A TOUCHING COMPASSION: DÜRER’S HAPTIC THEOLOGY

Shira Brisman

Abstract
In one of the final scenes of his 1511 woodcut sequence, The Small Passion, Albrecht Dürer depicts the newly risen Christ extending his forefinger towards the head of Mary Magdalen. As a moment of touching, the Noli me tangere belongs to a category of representations that attests to the indexical nature of Christ’s image. The stain of his face on Veronica’s cloth or the imprints of his feet on the mountain from which he ascended are testaments to his corporeal presence on earth. Throughout The Small Passion, Dürer expands the vocabulary of indexical transfer to a haptic theology and proves the suitability of prints as a language in which to tell the story of God’s mark on earth in the form of Christ. Yet, at the same time, subtle underminings of these moments of contact signal Christ’s touch as impermanent, a substitute for a more sustained embrace to come. In emphasising the transmission and dissemination of Christ’s contact through a visual vocabulary of touching, pressing, hugging and kissing, Dürer also finds a language with which to describe the process of printing itself and the power – and limitations – of a medium both widely reproducible and constrained in its durability as a corporeal substitute.

Keywords: Dürer, prints, Small Passion, Noli me tangere, Mary Magdalen, indexicality, self-referentiality
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A TOUCHING COMPASSION: DÜRER’S HAPTIC THEOLOGY

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The verb ‘to cleave’, which is etymologically linked to the German Kleid and the English cloth, exercises a unique usage in the English language; one meaning of the word cleave – to cling, adhere, or hold fast to – is the precise opposite of its other meaning – to part, divide or hew asunder (Kuryluk, 1991, p.179). Something like the oxymoronic behaviour of this word is captured in a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (Figure 1.1), the thirtieth in a sequence of thirty-six prints known as the Small Passion, published in 1511 under the title, Passio Christi ab Alberto Durer Nurenbergensi effigiata cu varij generis carminibus Fratris Benedicti Chelidonij Musophili. In this version of the Noli me tangere, Dürer departs from an iconographical tradition in which the elegantly swiveling, touch-denying Christ turns from the pleading Mary Magdalen, who reaches for her Master in a longing entreat. In Giotto’s painted rendition of the scene for the Scrovegni chapel, the space that separates the kneeling woman and swaying man represents the fissure of want, the chasm between the human desire for God and the belief that God can be touched (Hetzer, 1982, pp.43–50). Dürer closes the gap. Following a print by Martin Schongauer (Figure 1.2), in which the hand of Christ hovers parallel to the hand of Mary Magdalen, Dürer doubles this alignment, ordering all four hands in a seam down the center of his composition.

But whereas within Schongauer’s print the alignment is ironic – Christ’s hand thwarts while Mary Magdalen’s reaches – in Dürer’s version the irony takes place between what the depiction means and what it says, or, more accurately, between what Christ is saying and what he is doing. Noli me tangere are the words that Jesus says to Mary when she recognizes him standing outside the sepulchre, where she has just found a heap of linen in place of his dead body. As Jesus’ enunciation, the phrase performs a special function in the sequence of the Passion. Whereas other images depict events that happen to Christ, this scene is a visual representation of the words he speaks (Baert, 2012, p.195). In Dürer’s print the depicted action goes against the words to which it alludes: the upright protagonist does not recoil from Mary Magdalen’s approach but

Figure 1.1: Albrecht Dürer, Noli me tangere, c.1509/10, woodcut, 12.7 x 9.7cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.3663.
(Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)
instead reaches with his forefinger to touch her head at the very moment that he tells her not to touch him.

The deliberate contact within the image is contradictory to the text if the vulgate *Noli me tangere* is translated as ‘touch me not’, but Jesus’ extended finger transmits a powerful theological message when considering the Greek, *me mou hapto*, which can be translated ‘do not seek to cling to, or embrace me’ (Haskins, 1993, p.10; Bieringer, 2006, pp.13–28). Jesus cautions Mary not to welcome him in a secure grasp because this is not his permanent return – he has not yet ascended to his Father. His appearance to Mary Magdalen outside the tomb affirms his divine status through his defiance of death and acts as a prelude to his ultimate reappearance in the promised time to come. In Dürer’s haptic theology, Christ’s extended finger both affirms and denies: it verifies his carnal presence and his proximity to man. But at the same time the touch proclaims its transience: it is not an embrace but a promise of return, an installment of a memory and an anticipation that will be felt by all who wait: ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face’ (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Acting doubly, Dürer’s depiction of Christ’s touch is an enunciation in another sense – not only does it render in ink the meaning of Christ’s words, but it also announces Dürer’s understanding of the potentials and limitations of the printed medium. The transfer of image to paper through the contact between block and page mirrors the touch by which Christ leaves his impression on the human world – an impression that can be multiplied and widely circulated. But, like Christ’s touch, Dürer’s print project inscribes a message of its own impermanence. The printed image, marks in ink left behind on a page, is, like all Christian art, a substitute that insists on the presence of someone no longer available. ‘There is something inevitably regressive, animistic, or overcompensatory about all modes of mimetic representation’, writes Geoffrey Hartman, in an essay on Wordsworth’s ‘touching compulsion’, from which the title of this essay is derived (Hartman, 1977, p.350). The pathetic and bathetic touch of Christ in Dürer’s *Noli me tangere* – both a pledge and a rebuff – by allusion to the touch of woodblock to paper describes the very circumstances of its creation and invites consideration of all other instances of touch within the printed Passion series as mirrors of the process of printing, a process which suggests and deflects the human-divine bond.

In following the ordered alignment of hands down the centre of Dürer’s page, this paper begins with a discussion of how Christ leaves his mark; it then goes on to show how the printing process mirrors the process of printing.
process imitates Christ’s transmission of touch through self-referential instances of touching, kissing and hugging; finally, this paper demonstrates how Dürer’s haptic theology finds a perfect expressive language in the medium of prints in which the wide-reaching but indirect contact between artist’s hand and viewer imitates the transmission of the divine touch.

First impressions
Corporeality is the condition of fallen humanity. Awareness of the limitations of the human body impedes true spiritual contact with the divine. This is what Adam and Eve learned in the first moments after the fall when they attempted to hide themselves from God. But corporeality is also the condition by which fallen humanity comes to know and love God: through the incarnated Christ, his interactions with man on earth, and the traces of him that remain (Rudy, 2002, p.46). Proof and memory of the divine assumption of human form lie in the indexical marks he left behind: the blood-covered column of the flagellation, the imprint of his knees on the stone in Gethsemane, the sweat of his face on Veronica’s veil and the final indentation of dust on the mount from which he ascended. To Christian iconographical history belong two stories of the miraculous transfer of the image of Christ’s face to a cloth. By the eastern tradition, Jesus gave the Mandylion to Abgar, the pagan ruler of Edessa, in response to the ailing king’s belief in his miraculous healing powers. In the western tradition, the Sudarium of Veronica (a saint whose name means ‘true icon’) miraculously retained the imprint of his visage. Both of these legends involve a transfer of image to fabric. Cloth, material that clings to the body, operates in the Christian narrative as a synonym for dress or skin and represents the material for visualising God’s ‘clothing’ in Mary’s spotless white flesh (Kuryluk, 1991, p.4 and p.179). The transfer of Jesus’ image to surface mirrored the miracle of his incarnation. It also invested certain art objects with a particular power. The early Christian church endorsed the authenticity of acheiropoieta, images not made by human hands, which bore the imprint of Christ’s face. The efficacy of these icons in offering occasions for contact lay not only in the initial transfer from Christ’s body to tangible totem, but also in their proliferation. The availability of a true image of Christ’s face to churches far and wide was explained by tales of unmediated reproduction in which one acheiropoietos imprinted itself on another cloth or slab of wood. If the fabric or parchment was folded, the impression could multiply in twos or threes, each copy assuming the miracle-granting powers of the original (Koerner, 1993, p.83). In short, the procreation of Christ’s true image operated like a print before the age of prints. Likeness was considered not as a similarity in visual representation but as ‘a relationship between form and matter which involved gradations of contact and presence’ (Bedos-Rezak, 2006, p.48).
The inclusion of scenes of indexical impressing in Dürer’s Small Passion series endows his printing process with authority and authenticity. In mimicry of passion plays, in which the Sudarium was held up to the audience in a suspension of theatrical action, here the presentation of the Sudarium (Figure 1.3) is a caesura in a sequence of narrative proceedings that advance from left to right. A stilled moment that does not correspond to an event within the gospel text, Veronica stands, flanked by Peter and Paul, and holds forth the imprinted cloth. The image is self-reflexive. Centered as a print within a print, the steady gaze of Christ offers a confident analogy between the sheet the saint clutches and the page the viewer holds. Dürer presents another impression of Christ’s body in the Ascension (Figure 1.4), where Christ’s footprints on the mount – inked lines which represent the remains of the pressure of his feet – valorise a medium in which the image of Christ is offered as a memory of a weighted substance left behind (Kantor, 2000, pp.26–7).

The very fact of Christ’s ascension, the return of his body to his father, destabilizes the classification of Christ’s manifest image. The imprint of Christ defies the category of art object as a compensatory substitution for the loved-one now lost. Within the economy of artifact as surrogate, the image ordinarily replaces the missing person; but in the case of Christ, the dead regained his body and ‘was received up into heaven’ (Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51). Christ’s imprint is not a permanent proxy but rather a down payment, a pledge of the temporarily absent who will return. The image of Christ does not ‘fill the lacuna of a lost body’. Instead, it serves as witness to Christ’s historical body (Belting, 1998, p.2). Instances of bodily convergence within Dürer’s prints refer to the miraculous transfer of Christ’s image and to the process by which the ink was deposited on the page. Yet since images of Christ are not full replacements but only reductive traces, the prints are necessarily presented as mere impressions, marks indicating absence.

**Kisses and promises: the impact of the Fall**

The stained veil and depressions of earth on the mount are signs of the human tendency to fixate on bare markers (Hartman, 1977, p.353). In Dürer’s Small Passion, however, Christ’s imprints are evidence not only that he is gone. Depicting the narrative scenes of Christ’s life with instances of pressing, kissing and hugging, Dürer reactivates Christ’s touching compassion and redeems it as an ongoing process of transfer. Art involves remuneration, writes Geoffrey Hartman: ‘By means of representation the artist steals something from God or steals it back; and so it is almost inevitable that the representation ... invest itself as an autonomous, if alienated, source of value’ (Hartman, 1977, p.351). Dürer’s images of touching
suspend the moment of divine-human contact as if the grammatical tense of these interactions were indefinite and unending. Like the classically derived, imperfect verb inscribed on the tabula ansata of his 1504 engraving (Figure 1.5), ‘Albertus Dürer Noricus faciebat’ – faciebat, ‘was making’ instead of fecit, ‘made’ – Dürer leaves uncertain the limits of his impact, the boundary at which Christ’s touch and the influence of his own art cease to be felt. In re-presenting Christ’s touch through the language of prints Dürer situates his viewer between sin and redemption.

Like the word cleave in the English language, which serves both to bind together and to tear apart, the kiss in Christian iconography behaves in a paradoxical way: it both unites and separates man from God. The kiss of the Christian visual tradition inherits from antiquity the formal properties of the symplegma: figures that interlock in combat or in love (Steinberg, 1970, p.272). In illustrations of the Song of Songs (Figure 1.6), the kiss takes place within the letter ‘O’ of Osculetur me osculo oris sui – ‘Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.’ The Virgin and her son embrace as bridegroom and bride, symbolising the union of church and divine (Lavin and Lavin, 2001, pp.34–47).
The kiss is also an image used to describe the mediation of Christ between man and God. The twelfth-century monk Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that the Word of God, or ‘mouth’, assumed human form when it kissed the flesh. Just as a kiss is shared by the giver and the recipient, so Jesus took on divine and human form as intercessor between the two (Rudy, 2002, p. 60). Within the Small Passion, Mary Magdalen’s kissing of Christ’s feet in the Crucifixion (Figure 1.7) and Lamentation (Figure 1.8) demonstrate the more innocent connotations of a kiss as an expression of piety and of human longing for union with God. But it is the Betrayal (Figure 1.9) that summons the violent, sexual and severing intonations of the meeting of lips. Juxtaposing the merging of Christ’s mouth and Judas’ against a scene of more invasive and aggressive contact, Dürer evokes the brutal rift between God and man in the single gash of this kiss.

Dürer has two options for the composition. In keeping with an inherited association of sinfulness with a figure rendered sideways, he could have portrayed Christ facing forward and Judas in profile. But Dürer opts instead for the more dramatic, more tragic tradition in which Christ compromises his frontality to receive the kiss that brings about his capture. Translated to the language of prints, the conjoining of their lips assumes a particular potency: the page with its imprint recalls the memory of this semi-erotic contact which, by virtue of its surface-only nature (what is a kiss if not a promise of further intimacy?), suggests a fuller embrace to come. Yet it is the very moment of this kiss that brings about absence. The kiss seals Christ’s doomed fate: his suffering, death and flight from earth.

The pathos of visual representations of Judas’ perfidy is that the pressing of lips is inherently ironic and understated. While the two men facing each other in profile manifest the physical act of Judas’ betrayal, Dürer renders the emotional and theological impact of this kiss in the foreground of his composition. Pressing Christ and his miscreant to the middleground, Dürer treats the encounter between Peter and Malchus as the immediate subject of the scene. What is described in the gospels as a sudden striking of the apostle’s sword against the Roman servant’s ear is here envisioned as an entangled brawl. Peter lunges towards his subject, sword mid-swing. Malchus lies supine in a position of sexual subordination. As moralising prints of the period warned, to be beaten on one’s back with legs in the

Figure 1.8: Albrecht Dürer, Lamentation, c.1509/10, woodcut, 12.7 x 9.7cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.3659. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

Figure 1.9: Albrecht Dürer, Betrayal of Christ, c.1509/10, woodcut, 12.7 x 9.7cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.3643. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)
air was to yield to the undesirable posture of defeat. (Figure 1.10) (Moxey, 1989, p.104).

In Dürer’s print (Figure 1.9) the servant Malchus’s face is twisted in anguish as he blocks a falling lantern from crashing into his head, while he grasps at Peter’s cloak with his right hand. No more painful summary of the relationship between man and God can be found than in the contorted posture of this figure who pushes his attacker away while simultaneously drawing him near. This double gesture spells out the paradox of Judas’ kiss, as both the need to cling to Christ and the impulse to reject him.

Both Christ and Judas in the middleground and Peter and Malchus in the foreground portray a simultaneous seduction and severance between the coupled figures. Dividing these two groups is a peculiar emblem of union more intimate than either of the two scenes that frame it. At the very moment of the kiss, Christ places one finger inside the closed palm of his other hand (Figure 1.11), a gesture that bares an embarrassing similarity to what is, in modern culture, a lewd hand signal for intercourse. Here Christ’s hands perform an interlocking that is more penetrating and secure than the pressing and touching of surface-on-surface observable in other scenes. An unlocking of this gesture occurs in the Noli me tangere, where the hands of Christ and Mary Magdalen together constitute a version of the gesture, in release (Figure 1.12). The clasping of Christ’s forefinger in his cupped hand symbolises a potential union breached at the moment.

Figure 1.12: Albrecht Dürer, Noli me tangere (detail), c.1509/10, woodcut, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.3663. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)
of the Betrayal. The disassembled parts of this sign in the Noli me tangere display Christ’s reaching finger and Mary Magdalen’s open, receiving palm, two disparate pieces of a whole, waiting to be reunited at some later time.

For every moment within Dürer’s Small Passion that heralds man’s fall from grace there is an affirmation of potential redemption. Judas’ Betrayal finds a corrective response in Dürer’s Deposition (Figure 1.13). The kiss is ironic, as we have seen, because it involves a surface contact too superficial to stand for the violent rupture it brings about. The most secure physical bond between man and Christ in the series occurs when Christ’s body is lowered from the cross. Dürer’s composition departs from the pictorial type in which Christ’s body falls in a weightless S-curve. Instead, his corpse slumps forward, ‘like the carcass of a slaughtered animal’, and droops against the shoulder of his bearer (Panofsky, [1943] 2005, p.143). More intimate than a kiss, the hug demonstrates the moment of pressing and transfer by which the corporeal aspects of Christ – the sweat of his face, the weight of his body – make an impression in the human world, literally, through Christ’s indexical marks, and figuratively through the operation of memory.

Dürer’s permutations on the theme of touching, through representations of kissing, hugging and the gestures of hands, explore the aptitude of prints to stand symbolically for a relationship between God and man. At times the pressing of surface to surface seems a promising expression of the impact of divine touch, but at other times the meeting of planes is inadequate, a superficial mark that fails to offer a more engaged embrace. Another metaphor associated with the printing process is reversal: the image of the engraved block results in a backward impression on the piece of paper. In the Small Passion Dürer includes the interchange of front and back in his poetic claim of prints as theological language.

The reversal that introduces the Small Passion is a reversal of convention. Dürer begins his series with two striking visions of Eden, striking because in both the Fall of Man (Figure 1.14) and the Expulsion (Figure 1.15), Eve’s face is turned from the viewer. The Fall is a story of visual seduction. God warns Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge because ‘in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened’ (Genesis 3:5), but Eve is enticed by the tree which appears ‘pleasant to the eyes’ (Genesis 3:6). Depicting the primal sin offered an opportunity for artists to reenact the moment of the Fall by replacing the seduction of fruit with the seduction of a sensuous nude (Scribner, 1998, p.113). In his engraving of 1504 (Figure 1.5), Dürer had suggested the causal link between the Fall and sexuality by doubling the force of arousal with a spectacularly chiseled Adam and gracefully contrappostoeed Eve. In this early scene of balanced beauty Dürer had caught his viewer in the act of looking at – and falling for – the human form. Six years later the tone is different. The first two prints in Dürer’s series deny a glimpse of Eve’s face. Her head is turned, granting the viewer a sight of Adam’s expression, but not hers. Rather than aesthetically induce a reenactment of the Fall by offering contact with a seductive woman, Dürer acknowledges the already post-lapsarian stance of his viewer. Eve’s averted expression admits the beholder’s knowledge of the events to come. As she turns to him, she deflects the blame to the one who will share in her sin: in a moment Adam’s outstretched palm, which now reaches out in protest, will clutch the fruit and eat. The gaze-denying position of Eve downplays the moment of seduction and instead emphasizes, through her turning away, the shame and concealment that are the immediate consequences of their transgression. Within the language of prints, to be confronted with a dorsal image is to be reminded of the method of printing: the image is the deposit of a prototype in reverse. A staged
The process of tracing and carving preceded the existence of this print just as versions of this narrative were told before this composition. Acknowledging the place of his story within a serial order, Dürer also acknowledges the education and relative historicity of his viewers: the apple has been eaten, the tale has been told, and now it is up to the beholder to supply the face of the first offender.

In his woodcut series, *The Fall and Redemption of Man*, Albrecht Altdorfer exhibits a thorough digestion of Dürer’s rhetoric of presentation and concealment. In the *Fall* (Figure 1.16) and *Expulsion* (Figure 1.17), Eve’s is the visage that faces, while Adam’s turns away.

With this rearrangement, Altdorfer distinguishes himself from a copyist, whose imitation would entail a reversal of the left and right sides. Instead of a horizontal swap, Altdorfer inverts, engineering a response of opposites whose motion is one of rotating through rather than flipping over. The act belongs to an immersive reader of Dürer’s prints rather than a mere admirer of his graphic line. To pull Eve’s expression from obscurity to confrontation while burying Adam’s with a head-swiveling gaze is to acknowledge that these semicircular adjustments pivot the meaning of the print. The language of inversion takes on an added meaning when applied to what Milton called ‘man’s first disobedience’, as the language of both the Old and New Testaments describes repentance as an act of revolution – a return to God (Isaiah 44:22, Psalm 90, Acts 3:19, and elsewhere).

Altdorfer’s rendition calls attention to the fact that Dürer sets the tone of his *Small Passion* with a flip-flopping of expectation. The spiritual positioning of his audience vis-à-vis the fall relies on the upsetting of an established gender order whereby Eve is the object of the (male) viewer’s gaze. Her turn inward not only denies her objectification but also subordinates Adam to her stare. In toppling the social order, Dürer exercises print’s language of reversal and acknowledges the medium’s participating in a long tradition of narrative retelling. But later on in his account Dürer evokes the language of reversal to reinforce the spiritual order of epiphany by which God appears to man in order to save him. Within the *Small Passion*, the *Annunciation* (Figure 1.18) and *Christ’s Appearance to His Mother* (Figure 1.19) frame the period of Christ’s mission as mirror images of one another (Hass, 2000, p.186). In the earlier scene, God is delivered in human
Figure 1.16: Albrecht Altdorfer, *Fall of Man*, c.1513, woodcut, 7.2 x 4.8cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.326. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

Figure 1.17: Albrecht Altdorfer, *Expulsion from Paradise*, c.1513, woodcut, 7.2 x 4.8cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of W.G. Russell Allen, 1941.1.110. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

Figure 1.18: Albrecht Dürer, *Annunciation*, c.1509/10, woodcut, 12.7 x 9.7cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.3635. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

Figure 1.19: Albrecht Dürer, *Christ Appearing to his Mother*, c.1509/10, woodcut, 12.7 x 9.7cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.3662. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)
form as the angel rushes in from the left to announce the miracle to the kneeling Virgin. Twenty-seven pages later, this composition is turned as Mary, poised again in prayer, is interrupted by the arrival of her resurrected son. The directional change is abetted by the mirroring of the angel’s gesture of blessing in Christ’s opposite hand. Also relocated is the signature of Dürer that falls from the bed canopy to the base of Mary’s bookrest. In the replacement of his initials Dürer deliberately inverts his ‘D’, acknowledging how the world has turned: God is born of woman on earth then bids his final farewell.

Signatures: hand and face
Dürer’s autograph often provides a key to his theological message. Sometimes he positions his signature to compare the temporal conditions of his work’s making with the historical moment within the image. This is the case, for example, in the Small Passion’s Sudarium (Figure 1.3), in which Dürer frames Christ’s imprinted face with his date and initials, as if to say, ‘he leaves his mark, I leave mine’. Other times his initializing asserts his privileged position as witness to a Christological event, as in his Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand, where Dürer combines his painted self-portrait with an inscribed sign post in a redundant assertion of his presence (Marin, 1995, pp.198–204). In the paired Annunciation and Christ’s Appearance to His Mother, the transposition of Dürer’s signature imitates the mirroring of the printing process and symbolically traces the theophany: God’s descent from high to low and his reversal of original sin.

Dürer’s initials stamp each page of the Small Passion but in one of the prints the iconographic content serves as a signature for the project as a whole. Throughout the series, transactions between Christ’s face and other faces, between his hands and other hands, announce and defend an image behavior pattern whereby his imprint is passed on and becomes available to all. In the Road to the Calvary (Figure 1.20), the dramatic tension between Christ’s face and Veronica’s veil and the breaking of his fall with his hand serve as an anatomical diagram of the entire rhetorical scheme of the Small Passion. Compressing the space of Schongauer’s composition, in which Christ stumbles under the weight of the cross, Dürer augments it with the presentation of Veronica’s veil. Dürer inserts an intermediary object between Christ’s hand and the ground, a slab that bears a strong resemblance to the woodcutter’s block. The implied simultaneity of face to cloth and hand to block combines two metonymical stand-ins for both God and for the artist, and authorizes the print process as medium of apostolic transfer.

The Road to the Calvary conflates a narrative telling with the profession of a symbolic relationship of face and hand to creative action. It is not only that the face of Christ left an indexical mark that affirmed his incarnate presence on earth. Crucial to the understanding of the acheiropoietos is the iconographical history that preceded it. In pre-Christian images, the hand was a synecdoche for God. This was based on the locution in Exodus where God’s ruling dominion is referred to as ‘a mighty hand’ (Exodus 3:19). Moses tells the people that their relationship with God is based on auditory not visual mediation: ‘And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire; ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice’ (Deuteronomy 4:12). The observance of the Old Testament’s prohibition against making images was carried out through the symbolic proxy of hand of God for voice of God. The hand was a substitute, signaling the creative force by which divine utterances formed the heavens, earth, and all the earth’s inhabitants. Artists portrayed Moses’ solitary communications with God at the Burning Bush or during the receipt of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai with an arm protruding from the sky. Christian tradition alluded to this synecdoche.
as prehistory, finding in the incarnation of Christ justification for the materialisation of God’s image in pictorial form. In typologically aware representations of the Exodus encounter, a hand from the sky might deliver the Law to Moses, while his encounter with the Burning Bush might expose to the viewer a vision of the Virgin and Child (Figure 1.22) (Nelson and Collins, 2006, pp.113–15 and pp.271–73).

The analogy is between the shrub with its insatiable fire and the woman who remained ‘unconsumed’ by intercourse with man. The presence of the Hodegetria in this context suggests that Moses did not understand the events foreshadowed in his encounters with God, but that these clues were made visible signs when Christ assumed human form (Kessler, 2000, p.5). The descent of the divine into the world not only liberated artists to depict the image of Christ, but also vindicated all subsequent representations of God the father. Christian artists often included this iconophilic defense as part of the narrative history of Christianity. For example, in Giotto’s paintings for the Scrovegni chapel, God’s attendance at the sacrifice of Joachim (an event that precedes the birth of Christ) is indicated by the appearance of a hand in the sky (Figure 1.22), but later

Figure 1.21: Triptych icon of Moses on Mount Sinai and the Hodegetria within the Burning bush, from the Chapel of St. James in the Monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai, Egypt. (Kharbine-Tapabor/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY)

Figure 1.22: Giotto di Bondone, Joachim’s Sacrifice, c.1305, fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. (Alinari/Art Resource, NY)
in the fresco cycle at the Baptism of Christ (Figure 1.23), God the father emerges in full human form.

In his Road to the Calvary (Figure 1.20), Dürer elides the old and new pictorial traditions in the single instant in which hand and face make their mark. By underscoring (with the placement of a prop) the hand of Christ at the moment of the transfer of his image, Dürer announces that hand and face are united and made available through the imprint and its dissemination. The woodblock, like the veil, assumes the direct mark of the creator, and transfers this mark to all subsequent impressions.

This claim is further reinforced by a repetition and appropriation of Christ's hand gesture by Mary Magdalen. In the Crucifixion (Figure 1.7), Mary's hand presses against the ground to support her dolorous kissing of Christ's feet in imitation of Christ's hand gesture at his fall. The inheritance of her posture from his is made all the more evident in the diagonal rhyming of their bodies across an uncut sheet which shows the printing of four images to a page (Figure 1.24). Next, in the Noli me tangere (Figure 1.1) the gesture is reversed and personalised as Mary Magdalen lays her hand on the vessel of ointment—the vessel which has become her symbolic alter-ego, not only because of the vessel's feminine imagery, but also because Mary Magdalen is a vessel, the carrier of a message. She is the first witness to the risen Christ and the first recipient of the apostolic commission: ‘Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father; and your Father; and to my God, and your God’ (John 20:16–17) (Jansen, 1998, p.57). The touch of Christ is transmitted and reconfigured in the form of Mary Magdalen, the first witness of the Resurrection and the voice of the Church, who will tell of the fate of Christ’s body and the fulfillment of man’s destiny in things to come (Malvern, 1975, p.84). The translation of this gesture describes, through the metonymy of the hand, the history of the image of God: from pre-incarnation, to Christ’s bodily existence, culminating in the suspense of his return and the reliance of the transmission of his touch to sustain the memory of his presence. The placement of Mary Magdalen’s hand on the pot represents what is possible and what is beyond human reach.

Figure 1.23: Giotto di Bondone, Baptism, c.1305, fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. (Alinari/Art Resource, NY)
Hand and face are not only metonyms for God: they are also metonyms for the artist. Throughout Dürer’s oeuvre he investigates the symbolic value of hand and face as stand-ins for himself. In his silverpoint of 1484, the thirteen-year old Dürer confronts the two challenges of self-portraiture: first, how to render his right hand, which necessarily cannot pose while drawing, and second, how to fix his gaze within the picture, since his scanning eyes cannot look at mirror and page at the same time (Panofsky, 2005, p.16). In this early effort Dürer hides what appears as his left hand (the mirror reverse of his drawing right hand) in the sleeve of his cloak. In another self-image a few years later, Dürer presses his available hand against his seeing eye, calling attention to ‘the two traditional centers of pictorial interest in portraiture’ (Koerner, 1993, p.5). These youthful sketches culminate in Dürer’s most bold endeavor: the Munich self-portrait of 1500 (Figure 1.25). As Joseph Leo Koerner has shown, the daring self-consciousness of this likeness lies not only in the conflation of Dürer’s features with Christ’s but also in his imitation of the style of a true icon, an image not made by human hands (Koerner, 1993, p.53 and p.84). Uniting face and hand in vertical alignment, Dürer correlates artistic mastery with divine creation: the hand of this artist, which materialises his visage, compares with the hand of God, who brought his own image into the world.

For Dürer, the hand as self-emblem was personal. The ‘fame of the beauty of Dürer’s hand’ (Wölfflin, 1971, p.156) is recorded in the graceful long fingers that clasp the fur of his collar in the Munich self-portrait and in contemporaneous testimonials such as Joachim Camerarius’s preface to Dürer’s Proportionslehre in which he describes Dürer’s delicate hands: ‘But his fingers – you would vow you had never seen anything more elegant’ (Rupprich, 1956, vol.1, p.307). In the Road to the Calvary, the pressing of hand to tablet is an insertion of the self more profound than the neighboring tablet inscribed with Dürer’s initials. Within the pragmatics of the narrative, the gesture is absurd – the placement of the hand is too gentle to sustain the weight of Christ’s body and break his fall. The awkwardness of this breach of realism is even more apparent in the earlier Large Passion (Figure 1.26), where Dürer defies the laws of physics in Christ’s
unbending arm. In both compositions Dürer takes an artistic risk, jutting into the foreground an emblematic contact that stands for the spiritual effect of the scene. This trick recalls the Peter–Malchus scuffle as exegesis to the Betrayal. Here too one element spells out the emotional impact of another. The narrative content of the Road to the Calvary is the collapse of Christ's body under the heft of the cross. The double instances of imprinting – face to cloth and hand to block – signal this as the message to be passed on – the cross the beholder must bear. Dürer chooses this moment to make his mark. The mass of Christ's body, its submission to suffering, is what is transferred through the work of art to its audience and what makes an impression on the world.

Between the seams of transmission

Print is a medium that announces, defends and propagates a theophany through mimicry. Though over the course of his career Dürer would produce six different cycles portraying Christ's Passion, the success of Dürer's message about the transmission of divine contact through touch in this particular sequence lies in the circulation and reissuing of The Small Passion. Dürer's Netherlandish Diary, which records the sales he made on a trip begun nine years after the 1511 publication, includes several notes about his remunerations for this series; on one occasion, he sells sixteen copies of The Small Passion to Sebald Fischer for four gulden (Rupprich, 1956, vol.1, p.152). The woodblocks continued to be used to issue new editions over the course of the sixteenth century, often omitting the text that had accompanied the images: twenty-two verses of Latin poems by Benedictus Chalidonius (a reuse of a text that had been published in Strasburg in 1507) and, on the verso of the penultimate page, dedicatory poems by Willibald Pirckheimer and Johann Cochläus (Schneider, 2001, pp.302–3). In 1612, the Venetian publisher, Daniel Bissuccio, summoned the blocks to service again, issuing the narrative under the title, La Passione di N.S. Giesu Christo d’Alberto Durero di Norimberga (Meder, 1932, pp.129–31; Schneider, 2001, p.284). Instead of the original frontispiece, which had displayed a thorn-crowned Christ seated on a block carved with the initials AD (Meder, 1932, no. 125; Schneider, 2002, pp. 286–7), the introductory image was replaced with an engraving based on a portrait medal of Dürer by Matthias Gebel. Dürer had proffered at the outset the Man of Sorrows, an image of the divine that calls for identification through the imitation of his suffering (Isaiah 53:3). But a century later, it was the artist's own silhouette that introduced the set.

In 1839, the British Museum acquired thirty-five of the Small Passion's woodblocks (absenting the frontispiece and Christ Taking Leave of his Mother, both of which had been lost) (Bartrum, 1995, pp.41–2). With the permission of the institution's trustees, in 1844 Henry Cole directed the production of a new series based on stereotype copies of the blocks. The injuries to the originals (broken lines and worm holes) were filled in and the two missing compositions were re-engraved (Dobson, 1894, pp.9–13). The afterlife of the pearwood prototypes and the total number of surviving prints related to the series on the one hand affirms the notion that the medium of print fulfills, through images that describe the transfer of bodily trace, the apostolic commission – the injunction to tell the history of Christ's corporeal presence, the impressions it left, and the return it will make in the end. On the other hand, following the sequence of reprints and examining the woodblocks as artifacts speaks to some of the interventions that are hidden in the mechanics of production. Dürer's 1511 publication included a colophon (repeated in the other series he produced in that year – The Large Passion, The Life of the Virgin, and the Apocalypse) in which he warns potential copyists against the imitation of his
compositions: ‘Beware you envious thieves of the work and invention of others, keep you thoughtless hands [manus temerarias] from these works of ours’ (Rupprich, 1956, vol.1, p.76). Here the metonymy of hand for artistic production is summoned as a slap on the wrist to the fellow members of his trade. Already in 1511, Marcantonio Raimondi would breach the terms of this injunction by issuing an engraved edition of Dürer’s compositions (an incident memorialised, with a bungling of historical fact, by Giorgio Vasari) (Vasari, 1880, pp.398–409). In Raimondi’s rendition the blank tablets – void of initials and dates – weaken the claims of simultaneity between the impressions made from Christ’s body and the origins of the images’ authorship. An empty frame anchors the lower right corner in the scene of Christ’s fall (Figure 1.27); Veronica, holding up her veil, stands behind a silent prop (Figure 1.28).

The survival of the woodblocks has allowed for the assessment that they were cut by a number of different hands (Dodgson, 1903, vol.1, pp.296–7). The assurance

Figure 1.27: Marcantonio Raimondi, Road to the Calvary, 16th century, engraving, 12.7 x 9.7cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Francis H. Burr Memorial Fund, M22480.

Figure 1.28: Marcantonio Raimondi, Veronica with the Sudarium and Saints Peter and Paul, 16th century, engraving, 12.7 x 9.7cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Francis H. Burr Memorial Fund, M22481.

Figure 1.29: Hans Baldung Grien, Christ on the Pillar, 1517, woodcut, 21.8 x 15.3cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.902. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)
of the printed image as an indexical mark was thus already operating metaphorically by eliding a gap in production that stood between the artist’s design of the image and the carver’s whittling away of surface. The interpolation of a process between composing and cutting was quieted by the wide circulation of the Small Passion, which appealed to audiences both as a devotional aid and as a representation of the artist’s hand. One could almost let go unmentioned this rift in the smooth impression the prints give – that they bear the marks of their maker – were it not that at the time of the Small Passion’s circulation, another artist was developing a language with which to indicate fissures. In an image carrying the date 1511 (British Museum 1895,0122.233; Hollstein 59), Hans Baldung Grien situates the Christ Child between the arms of his mother and grandmother, his naked body on view for all to see (all parts of the human flesh are there; the probing hand of St. Anne checks) (Steinberg, 1996, pp.110–19 and pp.359–63). Joseph, accustomed to the marginalised spot of an onlooker, peers over a crackling wall. The rifts in this blockade – pressure clefts are what threaten the integrity of wooden blocks – separate those who touch the flesh of Christ from those who gaze upon it. The imminent tearing away of the divine body bubbles violently within Baldung’s presentations of the incarnate God. Fissures declare a foreboding sense of rupture and loss (Figure 1.29).

Dürer, however, used the analogy between haptic gestures and the printed medium to promote the efficacy of palpation. His narrative style was well understood by recipients who knew of daily devotion – and the handling of art – as an act of touch.

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