



Spotlight: The New Apelles

Albrecht Dürer and the Renaissance North of the Alps

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Albrecht Dürer, *Self-portrait at 13 years*,
silverpoint, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung,
Albertina

How is it possible that the son of an ordinary – successful, but not outstanding – goldsmith became not only Germany's most celebrated artist but also an international leading figure in Europe's cultural life?

Centuries of reflection, studies, and research on the topic of Albrecht Dürer have brought to light new insights and discoveries about the artist and his works.

Moreover, Dürer – and his father before him – have passed down a family chronicle that tells us about the personal history of the artist and his next of kin.

But still, many questions about the great artist remain open and unanswered.

His father, as we can deduce from his own self portrait, was a very talented draughtsman, who apparently learned the best part of his craft during his years of travel in the Netherlands, where he became familiar with the celebrated works of the “great masters” (Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and others), as his son would later call them in his chronicle.

The young Albrecht Dürer learned his outstanding mastery in silverpoint pen and burin during his apprenticeship in his father’s workshop.

Albrecht the Elder must have been very proud of his son and eager to hand the family business over to him one day.

All the greater was his disappointment when his son told him that his wish was to become a painter.



Albrecht Dürer the Elder, *Self-portrait*, silverpoint, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung, Albertina

Die achtundfünfzigste figur



Schatzbehalter, coloured copy, printed by Anton Koberger, 1491, formerly Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG

Albrecht the Younger started his second apprenticeship in the workshop of one of Nuremberg's leading figures in the art market: Michael Wolgemuth.

Under his master's tutelage, he underwent a thorough education in everything practical that a painter has to know. But apart from that, Wolgemuth and his assistants were also busy in the Nuremberg market of book illustration. They contributed the thousands of woodcuts for Schedel's *World Chronicle* and for a truly wonderful book on Christ's passion: the *Schatzbehalter*. This project was mainly in the hands of Wolgemuth's stepson, Wilhelm Pleydenwurff.

Dürer's participation is possible, yet not verified. But clearly he received trailblazing instructions on the art of woodcuts that determined his later career.

After his time in Wolgemuth's workshop, Dürer went to Colmar to meet "*Meister Martin*" Schongauer. However, by the time he arrived there, Schongauer had already passed away. Dürer then travelled to Basel – like Nuremberg, a capital of book printing. Scholars have argued in the past that Dürer worked for several print shops in Basel.

It had been suggested that he contributed illustrations for the *Epistles of St. Jerome* (1492), the *Knight of Tour Landry* (1493), and the *Ship of fools* (ibid. 1494). One woodcut of the *Spiegel der waren Rhetoric* (Freiburg, 1493) also has been ascribed to him.

Recently, however, it has been argued that the relatively "naïve and simple style" of the book illustration does not relate to the complexity of Dürer's later woodcut sets.

Friedrich Riederer, *Spiegel der waren Rhetoric*.
Freiburg: 11 Dec. 1493. First edition.
On offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG



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Apart from the fact that at that time Dürer was still at the outset of his career, we would like to add two more thoughts to this discussion:

In a printer's workshop, many draughtsmen and cutters worked on the same project and it would have been disloyal and unwise to create woodcuts that stand out from the rest of the illustration material. An overly-strong aesthetic disbalance was not the goal, and Dürer was certainly smart enough to know and avoid such a problem.

Why would a clever tradesman like Dürer shoot his bolt early by wasting time and energy and giving his best for an average pay? He could blend in with the run-of-the-mill production of his co-workers and still would have been an outstanding craftsman.

Der Ritter vom Turn von den Exempeln der gottesforcht vñ erberkeit



At any event, the woodcuts ascribed to Dürer were so popular that they were copied and re-copied in many incunable and post-incunable editions.

Copy after Albrecht Dürer's woodcut:
G. de La Tour-Landry, *Der Ritter vom Turn*.
Augsburg: Johann Schönsperger, 1498
Third edition in German,
On offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG

Likely, in 1496 Dürer made his first journey to Italy. He mainly stayed in Venice, where he got acquainted, for the first time, with the Italian Renaissance in art and its elaborate principles of proportion and perspective. These topics would become his obsessions for the rest of his artistic life.

When he returned from his trip, his style became visibly more refined, as he was anxious to apply his new insights and skills.

He apparently made a decision to emphasize graphic productions, and we know that in 1497 his vendible stock comprised twenty-five woodcuts and engravings.



He began to systematically sign his graphic works with his monogram.

It was not only an authenticity certificate but also a “seal of approval”.



Christ Among the Doctors, *Life of the Virgin*, 1502-1510, on offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG

Since 1497, Dürer developed a new distribution system for his prints. He employed sales agents, who offered his prints internationally. Single leaves or print series were easy to transport, and thus, Dürer's art and his fame quickly spread all over Europe.

In France...



St. John's Martyrdom, *Apocalypse*, 1511,
on offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG



Metal cut after Dürer, Jean Pichore for
Simon Vostre, Paris, c. 1504-05

Motifs from Dürer's woodcut series were not only copied, as demonstrated in the previous example, but were also placed in a new context. In the illustration set for Simon Vostre's printed Books of Hours, a scene from the *Apocalypse* was reused for the desperate women in the Massacre of the Innocents (right side).



Detail for A. Dürer's *Apocalypse*: The opening of the fifth and sixth seal.



Metal cut after Dürer, Jean Pichore for Simon Vostre, Paris, c. 1504-05

...and in Italy

Who is who? A copy by Marcantonio Raimondi (on the right)



Since Raimondi not only copied Dürer's works but also his monogram, Dürer brought up the first copyright charge in history against the Italian colleague.

The *Apocalypse* – the first of Dürer's three large books



His first book project was the illustration for St. John's Revelation, the last chapter of the New Testament. It was first issued in 1498 in the press of Dürer's Godfather, Anton Koberger, who provided also the typeset for the text.

Doomsday was a crucial subject at that time because most Christian believers were convinced that the world would perish in 1500.

The success of Dürer's unusual interpretation of the last days of mankind was unbelievable. As we saw in the examples of the Paris prints, it was repeated and interpreted countless times all over Europe.

Apart from the exciting and distressing topic, it was also a revolution in layout because text and image were of equal importance – although the illustration was, of course, more notable.

Most fascinating about the Dürer's *Apocalypse* is that it is his own original invention. There has never been anything remotely comparable on the subject before. His compositions became the role models for apocalypse illustration *par excellence*.

Certainly, Dürer knew the Bible woodcuts for Koberger's Bible of 1483. On offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Book AG



He may also have had knowledge of an *Apocalypse* manuscript, today in Paris, BnF nér. 3. (detail)

‘Three Large Books’

In 1511, Dürer re-issued his *Apocalypse* and additionally two other large, graphic series: the *Passion of Christ* and the *Life of the Virgin*. All three works were published in book form and Dürer called them in his own notes his “large books,” because their common feature is the large folio format. They are also connected by their content – the salvific history – from the incarnation of God’s word, i.e. Christ’s appearance on earth, his sacrifice and death and finally his reappearance on the last day, when God’s realm will be achieved.



The Whore of Babylon, *Apocalypse*, 1511,
on offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG



Circumcision, *Life of the Virgin*, 1502-1510,
on offer at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG
(original with large margins)



Entombment, *Passion*, 1511, on offer at Dr.
Jörn Günther Rare Books AG (original with
large margins)

Dürer and Luther's Reformation

Dürer had always been interested in new ideas and convictions. Thus, he was also open to the reformists' movement. Luther, who in general did not much care for illustrations of religious topics, albeit for didactic reasons, claimed that John's Revelation is such a obscure text that it calls for illustration.

Dürer's *Apocalypse* was chosen as the model for Luther's New Testament. The first set was designed by Lucas Cranach the Elder and it was closely related to Dürer's interpretation of the topic.

Interestingly, the protestant movement did not do any damage to Dürer's standing as an artist.

He was able to claim the artistic supremacy of his artworks over the religious aspect.



Martin Luther, *Septembertestament*, 1522, formerly Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG

Dürer's Three Scientific Books

Dürer's last ground-breaking books are his studies on Measurement and Perspective, on Fortification, and on Proportion. All three works are the result of his life-long interest and studies as well as his unquenchable thirst of knowledge. The works were published towards the end of his life, between 1525 and 1528, the last book on Proportion only shortly after his death. These systematic, comprehensive treatises constituted the foundation of what can be called an 'aesthetic dogma' for the next centuries.

They support the reason for Dürer's reputation as the "German Leonardo", with the fundamental difference being that Leonardo da Vinci's theoretical treatises on perspective were printed more than a century after his death.



A. Dürer: *Underweysung der messung...*, 1525;
Sammelband on offer at Dr. J. Günther Rare Books AG

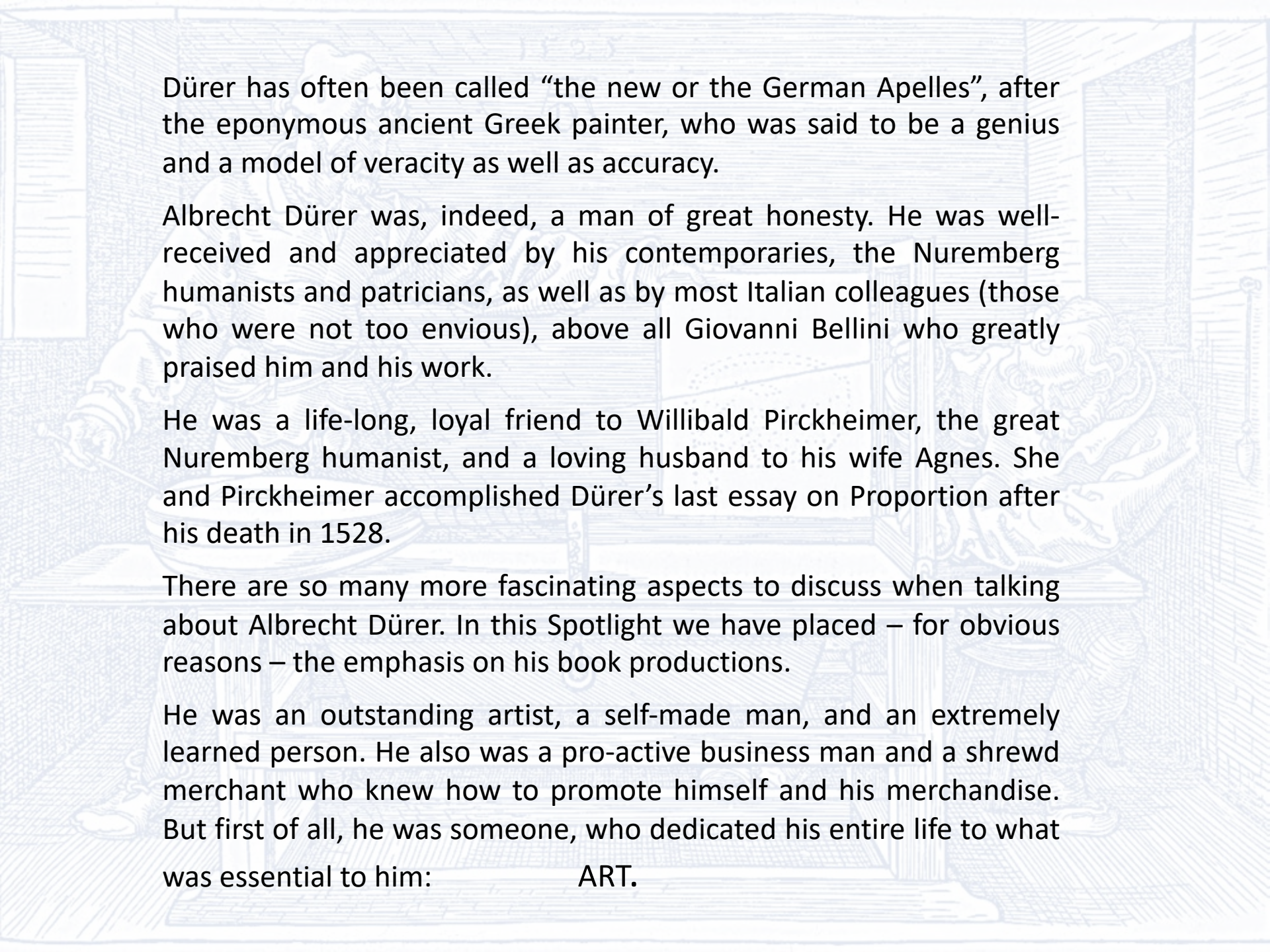
All three essential works have come to us in a handsome, stunningly preserved *Sammelband*. The treatise on fortification even includes the renowned, large woodcut of a fortress under siege; which was originally not intended for the volume, but is a very handsome addition to the content.



Pull-out woodcut (left half): *Sammelband* on offer at Dr. J. Günther Rare Books AG



Fortress under siege: pull-out woodcut
(right half): *Sammelband* on offer at Dr. J.
Günther Rare Books AG



Dürer has often been called “the new or the German Apelles”, after the eponymous ancient Greek painter, who was said to be a genius and a model of veracity as well as accuracy.

Albrecht Dürer was, indeed, a man of great honesty. He was well-received and appreciated by his contemporaries, the Nuremberg humanists and patricians, as well as by most Italian colleagues (those who were not too envious), above all Giovanni Bellini who greatly praised him and his work.

He was a life-long, loyal friend to Willibald Pirckheimer, the great Nuremberg humanist, and a loving husband to his wife Agnes. She and Pirckheimer accomplished Dürer’s last essay on Proportion after his death in 1528.

There are so many more fascinating aspects to discuss when talking about Albrecht Dürer. In this Spotlight we have placed – for obvious reasons – the emphasis on his book productions.

He was an outstanding artist, a self-made man, and an extremely learned person. He also was a pro-active business man and a shrewd merchant who knew how to promote himself and his merchandise. But first of all, he was someone, who dedicated his entire life to what was essential to him: **ART.**



Please come and join us in
Maastricht
at TEFAF 2020.
Relish some of
Dürer's greatest works!



We are looking forward to
seeing you at stand 109!

