ALBRECHT DÜRER

The Renaissance 'Translated' Into the German Vernacular

by Bonnie James

The National Gallery of Art's exhibition, "Albrecht Dürer: Master Drawings, Watercolors and Prints from the Albertina" (March 24-June 9, 2013) is a feast for the eyes and the mind, despite the fact that the information provided about the great German artist-scientist's life and work provided by the wall text, and in the large catalogue, does not begin to convey what, in this writer's view, are some of the most important things to know about him.

Dürer (1471-1528) used the metaphor of visual art to bring Italy's 15th-Century "Golden Renaissance," to Northern Europe, and thereby spur the process that led to the Peace of Westphalia, and to the artist who most embodied its principles, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669).

FIGURE 1

Albertina, Vienna

Albrecht Dürer: "Self-Portrait at Thirteen" (1484). This is the first known self-portrait in Western art.

Dürer twice crossed the Alps into Italy (in 1494 and 1505) with the aim of assimilating the lessons of the Renaissance, and translating them into his own vernacular. A number of his beautiful watercolors of those journeys can be seen at the NGA exhibit.

The first work you will see as you enter the exhibition (which presents 118 drawings, prints, and watercolors, displayed over five galleries), is a signed self-portrait of the 13-year-old Albrecht (**Figure 1**). It is both the first drawing we have by the artist, and the first known self-portrait in Western art. Judging by this drawing, it is not hard to see why Albrecht's father, a successful goldsmith, who had expected his son to carry on the family trade, realized that the artistically precocious boy should be apprenticed to the leading Nuremberg artist, Michael Wolgemut. It was in Wolgemut's studio that the young artist learned the basic skills of the artisan's craft—engraving, pigment grinding, panel priming, etc. He soon outgrew Wolgemut's studio, and in 1490, traveled through Northern Europe, working with established artists in various towns, to enhance his skills.

FIGURE 2

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Andrea Mantegna: "Lamentation Over the Dead Christ" (ca. 1480). Dürer greatly admired Mantegna's use of perspective, his mastery of human anatomy, and his ability to portray and evoke powerful emotion.

Discovering the Renaissance

Meanwhile, prints and copies of Italian works of art had begun circulating in Nuremberg and other northern European cities. In 1494, Dürer made his first trip to Venice, which was then the capital of world trade and commerce, and, like Nuremberg, a center of the printing industry (Gutenberg's printing press had been in use since about 1450). There, he forged a close relationship with the artists Jacopo Bellini and his sons Gentile and Giovanni, who were then, along with Andrea Mantegna, the leading exponents of the Renaissance of Northern Italy. Dürer's Italian connection would permanently reshape his life and work.

It was Mantegna's (1431-1506) use of dramatic perspective (**Figure 2**,[1] his mastery of human anatomy, and his adoption of the print medium as a vehicle to convey Classical ideas, that captivated Dürer, and redirected his artistic focus. Two examples of Mantegna's prints, and Dürer's "copies" of them are included in the NGA exhibit (**Figures 3a and 3b**).

Dürer's godfather, Anton Koberger, also a goldsmith, had established one of the largest printing enterprises in Europe; and Nuremberg was among the earliest cities to use the new printing presses. After returning from his first trip to Venice, in 1496, Dürer began to

1. A number of Dürer's artworks discussed in this review, including this one, are not part of the National Gallery exhibit, but have been introduced to provide context.

FIGURE 3a

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FIGURE 3b

Albertina, Vienna

Dürer copied works by Mantegna (and other Italian artists), in his determination to learn the "secrets" of the Renaissance masters. Here, Mantegna's "Battle of the Sea Gods" (left, 1470s) and Dürer's "copy" (1494). Judging by this copy, the German artist has already surpassed his teacher.

produce his now famous prints, which reflected the lessons he had learned in Italy.

Another important connection for Dürer, was his lifelong friend and patron Willibald Pirckheimer (**Figure 4**), Nuremberg's leading humanist scholar, who possessed the finest Classical library in the city. Pirckheimer's grandfather was a friend of Nicolaus of Cusa, and had studied with him at Padua, where Willibald himself had attended the famous university. Dürer also studied with the mathematician and astronomer Johannes Müller, known as Regiomontanus (1436-76), a follower of Cusa. Pirckheimer had acquired Regiomontanus's extensive library after the latter's death in 1496; Dürer had access to this fabulous library, where Pirckheimer, who translated many Classical works into German, provided his friend Albrecht with some of his translations from Greek, Hebrew, Latin, etc.

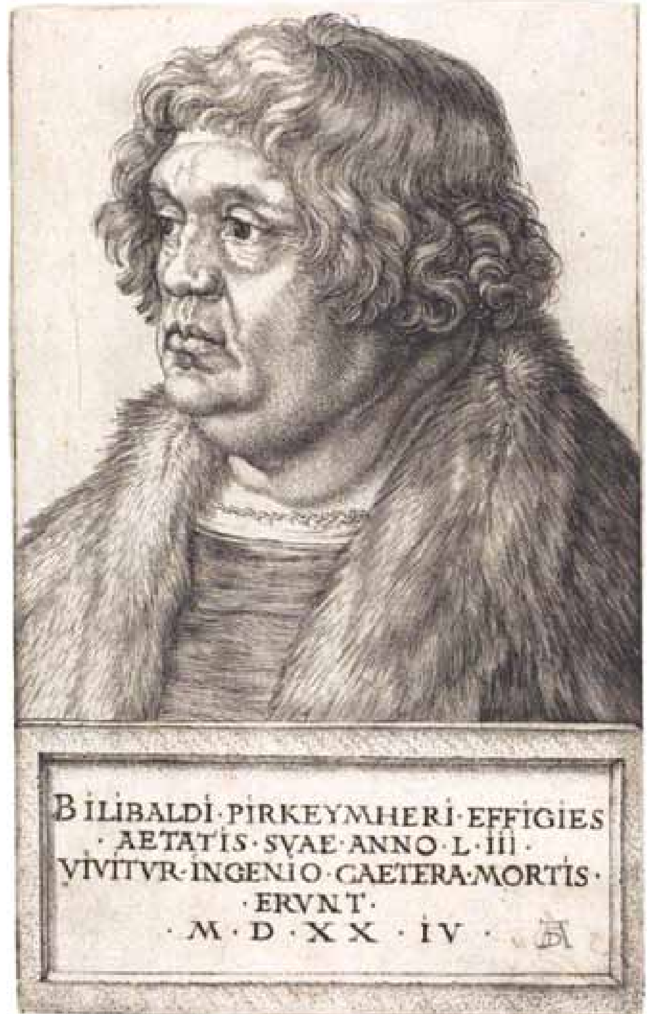
Pirckheimer also introducued his friend Dürer to the circle of leading humanist intellectuals in Europe, including Erasmus. Others in Pirckheimer's orbit, such as Luther and Melanchthon, intellectual leaders of the Protestant Reformation, were great admirers of Dürer's art; and the Emperor Maximilian and his successor Charles V, became Dürer's patrons. Dürer made insightful portraits of many of the most prominent figures of his time, for example, of Erasmus, Melancthon, and Maximilian, which appear in the NGA show. (While Dürer never formally abandoned his Catholic faith, he was strongly influenced by the reform movement within the Church, and reportedly avidly read Luther's writings.)

In 1500, the Italian artist Jacopo de' Barbari visited Nuremberg and met with Dürer. Dürer had been struggling with the representation of the the human figure, and de' Barbari revealed to him the "secrets"—likely, the scientific study of anatomy—known to the Italians, which made it possible to perfectly render the human form. Dürer made his second trip to Venice in 1505-07, and from there, he wrote to Pirckheimer that he planned to travel to Bologna (65 miles north of Florence) "to learn the secrets of the art of perspective, which a man is willing to teach me."

Luca Pacioli, the celebrated mathematician, who instructed Leonardo da Vinci in Milan in the late 1490s—both were under the patronage of the Duke Ludovico Sforza—wrote his famous treatise, *De Divina Proporzione*, with Leonardo, who illustrated the work with beautiful, and scientifically precise renderings of the Platonic solids, and other mathematical figures. Another Pacioli treatise, *Viribus Quantitatis* (On the Power of Numbers), was written sometime between 1496 and 1508 at the University of Bologna. Could this have been what Dürer was seeking in Bologna?

Later, Dürer himself would produce a number of theoretical treatises, on the principles of mathematics, perspective, and ideal proportions. For his *Four Books on Human Proportion,* Dürer asked that Pirckheimer write in the preface, "that I give the Italians very high praise for their nude figures and especially for their per-

FIGURE 4



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Dürer's lifetime friend, mentor, and patron, Willibald Pirckheimer (portrait, 1524), amassed the most extensive Classical library in Europe, and introduced the artist to the great thinkers of antiquity.

spective." In a draft introduction to that treatise, Dürer revealed how his interest in "human measurement" had been awakened:

"I found no one who has written about a system of human proportions except [Jacopo de Barbari], a native of Venice and a lovely painter. He showed me how to construct man and woman based on measurements. When he told of this, I would rather have come into possession of his knowledge than of a kingdom.... But Jacopus I noticed did not wish to give me a clear explanation; so I went ahead on my own and read Vitruvius, who describes the proportions of the human body to some extent."

The Prints: Educating the Common Man

Dürer took as his mission, to bring the ideas of the Italian Renaissance to the North, and to spread them, not only to his fellow artists, but to the common man, following the tradition of the Brotherhood of the Common Life—a Christian order dedicated to bringing learning to all children. Following in Mantegna's footsteps, Dürer used the medium of printing, which produced multiple copies of a woodcut, engraving, or etching, to express the most noble ideas through graphic images, and to disseminate them more widely than had ever been done before. Until Dürer's revolution, the only exposure ordinary people had to great art was through the works that adorned the churches. Now, Dürer's masterpieces could be reproduced in large numbers, and sold for pennies in the marketplace.[2]

FIGURE 5

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Dürer's "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1498) was part of his series of prints based on the Book of Revelation.

With a largely illiterate population, Dürer's invention of a metaphorical language to express profound ideas, allowed anyone to "read" the images he created. For example, his "Apocalypse" series, of which the best known is "The Four Horsemen" (**Figure 5**): This series of prints, issued beginning in 1498, and based on the Book of Revelation, was intended to intersect the religious fervor that had overcome the superstitious

2. Dürer's prints not only reached large numbers of people in his own time, but a century after his death, his method of "mass organizing" through the use of prints was adopted, and raised to an even higher artistic level by Rembrandt, an avid collector of Renaissance art, who owned a large number of prints by Dürer and Mantegna.

FIGURE 6

Wikimedia Commons

Self-Portrait in the image of Christ (1500).

masses, as the year 1500 approached (think of the hysteria around the year 2000). This was the early phase of what would become 150 years of religious warfare which ravaged Europe, causing massive depopulation and destruction, culminating in the Thirty Years War, which was finally ended with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia.

In the "Apocalypse," series, Dürer depicts all the terrifying details of John's account in Revelation, but in such a way that the viewer could not but be aware that an even more awesome power than evil itself were at work in *creating* the image, namely the mind of man. To underscore that idea, Dürer stamped each image with his, by now widely recognized "signature," his initials, writ large.[3]

Reinforcing the same idea, but even more powerfully, is Dürer's self-portrait of 1500, in which he boldly presents himself in the image of Jesus Christ (**Figure 6**). Could he have been any clearer?

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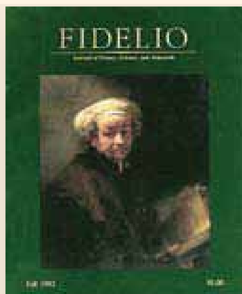
3. Dürer's brilliant "Master Engravings": "Knight, Death and the Devil," "St. Jerome in His Study," and "Melencolia I," are shown in the exhibit, along with other well-loved prints, such as "Adam and Eve." For a futher discussion of these and other works, see, Bonnie James, "Albrecht Dürer: The Search for the Beautiful in a Time of Trials," *Fidelio*, Fall 2005."



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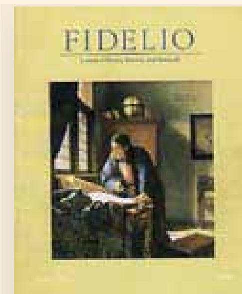
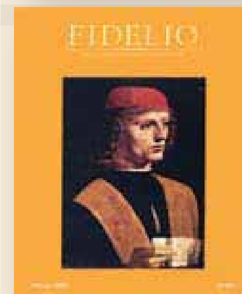


From the first issue, dated Winter 1992, featuring Lyndon LaRouche on "The Science of Music: The Solution to Plato's Paradox of 'The One and the Many,'" to the final issue of Spring/Summer 2006, a "Symposium on Edgar Allan Poe and the Spirit of the American Revolution," ***Fidelio*** magazine gave voice to the Schiller Institute's intention to create a new Golden Renaissance.

The title of the magazine, is taken from Beethoven's great opera, which celebrates the struggle for political freedom over tyranny. ***Fidelio*** was founded at the time that LaRouche and several of his close associates were unjustly imprisoned, as was the opera's Florestan, whose character was based on the American Revolutionary hero, the French General, Marquis de Lafayette.

Each issue of ***Fidelio***, throughout its 14-year lifespan, remained faithful to its initial commitment, and offered original writings by LaRouche and his associates, on matters of, what the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley identified as, "profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature."



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