

ASHMOLEAN EXHIBITION CATALOGUE: KNOSSOS

CATALOGUE ENTRY ON HIERONYMUS COCK'S *THE CRETAN LABYRINTH*

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Article

A large eleven-circuit hedge labyrinth dominates this landscape print.¹ Somehow, it floats within the bay, complete with tall trees and a pair of swans. Only accessible via a drawbridge at left, the circular structure is set against a panoramic landscape with towns and mountains seen in the distance. While there are no signs of the Minotaur or Theseus amongst the meandering hedges, this Flemish etching has traditionally been known as *The Cretan Labyrinth*, with the island setting probably referring to Crete. Tiny shapes can be observed following its winding path, with some having reached its centre.

The print was originally part of a series of twelve, commonly known as the 'Landscapes with Biblical and Mythological Scenes'.² This series, etched and published by Hieronymus Cock in Antwerp in 1558, displays a wide range of subjects from the Old and New Testament to classical mythology. *The Cretan Labyrinth* stands apart from the other eleven prints in that it does not focus on a Biblical or mythological scene but makes the labyrinth itself the main subject.

The figures in the foreground, however, shed more light on the contextual interpretation of this labyrinth and similar examples depicted in sixteenth-century Europe. The hunting party at left, including a couple on horseback holding a falcon, and the carousing group at right, involving a woman playing a lute, a flirting couple and even a jester, all refer to leisurely love. The print's Latin title also alludes to this theme: the 'marvellous winding paths' not only describe the labyrinth but also refer to the amorous nature of the characters in Cock's print. Not meant to confuse those who enter the labyrinth, the winding path describes one contorted route, folding back onto itself, representing the complexities of love. This symmetrical unicursal path is modelled on the eleven concentric circles found in the famous floor pattern in Chartres Cathedral, as opposed to a true "Cretan" labyrinth which is strictly composed of seven circles.³ The labyrinth in this print is derived from contemporary garden design. Hedge mazes and labyrinths evolved from the knot gardens of Renaissance Europe and were first built in the mid-sixteenth century from evergreen herbs and later from *Buxus* (boxwood) due to its sturdiness.⁴

The panoramic landscapes seen in Hieronymus Cock's etchings were copied from previous drawings by his late brother, Matthijs.⁵ These imaginary 'world landscapes' were a popular genre of Flemish art at the time. In these prints Cock deliberately creates a sense of depth with his wide landscapes which hazily disappear into the distance, as can be clearly noticed in *The Cretan Labyrinth*. This perhaps explains why the biblical and mythological subjects featured in Cock's series are seemingly unrelated as they were purely meant to showcase the 'world landscape'. As pioneering examples of

landscape in print, they remained hugely popular and were issued over several decades, even after Cock's death.⁶

Hieronymus Cock was one of the most prolific print publishers of his time. With over 2000 published prints, he dominated the European market and was a forerunner in the professionalisation of the print publishing business.⁷ He was also a pioneer in accompanying his print series with frontispieces containing a title in multiple languages, so the international buyer or collector would know exactly what to expect. For instance in the title-page accompanying the Landscapes series of *The Cretan Labyrinth*, Cock describes the prints as for the "general use of painters", indicating that they served as models, as inspiration for other artists, in addition to captivating audiences with their otherworldly landscapes.

References

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Image Caption

Hieronymus Cock after Matthijs Cock, *The Cretan Labyrinth*, c. 1558, etching on laid paper, 22.1 x 29.9 cm. Ashmolean Museum, WA1863.7692, Bequeathed by Francis Douce, 1834. @ Ashmolean Museum

¹ Literature: Hollstein (1949), p. 179, cat. no. 21; Riggs (1977), p. 277, cat. no. 50; Kern (2000), p. 228, cat. no. 422; Allart (2013), pp. 344–7, cat. no. 94.6.

² The separately published frontispiece contains a Latin series title: "Variae variarum regionum typographicae adumbrationes, / in publicum pictorum usum a / Hieronymo Cock delineatae, / in aes incisae, et aeditae. [Various printed designs of different regions, drawn, etched in copper and published by Hieronymus Cock for general use of painters.] See Bakker (2007/8), cat. no. 2.

³ Dating from the thirteenth century, its uncursal, long-winding path symbolised the Christian journey towards salvation. See Kern (2000), pp. 23–33 and p. 153, cat. nos. 259–61.

⁴ Kern (2000), pp. 206-35. Other similar hedge labyrinths are usually depicted with a Maypole at their centre, referring to the celebratory advent of Spring, see also Kern (2000), cat. nos. 419-39.

⁵ Only three drawings related to this print series have been identified, none of them for *The Cretan Labyrinth*. It is probable that there were designs for all prints in the series. See D'haene (2012), pp. 296-300.

⁶ Hieronymus Cock would publish the first pure landscapes in print, devoid of figures, in Northern European art only a year later in 1559-61. For the Small Landscapes, see Van Camp (2012).

⁷ Hieronymus Cock founded his publishing company in 1548, trading from "Aux Quatre Vents" (at the sign of the four winds) in Antwerp. After his death in 1570, the business was continued by his wife Volcxken Diericx until 1600.