Woodcut - Opening of the Four Seals

Public access description
This woodcut comes from a series of fifteen by Albrecht Dürer illustrating the Apocalypse of Saint John and published in 1498. The four riders illustrate the opening of the first four seals, signalling the end of humankind by Conquest, Discord, Famine and Death. Dürer has added dramatic energy to traditionally static representations of the opening of the first four seals, which are usually shown separately.

Here, the blockcutter's extraordinary skill has produced an illusion of depth using line alone. Horizontal parallel lines create a dramatic dark backdrop against which the foreground figures stand out. The energy of the scene comes from the delicate curling lines defining much of the detail in the foreground figures and clouds.

It was usual for artists like Dürer to employ specialist blockcutters to cut blocks to their designs. Dürer would have drawn the image onto the block for the blockcutters to follow. These woodcuts outstrip the quality of other woodcuts of the time, leading to suggestions that Dürer may have cut the blocks himself but Dürer's training as a goldsmith and painter would have taught him engraving and design skills, not woodcutting. As he published the book himself, he is likely to have supervised the cutting, ensuring that they were close to his intentions.

This page is from a book version published in 1498 in German. Dürer controlled all aspects of publication, borrowing the font for the text from his godfather, publisher Anton Koberger. He also issued a Latin edition for the international market. A reissue in 1511 was set to Latin verses with two other large woodcut series, the Life of the Virgin and the Large Passion. The images were also sold separately without text.

Descriptive line
'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' or 'Opening of the Four Seals', woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528); number five of sixteen illustrations to the 1498 German edition of the 'Apocalypse of Saint John'; Nuremberg, Germany, 1498.

Physical description
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse attacking a group of people. Their weapons are a trident, a bow and arrow, a sword and a sling. Above is an angel in a cloudy sky. Bolts shoot from the sky from top left. In the bottom left corner are the jaws of Hell, represented by a monster's mouth.

Dimensions
Height: 39.2 cm trimmed, Width: 28.2 cm trimmed

Museum number
E.716-1940

Object history note
This image comes from the German edition of 1498. There was also a Latin edition and single-sheet woodcuts were also issued. The set was reissued in 1511 along with the Large Passion and Life of the Virgin series, with Latin verse.

For the 1498 edition the font was borrowed from his godfather an important Nuremberg publisher Anton Koberger.

It has been suggested that sources for some of the images in Dürer's work were the woodcut Apocalypse series published by Koberger (1483) and Grüninger (1485)

Historical context note
1"I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!"
2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.
3 When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 4 Then another horse came out, a fiery red one.
Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

5 When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. 6 Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

7 When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth."

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O728479/opening-of-the-four-seals-woodcut-durer-albrecht/