

Press Release

Basel, October 7, 2025

## **Heroes, Saints, and Elephants Copperplate Engravings in Italy around 1500**

October 7, 2025 – January 25, 2026, Kunstmuseum Basel | Hauptbau, Grafikkabinette  
Curator: Silvia Massa

The exhibition *Heroes, Saints, and Elephants* presents the art of Italian Renaissance copperplate engraving at the Kunstmuseum Basel for the very first time. Around 40 prints from the collection of the Kupferstichkabinett are on display, featuring a wide variety of motifs. Some of these works were conceived as original images while others are based on compositions by Italian masters such as Andrea Mantegna, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci. Works by Albrecht Dürer, Lucas van Leyden, and Martin Schongauer, whose prints greatly influenced Italian artists, round out the exhibition.

Copperplate engraving developed in Italy starting around 1460. Initially, the technique was an arena of experimentation in which the cultural impulses of the Renaissance found expression – for instance, through the reinterpretation of motifs from antiquity. After 1500, increasingly more artists began to use copperplate engraving to reproduce and disseminate existing images, whether their own or those created by others. Early copperplate engraving became a productive driver of Italian art, establishing itself both as an important art form and a lucrative business. Many aspects of this history, however – such as the identity of some artists – remain unclear to this day.

The displayed works shed light on Italy's exchanges with countries north of the Alps, the commercial dynamics of art production, and the practice of copying common at the time. A vivid example featured in the exhibit is the work of Marcantonio Raimondi, who used copperplate engraving to copy a series of woodcuts (c. 1502–1510) by Dürer, but sold most of the sheets without adding his own monogram. This was long considered the first instance of copyright infringement in the history of art, but more recent interpretations demonstrate the case is more complex.

The notion of “original” and “reproduction” is continually interpreted anew – the boundaries can never be definitively drawn. *Heroes, Saints, and Elephants* invites us to rethink these definitions as they change over time.

**Images related to the exhibition**

[www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/medien](http://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/medien)

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