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Royal Academy of Arts  
Exhibition in Focus

RA

# Renaissance Impressions

Chiaroscuro woodcuts from the  
Collections of Georg Baselitz  
and the Albertina, Vienna



# An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

*Written by Dr. Katie Faulkner*

For the Learning Department  
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## Renaissance Impressions Chiaroscuro woodcuts from the Collections of Georg Baselitz and the Albertina, Vienna

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Cover:  
Cat. 18 (detail) Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*

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Academy  
of Arts

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## Introduction

The woodcuts in this exhibition were produced during the sixteenth century, coinciding with the end of a remarkable period in the history of European art, known as the Renaissance. Beginning in the fourteenth century, new styles of painting, sculpture and architecture began to emerge. Inspired by the art of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as new scientific developments, artists worked to produce highly realistic images of the human body and of the natural world. The period culminated in Italy with the High Renaissance, a flowering of art that was embodied in the work of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael.

To achieve a more naturalistic feel in painting, artists were experimenting with new ways to use the effects of light and dark. (The Italian term *chiaroscuro* can be translated into English as 'light-dark' and describes the distribution of light and dark in a work of art, particularly where there is a strong contrast between them.) Painters mixed and blended lighter and darker coloured oil paint, often applied in transparent layers, which allowed them to create a more naturalistic sense of depth of space, and a realistic modelling of faces, drapery and natural forms to give a three-dimensional result. During the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci was seen as the pioneer of this technique. Chiaroscuro woodcuts developed because printmakers wanted to use woodblocks and ink to imitate the painterly effects of light and shadow in paintings. The method enabled printmakers to create subtle gradations of tone, which are used to suggest three-dimensional volume and depth.

The works in this exhibition at the Royal Academy are some of the most important and valuable examples of chiaroscuro prints, from the collections of the Albertina Museum in Vienna, and from the private collection of the German artist Georg Baselitz. *Renaissance Impressions* provides a unique opportunity to see how the chiaroscuro woodcut technique developed; from its invention in Germany in the early 1500s to the varied ways that artists across Europe, particularly in Italy and the Netherlands, experimented with this new technology and created diverse imagery, with subjects ranging from the religious and mythological to portraits and landscapes.

## The chiaroscuro woodcut technique

A chiaroscuro woodcut is printed from two or more woodblocks. A key, or line, block carries the outlines of the design and gives some indication of shading through the use of hatched lines. The tone, or colour, block is exactly the same size as the key block and is used to lay down a coloured background and the highlights. Woodblock printing is a relief process. Designs are carved into blocks made from relatively soft fruitwoods, using knives and gouges. The areas to be printed are left raised. The key block is cut first, then printed onto the tone block as a guide for placing the

highlights and shadows. The tone block is then cut to create the separation of colours and the placing of contrasting areas of light and dark, from which the technique takes its name. The highlights are cut away from the surface of the woodblock so they do not take up the ink. When the block is printed, these areas remain blank, revealing the white of the paper as a highlight. A print may require several tone blocks, the making of which requires careful planning and great skill.

Next, oil-based inks are dabbed onto the raised surfaces of the blocks. These inks came in a wide range of colours and were usually made from mineral pigments. Neutral or earth tones were the most commonly used, but some artists used bright colours, sometimes in striking combinations.

It is important to understand that a chiaroscuro print is created in stages. The technique is very precise, because to provide a clear impression each block has to be lined up exactly. A tone block is printed first to place the highlights, the lightest areas of the print. The inked block is placed onto a sheet of paper and then pressure is applied using a screw-and-lever press (similar or identical to the type press invented by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany in the 1450s). The tone is then built up in the print from light to dark, using one or more tone blocks. The colours are usually closely related to one another, because the emphasis is on building up a range of tonal values. Finally, the line block is printed, usually with black ink, providing the outlines for the whole image.

## German prints before 1508

The origins of the chiaroscuro woodcut can be found in sixteenth-century Germany, but the beginnings of the technology required for colour printing and the demand for coloured woodcuts emerged in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was the first German artist to make a substantial income from printmaking after setting up his workshop in Nuremberg in 1495. The quality of prints he produced dramatically raised the status of the medium in Germany, including this work, *Rhinoceros*.

**Cat. 18** This woodcut records the arrival of the first live rhinoceros to reach Europe since the third century AD. Dürer made a drawing, and later a woodcut, of this remarkable creature, which was a gift from the ruler of Gujarat, Sultan Muzafar, to the governor of Portuguese India, Alfonso d'Albuquerque. The rhinoceros was then sent to King Manuel I in Lisbon, where it arrived on 20 May 1515. Dürer never saw the animal himself, but reportedly based his drawing on a description in a newsletter and from sketches, which were sent to him in Nuremberg from Lisbon. Later on in the year, the King despatched the rhinoceros to Rome as a gift for Pope Leo X, but unfortunately it did not survive the journey – the ship carrying it sank, and the rhinoceros drowned.

**'[The rhinoceros] has the colour of a speckled tortoise and it is covered with thick scales.'**  
Albrecht Dürer

**Cat. 18**  
Albrecht Dürer  
**Rhinoceros,**  
1515 and c. 1620  
Chiaroscuro woodcut printed from two blocks, the tone block in green  
21.1 x 29.9 cm

Albertina, Vienna  
Photo Albertina, Vienna

In this print, based on Dürer's original drawing, the rhinoceros's notoriously thick skin appears to have been transformed into a suit of armour. The white highlights across the back and ribs and on the front shoulder make the rhinoceros's hide look like burnished metal. The segmented body is covered with different patterns and textures, which look like animal skins we would recognise – patches, spots and scales – but this seems to have been done for decorative effect rather than accuracy.

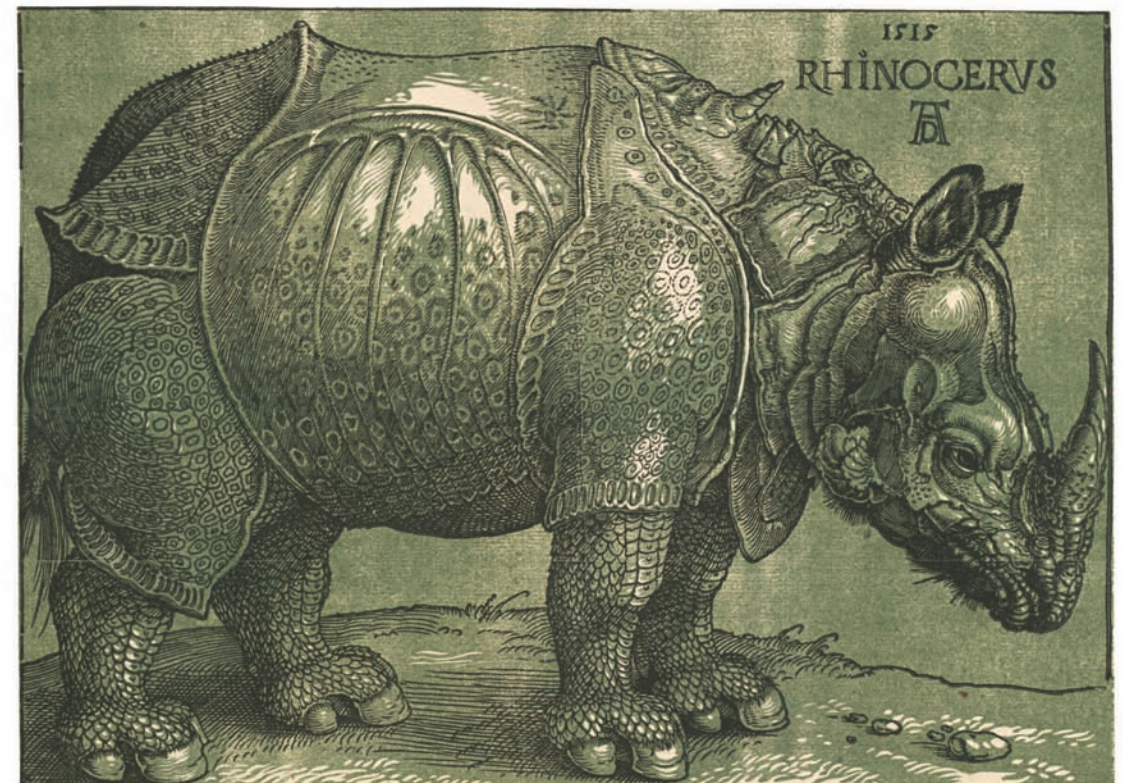
The rhinoceros's head is the most naturalistically drawn, with dense, radiating lines that create deep areas of shadow between the wrinkles of the neck, and fine strokes that indicate whiskers under the chin and fur inside the ears. Dürer also shows how the knobby horn has grown, clearly drawing the overlapping layers of keratin.

The first edition of this woodcut was printed in black and white, but the image became so popular that another eight editions were printed, including the dark green chiaroscuro example seen here, which the Amsterdam publisher Willem Janssen printed in around 1620, using tone blocks.

**Look carefully at this print. Can you tell which areas were printed from or defined by the first tone block? Which areas would have been printed last?**

**Why do you think Dürer's print of the rhinoceros was so popular?**

**How would such information about a rare or unusual animal be shared today?**





Buying prints was a competitive pursuit, with each connoisseur wanting his collection to be the most lavish and up-to-date. This was certainly the case for Maximilian of Austria, who became Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1508. Like many rulers and leaders, Maximilian was extremely concerned with his legacy. He was unable to effectively control his vast empire, but instead he decided he could shape how he was remembered through celebratory woodcuts and prints. These images were sent out and displayed on the walls of council chambers and great halls across the Imperial territory.

Maximilian's patronage acted as a powerful stimulus to professional printmakers, especially in cities such as Nuremberg and Augsburg in Germany. The chiaroscuro woodcut emerged from the competitive atmosphere that was fostered by those printmakers vying for Maximilian's patronage, although the foundations of the technique had been laid in the previous century. Erhard Ratdolt, a printer working in Augsburg, played a key role in the development of printing in more than one colour. In 1482, while working in Venice, Ratdolt produced an edition of the book *The Elements* by the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid, with its preface printed in gold. Three years later, Ratdolt was experimenting with using up to three colours in the diagrams for a book on astronomy known as *Sphaericum opusculum*, by Johannes de Sacrobosco. In the same year he printed the first coloured woodcut – a coat of arms for Bishop Johann II of Wedernberg – in black, yellow and red.

Importantly, Ratdolt's prints are not classed as chiaroscuro woodcuts because colour is used to fill in outlines, rather than to create the appearance of three-dimensionality. His colour-printing method offered an alternative to colouring prints by hand, although this remained a common practice. However, Ratdolt's most significant contribution to the birth of the chiaroscuro print came through his collaboration with the local Augsburg artist Hans Burgkmair (1473–1531). In the 1490s, Burgkmair produced designs for the title pages of religious texts, to be printed in colour, which were published by Ratdolt. As we will see, Burgkmair played a decisive role in the development of the chiaroscuro woodcut in the first decade of the sixteenth century.

## Claims to invention: Hans Burgkmair and Lucas Cranach

In a letter written in 1508, Conrad Peutinger, who closely advised Emperor Maximilian on many of his artistic projects, mentioned receiving woodcuts of knights on horseback, made with 'gold and silver'. He was referring to Lucas Cranach the Elder's *St George* (fig. 1), printed the year before and now in the British Museum. Cranach (c. 1472–1553) was the son of a painter and as a young man he had travelled around Germany and Austria seeking work. In 1505 he became the court painter to Frederick the Wise of Saxony and set up a workshop in Wittenberg in

**'I have, together with my artists, discovered a method of printing in gold and silver on parchment and paper.'**  
Conrad Peutinger, writing to Duke Georg of Saxony, 24 September 1508



**Fig.1**  
Lucas Cranach the Elder  
**St George,**  
c.1505–10  
Colour woodcut printed  
from two blocks  
23.3 x 15.9 cm  
The British Museum, London  
© Trustees of the British Museum

wanted to create competition between Cranach and Burgkmair, who was one of the most important painters and the foremost designer of woodcuts in the city of Augsburg. In response to this challenge Burgkmair produced a pair of prints, his own *St George and the Dragon* and a print of *Emperor Maximilian on Horseback*. Maximilian was devoted to St George, who he believed personified all the ideals of Christian chivalry. He actively encouraged the status of the knightly Order of St George, in preparation for a religious crusade against the Turks. These elaborate equestrian figures were a means of promoting the Emperor's own image as a defender of the Christian faith. The prints on view in the exhibition represent an important step in the development of the chiaroscuro woodcut.

Burgkmair's technique differed from Cranach's. The paper sheet was prepared with a coloured wash in the same way, but rather than using gold leaf Burgkmair picked out specific details using metallic ink applied directly to the block. Crucially also, Burgkmair used a tone block rather than a line block to create white highlights. The name Jost de Negker appears in both prints, and he is often given the credit for introducing the tone blocks to these impressions. De Negker (1485–1544) was a specialist woodcutter, originally from Antwerp in Belgium, but had settled in

Northern Germany. Cranach's *St George* represents an important stage in the history of colour printing and, like chiaroscuro woodcuts, was printed using multiple blocks. In the version in the British Museum, the paper was prepared with a wash of indigo pigment to provide the blue background. The wash was applied in horizontal bands, creating the effect of a cloud-streaked sky. This suggests that Cranach was attempting to emulate a style of drawing done on a coloured background, which was very fashionable at the time. Next, gold leaf was applied with a line block, to add a sense of luxury, but also to show the last of the sunlight glinting off St George's armour and the dragon's scaly throat. The outline block was then printed in black and, finally, the white highlights were put in by scraping away the surface of the paper. Cranach designed the outline block to work also as an independent composition that could be printed as a monochrome print.

**Cats 1 and 2** Peutinger was so impressed when he saw Cranach's *St George* that he commissioned Hans Burgkmair to conduct his own experiment with colour printing. Peutinger





**Cat. 1**

Hans Burgkmair the Elder  
**St George and the Dragon**,  
 1508 and c.1509–10

Chiaroscuro woodcut printed  
 from two blocks, the tone  
 block in beige  
 31.9 x 22.5 cm

Collection Georg Baselitz  
 Photo Albertina, Vienna



**Cat. 2**

Hans Burgkmair the Elder  
**Emperor Maximilian on  
 Horseback**, 1508 and 1518

Chiaroscuro woodcut printed  
 from two blocks, the tone  
 block in greenish beige  
 32.2 x 22.6 cm

Albertina, Vienna  
 Photo Albertina, Vienna





**Cat. 3**

Lucas Cranach the Elder  
**St Christopher**, 1509 and  
 second half of the sixteenth  
 century

Chiaroscuro woodcut printed  
 from two blocks, the tone  
 block in yellowish brown  
 28 x 19.6 cm

Collection Georg Baselitz  
 Photo Albertina, Vienna

Augsburg in around 1509. Printmaking was a collaborative process, and Burgkmair and de Negker worked together closely, with the artist focusing on the design and the cutting of the woodblock and printing left to the trained craftsman.

**Cat. 3** De Negker also worked with Cranach, and there was some dispute about exactly which artist or printmaker first discovered the chiaroscuro woodcut technique. Burgkmair, Cranach and de Negker were each eager to claim the invention as their own. Cranach also adopted the use of the tone block in his work, *St Christopher*. Cranach shows St Christopher clambering up a riverbank carrying a small child on his back. According to legendary accounts of his life, St Christopher was over seven feet tall and had a fearsome face. He endured a long search to find a way to serve Christ, until he met a hermit who suggested that Christopher's size and strength meant that he could help others cross a dangerous river. After he had been performing this service for some time, a little child asked Christopher to carry him across. As they attempted to ford the river, it became swollen and the child became heavier and heavier. When they finally reached the shore the child revealed himself to be Christ.

In his version of this religious subject, Cranach used a tone block for the first time. He left parts blank to allow the white paper to create highlights. This adds a particularly painterly effect to the landscape as light gleams upon the rocky cliff and through the puffs of cloud. The print is now dated between 1509 and 1510, but the earliest versions were signed with the date 1506. It seems that Cranach deliberately predated the prints to falsely suggest that he had pioneered the use of tone blocks before Burgkmair and de Negker, making it appear that he had invented the chiaroscuro woodcut. Even today, the lack of precise documentary evidence and the close working relationship de Negker shared with both Burgkmair and Cranach make it difficult to establish who was the first to use the technique, but the composition may give us some clues. In Cranach's *St Christopher*, horizontal lines on the rocks, on the surface of the water and in the sky seem to unify the whole image. The line block and the definition provided by its black outlines are still important to Cranach in this woodcut. In contrast, Burgkmair's *St George and the Dragon* and *Emperor Maximilian on Horseback* show a painterly modulation between areas of light and shadow, rather than a reliance on graphic lines, which may suggest that Burgkmair and de Negker were the first to pioneer the chiaroscuro method.

**Why was there such competition between Cranach and Burgkmair to claim the invention of the chiaroscuro woodcut technique?**

**Why do you think there was an appetite for cutting-edge and luxurious prints among collectors?**



## The spread of the chiaroscuro woodcut: Hans Baldung Grien

Artists across Germany began to follow Cranach and Burgkmair's example and adopted the chiaroscuro woodcut technique, including Hans Baldung Grien (1484–1545), who produced some of the most original works of art in the medium. Unusual for an artist at this time, Baldung came from a family of professionals rather than artisans. His father was a lawyer working for the Bishop of Strasbourg and his uncle became honorary physician to Emperor Maximilian. Hans Baldung (whose nickname 'Grien' may have arisen from his use of the colour green) probably worked alongside Albrecht Dürer, between 1503 and 1507, as his student in Nuremberg, but set up his own workshop in Strasbourg in 1510. He began working with the chiaroscuro technique when it was still very new, although it is not known exactly how Baldung learnt the method. He would certainly have been aware of Burgkmair's work as they both contributed to Emperor Maximilian's project to produce a lavishly decorated prayer book in 1515.

**Cat. 12** Baldung's subtle use of the tone block and his highly expressive style, seen in his *Witches' Sabbath*, was unlike anything seen in Strasbourg before. Representations of witchcraft were common in the early sixteenth century, but based on his woodcuts, it seems that Baldung had a particular interest in magic and the supernatural. At this time *Malleus Maleficarum*, known as the witch-hunting manual, was a popular book and may have inspired some of Baldung's imagery. Here, the witches are shown preparing to worship the devil. Skulls and bones litter the ground and a witch's cat sits hunched next to a tree. Four witches are cooking up a sinister concoction in their cauldron, while above them another rides a flying goat. As the young witch lifts the lid off the cauldron, fumes billow up into the sky.

Baldung has captured the upward movement of the clouds and plumes of smoke with long, sinuous lines from the key block, which are echoed in the tone block and the highlights. The horrifying aspects of the image are counteracted by Baldung's interest in the female form. The tone block has been printed in grey, and the shadows and highlights emphasise the erotic poses and rounded bodies of the witches. The fine, delicate lines in black and white are suggestive of soft, pliable female flesh.

**'For some learned men propound this reason; that there are three things in nature, the Tongue, an Ecclesiastic, and a Woman, which know no moderation in goodness or vice; and when they exceed the bounds of their condition they reach the greatest heights and the lowest depths of goodness and vice. When they are governed by a good spirit, they are most excellent in virtue; but when they are governed by an evil spirit, they indulge the worst possible vices.'**

James Sprenger and Henry Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486

### Cat. 12

Hans Baldung Grien  
**Witches' Sabbath,**  
1510

Chiaroscuro woodcut printed from two blocks, the tone block in greyish beige  
36.7 x 25.4 cm

Albertina, Vienna  
Photo Albertina, Vienna







**'Nor has there been wanting one who has had the enterprise to execute with woodblocks prints that possess the appearance of having been made with the brush after the manner of chiaroscuro, which is an ingenious and difficult thing. This was Ugo da Carpi, who, although he was a mediocre painter, was nevertheless a man of most subtle wit in strange and fanciful inventions!'**

Giorgio Vasari, 'Lives of Marcantonio Bolognese (Raimondi) and Other Engravers of Prints', *Lives of the Artists*, 1568

#### Cat. 39

Ugo da Carpi, after Parmigianino

**Diogenes**, c. 1527

Chiaroscuro woodcut printed from four blocks, the tone blocks in brown  
47.6 x 34 cm

Collection Georg Baselitz  
Photo Albertina, Vienna

#### Fig. 2

Parmigianino

**Diogenes**, 1524–27

Red chalk, heightened with white chalk

Private collection

## The chiaroscuro woodcut comes to Italy: Ugo da Carpi

Although artists such as Baldung, Burgkmair and Cranach produced prints that are considered to be among the highest achievements of printmaking, the chiaroscuro woodcut technique was not used for long in Germany. The technique soon found a new home in Italy. Nowadays, thanks to modern methods of communication, artists can share and exchange ideas almost instantly. In the sixteenth century, however, artistic ideas took longer to spread, but even so there was still constant communication between cities. Merchants from across continents travelled in order to trade their goods and artists moved around looking for work or inspiration in the great collections of the aristocratic courts of Europe. The artist Ugo da Carpi (c. 1480–1532), for example, would have discovered Cranach and Burgkmair's chiaroscuro woodcuts when they were brought to Venice, which was at the centre of the Italian publishing industry. He even claimed he invented the technique in 1516, a myth reinforced by the sixteenth-century biographer Giorgio Vasari.

Ugo da Carpi did not, as he claimed, invent the chiaroscuro woodcut technique, but he was responsible for introducing it to Italy and went on to develop the method in exciting ways. Interesting differences in the approaches of German and Italian artists began to emerge. German artists gave greater importance to the key or line block, which essentially completed the design, while the tone blocks provided background tints. In Italy, artists tended to place far more emphasis on creating large areas of tone, punctuated with dark accents and bright highlights.

**Cat. 39** Ugo's prints, such as his *Diogenes* from 1527, are considered to be masterpieces of the chiaroscuro woodcut. There are many different impressions of the print, each of which has been made in a slightly different way. *Diogenes* was created after a design in red chalk by another artist, Parmigianino (1503–1540), (**fig. 2**), which Ugo realised using four blocks. Broad areas of colour create an effect very similar to painting. The ancient Greek philosopher is shown as powerfully muscular and although he sits reading a book, the twist of his body, the billowing cloak and the acute angles in the crooked arm and bent knees add a sense of dynamism to the static pose. Ugo emphasises this by a bold use of white highlights picking out the rippling muscles.





This focus on creating dramatic or unusual movement was one of the central concerns of Mannerist art, an artistic style that was predominant in Italy in the 1520s. The lack of an enclosing line block also creates a more effortless effect than the busier and more laboured drawing style of German chiaroscuro prints. Visualising how to produce a four-colour woodblock print was very complicated, but artists aspired to draw and cut with a spontaneous and graceful style, to demonstrate that they could handle their materials with great confidence. Although Ugo's involvement with chiaroscuro prints only lasted a few years, the complexity of this image shows how far the chiaroscuro woodcut technique had developed in just two decades.

## Domenico Beccafumi and Andrea Andreani

The chiaroscuro woodcuts of artist Domenico Beccafumi (1486–1551) are among the most original and fascinating examples of the chiaroscuro technique. Unlike the other sixteenth-century woodcutters who predominately came from Northern Italy, Beccafumi hailed from Siena. He was an exceptionally versatile artist, who was also active as a painter, sculptor and engraver, and his painterly distribution of colour and light clearly follows the approach of Ugo da Carpi. One of Beccafumi's favorite subjects was the portrayal of apostles who, riveted by a vision, gaze into the distance or are rendered lost in thought. In some cases, Beccafumi combined the techniques of copperplate engraving and chiaroscuro woodcut – a complicated process requiring two different printing presses. He used this approach for representing a pair of apostles (cat. 86) in which the white highlights match the delicacy and linear style of the thinly etched lines of shading. This speaks to Beccafumi's subtle late style, in which he aimed to achieve the precision of copperplate engraving in the woodcut process.

Born in Mantua, Andrea Andreani (1540–1623) was the most famous and prolific Italian artist making chiaroscuro works towards the end of the sixteenth century. His style of cutting was careful and controlled, faithfully conveying the character of the designs on which he based his sheets. The artist soon began to tackle chiaroscuro prints in huge formats, for which he used several blocks with four plates each. With these monumental formats, which probably served as a substitute for paintings, Andreani explored the limits of the chiaroscuro woodcut. In 1586 he moved to Siena, following in the footsteps of Beccafumi. He executed woodcuts after Beccafumi's inlaid marble mosaic floors in Siena Cathedral, and collaborated with the most important Sienese artists of the day.

Between 1602 and 1610, Andreani dedicated himself almost exclusively to the reissue of earlier chiaroscuro woodcuts by other artists. He reworked partly damaged blocks or added new ones. In doing so, he frequently removed the names of former cutters and replaced them with his monogram 'AA', which identified him as the owner and publisher of the prints.

**'This elastic concept of authorship and ownership seems fairly straightforward ... But there were many possible configurations of people who came together to produce an engraving and get it onto the market.'**  
Evelyn Lincoln, *The Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker*, 2000

## The status of the artist: originality and collaboration

The artists and printmakers included in this Royal Academy exhibition lived in different cities and each would have worked according to different financial rewards and constraints, thus it is difficult to generalise about the operation of each different artist or workshop, but it is important to understand that printmaking was a collaborative enterprise. In Germany, chiaroscuro woodcuts were generally made according to original designs. In Italy, the chiaroscuro woodcut had a much longer history and was generally used to reproduce images made by other artists. This can be seen clearly in the prints that came from the workshops of Ugo da Carpi and his followers.

The language associated with printmaking in sixteenth-century Italy gives a picture of the different roles of people involved with the trade. An *incisore* or *intagliatore* was the engraver or cutter, who would have had to be highly skilled in both drawing and carving the wooden blocks used to make his prints. The woodblock cutter would often require the assistance of the *impressori*, or printers. The printer applied ink to the woodcuts and ran them through the printing press. Finally, the *editore* was the person responsible for publishing, marketing and selling the prints.

As the business of printmaking involved so many different people, it is not surprising that artists such as Ugo da Carpi were anxious to make it clear who had come up with the original print design and to define its legal owner. At the same time, woodcuts were also being used to make copies of works by different artists. Ugo produced woodcut copies of famous paintings by Raphael and Parmigianino, for example, but one of his pupils, Antonio da Trento (1508–1550), took to the extreme the idea of reproducing the work of other artists. According to Giorgio Vasari, Antonio lived in Parmigianino's house. One morning, before Parmigianino was awake, Antonio stole a trunk filled with his master's woodcuts, copper engravings and drawings. Although Parmigianino eventually got the prints back, he never saw his drawings again.

**Cat. 54** Although Antonio da Trento's design for *Narcissus* is taken from a black chalk drawing by Parmigianino, it still demonstrates his great skill as a printmaker. The subject originates from Greek mythology. Narcissus was a very beautiful young man who rejected the love of the nymph, Echo. As punishment for his cruel rejection of the girl, he was made to fall in love with his own reflection and, over time, transformed into a flower on the bank of a pool of water. Ironically in this image, his handsome face is turned away from the viewer. The plants and trees are intricately drawn, with the veins of the leaves and succulent bunches of grapes visible beneath them. These details do not detract from the young man's body, which is the main focus of the image, but there is a close visual relationship between his sleek and





**Cat. 54**

Antonio da Trento, after  
Parmigianino

**Narcissus**, c. 1527–30/1  
Chiaroscuro woodcut  
printed from two blocks,  
the tone block in brown  
28.9 x 18 cm

Collection Georg Baselitz  
Photo Albertina, Vienna

elegant physique and the nature that surrounds him. Densely hatched lines are used to denote both human flesh and the bark of the tree, and even the shapes of the muscles of Narcissus's back resemble the tree trunk. This perhaps points to Narcissus's eventual metamorphosis into a flower. At the same time, the different areas of the drawing are kept distinct from one another by Antonio's use of smooth, continuous outlines and the bright white highlights that fall across Narcissus's ribs and spine, in contrast to the areas of deep shadow in the undergrowth. The sculpted bust of a woman (Echo, we presume) sits in the bottom left-hand corner of the print. Her tragic facial expression adds further emotional depth to Narcissus's plight.

**Artists such as Ugo da Carpi and Antonio da Trento did not produce their own original designs for their prints. How does this affect the importance of their work?**

## The Netherlandish chiaroscuro woodcut

In contrast to its history in Germany and Italy, the development of the chiaroscuro woodcut in the Netherlands was far more fragmented. No one style or tradition of coloured woodcut dominated; and the medium did not attain the same level of popularity as it had done among German and Italian collectors. The chiaroscuro woodcut was explored by a small number of artists, some of whom were not primarily printmakers. Perhaps their lack of conventional printmaking knowledge allowed them the freedom to push the technique in alternative directions and explore new possibilities.

**Cat. 97** The first Netherlandish artist to exploit the full potential of the chiaroscuro woodcut was Frans Floris (1517–1570), a painter and etcher from Antwerp. He had visited Italy in the early 1540s, primarily to study antique sculpture in Rome, but while he was there he also paid great attention to the work of contemporary Italian artists. It is likely that his chiaroscuro woodcuts were inspired by the work of artists such as Ugo da Carpi and Michelangelo.

In *David Playing the Harp before Saul*, the figure with crossed arms in the centre of the composition is, in his stance and clothing, a direct quotation from Michelangelo's fresco paintings for the Pauline Chapel in Rome. Features of the way the woodblocks were designed and cut also suggest an Italian influence. The woodblock cutter for this piece, Joos Gietleughen, has arranged the colour broadly across the composition; pale highlights are distributed over the surface, and delicate black lines define the details. This style is similar to woodcuts by the Italian artist Niccolò Vicentino, based on drawings by Parmigianino which are included in this Royal Academy exhibition.

**Cat. 97** overleaf

Frans Floris

**David Playing the Harp  
before Saul**,  
1555

Chiaroscuro woodcut  
printed from four blocks,  
the tone blocks in pale red  
and reddish brown, on  
brownish paper  
33.4 x 48.1 cm

Collection Georg Baselitz  
Photo Albertina, Vienna







Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617) was one of the most important and experimental printmakers in the Netherlands. Goltzius was born fifty years after the invention of the chiaroscuro woodcut technique in Germany. He is best known for his drawings and engravings, but his woodcuts display a wide variety of styles and subjects. He worked with the medium for fifteen years at the very end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, first using the line block, then relying purely on tone blocks, before reintroducing the line block. Unlike Floris, who worked with woodcutters to produce his prints, Goltzius generally cut his own blocks, which indicates that he wanted to retain a great deal of control over the finished results. The development in Goltzius's woodcuts can be closely aligned to his drawing style. Some of his woodcuts seem to have been made because he wanted to experiment with the medium, rather than to meet the demands of publishers and collectors. Goltzius did not see the chiaroscuro woodcut purely as a way of reproducing paintings, but wanted to explore the new artistic potential of it.

**Cat. 103** Between 1588 and 1590, Goltzius produced a number of chiaroscuro woodcuts featuring subjects taken from classical mythology. Like Floris, Goltzius had travelled to Italy in 1590. In this woodcut we can see him combining the elegance of the Italian Mannerist style with his interest in anatomy and unusual poses. *Hercules Killing Cacus* from 1588, one of Goltzius's largest and most impressive woodcuts, shows a scene from the twelve labours of Hercules. The hero's tenth task was to journey to the end of the world to steal a herd of red cattle from Geryon, a three-headed, six-legged monster. On his way back to Greece, Cacus, a savage, fire-breathing giant, stole the cattle, which can be seen on the right-hand side of the print. Goltzius shows Hercules at his moment of triumph. After breaking into Cacus's cave, he is about to slay his enemy with a club. Goltzius has chosen a pose, legs splayed, arms raised high above the head, which allows him to emphasise the strength in Hercules's straining muscles. His body is athletic and his pose graceful in comparison to the grotesque twists of Cacus's torso and arm and the knotted, bulging muscles of his thighs and back. This print reflects Goltzius's skill and versatility as a woodcut designer. On the line block he has used short, irregular strokes to model the musculature of the figures, contained within fluid outlines. These lines would not make sense, however, without the colour provided by two tone blocks, which were used to create a sense of depth and volume, through the contrasting of yellow and bright green and the dramatic lighting.

**Why might Goltzius want to control all stages of the printmaking process?**

**Cat. 103**  
Hendrick Goltzius  
**Hercules Killing Cacus,**  
1588  
Chiaroscuro woodcut  
printed from three blocks,  
the tone blocks in yellow  
and green  
41.1 x 33.3 cm  
Collection Georg Baselitz  
Photo Albertina, Vienna





## The function of prints

Chiaroscuro woodcuts were generally printed onto paper and they were easily reproduced, making them much cheaper than an oil painting on canvas or wood. This meant that people from different social classes could afford prints, although the high quality woodcuts in this exhibition would still have commanded high prices.

Woodcuts and prints were displayed in many different ways: they could be carefully placed in frames, or carelessly pasted up onto a wall. Some collectors gathered their prints together into albums.

Prints also played a very important role in the education of artists and artisans. Artistic training in the sixteenth century revolved around studying works of art from ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the work of contemporary artists. Learning to draw from copies of great paintings and sculptures was one of the first and most important stages in an artist's training. A young trainee would not generally be allowed to learn how to become a painter, sculptor or engraver until he or she had mastered the art of accurate draughtsmanship. If they could not visit a work of art in person, they could instead study a printed reproduction of a painting. Most printmaking workshops would also keep model-books, albums of the best examples produced by their workshop, so that apprentices could learn to accurately reproduce their teacher's style.

**Cat. 95** Some rare woodcuts by the German engraver Erasmus Loy (1535–1570) had a very unexpected function. These woodcuts are decorative depictions of Renaissance architecture. The architectural forms are simplified and the chiaroscuro effect relies purely on tones of black and brown. The overall effect emphasises pattern rather than line. These unusual prints were used as wallpaper, which would have been glued to wood panelling or furniture to imitate the effect of wooden inlay. Householders would have bought these cheap prints to make their furnishings seem more



**Cat. 95**

Erasmus Loy  
**Courtyard with  
Renaissance Architecture,**

c. 1550

Chiaroscuro woodcut  
printed from two blocks,  
the tone block in reddish  
brown

44.2 x 36.1 cm

Collection Georg Baselitz  
Photo Albertina, Vienna



**Fig. 3**

Hans Wechtlin

**Alcon Slaying the Serpent,**  
c. 1510–26

Colour woodcut printed from  
two blocks, the tone block  
in olive green

27 x 18.3 cm

The British Museum, London  
© Trustees of the British Museum

luxurious and expensive. Since these woodcuts were used to decorate everyday items that suffer wear and tear, few have survived, even though they were printed in large numbers.

## Collecting chiaroscuro woodcuts

In the sixteenth century, woodcuts and other types of print had a wide variety of useful functions. Most popular prints were produced to be used, which means they are now very rare and often in poor condition. The chiaroscuro woodcuts that survive today and that make up this exhibition mostly belong to a particular category – high quality works of art made by identified artists such as Dürer, Ugo da Carpi or Goltzius. These chiaroscuro prints were not aimed at the popular market, but were produced for well educated, knowledgeable and wealthy collectors and connoisseurs. Works such as Goltzius's *Hercules Slaying Cacus* or Baldung's *Witches' Sabbath* were not for everyday use; they were safely stored in albums, protected from light, dust and human hands.

In Germany, these collectors were part of a newly emerging class of professionals, men like Hans Baldung's father, a lawyer. They made their money through trading with other European nations and serving courts or the state. A professional man in the sixteenth century would have been educated at university and would have had a deep knowledge of Latin, Greek and ancient history. This emphasis on learning about the classical world was an important part of what was known as a humanist education. Woodcuts and other prints often feature obscure subjects and complex meanings taken from classical literature and myth, intended to interest or flatter the intellect of these wealthy collectors. Hans Wechtlin (c. 1480–1526), a printmaker working in Strasbourg and following the example of Cranach and Burgkmair, often depicted unusual subjects from classical mythology. His *Alcon Slaying the Serpent* (**fig. 3**), from 1510, was certainly aimed at well-educated patrons. The classical subject and story represented here was obscure, even in the Renaissance. Taken from the works of the Roman poet Virgil, Alcon was a skilful archer from Crete. Wechtlin shows Alcon rescuing his young son from a serpent by shooting it with an arrow. Collectors who were interested in classical art would also have been drawn to this woodcut because Wechtlin's depiction of Alcon's son being squeezed by the serpent is reminiscent of a famous ancient Roman sculpture, the *Laocoön*. In contrast, prints aimed at the mass market would show a different range of more accessible subjects, such as portraits, well-known events from history or myth, and images from traditional folklore.



The European courts were also important centres of patronage and collecting. Emperor Rudolph II, grandson of Maximilian I, raised Renaissance court patronage to an unprecedented level of extravagance. Rudolph II was among one of Goltzius's most important collectors, but he also gathered prints from all over Europe. Such aristocratic and royal collections provided an important foundation for the study and preservation of prints today. The Graphic Art Collection of the Albertina Museum in Vienna, from where many of the prints in this exhibition come, is a good example of this. The museum's collection was founded in the eighteenth century, by Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen. In 1919, the palace and its art collection were handed over to the newly established Republic of Austria and opened to the public.

There has also been a long tradition of artists collecting prints, woodcuts and engravings. Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) is one of today's most important contemporary artists and engravers, and many of the works on display at the Royal Academy are from his personal collection. He uses some of the same traditional working methods that were employed in the sixteenth century, fuelled by his interest in and collection of Renaissance prints.

## Conclusion

The production of chiaroscuro woodcuts saw its heyday in the sixteenth century, when artists across Europe were responding to the return of classical forms and working towards achieving the perfection of naturalism that characterises Renaissance art. The chiaroscuro woodcut technique was initially developed because printmakers wanted to achieve the same effects of contrast and relief that made Renaissance painting so realistic. This period also saw a rise in the status of the print and a new demand for luxurious, coloured prints. As precious in the Renaissance as they are to us today, these works give us an insight into the intellectual, spiritual and sensual lives of the artists and collectors of the sixteenth century.

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Cat. 2 (detail)  
Hans Burgkmair the Elder  
Emperor Maximilian  
on Horseback

