

Dürer - Seminar 1

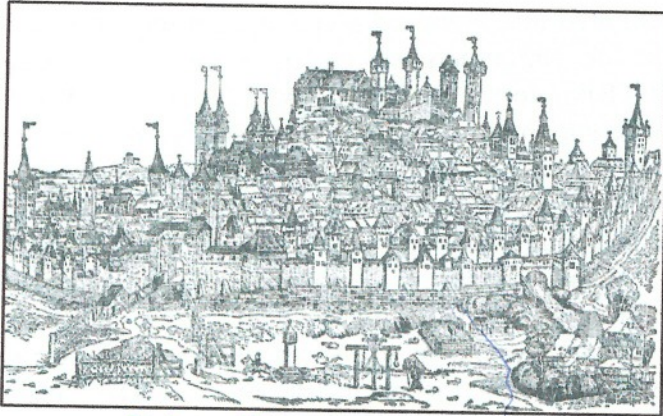
Background Notes

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WAHG

Dürer: Lecture Notes N°1

THE CONTEXT & THE ARTIST



Print of Nuremberg 1493

Divided into different states, Germany was ruled by separate princes who owed a political allegiance to the elected Holy Roman Emperor. Originally a more powerful institution in the early Middle Ages, the Empire had declined in importance and the Emperor, Maximilian I (1459–1519) had granted direct rule in all important matters to the princes. One of these was the Grand Elector of Saxony, Frederick III known as *the Wise*. He was a man of varied interests and after visiting Italy exposed Saxony to humanist ideas. Frederick founded the University of Wittenberg in 1502 to attract scholars to the Saxon court. To the South of Saxony lay Franconia (now part of Bavaria), which in the 16thC consisted of various Bishoprics and the imperial city of Nuremberg of some 50,000 inhabitants



Nuremberg was one of the most densely populated and wealthiest German cities and one of the strongest artistic and commercial centres in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After the Diet of Worms (1521) it rose to become the economic capital of Germany. Among its inhabitants a conspicuous class of cultured and moneyed merchants promoted a lively cultural and artistic life. Nuremberg was one of the first cities to have printing presses and laboratories producing scientific instruments. Humanistic studies were supported by amply stocked libraries. In Dürer's time Nuremberg was a cosmopolitan city, where it was easy to meet literary figures, mathematicians, geographers, theologians, artists, and merchants. Imperial privileges and the traditional working of precious metals widened Nuremberg's commercial contacts throughout Europe, from Cracow to Lisbon, from Venice to Lyons.

A certain dynamism in the art of central-southern Germany can be discerned during the last quarter of 15thC. The most interesting works from this period were large altarpieces, often executed by means of a combination of parts sculpted in wood and painted sections. A master of this technique was Michael Pacher, an excellent painter and sculptor who transcribe the humanistic training he had received in Padua into a late-Gothic key. The great Franconian artist was the sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider. He produced masterpieces in wood such as the *Holy Blood* altarpiece, in the church of St James at Rothemburg (c.1490).¹

Franconia and its principle city Nuremberg occupied a central position in the development of German art in the second half of the

¹ Perfectly preserved, this grandiose carved structure, with its spires and sculptures is full of pathos: the central panel, which simulates a Gothic room with arched windows, shows an episode from *The Last Supper*

15thC. Its artists although entrenched in the Gothic style were searching for a more wide-ranging artistic expression and were influenced by the ever-increasing cultural links with northern Italy and Flanders. But the turning-point in the process of stylistic change from the Gothic was marked by Dürer's work.

Albrecht Dürer 1471-1528 was born in Nuremberg. From an early age he was an outstanding draughtsman who expressed his skill in drawings, paintings and prints. He was apprenticed to his father, who was a goldsmith, and with a local painter of note Michael Wolgemut, whose workshop produced woodcut illustrations for major books and publications. But he soon became a major figure in his own right of the Northern Renaissance, unique among his contemporary compatriots because he alone had nothing retrogressive and provincial about him; he alone came close to the ideal of a European artist and found admirers far beyond the German lands. This is how Erasmus of Rotterdam eulogized him:

“What does he not express in monochromes, that is, in black lines? Light, shade, splendour, eminences, depressions; and, though derived from the position of one single thing more than one aspect offers itself to the eye of the beholder. He observes accurately proportions and harmonies. Nay, he even depicts that which cannot be depicted.. .the whole mind of man as it reflects itself in the behaviour of the body, and almost the voice itself. These things he places before the eye in the most pertinent lines-black lines, yet so that if you should spread on pigments you would injure the work. ...”

The art historian Erwin Panofsky considered that he was the first German to be self-consciously *an artist*. Unwilling to content himself with the traditional role of "*an honest craftsman who produces pictures as a tailor makes coats and suits,*" he raised himself from the status of a humble medieval artisan to that of a patrician, on an equal footing with persons of erudition, wealth and power. Held in high esteem not only by Erasmus, but also by other influential men, including some exacting Italian masters, Dürer accepted all admiration with gracious poise.

Dürer is unique in his period in that he treasured his own sketches, and cared to sign many of them with his famous monogram and date even though they were not intended for sale, but generally as gifts for close friends. Approximately one thousand of his sketches have survived. Alone among the Northern artists of his time, he drew and painted his own features repeatedly, and he did so without a trace of humility.

Dürer's introduction of classical motifs into Northern art, through his knowledge of Italian artists and German humanists, have secured his reputation as one of the most important figures of the Northern Renaissance. This is reinforced by his theoretical treatise, which involve principles of mathematics, perspective and ideal proportions. His prints established his reputation across Europe when he was still in his twenties, and he has been conventionally regarded as the greatest artist of the Renaissance in Northern Europe ever since. Dürer's watercolours mark him as one of the first European landscape artists, while his ambitious woodcuts revolutionized the potential of that medium elevating it to the level of an independent art form. He expanded its tonal and dramatic range, and provided the imagery with a new conceptual foundation. His famous works include the woodcut *Apocalypse*, and the engravings *Knight*, *Death*,

and the Devil (1513), *Saint Jerome in his Study* (1514) and *Melencolia I* (1514), which have been the subject of extensive analysis and interpretation.. Dürer was also a great admirer of Leonardo da Vinci. He was intrigued by the Italian master's studies of the human figure, and after 1506 applied and adapted Leonardo's proportions to his own figures, as is evident in his drawings.

The activities of artists are frequently divided into three general and imprecise periods, namely early, middle and late. Although such a tripartite scheme can be applied to the evolution of Dürer's oeuvre the divisions are blurred for the influence exerted in his *middle* period over his *early* and *late* do not predominate as distinctly as is the rule with many other great masters. His works up to his second pilgrimage to Italy in 1505 can be classified as *early*; the period between 1505 and his departure for the Netherlands as *middle* in 1520; the period from 1520 to his death in 1528 as *late*.

The first Period

After an apprenticeship of four years, Dürer had learnt all he could from Wolgemut and had reached a level of artistic quality exceeding that of his famous teacher. Following Wolgemut's advice, Dürer delayed visiting Italy where there were different artistic styles, until he had fully developed his own style and learnt more techniques from other German artists.

In the autumn of 1494, two months after his unfulfilling but financially and socially rewarding marriage to Agnes Frey, the 23-year-old Dürer set off on a new study trip to Italy which would last until the spring of 1495, taking in Padua, Mantua, and Venice. It was the young German artist's first direct contact with Italian humanist culture. Crossing the Alps was an exciting experience for him: Dürer produced moving pictures of the Alpine landscape in a series of

watercolours. Between Lombardy and the Veneto he visited the main centres of humanism and the workshops of artists such as Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini.

Dürer's first journey to Italy was a fundamental stage in his development; besides his passion for Italian art and an enduring love for the country's good taste and climate, he also became interested in how best to depict space and the proportions of the human body within the spirit of humanism. Northern Italian artistic culture, particularly that of the Veneto, was in turn keen to embrace the novelties introduced from the German region. Dürer went to Italy for the first time as a humble young man needing to complete his artistic training. Yet this early visit also formed the basis for the subsequent exchange of suggestions and ideas between artistic equals that is between Dürer and Venetian Artists.

In 1496, during an official visit to Nuremberg, The Grand Elector Frederick of Saxony publicly professed his admiration for the 25-year-old Dürer and commissioned a portrait and a series of paintings destined for the castle and the Schlosskirche, the castle church in Wittenberg. This marked the beginning of a lasting patronage, as well as a mutual friendship between the artist and one of the most influential and powerful figures in German politics. The endorsement of *Frederick the Wise* provided a remarkable spur for the career of an artist who was still young and practically just setting out. He painted for the prince's residence and for the castle church at Wittenbergⁱⁱ. Today these works are housed in various Museums.

ⁱⁱ Where a few years later Luther would affix the 95 Theses of the Reformation

The Middle Period

Dürer had become convinced that art must be based upon science - in particular, upon mathematics, as the most exact, logical, and graphically constructive of the sciences. Italy was not only a country with new ideas to offer Dürer in art, but it was also leading the world at this time in the revival of mathematics. During his middle period Dürer absorbed firsthand some of the great works of the Italian Renaissance, as well as the classical heritage and theoretical writings of the region. He probably met Leonardo da Vinci. He further developed his interest in the human form, as demonstrated by his nude and antique studies and his subsequent books on the subject perspective by a Northern European artist. His work was appreciated and influenced Italian especially Venetian Artists. Back in Nuremberg Dürer had access to some of Europe's outstanding theologians and scholars, including Erasmus, Philipp Melanchthon, and Willibald Pirckheimer, each captured by the artist in shrewd portraits. For Nuremberg's town hall, the artist painted two panels of the *Four Apostles* bearing texts in Martin Luther's translation that pay tribute to the city's adoption of Lutheranism. From about 1512 Dürer worked for Maximilian I, the Holy Roman emperor, Maximilian, however, had little in the way of wealth to pay for Dürer's work and he asked the councillors of Nuremberg to exempt Dürer from taxes as compensation and to pay him a pension. This they did until the death of Maximilian I.

The Later Period

Dürer visited the Netherlands to meet Emperor Charles V to request that his pension granted by the emperor's predecessor be restored. His request was granted. Whilst there he further studied Flemish and Dutch art and produced images of local people and its countryside.

One of his motivations for the visit was his belief that Maximilian's daughter had a book by Jacopo de Barbari on applications of mathematics to art. He was distressed to find that she had already given this book to another artist. On his return he wrote *Four Books on Human Proportion* (*Vier Bücher von menschlichen Proportion*), only the first of which was published during his lifetime (1528). He also wrote an introductory manual of geometric theory for students, *Underweysung der Messung* (1525)ⁱⁱⁱ. It was one of the first books to teach the methods of perspective, and was highly regarded throughout the sixteenth century. *Inter alia* it typifies the renaissance idea that polyhedra are models worthy of an artist's attention. More importantly, this book presents the earliest known examples of polyhedral nets, i.e., polyhedra unfolded to lie flat for printing. Dürer wanted to publish the methods so they were not kept secret among a few artists. Who he learned from is not known, but Luca Pacioli is a likely possibility. Some of the techniques and illustrations follow very closely the work of Piero della Francesca, which includes the first scientific treatment of perspective.

His awareness of his own role as an artist is apparent in his frontal, Christ-like *Self Portrait, 1500*, just one of many self portraits that he painted in his career. Dürer was a humanist and a creator. More than simply producing works for his own time, Dürer saw his fame and his contribution as enduring, and as part of history. Dürer was a brilliant painter and draftsman and a highly competent mathematician, though his first and probably greatest artistic impact was in the medium of printmaking.

ⁱⁱⁱ available in English translation as *Painter's Manual*