Print - Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus

Object: Print

Place of origin: Nuremberg (engraved)

Date: 1526 (engraved)

Artist/Maker: Dürer, Albrecht, born 1471 - died 1528 (engraver)

Materials and Techniques: Engraving on laid paper

Credit Line: Salting Bequest

Museum number: E.4621-1910

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 64, The Wolfson Gallery, case SS, shelf 1

Public access description

Albrecht Dürer produced many portraits which were either drawn or painted, but made comparatively few printed portraits. His subjects were his friends and associates but also leading figures in politics, religion, science and the arts as well as key figures involved in the Reformation. Some of these portraits were for private use while some were designed from the outset for public display. By the time he produced this print Dürer was an accomplished master of engraving.

This portrait of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), the Dutch theologian and humanist who was famous for his published correspondence, was made in 1526. Dürer's unusually detailed engraving shows Erasmus writing a letter with a reed pen. The book in the foreground is probably the 'Adagia', his compilation of proverbs reconciling classical and Christian wisdom. Dürer met Erasmus three times during a stay in the Netherlands in 1520-21 but did not produce this portrait until some years later, after Erasmus had expressed an interest in obtaining a portrait of himself by the artist. When Erasmus saw the print he complained that it was not a good likeness. However he allowed copies to circulate and probably distributed some as gifts.

Descriptive line

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam by Albrecht Dürer; engraving; 1526

Physical description

Erasmus is standing to the right of the image, facing towards the left, at a table on which is a writing desk. He is writing a letter. On the table next to the writing desk is a folded letter and a vase containing lily of the valley and other flowers. At the back of the image is a frame with an inscription in Latin and Greek with the artist's monogram below. In the foreground is an open book, possibly Erasmus's 'Adagia' and to the right several closed books.

Dimensions

Height: 24.5 cm cut to, Width: 19 cm

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Historical context note

Dürer met Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467-1536) on at least two occasions during his visit to the Low Countries 1520/21, and sketched his likeness. After receiving Dürer's engravings of Pirckheimer, he repeatedly asked Dürer to do the same for him. In the end, he wrote to Pirckheimer: 'I wonder how I shall show Dürer my gratitude, which he deserves eternally. It is not surprising that this picture does not correspond exactly to my appearance. I no longer look the same as five years ago.' The inscription reads: The Likeness of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Done by Albrecht Dürer from Life [Latin] - His Writings Present a Better Picture of the Man than this Portrait [Greek] /MDXXVI/AD.' The likeness is in all probability based on Erasmus's portrait medal designed by Quentin Massys.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O154972/portrait-of-desiderius-erasmus-print-durer-albrecht/