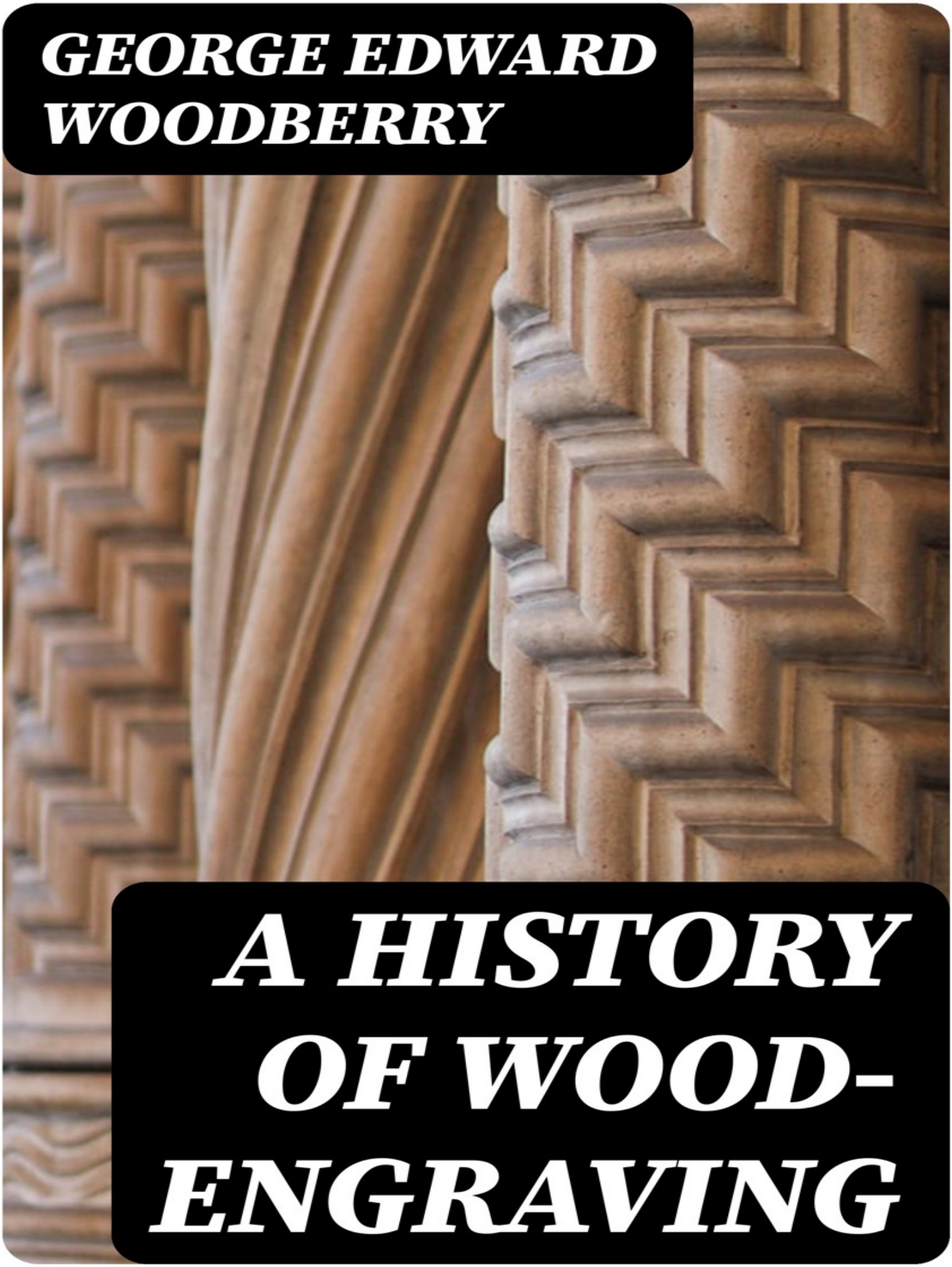

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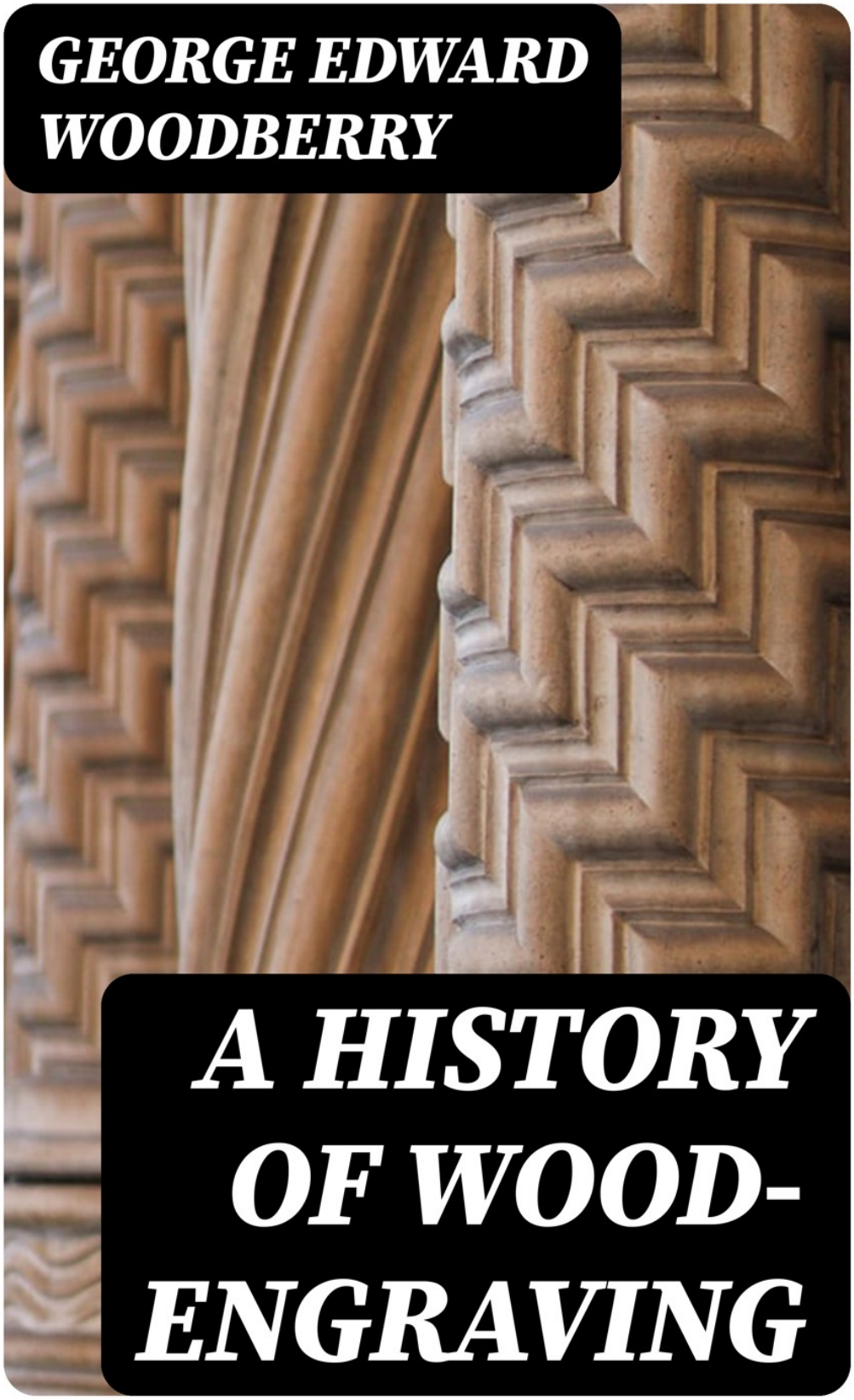

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I.

THE ORIGIN OF THE ART.

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FIG. 1.—From "Epistole di San Hieronymo Volgare." Ferra 1497.

THE beginning of the art of wood-engraving in Europe, the time when paper was first laid down upon an engraved wood block and the first rude print was taken off, is unknown; the name of the inventor and his country are involved in a double obscurity of ignorance and fable, darkened still more by national jealousies and vanities; even the mechanical appliances and processes which led up to and at last resulted in the new art, can only be conjectured. The art had long lain but just beyond the border-line of discovery. The principle of making impressions by means of lines cut in relief upon wood was known to the ancients, who used engraved wooden stamps to indent figures and letters in soft substances like wax and clay, and, possibly, to print colors on surfaces, as had been done from early times in India in the manufacture of cloth; similar stamps were used in the Middle Ages by notaries and other public officers to print signatures on documents, by Italian cloth-makers to impress colors on silk and other fabrics, and by the illuminators of manuscripts to strike the

outlines of initial letters. This practice may have suggested the new process.

It is more probable that the art began in the workshops of the goldsmiths, who were so skilled in engraving upon metal that impressions of much artistic value have been taken from work executed by them in the twelfth century, showing that they really were engravers obliged to remain goldsmiths, because the art of printing from metal plates was unknown.[1] By their knowledge of design and their artistic execution, at least, if not by their mechanical inventiveness, the goldsmiths were the lineal ancestors of the great engravers of the Renaissance. Their art had been continued from Roman times, with fewer interruptions and hinderances than any other of the fine arts. It was early employed in the adornment of the altar, the pax, and other articles of the Church service; already, in St. Bernard's time, so much attention was given to workmanship of this kind, and so much wealth lavished upon it, that he denounced it, with true ascetic spirit, as a decoration of what was soon to become vile, a waste of what might have been given to the poor, and a distraction of the spirit from holiness to the admiration of beauty. "The Church," he said, "shines with the splendor of her walls, and among her poor is destitution; she clothes her stones with gold, and leaves her children naked. * * * Finally, so many things are to be seen, everywhere such a marvellous variety of different forms, that one may read more upon the sculptured walls than in the written Scriptures, and spend the whole day in going about in wonder from one such thing to another, rather than in meditating upon God's law."[2] The art might have suffered seriously from such uncompromising opposition as St. Bernard made, had not Suger, the great abbot of St. Denys, taken up its defence and supported it by his patronage and by his eloquence. "Let each one have his own opinion," he writes, "but I confess it is my conviction

that whatever is most precious ought to be devoted above all to that holiest rite of the Eucharist; if golden lavers, if golden cups, and if golden bowls were used, by the command of God or of the prophet, to catch the blood of rams or bullocks or heifers, how much more ought vases of gold, precious stones, and whatever is dearest among all creatures, ever to be set forth with full devotion to receive the blood of Jesus Christ!”[3] By such arguments Suger defended the rightfulness and value of the goldsmith’s art in the service of the Church. After his time the employment of the goldsmiths upon church decoration became so great that they were really the artists of Europe during the two hundred years previous to the invention of wood-engraving.[4] In the pursuit of their craft they practised the arts of modelling, casting, sculpture, engraving, enamelling, and the setting of precious stones; and in the thirteenth century they made use of all these resources in the execution of their beautiful works of art made of gold and silver, richly engraved, and adorned with bass-reliefs and statuettes, and brilliant with many-colored enamel and with jewels—the reliquaries in which were kept the innumerable holy relics that then filled Europe, the famous shrines for the bodies of the saints, about which pilgrims from every quarter were ever at prayer, and the tombs of the Crusaders, and of dignitaries of Church or State. They employed their skill, too, for the lesser glory of the churches, upon the vessels of the Holy Communion, the crosses, candelabra, and censers, and the ornaments that incrusted the vestments of the priests. With the increase of luxury and wealth they found a new field for their invention in contributing to the magnificence of secular life; in fashioning into strange forms the ewers, goblets, flagons, and every vessel which adorned the banquet; and in ornamenting them with fantastic figures, or with scenes from the chase, or from the history of Charlemagne and Saladin, as well as in executing

those finely wrought decorations with which the silks and velvets of the nobles were so heavily charged that the old poet, Martial d'Auvergne, says the lords and knights were "caparisoned in gold-work and jewels." Under Charles V. of France (1364) and the great Dukes of the Low Countries, the jewel-chamber of the prince was his pride in peace and his treasury in war: it furnished gifts for the bride, the favorite, and the heir, and for foreign ambassadors and princes; it afforded pay for retainers before the battle and ransom after it, and in the days of the great fêtes its treasures gave to the courts of France, Burgundy, and Flanders a magnificence that has seldom been seen in Europe.[5]

Under such fortunate encouragement the goldsmiths of the fourteenth century reached a knowledge of design and a finish in execution that justified the claim of their art to the first place among the fine arts, and made their workshops the apprentice-home of many great masters of art in Italy as well as in the North. They best understood the value of art, and were best skilled in artistic processes; they were the only persons[6] who had by them all the means for taking an impression—the engraved metal plate, iron tools, burnishers for rubbing off a proof, blackened oil, and paper which they used for tracing their designs; they would, too, have been aided in their art, merely as goldsmiths, could they have tested their engraving from time to time by taking an impression from it in its various stages. It is not unlikely, therefore, that the art of taking impressions from engraved work was found out, or at least was first extensively applied, in their workshops, where it could hardly have failed to be discovered ultimately, as paper came into use more generally and for more various purposes. If this were the case, metal-engraving preceded wood-engraving, but only by a brief space of time, because, as soon as the idea of the new art was fully grasped, wood

must have been almost immediately employed in preference to metal, on account of the greater ease and speed of working in wood, and of the less injury done to the paper in printing from it.

Some support for this view, that the art of printing from engraved metal plates was discovered by the goldsmiths, and preceded and suggested wood-engraving, is derived from the peculiar prints in the *manière criblée*, or the dotted style, of which over three hundred are known. They were produced by a mixed process of engraving in relief and in intaglio, usually upon a metal plate, but sometimes upon wood. The effects are given by dots and lines relieved in white upon a black ground, assisted by dots and lines relieved in black upon a white ground. These prints have afforded much material for dispute and controversy, both as to their process and their date; the mode in which the metal plates from which they were printed were engraved, particularly the punching out small holes in the metal, which appear usually as white dots, and give the name to the prints, is the same as a mode of ornamental work[7] in metal that had been practised for centuries in the workshops of the goldsmiths, and on this account they have been ascribed to the goldsmiths of the great Northern cities.[8] They appeared certainly as early as 1450, and probably much earlier.[9] Some of these prints are evidently taken from metal plates not originally meant to be printed from, for the inscriptions on the prints as well as the actions of the figures appear reversed, the words reading backward, and the figures performing actions with the left hand almost always performed by the right hand.[10] These may be the work of the first years of the fifteenth century, or they may have been taken long afterward, in a spirit of curiosity or experiment. The existence of these early prints, however, undoubtedly from the workshops of the goldsmiths, and after a mode long practised by them,

strengthens the hypothesis—suggested by their wide acquaintance with artistic processes and their exclusive possession of all the proper instruments—that they originated the art of taking impressions on paper from engraved work; at all events, this seems the least wild, the most consistent, and best supported conjecture which has been put forth.

There is, however, no lack of more specific accounts of the origin of wood-engraving. Pliny's[11] reference to the portraits with which Varro illustrated his works indicates, in the opinion of some writers, a momentary, isolated, and premature appearance of the art in his day. Ottley[12] maintains that the art was introduced into Europe by the Venetians, who learned it "at a very early period of their intercourse with the people of Tartary, Thibet, and China;" but of this there is no satisfactory evidence. Papillon,[13] a French engraver of the last century, relates that in his youth he saw in the library of a retired Swiss officer nine woodcuts, illustrative of the deeds of Alexander the Great, executed with a small knife by "two young and amiable twins," Isabella and Alexander Alberico Cunio, Knt., of Ravenna, in their seventeenth year, and dedicated by them to Pope Honorius IV., in 1284–85; but, as no one else ever saw or heard of them, and there is no contemporary reference to them, as no single unquestionable fact has been adduced in direct support of the story, and as Papillon is an untrustworthy writer, his tale, although accepted by some authorities,[14] is generally discredited,[15] and was regarded by Chatto[16] as the hallucination of a distempered mind. Meerman,[17] the stout defender of the claim of Lawrence Coster to the invention of printing with movable types, relying on the authority of Junius,[18] who wrote from tradition more than a century after the facts, makes Coster the first printer of woodcuts. Some writers accept this story; but in spite of them, and of the well-

developed genealogical tree with which Meerman provided his hero, and even of Mr. Sotheby's[19] supposed discovery of Coster's portrait, his very existence is doubted. The charming scene in which the idea of the new art first occurred to Coster, as he was walking after dinner in his garden, and cutting letters from beech-tree bark with which to print moral sentences for his grandchildren—the old man surrounded by the childish group in the well-ordered Haarlem garden—is probably, after all, little more than a play of antiquarian fancy. These stories have slight historic weight; they are, to use M. Renouvier's simile, "a group of legends about the cradle of modern art, like those recounted of ancient art, the history of Craton, of Saurias, or of the daughter of Dibutades, who invented design by tracing on a wall the silhouette of her lover."

FIG. 2.—St. Christopher, 1423. From Ottley's "Inquiry into the Origin and Early History of Engraving upon Copper and in Wood."

The first fact known with certainty in the history of wood-engraving is, that in the first quarter of the fifteenth

century there were scattered abroad in Northern Europe rude prints, representing scenes from the Scriptures and the lives of the saints. These pictures were on single leaves of paper; the outlines were printed from engraved wood-blocks, but occasionally, it is believed, from metal plates cut in relief; they were taken off in a pale, brownish ink by rubbing on the back of the paper with a burnisher, and sometimes in black ink and with a press; they were then colored, either by hand or by means of a stencil plate, in order to make them more attractive to the people. The earliest of these prints which bears an unquestionable date is the famous St. Christopher (Fig. 2) of 1423, found by Heinecken,[20] in the middle of the last century, pasted inside the cover of a manuscript in the library of the convent of Buxheim, in Suabia. It represents St. Christopher, according to a favorite legend of the Middle Ages, fording a river with the infant Christ upon his shoulders; opposite, on the right bank, a hermit holds a lantern before his cell; on the left a peasant, with a bag on his back, climbs the steep ascent from his mill to the cottage high up on the cliff, where no swelling of the stream will reach it. The attitude of the two heads is expressive, and the folds of the saint's robes are well cast about the shoulders; in other respects the cut has little artistic merit, but the attempt to mark shadows by a greater or less width of line is noticeable, and the lines in general are much more varied than is usual in early work. It was printed in black ink, and with a press. There are two other early prints, the dates of which are uncertain, but still sufficiently probable to deserve mention—the warmly controverted Brussels print[21] of 1418, which represents the Virgin and Child, surrounded by four saints, in an enclosed garden, in the style of the Van Eycks, and with more artistic merit than the St. Christopher in design, drawing, and execution; and, secondly, the St. Sebastian of

1437, at Vienna. The former was discovered in 1844, in a bad condition, and the latter in 1779; both are taken off in pale ink, and with a rubber. There are numerous other prints of this kind, which have been described in detail and have had conjectural dates assigned to them, fruitful of much antiquarian dispute. One of these (Fig. 3) is here reproduced for the first time; it was found stitched into a manuscript of 1445, and is unquestionably as old as the manuscript; it represents a Crucifixion, with the Virgin and Longinus at the left, and St. John and, perhaps, the Centurion at the right; in the upper left-hand corner is an angel with the Veronica, or handkerchief, which bears the miraculous portrait of the Saviour, and above are a scourge and a knife; in the original the body of Christ is covered with dots and scratches in vermillion, to represent blood. It was taken off in black ink with a press, and is one of the rudest engravings known.[22]

FIG. 3.—The Crucifixion. From the Manuscript “Book of Devotion.” 1445.

Valueless as these prints[23] are, for the most part, as works of art, they are of great interest. They were the first pictures the common people ever had, and doubtless they were highly prized. Rude as they were, the poor German peasant or humble artisan of the great industrial cities cared for them; they had been given to him by the monks, like the rudely-carved wooden images of earlier times, at the end of some pilgrimage that he had made for penance or devotion, and were treasured by him as a precious memento; or some preaching friar, to whom he had devoutly given a small alms for the building of a church or the decoration of a shrine, had rewarded his piety with a picture of the saint whom, so far as he could, he had honored; or he had received them on some day of festival, when in the streets of the Flemish cities the Lazarists or other orders of monks had marched in grand procession,

scattering these brilliantly colored prints among the populace. Stuck up on the low walls of his dwelling, they not only recalled his pious deeds, they brought home before his eyes in daily sight the reality of that holy living and holy dying of the Saviour and his martyrs in whose intercession and prayer his hope of salvation lay. Throughout the fifteenth and a part of the sixteenth centuries, although the intellectual life of the higher classes began to be secularized, among the common people these mediæval sentiments and customs, which gave rise to the holy prints, continued without change until the Reformation; and so the workshops of the monks and of the guilds of Augsburg, Nuremberg, Ulm, Cologne, and the Flemish cities, kept on issuing these saints' images, as they were called, long after the art had produced refined and noble works. They remained, in accordance with the true mediæval spirit, not only without the name of the craftsman, *nomen vero auctoris humilitate siletur*, but unmarked by any individuality, impersonal as well as anonymous; there is little to show even the difference in the time and place of their production, except that their lines in the first half of the century were more round and flowing, while in the latter half they were angular, after the manner of the Van Eycks, and that they vary in the choice and brilliancy of their colors.[24]

At the very beginning, too, wood-engraving was applied to a new industry, which had sprung up rapidly, to furnish amusement for the camp and the town—the manufacture of playing-cards. Some writers have maintained that the art was thus applied before it was employed to make the holy prints; but there are no playing-cards known to have been printed before 1423, and it is probable that they were painted by hand and adorned by the stencil for some time after the first unquestioned mention of them in 1392.[25] The manufacture of both cards and holy prints soon

became a thriving trade; it is mentioned in Augsburg in 1418, and soon afterward in Nuremberg; and in 1441 the exportation of these articles into Italy had become so large that the Venetian Senate passed a decree,[26] which is the earliest document relative to wood-engraving in Italy, forbidding their importation into Venice, because the guild engaged in this manufacture in the city was suffering from the foreign competition. Wood-engraving, being only one process in the craft of the card-maker and the print-maker, seems to have remained without a distinct name for a long while after its invention.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, therefore, wood-engraving, the youngest of the arts of design, after fifty years of obscure and unnoticed history, held an established position, and was recognized as a new craft. In art its discovery was the parallel of the invention of printing in literature; it was a means of multiplying and spreading the ideas which are expressed by art, of creating a popular appreciation and knowledge of art, and of bringing beautiful design within the reach of a larger body of men. It is difficult for a modern mind to realize the place which pictures filled in mediæval life, before the invention of printing had brought about that great change which has resulted in making books almost the sole means of education. It was not merely that the paintings upon the walls of the churches conveyed more noble conceptions to the peasant and the artisan than their slow imagination could build up out of the words of the preacher; like children, they apprehended through pictures, they thought upon all higher themes in pictures rather than in words; their ideas were pictorial rather than verbal; painting was in spiritual matters more truly a language to them than their own *patois*. They could not reason, they could not easily understand intellectual statement, they could not imagine vividly, they could only see. This accounts for the

rapid spread of the new art, and for the popularity and utility of the holy prints which were so widely employed to convey religious ideas and quicken religious sentiment; in the production of these wood-engraving appears from the first in its true vocation as a democratic art in the service of the people; its influence was one, and by no means the most insignificant, of the great forces which were to transform mediæval into modern life, to make the civilization of the heart and the brain no longer the exclusive possession of a few among the fortunately born, but a common blessing. Wood-engraving was at once the product of the desire for this change and of the effort toward it, a mirror of the movement the more valuable because the art was more intimately connected with the popular life than any other art of the Renaissance, and a power feeding the impulse from which it derived its own vitality. In this fact lies the historic interest of the art to the student of civilization. At first it served mediæval religion; afterward it took a wider range, and by both its serious and satirical works afforded valuable aid in the progress of the Reformation, while it rendered the earliest printed books more attractive, in which its nobler designs educated the eye in the perception of beauty. Finally, in the hands of the great engravers—of Dürer, who, still mastered by the mediæval spirit, employed it to embody the German Renaissance; of Maximilian’s artists, who recorded in it the dying picturesqueness and chivalric spirit of the Middle Ages; of Holbein, who first heralded, by means of it, the intelligence and sentiment of modern times—it produced its chief monuments, which, for the most part, will here be dealt with, in order to illustrate its value as a fine art practised for its own sake, as a trustworthy contemporary record of popular customs, ideas, and taste, and as an element of considerable power in the advancement of modern civilization.