

H-Net Reviews

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Deutsche Einblattholzschritte: 1500 bis 1700. Digitale Bibliothek Spezial.

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Many researchers interested in early modern popular culture have spent hours at art libraries, poring over the elegant quarto volumes of Walter Strauss's collection, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500-1550*. Of course, owning these volumes is out of the question for most individuals. Along with sister collections dealing with woodcuts from the periods 1550-1600 and 1600-1700 (the latter edited by Dorothy Alexander), the Strauss woodcut catalogues are hard to find and extremely costly. An intact set of any of these works is likely to set the purchaser back at least \$300, and to own all three lavish collections, eleven volumes total, would probably cost well over a thousand dollars. The German firm Directmedia Publishing GmbH, however, has now made virtually all of the artworks from these three standard collections—almost 3500 images in all—available in its Digitale Bibliothek series for a mere EUR 79.90. Titled *Deutsche Einblattholzschritte: 1500 bis 1700*, this electronic collection combines the images from *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500-1550*, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1550-1600*, and *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1600-1700* into a two-CD set for Windows. *Deutsche Einblattholzschritte* will undoubtedly prove to be a rich and exciting resource for anyone interested in popular visual culture in early modern Germany. Its publication is a welcome event. It continues the democratizing trend towards increased accessibility, via microfiche and CD, of early modern primary documents to researchers worldwide. That being said, there are significant problems with this product. It is neither as well researched and documented, nor as versatile or easy to use, as one might wish. However, despite its flaws, it remains a worthwhile investment for any scholar who wishes to integrate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German

woodcut evidence into his or her work. This collection's single biggest asset is its broad, comprehensive coverage. The thousands of high-resolution scans represent a staggering bulk of raw data. Admittedly, for anyone familiar with the Geisberg-Strauss-Alexander volumes, there will be nothing new here, but the collection will afford many hours of browsing. Famous artists are well represented: there are over two hundred works by Hans Sebald Beham, over a hundred each by Burgkmair and the elder Cranach, almost eighty each by Baldung Grien and Drer, and forty by Albrecht Altdorfer. In addition, there are notable selections from the acknowledged masters of the woodcut, perhaps most notably the two hundred works by Erhard Schoen and the hundred by Hans Schaeufelein. These, one will notice, are all sixteenth-century names, and it is true that the collection is heavily weighted towards sixteenth-century works. Eyeballing the table of contents suggests that perhaps four-fifths of the works are of sixteenth-century origin, but given the design of the software it is difficult to determine the exact proportion. Many users will appreciate this collection of important works by well-known artists. Still more exciting for many researchers, however, will be the hundreds—thousands, rather—of lesser-known works, which open a window into the daily life and mentality of the age. Early modern table manners, styles of dress, skilled crafts, military customs, musical instruments, wedding practices, political ceremonies, and much more, are all depicted. The woodcuts offer possibilities for comprehending early modern sensibilities in a way that textual sources cannot: jokes and humor, popular conceptions of beauty, and stereotypical representations of social types—shrewish housewives, strutting lansquenets, homely peasants, wolfish prelates—all emerge from the woodcuts in fresh, vivid detail. As one browses through the collection, even casually, it is nearly

impossible to keep from being intrigued and captivated by the odd, curious details of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century life and the thought they afford. One 1551 broadsheet reports a plague of vipers and lizards recently broken out in Hungary, in which over three hundred souls perished from the eruptions of reptiles in their bellies (pp. 20f.).^[1] A seventeenth-century mock proclamation, with illustrations, explains the newly promulgated "Women's Law," ordering all men forthwith to "refrain from annoying their wives, if they are able," to seek permission before visiting taverns, and to rise daily before dawn to heat the house (p. 1228). There are countless religious images reflecting a wide range of sensibilities, ranging from acerbic, to poignant, to arresting (e.g., pp. 2404, 34, and 136). Commemorations of political events, depictions of agricultural or military life, portraits of notables, ornamental prints, almanacs and news reports round out the collection. Many of the reproductions represent ephemera whose primary value is documentary rather than aesthetic. But there are some compelling artistic surprises as well; see, for example, the several painstaking portraits of convicted murderers, which possess a disturbing psychological intensity and frankness (pp. 1090, 2731).

As is typical for Digitale Bibliothek's CD-ROM based publications, this collection reproduces, in compact and economical format, a well-known primary-source collection, rather than reflecting new research. Even so, the lack of scholarly apparatus is striking. Nothing included with the product gives the user any clear sense of what methods or sources were used in the compilation. No editor's name appears, nor is there a substantive introduction. The bibliography lists a grand total of three works—the three multivolume *German Single-Leaf Woodcut* collections mentioned above—while misspelling one editor's name to boot!

Clearly, the primary attraction for most users will be the images themselves. Well-designed research tools receive relatively little emphasis. The compilers include two databases—one of artworks, one of artists—indexed five ways. The databases provide basic information on the works and their creators: dates, dimensions, years and locations of birth and death, and the like. The indices provide alphabetical listings of the artists' names, woodcut titles, place names, personal names (primarily for portraits), and subjects. The first three indices are fairly straightforward to use. Simple but irritating shortcomings mar the other indices, however, and will prob-

ably limit their utility for most users. In the personal name index, spellings vary and are not standardized. In the subject index, the choice of thematic keywords seems idiosyncratic and arbitrary. And in all the indices, the compilers employ a peculiar, nonstandard method of alphabetizing. These are annoyances, not crippling problems. But one misses the comprehensive and thoughtful thematic categories included with the Strauss volumes. One senses that information was simply plucked from the print volumes without much care or consideration.

The software is serviceable but limited. It is clearly intended for use with large text databases, not with image collections. Full-text search and markup capabilities are comprehensive and well-conceived, but this collection contains little text to search. Image-viewing capabilities are just fair, with rudimentary printing support. For intensive work with a small number of woodcuts, users will likely want to export files to more full-featured image-viewing or -editing software. Finally, there are a few flaws in the file-management system used on the CDs. The software allows the user to display a page of hyperlinked thumbnail images and then, by clicking on the thumbnails, to jump to the corresponding full-size woodcut reproduction. For about half of the images, though, clicking on the thumbnail will take you not to the picture you want to see, but to the one that precedes it in the index. This seems to be simple sloppiness and poor prerelease error-checking.^[2]

In summary: this is a broad and fascinating collection of high-quality woodcut images. The execution of the CD shows signs of carelessness and general indifference towards scholarly concerns. The software is not as well suited for image-intensive work as one might like. However, it is possible to work around most of the limitations, and at this price, the collection is a worthwhile investment for anyone interested in early modern woodcuts.

Notes

[1]. Digitale Bibliothek's reader software is structured to mimic a printed book, and the woodcut collection is organized into "pages" or screens with a fixed pagination. This review references these internal page numbers.

[2]. An additional point: buyers whose product ships with version 3 of Digitale Bibliothek's reader software should consider upgrading to version 4 (available free of charge from Directmedia's website), which improves the user interface and eliminates the need to swap the collection's two CDs during use.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

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