



WOODCUT BY HANS WEIDITZ

### HANS WEIDITZ: A STUDY IN PERSONALITY

AMONG the seeming oddities which the study of old art brings out is the way in which on occasion really important artistic personalities have been lost or confounded by succeeding generations. That such things are sure to happen with the minor members of the various "schools," who, lacking pronounced individuality, work in the manners of more forceful contemporaries, is one of the commonplaces of the critical study of old paintings and sculpture, and is immediately reflected in the "names" which modern connoisseurship has bestowed upon the lesser personalities which from time to time are disentangled from the ruck of school work. To this is due, for example, the string of *Alumnos*, *Amicos*, and *Figlios* with which the pages of recent histories of Italian painting are sprinkled so plentifully, and the still more amusing, if not so popularly misleading, tautology of the phrases "near to" and "in the neighborhood of" which are now a recognized part of the learned vocabulary. Old prints by really minor men, however, are of so little artistic interest, and, even more, are of such slight decorative value, that this pleasant game of parlor baptism

has as yet hardly been begun in regard to them, although doubtless, so soon as all that is important is known about the major engravers, the requirements of the Ph. D. degree will begin to have their serious influence upon the study and terminology of prints and will invest their initiates with that weight and solemnity of speech which is the outward and visible sign of hazardous conjecture.

As it happens, there have been at least two shadowy personalities among the German print makers of the Renaissance who, being of undoubted importance, have been privileged to enjoy this species of many-named anonymity. To at least one of them so many appellations have been given by the several *Kunstforscher* that the tracing of his name through the "literature" puts a strain upon the reader's memory much like that required for the immediate recognition of a character in a modern Russian novel. But during the last few years their business, like that of *hoti*, seems to have been settled, and now that they can no longer rejoice in the polysyllabic names bestowed upon them by the learned, one of the most interesting questions concerning them is whether they can retain the importance which was theirs when they were *brennende Fragen*. The Benedikt-Meister

Brigitten-Meister,<sup>1</sup> or Pseudo-Dürer, as he has been variously called, without going into the further refinements exemplified by the attribution of his work to such definite masters as Hans Baldung or Hans Wechtlin, is threatened with the quenching of the fiery interest in him now that scholars, on the theory that two things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other, have for the most part agreed that he is neither more nor less than Dürer himself—although as an ordinary human being and no erudite, one might be excused for thinking that in the process of losing his so indeterminate personality he had gained a greater and at last really important one.

The case of Hans Weiditz is, on the whole, far more interesting than that of the "Bridget Master," since what scholarship has salvaged is not merely the fag end of a great man's work but the whole personality of a very considerable artist. Even yet little enough is known about him, but it includes not only the name by which his contemporaries knew him but such a group of definitely assignable works that his individuality has become patent to any one who is capable of recognizing an artist's hand—a fact which has had its disastrous consequences for the older lists of prints by various other and more eminent artists. Of these latter, Burgkmair has been the chief sufferer, but among the others has been no less a person than Dürer himself. The difficulty of localizing his work was in part due to Weiditz himself, because he made the great mistake, from the archaeological point of view, of working for publishers in many different towns, so that his illustrations were classed under the headings of several distinct schools. And then, to top his offense, he failed to sign his woodcuts—and people not knowing who did them naturally were unable to say how good they were!

As we now know him, Weiditz was not only the most versatile but the busiest of the illustrators of his time, his blocks appearing in books published in such widely distant places as Augsburg, Strasburg,

Nuremberg, Mainz, Frankfort, Landshut, Venice, and, unless memory of a little book seen many years ago plays one false, even in Paris. Moreover, his blocks began to appear as early as 1518 and many of them were in more or less constant use as late as 1620, while some are said to have been printed from as late as the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. One is acquainted with no list of books illustrated by him except that published by Campbell Dodgson of volumes in the British Museum, in which there are described more than one hundred and forty different items. There can thus be no question of the popularity of his work not only among the men of his own time but with the several generations which immediately succeeded his life, and yet his name was allowed to vanish from men's memories even within the period during which his work was in most demand. Apparently his name appears in no contemporary work except the Brunfels Herbal,<sup>2</sup> in the Latin preface to which he is referred to as Joannes Guidictius and in the German as Hans Weyditz. Even more curious, in view of the elaborate signatures with which most of his contemporaries were in the habit of marking their blocks, is his failure to put any indicia of authorship upon those which he made. It is almost as though he had deliberately courted the anonymity which for over three centuries was to be his lot, as of the four extant signatures, three are different—H. W., H. b. b., and I. and B. joined in a monogram.

In 1620 Steinmeyer, the Frankfort publisher, into whose hands there had come by successions and purchases a large number of Weiditz's blocks, issued a now very rare little volume which staggers under one of the most elaborate and verbose titles ever inflicted upon a book of similar size.<sup>3</sup> It

<sup>2</sup>A fine copy of the first edition was presented to the Museum in 1918 by Mortimer L. Schiff.

<sup>3</sup>Neue Künstliche, Wohlgerissene, vnnnd in Holtz geschnittene Figuren, dergleichen niemahlen gesehen worden. Von den Fürtrefflichsten, Künstlichsten, vnnnd Berühmbtesten Malern, Reissern, vnnnd Formschneydern, Als nemlich, Albrecht Dürer, Hanss Holbeyn, Hanss Sebaldt Böhem, Hanss Scheuflin, vnnnd andern Teutscher Nation Fürtrefflichsten Künstlern mehr. Allen Mahlern, Kupferstechern, Form-

<sup>1</sup>So called after his illustrations for the Works of St. Bridget, a beautiful copy of which was presented to the Print Room in 1918 by Felix M. Warburg.

really is not a title at all but a combination description and advertisement of the contents of the book, phrased much as the old-fashioned circus manager did his bills, and is made additionally interesting by its almost utter falsity; for while it announces that it contains work from the hands of Dürer and Holbein, it does not contain a single cut by either of them, and of its 350-odd woodcuts more than three hundred are by Weiditz, whose name is not mentioned at all. This omission, however, is handsomely made up for by Steinmeyer or his editor in the short preface, where in addition to many things of interest about a number of artists, it is said of the large group of woodcuts by the real hero of the book, that "although not bearing any signature by him they were drawn and cut by a notable and most famous artist and one well comparable to Dürer in spite of the fact that his name is not known, which after all is matter of small moment seeing that *das Werk lobet seinen Meister.*" And this, it is to be remembered, was said within less than one hundred years after Weiditz's death by a man who as proprietor of one of the greatest publishing houses in Germany prided himself upon the possession of more than three hundred of his blocks. It is doubtful whether a similar instance of forgetfulness can be produced from the archives of the printing trades.

In 1675 Sandrart in his *Teutsche Akademie* attributed Weiditz's works to Burgkmair. Obviously false as such an attribution was, it stuck, only to be further complicated by the subsequent inclusion under Burgkmair's name of the many blocks which Leonhard Beck designed for the Augsburg publishers. Some of Weiditz's things were attributed to Dürer by later writers and at least three of the woodcuts in Bartsch's canonical lists of the work of Dürer and Cranach are now easily recognizable as by Weiditz. The confusion

schneydern: Auch allen Kunst Verständigen, vnd derselben Liebhabern, zu Ehren vnd gefallen: Wie auch der angehenden Kunstliebenden Jugendt zu nutz vnd beförderung in Truck geben. Getruckt zu Franckfurt am Meyn. In Verlegung Vincentii Steinmeyers. Anno. M. DC. XX. The Huth-Murray copy is now in the Print Room.

thus begun was continued and increased through the last century by the writings of Passavant, Nagler, and Muther, the latter of whom reproduced many of Weiditz's cuts as by Burgkmair in his invaluable *Kulturhistorisches Bilderbuch*, with the result that even yet in many of the older collections, and in some of the younger ones for that matter, the work of Weiditz must not be sought for under his own name.

In 1891 Woldemar von Seydlitz, the subsequent cataloguer of Rembrandt's etchings and author of one of the best books on Japanese woodcuts, contributed an article to the *Berlin Jahrbuch* in which he clearly differentiated the personality of the anonymous artist whom he designated, after his most famous set of illustrations, as the *Petrarca-Meister*. From this time on Weiditz began to appear in the books and magazines as the *Petrarch Master*, the *Master of the Trostspiegel*, and as the *Pseudo-Burgkmair*, his hand gradually being recognized in many places where theretofore tradition had given other names. It was not until 1904, however, that the gathering and sifting of material had reached such a stage that Hans Röttinger of Vienna was able, in his *Hans Weiditz der Petrarca-Meister*, to demonstrate that all this work was by the artist who had decorated the *Brunfels Herbal*, and who was mentioned by name in the preface to that book. Even as yet it seems that nothing more than his name is known, not a single date or relationship having been adduced.

We are thus driven back upon his work for all that we know about our artist—where, just as Steinmeyer before us, we cannot help recognizing that *das Werk lobet seinen Meister*. Of course by mere listing of title pages in books decorated by him we are able to discover that he worked for many different publishers, that he seems to have spent considerable periods in both Strasburg and Augsburg, and that on at least two occasions he copied prints or drawings by Dürer. But interesting as is, for example, the genesis and the ordering of the portrait of the emperor Maximilian which Dürer drew from life and again on the block, which Weiditz copied, and which

Lucas of Leyden in turn copied from Weiditz, there is little if anything to be gained from such research.

The simple fact is that Weiditz was one of the little group of outstanding woodcut designers of the German Renaissance, with a highly individualized style and a most personal outlook on life. The weight of tradition assures us that Dürer, Holbein, Cranach, Altdorfer, and Burgkmair were the great masters of the woodcut, and it will take long for any belated contempo-

pictorial commentary on German life during the second quarter of the sixteenth century, but for the most delightful invention of pattern in black and white which his period affords. More than any of his fellows he knew how to break up the surfaces of his blocks into rich tapestries of color, and to keep the notation of fact interesting and piquant. Passing by these more technical and aesthetic aspects of his work, we can find unending pleasure in the reports of life and manners which he has



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rary of theirs to force his way into their company, but it seems not improbable that as these matters become better known Weiditz will be acclaimed the peer of any of these men except the first two. From a technical point of view his case may be urged even more strongly—since it is matter for serious discussion whether in so far as concerns composition, texture, and handling of the medium he is not the most interesting of them all. His failure to reach the very highest levels of artistry may be assigned to his lack of interest in dramatic presentation, and to a draughtsmanship which in its readiness is not comparable to the slower and more studied line of either Dürer or Holbein. These things admitted, however, it is to Weiditz that we must look not only for the fullest

left us in such profusion. He might almost be claimed as the first of the social caricaturists, the first artist who with full command over his printing surface devoted himself to subject matter which in later years was to be so variously handled by such men as Hogarth, Moreau, Chodowiecki, Daumier, and Gavarni, and in our own time, by Keene, du Maurier, Phil May, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Steinlen.

As one turns through the pages of any of the catalogues of illustrated books of the period, one notices that the almost unvarying line of religious titles is broken by very few exceptions and those primarily of educational and scientific books; for, Weiditz aside, the prominent woodcut designers of the German Renaissance devoted the major part of their effort to the illustra-

tion either of religious themes or of the various matters which cluttered the mind of the emperor Maximilian. The result of this is that the work of the typical illustrator of that time displays a notable aloofness from the current life and interests of ordinary people. By far the largest group of secular books in Mr. Dodgson's lists is gathered under the name of Weiditz, who is there to be found illustrating not only definitely pious works but books by such authors as Cicero,<sup>4</sup> Petrarca, Polidore Virgil, Thomas More, Erasmus, and Boccaccio, the lives of the Caesars and of Scanderbeg, the story of Melusina and the tragedy of Celestina, as well as treatises on wrestling, health, cookery, tournaments, medicine, law, contemporary politics, botany, and simples. Weiditz's range of interest was thus as wide as human life, upon which, as lived in Germany at his time, he throws a stronger light than any one else. From the beggar with his swarming family to the emperor in his palace<sup>5</sup> there is hardly a calling, condition, or occupation that he has not left record of, and all portrayed with a gusto and a sympathetic interest which reminds one strongly of the way in which Charles Keene in his so different manner sketched the English of his distant day. Neither solemn nor comic, Weiditz pursued his way, amused and interested by the teeming life about him, finding simple pleasure in the observation of manners, customs, and especially of costumes, which last he rendered with an eye always sharp for the picturesque. It thus comes about that Steinmeyer's little book of 1620 may be regarded as undoubtedly one of the most important and charming documents we possess concerning German social life during the second quarter of the sixteenth century, as it contains among its 307 cuts by Weiditz not only a very large number of his most interesting designs but such a full and detailed picture of

<sup>4</sup> A beautiful copy of the German translation of Cicero's *Officia* with Weiditz's woodcuts was presented to the Print Room in 1918 by Felix M. Warburg.

<sup>5</sup> The Print Room possesses a good impression of Weiditz's most important single sheet print, the Emperor Maximilian Hearing Mass, which was assigned to Dürer by Bartsch.

German life and activity as can nowhere else be found compressed within the covers of a single book.

Because of the great extent of Weiditz's work not only in subject but in absolute count of designs, it is perhaps lacking in the high emotional crises such as one finds in the prints of Dürer, Holbein, and Altdorfer, and, as compared with the output of any of his contemporaries, is marked by its almost journalistic competency of narration. This, however, is but another and perhaps a stuffer manner of saying that his interest was primarily objective, which in turn means merely that he was so absorbed in observing the great and shifting and many-colored pageant of life that he found little time for dreaming or theorizing. His work is thus, like that of all but very few of the social caricaturists, largely devoid of sharp emotional values and rarely conduces to day-dreaming upon the part of those who behold his prints.

He was, however, gifted with an unusual and most delightful sense of humor, which shows itself in his translation into black and white of the common metaphors of daily speech. In this respect he resembles Blake more than any other engraver of modern times, as he seems to have had no inhibitions which prevented him from drawing things just as he would have spoken of them in the always figurative language of the street. To this add his evident delight in strange things and his constant discovery of them in ordinary life, and we get a picture of a man whose eyes were always filled with a childlike and naïve wonder at the beauties and marvels which the world presented. Every way he turned he found things which interested him; the nursery, the fields, the market places, and all the occupations and callings held him enthralled with their kaleidoscopic businesses, and in each of them he saw things which no other man of his time had either the wit or the imagination to see the pictorial value of. He was thus the greatest illustrator of his period, developing the ordinary details of prosaic existence with a shrewd dramatic sense which makes them really important, even for us who live under such different conditions and with such a

different background of culture and belief.

Unfortunately for his renown the texts which he illustrated have with few exceptions been outlived by succeeding generations; for he came just at the time when, at least in Germany, the old literature was beginning to vanish and the modern had yet to make its appearance. Petrarch the moralist, Cicero's Offices, Polidore Virgil, have all faded from the lists of ordinary books which ordinary men are in the habit of reading, and the romances of Melusina and Celestina are now known only to the erudite who repair to them in their quest of material for dissertation. As for the books on medicine, cookery, law, and botany, they belong to the literature of information, and their matter has so changed with the passing of the centuries that they can be known and understood only by the professional archaeologist of those particular subjects. Had it been Weiditz's luck to be called upon to illustrate the Decameron, the only profane prose then written which still makes demands upon the time and the leisure of plain men, or had Germany at that time produced some such books as the Gargantua and Pantagruel which were to come forth in France not long after the presumable time of his death, he would have continued to hold his place in the affections of

both plain and bookish people, and, as it was, his illustrations actually had a longer life and were oftener reprinted than those of any other man of his time.

The little volume of 1620, having no text other than the short and insignificant rhymes under its pictures, has thus gone the way of all books which make an immediate appeal to the "average reader" both young and old. It was merely a "picture book," and the serious people of the world did not preserve it as they did their heavy treatises upon the 'ologies, but left it with many another delightful popular thing to the none too tender mercies of the small child, the serving maid, and the careless man, who out of love and intimacy thumb and maltreat the sources of their pleasure out of existence. Weiditz has thus paid the penalty usually reserved for those authors and illustrators who most directly reach the affections of the multitude—his work was destroyed in the very process of fulfilling its high function of giving pleasure. Possibly, were we Buddhists, we might say that his work had attained Nirvana—and when one stops to think about it, is there really any fate which the writer and the illustrator of books might more properly strive for?

W. M. I., JR.



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