

British Museum's world class Rudolfine prints displayed for first time

Printmaking in Prague: art from the court of Rudolf II

17 March – 28 August 2022
Room 90, Free

Press images: <https://bit.ly/3Ble12y>

One of the world's most important collections of sixteenth century prints from the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II will go on public display for the very first time at the British Museum this month.

Once described as the **greatest art patron in the world**, Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612) was an avid art collector during his 36-year reign. Acquiring objects from all over Europe and beyond, Rudolf amassed one of the **largest and most diverse collections of the time**: thousands of paintings, prints, drawings and sculptures, among other objects of curiosity. *Printmaking in Prague: art from the court of Rudolf II* will **display the British Museum's collection of Rudolfine prints for the very first time**, including work by **Jan Muller, Hendrick Goltzius and Aegidius II Sadeler**.

The exhibition will display 45 innovative prints dating from the 1580s to the 1620s, which was one of the most technically accomplished periods of printmaking. Subjects depicted range from mythological narratives and allegories, erotic subjects, commentaries on the status of artists and the arts, portraits with rich iconography, stunning landscapes and religious scenes.

Printmaking in Prague will convey a sense of the grandeur of the imperial court, and the fascinating chapter in history when the city of Prague flourished under Rudolf. It will be on display for free at the British Museum in Room 90 from Thursday 17 March until Sunday 28 August 2022.

Transforming the medieval city of Prague into a vibrant centre of art and science, Rudolf established his court there in the early years of his reign (1576–1612). Rudolf was a fervent supporter of the arts: he built state rooms and residences at Prague Castle to house both his large art collection and his artists. He decreed that painting

was to be elevated from the realm of craft to an art, and conferred nobility upon several of his court artists – a turning point for **perceiving northern European artists as equal to their Italian counterparts on an international stage.**

Throughout his 36-year-long reign, Rudolf sought out leading artists for his court from across Europe, including painters Hans von Aachen (1552–1615), Bartholomeus Spranger (1546–1611), and sculptor Adriaen de Vries (c. 1545–1626). His **court artists specialised in creating elongated forms, powerful figures and graceful beauty.** Aegidius II Sadeler (c. 1570–1629) was appointed as the first ever-imperial engraver to Rudolf's court. Together with Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617) and Jan Muller (1571–1628), Sadeler translated Rudolfine designs into print, making the courtly style accessible to a much broader audience across Europe – and spreading knowledge of his artistic patronage.

Highlights of the exhibition include Goltzius's ***Wedding of Cupid and Psyche*** (1587, after a design by Spranger) is a tour de force of engraving that showcases his signature swelling line to convey volumes and curves. In Muller's engraving of ***Bacchus and Ceres*** (c. 1597, after a painting by Spranger), he deftly translates Spranger's soft palette into monochrome, and depicts the mythological gods in an intimate moment. Muller's large-scale ***Bellona leading the Imperial Army*** (1600, after a design by Spranger) shows how prints for Rudolf's court glorified the emperor: Bellona, the Roman goddess of war, is shown blowing a trumpet and leading the Hapsburg standard. The Holy Roman Empire was at war with the Ottoman Empire during Rudolf's reign, and this victorious image was intended to inspire confidence.

Rudolf's *Kunstkammer* (cabinet of curiosities) was one of early modern Europe's most famed princely collections. Rudolf was a keen collector of northern art of the recent past, and his two favourite artists were Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525–1569), artists best known for their ability to represent the natural world around them. In addition to collecting their works, Rudolf ushered in a revival of this older style, and commissioned new works in the style of Dürer and Bruegel.

Olenka Horbatsch, Curator: Dutch and Flemish Prints & Drawings said: "Prints from Rudolfine Prague are the aesthetic highpoint of engraving, and we are thrilled to present the Museum's treasures from this collection for the first time. These highly sophisticated prints, a number of which span several meters, showcase the virtuoso talent of printmakers to Rudolf's court."

The free exhibition *Printmaking in Prague: art from the court of Rudolf II*, opens at the British Museum on 17 March – 28 August 2022 in Room 90. Alongside this in Room 90 will be *Drawing attention: drawings by emerging British artists.*

Notes to editors

Printmaking in Prague: art from the court of Rudolf II runs from 17 March – 28 August 2022 in Room 90 at the British Museum.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30.

Last entry 80 mins before closing.

The Department of Prints and Drawings

The Department of Prints and Drawings contains the national collection of Western prints and drawings, in the same way as the National Gallery and Tate hold the national collection of paintings. It is one of the top three collections of its kind in the world. There are approximately 50,000 drawings and over two million prints dating from the beginning of the fifteenth century up to the present day.

The collection is available to the public through the Study Room and through a programme of temporary displays, touring exhibitions and loans.

britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/prints-and-drawings



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