

Ferdinand Columbus: Renaissance Collector

9 February – 5 June 2005

Gallery 90

Admission free

In cultural and intellectual overviews of the Renaissance, one fascinating figure has been largely overlooked: Christopher Columbus's illegitimate son Ferdinand. Ferdinand travelled on the fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, compiled an account of that journey and wrote the first biography of his father. But, he was also without doubt the greatest bibliophile and print collector of his day. At the time of his death, his library in Seville contained over 15,000 volumes and more than 3,200 prints. Today a fraction of the books survive, the print collection has completely vanished and is known only through a detailed inventory. The inventory reveals the unique importance of the collection because of its size, range and the ingenious system devised by Ferdinand for classifying his prints. It is the earliest and certainly the largest Renaissance print collection that we know of and the study of the inventory has transformed our understanding of printmaking and collecting during the period.

Born in Córdoba in 1488, Ferdinand entered the court of Isabel I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragón six years later, as a page to Prince Juan. He received a humanist education, and the monarch's commitment to artistic patronage undoubtedly provided a firm basis for his own cultural interests. 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, Emperor Charles V employed Ferdinand as part of his entourage through the Low Countries to Germany for his coronation. Around the same time, Ferdinand befriended the great humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus and probably came in contact with the artist Albrecht Dürer who possibly ignited his interest in prints. After many years of travelling and collecting, Ferdinand settled in Seville in 1526. The most important feature in the house he built was the library, which achieved international fame and was described as the 'new Mount Parnassus'.

The exhibition presents a partial reconstruction of the Columbus print collection based on the descriptions in the inventory. About 150 works will be on display. Important amongst the Italian prints exhibited are works by Antonio Pollaiuolo, Giovanni Battista Palumba, and Marcantonio Raimondi. Those from Germany are by all the leading sixteenth century printmakers including Israhel van Meckenem, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung, Albrecht Altdorfer, Lucas Cranach the Elder and Hans Weiditz. Also included works by Swiss printmakers Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, and Urs Graf and from the Low Countries, the Master IAM of Zwolle, Lucas van Leyden and Jan Wellens de Cock. Many of the prints that will be displayed are great rarities, some survive in only one impression, and some are large format prints which are rarely exhibited. A highlight of the exhibition is a stencil coloured genealogical tree of the House of Charles V by Robert Peril that is 7.3 metres long.

The accompanying book, *Ferdinand Columbus: Renaissance Collector* introduces Columbus's life and work and catalogues 110 of the most significant prints in his collection. Written by Mark P. McDonald it will be published by British Museum Press on 31 January 2005 priced £25.

For further information or images please contact Hannah Boulton on 020 7323 8522 or hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk