Wolgmut and his fellow artists show that they had learned much from the Italian Renaissance artists but they remain strictly Germanic. Whereas the Italian woodcut designers' emphasis is decorative rather than pictorial, in contrast, Wolgemut's images seem to be undisciplined and lack good taste. The picture is the thing, not the latter. It is both pictorial and narrative in design. The woodcuts are adventurous. Cross-hatching was used for the first time so that value would be given to textiles and color tones could be represented. The *Chronicle* artists were even able to suggest such phenomena as smoke, glass, water, and velvet.

The *Nuremberg Chronicle* remains one of the great works in graphic art of the 15th century. Its making deserves the interest not only of art historians, typographers and printers, but to all those who love books.

Sources:


Liber Chronicarum (Nuremberg Chronicle)

Published in 1493

Representations of Noah’s Ark abound in books earlier than the *Chronicle*. Unlike others, this woodcut shows the frenzied work of construction, the shaping of the timbers under Noah’s supervision. The loading of the stores and in anticipation, the arrival of the dove with the olive branch in its beak.

History of Medicine Library copy is not in color
Liber Chronicarum, (Book of Chronicles) was conceived, executed and published in Nuremberg, Germany. Its artistic patina is completely “Nurembergian” and so it is no surprise it long ago gave way to the more popular title of Nuremberg Chronicle. With the exception of the Gutenberg Bible it has become the best known of all the items printed in the 15th century. Purchased in 1966, Mayo Clinic Libraries History of Medicine collection is fortunate to own a first edition copy, printed in Latin, dated 1493.

At that period in history Nuremberg was at the height of its medieval prosperity. It had between 45,000 and 50,000 inhabitants and was, after Cologne, one of the largest cities in Europe. Trade and craft had developed quietly, undisturbed by warfare after the new line of double walls surrounding the city was closed in the 1450’s. Following that, stone bridges replaced the wooden ones, streets and squares were paved and the water mains were laid. The town hall and many public buildings were enlarged. Big warehouses were built near the castle and above the former trench of the inner defense wall. Differences between the rich and poor were enormous. At the top were the aristocratic traders and creditors, in the middle were a large group composed of small tradesmen, plebeian craftsmen and retailers, masters and apprentices; at the bottom were the sick, those unfit for work, peddlers and paupers, all recipients of charity. All those who did not control the means of production were considered “the poor.”

It was painter, sculptor and woodcut artist Michael Wolgemut who conceived the idea of preparing a profusely illustrated world history. He tried to persuade his friend, publisher Anton Koberger, to undertake the printing but Koberger felt it was too expensive and risky. Wolgemut obtained the support of two wealthy patrons, Sebald Schreyer and Sebastian Kamermaister and it was only then that Koberger agreed to do the printing. Started in 1491, this complex project continued until completion on July 12th, 1493.

The text of the Chronicle was compiled and copied by physician Hartmann Schedel using the work of Jacob Pergomensi and other historians. During his student days in Padua, Italy, Schedel developed a love of collecting and copying manuscripts, a passion that continued throughout his lifetime. In 1470 he began to buy printed books and his library demonstrates that he was a resourceful and prodigious collector as well as a versatile scholar and bibliophile. The Chronicle covered the history of the world from the time of creation up until the time of the book’s publication.

Did Schedel report important contemporary events? There is no mention of the death of powerful Italian statesman Lorenzo di Medici in the year before the Chronicle was published. There is no news of Columbus’s first voyage to the New World which ended in March, 1493. Three pages are left blank so that each owner of the Chronicle can fill in later events as they happen. Schedel apparently felt only three were needed.

Rather than the artist illustrating the text of the Chronicle, Schedel’s task was to make his words fit the woodcuts. This task somewhat parallels that of a caption writer in today’s newspapers. Michael Wolgemut and his stepson Wilhelm Pleydenwurff were the principal artists of the Chronicle. They collaborated and worked as a team so their work is inextricably entwined. Wolgemut placed the accent upon the visual image, the woodcut itself. In so doing he changed the character of the woodcut art. Both the expressive and representational possibilities were enlarged. He opened up the way for his talented apprentice, Albrecht Dürer, to carry the woodcut to a new level of artistic achievement and transform a minor art into a major field.

For the Latin edition of the Chronicle the calligraphic Italian Rotunda type face was used, as was common for most Latin texts in the 15th century. Those who could not read Latin could purchase one of the later German editions. It was extremely popular because of its lavish illustrations of 645 different woodcuts with 1,164 repeats, making a total of 1,809 woodcuts. More illustrations than any book previously printed from movable type, it soon became a best seller.

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