

Dürer - Seminar 2

Background Notes

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WAHG

Dürer: Lecture Notes N°2

DRAWINGS & WOODCUTS

Some of the points made

DÜRER'S GRAPHIC WORKS

- Dürer was the first German artist to find new opportunities for the production and distribution of graphic works.
- He was the first to introduce the production of printed graphics in his own publishing business on an equal footing with the running of a painter's workshop
- He achieved technical excellence to a degree previously unknown e.g. in the reuse of worked wood engraving blocks, the use of copper plates as setting copies and printing high print runs.

DÜRER'S FLORAL AND FAUNA

"It is indeed true," wrote Albrecht Dürer, "that art is omnipresent in nature, and the true artist is he who can bring it out."

The Rhinoceros

In 1515 the first rhinoceros appeared in Portugal, a gift of Sultan Muzafar of Kamboja in India to King Emanuel I.

- ▶ Although Dürer had NOT seen the animal with his own eyes, he produced a drawing and a woodcut based on the sketch and description in a letter from a Nuremberg citizen who lived in Lisbon, Valentin Ferdinand, to a merchant who was a friend.

- ▶ The woodcut was also used to make a leaflet which Dürer sold at markets. The rhinoceros is standing in the foreground of the picture, filling its entire format. The detailed depiction of his armour and skin accords with the wording in the inscription below.

The Stag Beetle

- ▶ One of Dürer's most influential and most copied nature studies.
- ▶ Singling out a beetle as the focal point of a work of art was unprecedented in 1505, when most of Dürer's contemporaries believed that insects were the lowest of creatures.
- ▶ This beetle, rendered with such care and respect, seems almost heroic as he looms above the page.

The Large Turf

- ▶ It is a masterpiece of realism. This is partly a matter of the attentive accuracy with which he delineates each plant in a patch of wayside vegetation.
- ▶ A botanical eye can recognise several grasses, flowers and weeds – cock's-foot, creeping bent, smooth meadow grass, daisy, dandelion, germander speedwell, greater plantain, hound's-tongue and yarrow.
- ▶ Dürer doesn't just draw sample specimens, he portrays individual variant members of these species, with each blade and stem and leaf and flower given a differentiated identity.

DÜRER'S USE OF DRAWINGS

- ▶ As reference of other master's works
- ▶ As studies or sketches for later works as paintings or prints
- ▶ As independent works of art (*He was one of first artist to do so*)

DÜRER'S USE OF LINE AND TONE AREAS

All drawing is expressed by **LINE** and/or **TONE AREAS** or **MASSES**. In the **TONE** areas, line normally still exists, but it is not important for its own sake.

THE LINES

- ▶ describe visible edges
- ▶ have the function of defining forms
- ▶ provide shadows
- ▶ provide three dimensional depth

There are no black threads running along the edges of objects

Line is only an abstraction, because it is not lines that one sees, but **MASSES** - bright and dark masses that contrast with a background of a different colour or tone. Nevertheless it is possible to wrest an expression in line from the real world. ***Our perception has become accustomed to linear abstraction. There is a language of line in which everything or at least practically everything can be expressed***

Lines in drawing are used to define **contour** and to **model** the object. There are contours in every drawing, but accentuation of these contours makes a great difference. The more significance they have for the definition of form - that is, the more the object approaches an objective silhouetteⁱ - the greater significance the contours will have in comparison with the other lines.

ⁱ By **silhouette** is meant not only the overall outline of a figure but also the inner forms which have their own silhouettes.

Line is used to achieve modelling

Although ***Line*** is not a self-evident means of representing light and shade, the viewer raises no objection to seeing the dark area of a represented by a system of individual strokes.

- ▶ Whereas before the end of the 15thC longer or shorter strokes were placed side by side and one above the other to indicate the form of a mass, the technique became refined towards the close 15thC
- ▶ Thereafter linear artists such as Dürer made it their rule that the line systems of shaded areas be kept perfectly transparent and open, so that each individual stroke carries its own weight

DÜRER USED A GREAT VARIETY OF MEDIA

He worked *inter alia* with charcoal, chalk, brush, pen and silverpoint. The tools changed according to time and occasion. For example, whereas the silverpoint became more and more Dürer's instrument during his travels and for quick sketching en route, in his later years chalk had the same significance as the brush in his middle period.

Throughout the years, the pen remained Dürer's favourite drawing too. Its use is especially well adapted to satisfy the urge to give independent life to the individual strokes

THE ART OF WOODCUT

An art mastered by Albrecht Dürer

Woodcut technique involves two functions; the designing by the cartoonist and the shaping of the wood to the desired raised image by the cutter. Dürer while working as a journeyman with the publishers of Basel and Strasbourg did not normally cut his woodcut designs himself. But on occasions he undertook it in order to familiarize

himself with the technical process, and in order to demonstrate his intentions to the professional cutters. Among his earliest identified prints, whilst working in Basle in 1492 is an illustration of *St Jerome in his Study* prepared for the title page of the second edition of the saint's letters.

Similarly, Dürer handled the cutting knife only rarely in his later years, particularly after his second journey to Italy, but now for directly opposite reasons. Busy, not only with paintings and engravings but also with theoretical work and with the enterprises of Maximilian I, Pirckheimer and other humanists, he had to resort to a division of labour again, but now with himself in command of the whole operation. As far as the cutting was concerned, he could rely on a new generation of craftsmen. These might be members of his own workshop, or they might have set up an independent business devoted exclusively to the manufacture of woodblocks - the latter as in the case of Hieronymus Andreae, called "*Formschneyder*," who, from about 1515, did most of Dürer's "*woodcutting*" in the purely technical sense. Furthermore, they had all grown up under the master's influence and had learned completely to adjust their technique to the requirements of a "*Dürer style*"-soon more or less adopted by all the other woodcut designers in Germany - the fundamentals of which had been developed in the half decade from 1495 to 1500

Dürer's style

The characteristics of the new woodcut style which appeared in the *Apocalypse* and in the other *whole sheets* of 1496-99 were based on the plastic force and emotional vitality which Dürer had found in Italian works, whilst retaining, and even strengthening the richness and variety which had distinguished the illustrations of the

"*Nuremberg Chronicle*". To accomplish this he had to redefine the very function of the medium.

In the woodcuts of Dürer's German predecessors, there had been two different kinds of lines which can be termed "*descriptive*" on the one hand, and "*optical*" on the other. The "*descriptive*" lines, or contours, had served mainly to define the forms without contributing to the characterization of light, shade and surface texture. The "*optical*" lines or hatchings had served mainly to suggest light, shade and surface texture without contributing to the definition of form. Where these separate functions had happened to coincide, as in the representation of hair, fur or foliage, the result had often been utter confusion; and neither the contours nor the hatchings had had much plastic or emotional significance, the former being too monotonous in thickness and movement to go beyond a mere delimitation of areas, the latter being either too schematized or too chaotic to express organic structure.

In Dürer's post-Italian woodcuts this functional disparity was eliminated. The hatchings were no longer permitted to appear as schematic series of stiff, indifferent strokes or to fuse into indistinct masses, nor were the contours confined to the function of mere boundaries. Both were subjected to the discipline of what may be called "*dynamic calligraphy*," and were thereby reduced to a common aesthetic denominator.

Dürer woodcut lines, hatchings and contours alike, were made variable in length and width, swelling and tapering so as to express organic tension and relaxation. Hatchings as well as contours were transformed into flexible and expressive "*modelling lines*," with equal emphasis on the concepts of "*line*" and of "*modelling*."

Thus the functional difference which formerly existed between contours and hatchings was eliminated, the contours,

originally merely "descriptive," assumed luminary significance in proportion as the hatchings, originally merely "optical," fulfilled plastic function. In other words, the relationship between paper and printer's ink came to be sublimated into a relationship between light and shade: every black line, in addition to being "black" and to indicating form and volume, came to signify "darkness"; and the blank paper came, accordingly, to signify "light."

As a result, the woodcut medium became an adequate vehicle for the dynamic tendencies of the Italian Renaissance where all things, whether alive or inanimate, were interpreted as organic entities moulded and stirred by inherent forces.

The Apocalypse

Dürer produced many woodcuts but it was the prodigious woodcuts of *The Apocalypse* published in 1498 that made Dürer famous amongst artists and connoisseurs of Western Europe. There was a long tradition of *Apocalypse* illustrations in manuscripts, which continued in printed books, but nothing like Dürer's galvanising imagination had ever been brought to bear on the text

The word *Apocalypse* comes from Greek meaning an *unveiling*. The faith of the early Christians, living under persecution, was sustained by the expectation of Christ's imminent second coming. This found literary expression in the *Revelation of John*, written at the end of the first century A.D., an allegory foretelling the destruction of the wicked, the overthrow of Satan and the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth; the '*New Jerusalem*.' Thus the subject displayed through Dürer's imagination found a ready audience who interpreted it against the background of the general discontent with the institutions and the economic power of the

Church that was rife in Germany towards the end of the Middle Ages. This provided the fertile ground for Luther's Reformation.

Dürer gave precedence to the image, taking the entire large page of what he himself called a '*superbook*' for each of his 15 subjects. The third and most famous woodcut from Dürer's series of illustrations for *The Apocalypse* is the *Four Horsemen*. It presents a dramatically distilled version of the passage from the **Book of Revelation** (6:1–8)

'And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword. When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; ... When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, 'Come!' And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given great power over a fourth of the earth; to kill with sword & with famine & with pestilence & by wild beasts of the earth'

Summary

A Dürer drawing or woodcut is a crystal-clear configuration in which every stroke is clearly expressed. Each Stroke not only has the function of defining forms, it possesses its own inherent ornamental beauty