

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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Albrecht Dürer (Nuremberg 1471-1528)

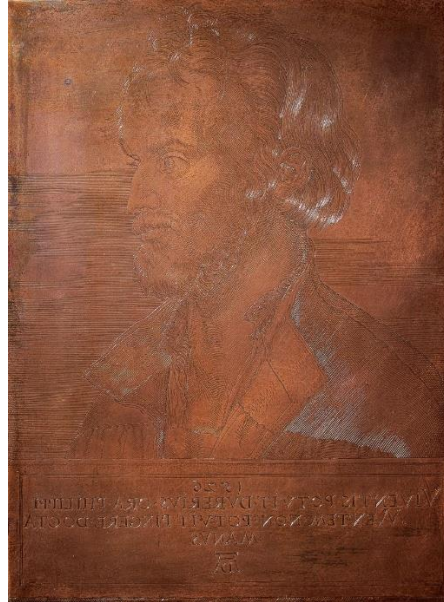
Portrait of Philipp Melanchthon

Signed by the artist in monogram (lower centre):
'AD'; inscribed and dated in plaque at bottom of
plate: '1526/ VIVENTIS . POTVIT .
DVRERIVS . ORA . PHILIPPI / MENTEM .
NON . POTVIT . PINGERE . DOCTA /
MANVS'

Copper plate

6 ¾ x 4 ⅞ in. (17.3 x 12.6 cm.)

On loan from Foundation Schloss Friedenstein,
Gotha



Provenance:

Duke Ernest II. of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745-1804);
Found in the drawer of a desk in the castle after the death of Ernest, and first documented in 1843
(inventory no. 20);
Thence part of the collection of Schloss Friedenstein.

Exhibition:

Minneapolis, Minneapolis Museum of Art, *Martin Luther: Treasures of the Reformation*, 30 October 2016 – 15
January 2017, pp. 275, 277, no. 283.

Literature:

Joseph Meder, *Dürer-Katalog: ein Handbuch über Albrecht Dürers Stiche, Radierungen, Holzschnitte, deren Zustände,
Ausgaben und Wasserzeichen*, Vienna, 1932, pp. 6, 113, no. 104.
R. Bellstedt, *Museen der Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha: Führer*. Munich, 2007

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This copper engraving depicts the reformer and humanist Philipp Melanchthon, in Romanesque bust portrait format, turned to the left, almost in full profile. A pen and ink drawing (Horne Foundation, Florence) served as the model for this plate. Dürer places Melanchthon over a fictive stone plinth bearing a Latin inscription, which translates as 'Dürer was able to depict Phillip's features just as in life, but the skilled hand could not portray his mind'. This engraving forms the last in a series of portrait prints of leading individuals of Dürer's age, that he completed in the last years of his life. Other important figures depicted include Desiderius Erasmus, Frederick the Wise, Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, and Dürer's close friend, Wilibald Pirckheimer.

Dürer made a total of 148 copper engravings throughout his life, created as individual prints or series; however, this is the only copper plate by Durer known to have survived. There is only one other Dürer metal plate known to have survived, this one an etched iron plate of the *Agony in the Garden*, dated to 1515 (fig.1). Etching is an intaglio technique, like engraving, in which the lines are bitten into the plate with acid, but was never one that Dürer truly warmed to. This was probably because unlike the smoothly hammered copper used most commonly in engraving, etching was done on iron or steel, which were prone to ragged lines, frequent foul (accidental) biting, and rust. The *Agony in the Garden* plate became part of the State Library in Bamberg through the collector Joseph Heller (1798–1849). A fascinating feature of this plate is that it has been gilded at some point in its collecting history. As Heller explains, the preeminent Dürer collector of the late sixteenth century, Rudolf II, had his Dürer copper plate of St Eustace gilded to demonstrate that Dürer's prints were as valuable as gold. It is unfortunately impossible to confirm if the Bamberg plate was also part of Rudolf's collection, as it only re-emerged around 1800, when painter Josef Schöpf rescued the plate from a blacksmith. This anecdote helps to explain why so few Dürer plates have survived: many were melted down due to the precious copper they were made from.

The present plate was first recorded in the inventory of Duke Ernest II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg in 1843 – a keen Dürer collector – nearly four decades after the Duke's death. No invoices or detailed records are known that document when the plate came into the Gotha collection, but it must have entered the castle by 1800. It was only rediscovered by chance in the drawer of a desk by Johann Christian Kühner, ducal privy councillor and official court painter since 1804. From 1816 forth Kühner supervised the ducal collections of the paintings, prints and drawings, and it was he who recorded the rediscovery in 1843.

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Dürer was the only printmaker of his generation to equally master skills of woodcut design, and copper plate engraving. The techniques are starkly different – in creating a woodcut, cutters deepen and carve around the design which has been drawn on the block, so that the areas to be printed are raised. With copper plates the process is reversed; the engraver carves out the lines and contours of the design. After inking, the plate is wiped and printed under great pressure, so that the incised parts of the plate are transferred to the paper. While Dürer would use the services of highly professional carvers for his woodcuts, he always incised copper plates with a burin himself. Dürer carried the technique to a degree of richness and detail that has never been surpassed. Dürer united the formal and technical models of north and south of the Alps for the first time. Dürer pushed engraving beyond its roots in metalwork and drawing, creating a consistent tonal ‘system’ for engraving that other practitioners might adapt to their own designs. His technique exploited the graphic precision and brilliance of engraving and built a unique visual language for the medium. In his hands engravings would come to be highly valued works of art. Perhaps only Lucas van Leyden, a younger contemporary in Holland, approached Dürer’s impact on engraving’s early visual course.

Dürer was known to use the highest quality materials when producing his prints, and the beaten copper for his engravings was certainly no exception. As Angela Campbell explores in *Albrecht Dürer and Jacob Fugger: Partner Patrons* in the upcoming Agnews catalogue, there is a strong possibility that Dürer was able to source uniquely high-quality copper for his plates. The Fugger family were the main miners and suppliers of copper in pre-Reformation Europe, and Dürer had a long-established connection with the family by 1526, having painted a portrait of the family patriarch, Jakob Fugger in 1520. It is therefore possible that this plate was made from refined Fugger copper, a very valuable commodity that helped to unlock technical virtuosity.

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Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, *Agony in the Garden*, 1515, etched iron plate, gilded, Staatsbibliothek Bamberg.