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The Altzenbachs of Cologne

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Early Modern German Print Publishers: Popular Prints of the Seventeenth Century

Part I

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For Bronwen, Hugo, and Monty

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Preface

My interest in the Altzenbachs goes back almost 50 years, although for the first few decades it was largely sporadic. As I was searching for German political broadsheets of the seventeenth century in libraries, museums, archives, and private collections, I routinely took the opportunity to see what prints by major print publishers like the Altzenbachs were also held there. These disparate prints formed the foundation of the present catalog, but even after I had committed myself to the project, I could not have foreseen how rich and extensive the material would be. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the prints published by the Altzenbachs has been neither reproduced nor cited, there are a handful with images that have taken on near-iconic significance and thereby guaranteed the fame of the Altzenbachs as noteworthy broadsheet publishers.

For years broadsheets were stepchildren in both libraries and museums, so that locating individual copies was time-consuming and often a case of pure luck. We are fortunate now that the significance of popular prints has been recognized by both scholars and public institutions with the result that more and more prints are reproduced in scholarly studies at the same time that public collections are striving to make their holdings available online. Without these positive developments many of the prints cited in this catalog would continue to exist in obscurity.

Popular prints are by nature ephemeral and never had any pretense of being great art to be collected. They were meant for the moment, and if they were saved it was usually either because of someone's devotional feelings or antiquarian interest. More often than not, it was a case of serendipity. In the case of the Altzenbachs we are fortunate that during the lifetime of their firm there were three well-heeled collectors who were broad-minded in their collecting practices. Along with prints by leading artists both past and present, they purchased ravenously whatever else was on the market at the time and thereby assembled unique print collections with both depth and breadth. These three collectors were Christian IV of Denmark (1577-1648), August the Younger of Brunswick-Lüneburg (1579-1666), and Maximilian Willibald of Waldburg-Wolfegg (1604-1667). Without their efforts much of what the Altzenbachs published would have been lost forever.

Collecting material on the Altzenbachs necessitated several research trips, but many collections could be consulted only by mail, and initial contacts often led to extended correspondence. The number of librarians and museum personnel who readily responded to myriad inquiries is too large to mention each one individually, but that in no way diminishes my debt of gratitude to each and every one. Of all of these people there are several who stand out and whose patient assistance was fundamental to the successful completion of this project: Bernd Mayer in Wolfegg, Claes Kofoed Christensen in Copenhagen, and Ruth Wagner in Cologne. In preparing all of the material for publication, the assistance of Michael Fröhlich at Harrassowitz Verlag was invaluable. It is, however, my wife, Martha, who deserves the greatest thanks for her unstinting support and thoughtful criticism.

Shepton Mallet
Summer, 2020

John Roger Paas

Introduction

One of the many things that sets the early modern period apart from earlier centuries is the sheer mass of visual material that was available to the general public. Prints of varying quality appealed to broad segments of society, from discerning connoisseurs to illiterate commoners, and for popular prints intended for the mass market this was particularly true in times of political, religious, and social unrest. Although in the wake of the Reformation secular prints became a staple of the market, devotional material continued to predominate. As the production of popular prints expanded and flourished throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the most important German centers in the empire were free imperial cities with an established tradition of book publishing: Augsburg and Nuremberg in the south, Strasbourg in the southwest, Frankfurt in the center, and Cologne in the northwest.

It was in Cologne from sometime in the first decade of the seventeenth century to around 1680 that the Altzenbachs, one of the most important German families to publish popular prints in the early modern period, were active. Not only were they a dominant force within the city; their prints were also copied by publishers elsewhere and gained thereby a wider dissemination. Despite the importance of the firm there has long been been widespread confusion about who actually ran it. The founder, Gerhard Altzenbach, who frequently referred to himself proudly on his early prints as a citizen of Cologne (*ciuis Coloniensis*), was born in Cologne presumably sometime around 1575-80. Because of the absence of church records from this time as well as of any written evidence from the firm, information about Altzenbach must be gleaned from official town documents. In one dated 12 July 1634 he is mentioned as having been granted permission to buy (or inherit) a house or piece of property in the parish of St. Columba.[1] Such permission required his being an official citizen of the city and a Catholic in good standing.[2]

Gerhard is often seen as the sole proprietor of the firm for over 60 years, although in actuality there were three Altzenbachs fully involved in print publishing in Cologne and sometimes engaged concurrently in the firm: Gerhard, Gerhard Jr., and Wilhelm. In many cases it is virtually impossible to determine conclusively which Altzenbach published which prints, for the vast majority of their prints are undated.[3] The earliest dated ones appeared in 1612 (see nos. 39 and 40). Gerhard Jr. is first encountered in the print trade in 1656, when the elder Gerhard, who had presented the town council with a large view of Cologne by Wenceslaus Hollar (see no. 16), requested that in lieu of any remuneration the cost of citizenship for his grandson be waived, which indeed it was.[4] Early on, Gerhard Jr. made a point of stating his junior status on prints that he published (e.g., nos. 95 and 201), but

1 Cologne, Historical Archive: Cölner Schrein 197, 12 July; Columba – 80/398a, C 667/90b. Cited in Heitjan, cols. 1161f.

2 Altzenbach's status as a citizen is further supported by the fact that merchants who had an open shop and sold paper wares were required to be official citizens (Schöller 1992, p. 39).

3 In some cases it is possible to narrow down the possible date of a print by considering when an artist working for the Altzenbachs was active in Cologne. Thus, for example: Michael Birbaum and Gerhard Hustin in the early decades of the seventeenth century, Johann Toussyn from the early 1630s to around 1670, Abraham Aubry from the early 1650s to sometime in the early 1660s, and Matthias van Somer in the 1650s.

4 Cologne, Historical Archive: Cölner Schrein 29, 28 January; Laurentius – 103/34b, C 668/269a. According to Krudewig 1911 (p. 45), the elder Altzenbach married Margaretha Kling on 13 June 1653, but by that time he would have been in his seventies, so it is much more likely that the reference is to Gerhard Jr. Presumably Margaretha was related to Joseph Kling, who etched at least two prints for Wilhelm Altzenbach (see nos. 100 and 162).

that was not to last long, and as a consequence, in many cases we are not able to separate definitively the output of the two Gerhards.[5]

The remaining member of the family firm, Wilhelm, became a citizen of Cologne in 1657.[6] He was active in the firm by 1664 at the latest (see nos. 330 and 339), and on 8 February 1668 he was granted permission to purchase a house or property in the parish of St. Columba.[7] Although the exact familial relationship between Wilhelm and the two Gerhards is unclear, in all likelihood he was either the younger Gerhard's brother or cousin. Of the three Altzenbachs Wilhelm was the only one for whom there is clear proof that he was also an accomplished printmaker, one who frequently collaborated with Gerhard Jr. (e.g., nos. 170 and 268).[8]

At the time that the elder Gerhard established his firm in the first decade of the seventeenth century, Cologne was the most populous and economically most important German city in the western part of the Holy Roman Empire. It was favorably situated on the Rhine, where major European north-south and east-west trade routes intersected and brought not only goods from abroad but also cultural and artistic influences. Although the city was a free imperial city with a civilian government, the Catholic Church exercised significant influence in the cultural life there and facilitated particularly close religious and mercantile ties with other Catholic centers such as Aachen, Liège, and Antwerp. Commerce within the city itself benefited from there being no restrictive guilds to determine business practices; instead, there were political corporations (*Gaffeln*). As a result, the various trades enjoyed a modicum of freedom, albeit under the watchful eyes of both the town council and the Church.

One of the trades that flourished in Cologne in the early modern period was the printing trade. In the early part of the seventeenth century the city was, with twenty printers, the largest printing center in the empire, as well as one of the largest in Europe. It far exceeded in importance other German centers such as Frankfurt and Leipzig, both known for their book fairs. Cologne was a center for the book trade in general, and along with the many printers situated in the city were book publishers as well as print publishers like the Altzenbachs. Their firm faced competition from Johann Bussemacher and Abraham Hogenberg in the early part of the century and later from Peter Overadt, yet it was they who were preeminent in the Cologne print market for most of the seventeenth century. Although the Altzenbachs are known primarily as publishers of prints, they were at the same time sometimes active as printers. This was not uncommon, for in the seventeenth century

5 There is also some confusion resulting from the presence of a printmaker in Paris in the 1660s and '70s with the same surname. Because he sometimes signed his prints with "G. Altzenbach", it has at times been assumed that this referred to Gerhard Altzenbach, when it reality the artist's name was Guillaume (or: Wilhelmus) Altzenbach. He is known to have belonged to the Flemish fraternity in Paris and to have worked with publishers there such as Pierre Landry (see Rejected Prints, R 5), Balthasar Moncornet (see Rejected Prints, R 4 and R 6), and Nicolas Regnesson (see Rejected Prints, R 7). According to Grivel (p. 275), he was born in Liège around 1637 as the son of the later Cologne print dealer Wilhelm Altzenbach.

6 Heitjan, col. 1170. Wilhelm (presumably the father of Guillaume Altzenbach of Paris) was originally apparently a citizen of Liège, where he was most likely born sometime in the second decade of the seventeenth century. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Gerhard Jr. similarly came from Liège and that Liège was also the ancestral home of the elder Gerhard, some of whose early prints show a connection with Liège (see nos. 20-23).

7 Cologne, Historical Archive: Cölner Schrein 50, 8 February; Columba – 115/39b, C 669/125a. Cited in Heitjan, col. 1159.

8 On one print published by one of the Gerhards Wilhelm's name as printmaker appears along with the word "Junior" (see no. 359). Rather than being a reference to a different Wilhelm, it is simply an indication of Wilhelm's position within the family firm. There has also been some suggestion that the elder Gerhard may also have been a printmaker, but there is no firm evidence to substantiate this.

the distinction between printing and publishing – especially in the production of popular prints – was still not clearly delineated.[9]

In order to thrive in a highly competitive market the Altzenbachs needed a keen sense of the interests of their potential clientele. Early in the century the elder Gerhard dabbled in the production of prints with a political overtone (e.g., nos. 40 and 41), but an unfortunate choice of subject in 1612 caused him to be briefly incarcerated and severely reprimanded by the town council. He had been anxious to capitalize on the interest in Cologne surrounding the expansion of the nearby Protestant town of Mülheim and had published an anonymous satirical print (see no. 24), which the town council interpreted as a political affront and immediately suppressed. Although his resulting incarceration was brief, Altzenbach had learned an important lesson, and from that point on the focus of the firm was primarily on devotional subjects as well as on non-political secular subjects.

Whereas mixing politics with religion could be a risky undertaking, a focus on strictly devotional subjects, especially in Cologne, a bastion of Catholicism on the Lower Rhine, made sound business sense. As an important episcopal seat and as a city with over forty religious establishments and a large Catholic population, there was a ready local market for devotional material. In addition, the pilgrimages that took place every seven years to view the relics of the Three Kings in Cologne Cathedral brought tens of thousands of devout pilgrims into the city.[10] Even in the off years people came to view a rich offering of holy relics in the various churches in the city. Many of these pilgrims would have wanted to take a souvenir home, and the Altzenbachs sought to meet this need by offering a variety of devotional prints for sale: broadsheets of the pilgrimages, images of saints, scenes from the lives of the Virgin and of Christ, etc. Many of their large prints with multiple images were intended to be cut up so that common people could afford to purchase specific small images to take home (e.g., nos. 435 and 454). In some cases the Altzenbachs were also involved in the sale of devotional broadsheets with multiple small images that served as *Schluckbildchen* (devotional images for swallowing), such as nos. 443 and 538.[11]

Several orders were active in the religious life within Cologne, including the Franciscans, Dominicans, Capuchins, Carthusians, and Carmelites. By the seventeenth century, however, it was the Jesuits who came to exert the most influence on a daily basis. The first members of the order arrived in Cologne in 1544, just four years after the founding of the order by Ignatius of Loyola, and they worked tirelessly (and successfully) to propagate the faith. Although the mass was celebrated in Latin, the goal of the Jesuits was to serve the spiritual needs of a non-humanistic, non-clerical public, and to reach as many people as possible, they did their preaching in German and wrote devotional poetry in the vernacular. The importance they placed on education set the Jesuits apart from the other religious orders, and with the help of the Wittelsbachs in Munich they established in Cologne the first Jesuit college on German soil. Their influence in the city grew even more when in 1550 the town council gave them control over the running of secondary education there.

As part of their strategy for strengthening the Catholic faith and increasing its appeal the Jesuits made widespread use of painting and printmaking for political and religious purposes. In essence, they saw this all as visual propaganda in the service of religion, but whereas paintings were frequently limited to a select circle, prints could be produced for the mass market. Because of the significance

9 When the elder Gerhard paid taxes in May of 1649, he was listed as a bookseller (*Boechkremer*) [Cologne, Historical Archive: Best. 70, Rechnungen (R), A 947].

10 The same was true for Trier, where according to Reichert (p. 179) an estimated 200,000 pilgrims visited the city in 1655. For this occasion the Altzenbachs issued several broadsheets (nos. 342-45).

11 The small images served as a type of folk medicine. People tore them off individually and swallowed them to make themselves feel better, much as aspirin is taken today, albeit without the same effect.

they placed on all types of religious images for instruction, meditation, and reflection the Jesuits were active supporters of the graphic arts.[12] The ultimate purpose of these printed images was to strengthen people's spiritual perception of life and to keep them within the fold of the Catholic Church. All of this was, of course, a boon to the Altzenbachs, who produced numerous images of saints, martyrs, the Virgin, and Christ, especially of scenes related to his Passion. A number of the prints have specific Jesuit subject matter (e.g., nos. 304, 406, 409, and 427), which in some cases underscores the importance the order placed on the cult of saints, and this clearly suggests that some Altzenbach prints were commissioned specifically by the Jesuits. The artists working for the Altzenbachs sometimes drew inspiration from images in Jesuit emblem books from abroad as they made their own prints, at times copying from two or three different books for one sheet (e.g., nos. 470-473).

The Altzenbachs were also strategic about where they established themselves for the sale of their prints. Publishers of broadsheets with topical news often favored locations close to city gates in order to receive news from outside first and later to sell their wares to hawkers heading out of town. The Altzenbachs, in contrast, chose locations near to religious establishments, where they could conveniently sell devotional material to people coming to and from church. We are fortunate that ever since the mid-fifteenth century print dealers in Cologne had to state their address on their prints and were allowed to sell them only in their shops.[13] We thus have accurate knowledge of where one could purchase prints from the Altzenbachs, and all of these locations were within easy walking distance of the cathedral. In early 1609 the elder Gerhard was mentioned as having a stall in the cathedral courtyard near the door leading to the garden behind the choir.[14] Soon thereafter he had a shop on St. Maximinstrasse (e.g., nos. 39 and 322) and later on Engergasse near to the Franciscan church (e.g., nos. 324 and 337). For many years the main location of the firm was in the cloisters of the Franciscan church, which since the sixteenth century had been the major location for selling art in Cologne (e.g., nos. 340f.). In light of these later locations, it is not surprising that the Altzenbachs published a number of prints related to Saint Francis (e.g., nos. 391-96), the Franciscans (e.g., no. 399), and the Franciscan veneration of the Virgin (e. g., nos. 199-202).

In addition to being deeply involved in the publication of devotional prints, the Altzenbachs also appealed to a secular local audience by offering prints of purely local interest, including views of the city and of important buildings and sites there, such as the main market square (see no. 26) and the town hall (see nos. 27f.). They were also strategic in currying the favor of the town council by publishing a calendar/almanac annually from the 1630s to at least the 1660s (e.g., nos. 3 and 31). Usually in December they would present the town council with the calendar for the upcoming year and in return normally received twelve thalers in recognition of their work. It is possible that the Altzenbachs also received commissions for official jobs from the town council, but because these materials would have been ephemeral by nature no evidence of such work is extant.

To meet the demands of the market, the Altzenbachs hired a number of artists to etch the plates for their prints. In the early part of the century artists working for the elder Gerhard included Wenceslaus Hollar, Matthäus Merian the Elder, Michael Birbaum, Servatius Raeven, and Gerhard

12 The Jesuits in Cologne were themselves also keen collectors of prints and drawings. In the eighteenth century the collection in the Jesuit college in Cologne with over 30,000 drawings and prints – some published by the Altzenbachs – was considered one of the largest and most significant in German lands. Unfortunately, the collection was taken as war booty by Napoleon's troops, so that many drawings are now in the Louvre and many prints in the print collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (e.g., no. 195).

13 Schöller 1992a, p. 19.

14 Cologne, Historical Archive: Schreinsbuch Hacht, Liber II, Nr. 167, 4 February.