

The influence of Martin Schongauer's engravings

Martin Schongauer is one of the rare artists to have enjoyed a significant reputation during his lifetime, despite having produced just a few painted works. He owed his fame, which extended far beyond the Upper Rhine, to his engravings. Albrecht Dürer visited Colmar in 1492 and wanted to meet the man he saw as his master. He arrived too late, as Schongauer had recently died, but the story, which was mentioned by Dürer himself, illustrates the level of fame enjoyed by the Colmar printmaker.

In the wake of the Master E.S., the artist known as "*Martin the Beautiful*" was responsible for bringing prestige to the art of engraving. The 116 prints signed with the monogram *M+S* are today seen as original artworks, despite their multiple status.

But what exactly was their function at the time they were made? Were they artworks in their own right on the same level as an illuminated manuscript or a panel painting, or merely reproductions? Originally, prints were probably produced as illustrations for religious texts, but then found their way into workshops, allowing the artists to build up extensive selections of models.

This inexpensive process, which produced prints on paper sheets that were light and took up little space, encouraged a great freedom of expression. As a result, it enabled artists to gain access to the latest creations and helped iconographic models to circulate. These movements began in the 1470s and continued into the mid – 16th century, covering a vast geographical area.

Prints spread from Spain and Italy in the south, from the cities of the Hanseatic League* in the north and from the kingdom of France as far as Central and Eastern Europe.

Borrowings from Schongauer ranged between copies, such as those made by Wenzel von Olmütz and Israhel van Meckenem, to the transposition of iconographic models. So in this room, we have brought together works by the Colmar master himself with examples of his influence upon the artists of the Upper Rhine.



Upper Rhine (Colmar?), *Altarpiece of the Annunciation*, c. 1490, oil on wood panel, polychrome gilded wood

In the *Altarpiece of the Annunciation*, a small private altarpiece painted in southern Germany in around 1490, the borrowings from Schongauer are indisputable. The scene of the Nativity reproduces the composition of his engraving in its entirety.

The 16th century stained glass window shows a scene of the Descent into Limbo in which the positions of the figures of Christ and Adam owe a great deal to Martin Schongauer. However, the poses of the figures and the treatment of the drapery, which give the scene a more animated feel, reveal an artist already looking towards the art of the Renaissance.



Upper Rhine (Colmar?), *Reliquary of St Hippolytus*, c. 1485, wood covered with gold leaf adorned with painted figures

The artist responsible for the decoration of the *Reliquary of St Hippolytus* (c. 1485) was heavily inspired by the Colmar master's series of Apostles. By choosing a black outline on a gold background, he remains very close to the engraved model, even including the same variations in line and hatching used by Martin Schongauer, and the little grassy slope designed to situate the figures.

Comparing the painted panel of *the Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1500) with Martin Schongauer's engraving reveals similarities both in the overall composition of the scene and in the extremely refined treatment of the fabrics and the drapery.



Upper Rhine (Colmar?), *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1500, oil on wood panel

Martin Schongauer, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1470–75, copper-plate engraving panel

The landscape in the background has been minimised, on the other hand, whilst the royal procession is emphasised in order to suggest depth. The archway of the stable has disappeared, the little dog in the foreground is now lying down, and most significantly, Joseph has appeared behind Mary.

By their nature, engravings are compact in size with a flat surface, but they were also adapted and transposed by sculptors into three-dimensional works.

The artist responsible for *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (c. 1510), for example, copied Martin Schongauer's engraving but

was unable to create the illusion of depth that the engraver suggested with shades of grey.



Upper Rhine (Colmar?), *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, c. 1510, polychrome wood (lime)

Hanseatic League: powerful association of German merchants established around the North Sea and the Baltic Sea