

LITTLE·ENGRAVINGS



CLASSICAL & CONTEMPORARY
No. 1 ALBRECHT ALTDÖRFER
A BOOK OF 71 WOODCUTS
PHOTOGRAPHICALLY RE-
PRODUCED IN FACSIMILE
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY T. STURGE MOORE

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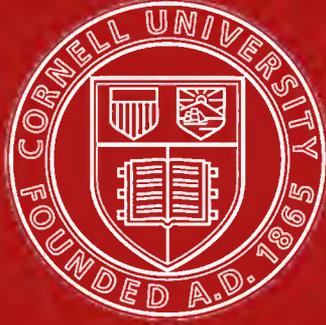
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INTRODUCTION

Works of art are not infrequently approached by seekers after either of two orders of excellence; they should be, and occasionally are, approached with the combined demand: that they present us with a discovered beauty and are at the same time exquisite applications of the means by which they do us this grace. For of all gifts beauty is the most thoroughly annulled by a lack of grace in the giving.

The beauty that has been tracked home through the suggestions of the world about us, the beauty that has been built up in the ardently fostered and anxiously chastened imagination, these, singly or combined, form the subject-matter of all arts; but the materials, that embody such discovery or such vision, they also have individual and inherent loveliness: they therefore may be used clumsily and against the grain, or be employed with that intuitive sensitiveness that bespeaks the born craftsman. If misused they will do much to obscure and destroy, but, in the contrary case, their enunciation will add buoyant radiancy to the vision or discovery conveyed.

Each medium is by its nature more proper for seizing certain features and less capable of expressing others: the born craftsman is quick to appreciate this, and so orders his inventions or construes his perceptions, as never to lay undue weight on the weaker characteristics of his material; the ordinary professional expert, on the other hand, is never so pleased as when he has made some vehicle bear what it was never meant to bear, and by the addition of his skill forced it to belie its own nature. The born craftsman is perhaps always potentially an Artist: he who naturally loves and fondles words, has that inclination to grow up an orator, that the nimble and sturdy have to become runners and wrestlers; he degenerates and runs to seed in the mere rhetorician as those others might in the acrobat or pugilist. And the artist also is forever in danger of letting the performance so engross as to degrade him. None the less it is right that his skill tax his medium to the utmost there, where it is peculiarly capable, for thus only can he differentiate work in it from that in any other, and thereby establish its kingdom for ever; just as the professional expert by breaking over its frontiers is forever tending to reduce his own and his neighbour's provinces to anarchy.

The wood block is well adapted to display the opposition of these two spirits of work; the expert can surpass himself in the stupidity of his devastating triumphs, while the born craftsman can entrench and organize his art till it is out of all fear of competition from foreign states. Slow and tardy is the effect of the graver on the wood, and thus it is peculiarly suitable to furnish delicate natures, easily perturbed and scattered, with those conditions of gradual concentration which can alone render them effective; on copper the

etching needle permits great licence, the graver less, and the stipple used by Giulio Campagnola would appear to have supported him with similar cautions to those which may be taken advantage of by the engraver on wood.

The woodcuts of Durer, Holbein, and other German artists are in the main merely facsimiles of pen drawings. The design (not being conceived in the first instance as a woodcut, as earlier and ruder work had been) leaves but little room for the cutter to prove himself expert or craftsman. With Altdorfer there is a difference: whether he ever cut any blocks himself or not, he evidently made his designs with more appreciation for the capacities of this medium. His pen work when intended for the wood must have differed to a far greater extent, from what it was in and for itself, than Durer's did, or still more than Holbein's; and probably he knew and practised engraving enough to enable him at least to go over the work of his assistants. For an appreciation of his work as a discoverer and seer of beauty I must refer the reader to the number of the "Artist's Library" devoted to him. But one point I may return to here, since a sympathetic and intelligent reviewer of that essay has denied Altdorfer dramatic power. His argument takes an old and vicious form; he draws from the fact that Altdorfer did not seize the opportunity offered to him when he had to treat the subject of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the conclusion that he was incapable of seizing it. But obviously such a fact will barely raise the ghost of a presumption as to his incapacity, and is far indeed from proving that he was not able: in the present volume the student will find ample refutation of this stricture, and one would be glad to think that "to show such work was to praise it," but I dare scarcely suppose that the reviewer in question had not seen it, so must beg the reader's pardon for more particularly insisting on this signal virtue of dramatic power. The tiny cuts of the Fall and Redemption of Man compare favourably with those of Durer's Little Passion. If we put side by side the cuts of either artist representing the Flagellation, how infinitely more dramatic and successful is the lesser master! And the charge of soldiers raising the cross on the points of their spears shows us Altdorfer seizing an opportunity of which Durer made no use, though he burdened his series with several designs that are practically mutes; and again where the Man of Sorrows sinks beneath the weight of the Cross, the master of Ratisbon is more direct, less conventional, and more weighty, while his Last Supper also easily bears away the palm. I therefore insist again that he foreshadows Rembrandt, the greatest of plastic dramatists, and, as I hinted in the former essay, this opinion is not merely, or in the first place, my own, but proceeds from a source altogether more deserving of respect. This claim of "dramatic power" by itself, not that others are wanting, would be sufficient to place our

artist in an æsthetic sphere higher than any known to Cranach, whom some critics have preferred to him. When Altdorfer made the drawing at Vienna representing Abraham's sacrifice (of which the reproduction made for the "Artist's Library" proved unfortunately quite inadequate), he was playing with his subject in a spirit of romantic fantasy; he had descended to the sphere of caprice, the sphere of Cranach; he had descended to add aërialness, delicacy, and buoyancy to the elegance of Cranach, who in matters of tone and colour is always comparatively opaque and heavy; and he brought with him that crisp distinction of line which never warps or becomes water-logged like the contours of a sleepy pear, as the line of Cranach, except in one or two of his most felicitous works, too often does. Cranach, indeed, has his own peculiar achievement, which is best praised by not bringing it into comparison with the works of an artist of infinitely wider range. In regard to Altdorfer's other claims, let it here suffice to quote the words of a pre-eminent authority, who speaks of him as "destined shortly to a front rank as an artist, as an engraver to the first and greatest place of all." The reproductions here published represent his work on the wood in all but its entirety.

It is proposed also that in future numbers of this series we should study:—The genial improvisations on the wood by William Blake, who was so impatient that he did not hesitate to adopt from artists he most bitterly attacked and employ their conventions in the most incongruous fashion whenever the intuition of the moment gave way.—The delicate and fully realized idylls of his pupil, Calvert, whose exquisite docility has enabled him to produce perhaps the most felicitous of cuts; though the sweep of his wing will not bear comparison with that of his master, much less with greater names whose thought has been interpreted to us on the block.—The experiments made by Millet to bend the proficiency of others to his nobler uses.—Giulio Campagnola's lovely plates, which are as though he had childishly kissed the soul from some waif fragment of Praxiteles, and received encouragement in his efforts to express it from Giorgione himself.—The wonderful results that Titian produced when he consented to oversee the work of a very poor trade-engraver. Other artists may be included. And I—who have followed at a distance in the revival of work on the wood led by Mr. Ricketts, so matchless in his intuitive recognition of the capabilities of different materials and in his power of designing in perfect harmony with the demands they make,—I am unhappily bound to appear like a stammerer with this only excuse, a consciousness, that if I were but able to say my lesson in a manner that would do justice to my master, then, in point of elocution at least I should not be out of place.

NOTE

The first two illustrations are from unique impressions (unfortunately coloured by hand) of woodcuts ascribed by Mr. Campbell Dodgson and Dr. Dörnhöffer to Altdorfer. It may be argued from them that Altdorfer was his own engraver; for they are the roughest of sketches engraved in facsimile, the character of the pen line being faithfully given. That so much care should be expended on such slight designs is perhaps best accounted for by supposing the draughtsman his own cutter, the task being one an artist learning to engrave might well set himself, especially when the work done would be in its degree commercially useful, while the time of a capable journeyman would be too valuable for such a job. The third illustration helps to reinforce this supposition; the engraver has commenced to cut this drawing on the thighs of the nude figure, and not methodically in one corner as might have been expected; such a way of setting to work is at all events far more characteristic of the artist engraver than of the paid interpreter; in the same direction points the fact that the engraving was given over at once, although the drawing had been completed, and lastly certain little sketches, obviously by Altdorfer, jotted down on the back of this block (as also on that of one supposed to be by Altdorfer in the Triumphal Arch of Maximilian) tempt us to speculate on the probability of their having knocked about the studio. However, our knowledge of the conditions and habits of craftsmen at this period is so slight, that while pointing out that these conjectures tend to corroborate the conclusion arrived at by Mr. C. S. Ricketts from internal evidence, plausibility is the most that it is fair to claim for them.

CONTENTS

- 1 Seven small cuts described by W. L. Schreiber, "Manuel de l'Amateur," Nos. 901, 939, 1174, 1183, 1269, 1572, 1669. Ascribed to Altdorfer by Mr. Campbell Dodgson of the British Museum. Monogram on the fourth and sixth. Date about 1500.
- 2 A small woodcut with circles of text also cut. Schreiber No. 1526. Ascribed to Altdorfer by Dr. Dörn-höffer of Vienna. Date 1500-1506.
- 3 A drawing on a wood block in the Alte Pinakotek at Munich, which has been commenced by an engraver. Monogram and date 1512. Reproduced by permission of Dr. W. Schmidt.
- 4 Lovers in a Wood. Monogram 1511, Bartsch 63.
- 5 Massacre of the Innocents. M. 1511, B. 46.
- 6 Judgment of Paris. M. 1511, B. 60.
- 7 St George slaying the Dragon. M. 1511, B. 55.
- 8 The Death of St John the Baptist. M. 1512, B. 52.
- 9 The Resurrection. M. 1512, B. 47.
- 10 The Annunciation. M. 1513, B. 44.
- 11 St Christopher fording the Stream. M. 1513, B. 53.
- 12 The Death of St John the Baptist. M. 1517, Schmidt 54.
- 13 The Fall and Redemption of Man. Monograms. Undated. B. Nos. 1-40.
- 18 Abraham's Sacrifice. M. B. 41.
- 19 Return of the Spies. M. B. 42.
- 20 Jael and Sisera. M. B. 43.
- 21 Adoration of the Shepherds. M. B. 45.
- 22 The Virgin in a Church. M. B. 48.
- 23 The Virgin enthroned. M. B. 49.
- 24 St Christopher. M. B. 54.
- 25 St George. B. 56.

- 26 St Jerome in his Cavern. B. 57.
- 27 St Jerome M. B. 58.
- 28 The Fountain M. B. 59.
- 29 Thisbe finding Pyramus M. B. 61.
- 30 A Standard Bearer. M. B. 62.

NOTE.

Besides the above there are a few engravings signed by Altdorfer or attributed to him, which, on account of their size, could not be included in the present volume. In the Editor's opinion they belong without exception to Altdorfer's least interesting works. The Publishers, however, are prepared to issue reproductions of any or all of these pieces (except the inaccessible St Catherine), if subscribers' names are received in sufficient number. The reproduction in each case will be the exact size of the original, and will be printed like this volume on pure linen-rag paper. The price will of course depend upon the extent of the demand for them.

The omitted cuts are as follows:—

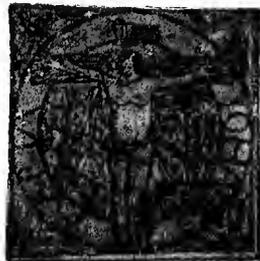
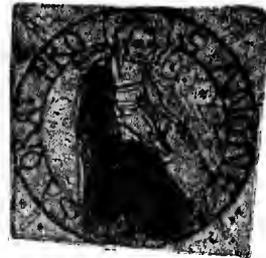
- 1 An altarpiece with the Virgin, Child, and Saints. M. B. 50.
- 2 The Beautiful Mary of Ratisbon. M. B. 51.
- 3 A St Catherine mentioned by Passavant, vol. III. p. 304, No. 64. Its present whereabouts are unknown. M.
- 4 Ten of the eleven subjects illustrating the Emperor's private life, which embellish the round towers, left and right, of the Triumphal Arch of Maximilian. Dated 1515.
- 5 In the Triumphal Procession of Maximilian, Nos. 57 to 88 of the Vienna edition, published in 1796; also the last five subjects, with a sixth found only in proof sets.

I.

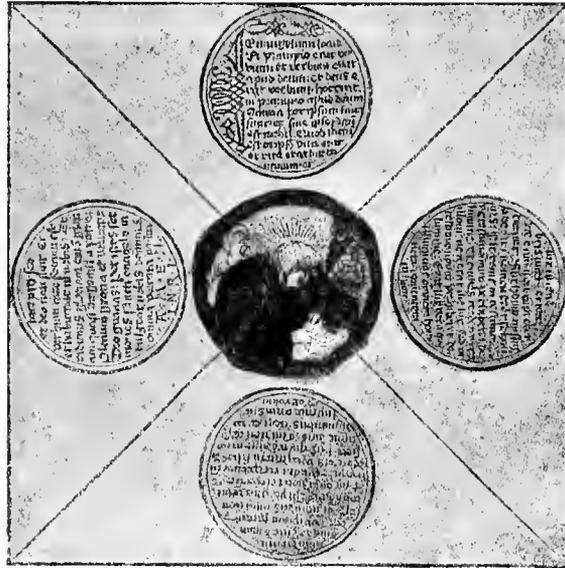
St Benedict.
St Achatius.
St Roch.

The Man of Sorrows.
Christ on the Cross.

St Agnes.
St Jerome.



II. St John the Evangelist.



III.
St John consoling the Virgin.



IV.
Lovers in a wood.



V.
Massacre of the Innocents.



VI.
The Judgment of Paris.



VII.
St George and the Dragon.



VIII.
The Death of St John the Baptist.



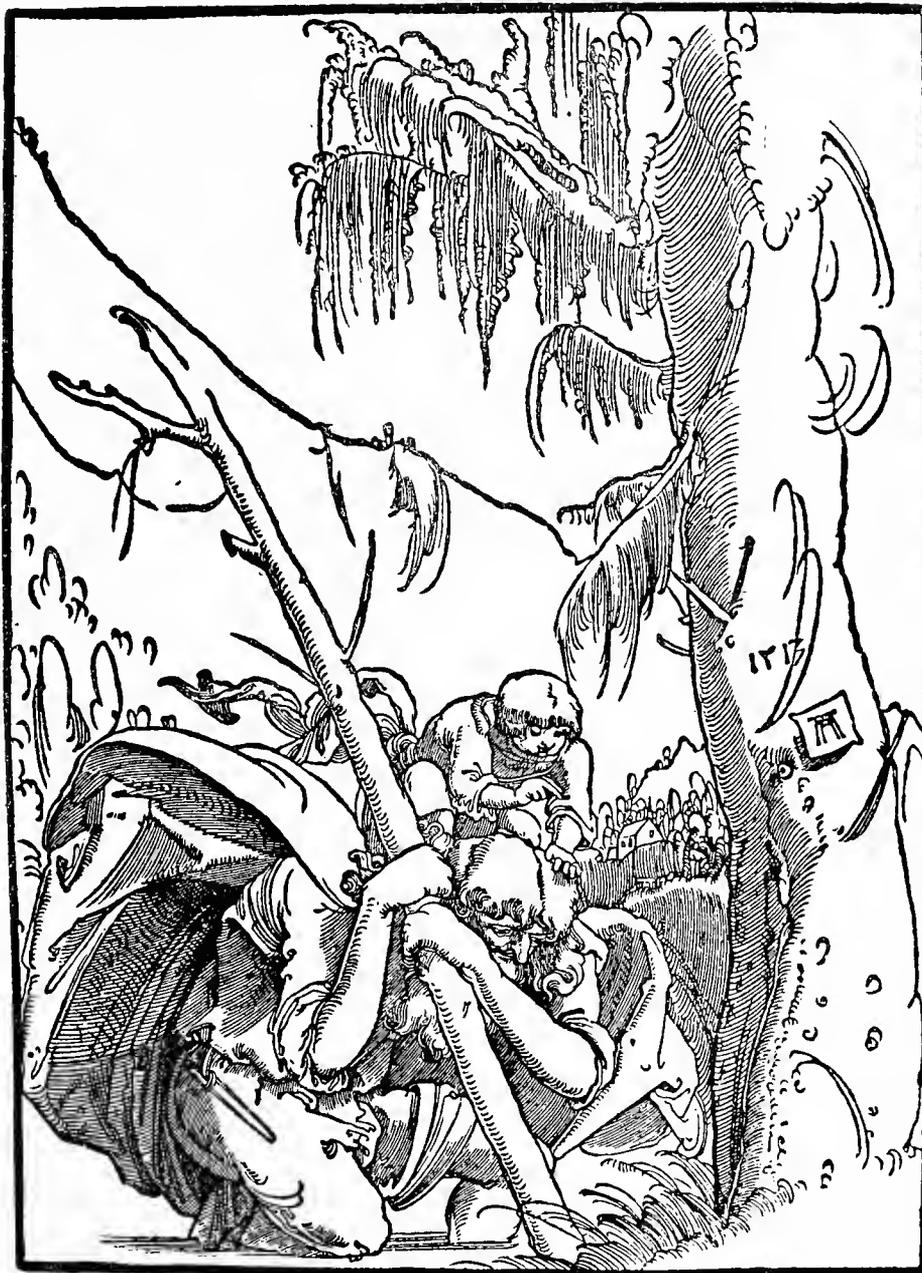
IX.
The Resurrection.



X.
The Annunciation.



XI.
St Christopher fording the Stream.

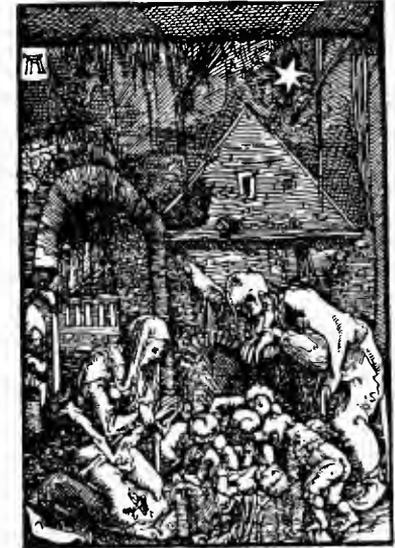


XII.
The Death of St John the Baptist.



XIII.

The Forbidden Fruit. Paradise Lost. Joachim's Offering refused. Joachim and the Angel. Joachim and Anna. The Presentation of the Virgin. The Annunciation. The Visitation. The Nativity.



XIV.

The Adoration of the Kings. The Circumcision. The Presentation.
The Flight into Egypt. Christ among the Doctors. The Transfiguration.
Christ parting from his Mother. The Entry into Jerusalem. The Last Supper.



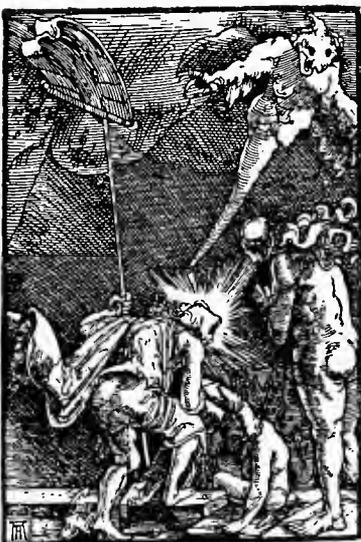
XV.

The Agony in the Garden. Peter strikes off Malchus' ear. Caiaphas rends his Clothes. Christ before Pilate. The Flagellation. The Crown of Thorns. Behold the Man. Pilate washing his hands. Christ sinks under his Cross.



XVI.

Christ nailed to the Cross. The Raising of the Cross. Christ on the Cross. The Descent from the Cross. St John comforts the Virgin. The Entombment. The Descent into Hades. The Resurrection. Christ and Mary Magdalen.



XVII.

The Ascension. The Death of the Virgin.
The Last Judgment. The Virgin and Child.



XVIII.
Abraham's Sacrifice.



XIX.
The Return of the Spies.



XX.
Jael and Sisera.



XXI.
The Adoration of the Shepherds.



XXII.
The Virgin and Child in a Church.



XXIII.
The Virgin enthroned.



XXIV.
St Christopher.



XXV.
St George.



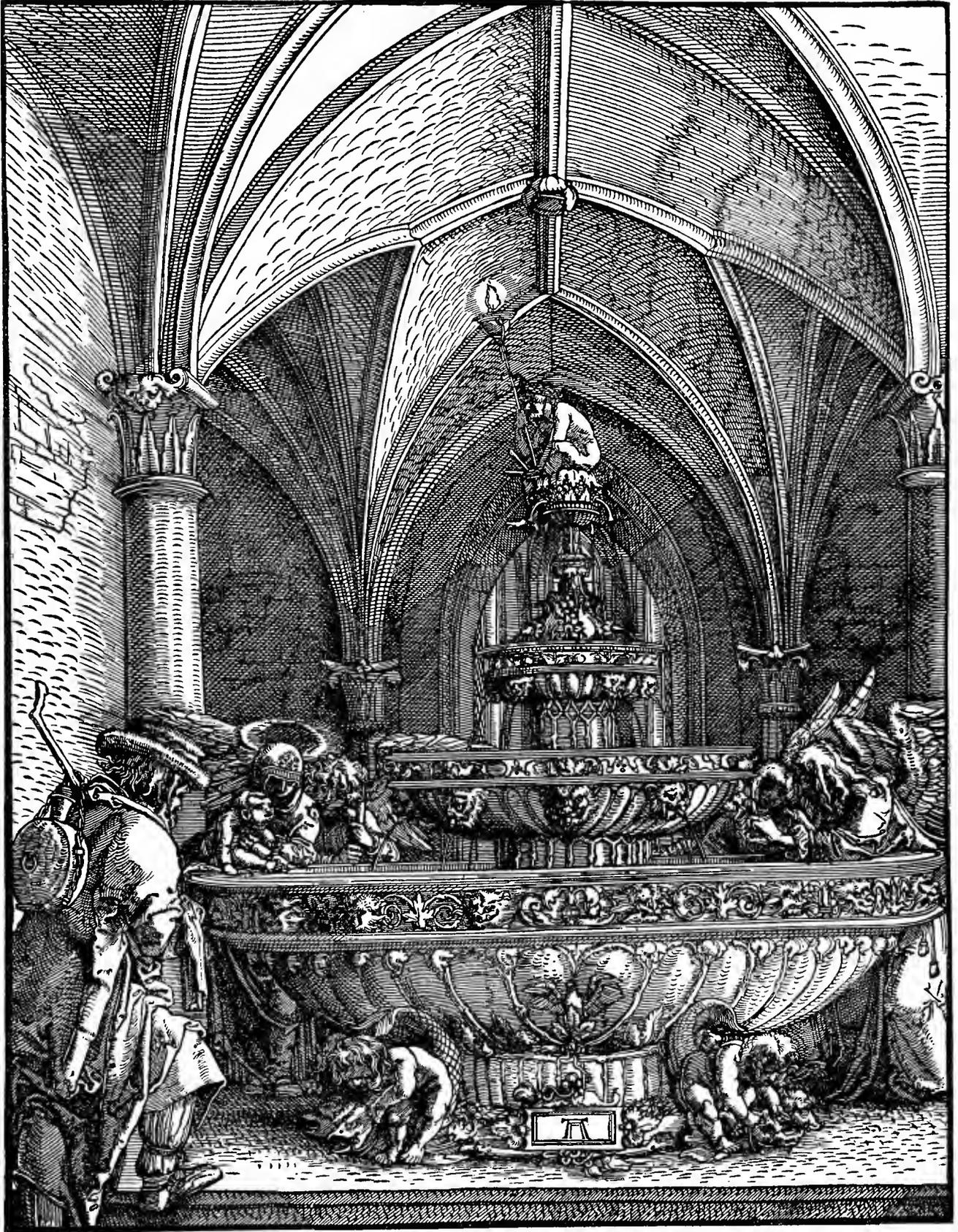
XXVI.
St Jerome in his Cavern.



XXVII.
St Jerome.



XXVIII.
The Fountain.



XXIX.
Thisbe finding Pyramus.



XXX.
A Standard Bearer.



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