The Matrix and the Meaning in Dürer's Rhinoceros

Author(s): Jesse Feiman

Source: *Art in Print*, November - December 2012, Vol. 2, No. 4 (November - December 2012), pp. 22-26

Published by: Art in Print Review

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43047078

The Matrix and the Meaning in Dürer's Rhinoceros

By Jesse Feiman

Fig. 1. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), pen and brown ink on paper, 27.4 x 42 cm. The British Museum, SL,5218.161. ©Trustees of the British Museum.*

William Ivins considered printed images the premier technological innovation of the early modern period. He believed that the rapid and widespread dissemination of visual information they enabled rivaled, or even superseded, the parallel development of printed texts. Ivins' argument rests on the functioning of prints as "exactly repeatable pictorial statements,"[1] images capable of delivering multiple and identical sets of information. Joseph Koerner, writing half a century later, similarly observes that "print[s] ... conveyed the same information in each impression."[2] But how "exact" was the repetition of those pictorial statements in actuality? Matrices gouged or etched during the 16th and 17th centuries were often printed over many decades and deteriorated over time. As they passed from one workshop to another, where they were printed using whatever inks and papers were available. As a result, prints pressed from a single matrix could have strikingly different appearances. Albrecht Dürer's famous *Rhinoceros* (B. 136) offers a particularly rich case through which to explore the intentional and unintentional alterations of a print over the course of its publication.

For more than a century, printers from Nuremberg to Amsterdam published impressions of *Rhinoceros*. The first, from Dürer's own workshop, were finely articulated, monochrome illustrations of a rhinoceros as imagined by the artist; the last were *chiaroscuro* woodcuts that emphasized dramatic lighting effects over refined detail. Altogether, the impressions from various states of *Rhinoceros* do not represent "exactly repeatable pictorial statements" so much as situations in which wood, paper and ink interacted dynamically to produce a range of visual statements. By plotting the history of *Rhinoceros*, we can see its meaning shift from a didactic source of zoological information to a pictorial source of aesthetic pleasure.

In 1515 Dürer first drew a detailed, if stylized, rendering of an Indian rhinoceros (Fig. 1) that passed through Lisbon, the first to be seen in Europe in a millennium.[3] He represented it in profile, facing left. O-shaped protrusions pepper the rhinoceros's shoulder, belly, and hindquarters; overlapping scales cover its legs. Dürer rendered the animal's folds of skin as sharply drawn contours, giving it an armor-like appearance.[4] Otherwise, Dürer's representation of surfaces was highly accurate—the ribbed mid-section, knobby skin and soft, hairy ears. The degree of detail was surprising, given that Dürer had not actually seen the rhinoceros, and had based his depiction on

a verbal description and perhaps a sketch by another artist.[5]

The rhinoceros stands at rest in this drawing with only pale shadows at its feet to suggest its placement in space; its pose and isolation on the page present it as a specimen, though details such as the hairs on the ears or the textured surface of the nasal horn give the impression that he had drawn a specific member of the species. Dürer's attentive drawings of plants and animals from direct observation, such as the famous 1502 *Hare* drawing at the Albertina in Vienna, have earned him a reputation for empiricism akin to the efforts of 16th-century intellectuals in the nascent field of natural philosophy [see the review of *Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge* on p.35 of this issue]. The emphasis they placed on observation marked a break with earlier modes of inquiry. This interest found expression in accumulation of specimens and illustrations in *wunderkammer*.[6] But of course he had not actually seen the rhinoceros. Instead, Dürer had synthesized the information he had been given and produced an imaginatively coherent creature. In contrast to his axonometric view of a hare, the rhinoceros is presented in a schematic view. The visual and tactile sensations it evokes are informational, not mimetic.

In an inscription at the bottom of the drawing, Dürer related the story of the animal's arrival in Europe along with details of its appearance and habits, such as the color of its skin and its purported antipathy to elephants. He described rather than illustrated the rhinoceros's "lively and alert demeanor."[7] This text, like the drawing, presented the animal as an aggregation of attributes.

The woodblock maintained the precision of Dürer's drawing, while incorporating a few changes: Dürer enlarged the dorsal horn, removed a plate from behind the rhinoceros's ears, and added hairs to its chin and jowls. Dürer also placed the rhinoceros in a nondescript landscape consisting of a horizon, tufts of vegetation and some stones. His rendering of the animal's midsection became more ornate, but it follows the same vocabulary of pictorial elements (ribs, O-shaped protrusions, etc...) as in the drawing. Although woodcut lines are thicker than those of the artist's pen, early impressions of *Rhinoceros*[8] (Figs. 2, 3) show that, for much of the image, Dürer followed his drawing line for line, capturing all its delicate and critical visual information—the segments of the rhinoceros's body, the textures of its skin, even the fine hairs on its ears. In both the drawing and the woodblock the animal faces left, so in the printed image it faces right. The letterpress text that appears at the top differs slightly from the inscription the drawing but maintains the same didactic tone.[9]

Dürer produced very few prints of single animals, but the presence of a rhinoceros in Lisbon was news. Like *The Monstrous Pig of Landser*, an engraving he had made about twenty years earlier depicting an eight-footed, two-headed sow born in 1496, *Rhinoceros* offered a cogent, easily distributed report of a sensational subject.[10]

If we think about *Rhinoceros* as a work of art, as opposed to an artifact of journalism, it is clear that the drawing and the print entail quite different relationships between the artist and the object: while the drawing is indexical and autographic, the print is only indirectly linked to the artist's hand. It is unknown whether Dürer actually cut the block, and it is unlikely that he himself printed any substantial number of impressions.[11] The first impressions of *Rhinoceros* date from 1515,[12] but there are no records of how many were created. It is likely that Dürer monitored the efforts of the printers working in his shop and enforced a certain standard in the look of their impressions, but watermark evidence indicates that the vast majority of surviving impressions of *Rhinoceros* were produced after Dürer's death in 1528.[13]

In the subsequent decades the *Rhinoceros* woodblock began to change, physically as well as heuristically. A slight crack appeared in the lower right-hand corner of the matrix. Prints pulled after about 1540 show a horizontal white line across the rhinoceros's hind leg.[14] By the last two decades of the 16th century this crack had grown, and impressions show it extending through both of the rhinoceros's hind legs. The border became chipped in several places and damage began to accumulate in the most delicate passages of the print, such as the fine lines of the ears, chin and eyes (Figs. 3a, 3b, 3c).

An impression in the collection of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, dated c. 1590, demonstrates the efforts of printers to mask the damage to the woodblock through careful application of ink. In this example, losses threatened to disrupt the intricate network of lines in the rhinoceros's chin. Rather than allow this to disturb the overall appearance of the impression, the printer applied extra ink to this area of the woodblock. When the block was run through the press, the excess ink filled in the areas lost from the printing surface.

Printers further mitigated the effects of losses through their choices of inks and papers. While early impressions were printed in deep black ink on bright white paper, the one at the Clark (Fig. 3) uses brown ink on cream-colored paper. This was typical of *Rhinoceros* impressions from the end of the 16th century, which often employed brownish or gray inks that reduced the contrast between printed mark and paper support, making losses to the matrix less noticeable.[15]

The deterioration of the *Rhinoceros*

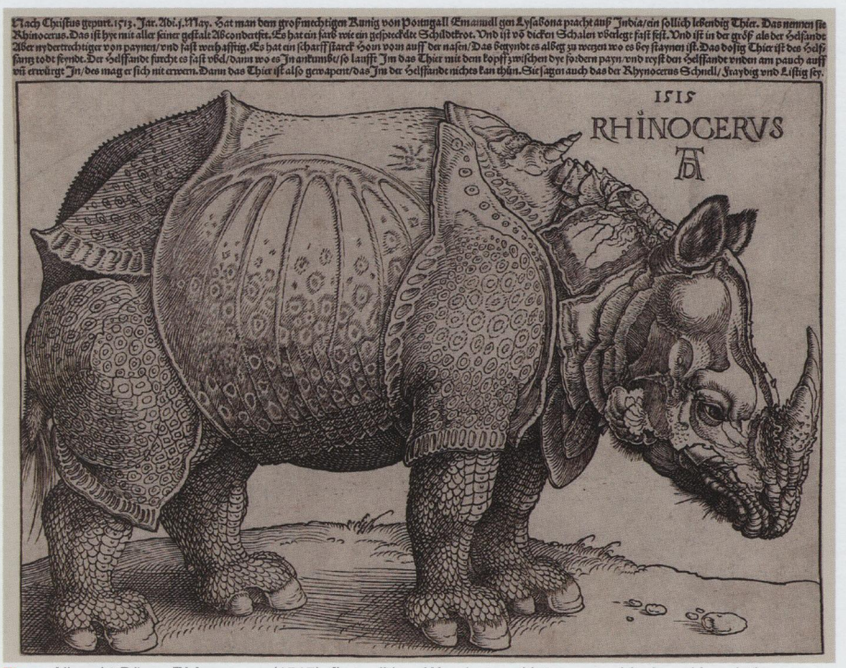


Fig. 2. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), first edition. Woodcut and letterpress, block and inscription together: 23.5 x 30.1 cm. Meder 273.1. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Stephen Bullard Memorial Fund, by exchange, 68.247. Photograph ©November 2012, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

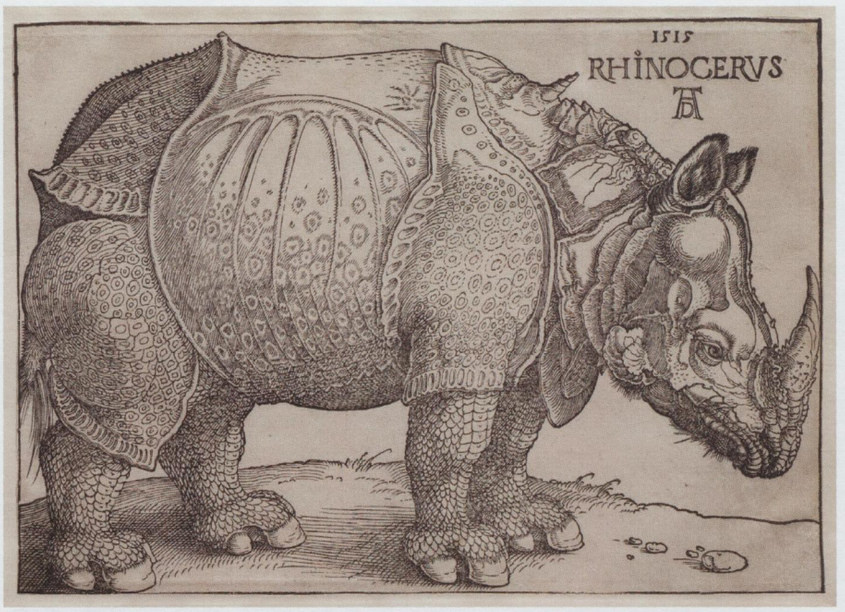
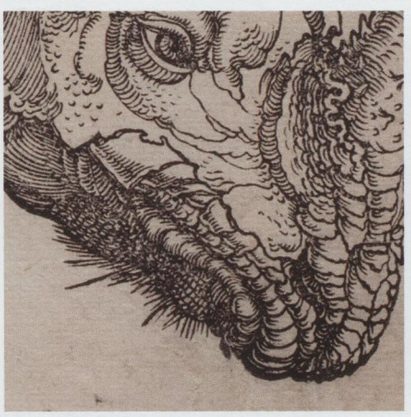
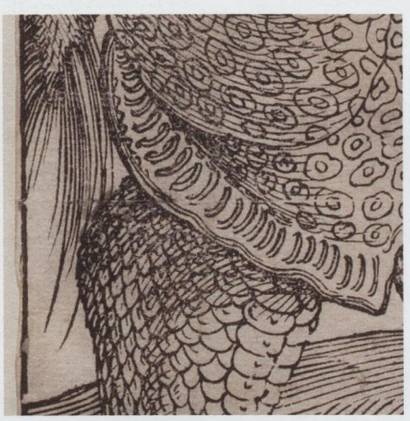


Fig. 3. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), woodcut on paper, 21 x 29.6 cm. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.*





Figs. 3a, 3b, 3c. *Albrecht Dürer, details of* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), woodcut on paper, 21 x 29.6 cm. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Details show fine hairs and the emerging crack in the woodblock across the back leg.*

woodblock, the over-application of ink and the variations in colors affected the clarity of Dürer's image. These strategies aimed to create visually appealing impressions, but obfuscated some degree of descriptive information. The "pictorial statement" of the *Rhinoceros* changed, but to what extent did this affect its utility?

Ivins believed that "we must look at [prints] from the point of view of general ideas and particular functions."[16] *Rhinoceros* served several "particular functions"—journalistic, aesthetic and zoological. If its "general idea" were only the journalistic announcement of a rhinoceros in Lisbon, then damage to the block would not have been a problem. In fact, the image would have been superfluous, as the inscription alone could have served the purpose. Considered solely on aesthetic grounds, *Rhinoceros* remained a work of astounding artistry throughout its varied impressions. It was the zoological function that was most compromised by the wear on the block. Though it maintained the "general idea" of a rhinoceros throughout the history of its printing, the precision and accuracy of the information it conveyed was compromised by the changes it underwent.

Around 1620, Dürer's 105-year old matrix came into the possession of Hendrik Hondius, a printmaker and publisher in The Hague. Like the printers who preceded him, Hondius applied excessive ink to select areas of the printing surface, but in some areas could only produce muddied results (Fig. 4). In the early impressions, the placement and arrangement of lines on the rhinoceros's ears give the appearance of stiff hairs stemming from soft skin stretched over cartilage. In the prints produced by Hondius, these lines blend together, obscuring the visual and tactile sensations they connote. An ear may seem a minor detail, but the fact remains that these impressions no longer "convey the same information," in Koerner's phrase, as the earlier examples.

In the impressions Hondius printed, the crack in the block has spread horizontally through all four of the animal's legs, roughly two thirds of the length of the image. The crack is fine enough that it does not obscure much information, but its progress has been used to date and order the succession of impressions.

More importantly, Hondius altered the accompanying text, translating it from German to Dutch and correcting the date from 1513 to 1515. He also added the claim—never made by Dürer—that Dürer had drawn the rhinoceros from life ("*near t'leven geconterfeyt*.") While continuing to direct viewers' attention to attributes of the animal, Hondius's text also highlighted the role of the artist and grounded the authority of the print in the renowned ("*hooggeroemde*") artist's reputation for empirical observation. The promotion of the artist's name suggests the image should be appreciated not just for its informational value, but as an artistic achievement.

Hondius also added a letterpress inscription identifying himself as the publisher of *Rhinoceros*, which no prior printers of the block had done. This promoted Hondius's shop as the source for the impressions,[17] and also attached Hondius's name to that of Dürer, even as he altered the manner in which Dürer's invention was expressed.

Sometime after 1620, the Amsterdam publisher Willem Janszoon acquired the *Rhinoceros* woodblock from Hondius. By this time, the matrix had deteriorated to the point where it could no longer produce acceptable impressions, as the crack through the animal's legs spanned the entire block.[18] Janszoon's solution was to add a second matrix, printed in color (Figs. 5, 6), which converted *Rhinoceros* into

a *chiaroscuro* woodcut with deep shadows and bright highlights.

Janszoon's tonal block imposed dramatic lighting on Dürer's remarkable but staid image. The color, which varies among existing impressions from gray-green to bright yellow, competed with the black lines for the viewer's attention while literally masking the poor condition of the Dürer matrix. The information expressed in Dürer's originally delicate lines is all but lost. Rather than attempt to recover that information, Janszoon continued the turn toward an aesthetic understanding of the image. In his impressions the informative inscription disappears altogether.

Rhinoceros had now become a decorative rather than a didactic image. In 17th-century Holland, posthumous prints formed an important segment of the print market. Hondius, Janszoon and their contemporaries used existing matrices to satisfy popular demand,[19] and *chiaroscuro* woodcuts were especially desirable as a result of their aesthetic appeal and the increased labor required to produce them.[20]

Ivins and Koerner sought to locate the power of the print in visual statements that were "exactly repeatable" or conveyed "the same information." Their observations were oriented towards the features shared in common, the lines carved into woodblock. The range of appearance amongst the various states of *Rhinoceros* resists the notion of uniformity. The impressions by Hondius and Janszoon were coaxed from the piece of wood that had been carved in Dürer's workshop, but given the deterioration of the woodblock can we say they were printed from "the same" surface? The material substance of the *Rhinoceros* matrix was never replaced or repaired, but time altered it and prompted printing solutions that, in some cases, departed significantly from what Dürer had created.

Assuming the matrix to be a stable and constant object within any given state of the print, Ivins and Koerner do not address such inconstancies of appearance.[21] Their arguments privilege the creator of the matrix and marginalize the printers, whose efforts and intentions became increasingly visible and important as the block became further removed from the life of Albrecht Dürer. This emphasis on the matrix as the site of meaning may be more reflective of the 20th-century attitudes of the writers than of the 16th-century attitudes of Dürer or the 17th-century attitudes of Janszoon.

To get a sense of how these issues might have been thought about by Dürer, we can look at the two known instances in which Dürer or his wife Agnes sued a copyist of his work. In the famous case against Marcantonio Raimondi in Venice, the Signoria found Raimondi guilty of using

Fig. 4. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), sixth edition, woodcut, block and inscription together. 25.4 x 30.3 cm. Published by Hendrik Hondius in The Hague, circa 1620. Meder 273.6. The British Museum, E,3.166. ©Trustees of the British Museum.*

Fig. 5. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), seventh edition, chiaroscuro woodcut, printed from two blocks, 21.2 x 29.8 cm. Published by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, after 1620. Meder 273.7. The British Museum. 1877,0609.71. ©Trustees of the British Museum.*

Dürer's monogram instead of his own. The Italian artist added his mark to his engraving plates and continued to print his work with impunity.[22] In the second case, against an unnamed printmaker in Nuremberg, the civil authorities impounded the prints but not the matrix.[23] In both cases, the impressions—not the matrices—operated as the location of meaning (and offence). I would argue that with *Rhinoceros*, neither the matrix nor the impression is of primary importance, but that the two have interacted dialectically to produce meaning.

Printmaking draws on the intentions of the artist who composes the image and the intentions of the technicians—block cutters,

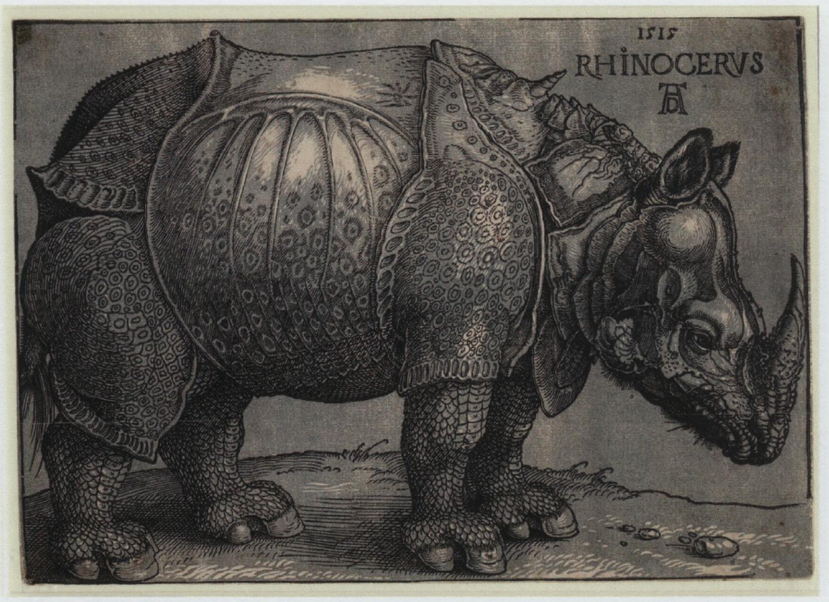


Fig. 6. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Rhinoceros*** *(1515), seventh edition, published by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, after 1620. Chiaroscuro woodcut, printed from two blocks, 21.2 x 29.8 cm. Meder 273.7. The British Museum, 1913,1015.110. ©Trustees of the British Museum.*

printers—who bring that image into being. In all cases, the marks gouged or etched into the matrix determine a set of possibilities within which the image functions. In this way, the artist limits the potential for the prints that his or her matrix can press into paper. Within that set of possibilities, however, the block cutters and printers can exert their influence on the final appearance of those prints. During their lifetimes, artists can control the final execution of their works, but when the matrix survives the artist, the possibilities expand and publishers like Willem Janszoon can create visual inventions unanticipated by the artist. An image like Janszoon's *chiaroscuro* woodcut of *Rhinoceros* can be considered a nearly independent pictorial expression.[24]

As a famous work by a well-known artist, *Rhinoceros* and the history of its publication have been particularly well-researched.[25] But the complexity we find in the printing history of *Rhinoceros* is not exceptional—for works produced before the turn of the 19th century, such complexity is the norm.[26] The printing of matrices over decades, even centuries, was a common practice. Catalogues such as *The Illustrated Bartsch* and Hollstein's *German Engravings, Etchings, and Woodcuts, c. 1400-1700*, are filled with detailed documentation on the changing conditions of the matrices and the printerly innovations applied to them. The elaborations these volumes provide, however, present each impression as an iteration of the same idea, pressed from the same matrix.[27] Such information is often seen as minutiae of interest only to connoisseurs, but hidden within them is also a tale of how the print allowed for not just "exactly repeatable pictorial statements," but also for changing meanings, changing audiences and changing notions of authorship and authenticity. ■

Jesse Feiman's work explores the methods of connoisseurship, the history of collections, and the historiography of print cataloguing. He is currently pursuing a doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Notes:

1. *William J. Ivins,* Prints and Visual Communication *(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 2.*
2. *Joseph Koerner, "Albrecht Dürer: a Sixteenth-Century Influenza," in* Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy *(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 18-19.*
3. *Dürer dated the drawing 1515, but the inscription states that the rhinoceros arrived in Europe in May 1513. This mistake persisted through many editions of* Rhinoceros, *but was corrected in later ones. Joseph Meder, Dürer-Katalog, ein Handbuch über Albrecht Dürers Stiche, Radierungen, Holzschnitte, deren Zustände, Ausgaben und Wasserzeichen (Wien, Gilhofer und Rauschburg, 1932), 254.*
4. *Erwin Panofsky,* The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer *(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 192; Joseph Leo Koerner, "Albrecht Dürer: a Sixteenth-Century Influenza," in* Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy *(London: British Museum, 2002), 31; Susan Dackerman, "Dürer's Indexical Fantasy: The Rhinoceros and Printmaking" in* Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge *(Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 2011), 164.*
5. *Dackerman, 168.*
6. *Figures like Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) and Frederico Cesi (1585-1630) placed a particularly strong emphasis on pictures, which could "describe all the world of nature in pictorial or graphic form." David Freedberg,* The Eye of the Lynx *(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.*
7. *Dackerman, 167.*
8. *I based my observations on the impression owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 68.247.*
9. *For the changes in the inscription from drawing to print, see Dackerman 167-168.*
10. *Colin Isler suggested the journalistic significance of* Rhinoceros *as well as the comparison with* The Monstrous Pig of Lansder *in Dürer's* Animals *(Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 270.*
11. *While documentary evidence about Dürer's workshop has not been found, in most print shops different specialists designed, cut and printed matrices. David Landau and Peter Parshall,* The Renaissance Print, *1470-1550 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 9.*
12. *Bartram,* Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy, *287.*
13. *Adam von Bartsch,* The Illustrated Bartsch, *Walter Strauss, ed. (New York: Abaris Books, 1980-81), 10: 414-415.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. von Bartsch, *10: 415.*
16. *Ivins, 3.*
17. *Nadine M. Orenstein,* Hendrick Hondius and the Business of Prints in Seventeenth-Century Holland, *(Rotterdam: Sound and Vision Interactive, 1995), 97.*
18. *Landau and Parshall state, "warping will tend to split the block along its longer axis … the resulting splits in the block will register clearly in any undoctored impression taken from it."* The Renaissance Print, *22. This is likely what occurred in the case of the* Rhinoceros *matrix. A Janszoon impression in the collection of the British Museum (1913-10-15-110) shows evidence of having been retouched in order to mitigate the effect of the crack on the appearance of the print (see reproduction this article).*
19. *Orenstein, 95.*
20. *Angela Fritz, "Collectors of Chiaroscuro Prints," in* Beyond Black and White *(Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Art Museum, 1989), 19-20.*
21. *Ivins and Koerner obviously recognized that intentional alteration of a matrix produced different states of the image. The notion that printed images are exactly repeatable assumes uniformity* ***within*** *each state. The deterioration of the matrix, however, constitutes a form of unintentional alteration that varies the appearance of a print within a single state.*
22. *Lisa Pon,* Raphael, Dürer, and Marcantonio Raimondi: Copying and the Italian Renaissance *(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 39-41.*
23. *Koerner, 209.*
24. *Differences between historical and contemporary understandings of authorship can be seen in the fact that Janszoon's impressions are commonly attributed to Dürer, while screenprints printed by Richard Ekstract in 1965 from Andy Warhol's original acetates have been excluded from the Warhol catalogue raisonné by the Andy Warhol Art Authentication Board.*
25. von Bartsch, *10:414-415; Meder, 254-255.*
26. *Landau and Parshall stated, "However shabby they may have become, [woodblocks] were often kept in use for centuries."* The Renaissance Print, *22. Orenstein pointed out that, "as early as the fifteenth century, plates were handed down and reprinted by succeeding printmakers," 95. Printmaker and famed catalogue author, Adam von Bartsch, is known to have printed an edition of Dürer's* Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I *as late as 1799. Meder, 224-225.*
27. *The practice of numbering prints, begun by Adam von Bartsch in the 18th century, imparts a single identity to all impressions pulled from a matrix. His description of Dürer's* Rhinoceros *dated all of its iterations to 1515, including the chiaroscuro examples. Adam von Bartsch,* Le Peintre Graveur *(Vienna: J. V. Degen, 1808), 7:147-148, 12: 6. Subsequent catalogues, such as Hollstein's* German Engravings… *and* The Illustrated Bartsch, *supply more refined and more accurate information about the origins of particular impressions than* Le Peintre Graveur, *but they nevertheless maintain its conceptual framework, in which the origin of a print in the mind of a genius and in the surface of a matrix determine its position.*