Megan Palmer

The Rootmass of the Woodblock: Towards a Rhizomatic Image Cataloguing System

Slideshow for talk co-delivered with EBBA Associate Director Carl Stahmer, November 4, 2011.
Most ballads had text, tune titles, and woodblock illustrations. It is to this latter that we turn today.
Woodblock Printing: Terminology

EBBA uses the term “woodcut impression” over the less specific “woodcut:”

“Woodcut impression” reminds the reader of what these images are—printed impressions made by inked blocks—and what they are not—such blocks themselves.
Woodblock Printing: Technique


- Cutter carves image with knife in a piece of medium-hard wood.
- Knife used similar to a penknife, though chisels and gouges also used.
- Cutter (usually *not* the same person as the artist who draws the design) cuts away the white space leaving the lines of the design.
**Printing**

On the right, the man inks the filled form with a dabber. The ink has to have a stiff consistency or it will run from the raised parts of the block to the hollows.

After inking, a clean sheet of paper was laid down, and the hinged frisket was placed over the paper to hold it in place. Then, all of this was placed on top of the type, and the whole apparatus slid under the screw press, which was forced down by pulling the handle on the far right.
Woodblock Printing: Technique


At Left: print

At Right: original wooden block. From *Prints and Printmaking.*
**Broadside Ballad woodcut impressions**

- The majority of seventeenth-century English broadside ballads used woodcut illustrations.

- Most common layouts featured 2-4 impressions; other numbers possible depending on ballad text, subject, and printer’s discretion.
Representation
Representative

E. H. Gombrich: “We must always rely on guesses, on the assessment of probabilities, and on subsequent tests, and in this there is an even transition from the reading of symbolic material to our own reaction in real life.”

“Language does not give names to pre-existing things or concepts so much as it articulates the world of our experience."
Recently, scholars have begun to recognize their usefulness.

• Tessa Watt: traces relationship between ballad illustrations and religious images more generally during the age of the Reformation; finds woodcut images were important elements of visual culture for early modern Londoners.

• Alexandra Franklin: Printers used woodcuts with a deliberate and thoughtful eye to the design of any particular ballad.
Our director, Patricia Fumerton, makes a number of sophisticated arguments about the importance of woodcut illustrations to broadside ballads:

“A ballad's accompanying pictures held equal (if not superior) status with its text, especially for those among the lower orders who were illiterate or barely literate.”
Image Recognition: What do you see?
Image Cataloguing: What is the object?
Tree v. Rhizome
**Image Cataloguing Tree Systems**

**ICONCLASS**: Begun in the 1950s; a subject-based image classification system hierarchically ordered on a complex tree system. It consists of 28,000 definitions and 14,000 keywords.

- Built to be comprehensive across all forms and periods of visual art.
- Impedes rather than helps ballad image searches due to the restricted media, size, and purpose of ballad illustrations: too large and unwieldy; it involves many hours of labor for cataloguers; and it results in a sometimes difficult-to-manage interface for end users.
Image Recognition: What do you see?
Here again, we enter the land of complicated taxonomical trees that, in the end, confuse as much as they clarify.
Iconclass

This image occurs 14 times in our collections; once in the Bodleian Library’s collections.

In Bodleian Iconclass cataloguing, the image is:

31A231
31A2513(+81)
31A2518(+81)
45C13(SWORD)
31A231
Human Being, man in general; man in a general biological sense; the (nude) human figure, “corpo humano” (Ripa); anatomy (non-medical); postures of the human figure; standing figure

31A2513(+81)
Human Being, man in general; man in a general biological sense; postures and gestures of arms and hands; postures and gestures of arms and hands in general; arm stretched sideways; (+ sex and age (of human being)); (+ male human being (not to be used where -A- is prescribed))
Iconclass

31A2518(+81)
Human Being, man in general; man in a general biological sense; postures and gestures of arms and hands; postures and gestures of arms and hands in general; hand on the hip; (+ sex and age (of human being)); (+ male human being (not to be used where -A- is prescribed))

45C13(SWORD)
Society, Civilization, Culture; warfare, military affairs; (military) equipment and supply; weapons; hacking and thrusting weapons; hacking and thrusting weapons (with NAME)
“Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centers of significance and subjectification...an element only receives information from a higher unit, and only receives a subjective affection along preestablished paths” (16)
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Old Description

A man stands looking to his right with his feet shoulder width apart. He wears an ornately embroidered jerkin and slops. His left hand is on his left hip and he holds his right hand out to the side. His sword is attached to his left hip and the tip of the sword points off to the right behind him. He wears a flat hat and a mustache.
The processes of becoming occur in production of “new statements, different desires… the production of the unconscious.”
Visualization Tool: Cataloguer Interface

Early Modern Center
English Ballad Archive, 1500-1800
English, University of California-Santa Barbara

Search for Impressions in Database:

Words in Description:
feathered fan
Go

Current Image to be Catalogued:

Source Ballad Information:
20042: Page 230
The Wanton Wife of Bath
Printed for J. Clarke, W. Thackeray and T. Passinger
1685

Impressions in Group:

Go

View All Impressions

Top Match: # 0005

Known Variants

Description: woman; holding feathered fan; arm at waist; flowers on dress
Keywords: nobility / aristocracy; woman / women

Possible Relations

# 6779
# 1521
# 1595
# 1600

Keywords: nobility / aristocracy; woman / women, outdoor scene

UCSB Early Modern Center Ballad Archive, 1500-1800
University of California at Santa Barbara, Department of English
Director: Patricia Fumerton
Visualization Tool: End-user Interface
Visualization Tool: End-user Interface
Our digital woodcut impression catalogue:

• Allows us to treat each impression as unique.

• Allows us to identify “variants”: our “lady with fan” impressions, each individually catalogued, are also grouped in the catalogue; a query will return all variants of any impression.

• Variant rule of thumb: if two impressions are 80% or more alike, they will be grouped together.

• We are working towards identifying a second level of variants: images likely to have been made by the same block.