

HANS HOLBEIN'S DANCE OF DEATH

ONE of the most important single accessions made for the Department of Prints since its establishment in 1917 is a complete set of proofs of the woodcuts of the Dance of Death designed by Hans Holbein the younger and cut by Hans Lutzelburger, which has recently become the property of the Museum. There are complete sets of proofs in the British Museum Print Room, the Berlin Print Cabinet, the Cabinet d'Estampes at Paris, the Museum at Bâle, and the Print Cabinet at Karlsruhe. In some of the books about Holbein it is said that there is a full set in the Douce Collection at Oxford, but inquiry at the Ashmolean Museum there showed that such statements are untrue. The Albertina at Vienna, according to Woltmann (Holbein und seine Zeit, 2d ed., Leipzig, 1876) had proofs of thirty-nine of the series, and the British Museum and Cabinet d'Estampes of Paris have nearly complete duplicate sets. How many complete sets there may be in private hands it is impossible to tell, but Count von Lanna inserted in his catalogue a note to the effect that after long searching and much trouble he had been at last able to put together what he said was the sixth full set known, referring thereby to those five celebrated sets in great European public collections mentioned above.

The set acquired by the Museum comes from an English private collection in which it has reposed quietly, completely, and unknown to fame for many years. Like the Lanna set, which is now presumably somewhere in central Europe, having been sold at auction a few years before the war,

the present set was evidently made up piece by piece. It consists of forty-two impressions of forty-one subjects, being all those listed by Woltmann as having appeared in what he called the first proof issue, together with an impression of the "Soldier," a print to which he makes no reference as existing in proof state, although to judge from the colotype reproduction in Goette (Holbein's Totentanz und seine Vorbilder, Strassburg, 1897) there must be a proof of it in the Berlin Cabinet.

In what Woltmann describes as the first proof issue there were forty subjects, that is, with the single exception of the "Astrologer," all those that appeared in the first edition of the Dance in book form, which was published at Lyons in 1538. The other proof issue would seem to have been composed of all the forty-one subjects of the first edition, as the set of thirty-five impressions from it in Paris, which are the only ones described by the authorities, contains the "Astrologer" but otherwise no additional subjects. In an edition of 1545, and subsequently, other subjects,

among them the "Soldier," were added to the original forty or forty-one. The so-called first and second proof issues are distinguished by the type-printed titles which occur at the tops of the pictures, the titles of Woltmann's first issue being printed in italics, and those of his second issue in gothic characters, in each case the titles being in German. It is impossible to tell from the descriptions given by the authorities to which proof issue most of the present set, which is undoubtedly a mixed one, belong, as in all but three cases the titles have been cut away. Examination shows, however, that while some are on the very white paper with strongly marked ribs



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observed in the impressions in this set with italic titles, others are on a slightly thicker paper in which the ribs are much less prominent. The "Soldier" is on still a third kind of paper, thin and closely resembling that of the impressions with italic headings. One of them, the "Physician," on the second kind of paper, shows on the top margin a small piece of the tail of a letter in the title, which does not come in the same place that the tail of the z does in the facsimiles of the Berlin "italic" set. As the "gothic" set at Paris has not been reproduced by photographic process, it is impossible to tell whether this impression originally came from a "gothic" set, but the presumption would seem to be in favor of that supposition. Needless to say, these impressions without titles cannot have been cut from any of the editions in book form, as in the books the blocks are always printed back to back on either side of the same sheet. The backs of the impressions are intact, and except in the case of the one duplicate, none of the impressions have been torn or damaged.

Firmin Didot, who in his *Essai . . . sur l'histoire de la gravure sur bois*, Paris, 1863, first described the proofs with gothic titles, claimed that they were the earlier ones. Woltmann reversed Didot's order; and each claimed that the order adopted by him was proved by the existence of breaks in the blocks which appeared in one set and not in the other. It has, of course, been impossible to compare the Museum set with the "italic" set in Berlin, which Lippmann (*The Dance of Death* by Hans Holbein, London, 1886) claims to be the most brilliant set known, or with the "gothic" set in Paris. But it has been possible to compare them with the collo-

type facsimiles given by Goette of the Berlin set and by Davies (Hans Holbein the Younger, London, 1903) of the London set, each of which has italic titles throughout. Comparisons made in this manner are naturally not conclusive, and so it must suffice to say that at least three of the Berlin set and six of the London set, judging by the reproductions, show breaks in the lines which are not visible in the Museum set.

Although the *Dance of Death* is undoubtedly the most famous set of prints ever made, the designs in one form or another having run through countless editions and still being reprinted from time to time, peculiarly little is known about their origin. For what purpose or under what circumstances Holbein designed them is unknown, and their date is almost equally vague, although the existence of a number of drawings after them, now in Berlin, which are dated 1527, may be considered as indicating that the blocks must have been cut by that time. None of the prints bears Holbein's signature, and



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his name would seem to have been mentioned in none of the early book editions. Four of the blocks from the set, however, were printed with his *Old Testament* series in its early editions, in the second of which, printed in 1539, the illustrations in the book are definitely attributed to him. The cutting of the blocks of the original forty or forty-one subjects, and frequently that of the supplemental subjects of the "Wagoner" and the "Soldier" is today attributed to Hans Lutzelburger, a woodcutter of whom nothing save a few signatures is positively known. One of these signatures, which taken by itself need not necessarily be that of Lutzelburger, is the H L which

appears on the cut of the "Duchess" in the Dance. The cutting of the series, however, in its supreme delicacy and refinement, is comparable only to the cutting in the so-called Alphabet of Death, a set of historiated initials, unsigned but obviously by Holbein, a proof set of which, printed on one side of a single sheet of paper over the printed legend "HAnns Lutzelburger, formschneider, genant Franck," is preserved in the British Museum. Repeated search of the Bâle archives has brought to light little or nothing about him, although on the basis of some most inconclusive documents, printed by His in Zahn's *Jahrbuch* for 1870, it is usually stated that he died in 1526.

Aside from the rare proofs above described, the titles on which are in types which Didot said he recognized as those used by Froben of Bâle in printing the 1525 translation of Lucan by Erasmus and Thomas More, there is no trace of the blocks until 1538 when the brothers Gaspard and Melchior Trechsel published them with Latin Bible texts above, and French quatrains, presumably by Gilles Corrozet, underneath each one. The book, entitled "*Les simulachres & histories faces de la mort, autant elegamment pourtraictes, que artificiellement imaginees,*" was prefaced by an "Epistre" or preface addressed to the "moult reuerende Abbessse du religieux conuent S. Pierre de Lyon, Madame Iehanne de Touzelle," which, terminating with the words "*Salut dun vray Zele,*" was most probably written by Jean de Vauzelles, prior of Montrottier, one of three very well-known brothers whose motto was "*D'un vray Zelle.*" This preface is famous in Holbein literature because of its reference to the death of

him, whose name is not mentioned, "*qui nous en a icy imaginé si elegantes figures.*" As Holbein did not die until 1543, the reference can hardly have been to him, and the as yet unanswered query is, who was meant? Of course there are theories a plenty. That it was a ruse to shield the author from ecclesiastical condemnation has been urged. But in that case why should the Trechsels and Jean de Vauzelles have stood up and so boldly associated their names with the book? That it is a reference to the death of Lutzelburger is another guess. But we don't really know that he was dead at that time, and anyway, if he did die in 1526, why should a group of great Lyons humanists have so much lamented the death of a presumably utterly unknown formschneider, at best but a superior sort of artisan, who had died eleven years previously in Bâle? Douce in his well-known book on the Dance boldly took the bull by the horns and tried to prove that Holbein didn't make the designs, and however much one may not believe in the correctness of his theory



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one can't help sympathizing a little with his reaction to the quandary.

The designs of the Dance of Death are best known to English-speaking readers through the etched copies by Hollar, the wood engravings by John Bewick, and the "facsimiles" engraved on wood by Bonner, Byfield, and Powis for Douce's "*Dance of Death,*" the latter of which have frequently been reprinted in cheap editions, one of the last of which has a graceful preface by Austin Dobson. The Hollar and Bewick versions are interesting chiefly to those interested in those two artists, as they are, to say the least, but free and timid interpretations of a mighty theme. The Douce

"facsimiles" are in some respects quite remarkable, as they were copied by hand on the block before the days of photography. At a casual glance they bear strong resemblance to the originals, but once seen side by side with the set of proofs, they become little more than memoranda of the compositions, for the most beautiful, sensitive drawing and sharp observation of the originals have been lost, and nowhere do they show any trace of that inimitable knife-work which led that most exigent critic of woodcutting, the late W. J. Linton, to say of Lutzelburger's work, "Nothing indeed, by knife or by graver, is of higher quality than this man's doing," for by common acclaim the originals are technically the most marvelous woodcuts ever made.

Any attempt to discuss or expatiate upon the artistic merits of the Dance of Death is today a matter of supererogation, they have long since earned their proud position among the greatest pictorial masterpieces of the world, and it is better to see and pore over them even in any photographic or "process" reproduction than to read all the books that have been or could be written about them. They need neither explanation of subject matter nor vicarious judgment, for they speak directly and with the utmost simplicity to whosoever looks at them, and they are so impersonal, so emotionless, in their manner of presentation that they have no age. They are now and they will always be modern.

Reference has been made above to the Bible illustrations of Holbein, a copy of the first edition of which, printed at Lyons, also in 1538, by the brothers Trechsel, was acquired by the Museum last year, the only

known set of proofs being at Bâle. It is prefaced by two sets of verses, one in Latin by Nicolas Bourbon de Vandoeuvre, into which in the second edition (1539) was inserted the reference to Holbein above mentioned, and one in French by Gilles Corrozet, who is believed to have contributed the verses to the first edition of the Dance. Now these names, taken with that of Vauzelles, are very interesting for various reasons, since, while they throw little light upon the origin or the history of the Holbein Dance, they enable us to

know something about the little group which, recognizing its very great merits, actually published the two sets of prints to the world and thereby earned the undying gratitude of succeeding generations of men. The "modern" character of the prints has been mentioned, and it was just this perhaps that attracted to them the attention of one of the most important groups of men which the modern world knows, for where the great Italians of the Renaissance were "Humanists," and the Germans were

squabbling over theology and politics, this group at Lyons was quietly doing more to lay the foundations of modern thought than any other. Like most men who do yeoman service in advancing science and modes of thought, they have for the most part been forgotten, with one great exception none of them having written or done anything which has not since been superseded. Space is not available to do more than shortly indicate their several claims to remembrance, but it seems a pious duty which should not be left undone. First, the Trechsels were the worthy sons of Jean Trechsel, who though not the first printer at Lyons to date one of his books, is nevertheless said to have



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been the first man to set up a printing shop in the city. Jean lives in the memory of all lovers of good texts and good printing by the fact that among his correctors were John Lascaris, the greatest Greek scholar of his day, the descendant of three Byzantine emperors, and an ambassador of France to Venice, and Josse Bade, whose Latinity was compared by Erasmus to that of Budaeus, who became Trechsel's son-in-law, and later, having himself established one of the important Paris presses, passed on the tradition of sound scholarship and good printing by marrying his daughter to the great Estienne. Corrozet, the least of our group, was good natured, the most popular poet of his time, and in constant demand for prefatory and flowery epistles. Vauzelles, in addition to being one of the leading litterateurs and citizens of his time, has a very high place in the history of philanthropy, as in his "Police subsidiaire, ou Assistance donnée à la multitude des pauvres" of 1531 he first broached the idea of the "Aumone Générale" which is said to have been "une des gloires de Lyon, le type des établissements destinés à lutter contre le pauperisme," and which served as a model for all the other hospitals of the kingdom, including even that of Paris. Bourbon, a protégé of Anne Boleyn's, the tutor of Henry Carey, Henry Norreys and the Dudleys, the friend of Dean Boston and Bishop Latimer, had been the intimate friend and counselor of the chiefs of the reform party in England, where about 1535 Holbein had drawn his portrait. Another in the group of friends, as is shown by other evidence, was Michael Servetus, who

having in 1535 been a corrector or editor for the Trechsels, later studied theology and medicine, in the one field being Harvey's forgotten predecessor in the discovery of the circulation of the blood, and in the other earning great fame by being burned alive by the Calvinists of Geneva in 1553. Then there was Étienne Dolet, Latin grammarian and reformer of the accents in French, printer of Rabelais' book, the "printer-martyr" of the Reformation in France, who was burned in Catholic Paris for his religious beliefs. Another was Jean de Tournes, the printer of the little books by which the charming work of the Lyons woodcutters of the middle of the century is chiefly known to fame, and founder of a great printing house which lasted prosperously until sold by his descendants shortly before the French Revolution. Also, though by no means least there were Clement Marot, the first poet to appear in France after the death of Villon, and none other than Dr. François Rabelais himself, then generally known to the world simply as the great surgeon of the Lyons hospital. One would like to think that perhaps the doctor too had a hand in the conversations concerning the advisability of publishing the Dance of Death, and to see his hand in the heading following the preface to that first edition, which reads as follows: "Diverses Tables de Mort, non painctes, mais extractes de l'escripture sainte, colorées par Docteurs Ecclesiastiques, & umbra-gées par Philosophes." But who knows?

From beginning to end the whole subject is one of fascinating mystification.

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