

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: Albrecht Dürer The Sea Monster (Das Meerwunder)
1498 – 1500 by Albrecht Dürer

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The Sea Monster is a copper plate engraving by the Northern Renaissance artist Albrecht Durer, made between 1498 - 1500. The piece is rectangular, being 24.9cm high and 19.1cm wide making it a few cm smaller than an A4 piece of paper. The print depicts a dramatic scene of abduction; a woman has been snatched from the shore by a horned merman, who is carrying her into the ocean.

In the background a male figure wearing turbaned headwear runs towards the water's edge, arms raised in anguish, sword hilt visible at his hip and coat flapping behind him. The other figures - just to the left of the man - appear to be the abducted woman's bathing companions are shown scrambling to get out of the water, lest the same fate befall them. Two are knee deep and climbing onto the rocks. One has her back to us, the other arms outstretched towards her stolen companion. A third woman is chest deep, turning away from us the viewer, with her arms outstretched as she tries to swim back to shore. Durer's thin lines become spaced out around the women, forming into waves as they disturb the water in their panic to get back to land. A short patch of reeds at the bottom right corner of the piece sits in front of the swirling waves behind, suggesting we are viewing the scene from the edge of a shoreline, just like the frantic background characters.

There has been debate over the exact subject matter of the piece, and whether Dürer was referencing a specific tale or event rather than a more general myth narrative of a woman being stolen away by a sea creature, which harks back to Ancient Grecian legends. The Germanic inspired landscape the woman has been taken from is mountainous with a rocky waterfront and a cluster of buildings nestled at the base of tall cliffs extending up towards the sky. At the top of the cliff is the imposing Nuremberg Castle.

A ship, placed to the far right of the piece where the sea meets the shoreline, is sailing into the distance. Long thin horizontal lines running parallel to each other are used to create the sky. These stop at the outline of giant billowing clouds that dominate the top third of the piece.

Engraving is an intaglio printmaking process in which lines are cut into a metal plate using a tool called a burin. The size and shape of the burin will change the density and thickness of the printed lines. To create tone, an artist can place these lines close together, or add small dots. Crossing and intersecting lines, or crosshatching, will create the same effect. This will result in darker areas, whereas light is achieved by spacing the lines or dots further apart. So, even though the print is created using only black ink, tone is achieved throughout. The brightness of the clouds, the shadowy clustered forest at the waters' edge, the curved shading on the woman's body and the overlapping scales of the merman all demonstrate how Dürer was able to create exceptional light, depth and texture within his prints.

The central figure is a naked woman, who is looking over her right shoulder back at the shore. She is riding on the tail of a male creature -the titular sea monster-, who has both human and fish-like qualities. The woman is naked save for an elaborate jewelled Milanese headdress representative of her wealth and status. She is depicted lying on her left side, propped up on her elbow as her other arm is obscured behind her back, reappearing with her right hand coming to rest on her hip. Her hair is pinned behind her headdress that sits on the crown of her head. The headdress is held in place by a string of precious gems around her forehead, and two thin straps under her chin. Her hair is long and curly, cascading out from behind the headdress as if being whipped by the wind.

But it is her expression the viewer is most drawn to. Her mouth is open, and as she gazes back to the safety of the shore it is striking how little she seems afraid. Certainly she appears shocked, but some critics have suggested that her relaxed pose shows she is not overly worried about her situation.

Durer has used small curved lines to emphasise her figure. Eyelash like lines highlight the curve of her legs, the dip of her waist, the roundness of her stomach and breasts. A piece of fabric is loosely gathered over her right arm, where the merman is gripping her tightly. The material follows the line of her body, sitting between her and the merman's tail and wrapping around her crossed shins. From under a fold of the woman's drapery, the merman's long fish tail emerges layered in tiny overlapping scales.

The merman mirrors her posture, only facing out towards the vast ocean. He looks sternly to his right, with the artist using multiple etched lines to show the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and the bags beneath them. The bottom half of his face is completely covered by a long beard, and a gnarled forked antler protrudes from his forehead. The merman holds a giant tortoise shell as a shield. It is roughly the length of his torso and is held out in front of him at the bottom right of the piece, obscuring his left arm. His right hand is gripping the upper left arm of the woman as he carries her further away from the shore. In stark contrast to the female figure the merman's torso which Dürer has defined through heavy crosshatching, casts his figure in shadow. Numerous dots on his chest give his skin a fish-scale like quality, and his heavily shaded torso and jagged fin like genitals juxtapose the woman's bright figure. The tightly packed undulating lines that make up the sea in the background breakout to become frantic overlapping waves around the couple, highlighting the chaotic scene their departure creates.