

DANIEL HOPFER

German, c. 1470–1536

Madonna and Child, designed c. 1500 and
reprinted 1802
Etching

Gift of H. H. Hartwell (5761)

Daniel Hopfer originally trained as a decorator of arms and armor and is the earliest known artist to adapt the practice of etching on iron to printmaking. As evidenced by the print on view here, however, his work was not restricted to ornamental armor designs. This image is a typical early 16th-century example of the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven accompanied by the infant Jesus, who stands calmly on his mother's lap.

Though stylistically characteristic of 16th-century etching, the work was actually printed in 1802 from Hopfer's original plates, which had passed through several owners over the centuries. Hopfer's tendency to use iron plates rather than stainless steel contributed to their longevity, since pure iron does not corrode as fast as metal alloys. By the 17th century, the plates had fallen into the hands of a print dealer—thought to be a distant relative of Hopfer—who scratched numbers into 91 of the 230 plates. In 1802, C. W. Silberburg, an enterprising print publisher, reissued a set of these 91 prints. The number “89” at the bottom right corner of the print on view here identifies it as from this set..

SEBALD BEHAM

German, 1500–1550

***The Prodigal Son*, 1540**

Engraving

Gift of the Andrew Adams Collection, 1937 (10610)

The parable of the prodigal son is a biblical story of redemption intended to reinforce the power of divine love. In this set of engravings, the narrative begins at the top left, where a father gives his younger son a share of the family's wealth. The story continues in the print to its right, which shows the son indulging in luxuriant foods and lustful behavior, wantonly wasting his money. In the lower register, the son, now destitute and working as a swineherd, repents his former ways. Finally, he returns home and is welcomed by his father, whose love and forgiveness is a metaphor for God's grace.

The theme of the prodigal son is particularly apropos for the printmaker Sebald Beham, since he was exiled from his native Nuremberg in 1525 for alleged acts of atheism and anarchism in support of the Peasants' War. He was allowed to return to Nuremberg shortly after but was expelled again in 1528 due to allegations of plagiarism. Beham returned in 1529 but did not stay long and ultimately renounced his Nuremberg citizenship. He spent the rest of his life working throughout Germany and eventually settled in Frankfurt, where he became a citizen in 1540, which is also the date of these engravings.

ALBRECHT ALTDORFER

German, c.1480–1538

St. Jerome in the Cave, c. 1500–1538

Woodcut

Purchase, 1952 (13166)

Albrecht Altdorfer was recognized as an accomplished artist during his lifetime and is now credited as the first to use landscape as subject matter in its own right. In this woodcut, however, the dramatic landscape serves as a backdrop for an image of St. Jerome in the cave in the Syrian desert where he spent several years in seclusion in the company of a grateful lion. (Jerome famously encountered the suffering animal and relieved its pain by removing a thorn from its paw in a courageous affirmation of faith.) Altdorfer shows the saint engaged in prayer, his gaunt figure almost lost in the soaring space of the cave. The artist has skillfully indicated a variety of natural textures and delicately differentiated between light and shadow, with only the use of black ink.