

Unique Multiples: The Dual Nature of 15th- to 17th-Century European Prints

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The history of printmaking does not always line up with modern views of fine art. Early modern prints were often the work of multiple artists, in contrast to the modern preference for a single artist. Scholarship has tended to be biased against prints seen as cheap, damaged, or perhaps even ugly, and this bias draws attention away from the variations inherent to their production and use. Different copies of the same print are not necessarily identical. There are a number of factors that occur during the production that result in differences between impressions of the same print. Prints were also frequently altered after production, whether they were painted by a professional colorist or modified by owners as a part of worship practices. In light of such variations, this paper seeks to add another complication to the way early prints are viewed and ask to what degree is it accurate to call them multiples. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a multiple as “[a] work of art produced in multiple copies by industrial mass-production.” Although accurate, this definition is limiting in that it does not convey the vast amount of variation and at times individuality that can be found in early modern prints.

In the prints produced between the 15th and the 17th centuries, the most prominent types of print were woodcuts and engravings. Woodcut came to Europe from Asia around the 14th century, and was used for stamping patterns on textiles before being used on paper at the turn of the century. Woodcut are relief prints, which means that the ink is applied to a raised surface and then transferred onto paper with light pressure (Griffiths 15; Saff and Sacilotto 4). Engraving is an intaglio process that developed around the 1430s from decorative metalwork techniques used by goldsmiths and silversmiths. Lines are incised into a metal plate with a tool called a burin (or

later, in the case of etching, with acid), forming depressions that hold the ink. A rolling press then uses high pressure to transfer the lines onto dampened paper (Griffiths 15, Saff and Sacilotto 4). There are some practical differences between the two processes; intaglio metal plates allow for much greater detail and easier editing, require far more training to make, and are stored more easily than wood because the metal plates do not rot. There are also differences in perception. In the early modern period, woodcut had an association with cheapness and mass production because of its origin in the lowly art of printing textiles, so they sold for much less than an engraving even when made by a master like Dürer. This cheap connotation was aided by the fact that intaglio plates wore down and that, as a result has smaller runs than those of woodcuts, that could be printed in the thousands (Griffiths 16, 21). The public valued a print more the fewer copies existed.

By the 1550s, prints had become increasingly commercial, and rise of publishers had given them an international market (Griffiths 18). By the 18th century, printmakers had become employees of painters,¹ but for centuries prior, printmakers' relationship with painters was one of collaboration. Copying went both ways between them; painters frequently supplied designs for prints, and many painters copied faces from printed reference books (Griffiths 24–25). Copyright did not exist yet and artist rights had more to do with reputation than whether a specific artist actually created the work (Griffiths 99).

The modern practice of numbering prints did not happen until the 19th century, while fractional numbering that gave the print's number within a limited edition began in the 20th

¹ The print market supported painters by spreading reproductive prints of their work, therefore the print market was closely tied to the a painting market. The demand for printed reproductions of paintings gradually shifted the nature of printmaking to be subordinate to painting (Griffiths 24–25), but this is not the case in the early part of printmaking's history and this paper does not focus on reproductive prints. For more on prints as reproductions, see (Fawcett, "Reproductions").

century (Haunton et al.; Suffield). Numbering distinguishes an identifiable individual from the multiples, but it is a recent invention. This is different from the variation in early prints, that results from the process itself, that does not produce identical objects the way a modern printer would, as well as the treatment from users after production.



Fig. 1. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves* (“*The Three Crosses*”), second state, 1653. Drypoint on printed vellum. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art [metmuseum.org]

Rembrandt is an extreme example of the kinds of variations a print can have due to changes to the plate and from the run through a press. Often called an “experimental printer,” he is famous for making numerous versions of every single one of his prints. A market for collecting quality prints rose mid-16th century and was well established in the 17th century when Rembrandt was working. A large proportion of Rembrandt’s prints have survived because

collectors highly valued them and thus treated them carefully, but the original editions were likely small because Rembrandt used particularly delicate lines that wore down quickly when passed through a press (Fucci 18; Haunton et al.). He also made frequent use of drypoint, a technique that left furrows rather than removing the metal, producing velvety lines that disappeared within a few dozen impressions (Fucci 17–18). The short lifespan of these prints often meant reworking them to restrengthen lines, and Rembrandt frequently made alterations to the image itself while reworking the plate. When a change is made to the plate, the succeeding prints are referred to as “states.” Differences between two states can be subtle, or can be the product of drastic alterations, for instance to the composition or the lighting depicted in the print. In Rembrandt’s *Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves* (figs. 1–4), the changes in marks between the first few states are relatively small, but in the fourth state (fig. 4), several of the figures have changed their orientation or disappeared from the print entirely. Even within a single state prints are not identical; there are variations in the lines resulting from the plate’s down, and Rembrandt used a wide range of papers that responded differently to ink and that altered base tones. He also varied how he cleaned the plate between runs through the press. Ink left on the plate creates a grey “plate tone” on impressions, and selectively wiping sections of the plate allowed Rembrandt to control how much of a plate tone appeared on different parts of the image (Fucci 18–19). This wiping can be seen in the differences in location and intensity of shadows in figures 1–4, which change the focus of the image (“Christ”). Prints like these may be given the same title, but due to nature of the process, each impression was inherently not identical.

There is some evidence of the impact of economic factors in Rembrandt’s works, reflecting the audience’s preferences. A change to the plate fixed the number of a given state that

could be printed, increasing the sale value of previous states (Fucci 34). Many collectors liked being surprised by a printmaker's new work, as well as being able to collect multiple versions of a print (Griffiths 23). Printmakers copying a painter's design would send working proofs to the painter for approval, which by the mid-17th century had become popular with collectors. In Rembrandt's case, the level of finish is not directly related to completion, as he was known to both add or remove details when reworking plates, but prints that looked less complete resembled the proofs distributed by other artists and may have intentionally imitated them (Fucci 21–23). Rembrandt notably did not vary all his prints the same way. Portraits of print collectors, referred in Dutch as *liefhebbers*, would have a great deal more variation between states and were likely to have been proof-like versions, suggesting that he was catering to what the patron wanted (Fucci 24). The unprecedented degree to which Rembrandt experimented makes the variation in his prints more obvious, but the alterations reflected what the public valued in prints and was true of intaglio prints in general.

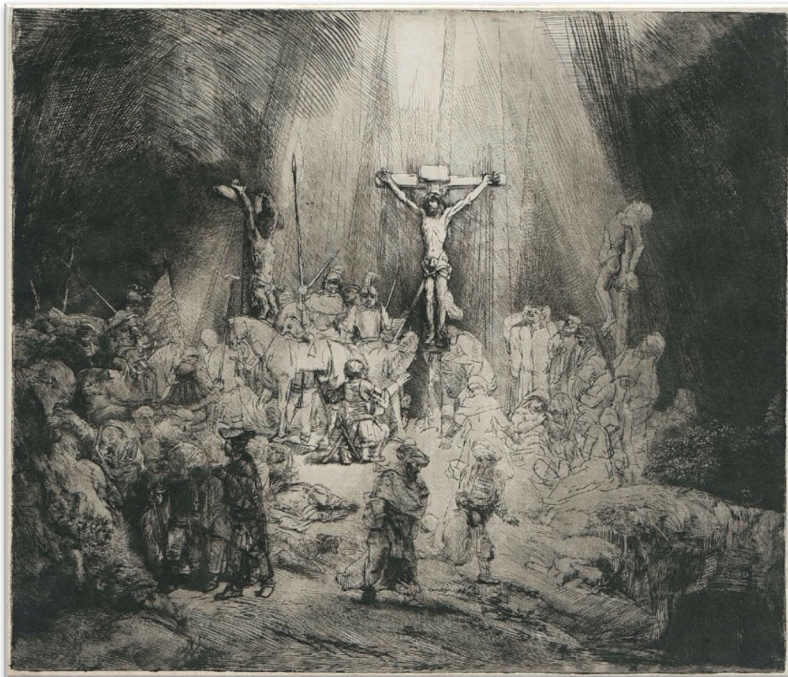


Fig. 2. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves* (“*The Three Crosses*”), x state 1653. Drypoint. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. [metmuseum.org]

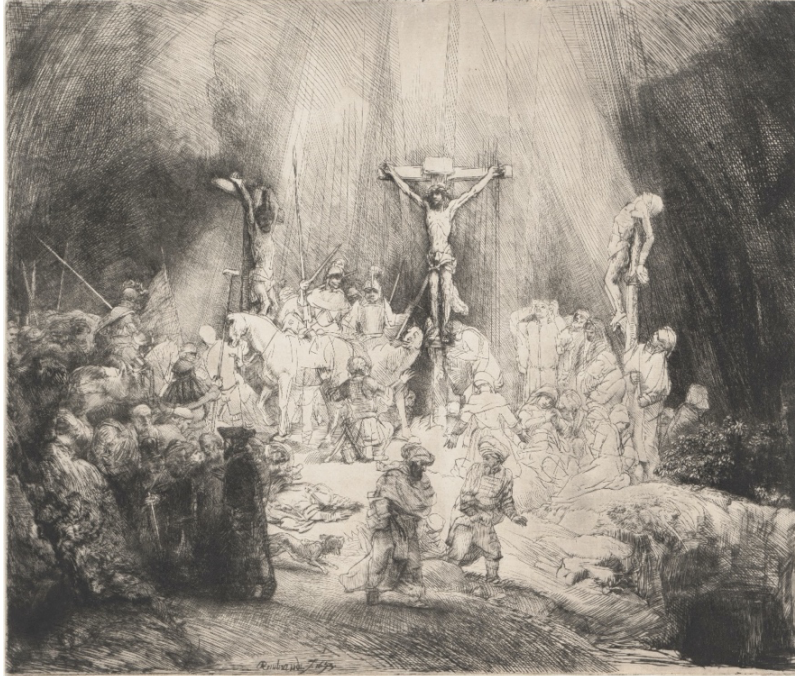


Fig. 3. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves* ("The Three Crosses"), x state, 1660. Drypoint. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. [metmuseum.org]



Fig. 4. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves* ("The Three Crosses"), fourth state, 1660. Drypoint. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. [metmuseum.org]

After going through the press, prints could undergo another range of variations with the addition of color. For a long time, scholarship considered color in prints as way to compensate

for the technical inabilities that disappeared as the medium matured. This notion might have originated in contemporary and in 20th-century commentaries that used Albrecht Dürer as an example of the superiority of design over color. The avoidance of color also likely comes from the modern discomfort with works made by multiple artists (Dackerman and Primeau 15). However, the vast majority of early modern prints, regardless of quality or period, were hand painted. The color added to Dürer's *St. Jerome in his Study* by Domenicus Rottenhammer (fig. 5) doesn't obscure the lines so much as compliment them, with relatively few changes to the arrangement of values seen on uncolored copies (fig. 6). This was not always the case; color could also be added quickly with stencils and transparent inks, with opaque paint that hides the original lines, or anywhere in between.



Fig. 5. Albrecht Dürer and Domenicus Rottenhammer, *St. Jerome in his Study*, 1514. Engraving with transparent washes and body colors, highlighted with gold. Coburg: Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg. [Dackerman 240]



Fig. 6. Albrecht Dürer, St. Jerome in his Study, 1514. Engraving. London: The British Museum [britishmuseum.org]

Stencils were made by cutting sections out of copies of the print, allowing for the mass production of colored prints. Such modus operandi reveals that the prints that were destroyed possessed a low intrinsic value. The quality of the coloring varied even among stenciled prints, and some prints used both stencils and hand-painted modeling (Dackerman and Primeau 67, 196). Like painters, colorists had workshops with apprentices and journeyman working under them, which shows the degree to which they were an integrated part of printmaking. A single workshop could produce painted prints in a wide range of quality (Dackerman and Primeau 22–24).



Fig. 7. Nicolas de Bruyn and Hans Thomas Fisher, *Large Landscape with Christ Before the Captain*, 1603. Engraving with transparent washes and body colors highlighted with gold and mounted on wood panel Germany: Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg. [Dackerman 260]

Prints with opaque paint became a poor man's painting. *Large Landscape with Christ Before the Captain* (fig. 7), for example, was mounted on wood and varnished, giving it at a lesser expense the appearance and durability of a painting (Dackerman and Primeau 259). This print was not intended to deceive the viewer, as the lines are still visible on close inspection, but in the 16th century some were sold deceptively as paintings (Dackerman and Primeau 38, 259). Such prints had a close affinity to paintings, both from the patron's choice to treat them like one and from their ability to deceive. At this level of opacity, colorists sometimes also made changes to the design itself (Dackerman and Primeau 33). These prints are multiples and paintings at the same time.



Fig. 8. Anonymous German artist, *Christ on the Cross with Angels*, c. 1465–75. Woodcut with transparent washes. Washington DC: Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art [nga.gov]

Viewers could also alter a print after their production, a fact that is most obvious in 15th-century religious prints. These types of prints were often produced in the thousands, so if any print is to be called a mass-produced multiple or disposable, these would seem to be a good match. These prints, however, also have the most individuality. Viewers valued the religious iconography and materiality far more than aesthetic beauty or tidiness. Paint was applied loosely, but not carelessly. Colorists focused on the brightness of colors, and a texture from thick paint was desirable on an object made for personal worship and meant to be touched (Areford 48, Dackerman and Primeau 64). The red paint used as Christ's blood was often a distinct pigment from other reds because of the strong sacramental significance it held for worshippers, giving the

paint itself an intrinsic value. The blood was also entirely painted, rather than printed, as seen in figure 8, so the amount and location of blood red could vary greatly on iterations of the same print (Areford 45–49, Dackerman 65). It is also worth noting that these kinds of prints would sometimes be used as apotropaic talismans or even as a part of exorcisms, which further stressed their identity as objects (Areford 81–85).



Fig. 9. Anonymous Artist, *Christ as an Example of Silence* (?), c. 1460, colored woodcut, (image fragment). London: British Museum [Areford 70]

Due to these prints' devotional use, it was extremely common for viewers to alter them by writing on them, adding new paint, or cutting them up and pasting them into new contexts. Historians used to treat this as if the print was damaged, but that is inaccurate when it is viewed in the context of how the prints were meant to be used (Areford 66). Some prints contained empty scrolls that had to be filled in with writing. The print in figure 9 was named *Christ as an Example of Silence* based on the verses written on it, but this is one of countless inscriptions that viewers could have added to the empty scroll, giving the image a meaning unique to them

(Areford 69–70). Figure 10 is an example of an image that received considerable alterations. It is one of several iterations of the same print used in a manuscript, each one cut out of its original print, with a disembodied arm still visible near the bottom of the cross. The manuscript's maker then painted additional blood and added text as part of its new context that walked the viewer through a meditation on different wounds on Christ's body (Areford 88). The result is a new image made by several people and distinct from the many other copies of the print. Religious prints were meant to be altered by their owners over time, and the physical and spiritual nature of the object was stressed to the point that the prints had significance as individuals despite starting as a mass produced work.



Fig. 10. Anonymous Artist, *Christ on the Cross*, late 15th century. Colored woodcut (image fragment). Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek [Areford 13]

A print may be a multiple, but the word multiple does not fully describe the reality of early modern prints. Although mass-produced, they included a diverse range of variations and alterations made after production. They are multiples and unique objects at the same time. A term like “multiple” is better used as a tool for understanding objects than as a definite fact. Terms can provide background to the nature of an object, but fail to include the exceptions and complications that are inevitably occur in any category. Furthermore, it is also important to keep in mind that definitions change; historical viewers did not necessarily view ideas like beauty or artistic ownership the same way current scholarship does, which further complicates definitions. A looser use of terminology can better convey changes in context and help recognize the fact that objects are not bound by concrete definitions.

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