

Dürer - Seminar 3

Background Notes

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WAHG

Dürer: Lecture Notes N°3

ENGRAVINGS & ETCHINGS

Some of the points made

The purpose of the Seminar

is to illustrate through a limited selection of Dürer's engravings and etchings his skill in these techniques, some of his innovations and how their 16thC symbolism can be interpreted.

Engraving

The main method used by Dürer to make prints. Unlike woodcutting engraving entails the artist to design the image and execute the incisions. In this technically demanding medium, the artist uses a burin or stylus with a sharp metal point to incise lines into a metal plate (usually copper). Exquisite detail can be achieved by controlling the depth, length, and type of line and through various techniques such as cross-hatching and stippling to create tones, hues, and shadings. Once complete, the incised lines are filled with ink. The inked plate and the damp paper are then squeezed under heavy pressure between rollers of a press to force the ink within the lines up onto the paper. In a manner just opposite to the woodcut, the engraved lines print, while the uncut, uninked areas remain the colour of the paper. Because copper is a soft metal and the lines are delicately incised, a copperplate engraving is not particularly durable, and the image degrades after several dozen impressions. An engraved image cannot be printed at the same time as text, but has to be bound

into the book as a separate sheet. The refinement and range of tone and the limited number of impressions make engraved prints desirable as separate, though expensive collectable items.

Etchings

An intaglio technique, which uses chemical action to produce incised lines in a metal printing plate. The plate, copper in Dürer's time is prepared with an acid-resistant ground. Lines are drawn through the ground, exposing the metal. The plate is then immersed in acid and the exposed metal is 'bitten', producing incised lines. Stronger acid and longer exposure produce more deeply bitten lines. The resist is removed and ink applied to the sunken lines, but wiped from the surface. The plate is then placed against paper and passed through a press with great pressure to transfer the ink from the recessed lines. Sometimes ink may be left on the plate surface to provide a background tone. Etching was used for decorating metal from the fourteenth century, but was probably not used for printmaking much before the early sixteenth century.ⁱ

Iconography: The Language of Symbols

Dürer in his prints used symbolism both religious and secular. He drew from the rich, expanding culture of visual symbols that European Renaissance offered. The Renaissance symbolic discourse

ⁱ Since then many etching techniques have been developed, which are often used in conjunction with each other: soft-ground etching uses a non-drying resist or ground, to produce softer lines; spit bite involves painting or splashing acid onto the plate; open bite in which areas of the plate are exposed to acid with no resist. Foul biting results from accidental or unintentional erosion of the acid resist.

presupposed a multileveled cosmos interconnected by analogies and relationships. Dürer combined imagery from at least two different systems of thought. The more popular, traditional one concerns the effects of the celestial and planetary influences that was then thought governed human temperament that was derived from Greek and Roman times. The second, more sophisticated set of images derived from the work of Renaissance Humanists and the new intellectual interests of science, especially in mathematics and geometry. To day the explanations of Renaissance symbol making remains both tentative and inadequate.

Some examples

The Four Witches 1497

- Illustrates the ambiguous meaning of those Dürer's works that combine the heathen and classical with the Renaissance ideals of thought.
- ***The depiction*** The devil lurking in the background and the skull and bone on the floor preclude the suggestion that the Three Graces or Discord and the Three Fates are pictured in this engraving. It seems more likely that the girl wearing the wreath is being initiated by three matrons or witches
- ***Its background.*** In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued his encyclical *Summis Desiderantes*, which described witchcraft in vivid terms, particularly the existence of devils taking the shape of women. Men who had intercourse with these she-devils became afflicted with sickness, pains and impotence. In 1486 in Cologne, Jacob Sprenger published his vicious book *Malleus maleficarum* (Hammer for witches), a guide for witch-hunters; women in particular, including midwives

and even nuns, were termed susceptible to devilish deeds. This book went through at least sixteen editions in Germany, eleven in France and six in England, the last in 1669. Dürer's prints may well be connected with one of these editions.

A comparison between *Virgin with the Dragonfly* c1495 and *The Madonna with the Monkey* 1498 illustrates Dürer's subtle changes in technique and composition after his first visit to Italy. It demonstrates:

- Advances in the realization of space, volume and texture
- Figures more clearly detached from the background and have the plastic power of a sculpture in the round
- The use of different engraving technique in particular greater use of curved lines.

***Adam and Eve* 1504**

Under the influence of Italian theory Dürer became increasingly drawn to the idea that the perfect human form corresponded to a system of proportion and measurements

- By 1504 Dürer was a complete master of engraving. Human and snake skin, animal fur, and tree bark and leaves are rendered distinctively
- In all aspects Dürer's art became strongly classical. The figure of Adam is reminiscent of the Hellenistic *Apolo Belvedere*, excavated in Italy late 15thC. The figures are depicted in nearly symmetrical idealised poses.
- **Its symbolism:** Adam holds a branch of mountain ash, the *Tree of Life*, The fig tree, of which Eve has broken off a branch, is the forbidden *Tree of Knowledge*.

- Four of the animals represent the medieval idea of the four temperaments: the *cat is choleric*, the *rabbit sanguine*, the *ox phlegmatic*, and the *elk melancholic*.
- Before the Fall, these humours were held in check, controlled by the innocence of man; once Adam and Eve ate from the apple of knowledge, all four were activated, all innocence lost

During 1513 and 1514 Dürer created the greatest of his copperplate engravings: the *Rider*, *St. Jerome in His Study*, and *Melencolia I* collectively known as his *Meisterstiche* (master engravings)

Though they do not form a series in the strict sense, the prints do correspond to the three kinds of virtue in medieval scholasticism - moral, theological, and intellectual. The extensive, complex, and often contradictory literature concerning these three engravings deals largely with their enigmatic, allusive, iconographic details. Although repeatedly contested, it is probable that the engravings were intended to be interpreted together. There is general agreement that Dürer, in these three master engravings, wished to raise his artistic intensity to the highest level, which he succeeded in doing. Finished form and richness of conception and mood merge into a whole of outstanding artistic achievement.

Night, Death and the Devil Called simply the *Reuter* (Rider) by Dürer; it embodies the state of moral virtue. It is an allegory on Christian salvation. Based on a depiction of the *Christian Knight* armed with his Christian faith rides past *Death* on a Pale Horse, who

holds out an hourglass as a reminder of life's brevity, and is closely followed by a pig-snouted *Devil*. The Pointer alludes to *faith* and the Lizard to *religious zeal*. Dürer based his design of the horse on Leonardo da Vinci's horses that have the same simultaneous lifting of diametrically opposite legs, strong neck and the visibility of the shoulders.

St Jerome in his cell, Unlike the *Reuter* the contemplative rather than the active aspect of Christian life is stressed. Dürer creates calm in the warm atmosphere of the homely, well cared-for room. An emphasis is placed on the subtle differentiation of the material qualities of the objects. Its construction is based on geometry as was concurrent in Italian art yet it looks different. This due to the way Dürer has constructed the space. He has applied perspectival techniques to the setting and to specific forms but the pictorial elements have been invented independently of an overall geometrical base for the total design. Thus the perspectival motifs are not interwoven with a co-ordinated system of geometrical harmonies.

Melencolia I is a depiction of the intellectual situation of the artist and is thus, by extension, a spiritual self portrait of Dürer. An influential treatise, *De occulta philosophia* of Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim,ⁱⁱ almost certainly known to Dürer, probably holds the explanation for the number *I* in the title. Creativity in the arts was the realm of the imagination, considered the first and lowest in the

ⁱⁱ Written in three books between the years 1509 and 1510 was an ambitious attempt to rejuvenate the art of the occult, which had degenerated during the previous centuries. Cornelius Agrippa did this by assembling an intellectual and theoretical foundation from his extensive collection of sources.

hierarchy of the three categories of genius. The next was the realm of reason, and the highest the realm of the spirit. It is ironic that this image of the artist, paralysed and powerless, should exemplify Dürer's own artistic power at its superlative height.

In medieval philosophy, each individual was thought to be dominated by one of the four humours; melancholy, associated with black gall, was the least desirable of the four, and melancholics were considered most likely to succumb to insanity. Renaissance thought, however, also linked melancholy with creative genius; thus, at the same time that this idea changed the status of this humour, it made the self-conscious artist aware of the terrible risks that came with his gift.

In about 1508 Dürer began to collect material for a major work on mathematics and its applications to the arts. This work would never be finished but Dürer did use parts of the material in later published work and in *Melancholia I*. The winged personification of Melancholy, seated dejectedly with her head resting on her hand, holds a calliper and is surrounded by other tools associated with geometry, the one of the seven liberal arts that underlies artistic creation—and the one through which Dürer hoped to approach perfection in his own work. It contains the first *magic square* to be seen in Europe, including the date 1514 as two entries in the middle of the bottom row.ⁱⁱⁱ Also of mathematical interest in *Melancholia* is the polyhedron. In the print the faces of the polyhedron appear to consist of two equilateral triangles and six somewhat irregular pentagons.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Magic Square.** In mathematics, an array of distinct numbers so arranged in a square that the sums of each row, each column, and each main diagonal are equal.

Some general comments on 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
- His draughtsmanship allied to his craft expertise and his humanistic and mathematical studies resulted in him achieving a technical and artistic excellence in his graphic work to a degree previously unknown His varied interest in particular his studies of Italian art, 1 and Humanist studies especially into mathematics and proportion were instrumental through his graphic works of spreading Renaissance ideas to Northern Europe.

Summary

Dürer was a man of wide interests that are reflected in his prints, drawings, oils and watercolours

But

he is chiefly remembered for the way that he revolutionised printmaking, elevating it to the level of an independent art form.

He expanded its tonal and dramatic range, and provided the imagery with a conceptual foundation of perspectival depth