

The restoration of the woodcut "Triumphal Arch of the Emperor Maximilian I", by Albrecht Dürer

PART II

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State of preservation

Before restoration, this copy of the "Triumphal Arch of the Emperor Maximilian I" from the Braidense National Library, had been glued to a single cotton canvas fastened at the top and bottom with two wooden rods, the typical way of mounting maps and other large size objects in paper in order to hang them easily.

The print, made up of numerous sheets, fragments, old restorations and completely new reconstructions, had been glued to two machine-made paper backings before being mounted onto the canvas, subsequently rolled around the two wooden rods and carefully conserved inside a wooden chest. The print had been rolled so tightly around the two wooden rods that the paper had become brittle and many fragments had detached, facilitated by the joins of the various sheets, the old restorations and the reconstructions. Unfortunately, the vast dimensions of this object prevented a safer setting in a mount or in a frame under glass; fortunately, the fact that the print had not been consulted in decades, reduced the amount of damage.

At an initial visual observation the numerous reconstructions were very conspicuous, very wide-spread in the upper part, such as the remake, for example, of the inscription underneath the "Mystery of the Egyptian letters".

These reconstructions and the mounting can be dated back to a restoration which probably came about before its sale at the Hoepli auction in 1927.

Following the Library management's decision to restore the print and conserve it dismembered into pieces inside mounts, the most appropriate type of restoration for the conditions of the print was studied and established. This involved proceeding with the conservation and repair work of the restorations and reconstructions produced during the last intervention.

In fact, these restorations only concerned the lacunae and did not touch the original which remained free from overpaints; furthermore, eliminating these totally imitative reconstructions would have reduced the print to being an archaeological object which would have lost in this way any possible artistic reading and homogeneous vision.

Preliminary procedures

Before starting the actual restoration, a tracing was made on transparent sheets of acetate in order to bring forth all the elements and data necessary for documenting the present condition of the print, such as the various pieces of which it is formed, the actual dimensions with the external outline, the more serious tears and the reconstructions and overpaints.

This tracing, important for a better understanding of the print's current condition, will be indispensable if the need arises to reassemble it as a single element.

Restoration

Since no particular problems were found, restoration closely followed the phases forecasted in the initial estimate without significant changes.

The print was first dusted and dry cleaned with soft brushes, eraser powder and erasers.

It was then divided into pieces according to the type of separation which had been determined by the Library's management, in relation to the composition itself and following the already existing cuts in the print.

The division was made vertically following 4 lines and horizontally along 5 main lines. This way of dividing the sheets allows for a temporary remounting in the event of an exhibition. All the pieces were marked with a number from 1 to 24.

From this moment on, it was no longer a question of restoring a very large object but of 24 pieces of smaller dimensions. However, before proceeding, the stability of the inks in the reconstructions and overpaints was checked. They turned out to be completely stable, probably because they were made in Indian ink.

After the dry removal of the canvas, the pH of the back of the paper support and front of the print was taken. The positive values of the print between 5,7 and 6 reassured us.

The two paper backings, both machine-made, were removed in two phases: as regards the first, the print was moistened with filtered water and ethyl alcohol at 95° and laid onto a sheet of transparent melinex; the backing and old adhesive (probably transparent starch paste) were removed with scalpels; the second backing, in direct contact with the print, was washed in warm water and deacidified with calcium hydroxide; the front of the print was protected by a non-woven support fabric and laid on a net fixed to a plastic frame, controlling that it remained on the surface of the water in order to avoid the loss of small fragments, reconstructions and overpaints.

After the print was taken out of the water, it was placed on a sheet of melinex used as an overlay and the backing and old adhesive (also transparent starch paste) were removed. Unfortunately, the darker stains did not recede during washing. They were therefore caused by dust mixed with an old adhesive.

Before applying a new backing, the watermarks were observed in transparency over a light table, some tears were reunited, a few fragments not perfectly lined up were repositioned and the tears or more conspicuous

cuts were joined with Japanese paper (9g/m²) and methylcellulose (Tylose MH300®). During this task we were able to ascertain the origin of the damage on the upper part of the print which was due to mould attacks that had come about in the past. The presence of mixed flour pastes and traces of an old canvas with a very large weft (probably hemp) from an earlier mounting, could also be observed.

Having completed this preparation a new backing of special Japanese paper: Usumino (22g/m²) from the Morita firm, was applied.

The fineness of this Japanese paper allows one still to observe the watermark and the structure of the paper in transparency and the impression itself of the woodcut in raking light.

Once each piece had dried, the small lacunae were restored with Japanese paper of the same thickness as the print.

Lastly, the 24 pieces were smoothed out between non-woven support fabrics and durable conservation boards and the inpainting was carried out with watercolours and pastels.

The conditioning

The 24 pieces of the print were inserted into board folders (400g/m²) durable for conservation (Miliani papermill, Fabriano) and permanent paper (Canson). The choice of folders instead of thicker mounts, made by request of the Library, allowed for restricting the thickness and weight of the boxes and in this way, reduce their number. The folders are now kept inside 3 boxes: 50 cm x 70 cm and 80 cm x 88,5 cm in dimension, made in durable conservation board (Canson; 2,4 mm), covered on the outside with brown canvas and on the inside with permanent paper (Canson). So as to open the boxes easily and remove the folders, the lid has been separated from the base and one of the sides of the base is removable.

Considerations on the earlier restorations

During this restoration, the various interventions made on this print could be understood and individualized.

The print had been glued to a very thick canvas, probably made of hemp; this had left its impression on the paper. It was displayed in these conditions for a long time. It certainly drew a lot of dust and in some points probably became detached from the canvas. The presence of traces of mould and the weakening of the paper in the upper part makes one presume that it had sustained water seepage and remained damp for a long time. To make up for the detachments of the canvas, the paper had been reglued more than once, with strong glues, dark in colour (rabbit or mixed flour), the combination of these glues and dust caused indelible dark yellow spots, still visible today even after washing. Many pieces of the print were lost during this period.

Before its sale at the Hoepli auction in 1927, the print underwent a complete restoration carried out to perfection, with the means of the times.

The canvas was removed; the old adhesive was taken off. The print was certainly washed and then lined with two layers of paper and lastly with a cotton canvas. The paper backing in contact with the canvas was glued with an adhesive (starch paste) which was strong and thick; the paper backing in contact with the print was glued with the same adhesive, but more liquid so as to insure an easy reversion. The upper mould infested part was probably disinfected; in fact, the mould had stopped and no trace was found on the paper backings.

The lacunae were repainted in indelible Indian ink without covering the original.

Since it is known that, before being sold, this print belonged to Alessandro Castagnari, who was a print dealer (1881-1940), it would be very interesting for the conservators of today to have information about the restorer who worked on this collection and therefore about numerous prints which are State property now and in particular those belonging to the National Print Collection in Rome.