Woodcut.

THE FIRST PRINTED STAR CHART OF THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

[Imagines coeli Meridionales].

Author
DÜRER, Albrecht

Publication date
1515 but c1781].

Publisher

Publication place
[Nuremberg,

Physical description
Woodcut.

Dimensions
445 by 610mm (17.5 by 24 inches).

Notes
In 1515, under the patronage of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, the engraver Albrecht Dürer, mathematician Johannes Stabius and astronomer Conrad Heinfogel produced Europe's first printed star charts: 'Imagines Coeli Meridionales', showing the southern hemisphere, and 'Imagines Coeli Septentrionales', displaying the northern hemisphere.
Although the Chinese astronomer Su Song had printed an astronomical chart as early as 1090, prior to the 'Imagines Coeli', all European star charts had been drawn by hand. Kanas debates whether

these early charts can be considered “true star maps” at all, “since they did not allow for an accurate representation of where the stars were located in the heavens. In fact, the constellation images were often simply used as a decorative illustrations for medieval texts, such as religious books, astrological expositions, and classical poems”. Engberg-Pedersen agrees that “they had little use as maps of terrestrial events, since they represented the fixed stars but not the wandering stars (i.e. the planets)”.

In response, Maximilian I commissioned Dürer to create the first scientifically rigorous charts, with the help of Stabius and Heinfogel. These two men were responsible for the projections and plotting of the constellations, while Dürer drew and engraved the charts. The ‘Imagines Coeli’ include a coordinate system and demonstrate an attempt to accurately position the 48 constellations contained within Ptolemy’s second century star catalogue.

They present these as the familiar constellations with names taken from Classical mythology. As a result, the ‘two celestial planispheres can be seen as a representation of over two thousand years of intellectual thought. The constellation and celestial iconography inherited from Antiquity, Greek geometrical studies, and the Islamic scholarship focusing on spatial accuracy for charting the heavens all culminated in this work, aided by the aesthetic mastery of Dürer’ (Wörz, p. 156).

The southern hemisphere chart, of which the present item is an example, depicts fewer constellations than its northern counterpart, primarily because “this part of the sky had not yet been much mapped out by Europeans, since this was only the beginning of the Age of Exploration in the Renaissance” (Hunt). It does, however, show several important constellations, including Orion, Canis Major, Canis Minor, Centaurus and Argo Navis, which has subsequently been divided into three smaller groups. Dürer was not only the draftsman, but also a keen astronomer himself, having purchased a house in Nuremberg with an observatory in its roof. This city played an important role throughout the subsequent centuries as a centre for printing and the manufacture of scientific instruments.

Thanks to their astronomical accuracy and their printed medium, the ‘Imagines Coeli’ were made widely available and soon became highly influential. Other printers soon began to produce their own charts derived from Dürer’s work, for example Peter Apian, who included similar star charts in his ‘Astronomicum Caesarum’ of 1540. While there are only 10 extant examples of the 1515 charts, the original plates engraved by Dürer survived into the eighteenth century, when they were used again in 1781 to reproduce the charts. The present chart is an example of this later, third state, and is itself extremely rare.

Bibliography

Warner 1Bc (third state);Engberg-Pedersen, ‘Literature and Cartography: Theories, Histories, Genres’, (MIT Press, 2017); Hunt, ‘Albrecht Dürer’s 1515 Imagines Coeli Star Charts’, (Electrum Magazine, July 20, 2012); Kanas, ‘Star Maps: History, Artistry and Cartography’, (Springer Praxis Books, 2007); Marr, ‘Ingenuity in Nuremberg: Durer and Stabius’s Instrument Prints’, (The Art Bulletin, 2018); Warner 1Bc (third state); Wörz, ‘The Visualization of Perspective Systems and Iconology in Dürer’s Cartographic Works’, (Oregon, 2007).

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 12550