

# Humanist Transmissions: Dürer, Erasmus and the Print Collection of Ferdinand Columbus

One of the most striking aspects of the recent exhibition *Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy* is the lasting influence Dürer had on artists across many mediums. So powerful was Dürer's artistic vision that his inventions were absorbed and reflected in the artistic productions of his contemporaries. One example is Marcantonio Raimondi's *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* 1505-6 copied after a Dürer original (Pls 1 & 2).<sup>1</sup> This sort of direct appropriation by artists continued long after Dürer died. Whereas Dürer's impact on artistic production is easy to trace, how contemporary collectors viewed him is not so easy to ascertain.

Dürer revolutionised the printmaking medium and in doing so considerably elevated its artistic status. His prints represent perhaps his outstanding achievement and there is evidence for them being greatly appreciated during his lifetime. In his diary written during his trip through the Netherlands during 1520-1 Dürer records giving away prints as gifts and selling others.<sup>2</sup> The humanist Desiderio Erasmus greatly admired Dürer, and in his *De pronuntiatione* observed: 'What cannot Dürer express in monochromes, that is, by black lines only?'<sup>3</sup> What did those who bought his prints do with them? And how did they collect them? Collectors later in the 16th century pasted prints into albums as a way of organising them, sometimes by subject.<sup>4</sup> But no collection of prints from the early 16th century survives intact so it is not possible to fully understand how they were viewed and treated.<sup>5</sup> There was however one collector who was determined to assemble a comprehensive print collection. His name is Ferdinand Columbus (1488-1539, Pl. 3), the son of Christopher Columbus who during his lifetime collected 3,204 prints.<sup>6</sup> These prints he carefully described in an inventory that survives in Seville (Pl. 4). The collection has now completely vanished.

Born in Córdoba in 1488 he spent his early years there, before entering the court of Isabel and Ferdinand in 1494, as a page. Within the court, Ferdinand was given a humanist education. His years at the court so dedicated to artistic patronage no doubt provided a basis for his cultural interests.<sup>7</sup> Ferdinand remained at the court until 1502 when at the age of 14 he was sent to accompany his father on the fourth and final voyage to the New World. Ferdinand returned to Spain in November 1504 after which time he became increasingly involved in developing his cultural interests.

When Ferdinand began buying prints cannot precisely be determined, but his first book purchases are from 1510 in Spain, when he was 22 years old. In late 1512, Ferdinand embarked on his first European journey, travelling to Italy, and he returned there on several occasions in the following two decades. He is known to have bought many books and possibly prints during that time. Throughout his adult life,

Ferdinand travelled continuously through Europe mainly on missions for the Spanish court, during which he went on detours to buy books and prints. In 1519, Charles V employed Ferdinand as part of his train through the Low Countries to Germany for his coronation. After Charles' coronation in October 1520 Ferdinand took leave of the Emperor and went to Basel, Venice, Nuremberg, Frankfurt etc. We know where Ferdinand travelled because on the title-pages of the books he purchased he inscribed the date, price and place of purchase (Pl. 5). Because of these inscriptions, it is possible to trace his travels throughout Europe and to link up where he bought his prints.

## Ferdinand's motivation for buying prints

It seems that Ferdinand began collecting prints in earnest on his 1520 trip through Europe. What might have been the prime motivator? His Roman experience mentioned earlier certainly exposed him to the world of prints, but there is no evidence that he bought in large numbers at that time. In fact, the smattering of prints by important Italian printmakers such as Marcantonio suggests that he was not buying when presumably they were available in great numbers. The reason for Ferdinand's increased interest in prints probably lies in his direct contact with Albrecht Dürer.

On July 12 1520, Dürer and his wife Agnes left Nuremberg for the Netherlands, where they spent almost a year. Dürer recorded his experiences in great detail in his diary.<sup>8</sup> The main purpose of the trip was to meet Charles V who, he hoped might confirm the annual pension awarded to him by Emperor Maximilian. He also wanted to sell his prints, and for this reason carried many sets. As Dürer's diary reveals, his time in Antwerp was largely taken up with this task. On one occasion, he sold 16 sets of the *Small Passion* engravings. During his journey, Dürer mixed with royalty, noblemen, and various dignitaries from the court of Charles V. Dürer socialised with Jean de Metenye, the Grand Marshal of the Emperor, dined with the Count of Nassau and was on friendly terms with the Regent Margaret of Austria. He even gave her a complete set of all his prints. Dürer was in Aachen when Charles V was crowned emperor on October 23 1520.

From July to late October 1520, there were regular opportunities for Ferdinand and Dürer's paths to cross. Their first point of contact might have been in Brussels where Dürer arrived on August 27 and stayed 5 days.<sup>9</sup> Ferdinand was there for periods in June, July and in August. Ferdinand and Dürer's itineraries corresponded at several points after that. Both were in Aachen in late October and in Cologne in November. Dürer had given Erasmus an engraved *Passion* in early September. Ferdinand met Erasmus a month later on October 7, and received from him a copy of his

*Antibarbarorum*, which he proudly inscribed several times (Pl. 6).<sup>10</sup> Because of Dürer's networks and because he was the most highly regarded artist of his age, Ferdinand must have at least known of his reputation.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that Dürer sold his prints to Ferdinand.

Erasmus was very aware of the power of the printed image.<sup>12</sup> There are instances in his correspondence where Erasmus mentions sending prints to various friends. In 1526 Dürer engraved the striking portrait of Erasmus where he is shown working at his desk (Pl. 7).<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above, Erasmus greatly admired Dürer. Ferdinand's meeting with Erasmus in October 1520 also had an enormous impact on him. But if Erasmus' recognition of Dürer's printmaking ability was not enough, then his clear appreciation of the printmaking medium surely reinforced any interest Ferdinand had in prints and print collecting.

#### Dürer prints owned by Ferdinand

Out of the 3,200 prints Ferdinand owned 390 are by Albrecht Dürer and his workshop. From this, 171 are from Dürer's hand. This number represents by far the greatest by any one artist. The vast majority of prints by Dürer and his workshop are woodcuts, only 10 are engravings. One example is the *Large Horse* 1505 (Pl. 8).<sup>14</sup> The Dürer workshop prints include many small woodcuts made as book illustrations.<sup>15</sup> Other workshop woodcuts include *St Christopher and Fortune*.<sup>16</sup> From Dürer's hand Ferdinand owned the entire *Life of the Virgin* series the majority of which were made in 1504 (see Pl. 1) both the *Small Passion*, 1509/10, and the *Large Passion*, 1511 (Pl. 9), and the *Apocalypse* series (Pl. 10).<sup>17</sup> All these prints were entered in the inventory as individual sheets but there is evidence some were bound in albums. In the inventory, 23 prints by Dürer have the symbol 'B' marked alongside the entry. They include 15 out of the 16 woodcuts of the *Apocalypse* and 8 from the *Large Passion of Christ*. The letter 'B' is clearly an abbreviation of 'Biblioteca' (library) and meant that the prints with that annotation were bound and kept in the library proper – on shelves – as distinct from being stored with the other prints.<sup>18</sup> Dürer issued the prints from the *Large Passion* and the *Apocalypse* together as a bound set in 1511, confirming that they remained in this format in Ferdinand's library. Ferdinand was a collector of images and as such his print collection contained almost no broadsides. It is clear that he made a distinction between his print collection (images) and his books (text). It is more likely, therefore, that his bound *Large Passion* and *Apocalypse* series were not the editions with texts. He probably bought them bound whereas all of his other prints were bought as single sheets or in rolls. He also owned many Dürer prints not part of series. Some examples include the *Rhinoceros* (Pl. 11), *Map of the Northern Sky* (Pl. 12), the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand Christians*, the *Men's Bath House* (Pl. 13) and *Emperor Maximilian*.<sup>19</sup>

In some of the entries describing prints in the inventory, monograms are copied. Inventory number 1275 describes Urs Graf's *Virgin and Child* and the monogram also appears in the inventory<sup>20</sup> and in the entry describing Giovanni Battista Palumba's *Mars, Venus and Vulcan* the small IB with the bird is copied (Pls 14 & 15).<sup>21</sup> The entries that describe Dürer's prints are however very different. To many entries,

Ferdinand adds in his own hand 'this print is truly by Albrecht'. This inscription was most often added after Dürer's AD monogram. The authorship of the Dürer prints was clearly very important to Ferdinand.<sup>22</sup> It also suggests an intimate knowledge of the artist.

In Ferdinand's inventory in Seville the prints are described in a straightforward way under a series of classification categories inscribed on the top of each page (Pl. 16). They are ordered first by one of seven size categories: *sezavo* (70 x 50mm), *octavo* (110/130 x 70/90mm), *quarto* (160/190 x 120/150mm), *medio* (240/260 x 160/180mm), *pliego* (300/380 x 200/300mm), *marca* (c.400 + x c.500 + mm) and *rótulo* (rolled). The second part of the classification is subject. The subjects include male and female saints; males and females; animals; inanimate objects; ornament and maps. The subject of saints is obvious but inanimate and ornament prints not so. An inanimate subject is Jost de Negker's *Music Hand* (Pl. 17)<sup>23</sup> and an ornament print is Dürer's *Interlaced Cord Pattern* (Pl. 18).<sup>24</sup> The third part of the classification is the number of any one of these in the image, for example, '8 male saints', '5 females' or '7 dogs'. After 15, 'many' is used. The fourth criterion is whether these figures are dressed or undressed. A complete classification category from the inventory runs for example, a 'quarto size print of 1 dressed male saint'.

How did these classification categories function? Take one example, Albrecht Dürer's *St Michael Fighting the Dragon* of which Ferdinand owned an impression (Pl. 19).<sup>25</sup> The print is 394 x 283mm and contains four dressed male saints. In the inventory, it is classified therefore as a 'pliego size print of 4 dressed male saints.' A second example is Albrecht Altdorfer's *St Christopher Bearing the Christ Child* (Pl. 20).<sup>26</sup> It measures 168 x 120mm and there are 2 male saints, and thus it is described under the category a 'quarto size print of 2 dressed male saints.' All the prints purchased by Ferdinand were described under the categories at the top of the inventory page.

The classification of prints under these categories was not always straightforward because many prints often contain mixed figures. Ferdinand also devised a system of secondary rules to assist in the process of classification. In all cases saints take precedence over other figures, males take precedence over females, and clothed figures take precedence over naked figures. Therefore, a *sezavo* size print that depicts 2 dressed soldiers with 3 naked females would be classified as 'sezavo size print of five dressed men.' A *quarto* size print depicting the *Christ Child with the Virgin* is always classified a 'quarto size print of 2 dressed male saints.' To give an example, Lucas Cranach's *Martyrdom of St John* contains many figures (Pl. 21).<sup>27</sup> Only one of them is a saint but the print is classified as a 'pliego size print of many dressed male saints'.

Now to the descriptions of the prints in the inventory. Each inventory entry describes some utterly unique feature, so it is impossible to confuse two or more prints of the same subject. These descriptions are one of the most fascinating aspects of the inventory because of their detail. Dürer's woodcut of *Samson Rending the Lion* (Pl. 22)<sup>28</sup> is described in the following way,

Hercules fighting a lion, his thumbs inside its mouth pulling it open, we can only see three fingers, right foot hidden, around his head is a tie, the lion's tail is raised, in the background is a city and a fort, many trees, a galleon, a boat, a barge, next to his right arm is a man on horseback, the other on foot is in front.<sup>29</sup>

A second example is Dürer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (see Pl. 10)<sup>30</sup> that is described as,

An image of the apocalypse, there are four men on horseback, below appears Death who carries a fork of three prongs, below to the left of the horse next to the inferno is a king, another carries a balance in his right hand, his left the reins, the other in the right has a drawn sword that an angel touches with his left, the other fires a bow and arrow, there are five fallen men and a woman.<sup>31</sup>

The unique system of classification devised by Ferdinand based on the size and the subject of his prints reflects the widespread humanist concern for ordering and understanding the universe. Ferdinand's probable contact with Dürer seems to have fuelled his interest in print collecting that soon became an obsessive passion. And the association between Dürer, Erasmus and Ferdinand Columbus was a combination of forces that gave rise to the onset of serious print collecting while indicating the high regard in which prints were held in the early years of their production.

#### Notes

- 1 Dürer: Bartsch 88; Raimondi: Bartsch 406. All Bartsch references are to A. Bartsch, *Le Peintre-graveur*, 21 vols, Vienna 1803-21 (see also *The Illustrated Bartsch*, ed. W.L. Strauss, University Park, PA, and New York 1971-).
- 2 For his journey see H. Rupprich (ed.), *Dürer: Schriftlicher Nachlass*, 3 vols, Berlin, 1956; for English translation see J.-A. Goris, and G. Marlier, *Albrecht Dürer. Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands. 1520-1521*, New York, 1971.
- 3 See *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami recognita et adnotatione critica instructa notisque illustrata*, Amsterdam, 1969-, I-4, 40; also L. Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters*, Princeton, 1993, p.3.
- 4 M. Bury, 'The Taste for Prints in Italy to c. 1600', *Print Quarterly*, ii, 1985, pp.12-26; M.P. McDonald, 'The Print Collection of Philip II at the Escorial', *Print Quarterly*, xv, 1998, pp.15-35; P. Parshall, 'The Print Collection of Ferdinand, Archduke of Tyrol', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, lxxxviii, 1982, pp.139-84.
- 5 Recent publications on the subject have begun to address these matters. See for example three essays in *Studies in Iconography*, xxiv, 2003: D.Areford, 'The Image in the Viewer's Hands: the Reception of Early Prints in Europe', pp.2-42; P. Schmidt, 'The Use of Prints in German Convents of the Fifteenth Century: the Example of Nuremberg', pp.43-69; R.Field, 'A Fifteenth-Century Woodcut of the Death of the Virgin in a Manuscript of Der Stachel der Liebe', pp. 71-137. On the early evidence for print collections see B. Hernad, *Die Graphiksammlung des Humanisten Hartmann Schedel*, Munich, 1990; and general comments in D. Landau and P. Parshall, *The Renaissance Print: 1470-1550*, New Haven and London, 1994.
- 6 British Museum Press is publishing a complete transcription, translation and critical study of the inventory by this writer in April 2004. See also M.P. McDonald, 'Extremely curious and important!': Reconstructing the Print Collection of Ferdinand Columbus', in *Collecting Prints and Drawings in Europe, c.1500-1750*, ed. C. Baker, C. Elam and G. Warwick, Aldershot, 2003, pp.37-54; M.P. McDonald, 'Colecciónismo en la era del descubrimiento: La colección de estampas de Hernando Colón', *Goya*, no. 283-284, 2001, pp.299-307; T. Marín Martínez, (*Memoria de las Obras y libros de don Hernando Colón*, Madrid, 1970).
- 7 See J. Yarza, *Los Reyes Católicos: paisaje artístico de una monarquía*, Madrid, 1993.
- 8 See note 2 above.
- 9 A timetable of Ferdinand's travels is provided in Appendix 2 in my forthcoming book on Columbus. See note 6 above. See also K. Wagner, 'El itinerario de Hernando Colón según sus anotaciones. Datos para la biografía del bibliófilo sevillano', *Archivo Hispáñense*, no.203, 1984, pp.81-99.
- 10 J. Gil, *Las joyas de la Colombina: las lecturas de Hernando Colón*, Seville, 1989, n.37, pp.55-56.
- 11 On Dürer's reputation see G. Bartrum, 'Dürer viewed by his Contemporaries', in *Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy*, London, 2002, pp.9-17.
- 12 On this subject see the excellent study, L. Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters*, Princeton, 1993.
- 13 Bartsch 107.
- 14 Bartsch 97.
- 15 For example, prints made for the *Salus Animaæ*. See M.C. Oldenbourg, *Hortulus animae (1494)-1523: Bibliographie und Illustration*, Hamburg, 1973; also F.W.H. Hollstein, *German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts 1400-1700*, Amsterdam/Rotterdam, vii, 1954-.
- 16 *St Christopher*, Bartsch 16 (as Dürer); *Fortune*, Hollstein, 27.
- 17 *The Apocalypse*, Bartsch 60-75; *Life of the Virgin*, Bartsch 76-95; *Small Passion*, Bartsch 16-54; *Large Passion*, Bartsch 4-15.
- 18 That not all the entries describing prints from the *Large Passion* were marked with a B should not be taken to imply that only those that were, were bound. There are many symbols used in the inventory and the same sporadic patterns occur elsewhere. For discussion of the meaning of the symbols see chapter 5 in volume 1 of the forthcoming Columbus publication. See note 6 above.
- 19 Bartsch 136, 152, 117, 128, 153 respectively.
- 20 Hollstein.xxxiv.10/I.
- 21 Inv.no.2032.
- 22 On the importance of Dürer's monogram see J. Koerner, 'Albrecht Dürer. A Sixteenth Century Influenza', in *Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy*, London 2002, especially, pp.25-31.
- 23 Hollstein, xxix.12
- 24 Bartsch 143.
- 25 Bartsch 72.
- 26 Bartsch 53.
- 27 Bartsch 61.
- 28 Bartsch 2.
- 29 'Hercules que disqui para una leon esta caballero encima del tiene metidos los pulgares por la boca de entradas manos no se le parecen syno 3 dedos ni el pie diestro en la cabeza tiene una çinta y el leon tiene alçada la cola ay por lexos una cibdat y una fortaleza y muchos arboles y una galera y una nao y un Barco y a par de su braço diestro va uno cavallero y otro a pie delante (Dürer monogram).'
- 30 Bartsch 64.
- 31 'Un figura del apocalipsi en la qual ay 4 hombres a caballo y al mas bajo parece\_\_\_\_y lleba en las manos un garfio de 3 puntas tiene debaxo de syniestra el caballo junto a la boca del ynfierno un rey el otro lleva en la diestra una balanca y con la syniestra tiene la rienda y el otro tiene la diestra una espada sacada y bale a tomar un angel con su syniestra della y el otro va a tirar con un arco una saeta ay 5 hombres en el suelo caydos y una muger (Dürer monogram) (es vere de Alberto).'



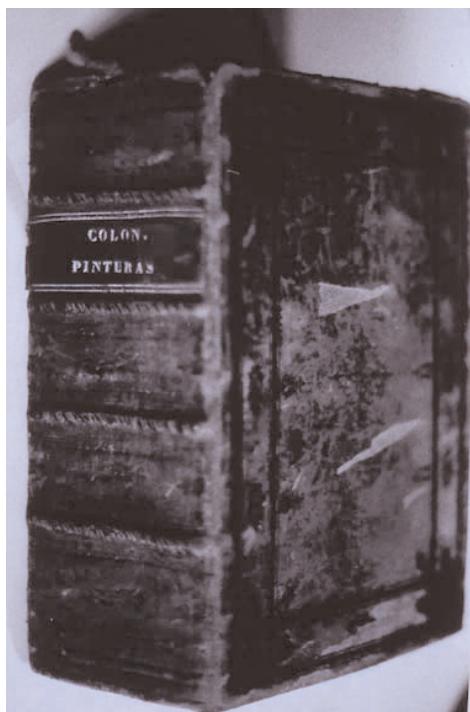
**Plate 1** Albrecht Dürer: *Presentation in the Temple*, c. 1503-5, woodcut, British Museum



**Plate 2** Marcantonio Raimondi: *Presentation in the Temple*, c. 1505-6, engraving, British Museum



**Plate 3** Anonymous 16th century: *Portrait of Ferdinand Columbus*, oil on canvas, Biblioteca Colombina, Institución Colombina, Seville (photo author)



**Plate 4** Columbus' print inventory in Seville. Institución Colombina, Biblioteca Colombina, Seville, Sig.10-id-5 (photo author)



*Este libro costó. 24 díneros en león por a gozo de  
1535 y el díñado vale. 570. díneros*

**Plate 5** Title-page of book from Columbus' collection, with date, price and place of purchase, Biblioteca Colombina, Institución Colombina, Seville, sig.1-2-16 (photo author)



**Plate 6** Desiderius Erasmus: *Antibarbarorum*, liber unus, title-page, Basel 1520, Biblioteca Colombina, Institución Colombina, Seville, sig.12-2-16 (photo author)



**Plate 7** Albrecht Dürer: *Portrait of Erasmus*, 1526, engraving, British Museum



**Plate 8** Albrecht Dürer: *The Large Horse*, 1505, engraving, British Museum



Plate 9 Albrecht Dürer: *The Arrest of Christ*, 1510, woodcut, British Museum



Plate 10 Albrecht Dürer: *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 1498, woodcut, British Museum

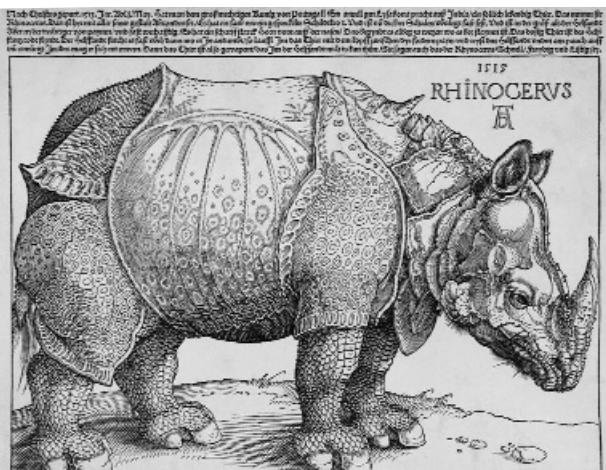


Plate 11 Albrecht Dürer: *Rhinoceros*, 1515, woodcut, British Museum



Plate 12 Albrecht Dürer: *Map of the Northern Sky*, 1515, woodcut, British Museum



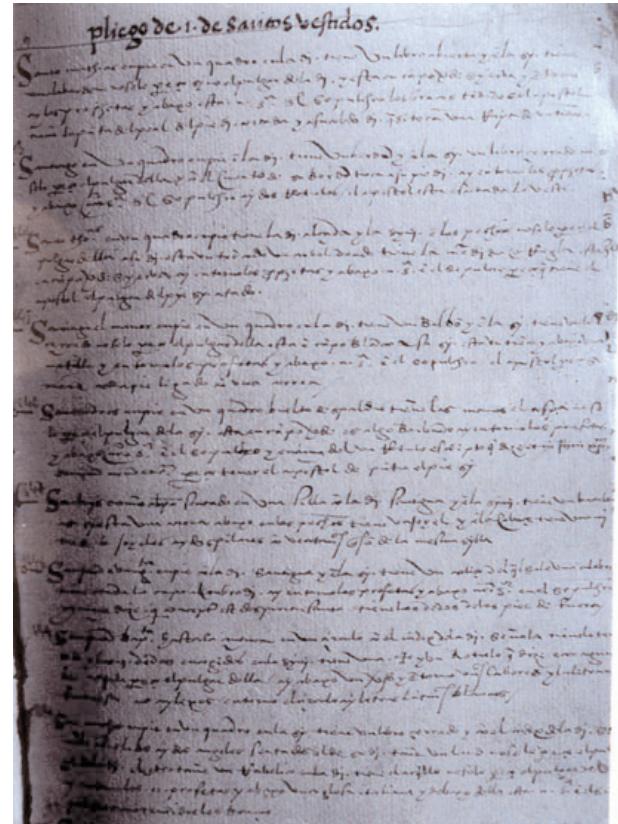
**Plate 13** Albrecht Dürer: *The Men's Bath House*, c.1496, woodcut, British Museum



**Plate 14** Giovanni Battista Palumba: *Mars, Venus and Vulcan*, c. 1505, woodcut, British Museum



**Plate 15** Detail of monogram from Plate 14



**Plate 16** A page from Columbus' print inventory, Biblioteca Colombina, Institución Colombina, Seville, sig.10-id-5 (photo: author)



Plate 17 Jost de Negker: *Music Hand*, c. 1500-8, woodcut, Kestner-Museum, Hannover

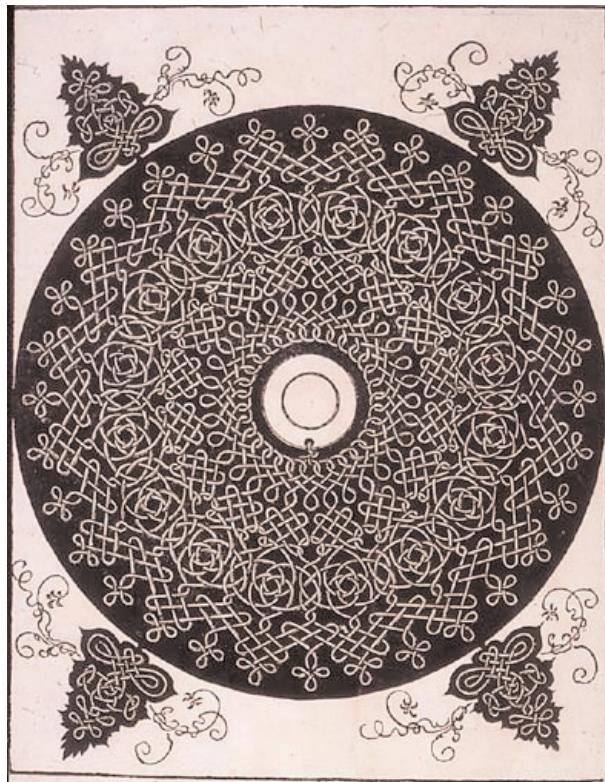


Plate 18 Albrecht Dürer: *Knot design for ornament*, c. 1506-7, woodcut, British Museum



Plate 19 Albrecht Dürer: *St Michael fighting the Dragon*, 1498, woodcut, British Museum



Plate 20 Albrecht Altdorfer: *St Christopher bearing the Christ Child*, 1513, woodcut, British Museum



**Plate 21** Lucas Cranach: *Martyrdom of St John*, c. 1508, woodcut, British Museum



**Plate 22** Albrecht Dürer: *Samson rending the Lion*, c. 1497-8, woodcut, British Museum