

Albrecht Dürer — Restless Genius

Background Notes

Dr Gillian White — 5 June 2024



The Feast of the Rose Garlands, 1506, mixed media on poplar,
162 x 194.5 cm (National Gallery, Prague)

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Albrecht Dürer: Restless Genius

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) was a restless genius: a voyager through the towns and cities of north and south, and an explorer in the ideas of humanism and the Renaissance. This travel broadened Dürer's mind, allowing the hugely gifted craftsman to grow into a virtuoso of art and intellect. Because for Dürer, a great artist's work was more than just the combination of eye and hand, brush and paint, it also embodied the learning and theoretical knowledge of the artist: *kunst*, art forged by both skill and intellect. Such an artist, wrote Dürer, appeared only once in every two or three hundred years, and we cannot doubt that he placed himself amongst the greats.

Dürer lived in the thriving city of Nuremberg, the intellectual hub of the Holy Roman Empire. Having completed his initial training, he embarked on the first of his travels, the *wanderjahre*, during which a newly-fledged journeyman would be expected to travel, to learn and observe, whilst spending time in the workshops of established masters. In this way, the individual would be 'finished', his skills and experience widened, and when he returned home, he would benefit the local community by bringing with him the styles and practices of other places. Thus, cultural exchange through travel was built into the world of the German artist. Dürer travelled from 1490 to 1494. His exact itinerary is unclear, but he certainly spent time in Colmar, in Basel and in Strasbourg, and his focus was on printmaking.

On his return, Dürer married but in weeks he was off again, this time heading south through the Tyrol to Venice. As he journeyed, he painted a series of watercolour landscapes, innovative for their spontaneity and the naturalistic style of their execution. His stay in Venice was brief – just a few

months – but it was long enough to expose the young artist to new ideas about classicism, perspective, anatomy and proportion, which would significantly influence his later output, especially, in the short term, his prints.

This first visit to Venice is greatly overshadowed by his second. During the decade that separated the two journeys, Dürer's reputation, especially as a printmaker, flourished and when he travelled south again in December 1505, he did so as a famous artist and not as a tyro. Letters that he wrote to his friend, Willibald Pirckheimer, give us an unusual insight into the reality of the German artist in Italy. The letters are humorous, often vulgar, at times irritated, at times arrogant, and they present a vivid picture of a self-assured man who was both delighted and dismayed by Venice. The social elite welcomed him and, according to his own writings, Dürer was invited, but declined, to become the Republic's official painter. However, as he told Pirckheimer, the local artists were his enemies, envious of his ability and given to copying his work, but also critical of his skill as a colourist and the lack of 'antique' influence in his style. Amongst local artists, only the elderly Giovanni Bellini held Dürer's respect. Furthermore, in a city where art production was strictly controlled by a closed guild system, Dürer was a foreigner, and he complained that he had been fined several times by the magistrates. Clearly, then, the interchange of north and south could, in practice, be a trying experience.

Of the paintings that Dürer did in Venice, *The Feast of the Rose Garlands* (1506) is the most significant (cover). It is an undoubtedly German work, but painted in a self-consciously Venetian style. It was commissioned by the German merchant community in Venice for their church and the subject matter, the Virgin Mary presenting rose garlands to the pope and the emperor, reflects a contemporary political issue between the Papacy,

Venice, and the Holy Roman Empire. But despite the strongly German context, Dürer created the work using Venetian techniques. The panel was poplar, dressed with gesso; preparatory drawings were done on *carta azzurra*, blue-dyed paper to which ink and white highlights were applied; and the central angel musician was taken from a Bellini altarpiece. But above all else, *The Feast* was an essay in Venetian colour, brilliant with opulent but harmoniously balanced paints, including the expensive lapis lazuli pigment that was imported into Europe through the great city. It was a proud riposte to the local artists who accused Dürer of incompetence with colour and he reported to Pirckheimer that 'everyone says that better colouring they have never seen', and that his admirers 'had never before seen such a lovely, sublime painting'.

Dürer arrived home in February 1507, in the depths of a German winter. In his last letter to Pirckheimer he had observed, 'How I shall freeze after this sun!' But his comment was not merely meteorological. He continued, 'Here I am a gentleman, at home only a parasite.' Because in Italy, Dürer had learnt that the artist could be more than a simple mechanic, a common labourer, he could be celebrated for his creativity. If, of course, he possessed not just the skills of line and colour but also the skills of mind and knowledge.

From his first visit to Venice on, Dürer actively pursued the theoretical side of his art, most notably in his studies of Nature and the human form. Here, Netherlandish traditions of illusionistic painting and Humanist ideas of understanding Nature in order to surpass it, merged. By detailed, almost scientific, study of the natural world, the artist could understand universal truths, pick out the very secrets of creation. As Dürer wrote, 'art is embedded in nature; he who can extract it has it', adding, 'no man can ever make a beautiful image out of his private imagination unless he have

replenished his mind by much painting from life'. This is the ideology that lies behind some of Dürer's most famous studies, including *The Hare* (1502) and *The Large Piece of Turf* (1503) (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 *The Large Piece of Turf*, 1503, watercolour and gouache, 40.8 x 31.5 cm (Albertina, Vienna)

This desire to understand and to codify the secrets of Nature also drove Dürer's studies of the nude body. It was an exploration exemplified by his engraving *Adam and Eve* (1504). The figures were based on classical statues, the *Medici Venus* and the *Apollo Belvedere*, but were also informed by Vitruvius's theories on the ideally proportioned body. Dürer's application of these principles can be seen in his study of Adam (fig. 2), where the rational proportions defining the body have been laid out

geometrically over the nude form. Later, Dürer travelled on from the simple adoption of ancient theories and made studies of 'real' human bodies, seeking to find new truths that might guide artists as Vitruvius had once guided him.

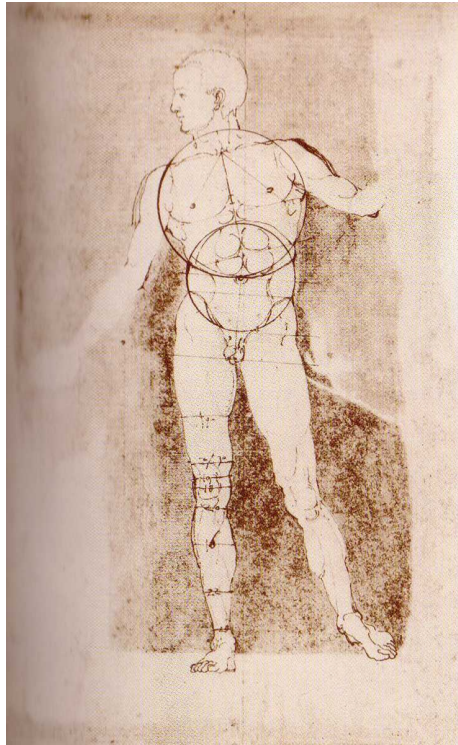


Fig. 2 *Adam*, c.1504, pen and ink, 26.2 x 16.6 cm (Albertina, Vienna)

Dürer's work as a theoretician led to three illustrated treatises: *Instruction in Measurement* (1525), *Theory of Fortification* (1527) and *Four Books of Human Proportions* (1528). The last volume, published posthumously, also contained an essay outlining Dürer's ideas of ideal beauty. In these practical books, Dürer emphasised again that the intellect was as vital as

the hand and eye to the process of creating art. He also recognised that, just as his contemporaries benefitted from knowledge of the classical world, so future artists would benefit from knowledge of his. Thus, Dürer would outlive his mortal existence.



Fig. 3 *Self-Portrait as the Man of Sorrows*, 1522, metalpoint on green prepared paper, 40.8 x 29 cm (believed destroyed in Bremen during Second World War)

Dürer's mortal existence seems to have obsessed him, as is apparent in an unparalleled series of self-portraits, in which the artist explores not just his outward appearance but also his inward nature. They range from the confident twenty-six-year-old artist, dressed as a gentleman and challenging the viewer to doubt it (1498), through the famously Messianic portrait of 1500, to the excoriating drawing of himself as Man of Sorrows in 1522, his naked body failing, his hair unkempt, his eyes wide and fearful (fig. 3). This unsettling image was provoked by the illness that Dürer contracted during his travels in the Netherlands, 1520-21.

Prompted by business, the tour was largely a celebration of Dürer's fame, which he duly noted in his diary. Ever open to novelty, the artist found new things to intrigue him, especially amongst the objects pouring into northern Europe from the New World. But despite the many delights, the fever contracted whilst travelling ultimately proved fatal.

The restless genius died in Nuremberg on 6 April 1528. He had successfully bridged the worlds of north and south, taking from each the best and moulding it into something uniquely and recognisably Dürer. Grounded in phenomenal skill and spurred on by the Renaissance ideals of humanism and the worth of the artist, Dürer found immortality.

... for a good [artist] is full of invention within ... and, were he able to live for ever, he would always have something new to bring forth.



Further reading

- Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Dürer* (2012)
- Susan Foister and Peter van den Brink, *Dürer's Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist* (2021)
- Larry Smith and Jeffrey Chipps Smith (eds), *The Essential Dürer* (2010)
- Norbert Wolf, *Dürer* (2012)

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