

ALBRECHT DÜRER, 1471-1528

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THE political history of mediaeval Germany, recording continual feuds between petty principalities, combined with the keen, commercial traits and stern melancholy of the Teutonic temperament—as compared with the gentle pensiveness and love of beauty so characteristic of sunny Italy—seemed most unpropitious for the fostering of the artistic side of life.

From the Imperial cities of Nuremberg and Augsburg—which enjoyed a liberty and freedom little known elsewhere—came, however, two of the world's greatest artists—Dürer and Holbein; for, like Spain, Germany has only two giants on her roll of painters. Nuremberg was the centre of many activities in the fifteenth century, having the first German paper mill in addition to many skilled clockmakers, braziers and organ-builders; but most celebrated of all ranked the workers in gold, whose artistic metallic designs were jealously guarded and supervised by the rights of their guild.

After having spent some time with past masters of his craft in the Netherlands, to this progressive town in 1455 came an Hungarian, Albrecht Thürer or Dürer—the name signifying a door—to engage himself to an expert goldsmith, named Hieronymus Holper, whose fifteen-year-old daughter, Barbara, he married twelve years later on becoming a burgher of the city. The illustrious Albrecht was the third of eighteen children born to this worthy couple—most of whom died in infancy—and Anton Kobürger, the celebrated printer, became his godfather; while the adjoining house a few months earlier had witnessed the birth of Willibald Pirkheimer, who as student, writer, man of wealth and position was destined to be a life-long friend, patron and admirer of his artistic neighbour.

The painter writes: “My father was a God-fearing man, most anxious to bring up his children to honour the Lord . . . and when I had learnt to write and read took me from school and taught me the goldsmith's trade”; but when in his thirteenth year the boy's decided talent for sketching was shown by a portrait drawing in silver print of himself in a looking glass (still preserved in the Albertina Gallery at Vienna), and a careful copy from an old master of “The Virgin and Two Angels” (Berlin Museum), the parents, yielding reluctantly to his desires, apprenticed him at the age of

fifteen, for three years, to the fine painter, Michael Wolgemut, founder of the Nuremberg school of wood and copper engraving. The Uffizi, Florence, treasures a portrait of Dürer Père, painted while under tuition, on the back of which is seen the coat-of-arms—an open door under a penthouse roof borne by their Hungarian ancestors—evidently an early effort in a province where he later excelled.

On the expiration of this sound training, Dürer enjoyed four years travel (1490-94) spending much time in Colmar, Strasburg and Basle en route to Venice, where he met Jacopo dei Barbari, from whom he eagerly learnt those laws of anatomy and proportion which so interested him all through life and closely studied the works of old Italian masters. The detailed treatment of innumerable water-colour sketches of scenery, views of castles and towns done during these *Lehr und Wanderjahre*—now largely in private collections—shows that the artist might even be ranked as the fore-runner of modern landscape.

Returning home (May 1494) Dürer found his early marriage had been arranged with a friend's daughter Agnes Frey, possessing a modest dowry of two hundred florins, and following the ceremony the young couple resided with his parents. The ambitious artist next opened a studio—for in Nuremberg painting was regarded as a fine art quite independent of guilds—and by his energy and unremitting industry gradually began to acquire fame. His Leipzig portrait in his twenty-second year shows a carefully dressed youth holding the blue flower called "man's fidelity", and was probably painted as a present to the bride; and among several sketches extant of Agnes one represents her as a handsome Hausfrau in a white cap and richly trimmed dress. On the father's death (1502) Albrecht assumed full charge of the family, giving his brother Hans such a good education in art that he later became court painter to the King of Poland at Cracow.

Albrecht Dürer's earliest known altar pieces are the triple picture in tempera of "The Madonna with the Infant Christ asleep on a pillow" with shutters of St. Anthony and St. Sebastian (Dresden); and that immortal work "The Adoration of the Magi" (1504) at the Uffizi,— both wrought for the Elector Frederick of Saxony, who also ordered "The Crucifixion" now in the Palace of the Archbishop of Vienna at St. Viets, its wings adorned on the inside by "Christ Bearing the Cross" and "The Risen Lord"; while on the outside are St. Sebastian and St. Roch—the original drawings being still preserved at Basle. His next important achievement was the Baumgartner Altar piece executed for the

Archbishop's Palace at Vienna, but now in the Pinakothek Munich, depicting the "Nativity" in a quaint German courtyard; while the shutters bear portraits of the donors painted as two knightly saints in armour carrying flags. The right wing exhibits Lucas Baumgartner as St. Eustache with a sword in his left hand, and on the corresponding flap his brother Stephen, in the rôle of St. George, rests his hand on the dragon's head.

His skill in painting was at its best in portraiture, and these early years also witnessed the production of such remarkable examples as "Oswald Krell"; "Hieronymus Holzschuher"; "Portrait of a Young Man" (probably his brother Hans); "Portrait of Himself (1498) at Prague with a copy now in the Uffizi"; "Michael Wolgemut"; Four Replicas at Augsburg, Munich, Florence and Sion House of "Albrecht Dürer Senior"; "Elector the Wise of Saxony", painted in tempera, Berlin; "Emperors Charlemagne and Sigismund"; "A Daughter of the Furlager Family" (Augsburg) thinly disguised as a saintly maiden; and three "Tucher" portraits of which two are at Vienna and the other at Cassel; but still more outstanding are his astounding "Portrait of Hans Imhof the Elder of Nuremberg"—one of the masterpieces of his time—and the world famous and wonderfully Christ-like "Portrait of Himself" (Pinakothek, Munich) in which he painted an unforgettable and haunting face suggesting the head of the Saviour with its beautifully regular features, high forehead, tender, radiant look, auburn beard and thick hair—of which the artist was very proud—flowing in long tresses over the cheeks to curl upon his shoulders. This most familiar and dignified picture of Dürer at the age of thirty-three, with the right hand grasping his fur coat, catches the attention with a fascination only comparable to the disturbing charm of Da Vinci's figures; and Camerarius, friend of Luther and Director of the High School of Nuremberg says:—"Nature bestowed on Dürer a body remarkable in build and stature, worthy of the noble mind it contained."

Dürer painted his own portrait several times, and we find his calm, distinguished figure in "The Fife and Drum-Players" (1500) on the exterior shutters of a triptych, painted for an altar in the private Chapel of Jabach, a Cologne banker, but of which the central panel is missing. On the reverse side of the wings are depicted St. Joachim with St. Joseph, and St. Simeon with St. Lazarus—both pictures being now in the Pinakothek, Munich. Frankfurt Museum possesses the outside panel representing Job sitting upon a dunghill with his wife pouring water over him, while in the corresponding scene, still at Cologne, two friends of the unfortunate Job have come to add to his misery by playing

upon the flute and drum. This idea of the Biblical story is distinctly original, and Dürer has given his own features to the drummer who wears a red cloak and dark coloured hose; but has attired the fife-player in the eccentric costume of a yellow cap, green doublet and yellowish brown breeches.

The Louvre possesses two pictures by Dürer—one portraying "A Young Boy" and the other, a most successful delineation of "An Old Man" in whose face intelligence, quickness, keenness, good humour and directness of regard are so mingled as to give a subtle and vivid sensation of movement to the sitter. Up to 1496 Dürer had simply initialled his work; from that time he adopted the familiar monogram of an A with D enclosed which, with the date, appears on a tablet, hanging sign, flat stone or floating banner, as best suited the design; and to ensure the authenticity of his greatest works he adorned them with his portrait, in addition to monogram and date; while sometimes his friend, Perkheimer, is associated with his signature.

His two altar-pieces of "The Lamentation over the Body of Christ" are now at Munich and Nuremberg; but though Dürer held that the art of painting was to serve the church by exhibiting the sorrows of our Lord and also to preserve the likeness of men after their death, yet he himself broke new ground in northern art by turning from sacred subjects to paint mythology in "Hercules fighting the Stymphalian Birds (Nuremberg)."

It was not by his painting—even his excellent portraiture—however, that Dürer was to win world-wide fame, for his skill in that *métier* could not equal his compatriot Holbein nor approach the Netherlandish genius. It was only when he turned to engraving on both wood and copper that he attained grandeur and a boldness of design and invention that is absolutely creative, and both arts he developed from infancy in such a special manner that their technical excellence is still unsurpassed.

The close of the fifteenth century witnessed the great religious agitation of the Reformation, which left no thoughtful men untouched; yet, though sympathizing with the Reformers—for Luther and Melancthon were among his friends—his journal records money paid to his confessor, and Dürer never broke from Rome. There is no doubt, however, that the spirit of his age was powerfully affecting his mind and art when, shedding all petty aims of beauty, he executed his wonderful series of fifteen large woodcuts for the German and Latin editions of the "Apocalypse" or "Revelation of St. John" published at Nuremberg (1498); and his prints went broadcast over a world in ferment to be largely devoured at a time

when multitudes could understand a picture but few could read writing. The unsurpassed imagination of the man—balked by painting—soared now on eagle pinions, and he seems to grasp the prophetic poetry of the text, for the words are interpreted literally with the terrible effect of tragedy; and hence, though the Italian masters were astounded by his marvellous engravings, this work was never popular in that country. The artist seldom did more than trace the designs, leaving the "Form Schneider" to carry them out; yet Dürer possessed such power of expressing his precise meaning that the task of the engraver was made easy. The sixteenth cut, representing "The Vision of the Virgin and Child beheld by St. John as he writes his Revelation" was added to the title page of a second edition of the Apocalypse (1511); and these plates mark a new era in the history of wood-engraving, not only from their lofty conception and design, but because they were more skilfully executed than previous works.

In 1511 appeared the first edition of the "Life of the Virgin" illustrated with a series of twenty exquisite woodcuts, in which Mary is shown amid scenes of simple domestic German life with a background of Dürer's own home and Nuremberg Castle—thus casting aside old traditions and seeking inspiration from the people around him; yet the story is told in a charmingly vivid way without sacrificing the dignity of the Madonna, and often with a touch of poignancy, as in the parting with her Son before the last journey to Jerusalem.

Among his noble original conceptions may be named the famous "Coat-of-Arms with the Cock"—which became the standard of heraldic design; "Virgin with the Monkey"; "Angels with the Napkin of Veronica"; "Prodigal Son"; "Mass of St. Gregory"; "Holy Trinity"; "St. Anthony"; "The Nativity"; "The Great Fortune and St. Eustache or St. Hübert"; while his first elaborate effort to make engraving reach as full an utterance as paint was his celebrated "Adam and Eve" (1504), in which he reveals his study of Mantegna. About this time were designed two shutters for an unfinished altar-piece at Bremen representing St. Onuprius and St. John the Baptist, as well as the two renowned series of twelve folio cuts in copper, known as "The Great Passion" (1508-13), giving the events of Christ's life after the Last Supper; and the larger set—containing thirty-seven plates of the "Little Passion", beginning with "Adam and Eve in Paradise" and closing with the Last Judgment—and this is probably the best known of his engravings, as thirty-five of the original blocks are now in the British Museum.

The wood-engraver's knife so damaged his design for the "Great Passion" that the artist wrought twelve new drawings, free of all symbols, haloes, etc., on green paper, since known as the "Green Passion", now treasured in the superb collection of sketches at the Albertina, Vienna. The three supreme achievements of German engravings, as they are the greatest utterance of Dürer's sublime genius, are his "Melancholia"; "St. Jerome"; and "The Knight, Death and the Devil"—the latter exhibiting the tendency of that age in the Christian Knight as he rides in full armour through a gloomy defile. At his side rides Death, holding an hour-glass with the sands nearly run out, and behind is a fiend ready to fall upon him; but the rider goes bravely forward, heeding neither Death nor Satan, but pressing on to the "prize of his high calling."

Another entrancing work on copper with a variety of detail from a South German home of the sixteenth century is "St. Jerome in his Chamber." "On the wall in the background hangs Jerome's shady hat with his sand-glass as its neighbour. Shelves, nails and wall-racks hold his scissors, knife, bell, candle-stick and other articles of household use. Chairs and benches are amply cushioned, books and boxes repose on and under the window seat. On the upper window-sill light falls upon a skull, and near it, at the edge of a table on which the saint, absorbed in his literary labours, bends over his small writing-desk, a crucifix is dimly discerned. The foreground is occupied by two sleepers: the lion—which is St. Jerome's faithful comrade in art and a lamb beside him. Light rests on both the slumbering creatures, bringing out the strength and kindness of the forest lord and the trustful peace of his small neighbour."

The details of such pictures as "Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration"; "Christ Bearing the Cross"; and "Christ before Herod"—their power, the number of objects and figures crowded into the space, render them worthy of closest study; while his knowledge of perspective and anatomy made him the first to apply the principles of oil-painting to engraving—or work "bitten in" to the metal, thereby elevating its low standard into the realm of true artistic excellence, and winning his own title of the "Father of Etching." "Having obtained thorough mastery of its technicalities he could now give expression to strange imaginings with a confidence as firm as his skill was delicate and faithful in delineating nature. Fearful lest any revelation be lost, he gives that wonderful mixture of sublime and homely, beautiful and grotesque, which crowd strangely into a picture; for freakish figures, extraordinary fancies and bold ideas of all sorts haunted his brain."

According to Vasari, Dürer paid a second visit to Venice (1505-6) to defend his rights against Marc Antonio who was copying his plates and monogram; but he had probably, before starting, received a commission from the German merchants settled in the "City of the Waters" for a picture to adorn their new Hall of Exchange—The Fondaco dei Tadeschi—upon whose decoration Titian and Giorgione were also employed; for shortly after his arrival he began work on "The Feast of the Rosary or Rose-Garlands"—now much damaged in the Monastery of Strahow near Prague. The Virgin and Child are here seen distributing rosaries and crowning the Emperor Maximilian and Pope Julius II, assisted by St. Dominic and angels, with wreaths of roses; Dürer stands in the background accompanied by the humanist, Pirkheimer. During his sojourn there he also painted "The Child Christ disputing with the Doctors" (Barberini Palace, Rome); "Portrait of a Fair-Haired Young Man" (Vienna) on the back of which is depicted Avarice as an ugly, lean, old hag holding a bag of gold coins and laughing with scorn; and his very fine "Virgin with the Siskin" (Emperor Frederick Museum, Berlin), which shows the Madonna "sitting with her back against a piece of red tapestry—her right hand rests upon a big book and with her left she is taking a bunch of lilies of the valley that an angel is offering her. The Infant Christ has a cluster of berries in one hand and is looking at a siskin that has perched on his left arm. Two angels are holding a wreath above the Virgin's head and little St. John the Baptist, with his cross of rushes, is kneeling at his Divine playmate's feet. In the background is a landscape with some ruined buildings; a letter lying upon a small table in the foreground of the painting bears these words: 'Albertus Dürer *germanicus* faciebat post Virginis partum 1506.' The picture is very graceful and tender in style and is one of the most exquisite the great artist ever painted. The Virgin wears a blue mantle over a red underdress, her clear, brown skin has amber lights in it, and she, her Son, little St. John and the angels are all enchanting figures that are quite worthy of comparison with the most delightful creations of the Italian school."

Since Dürer especially devoted himself to the most minute and careful representation of the realities of life, disregarding mere beauty and charm of face, the majority of his portraits reveal a more energetic than amiable type of character: so that a striking exception is found in "Portrait of a Young Woman" (Berlin Museum) bearing the name "Agnes D" interwoven with the embroidery of her costume. This fascinating woman, wearing a low bodice, with a large necklace around her throat, has the placid features of the

Teutonic type, but her dark skin suggests a more southern origin, so it has been concluded that the original was a German, painted, from its technique, during his stay at the "Queen of the Adriatic"; whence he wrote Pirkheimer of selling several panels to Venetian nobles, and receiving much kindness from the aged Giovanni Bellini, though some of his confreres were jealous of his gifts. With a restless, untiring search for knowledge Dürer learns the secrets of perspective and continues his studies of the nude and human form; but his own personal influence may be traced upon the young Titian's celebrated "Tribute Money," whilst it is certain that Raphael greatly admired the German's drawings and engravings—even copying figure by figure from "Christ bearing the Cross" in the "Spasimo di Sicilia." The Florentine and German artists exchanged pictures and other tokens of friendship, but an offer from the city of Venice of a salary was declined by the Northerner, who wrote:—"I would rather live in a moderate manner in Nuremberg than be rich and great in any other place."

After visiting Bologna, Ferrara, and Mantua he returned to his native city where he purchased a house—still carefully preserved—and then followed crowded years of work on several large altarpieces including the two panel figures of "Adam and Eve" (Pitti Palace, Florence). In quick succession came "The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand Persian Christians by King Sapor" (Vienna); "The Assumption of the Virgin"; "Virgin Crowned by two Angels"; (in Marquis of Lothian's collection, Scotland); and the splendid "Adoration of the Holy Trinity"—the most important and best preserved of all his immense paintings—executed in clear, yet restrained colour for the Chapel of All Saints in the House of the Twelve Apostles of the Monastery of Landauer, Nuremberg. In 1585 the Town Council sold this picture to Emperor Rudolph II of Prague, whence it was sent to Vienna, where it now hangs in the Imperial Gallery. In the upper section a figure representing God holds, with outstretched arms, the Cross upon which the Saviour is hanging, and the Holy Spirit hovers above the Crown upon the Father's head; while round the Holy Trinity are grouped legions of angels, saints and prophets—amongst whom are the Virgin with St. Agnes, St. Catherine, St. John the Baptist, David and Moses. In the lower part of the picture a still greater crowd of all sorts and conditions of people are kneeling or standing upon clouds, embracing several Popes, a King, an Emperor, a Cardinal and a Knight. At the right prays the donor, Matthias Landauer, with his fur cap between his clasped hands, and on the left the artist holds a paper inscribed "Albertus Dürer noricus faciebat a Virginis partu 1511."

Visiting Augsburg during the Imperial Diet (1518) he painted Maximilian's portrait and also finished two immense works, composed of numerous copper-plates and wood-engravings, to illustrate the Emperor's travels; and forty-five intricate marginal pen drawings for his prayer-book. There is also extant a valuable print (formerly owned by the late James F. Claghorn of Philadelphia), made from a gold plate which, in the space of an inch, contained the whole representation of the Crucifixion with crowds of figures, engraved by Dürer for the pommel of Maximilian's sword. Here also was drawn the charcoal sketch of Cardinal Albert of Brandenburg, Primate and Elector of the Empire, and Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg (Albertina, Vienna), from which he made his first great engraved portrait.

Following Maximilian's death it seemed desirable to have a personal interview with his successor, Charles V of Spain, to secure the continuation of his yearly pension of one hundred florins; so Dürer, accompanied by his wife, visited the Netherlands (1521) and in an interesting diary—perhaps the earliest modern record of more than a year's travels—describes his wonderful reception at Antwerp by Quentin Matsys and the learned Erasmus of Rotterdam (whom he sketched twice), as well as other visits to Bruges, Aix-la-Chapelle, and Ghent, where he much admired the work of the Van Eycks. Many were the commissions for portraits, altar-pieces and engravings undertaken and finished, and numerous presents exchanged; while Antwerp tried vainly, as had Venice twenty years previously, to secure the distinguished artist as a permanent citizen by the offer of an income. In Dresden Gallery hangs a portrait of Bernard Van Orley, the Brussels painter at the age of thirty, bearing Dürer's monogram, while his diary states: "I have painted Bernard of Brussels in oil colours. He paid me eight florins for the portrait, made a present of a crown to my wife, and gave my servant, Suzanne, a florin worth twenty-four sols."

Returning to Nuremberg in 1522 Dürer spent the last six years of his life less on the production of art than in the search after its fundamental and scientific principles. Among his valuable literary writings are important treatises on the "Art of Mensuration" (1525); "Instruction in the Fortification of Towns, Castles and Places"; "Music and Gymnastics"; "Lessons in Human Proportion"—in all some one hundred and fifty books and pamphlets according to Camerarius. Eminently progressive and many-sided, Dürer resembled Da Vinci more than any other of the old masters, for he cultivated architecture and sculpture, and was the first German to teach the rules of perspective and insist on a knowledge of

anatomy as necessary to productive art. Accompanying a keen, profound observation, was a soaring and ardent fancy which sought for the unusual and saw in nature the best of all art instruction; feeling, as did Michael Angelo, the power with which he was endowed was a breath of the Divine.

Dürer also achieved some plastic works, for a carving in hone-stone of the "Birth of St. John the Baptist" is in the British Museum; but his last chef d'oeuvre—following the well-known "Erasmus and Melanchthon"—was his painting (1526) of the "Four Evangelists"—grandly conceived figures which he generously presented to his native city, and they were placed in the Council Chamber of the Town Hall, for which he planned a set of frescoes; but in 1627 the Municipal Authorities of Nuremberg gave both panels to Maximilian I, Elector of Bavaria, and they now repose in the Pinakothek, Munich. These pictures, sometimes called "The Four Temperaments" reveal distinct individual characters: St. John—said to be a likeness of Melanchthon—is gentle; St. Peter, meditative; St. Paul, has a piercing, gloomy and searching glance; and St. Mark's features show an aggressive and warlike disposition. Placed well in the foreground, the great preacher, St. Paul, is evidently the most important figure in the artist's eyes, for he concentrates all the splendour and brilliance of the painting into his white cloak and energetic features; while the sword he holds not only represents the executioner's weapon but is also an emblem of the valiant battle he is fighting for Christianity.

On April 6th, 1528, suddenly and peacefully "the German Apelles" passed away in his fifty-seventh year, being buried in the vault of the Frey family in St. John's Churchyard, at Nuremberg, to the bitter grief of the greatest men of his day; and Pirkheimer regrets missing "that tender farewell on the shore of this rude world." The revered memory of this charming personality makes the mediaeval city—which had given him little substantial recognition in life—still a place for pilgrims, who visit his old home and admire the fine monument erected on the third centenary of his birth.

Dürer was an admirable draughtsman and engraver, whose work is noble, imaginative, dramatic and yet very sensitive in character; and, by giving a glamour to all he touched, he infused new life and vigour into the productions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the golden age of German art. Contemporary painters and engravers, both, on wood and copper, took him as their model, gaining inspiration from the distinctly individual workmanship of one who, through wide travel and constant companionship with some of the most learned and thoughtful men of his day, had

cultivated his intellect while training his hand and eye, so that he was able to break away from the conventional methods of mediaeval art, and yet retain the unbounded admiration and appreciation of the great Venetians for his unique gifts.

Sidney Colvin admirably says: "All the qualities of his art—its combination of the wild and rugged with the homely and tender, its meditative depth, its enigmatic gloom, its sincerity and energy, its iron diligence and discipline—all these are qualities of the German spirit. . . He has every gift except the Greek and Italian of beauty and ideal grace. In religious painting he has profound earnestness and humanity, and an inexhaustible dramatic invention, and the accessory landscape and scenery of his compositions are more richly conceived and better studied than by any painter before him. In portraiture he is equally master of the soul and body, rendering in every detail of the human superficies with a microscopic fidelity which nevertheless does not encumber nor overlay the essential and inner character of the person represented."

Lubke also writes:—"In creative richness of fancy, in extensive power of thought and in moral energy and earnest striving Dürer must be called the first of all German masters; and as regards artistic gifts need fear no comparison with any master in the world, not even with Raphael and Michel Angelo, notwithstanding in all that concerns the true means of expression—the clothing of the idea in the garment of exquisite form—he lies so deeply fettered within the bonds of his own limited world that he rarely rises to the same height of thought or expression." "We do not indeed find in Dürer's art the classic ideal of the perfection of man's physical nature nor the spiritual ideal of the early religious painters, nor the calm dignity and rich sensuous beauty of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance; but in it we find a noble expression of the German mind with its high intellectual powers, its daring, speculative philosophy, its deep-seated reverence, and its patient laboriousness.

"Dürer's thirst for righteousness was as great as his thirst for the beautiful. He endeavoured to express in terms of the visible the intangible things of the soul, and the thoughts which were the creative power of his pictures were springs from an inner fountain supplied from the source of all good and beauty"; for his friend Melanchthon bears testimony to his rare worth as a man by saying "his least merit was his Art."