

## **View the Old Testament through the timeless woodcuts of Renaissance master Hans Holbein**

Hans Holbein, *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti*. Lyon: Johan Frellon, 1547. 7 5/8 inches x 5 1/2 inches (194 x 140 mm), 104 pages, illustrated throughout.

This series of magnificent woodcuts by Hans Holbein the Younger represents a pivotal moment in the history of Bible images. In it, Holbein — one of the foremost Renaissance artists of northern Europe — transformed the traditional late-medieval iconography of the Old Testament into a landmark of book illustration. In his beautifully structured compositions, this master artist set firm figures within clearly defined spatial settings. He conveyed emotional depth through delicate nuance of pose and expression, preserved by the skillful cutting of the blocks, and enriched his images using ancient as well as contemporary costumes. The lines capture the essence of Holbein's lively, differentiated draftsmanship, the subtle plasticity created by his distribution of areas of hatching, the expressiveness of the faces, and the fluid gestures of the figures. These illustrations relate grand narrative in a compact format, but their monumental compositions could easily be enlarged to the size of murals.

The *Icones* contains 88 Bible illustrations in horizontal format, supplemented by four illustrations in vertical format taken from Holbein's famous suite *Images of Death*. The pictures are accompanied by citations of the relevant biblical text together with short Latin explanatory notes. This edition appeared in 1547 and retains a Latin text above the pictures as well as the French explanatory text below.

Holbein's older contemporary Albrecht Dürer brought graphic illustration to a new level of virtuosity. Although Dürer produced a number of New Testament cycles as well as some isolated Old Testament images, he never produced a cycle of illustrations for the Old Testament. Holbein's *Icones* thus represent not only a highlight of his graphic oeuvre, but also occupy a central position in the history of Bible illustration.

This is a beautiful copy from Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, and is bound in red, pebbled goatskin over pasteboard. The boards are tooled in gilt; the spine has a gilt title in the second panel, the date is in the bottom panel, and other panels are decorated in gold. "Bound by Hering, 9 Newman St." is stamped in black ink on the verso of the front flyleaf. The textblock has gilt edges.

The earliest recorded owner of the book in its new binding is Sydney Carlyle Cockerell (1867–1962) who acquired the book in 1902. He was an associate of John Ruskin and William Morris and was eventually commissioned to catalogue Morris' fine collection of books and manuscripts in 1892. By 1894 Cockerell served as secretary to the Kelmscott Press, eventually winding up affairs after Morris' death in 1896. From 1908 to 1937, Cockerell was director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

Octavo code: hlbst