

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-08072-9 - The Woodcutters of the Netherlands in the Fifteenth
Century: In Three Parts
William Martin Conway
Excerpt
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WOODCUTTERS OF THE NETHERLANDS.

PART I.

HISTORY OF THE WOODCUTTERS.

CHAPTER I.

WOODCUTS FROM THE BLOCK-BOOKS.

1. The *Biblia Pauperum* (used 1487—1500).
2. The *Canticum Canticorum* (used 1494).
3. The *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (used 1481—1484).
4. The *Boec van den Houte* (used 1483).

SECT. 1. The *Biblia Pauperum* (used 1487—1500).

THE earliest existing productions which can be called prints from carved blocks of wood are certain stray sheets, bearing rough outline images of saints, and scattered up and down, in small quantity, among the libraries and museums of Europe. So far as can be gathered from internal evidence the dates of such of these prints as still exist lie somewhere in the 15th century. Mr Weale indeed has called attention to records of a lawsuit at Bruges, towards the close of the 14th century, from the depositions in which it is clear that a set of

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woodcutters were even then at work in that prosperous city, carving figures upon blocks of wood and taking impressions from them. Unfortunately we can point to no surviving specimens of the industry of these forgotten craftsmen. Our present concern, however, is not with the interesting but mysterious relics of this period of infancy of the art of woodcutting; but we must pause for a moment over the second group of productions, by which its increasing strength was manifested to the world—the so-called Block-books.

A Block-book is a book printed wholly from carved blocks of wood. Such volumes usually consist of pictorial matter only; if any text is added in illustration it likewise is carved upon the wood-block, and not put together with moveable types. The whole of any one page, sometimes the whole of two pages, is printed from a single block of wood. The manner in which the printing was done is peculiar. The block was first thoroughly wetted with a thin watery ink, then a sheet of damp paper was laid upon it, and the back of the paper was carefully rubbed with some kind of dabber or burnisher, till an impression from the ridges of the carved block had been transferred to the paper. Of course in this fashion a sheet could only be printed on one side; the only block-book which does not possess this characteristic is the *Legend of S. Servatius* in the Royal Library of Brussels, and that is an exceptional volume in many respects besides.

If a man wanted to set up as printer of books all he had to do was to buy a set of wood-blocks and a rubber, and his apparatus was complete. It seems probable that wealthy persons and religious institutions were wont to possess such sets of blocks, and, when occasion arose, they printed a set of sheets for presentation to a friend, or, in the case of convents, for sale to the passing pilgrim. A printer of Block-books had no need to serve an apprenticeship; any neat-handed man could print for himself. Mons. E. van Even has discovered the inventory of the possessions of Jean de Hinsberg (Bishop of Liège, 1419—1455) and his sister, a nun in the convent of Bethany, near Mechlin. Amongst other items in the list are two of very great interest to us—

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*Unum instrumentum ad imprimendas scripturas et ymagines.**Novem printe lignee ad imprimendas ymagines cum quatuordecim aliis lapideis printis.*

It follows that in the days of the Block-books the class of printers had scarcely begun to arise. People purchased blocks from the woodcutter, not books from the printer. The woodcutter's business was to engrave sets of blocks, or single blocks, for which he knew he would be likely to have a sale. Thus, instead of continually engraving new subjects, he restricted himself for the most part to certain known series of subjects for which a demand existed. Such a series, for example, was the so-called *Biblia Pauperum*, or set of figures illustrative of the sacred history, by aid of which, it is said, the preacher could assist the understanding of the more stupid classes. Such a series again was the *Ars Moriendi*, a volume of pictures of the various temptations to which a sick man is exposed and of his triumph over them, intended to be carried by the priest to the bedside of the sick man for the comforting of his soul, if thus perchance comfort might arise. We are enabled in this manner to account for the fact that such a large number of editions of these books exist. There are but few block-books, but of each there are many editions; and each edition is so like all the rest, that often it is scarcely possible to distinguish one from another. How many editions of the *Biblia Pauperum* survive I cannot say, but I have been able to separate those in the following list. Which of them is the first, and which are the copies, there is no possibility of deciding at present.

Edition A. (Sotheby¹ 1)—Earl of Pembroke; Mr Holford (Inglis copy); National Library, Paris.

Edition B. (Sotheby 2)—British Museum; Duke of Devonshire; Earl Spencer (copy A); Mr Loscombe; M. Six van Hillegom; Meerman Museum at the Hague (imperfect); Court Library, Munich; Court Library, Vienna; Libraries at Gottweig, Dresden, Hannover, and Passau (incomplete).

¹ I give no references to Heineken, as his descriptions are utterly inaccurate. Sotheby's accounts are in his *Principia Typographica*, London, 1858, 3 vols. folio.

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Edition C. (Sotheby 3)—British Museum; Duke of Devonshire; National Library, Paris.

Edition D. (Sotheby 4)—Bodleian Library, Oxford; Corpus Christi College, Cambridge¹; Earl Spencer (copy B); National Library, Paris; Meerman Museum at the Hague; Darmstadt.

Edition E. (Sotheby 5)—British Museum (Print Room); the Duc d'Aumale.

Edition F. (Sotheby 6)—Bodleian Library, Oxford; Court Library, Vienna; Court Library, Munich (2 copies).

Edition G. (Heineken 1)—Lord Vernon; Leipzig.

I do not mean to say that these seven sets of cuts were all made by one woodcutter, but it is not unlikely that two or more are by the same hand; and, of course, for one edition that survives, several have probably perished. I think it exceedingly likely that my edition B will, on further investigation, be broken up into two editions. The number of copies of it which exist in the south of Germany and Austria points to the possibility that the blocks from which those copies were printed belonged to some South German convent.

The same general description applies to all editions of the book; the following has been taken from the copy preserved in

¹ A noticeable fact in the Cambridge edition is that it presents a marked difference in appearance between the cuts in the first and last halves of the book, not in the style of cutting but in the printing. Those marked with the letters of the first alphabet are as light in tint as the rest are heavy. Were it not that we are sure that the book has been in its present condition since the year in which it came into the College Library with the other books bequeathed by Archbishop Parker, we might be inclined to hold the opinion that it had been formed, at a late period, of parts of two incomplete copies, one of which had been kept in a damp place. We must, however, conclude that the last ten sheets were more carefully printed with a somewhat darker ink than the others, and possibly not at the same time. They do indeed look somewhat earlier as they hardly present a crack. So far as I am able to gather from Sotheby's remarks this edition corresponds with that copy belonging to Lord Spencer, referred to by him as Spencer B. The blocks however are less worn. They do not correspond with those of any of Heineken's editions. In this Sotheby has fallen into error. He thinks Heineken's third edition is the same as Spencer B. But Heineken took his description of that edition from the copy now in the Grenville Library at the British Museum, and this Sotheby recognises as printed from different blocks to those employed for either of Lord Spencer's.

the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. The volume consists of twenty sheets, printed only on one side, each sheet bearing an impression from a separate block. The working of the book is by separate sheets and not by quires. The recto of the first leaf is blank; its verso and the recto of the second bear the impression of the first block. Then follow two blank pages, then two more printed ones, and so on. In the Cambridge copy the blank pages are pasted together; but this was not always done. Each page is broken up into compartments, and illustrates one subject, the arrangement of all the pages being similar. They are divided horizontally into three portions. The centre of the upper one is occupied by two windows separated by a pillar. Through each of these windows the upper part of the figure of a prophet appears. His name is written below him on the window sill, and he holds in one hand a long scroll which stretches out to the edge of the page, and bears a text referring to the central subject. The spaces on the right and left of the double window contain several lines of text, extracted from the Vulgate, and referring to the general subject of the page.

Immediately under the pillar which divides the prophets, a letter is placed, marking the position of the page in the series. The first twenty are designated by simple letters, the remainder by the same letters placed between two dots.

The middle division of the page is divided into three parts by pillars which support low, almost flat, arches. Under each of these an event from the Bible history is represented. The central subject, which forms the keynote of the whole, is from the New Testament; those on the left and right are parallels, more or less illustrative of it, chosen from the Old.

The lowest horizontal division is like the upper one. There is a double window in the centre with prophets holding scrolls, bearing their names and a text referring to the central subject; whilst, in the blank space on each side, is a leonine verse, which relates to the compartment immediately above it. A similar verse, applying to the central subject, runs across the bottom of the cut.

From this description it will be seen that there are one

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hundred and sixty figures of prophets. They are not, however, all different (and this, I believe, has not been noted before) but many of them occur again and again. Thus, David is found thirty-four times, Isaiah twenty-four, and so on, there being, in all, at least thirty-nine different figures. Not that the same man is always represented in the same position, but he is always visibly the same man, wearing the same clothing and most easily recognised by his hat, for all thirty-nine hats are different. It is further worthy of remark that every now and then a mistake occurs, the names under two adjacent figures being accidentally transposed. Now it is not likely that this would have happened in the original edition of the book, but a mistake of the kind might very easily creep into a copy.

The style of the series has been so frequently described, and, on the whole, with so little practical result, that I content myself with merely quoting the words of M. Renouvier¹.

“Ces compositions souvent trop simples ont quelquefois un excellent arrangement . . . Les figures, assez bien proportionnées, quoique avec des têtes généralement trop grosses pour le corps, et plus grosses pour les hommes que pour les femmes, décèlent, sous leurs linéaments rudimentaires, leur expression grossière, et leur taille faite à tâtons, une certaine habileté et un esprit subtil: elles ne tombent pas dans la charge de la grimace, malgré leur naïveté copieuse . . . Les têtes sont variées, étudiées dans la réalité et quelquefois très-heureusement expressives . . . Pour résumer la manière du dessinateur dans ces défauts et ces qualités, je dirai qu’il est adroit par instinct et maladroit par ignorance. C’est peut-être le caractère le moins trompeur de la primitivité de l’artiste. L’habileté de sa main et la vivacité de la composition sont trahies à chaque instant par l’inexpérience du procédé. Il a le contour trop timide ou trop appuyé, mais il sait accentuer les traits essentiels: ses corps, qui paraissent épais dans leurs draperies, prennent une tournure svelte dans les rares nudités qu’il se permet. Toutes ces façons archaïques du dessin ont leurs analogies dans la taille, et je ne comprends

¹ *Histoire de l’origine et des progrès de la gravure dans les Pays-Bas.* Mémoires couronnés par l’Académie royale de Belgique.—Tom. x. Brussels, 1860, 8vo. p. 62.

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pas comment Heineken, Zani, et Ottley ont été amenés à distinguer dans ces planches un graveur différent du dessinateur. Les tailles sont épaisses, épargnées et n'obtiennent pas des effets d'ombre ; mais elles accentuent et varient les objets dans leurs aspects : les chevaux, les moutons, les arbres même, malgré le système arrêté et puéril avec lequel ils sont façonnés, produisent à peu de frais un ensemble souvent pittoresque . . . Les qualités qui ressortent de toutes ces observations appartiennent à une école de dessin déjà faite et considérable, ayant pour don principal le sentiment vif de la réalité en même temps qu'un esprit subtil et mystique. Cette école ne peut être que celle qui florissait dans les provinces néerlandaises gouvernées par Philippe le Bon, duc de Bourgogne, sous l'influence des Van Eyck."

With this criticism of Renouvier's I should, on the whole, be inclined to agree ; a further and more accurate examination of style may, however, be advisable, at some future time, when we have firmer ground to go upon.

The date of the production of this series of blocks is, as has been said, completely lost in obscurity. Various facts have been adduced, tending to indicate an exceedingly early origin, but they all require authentication, owing to the known inaccuracy and partizanship of the authors who have written on the subject, Renouvier excepted,—qualities which have ended in throwing the works of otherwise learned men into disrepute. Five manuscripts of the book in various states are known¹. They are at Munich (15th cent.), Wolfenbüttel (now lost), Leipsig (Weigel copy), and Constance (13th cent.). Of these the Munich copy bears the closest resemblance to the block-book, from which indeed it may have been copied. Heineken considered the designs to have been taken from a series of ninth century (!) reliefs in the cloister of the cathedral at Bremen. Lessing thought that the book had been copied from painted glass windows in the convent of Hirschau in Suabia, since burnt

¹ Laib and Schwarz, *Biblia Pauperum*. Zurich, 1867, p. 5. Meerman, *Origines Typographicæ*. Hagæ Comit. 1765, 4to. Fiorillo, *Geschichte der zeichnenden Kunst in Deutschland*. Hannover, 1815, 8vo.

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down¹. It is, however, hardly necessary to say that many so-called copies of this period are nothing but productions of entirely independent artists working, according to the manner of the day, in adherence to a fixed and recognised type. When we find Berjeau saying that the *Biblia Pauperum* cuts were copied by Martin Schongauer, Israel van Mechenen, Albert Dürer and most of the ordinary Dutch woodcutters besides, it is evident that he has got himself into a complete labyrinth and lost his way, and unless we sternly refuse to start on vague ramblings of this kind we may come to the same end.

One of the copies of this book belonging to Lord Spencer (Copy B) is still bound in its original binding with an edition of the *Apocalypse* (Sotheby's fourth). The latter is to all appearance German, and is painted in the style of colouring which we associate with South Germany. The binding is impressed with the following inscription, *Iste liber est fratris Ulrici Gyslinger lectoris in Ulma minorum et illigatus est anno domini MCCCCLXVII per me Iohannes Rickenbach degyllengen*². Sotheby also mentions³ that the Grenville copy of the *Biblia Pauperum*, now in the British Museum (Grenv. 12090), was, when in the Gaignat collection, bound up with the third edition of the *Apocalypse*. The latter is now in the possession of the Duc d'Aumale, another copy of the same edition being in the King's Library in the British Museum.

The Horn copy of the *Biblia Pauperum*, which passed through the hands of Mr Inglis and Lord Vernon and is now in the possession of Mr Holford, was, when it first came to Horn,

¹ Plenty of notices of this kind are mentioned by Berjeau, *Biblia Pauperum*, reproduced in facsimile. London, 1859, fol.

² Ottley, *An inquiry into the origin and early history of engraving*. London, 1816, 3 vols. 4to.—Vol. i. p. 100, note.

³ Sotheby, *Principia Typographica*.—London, 1858, 3 vols. fol. Vol. i. pp. 22, 59. The Spencer B copy is, as already mentioned, of the same edition as the Cambridge copy. Three leaves of the same edition are preserved in the Print Room of the British Museum, D. 2. The binding of a volume in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* at Paris bears the following inscription: *Per me Johannem Rickenbach capellanum in Gylingen illigatus est anno Domini, 1469*. See *Bibliothèque Nationale. Notice des objets exposés*—Paris, 1878, No. 486 p. 95.

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bound up with a copy of the *Ars Moriendi* and with one of the Apocalypse. The original binding was ruthlessly destroyed, and Horn was only able to state from memory that it had “the following words, stamped at the extremity of the binding, towards the edge of the squares: ‘*Hic Liber Relegatus fuit per Plebanum Ecclesie—Anno Domini, 142(8).*’” The last figure of the inscription he was not sure about, but he felt quite certain of the other three. When, however, it is remembered that the figure 5, as then written, bore a strong resemblance to a 2, as we now write it, it does not seem improbable that Horn’s memory deceived him, and that the date borne by the binding was the more credible one of between 1450 and 1460. The whole matter, however, is unsatisfactory, and the destruction of the binding has deprived us of a most valuable piece of corroborative evidence. All we can say with any tolerable approach to certainty is that the book was printed not later than 1467, and this must be understood for the present to rest on the authority of Sotheby.

The preceding account of the *Biblia Pauperum* is, strictly speaking, beyond our present province; but it has seemed better to insert it here, that the reader may clearly see what the blocks are to which his attention must now be called.

On the eve of the Epiphany 1487, Peter van Os, the printer of Zwolle, published an edition of the *Epistles and Gospels* in Dutch, illustrated with a series of woodcuts which on examination are found to be cut-up portions of the set of blocks originally employed for the printing of Edition B of the *Biblia Pauperum*. From this time on, such cut-up portions were continually used for the illustration of books which issued from this and the allied press worked by Barmantloe in the neighbouring town of Hasselt. The last volume known to have contained any of them is the *Vulgaria* printed by Van Os in 1500, the title-page of which is adorned with one of the figures of prophets above referred to. That the style of the woodcuts afterwards made at Zwolle was much influenced by that of the *Biblia Pauperum* can scarcely be maintained. Because Zwolle is the only town where the original blocks can be shewn to have been, it does not follow that they were engraved there, though

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we cannot now fix for them any other locality of origin. We leave them therefore at Zwolle till further investigation enables us to place them elsewhere.

SECT. 2. The *Canticum Canticorum* (used 1494).

Certainly the most beautiful of the Block-books of the Low Countries is this volume of illustrations to the Song of Solomon. Four editions of it exist, and of these the first mentioned is by far the best, and presents all the characteristics of originality.

Edition A. (Sotheby 1)—British Museum; Earl Spencer (no title heading); National Library, Paris; Haarlem Library; Court Library, Munich (2 copies).

Edition B. (Sotheby 2)—Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Edition C. (Sotheby 3)—British Museum, National Library, Paris¹.

Edition D.—Court Library, Vienna.

The volume in every case is composed of eight sheets, printed only on one side, and bound together in the same manner as the *Biblia Pauperum*. The whole of each sheet seems to have been printed from one block. The woodcuts on all the leaves are similar. Each is divided by a double horizontal line into two compartments, of which there are therefore thirty-two in all. Christ, the Bride, her attendant maidens, and angels are the persons represented in various combinations. Some heraldic bearings are met with, but no satisfactory explanation of them has yet been given. The woodcutting is very carefully done, and the lines are beautifully finished. The figures are more slim in form, and more thoroughly imbued with the mystic mediæval spirit, than those of the *Biblia Pauperum*.

The original series, as has been said, was copied three or four times. Of the later history of the blocks of these copies we have no information. The blocks of the original edition seem

¹ The *Canticum Canticorum*, numbered Xyl. 31 at Munich, is either of this or of a fifth and quite unknown edition. Sotheby's account is too vague.