

Rainer Schoch Albrecht Dürer and the ideal human form



Lot 22

Never has such an abundance of studies for a Albrecht Dürer copperplate engraving been so well preserved – drawings, nature studies, even test and condition prints. This 1504 artwork, entitled "Adam und Eva", is the culmination of Dürer's many years of intensive analysis on proportions and dimensions of the human figure.

The first human couple is portrayed in clear, uncut, relief-like silhouettes that stand freely before a forest filled with mysterious creatures at dusk. Their bright and harmonious bodies build contrast with the dark entanglement of jagged trees and low-lying animals upon the ground. Of which include elk, cow, rabbit, and cat – animals that since antiquity have been interpreted as embodiments of the four temperaments: Melancholicus, Phlegmaticus, Sanguinicus, Cholericus. According to medieval teachings, the bodily fluids of these animals gained influence on man after the Fall of Man, leading him to animalistic instincts and the perpetuation of sin. Dürer deliberately chose to capture the moment before the Fall. Eve, assisted by the serpent, has

plucked a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and offers it to Adam, who is supporting himself with a grip on a branch in his right hand, and seemingly resisting the offer with his left. A parrot is placed over his shoulder as a sign of wisdom. At the foot of the couple, a cat and mouse paraphrase the tension of their mind game.

The biblical Fall of Man may appear to be the overt theme of the artwork, but really it only serves as a pretext for visual metaphors that refer more to the field of art theory than religious doctrine. Dürer found the Earth's first couple to be the ideal pair for an effective study of the Vitruvian theory of the human body. Adam adapts the posture of The Apollo Belvedere, and Eve that of Venus de' Medici. Unlike late medieval depictions of the Fall of Man, their nudity is not defamatory, but rather the essence of a worldly ideal of beauty, and their constructed ideal figures are the product of the artist's creative genius. Thereby, Dürer is doing much more than creating a primary pictorial theme, he is building and developing upon artistic disciplinary discourse.

The nudes placed in front of the forest's dark foliage allude to an iconic work from the Italian quattrocento, Antonio Pollaiuolo's "Battle of the Nudes" from the 1470s. In particular, the small panel with the unusual signature, "ALBERTUS DURER NORICVS FACIEBAT 1504" demonstrates Dürer's assertive response to Pollaiuolo's exemplar. This suggests that Dürer undertook the extraordinary amount of work for his master engraving "Adam und Eva" one year prior to his second trip to Italy, an undertaking he certainly had in mind during his preparation. In a way, the engraving could serve him as a "business card" and entrance ticket to the artist circles of the High Italian Renaissance. Not only because of its

exemplary ideal figures of antiquity, but also because of the engraving's near perfection.

According to Josef Meder's catalogue raisonné, the work at hand reflects the third state of printing, which means it is the first of the completed plates. This is indicated by the bark gaps inserted below Adam's underarm. The large ox head watermark (M.62) fills the entire width of the sheet, demonstrating that the print and the plate were made at the same time. The sheet is trimmed very close to the platemark, a practice that was often done. The modelling of the figures is so delicately arranged, with the most finely detailed parallel and cross-hatching, that it almost resembles varnishing technique used in painting. In earlier prints, Eve's pale skin stands out clearly from Adam's darker complexion.



Belvedere Apollo. Marble.
Rome, Vatican Museums



Venus von Medici. Marble.
Florence, Uffizi

22 Albrecht Dürer

1471 – Nuremberg – 1528

"Adam und Eva". 1504

Copper engraving on laid paper (watermark: Ochsenkopf (Meder 62)). 24,9 × 19,2 cm (25,1 × 19,3 cm) (9 3/4 × 7 1/2 in. (9 7/8 × 7 5/8 in.)). The collector's mark Lugt 1041c and the stamp "K. K." on the reverse. Catalogue raisonné: Schoch/Mende/Scherbaum 39 / Meder 1, 3 a. One of the rare prints made during Dürer's lifetime, before 1519. [3562]

Provenance

Friedrich Quiring, Eberswalde / Private Collection, Germany (1960 acquired at C. G. Boerner, Düsseldorf)

EUR 80.000–120.000

USD 86,000–129,000

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- Iconic work by the most important German Renaissance artist
- Incomparable technical bravura in copperplate engraving
- One of the rare prints made during Dürer's lifetime

Their nudity is the essence of a worldly ideal of beauty.

