

The Gothic

in the tropics

A pioneering study in Brazil analyzes the work of the German xylographer Dürer that is stored in Rio de Janeiro

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Whoever said that the dull magazines found in the dentist offices don't have another purpose other than to entertain the next patient? The art historian Sandra Daige Antunes Hitner has excellent arguments to knock down this theory. It was while leafing through one of these examples that one of her friends came across an article about the unexplored engravings of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) in the archive of the National Library in Rio de Janeiro and commented on the fact to her. To examine the work of the artist influenced by the Renaissance that changed German esthetics was the mission tailored made for this researcher, in love with medieval Nordic culture. At that moment her doctorate project was born, carried out at the Communication and Arts School (ECA) of the University of São Paulo (USP) and financed through FAPESP. It consisted of a search for the authenticity and the antiquity of the work of the German artist, the greatest victim of plagiarism in the history of the arts and the most coveted xylographer in the world. In her masters thesis Sandra had already been the first researcher in the country to investigate artistic patrimony using laboratory methods used by restorers, such as X-rays, infrared, ultraviolet, tangential light and the chemical analysis of paint and wood. In order to have an idea of the importance of her research, only works examined in this manner by experts can figure in international catalogues, once they have gained a proven certificate. During her masters, she had carried out this study on a work of the primitive Flemish artist Hieronymus Bosch from the Museum of Art of São Paulo (Masp).

When she chose Dürer, the researcher thought that she would be faced with an easy task. The major difficulties had already been overcome through the research of Bosch, in which everything was new – Sandra had training in Brussels, Belgium, in order to learn to interpret the results from the methods used



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The Angel who holds the Key to Hell, belonging to the series *The Apocalypse of Saint John*, the first book by Dürer, done when the artist was twenty five years old. The Rio de Janeiro example bearing a watermark dating from the 16th century, but has no text on the reverse side

The Circumcision
from the series *The
Life of the Virgin*,
has an amorphous
watermark and is
without text behind



in the search for the authenticity of works of art. One can then fully understand her surprise when confronted with the Rio de Janeiro patrimony originating from the Portuguese Royal Library. The archive had passed through decades as the victim of the ignorance of its keepers. According to an explicit report in the researcher's thesis, written by the director of the National Library of Rio in 1876, José Zephirino Brum, the works of Dürer had been in very poor state, deposited in drawers, eaten by bugs, in a non-acclimatized environment, worn down by salty air. "I had imagined that I was going to find something fine, after all it was the king's archive", Sandra says. His was definitely not what happened. Among the xylographs analyzed, there were many with low artistic quality.

Sandra Hitner found in the library some one hundred and sixty seven works by Dürer, all mixed together – xylographs (paper prints coming from

masters sculptured in wood), engravings and metal molds. Her first task was to separate out one from the other. Once this phase was completed, the researcher concentrated upon the ninety one xylographs that she had found. In order to begin the search for authenticity, it was necessary to study the material – in the case of the xylograph, the paper. However, she didn't know how to do this since all of her knowledge was based on the investigating examinations of paints on wood.

In order to familiarize herself with the material, the historian got in touch with the Dürer print archive of the Eugène Dutuit Collection, in the Petit Palais Museum in Paris. Afterwards she continued her studies in Nuremberg and Berlin in Germany, and in Vienna in Austria, at the Albertina Museum, locations that house the most important Dürer collections in the world. "I

almost fainted when I compared what I saw there with the collection that was in Brazil", Sandra explains. According to the researcher, even the color of the paper was totally different, since the quality of the medieval material was also variable. The most important characteristic for the definition of this quality, as well as the color, are the water mark designs, since, according to the design that the paper bears, one can define the age and the location where it was made.

By observing the various certificates of the main archives, Sandra could verify that the Brazilian collection was not as noble as had previously been supposed. Xylographs are prints taken from a wooden master and can only be considered authentic when printed from the master. Hence their originality is not identified through autography.

The analysis of a xylograph is very complicated because of the defects in the block printing. The older the mold,



The Carrying of the Cross, from the series The Great Passion: cracks, gaps and rusty marks

the fewer the typical features that the print possesses. The pieces begin to show gaps, become worn, damaged or altered by the action of time and by inclemency such as heat and humidity. The wooden masters are attacked by dry rot, which leave marks on the surface in the form of routes taken or holes, and, on the prints, they show up as white circles or oval marks. The restorations carried out over the centuries have destroyed important indicators of authenticity. The more they have been repaired the greater has been the de-characterization of the print, which ends up spoiling the beauty of the xylograph, which lies exactly in the clear and constant traits. The “newer” the impression the more it is discontinuous and rubbed out. There are works of Albrecht Dürer that had been taken from the original master starting from the 16th century and going on into the 19th century.

Having mastered the technique of recognition of the medieval paper,

Sandra moved towards the other laboratory tests. She made use of tangential light in order to analyze the constancy of the layers of ink. She placed them under the microscopic lens and ultraviolet light to observe the repairs and eventual repaired spots. She photographed using infrared film in order to capture the watermarks and the adjacent area, should there be any. In this manner she was able to produce a number of pieces of data sufficient for the organization of certificates.

Apocalypse - The most well known xylographs of Dürer are those of the Christian series: *The Apocalypse of Saint John, The Great Passion and the Life of the Virgin*. On the back of each one of them there was a text written by a Benedictine monk. Dürer made only a few engravings on their own, which are rare, as a manner of testing and as gifts. However, all of them contained a manuscript on the back. This was one mo-

re reason for discarding a number of other engravings from the Portuguese royal collection. Many of them do not have any text on the reverse side.

Another absence to be found was in the watermarks (filigree) – various prints do not have them. And to finish, when Sandra was in Berlin, researching dictionaries, she got to know that many of the Brazilian archive watermarks don't match up with those recognized in Germany. In order to be certain that the “Brazilians” were amorphous she went to the Municipal Upper Archive of Stuttgart, currently the largest agglomerated center of filigrees. There she found the card catalogue of Gehard Piccard, the scientists who developed the painstaking work with the watermarks of the medieval German school. During a two week period the researcher examined more than eight thousand cards of possible watermarks. During the comparison she confirmed her skepticism: the Rio archive didn't ma-

*Saint John
Swallowing the Book
that the Angel had
Presented to him,
from the Apocalypse:
the engraving didn't
merit a certificate*



tch up with a single example from the Piccard Center.

Since 1999, Sandra has been journeying once per year in search of matching material. Amongst other specialists she has established contact with professor Matthias Mende from Nuremberg, one of the most knowledgeable persons concerning Dürer throughout the world, from whom she received facsimile books of engravings, fundamental material to give continuity to her research. In Berlin, where Dürer's engravings are on display, she had authority from the guardians of the museum to photograph what she liked, even those not normally allowed. As well she could touch the works in order to assimilate the small details.

Coming from the historian's research project, twenty six of the ninety one engravings within the Brazilian archive have gained certificates of originality. Nevertheless, it is possible to note in some of them that, though

within the standards of originality, or that is to say, having been printed from the original Dürer mold, the print is not of good quality. "Consequently we have in the archive various other original magnificent prints, some of them

dated with precision", Sandra says. The historian included in her doctorate thesis, under a separate heading, prints that do not demonstrate clarity under analysis, leaving out the certification – they were catalogued with respect to their inherent documental value. Those that were surprising for the variation in their watermarks will be sent to the Piccard Center in Stuttgart for cataloguing.

In the end the question remains: how could a royal archive contain within its collection examples so unequal? There remains the possibility of some of the engravings having been exchanged after the Portuguese court had left for Brazil. Or, who knows, the king's ambassadors incumbent with the task of gathering together precious articles in Europe for the Crown didn't know much about art. The fact is that there is, within this field of history, a lot to be uncovered in the National Library.

THE PROJECT

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MODALITY

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