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## A new era – the Age of Dürer Masterpieces of printed graphics c. 1500

**Alte Galerie, Schloss Eggenberg, Eggenberger Allee 90, 8020 Graz**

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The time around 1500 was one of the most exciting and eventful periods in world history. The known world was expanding rapidly thanks to voyages of discovery, but individual awareness was also developing fast. Man was increasingly willing to rely on his own strength and discover the world down here for himself. The authority of the Church now found itself threatened by powerful forces demanding changes, which would ultimately lead to the Reformation. It was also a time of change in the media. Among the most important innovations was book-printing, and the associated increase in paper mills expanded the possibilities for printing on paper. That led to unparalleled opportunities for a more durable technology for disseminating information. As in our computer age, the growth in picture output was reflected in private households in the course of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, due to the availability printed graphics.

Constituting the core of the exhibition are ten copperplate engravings by Albrecht Dürer selected from the extensive holdings of the Alte Galerie's Engravings Room. The three 'masterworks', which many generations of experts have puzzled over, represent Dürer's graphic work at its peak: *Knight*, *Death and Devil* alludes to the 'vita activa' represented by the Christian knight fighting actively for his ideals. *St Jerome in His Study* alludes to the 'vita contemplativa' of the scholar with his books, and *Melancholy* is a synonym for cognition, marked by the facial traits of brooding and doubting. Another fixed planet in the firmament of art history is the copperplate engraving of *Adam and Eve* dated 1504, which is indicative of Dürer's years of preoccupation with the new proportion theory, which he had come across in Italy and taken back with him north of the Alps.

The exhibition is rounded off by works from Italy, for example by Mantegna or Marcantonio Raimondi. The latter was Dürer's adversary in the first copyright dispute in history, after the Italian had copied not only his woodcuts but also his monogram. The northern component is represented by works of artists such as Lucas van Leyden, Martin Schongauer, Hans Baldung Grien and Leonhard Beck.

At the end of the 1510s, a new generation of copperplate engravers born around 1500 made their mark. Known collectively as *kleinmeister*, they were notable not only for the small (*klein*)

formats they used but also for their legal combativeness. The children of the Reformation, they increasingly adopted secular subject matter such as genre themes or ornamentation. The genre works reflected aspects of ordinary life. In the 'lower' genre, now autonomous pictures taken from larger contexts featuring the frolics and instincts of the peasantry came to the fore, while the 'higher' genre focused—along with its socio-historical relevance—on deep human yearnings: the longing for eternal youth and ideal beauty.

The graphic works from the Alte Galerie are supplemented by books and fragments from the early days of book printing. The diversity of books grew by leaps and bounds in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and with it the dissemination of knowledge, which could now be passed on more quickly, simply and cheaply than had been possible with manuscripts. The very first knowledge collections were the 'encyclopaedias'. They contained first and foremost all the available knowledge on a given subject, and like today's Internet search-engines, were laid out in a user-friendly fashion. A particular challenge was getting across large quantities of knowledge by inserting book woodcuts. Memorable graphic aids such as circles, family trees or human hands helped to articulate the complex information and get it across.

The principal book-printing centres had already established themselves in German-speaking areas by the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first printing business in Nuremberg opened in 1469. Dürer himself did not own a printing shop, even though he had a great interest in the graphic trade. He had his works printed by his godfather Anton Koberger, the outstanding personality of the incunabula period. He was the first to set up a commercially successful business combining book-printing, publishing and the book trade.

A prime example of a professional approach to book production is Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle*. The surviving written records show how it came into being, from planning stage through artists' contracts, the first roughs and the sales at fairs and via established trading channels across Europe. It is evident that book-keepers, major merchants and long-distance traders played a part in offering and selling the precious product that was transported in barrels. Printed works generally entered the trade unbound and uncoloured. The *Nuremberg Chronicle* cost two guilders in 'untreated' condition, which was equivalent at the time to 24 ducks or 20 kg (44lbs) of pork. The price for a bound, coloured copy could be up to six guilders, equivalent to six tubs of Franconian wine.

Four important incunabula were secured for the exhibition, including Dürer's first documented book woodcut from his Basle period (1492). This title page with St. Jerome occupies a notable key position in the artist's early work. Also of artistic importance is *The Shrine*, which comes at the beginning of the outstanding book illustration of Nuremberg and even surpasses the embellishment of the later *Nuremberg Chronicle* in quality. Apart from that, there are also four prominent early 16<sup>th</sup>-century printed works represented in the exhibition. On show are the three books by Dürer on art theory (first editions of 1525, 1527 and 1528), also a first treatise by Johannes Werner on equal-area global projection, representative of many scientific publications. Dürer was also in contact with the leading mathematical and astronomical scholars, and worked

with them on maps of the sky and the Earth, which are represented in the exhibition in facsimile form.

Among the lenders are Graz University Library and the Archives of the Diocese of Gurk in Klagenfurt (each with four prints), giving us a tantalising glimpse of their different areas of collection. Their extensive holdings of incunabula and early prints are among the largest in Austria.