

## **A xylographic guide to the art of dying**

*Ars moriendi*. Germany, ca. 1470?. 13 7/8 inches x 10 3/4 inches (352 x 273 mm), 28 pages, illustrated throughout.

Blockbooks are illustrated volumes whose pictures and text were printed from carved wooden blocks. Contemporary with the earliest incunables, blockbooks were more than precursors of illustrated books, but were rather a parallel form of publication for a different audience. Blockbook readers were accustomed to bold execution and modest production: nonetheless the medium boasts a number of very striking works that reflect complex iconographic traditions. Movable type quickly superseded the xylographic medium, making examples of blockbooks extremely rare today.

The *Ars moriendi* (*Art of dying*) was a popular medieval genre that described the states of mind and soul that were to accompany the Catholic Church's rituals for salvation, culminating in the last rites. These handbooks were perfect candidates for printing; ideally, every priest required this brief and convenient guide to ministering to the dying — providing comfort and consolation, confession, and extreme unction. The earliest surviving printing of any *Ars moriendi* is not a typographical edition but a blockbook (as is this volume) from the southern Netherlands, tentatively dated to 1450.

This rare blockbook from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress is bound in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century continental red morocco with blind-stamped borders and coat of arms, and a set of silk ties.

Octavo code: scharu