Daniel Hopfer’s *The Peasant Feast* has an unexpectedly complex genealogy, which provides a bird’s-eye view of sixteenth-century German visual culture. Hopfer (c. 1470–1536) was an almost exact contemporary of the well-known painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), whose enduring legacy was already deeply felt in his lifetime. Hopfer has been widely credited with introducing etching, shortly after 1500, as one of the options available to artists making prints. In contrast to Dürer, however, who is celebrated as much for the virtuosity of his technique as for the ingenuity of his inventions, Hopfer utilized his newfound technique as a tool for popularizing many different types of prints designed not only by himself, but also by others. This popularization resulted in a long life for his plates, which were reprinted into the nineteenth century, but a less illustrious reputation. His prints range from replicas of well-known works by famous artists to original designs for decoration and ornament, from adaptations of popular religious themes to contemporary and ancient history, and from portraiture to satire.

Although Hopfer’s etchings have been written off or simply ignored by earlier generations of art historians, and considered derivative or worse, recent scholarship has begun reassessing his contributions.¹ More generally, the role of copies, replicas, and reinterpreted motifs in early

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¹ Albrecht Haupt, for example, bombastically characterized Hopfer (and his sons, who worked with him) as “the most thieving artistic riffraff” in the history of etching (“das diebischste Kunstgesindel, was geistiges Eigentum anlangt, das wohl jemals in…Eisen…gestochen hat.”), in his “Peter Flettners Herkommen und Jugendarbeit,” *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, vol. 26 (Berlin: G. Grote’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1905), 148. The first monograph on Hopfer is Ed Eysen’s “Daniel Hopfer von Kaufbeuren: Meister zu Augsburg 1593 bis 1536” (PhD diss., Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, 1904). Recent studies include Freyda Spira, “Originality as Repetition / Repetition as Originality: Daniel Hopfer (c. 1470–1536) and the Reinvention of the Medium of Etching” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2006); and Christof Metzger et al., *Daniel Hopfer: Ein Augsburger Meister der Renaissance* (Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009). No monographic studies were produced between 1904 and 2006.
modern visual culture is also being reconsidered. This paper will consider the introduction of the etching technique and the subject matter of *The Peasant Feast* in the context of Hopfer’s work and times. Its primary aim, however, will be to use this example to resituate Hopfer’s role in the print market and to frame his project as an innovative new business model.

Etching was the third printmaking technique to appear in Europe, following woodcut, which was in use by 1400, and engraving, which emerged in the 1420s and 1430s. Etchings—in which the design is etched into metal by the corrosive action of acid—seem to have been made in a limited way by printmakers in northern and southern Europe in the early decades of the sixteenth century. By the 1530s, increasing numbers of artists of all kinds from all over western Europe were making them.

Augsburg, a city with ancient Roman origins, was named a free imperial city of the Holy Roman Empire in the thirteenth century, and by the late fifteenth century it was a thriving place of commerce, trade, and the arts. Among many other things, it was home to a significant armor-making industry and to the metalworker Daniel Hopfer, who registered in 1493 as an Augsburg citizen and member of the craftsmen’s guild that encompassed artists and artisans alike. Armor was made of iron or steel, and the same method of etching that was applied to the decoration of armor and other ironwork was also used to produce etching plates for printing.

It is generally assumed that the first etchings were on iron, but the exact details of when and how etchings came to be printed from iron or steel plates are unknown. It is clear, however, that the same technique was used for decorating armor and other iron objects. Hopfer is considered to be the first artist to adapt etching from the iron trades to printmaking, probably in the first decade of the sixteenth century. He was in any case the first artist truly to specialize in the technique. Although Dürer and a handful of other contemporaries tried their hand at etching on iron, only Hopfer and his two sons, Hieronymus and Lambert, produced significant bodies of work in the medium. The majority of etchings have been made on copper, which is easier to work with and does not rust and corrode like iron.

Despite the inherent difficulties of the materials, Hopfer, whose training probably reflected an interest in painting as well as metalwork, was known to have decorated both iron and steel

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6 Both iron and steel were used by the early sixteenth-century etchers. See A. R. Williams, “The Metallographic Examination of a Burgkmair Etching Plate in the British Museum,” *Historical Metallurgy* 8, no. 2 (1974): 92–94.

7 Approximately 150 iron etchings by Hopfer survive; most of the iron plates also survive. Metzger’s *Daniel Hopfer* catalogs 154 etchings in addition to several woodcuts and decorated metal objects.
objects with etching, probably before his entrepreneurial work as a printmaker. The first generation of unnamed engravers from the 1420s or 1430s fit this same model: they were metal craftsmen who applied their goldsmith skills to making prints. Later in the same century, Martin Schongauer and Albrecht Dürer, both of whom were trained as painters but were sons of goldsmiths, represented a new trend, in which successful painters began to incorporate printmaking into their artistic activity.

Etching was the newest printmaking technique in Augsburg when Hopfer made The Peasant Feast, and Hopfer had by then single-handedly established the usefulness and salability of etchings. Perhaps an even more important point, however—one less widely acknowledged—is Hopfer’s successful deployment of an innovative business model based on his exploitation of this new printmaking technique and, significantly, his production of a large stock of varied subjects and types of prints. In doing this, he was among the earliest of the entrepreneurs we would now call print publishers, as I will discuss further below.

The subject and even the scale of this two-plate etching were also new at the time: madcap, frolicking groups of peasants such as these, gathered in and around a tavern, are associated with the kermis, an annual Catholic church festival. Prints representing the kermis and displaying excess consumption and violence by peasants in the countryside first appeared in Nuremberg in the late 1520s, as the Lutheran Reformation was taking hold there. These prints sometimes include a representation of a village church, and occasionally they depict a wedding feast. However, the one constant is the presence of a tavern as a site of abundant drinking and raucous merrymaking.

The compositions are filled with figures who drink, dance, and fight to the point of collapse. Hopfer’s etching, which is of the variety that zeroes in on tavern activity with no church visible, was undoubtedly inspired by the peasant kermis woodcuts from post-Reformation Nuremberg, and notably those by Sebald Beham (1500–1550), who is credited with inventing the genre. Hopfer’s use of two plates to create a continuous horizontal composition also echoes Beham’s use of multiple blocks to produce large-scale woodcuts. Both were exploring ways to expand the scale and ambition possible within the world of prints, a phenomenon apparent throughout sixteenth-century Europe.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to enumerate every element in this elaborately staged and detailed print, but the following summary gives a brief overview. The composition is roughly bifurcated by a slim central tree trunk, which handily disguises the seam between the two plates

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8 The precise details of Hopfer’s training are not known, but it may have included both painting and drawing as well as metalwork. See Metzger, Daniel Hopfer, 9–13 and 20–21. See also Spira, Originality as Repetition, chapter 1; on page 17 she cites the context of his contemporaries, all of whom worked in many media and for multiple audiences.
9 These Nuremberg prints and their potential meanings have been the subject of intense debate. See note 13 below.
11 See Larry Silver and Elizabeth Wyckoff, eds., Grand Scale: Monumental Prints in the Age of Dürer and Titian (Wellesley, MA: Davis Museum and Cultural Center, 2008).
from which it was printed. On the left-hand side a large, two-story tavern looms in the background, while a broad alpine landscape unfolds in the distance on the right. The tavern, with a broom jutting out above its door, is operating at capacity, with revelers indoors and out, spilling slightly onto the second plate to the right of the tree trunk. Although most of the characters appear to be dressed in peasant attire, a standing figure at the center is wearing the hat and robe of a theologian; the man with his arm around him appears to be engaged in a pointed argument.

On the right, a chaotic, rambling fence demarcates a field with musicians and couples dancing and otherwise interacting. There are other couples and groups in the background with a somewhat higher density of men, suggesting perhaps a more threatening atmosphere that is accentuated by the swords hanging from nearly every man’s belt. The revelers appear animated and engaged, drinking, discussing, dancing hard, flirting, making out, fighting, vomiting, and defecating. Along the outer perimeters of the fence there are more people vomiting and defecating, an older couple gropes each other, and a menacing standoff unfolds between a man and three young women. The effects of drink are thus present in all stages, from celebration to violence to drunken collapse.

Although Hopfer borrowed liberally from the earlier Nuremberg kermis prints, his etching is not a slavish copy, but rather an adaptation of the theme to the Augsburg context. This localization is most distinctly visible in the alpine landscape in the background, and especially in the broom hanging from the tavern roof, which designates this locale as a so-called *Besenwirtschaft* (literally “broom tavern”). In the Nuremberg prints, the sign over the tavern is either an “X” within a circle, or a combination of a cloth (indicating food is being served) and a mug (for drink). But in the Augsburg region, the broom is the sign of a seasonal homegrown wine tavern, which still proliferates in German-speaking countries. Anyone who produced wine was, and is, permitted to sell their own wine during a limited season. The raising of the broom (or other sign) over the door signifies that they are open for business.

Echoes of Beham’s figure types are present in Hopfer’s print, as are compositional devices such as the table of peasants in the foreground and the central tree trunk, but the etching is truly a new variation on the theme. In this example, it is possible to see Hopfer the entrepreneur still active at the end of his four-decade career, identifying a wholly new category of image and adapting it to his own stock. It is probably not innocent that he chose this subject just in the years when the city was gradually adopting Protestantism as the official religion (1531–1537).  

What to make of this raucous and action-packed etching and its message? Much art historical and anthropological ink has been spilled about the blossoming of peasant prints in Germany and the Netherlands in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, framing them to varying degrees

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12 The *Peasant Feast* is not dated in either plate, but would seem to be most probably c. 1535–36. It cannot be later than 1536, since that was the year of Hopfer’s death, nor does it seem plausible that it could be earlier than Beham’s *Large Kermis*, with which it shares many general compositional devices and which is dated 1535 in the block. See Max Geisberg, *The German Single-leaf Woodcut: 1500–1550* (1930), ed. Walter L. Strauss (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974), 251–54; see also Stewart, *Before Bruegel*, 60. Tall maypoles appear in many of the prints, but the device of the tree trunk down the middle may be borrowed from Beham’s *The Feast of Herod*, c. 1530. See Geisberg, *German Single-leaf Woodcut*, 179–80.
as moralizing, comic, and affirming of a national identity. Be they tragic or comic, meant to warn or to amuse, there is no simple explanation for these images; although arguments can be made for both extremely critical and affirmative readings, the truth more probably lies somewhere in the middle. They should, on the one hand, be seen in the context of Martin Luther’s criticisms, starting as early as 1518, of the kermis as a sign of the excesses of the Catholic Church. They should also be seen as a celebration of the local, of an indigenous tradition that harkens back to Germany’s roots as rough peasant stock in the days of the Roman Empire. A full reading would also include a consideration of early modern medicine, with its discussion of the four humors and temperaments, and the place of alcohol within that system, which diverges significantly from contemporary views on alcohol abuse. If drunkenness was looked down upon as a daily activity, it was also considered good to let loose and get drunk on sanctioned occasions.

Those tacks and more have all been explored more or less at length in the literature; I propose another direction. Given our knowledge of Hopfer’s habit of borrowing from his peers, I will focus rather on the question of artist and authorship in an attempt to contextualize Hopfer’s relationship to his artistic models and how those relationships informed his business.

*The Peasant Feast* is signed in both plates with his customary initials DH flanking a decorative pinecone borrowed from Augsburg’s coat of arms. He was clearly not trying to fool anyone into thinking his etching was by Beham. And despite its obvious roots in Beham’s woodcuts, it is indeed an excellent example of Hopfer’s entrepreneurial activity: he took a successful model—the Nuremberg kermis woodcuts—and created a new version that was unmistakably his own by utilizing the new technique of etching and by incorporating a new compositional variant and the Hopfer/Augsburg signature.

The derision of modern writers calling Hopfer a plagiarizer who produced roughly executed, mechanical copies of works by other artists is clearly not supported by this example. He was, rather, participating in the broader European marketplace for printed images. There is of course truth to the statement that Hopfer reproduced works by other artists, and indeed the early sixteenth century saw the first stirrings of something similar to copyright protection. Dürer, for example, sued when an Italian engraver copied his *Life of the Virgin* series and used his AD monogram.

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15 See Margaret D. Carroll, “Peasant Festivity and Political Identity in the Sixteenth Century,” *Art History* 10, no. 3 (1987): 289–314. Carroll cites, for example, the Roman historian Tacitus’ *Germania*: “No nation indulges more freely in feasting and entertaining than the German....” Ibid., 290.
17 Spira points out that roughly 29% of Hopfer’s etchings imitate or replicate work by other artists, not the majority as is often assumed. Spira, *Originality as Repetition*, 241.
18 Spira affirms the Augsburg pinecone connection. Ibid., 23–24. According to her, it is not the more poetic cone of hops that would be a play on Hopfer’s name (Hopfen=hops), but might it not in fact refer both to Augsburg’s pinecone and Hopfer’s namesake?
19 For an excellent discussion of this and other examples, see Pon, *Raphael, Dürer and Raimondi*, 39–66.
However, a more complex understanding of the notion of copies and artistic borrowing in early modern Europe is needed. Copying, for example, was a fundamental part of an artist’s training. Additionally, in the centuries before the invention of photography, a handmade copy was the most efficient means for transmitting artistic ideas from place to place. Printmaking allowed for wider distribution of ideas—artistic and otherwise—and, among other things, prints served as models for artists and artisans in all media. Prints often legitimately reproduced works of art in other media, either precisely or in adapted form, officially commissioned or not. Prints also were often created as original works conceived specifically for printed form, and there are many hybrid categories in between.20

In this context, then, Hopfer can more accurately be characterized as a skilled artist and an astute businessman who created a niche business based on his exploitation of a new printmaking medium. He built up a varied stock of plates consisting of his own prints, copies, and adaptations that he and his sons could sell for profit. The wide range of seemingly disparate subjects and his bridging of the worlds of ornament and fine art may make his production appear chaotic (to a modern eye), and especially in comparison with an artist of refinement and distinction like his contemporary Albrecht Dürer. Dürer was an extraordinary perfectionist and self-promoter, two qualities that contributed to his exceptional printmaking project. Hopfer’s production is equally distinctive and self-promoting—his etchings are unmistakably his—though it lacks the refinement and perfectionism of his Nuremberg contemporary.

Hopfer was, nonetheless, an equally forward-looking businessman. When he copied or adapted the work of other artists, his prints broadened the audience for those artists’ works as well as his own. *The Peasant Feast*, which translated an essentially Nuremberg subject for an Augsburg audience, is an example of that. Although we know little about the precise audience and market for prints in the sixteenth century, which were rarely made on commission, it is reasonable to assume that the buyers of Hopfer’s prints extended beyond the city as well. There was an active international market, and there is no doubt, for example, that Dürer’s and Hopfer’s audiences overlapped.

Both Dürer’s and Hopfer’s printing plates survived their own lifetimes and were reprinted by others, often with little attention to quality, for hundreds of years. The long-lived popularity of Hopfer’s etchings is revealed in a second, later impression of the left-hand plate of *The Peasant Feast* in the Kemper Art Museum’s collection. The numeral “200” in the lower left corner of this plate was added in the late seventeenth century by David Funck in Nuremberg, who published 230 plates by Hopfer and sons in 1684.21 This is a demonstration of the practice of many publishers beginning already in the sixteenth century if not before. They may have commissioned new plates from artists, but they also began acquiring used printing plates, incorporating them into their own stock.

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21 See Metzger, *Daniel Hopfer*, 24–34.
Artists collected prints as source material, and individuals and tavern owners also found ways to
tack them onto walls, or decorate furniture or objects with them. intellectuals and aristocrats
compiling encyclopedic collections built libraries of them, binding them into albums organized
by subject. Sometimes the prints themselves carry information about their previous ownership,
and the Kemper Art Museum’s complete impression of The Peasant Feast is one such example:
a stamp on the verso shows that it was once in the collection of the princes of Waldburg-
Wolfegg-Waldsee, a village southwest of Augsburg.

The Wolfegg collection was formed over one hundred years after Hopfer made the print, but it
continued a humanist collecting tradition with roots in the sixteenth century. One of the Wolfegg
princes from the second half of the seventeenth century amassed a large quantity of prints and
drawings, which he mounted into albums by subject. The collection, which remains largely intact
today, includes an extraordinarily broad range of prints and drawings, high culture and low.
There are original works by Dürer and Rembrandt alongside The Peasant Feast, as well as
copies made after much lesser-known artists, thus clearly demonstrating the overlapping
audience for Dürer and Hopfer.

The mid-sixteenth century saw the emergence of a distinct business that we would now call print
publishing, first in Rome and then Antwerp. A comparison of Dürer and Hopfer once again
proves useful, since they each presented a distinct model for the future of print publishing. Dürer,
on the one hand, transformed the very nature of what a woodcut or an engraving could be, and he
kept very firm control over his prints and their distribution, resulting in a distinctive (and elite)
“house style” that was thoroughly his own. Hopfer created an equally distinctive style based on
the recognizability of his etchings, but his was also distinguished by the variety of his sources,
which he nonetheless transformed into his own popularizing aesthetic. As print publishing
developed throughout Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century, there continued to be
artist-dominated houses, but more and more publishers were building up a varied stock,
commissioning and acquiring plates from many different sources, and it is this model of the print
publisher, I would argue, that Hopfer’s example of eclectic and wide-ranging sources
anticipated.

22 For a discussion of the material culture of prints in the seventeenth century, see Jan van der Waals, Prenten in de
Gouden Eeuw: van kunst tot kastpapier (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 2006).
23 See Frits Lugt, Les Marques de Collections de Dessins & d'Estampes (Amsterdam: Vereenigde Drukkerije,
1921), no. 2542, also available online at http://www.marquesdecollections.fr/. Works from the Wolfegg collection
have been sold over the years, although no complete record of the sales survives. For a description of the collection
and its origins, see Bernd M. Mayer, Von Schongauer zu Rembrandt (Ravensburg: Städtische Galerie Altes Theater,
1996).

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