

ANNA WELCH

London calling (again)

Anna Welch, Principal Librarian History of the Book & Arts, shares a journal of her recent explorations in the British Museum print collection.

In the winter of 2019, I took a week away from my role at State Library Victoria to work on an article about a fascinating manuscript in the collection of the University of Sydney. I removed to a remote house in the country so I could focus on writing without distractions. One day I received an email which was the happiest possible distraction: news that I had been awarded the Harold Wright Scholarship and the Sarah & William Holmes Scholarship in their 50th anniversary year and, with them, the opportunity to study in the prints collection of the British Museum in London.

Since the inception of these two scholarships in 1969, this opportunity has been the holy grail for all Australian and New Zealand curators and scholars of prints.¹ Harold Wright (1885–1961) was a Londoner who never left London, but whose influence is felt around the world. From 1903 until his death, he worked in the print departments of commercial art dealers – firstly at Obach & Co., which in 1911 merged with P & D Colnaghi & Co. Wright’s expertise shaped the collecting of institutions in the United Kingdom and around the world, including Australia and New Zealand. The Prints & Drawings Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) – without doubt the finest in Australia – benefitted from his connoisseurship and his friendship with members of the Lindsay family (which included five artist siblings, including Sir Ernest Daryl

Master of the Berlin Passion, engraving on paper of the Nativity pasted into a vellum Book of Hours and hand-illuminated, Utrecht, c. 1450–63, British Museum, 1912,1022.1.5.
Photo by Anna Welch.



Lindsay who was director of the gallery from 1942–1955). I was fortunate to work in that collection between 2011 and 2014, and I saw firsthand both the impact of Wright's recommendations for acquisitions, and the life-changing experience of the Harold Wright and Sarah & William Holmes scholarships, as all my curatorial colleagues in the department – Cathy Leahy, Petra Kayser and Alisa Bunbury – were alumnae of the scholarships.

When Wright died in 1961, his widow Lily Isobel Wright enacted his wishes by auctioning his significant personal collection of old master and modern prints and using the proceeds to establish a scholarship. To the scholarship in Wright's name, Lily added one in honour of her parents, Sarah and William Holmes. The motivation behind both scholarships was to give young Australian and New Zealand print scholars a chance to develop their connoisseurship and expertise through immersion in one of the world's finest collections, that of the British Museum. While the collections in our region are themselves significant, nothing compares with the encyclopaedic holdings of the British Museum, which has around 2.5 million works on paper from the 14th century to the present, and which continues to collect contemporary British graphic arts. Along with the extraordinary opportunity to study this vast collection without narrow objectives, the scholarships also give Australasians a chance to connect with their northern-hemisphere colleagues – to learn from them, and to develop friendships and professional networks.

In February 2020, I set off for my four-month stay in London, as excited and optimistic as a child on Christmas morning. The next chapter of this story is a familiar one to all: the global pandemic changed everyone's lives and plans. I had five weeks in London, the last three weeks of which were in lockdown. There was a strange week where staff (including visiting scholars) were allowed into the Museum, though it remained closed to the public. Walking through the empty galleries to the Prints & Drawings study room past Graeco-Roman sculptures draped with white sheets, watched by the enigmatic eyes of Egyptian sarcophagi, was an eerie and unforgettable experience. I was fortunate to get one of the last flights back into Australia before the borders closed, and to miss hotel quarantine by 30 minutes.

As for everyone, the last few years have been challenging for me. The light at the end of the tunnel was the thought of returning to London to pick up where I left off, and to immerse myself anew in the refreshing erudition of the study room. While I waited, and in the enforced quiet of Melbourne's long lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, I wrote two articles about works that I had seen in my brief time at the Museum. The first, about an early 16th-century Paduan engraving printed on a hitherto unidentified fragmentary broadside,



Top: The Prints & Drawings Study Room, British Museum. Photo by Anna Welch.

was published in *Print Quarterly* in June 2022.² The second, on Fra Angelico's drawing of King David on an intriguing vellum manuscript fragment, will appear in the December 2023 issue of *Word & Image*.³ The time to work on these articles was a silver lining of lockdown.

In November 2022, with the kind support of Hugo Chapman and Stephen Coppel at the British Museum and of Toni Burton at State Library Victoria, I was finally able to resume my scholarships, re-setting the clock for a new four-month stay. Arriving back in London was pure joy, as was reuniting with the wonderful curators and librarians at the British Museum, the British Library, the Warburg Institute, the Courtauld Institute of Art and Courtauld Gallery, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and the antiquarian booksellers with whom I've worked closely over the years. 'An embarrassment of riches' was the phrase that continually surfaced in my mind over that British winter.

I felt like a kingfisher dipping into the waters of a great river, surfacing with nourishment each time.

While the terms of the scholarship encourage recipients not to have too narrow a focus, or too specific a plan, some kind of strategy is needed in such a big collection. As an historian specialising in Italian medieval and early modern books and graphic arts, I began my exploration in 14th-, 15th- and 16th-century Italian boxes of prints and drawings, with forays into the Low Countries (especially Belgium/Flanders and the Netherlands) and Germany. Some of the first works I studied were the Italian drawings on vellum, including Fra Angelico's drawing of David that had so consumed my attention during a long cold winter lockdown in 2020. The chance to study works on paper (and vellum) in person is essential to a fuller understanding of their material nature: drawings and prints are not simply images; they are material creations made of multiple media and with a physicality and aura. Studying these works in person provides the opportunity to examine evidence of production, use and reception, and so to consider how these works functioned in their original context and how this meaning has shifted over time as they have moved into the museum setting. Looking closely at Fra Angelico's drawing allowed me to answer my lingering questions about how it was made (for example, areas were burnished (polished), and I had identified lines that had faded and others that had never been drawn) and in so doing, finalise my article.

The British Museum collection offers the chance to follow in detail the history of European printmaking. For example, I studied mid-15th-century German and Italian woodcuts and the birth of engraving on metal plates in the goldsmith workshops of Germany around the same time, and the subsequent spread of engravings through the Low Countries and Italy. Through these boxes of prints, organised by country then by artist, one can trace the influence of, and interactions between, early masters, such as the Master E.S. (1420–1468), Martin Schongauer (1448–1491), Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and – my favourite – Jacopo de' Barbari (c. 1460/70–before 1516).

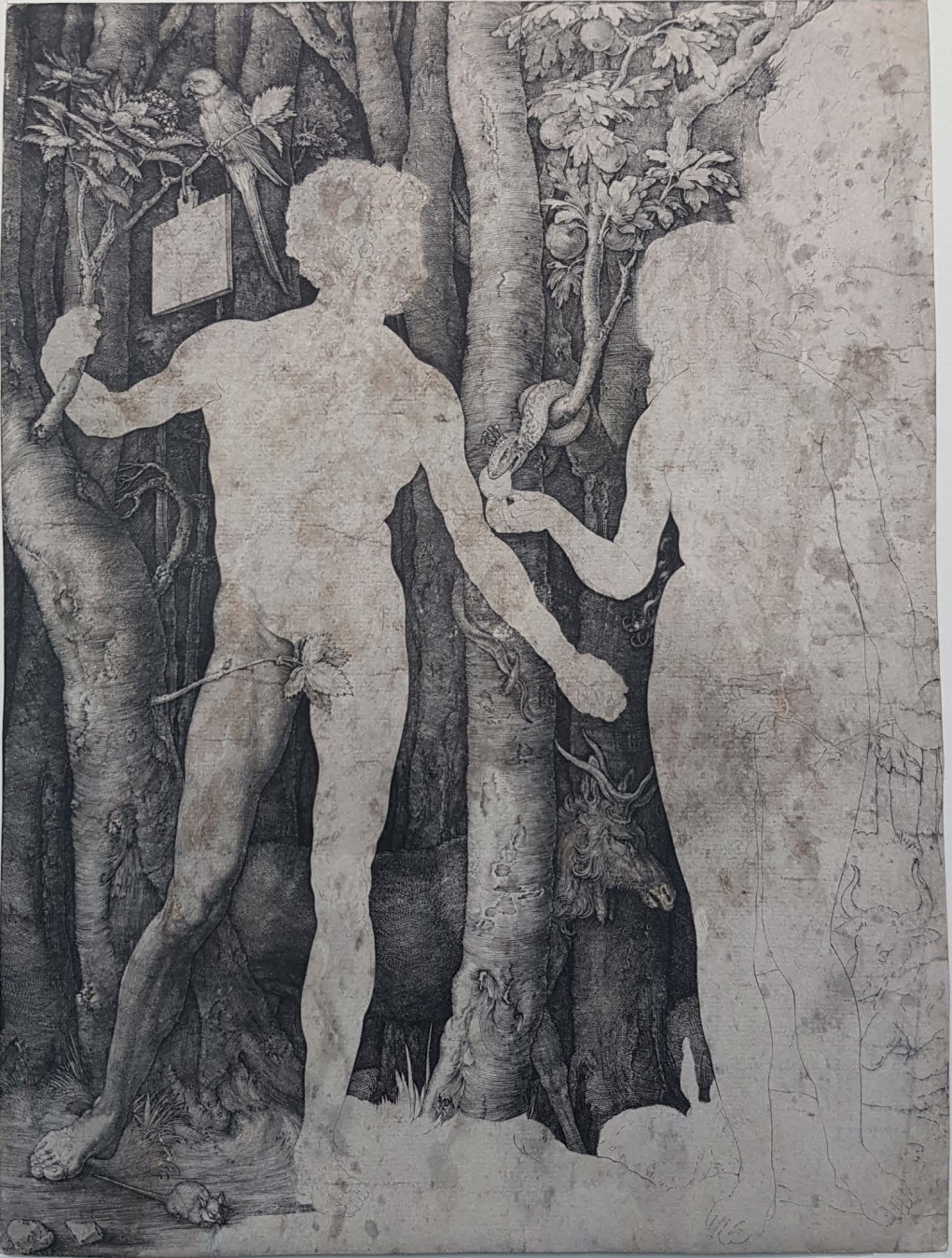
Dürer and de' Barbari are a compelling example of personal artistic exchange between Germany and Italy in the 15th and early 16th centuries. In 1494–95, Dürer made the first of two extended trips to Italy, spending time in Venice where he met and absorbed the influence of Giovanni Bellini, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Lorenzo di Credi, Andrea Mantegna and Jacopo de' Barbari. In 1500, de' Barbari left Venice for Germany, where he remained for some years working for Emperor Maximilian I in Nuremberg (where Dürer also lived) among others. Evidence of Dürer and de' Barbari's artistic relationship is found in Dürer's surviving papers but also in key works by both artists. One



Examining prints in the study room: Andrea Mantegna, frieze engraving across two sheets of the battle of the sea gods, 1470–1500, British Museum, V,1.66 and 1845,0825.610. Photo by Anna Welch.

prominent example is de' Barbari's engraving of Apollo and Diana and Dürer's drawing of the same subject.⁴ Both works are believed to have been made c. 1501–1505, after the two artists had met at least once. Debate continues about who influenced whom, but most scholars agree that Dürer adopted the seated figure of Diana in his drawing (made as the basis for a print he never executed) from de' Barbari's print. The rare and thrilling opportunity to examine the two works in person brought depth to my understanding of the rich and fertile artistic scene of that period.

Curatorial specialisations tend to divide people into working on either prints or drawings, and either works on paper or books. As someone who is interested in the grey areas between these distinctions, I revelled in the



Albrecht Dürer, an unfinished trial proof of an engraving of Adam and Eve, 1504, British Museum, 1837,0616.72.



Albrecht Dürer, finished engraving of Adam and Eve, 1504, British Museum, 1895,0915.299. Photos by Anna Welch.

opportunity to wander freely across these borders. The conclusions I reached on both the artworks were only possible because I brought knowledge of the book to the study of prints and drawings. It was predictable, therefore, that I would be drawn to studying that most hybrid of creatures, manuscripts with pasted-in prints.

The British Museum and the British Library have a history not unlike that of State Library Victoria and the NGV here in Melbourne. The British Museum, founded in 1763, housed a vast library in its central domed reading room. In 1973, the *British Library Act* established the British Library as a separate institution, and in 1998 the library moved into its own new building just up the road from the museum. This divorce separated the collections in uneven ways familiar to those who have ever wondered why State Library Victoria has a prints collection or why the NGV has five medieval manuscripts: some books remained in the Prints & Drawings Collection at the British Museum, and some prints went to the new British Library. This separation can at times obscure knowledge about the collections.

The boundaries between works on paper and books are porous: the same artists worked in both formats, and the presence of prints in books, whether original to a publication or added, complicates the binary. From the 15th century onwards, prints were sometimes glued into personal manuscript prayerbooks as a cheaper method of illustration, supplanting hand-drawn illuminations. They could then be hand-painted and illuminated or left in their original state. This practice seems to have been most common in books made for and by women in the Low Countries and Germany. Modern curatorial practice has meant that only the prints in these manuscripts in the British Museum's collection were catalogued: the texts have been largely overlooked until recently, as has the materiality of the binding and writing surface.⁵

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my time at the British Museum was to collate and describe in detail the four 15th-century manuscripts illustrated with prints in the Prints & Drawings Collection, bringing together my love for the form of the book, palaeography (the study of handwriting), medieval spirituality, and medieval and early modern art. The fruits of this labour can be seen in the online database records of these books, and my more discursive descriptions are on file with the curators and can be supplied to researchers on request.⁶ Collating these books – that is, analysing the way the book was assembled, including counting the number of leaves per gathering – yielded significant new information about how women used prints in their books, showing that the usual method of adding images was to insert a 'singleton' leaf, rather than leave a blank leaf in a gathering and paste the image on



Anonymous artist, a tiny niello print of three men singing, Florence, c. 1450–1475, British Museum, 1845,0825.152.

afterwards. This, and the variable number of leaves per gathering, reflects the idiosyncratic nature of book design and production in this period, which carried on well into the 16th century in books made by nuns and other religious women in the Netherlands and German-speaking regions. It shows how women made books differently to their male counterparts, responding to the differences in available source material but also perhaps to ‘in-house’ cultural practices within convents, as older women taught younger ones how to make their own prayerbooks. There is much more to be discovered about female book production in that period, and I look forward to continuing to explore the topic.

It’s not often in life that one gets through the low door in the wall into Wonderland, and truth be told it was with some reluctance I boarded my flight back to Melbourne in March 2023. But I have been enriched in countless ways by these scholarships, and it will take a long time to digest all that I feasted on in London. It is a great honour to bring new knowledge, new contacts and new perspectives back to my work in Australia.