

Press release: Thursday 26 November 2015

Earliest attempts at colour printing in the West on display for the first time

26 November 2015 – 27 January 2016

German Renaissance Colour Woodcuts at the British Museum
Curated by British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow Dr Elizabeth Savage

A new exhibition launching at the British Museum on Thursday 26 November will examine the earliest attempts to incorporate colour into printmaking in the 1400s and 1500s in the German lands—where colour printmaking began in the West. It brings together 31 prints and one drawing, many of which are unique and have never been displayed together before, to present a representative survey of the first century of colour printing in Germany, where the technology developed.



Hans Weiditz
Arms of Matthäus Lang von Wellenburg, 1520



Hans Weiditz
Portrait of Charles V
1519



Hans Burgkmair
Lovers Surprised by Death
1510

Curated by Dr Elizabeth Savage as a result of her British Academy funded research project, it is the first exhibition dedicated to the early history of colour prints in Renaissance and Reformation Germany.

Before 1700, colour prints were thought to be extremely rare, if not technically impossible. The few outliers, like Italian *chiaroscuro* (tonal) woodcuts, are celebrated as visionary and exceptional. But new research has revealed hundreds of previously unknown colour prints. Circulating in thousands (if not tens of thousands) of impressions, colour prints decorated furniture, imitated expensive woods on ceilings, illustrated ideas in books, clarified religious iconography, and, of course, were admired as art. By tracing technical developments and artistic and market trends across the sixteenth century, 'German Renaissance Colour Woodcuts' demonstrates that colour printing was part of daily life in Renaissance and Reformation Germany.

Dr Savage, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, said:

“The history of prints is usually in black and white, but early prints were vibrant. Late medieval and early modern German printers pushed the emergent technology of the printing press to its limits in their quest to print colour. They, not the artists, controlled this artistic effect. The British Museum holds one of the world’s largest collections of early colour prints, so this is a unique opportunity to see how printers manipulated different palettes and achieved a range of stunning visual effects 500 years before Photoshop.”

The exhibition is arranged in five sections. Highlights include three of the six woodcuts printed with gold in early modern Europe.

It begins with the origins of printmaking in the West, or colour printmaking before chiaroscuro. Generations before Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, images were printed by hand by stamping or block-printing. They would have been considered incomplete without paint. In 1507 and 1508, patrons of Lucas Cranach and Hans Burgkmair competed to create woodcuts printed in gold. Cranach’s *St George* (1507) is the earliest known single-sheet, or ‘fine art’, colour print.

The second section explores production in Strasbourg in the 1510s, a short-lived hotbed of colour printmaking. It presents Hans Baldung’s *Preparation for the Witches’ Sabbath* (1510) and a newly identified copy by Lucantonio degli Uberti (1516), who was then active in Venice. Also in Venice in 1516, Ugo da Carpi claimed to have invented chiaroscuro woodcut (with tonal contrast). Rather than a turning point for European art, was Ugo’s great breakthrough really a close second—and could the first Italian colour print have been Lucantonio’s copy of an older German woodcut?

The third section covers colour printing during the Reformation, for both Catholic and Protestant purposes, from c.1520 through the mid-1500s. *Holy Roman Emperor Charles V* (1519) was recently identified as the sixth woodcut printed with gold in early modern Europe. The seven inks of *Arms of Matthäus Lang von Wellenburg* (1520) make it the most complex woodcut printed for centuries.

The fourth section shows how people lived with and used colour prints in the late 1500s. Other impressions of Erasmus Loy’s imitation *Intarsia Panels* and *Ornamental Design* (for a frieze) were pasted onto wooden furniture, walls and doors. A century later, the addition of new tone blocks to Albrecht Dürer’s *Ulrich Varnbüler* (designed 1522, printed in colour c.1620) suggests a new market.

The fifth section shows presents one of the largest examples of other roles of colour in Renaissance printshops. Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut *Great Column*, which is over 160cm/5ft tall, may have imitated the paint as well as the design of the drawing it is based upon (also on display).

Catalogue

The exhibition coincides with the publication of *Printing Colour 1400–1700: History, Techniques, Functions and Receptions*, edited by Ad Stijnman and Elizabeth Savage (Brill, 2015). Bringing together research from 24 contributors, it is the first handbook of early modern colour-printing techniques. The first printing sold out before the UK launch; the second printing is now available.

Visiting

Admission: Free and open to all.
Opening hours: 10.00–17.30 Saturday to Thursday and 10.00–20.30 Fridays.
Location: Room 90, British Museum, Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3DG.

Editor’s notes:

1. For further information, images, or for interviews with Dr Savage please contact the Press Office on press@britac.ac.uk or 020 7969 5227.
2. **The British Academy** for the humanities and social sciences. Established by Royal Charter in 1902. Its purpose is to inspire, recognise and support excellence and high achievement in the humanities and social sciences, throughout the UK and internationally, and to champion their role and value. For more information, please visit www.britishacademy.ac.uk.

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3. **Dr Elizabeth Savage** is a 2015–2018 British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow. She received funding for research into Victorian collections of medieval and Renaissance printing techniques. British Academy Postdoctoral Fellows are outstanding early career researchers selected through an extremely competitive annual competition with a success rate normally around 5%. The Postdoctoral Fellowship is a significant career development opportunity offering three years fully funded to concentrate on research and building academic experience.