

the Whitworth

Audio Descriptions transcript

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AUDIO DESCRIPTIONS

Audio descriptions of artworks from the collection of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester.



AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse : Death, Famine, War and The Conqueror (from The Apocalypse) [P.3061], by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

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This is a woodcut print of The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse by Albrecht Dürer, published in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1498, one of the 15 prints in Dürer's Apocalypse series. The print is 391mm long and 281mm wide. Many prints were trimmed by collectors in order to fit their needs, and this print is no different. It has been trimmed to the plate mark, forming a neat border.

It dramatically represents the figures described in the Book of Revelation (6:1-8). The unfolding scene in front of us is positioned as if the viewer is one of the central witnesses to the beginnings of the apocalypse. This was, and remains, one of the most powerful depictions of the story in the history of western art. Published in 1498 at the height of mid-millennial fears about impending doom, Dürer's woodcut version of the Apocalypse story captured the spirit of the times. Rather than depict the Apocalypse with text and small images, Dürer's prints dominate the pages before the reader turns over to read the accompanying verses.

The scene shown is one of chaos, it is the beginning of the apocalypse – the first four seals have been opened and the Horsemen are beginning their descent onto Earth. The background is dominated by rows of finely carved lines which emphasise the speed and urgency with which the horsemen are riding. The top of the print depicts a serene angel hovering above the horsemen, their wings stretching across the print. The billowing robes the angel is wearing covers their entire body and flows behind them. The angel themselves is androgynous in their depiction, their curly hair descends just below their shoulders and is swept away from their face. As the Apocalypse was believed in the late 15th century to be a phenomenon that would be ordained by Heaven, the top left corner has heavenly light rays diagonally striking its way across the corner, going against the sky's horizontal lines.

The first Horseman that arrives after the First Seal is broken is Conquest. Conquest can be seen about to gallop off to the far right hand side of page and into the margin, his face almost expressionless. He is wearing an elaborate crown on top of his head, it has an ornately curled border stretching across and extending outwards. The top has a tassel blowing in the wind to the left of him. He has long wavy hair flowing over his shoulder, whilst his full curly beard remains still in the wind. Conquest is readying a large, yet simple bow and arrow, drawing it taut as if preparing to release it.

Moving across the left of scene, War rides across Conquest's right-hand side. What first captures the viewer's attention is War's longsword, wielded high above his head and almost slicing itself across the clear, fluffy clouds.

Travelling down his arm, we see chainmail criss-crossing his forearm. Over the chainmail, War is wearing a plain button-down shirt with ornate sleeves.

Tassels flow around his shoulders. Like Conquest, War also wears a crown atop his head, his face again devoid of emotion. A single brooch is stitched in the middle of the hat's rim, just above his forehead.

Next to War, in the dead centre of the print, is Pestilence. He is dressed in soft, luxurious clothing and elaborate robes. A cluster of jewels are strung in a layered necklace around his neck and on his belt. Unlike War and Conquest, Pestilence does not wear a hat. Instead, he has a full head of curly hair making him appear much younger than his companions. Unlike the other Horsemen, Pestilence is clean-shaven, his cheekbones more defined as he pulls his mouth into a grimace of determination. His thick eyebrows are pulled down as he squints ahead of the print's margin and over the horizon, looking for his target. This the first Horseman in the print where his full body is depicted. His robe is lined with white fluffy fur, and it is held secure by a lavish belt. The belt also has

bells at the end of individual ropes, also swinging in the wind as Pestilence surges forward. Pestilence's armoured legs are tightly grasping the horse, the stirrups pulled taut against its body. What we also notice is that the reigns and stirrups are different than the other horses', they match its master's clothing with their fur-lined trim. Swinging behind Pestilence are the scales that will be used to weigh and restrict the harvest, beginning the onslaught of famine.

Finally, as we move to the bottom left of the print, we are confronted by Death. Death is depicted with more wild abandon than the other riders, his is almost throwing his head back and opening his mouth wide in maniacal laughter as he begins his path of destruction with his brethren. Rather than simply following the allegorical tradition of Death being depicted as a skeleton, Dürer's Death is an emaciated old man, with wild, wide-open eyes and a shock of white hair whipping across his head from the wind. Death is shown holding a pitchfork, a weapon that will be used to gather the human souls and to throw them into Hell's mouth. In contrast to the powerful muscular horses of his three companions, Death is shown riding an emaciated horse whose proportions are much smaller than his own. Death is known as the great leveller, where all of humanity's accomplishments and social structures will be levelled under Death's thundering hooves.

At the bottom of the print, the first casualties are depicted with agonising detail. The writhing mass of limbs suggest a crush of people have fallen, ready to be trampled by Death. The ordinarily dressed gentlemen to the far right of the print, almost out of frame, appears to be torn between escaping the Horsemen and watching their onslaught with a mixture of awe and terror. He raises his left arm as a futile attempt to defend himself from the hooves of Pestilence's horse.

Moving on from the Horsemen, we now reach the bottom of the print. Here, the first casualties of the apocalypse are depicted. All of the observers in this print are depicted in contemporary clothing of Dürer's time and represent different social classes. This reflects the belief that during the Apocalypse, no member of society will be spared from destruction.

We will move from the left of the print to the right of the print. As mentioned previously, the bottom left corner is dominated by the scaly, draconic beast opening its jaw, ready to eat the bishop who has just been trampled underfoot by Death. The creature represents Hell, but according to different translations of the Bible it could also be a depiction of Hades, the Greek god of the Underworld.

The bishop's ornately decorated headpiece almost appears to be weighing him down into the beast's mouth. Sprawled across the bottom of the page, we notice a fleeing observer has fallen and is about to be trampled by Death's hooves. The right-hand side of the print is cluttered with fleeing observers clambering over a collapsed person, each one wearing a different expression of terror and despair.

Dürer's woodcut print of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a testament to his skill and eye for detail. Each inked line captures the swirling emotions of the viewer's fear and the Horsemen's powerful determination as they storm across the scene.