

Ferdinand Columbus

The Print Collection of

1488–1539

A Renaissance Collector in Seville

Mark P. McDonald



BOOK OF THE YEAR

The print collection of
Ferdinand Columbus (1488-1539)
A renaissance collector in Seville

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APOLLO's book of 2004 is a mighty work of scholarship that has revolutionised the study of early European printmaking and collecting. As **Christian Rümelin** says, the only adequate praise is 'a string of superlatives'.

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One is tempted simply to use a string of superlatives to describe what has been achieved in this recently published book of two volumes and a CD-Rom dealing with the print collection of Ferdinand Columbus, the illegitimate son of Christopher. Born in 1488 and educated at the Spanish court together with his half-brother, Ferdinand became a leading Spanish humanist and an important advisor to Charles V, King of Spain and the Burgundian Netherlands, and later, in 1519, Holy Roman Emperor. After the death of his father in 1506 Ferdinand was deeply involved in securing the inheritance for his half-brother and himself, a battle that continued even after Ferdinand returned to the court from a trip to the New World in 1509.

As he fought for this paternal inheritance and protection of the family name, he also followed his scholarly interests, which had developed during his time at the court. These interests gradually became more intense and led to the establishment of a proper library. When Ferdinand joined a royal trip through Europe, he had the opportunity not only to expand his library, but also to buy prints. There is strong evidence that he mainly bought his prints while travelling, rather than via agents and booksellers in Seville.

Within a few years, Columbus established a collection of around 3,200 sheets and recorded them in an inventory, now in the Columbus archive and library in Seville. It is not only the

oldest inventory of a print collection that has survived, it is also surprisingly systematic in its details and shows for the time a highly intelligent approach to prints. One of the challenges posed by the Columbus inventory is that the collection is known only through this record, as the prints were dispersed long ago, probably shortly after Ferdinand's death in 1538.

And so the task that Mark McDonald takes on for *The Print Collection of Ferdinand Columbus (1488-1539)* is nearly Herculean. In the first instance, McDonald had to transcribe the entries of the inventory, translate them into English, and identify as many prints as possible. The inventory was structured in a quite precise system, firstly according to the dimensions of the prints in their original Spanish sizes and in relation to book publishing, and then the number of figures, either dressed or nude, and their relation to either secular or profane imagery, and finally a detailed description of the sheet. The descriptions sometimes contain names or monograms, and together with other features noted offered the possibility of either identifying a print or judging that it has not survived, and even that no impression of it is known. What McDonald achieves then is mind-boggling – all entries are clearly analysed in terms of their size and iconography, from which he has been able to identify about half. To this end, a great advantage for the reader is the

inclusion in the publication of McDonald's database as a CD-Rom.

For fifteenth-century prints, Ferdinand mainly collected engravings rather than woodcuts, but for sixteenth-century works the converse occurred. The number of sheets that are in theory identifiable, but are not known in even a single impression, reveals totally new insights into print production and the importance of visual material in the early sixteenth century. Although the transcription and analysis alone is a huge achievement for print scholarship and research into renaissance collecting, it is the identification of the prints that opens a completely new chapter, a point expanded on by all contributors to the first volume – Fritz Koreny for fifteenth-century German prints, Peter Parshall for sixteenth-century German, David Landau and Michael Bury on the early Italians, Ger Luijten for early Netherlandish prints, Peter Fuhring on ornamental sheets, Malcolm Jones on non-religious and more popular material, and Peter Barber on the maps. It is interesting to see that Ferdinand Columbus was obviously interested in imagery more than in the printmaking itself or luxury impressions, thereby having a completely different approach from what has been considered important to print collecting since around 1800.

The conclusions of McDonald's book have some important consequences, firstly for knowledge of printmaking in the late fifteenth and

early sixteenth centuries. Given that printmaking was a mass medium and many of these sheets were printed in quite large numbers, it is surprising that this inventory, for all countries that Columbus visited, includes so many impressions that are today completely unknown or known only in later states or different editions. Not only do many *oeuvre*-catalogues have to be amended to include these sheets, the whole understanding of print production needs re-evaluation.

Our knowledge of the print market and production, especially in the period between 1510 and 1530, has taken a huge step forward, and one cannot stress the importance of these new findings highly enough. This publication is one of the most important for the history of early printmaking, not only because it uncovers a large collection of the time, but also because it has made available a transcription of entries and various commentaries that were unusable before. *The Print Collection of Ferdinand Columbus* is a major handbook on fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century printmaking. Everybody working in this field or interested in it will have to consult it, and its ideas, thoughts and approaches will form the basis of the new research that will now have to be undertaken.

Its publication is also the launchpad for an exhibition that has been shown in Madrid and Seville and will be coming to London early next year. Although the original collection has not come down to us, a great deal can be done with the identified sheets, drawn for the exhibition mainly from the holdings of the British Museum. Besides the inventory in its three volumes (or two-plus, if one likes), the exhibition is another product of McDonald's research, albeit a shorter and more compressed version. This may be a different story, no less intriguing or well thought out, but it will be a great pleasure to be confronted with another approach to printmaking and print collecting with such a fascinating source at its heart.

Christian Rümelin is assistant keeper of prints and twentieth-century art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.