentation over the body of Christ* (cat. 39) that was used as a folded private altarpiece by a nun named Apollonia. It was kept in a small pouch she probably embroidered herself and a box to contain these items. On view are several woodcuts of the “Holy Face” believed at the time to record the actual appearance of Christ. There are also a number of unusual instructional images, such as *The Hand as the Mirror of Salvation* (cat. 92), a mnemonic device intended to help recall the ecclesiastical scheme of repentance.

**Room V: The Saints** presents images of those who were considered intercessors with God on behalf of the faithful. Many of these woodcuts have inscriptions imploring the aid of a saint, additions that reflect the intimate relationship that could develop between images and their beholders. Among the many saints portrayed are *Saint Margaret* (cat. 97), an elegant and finely crafted metal cut of the patron of childbirth; *Saint Onuphrius* (cat. 102), whose image is conflated with the medieval “wild man,”

venerated as an ideal of abstinence; and *Saint Christopher Bearing the Christ Child* (cat. 14a), a subject invoked by travelers to this day for their protection.

### **Curators, Catalogue, and Related Activities**

Peter Parshall, curator of old master prints at the National Gallery, Washington, and Rainer Schoch, head of the graphic arts collection, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, are co-curators of the exhibition and the editors of the exhibition catalogue, **Origins of European Printmaking**. The catalogue, featuring contributions by Richard S. Field, Peter Schmidt, and David S. Areford, is a comprehensive history of late medieval woodcuts and explores the topic in a broad social and economic context. Published by the National Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, the hardcover catalogue will be available in September for \$65 and can be ordered by calling (800) 697-9350, (202) 842-6002, or by emailing [mailorder@nga.gov](mailto:mailorder@nga.gov) (372 pp., 177 color and 53 black-and-white illustrations). Also available is a German edition published by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

National Gallery curator Peter Parshall will present the lecture, **The Beginnings of Image Printing in Europe**, on October 9 in the East Building Auditorium at 2:00 p.m.

A 60-minute gallery talk, **The Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-Century Woodcuts and Their Public**, will be presented in the exhibition by National Gallery of Art lecturer J. Russell Sale on September 20 at 1:00 p.m., and September 21, 25, 27, and 29 at 12:00 noon.

A special lecture series, **Printmaking in the West: History and Technique**, presented by National Gallery of Art lecturer Eric Denker, explores the development of the major print processes in Western art, from the early religious woodcuts through the innovations of early twentieth-century masters. The first session, "**Woodcut, Wood Engraving, and Other Relief Techniques**," examines the development of the first printmaking techniques in Europe and will be held September 14 and 17 in the West Building Lecture Hall at 10:30 a.m.

### **Permanent Collection**

Fifteenth-century woodcuts in the National Gallery of Art's collection that are not part of the exhibition can be seen by appointment in the Print Study Room, East Building, Monday–Friday, 10 a.m.–12:00 noon, and 2–4 p.m.; call 202-842-6380 to schedule an appointment.

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## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit [www.nga.gov/renovation](http://www.nga.gov/renovation) (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) and on [Twitter](http://twitter.com/ngadc) at [twitter.com/ngadc](http://twitter.com/ngadc).

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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