

The Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I: Wood-cut by Dürer and its restoration, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan

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The wood-cut arrives at the library mounted on a single support

In 1927, Tommaso Gnoli, director of the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan, purchased a rare exemplar of the wood-cut *Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I* by Albrecht Dürer and his collaborators from an auction held by antique book dealers U. Hoeppli, on 12-14 April. The auction catalogue tells us that the piece had belonged to the collection of Alessandro Castagnari, the Roman dealer who had put three hundred and thirty-eight prints and drawings by XVI - XIX century masters up for sale, including some fifty works by Dürer. The wood-cut, however, did not bear the mark that distinguishes pieces from the Castagnari collection of which various works on paper had been sold to the Gabinetto disegni e stampe, Rome (F. Lugt, *Les marques de collection de dessins et d'estampes*, Amsterdam, 1921, p.16, n. 86; *Supplément*, La Haye, 1956, p. 13, n. 86).

The purchase of such an exceptionally rare piece was quite in keeping with the acquisitions policy that the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense had practiced since its very beginnings in the eighteenth century, the intention being to enrich its patrimony not only with books useful for study, but also with printed works and manuscripts noteworthy for belonging to a precious edition, their antiquity or their illustrations -- pieces to admire as one would a museum piece. This wood-cut stands out from other graphic works not only because of its large-scale format but also for the richness and complexity of its content, all of which strikes the viewer on first impact.

The Hoeppli auction catalogue (*Collezione Alessandro Castagnari*, Milan, 1927, p. 25, n. 166) also informs us that the piece was mounted on a large support (about three meters by three). Since the panels had been brought together and mounted on canvas to compose the entire arch (the only exemplar in Italy to be preserved in such an arrangement at that time), the wood-cut was exhibited in the library in 1929 for the 1° Congresso bibliografico mondiale and is described briefly in the *Catalogo descrittivo della mostra bibliografica* (Milan, 1929, p. 40).

Since documents from the library archives tend to rule out any restoration of the piece for the occasion of this exhibition, one can presume that this montage was carried out at some time prior to 1927. Because the piece was subsequently stored in a tight roll -- not necessarily ideal conditions for the prints -- a decision was made recently to remove the heavy support from the piece and arrange the elements in such a way as to favor its preservation with a view to opening it up for eventual exhibition and study purposes and to show the work to its best advantage.

The conditions of the print prior to the work carried out on it and the restoration process itself are to be described in a communication by restorer, Mrs. Nathalie Ravanel, while it is my task to indicate the criteria and choices that guided the work executed on the piece,

and to indicate the first elements worthy of study in the piece as they emerged following its restoration.

Features of the work

Due to the exigencies of this work on paper and the contradictions inherent in their very nature, various options were taken into consideration before any final decision regarding how to set about the restoration was made. The piece set out to exalt and propagandize the ancestors and the undertakings of the emperor Maximilian I of Hapsburg (1459-1519), grandfather of Charles V. This suggested that it was destined to be exhibited in various different cities. Visually, the commemorative intention took the form of an allegorical arch composed of various small scale images. The complex symbiology of these images is only accessible to experts on the subject and was not readily interpretable even when the piece was first produced. For this reason, an explanatory text by Stabio was included as an integral element in the work, and was engraved in wood to form a base for the arch. The attendant historical scenes and figures each bear a caption in order that they be identifiable. In this sense, this example of Dürer's high-level artistic expression not only warrants admiration but it demands interpretation if one is ever to understand what it actually represents and signifies.

The main problem faced by the viewer is the need to perceive the work from a variety of different vantage points. Because of its very dimensions, the grandiose architectural structure that brings the wood-cut close to the painted works can only be truly appreciated from a distance. Meanwhile, the small scale of the figures and the scenes link the piece inextricably to the characteristics of graphic work on paper, and only close inspection can do it justice.

Choice of presentation following the restoration

Comparisons with the work executed on the other two exemplars in public collections in Italy (Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome, Gabinetto disegni e stampe degli Uffizi, Florence) led to further considerations. Only the version where the single pieces of paper were not assembled as a whole seemed to allow for close observation.

One idea was to mount all the pieces together in an arrangement that would be fitting for permanent exhibition. However, this might have worked against the longer term conservation prospects of the paper which does not stand up to being exposed to light, as well as creating space problems due to the bulky dimensions of the piece. Moreover, such a solution would deny the viewer close inspection of details, the chance to view the paper transparently and to study the work. On the whole, the opportunities for appreciating the work in all its aspects would have been greatly reduced.

On the other hand, a well organized exhibition that would take into consideration the artistic, historical and cultural value of the piece would afford it a much more efficient presentation as well as opening it up to an undoubtedly broader public, even if for a shorter time. For this reason, it was decided to present the piece in a way that would not only ensure optimum preservation but would leave the piece open to all possibilities: the manageability of the twenty-four pieces the work is divided into, immediate contact with the paper while the chance for a relatively easy temporary arrangement of the pieces, for the purposes of the exhibition, allows the piece to be seen as a whole.

The present restoration versus the previous one

The criterion that inspired the restoration carried out in the early 1900s transpires in the care taken to bring the print as closely as possible back to its original state. Not only did this require that the considerable damage that the paper had sustained through the centuries be remedied but also a skillful attempt at filling various gaps with pen in a bid to approximate the strokes of the original.

The intention was that the viewer be given the chance to admire the work without the eye being distracted by the patching carried out to seal the gaps and consolidate the ensemble. Two small papers missing from the end of the base of the arch were even replaced by copies in pen. Altogether missing, meanwhile, was the writing by Stabio beneath the arch. This bears witness to a mentality that has changed with time. The approach now -- one with which various experts agree -- is not to remove such additional elements since not only do they constitute part of the external history of the piece but also because they were executed in good faith, with due respect for the original, and never superimposed at those points where they have been added in a bid to complete the piece.

One error committed in the previous restoration was rectified: the piece is composed of a vast amount of small scale papers and four of the historical scenes had been put in the wrong position. Samples of materials -- canvas and paper -- used in the old montage have been conserved as documentation of the external history of the piece.

Watermarks: origins and age of the paper

On completion of the restorer's work, I was able to see the papers transparently, at which point I became aware that despite the vicissitudes that had damaged the paper through repeated washing, restoring and its covering at the time, it is still possible to distinguish the marks left by the wood-cut matrix on the back of many of the sheets where the tracts are strongest.

Observation of the paper against the light reveals the watermarks that confirm that the edition belongs to the XVI century. Three watermarks appear throughout the piece, one of which recurs more than the others: this is the Latin letter K, inscribed within a circle, that countermarks part of the paper that had originated from Kempten since 1555 and indicated in Briquet (*Les filigranes*, Leipzig, 1923, 3, pp. 445 - 46, n. 8263).

This watermark is always highly visible and can sometimes be seen with just the barest passage of light. It appears in sheets or cut-outs situated in almost every part of the arch, including the historical scenes and captions where it has been cut.

The other two watermarks can be found to the far left of the arch where the K within the circle is also present. One is in the form of a snake and recurs seven times with variations in every sheet. It is incomplete because the mark -- which is scarcely visible -- is not consistent, even where the paper has not been cut. This watermark, which is not addressed by Briquet, takes on a series of forms highly similar to one detected by Heawood in an English manuscript from 1598 and illustrated in the first volume of the *Monumenta Chartae Papyraceae* (E. Heawood, *Watermarks*, Hilversum, 1950, p. 147, n. 3760). Since England was importing paper from the continent at that time, we must not exclude that this paper too was of German origin, especially since similar watermarks have been found in volumes published in Germany (3758 - 59).

The third watermark appears twice: once, in its entirety, in the image of *Albrecht I der fighafft*, and again, cut into a thin strip in the frame of the family tree. This mark consists of three mountains surmounted by a cross and inscribed in a moulded shield. Both Heawood (n. 891) and Briquet (n. 1246) confirm the use of paper with an almost identical watermark in Ingolstadt in 1568, Ausbourg in 1591 and Lunebourg in 1595. This watermark differs from the one indicated in the *Illustrated Bartsch* (New York, 1981, 10, n. 338, p. 418) only in the shape of the shield for the 1559 Viennese edition of the *Arch*.

The origins of at least two watermarks can be traced back to Bavaria, and all come from the second half of the sixteenth century.

Contribution of watermarks to the study of this edition

Further insights can be gleaned by considering the distribution of the numerous pieces of various dimensions that go to make up the work as a whole: medium-sized and small sheets, strips and slivers of paper. In particular, by observing the cut watermarks, we learn that the ensemble is derived from an assemblage of pieces originally printed separately. It is a known fact that Raphael Hofhalter published the separate series of twenty-four historical scenes depicting also the battle of Pavia (*The Illustrated Bartsch*, 10, p. 419) in Vienna in 1559, as well as the complete edition of the *Arch* in its third version. However, in the Braidense library edition, which also includes the panel celebrating the victory of Charles V, the problem of fragmentation is much more widespread and does not only affect the part of the work depicting the historical scenes.

Another particular of this exemplar that warrants further study is the lack of the date, 1515, in the scrolls at the base of the columns at either side of the arch. This element distinguishes the Braidense version from the photographic representations of all other known exemplars. The two sheets that bear the scroll without the date contain different watermarks: on the left, the serpent, on the right the K inscribed within the circle.

Other characteristics of the print coincide with the characteristics elsewhere attributed to the Viennese edition of 1559, a date that appears in the niche where we find Rudolph I of Hapsburg.

Transparent examination of the paper

It is easy to single out the individual sheets that do not belong to the original edition by examining them against the light; examples include the trumpeter at the edge of the upper part of the main frame, to the left of the large writing and the vertical strips separating the historical scenes in the right hand part of the arch on which frames that bear only a vague resemblance to the authentic ones that appear at the left have been printed.

Also evident are the patches closing the gaps in the paper which had been rendered all but unrecognizable by the additional interventions in pen. These first pointers towards new possibilities for study of this work following its restoration suggest that careful observation and expert insights will prove useful for a deeper understanding of a remarkable wood-cut.

ABSTRACT

In 1927, the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense purchased an exemplar of the monumental wood-cut *Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I* by A. Dürer and collaborators, then owned by A. Castagnari. During a painstaking restoration, carried out before the piece became property of the Biblioteca Braidense, it had been mounted on a single paper and canvas support (about three meters by three).

Since the piece had been stored in a tight roll, which scarcely favors the preservation of prints, it was decided it should undergo another restoration. In deciding how the work should be presented following its restoration, it was necessary to consider that the grandiose architectural structure demands to be viewed from a certain distance, while the small scale of the historical scenes and figures responds to close inspection. It was therefore decided that the work be subdivided into twenty-four pieces and stored in folders so as to ensure better preservation, and to open the piece up to study and exhibition, arranging the pieces as one ensemble.

The previous restoration had been carried out with a view to repairing the damage sustained by the paper as well as to conceal any gaps with careful touch-ups and integration. While the criteria for restoration have subsequently changed, it was decided not to remove the additional pieces.

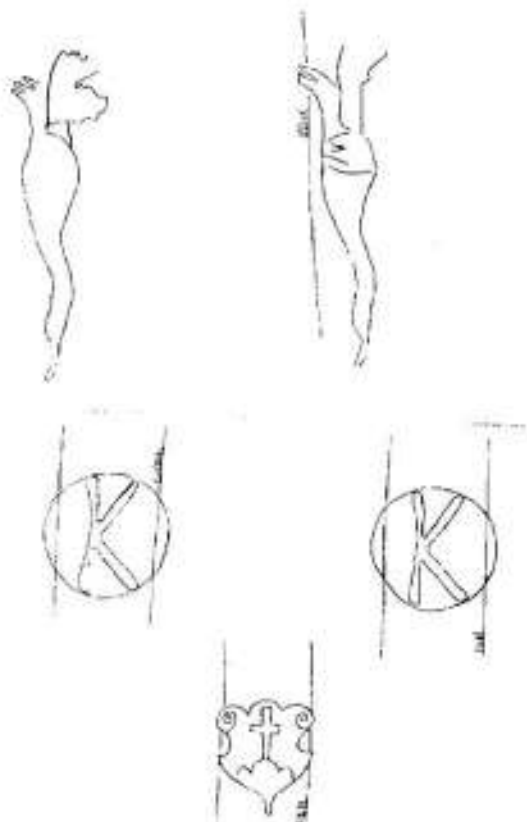
Following the restoration, three watermarks were detected by examining the paper against the light: 1) the Latin K inscribed within a circle (Briquet, n. 8263); 2) three mountains surmounted by a cross in a moulded shield (Briquet, n. 1246; Heawood, n. 891); 3) a snake (Heawood, n. 360). Numbers one and two are of Bavarian origin (from 1555) while the third, origin unknown, is probably German and also from the XVI century. This points to the fact that the print belongs to the 1559 edition while the exemplar as a whole results as an assemblage of various pieces printed separately. One particular that distinguishes it from all known others is the lack of the date 1515 in the scrolls

at the base of the two columns on either side of the arch. Examination of the paper against the light makes it very easy to distinguish the paper used for the integrated elements.

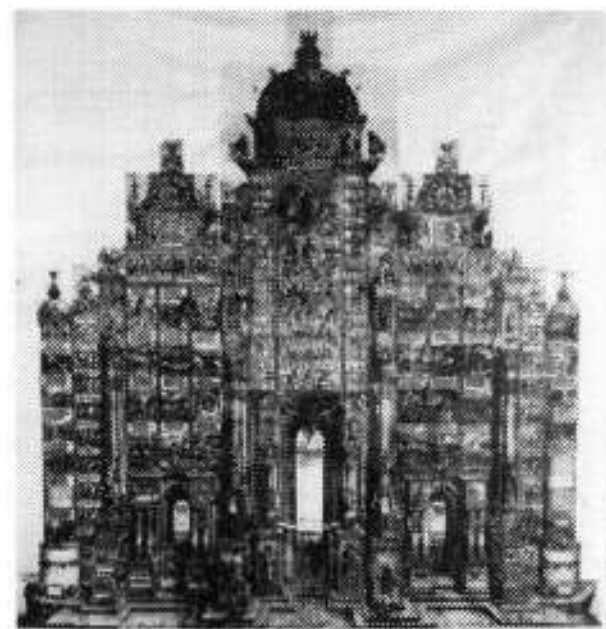
One hopes that this example of the wood-cut will be of interest to experts in the field.

Translated from Italian by Christopher Martin

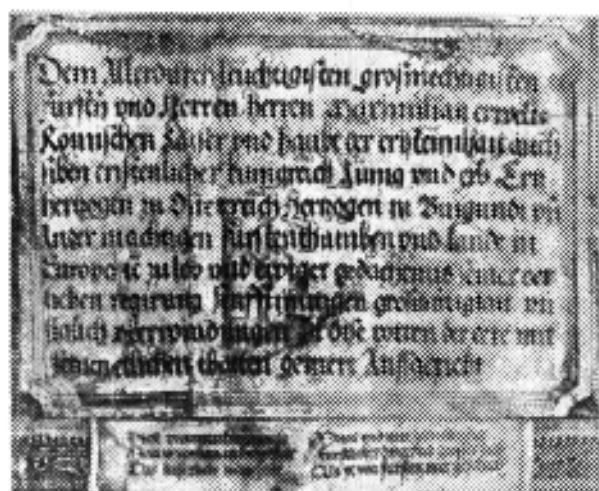
Captions of the illustrations



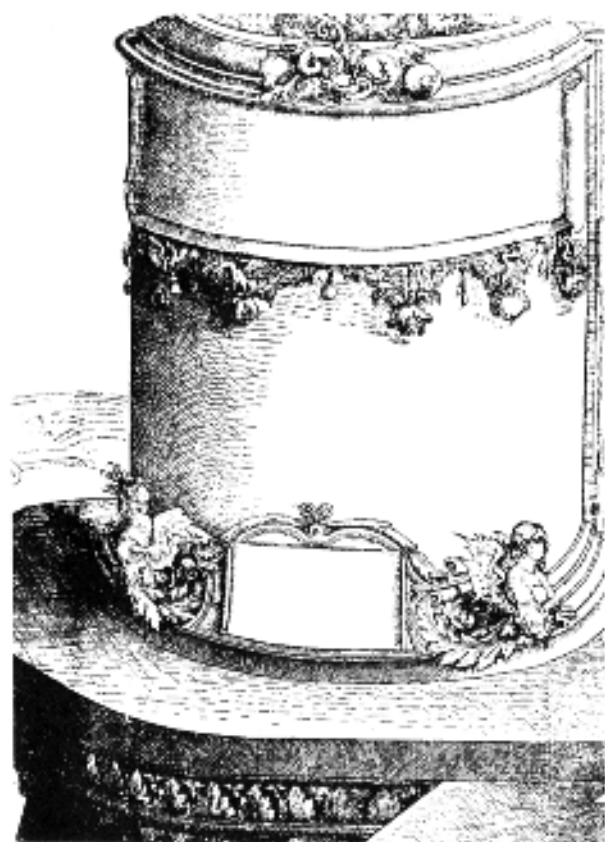
1) Watermarks of the *Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I*.



2) *Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I* by Dürer before restoration.



3) Fig. 3, 4 & 5 show details of n. 2 after restoration.



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