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Dürer, Albrecht

(b. Nuremberg, Germany, 21 May 1471; d. Nuremberg, 6 April 1528)

mathematics, painting, theory of art.

Dürer was the son of Albrecht Dürer (or Tüirer, as he called and signed himself) the Elder. The elder Dürer was the son of a Hungarian goldsmith and practiced that craft himself. He left Hungary, traveled through the Netherlands, and finally settled in Nuremberg, where he perfected his craft with Hieronymus Holper. He married Holper's daughter Barbara. The printer and publisher Anton Koberger stood godfather to the younger Dürer.

Dürer attended the *Lateinschule* in St. Lorenz and learned goldsmithing from his father. From 1486 to 1489 he studied painting with Michael Wolgemut (then the leading church painter of Nuremberg); in Wolgemut's workshop he was able to learn not only all the standard painting techniques but also wood and copper-engraving. In 1490, in accordance with the custom of the painter's guild, Dürer went on his *Wanderjahre*. Until 1494 he traveled through the Upper Rhine and to Colmar, Basel, and Strasbourg, presumably making his living as a draftsman.

Dürer returned to Nuremberg and on 7 July 1494 married Agnes Frey, the daughter of Hans Frey, Frey, who had been a coppersmith, had become prosperous as a mechanic and instrument maker. He belonged to that school of craftsmen in metals for which Nuremberg was famous. The marriage brought Dürer's family increased social standing and brought Dürer a generous dowry.

As early as his *Wanderjahre* Dürer had come to appreciate the works of Mantegna and other Italian artists. He wished to learn more of the artistic and philosophical rediscoveries of the Italian Renaissance (he knew from books about the Academy of Florence, modeled on Plato's Academy). Moreover, he had become convinced that the new art must be based upon science—in particular, upon mathematics, as the most exact, logical, and graphically constructive of the sciences. It was this realization that led him to the scientific work for which he was, in his lifetime, as celebrated as for his art. He decided to travel to Italy and in 1494 left his wife in Nuremberg and set off on foot to visit Venice.

On his return to Nuremberg in 1495, Dürer began serious study of mathematics and of the theory of art as derived from works handed down from antiquity, especially Euclid's *Elements* and the *De architectura* of Vitruvius. These years were highly productive for Dürer; in 1497 he adopted his famous monogram to protect his work against being counterfeited. At about the same time he formed an important and lasting friendship with Willibald Pirckheimer, subject of one of his most famous portraits. (Dürer was fortunate in his patrons and friends; besides Pirckheimer these included such humanists as Johannes Werner, the mathematician; Johann Tscherte, the imperial architect; and Nicholas Kratzer, court astronomer to the English King [Henry VIII](#).)

Most important, however, this period marked the beginning of Dürer's experiments with scientific perspective and mathematical proportion. The mathematical formulations of Dürer's anatomical proportion are derived both from antiquity and from the Italian rediscoveries; he drew upon both Polyclitus the Elder and Alberti, and to these he added the notion of plastic harmony after the mode of musical harmony taken from Boethius and Augustine. The earliest of Dürer's documented figure studies to be constructed in accordance with one or several strictly codified canons of proportion date from 1500 and include the study of a female nude (now in London). In addition, critics have pointed out that the head of the famous Munich self-portrait may be shown to have been constructed proportionally.

Throughout the years 1501–1504 Dürer continued to work with the problem of proportion, making numerous studies of men and horses. His copper engraving *Adam and Eve* (1504) marks the high point of his theoretical mastery—the figures were methodically constructed, he wrote, with a compass and a ruler. The preliminary studies for the *Adam and Eve* (now in Vienna) reveal Dürer's method. During this time he also mastered the techniques of linear perspective, as may be seen in his series of woodcuts, *The Life of the Virgin*.

In 1505–1507 Dürer returned to Venice. He extended his Italian travels to Bologna on this occasion, “on account,” he wrote, “of secret [knowledge of] perspective.” He most probably made the journey to meet with [Luca Pacioli](#), a mathematician and theorist of art. Pacioli's book, *Divina proportione* (in which [Leonardo da Vinci](#) collaborated), propounded the notion that the

sectio aurea (the famous “golden mean” of classical sculpture and architecture), being mathematical in nature, related art to that science exclusively. In Venice, at the close of his second Italian trip, Dürer bought Tacinus’ 1505 edition of Euclid, which was henceforth to be his model for mathematical formulation. This period of Dürer’s life marks the full maturity of his mathematical, philosophical, and aesthetic theory; in his painting he had begun to realize the full synthesis of late German Gothic and Italian Renaissance painting.

Between 1506 and 1512 Dürer devoted himself to the rigorous study of the problem of form, which presented itself to him in three aspects: true, mathematical form; beautiful, proportional form; and compositional form, used in an actual work of art, ideally the fusion of the preceding. In solving these problems Dürer drew upon the resources of arithmetic and geometry; it was in his achievement as a painter that his formal solutions were meaningful and expressive.

From about 1508 Dürer sketched and wrote down the substance of his theoretical studies (fragments of these notes and drawings are preserved in the notebooks in London, Nuremberg, and Dresden). Some of these fragments may have been intended for inclusion in the encyclopedic *Speis’ der Malerknaben* that Dürer had planned to publish; this *Malerbuch* was to have presented his mathematical solutions to all formal problems in the plastic arts. Although the *Malerbuch* was never completed, Dürer extracted a part of it for his major “Treatise on Proportion” (*Proportionslehre*).

In 1520–1521 Dürer traveled to the Netherlands, particularly Bruges and Ghent, where he saw the works of the early Flemish masters. He returned to Nuremberg ill with malaria; henceforth he devoted himself primarily to the composition and printing of his three major theoretical books. (He continued to paint, however; his pictures from this period include several notable portraits of his friends as well as the important diptych of the *Four Apostles*, given to the city council of Nuremberg by Dürer in 1526 and now in Munich.)

Dürer had completed the manuscript of the “Treatise on Proportion” by 1523, but he realized that a more basic mathematical text was necessary to its full comprehension. For that reason, in 1524–1525, he wrote such a text, the *Underweysung der Messung mit Zirckel und Richtscheyt in Linien, Ebenen und gantzen Corporen* (“Treatise on Mensuration With the Compass and Ruler in Lines, Planes, and Whole Bodies”), which was published by his own firm in Nuremberg in 1525.

The *Underweysung der Messung* is in four books. In the first, Dürer treats of the construction of plane curves (including the spiral of Archimedes, the logarithmic spiral, tangential spirals, conchoids, and so forth) and of helices according to the methods of descriptive geometry. In addition he includes a method for the construction of “Dürer’s leaf” (the *folium Dureri*), presents the notion of affinity by the example of the ellipse as a related representation of the circle, and, most important, describes the conic sections in top and front views as well as demonstrating their construction.

In book II Dürer develops a morphological theory of regular polygons and their exact or approximate constructions. He shows how to make use of such constructions as architectural ornaments, in parquet floors, tessellated pavements, and even bull’s-eye window panes. The book concludes with theoretical investigations (culminating in the Vitruvian approximation for squaring the circle, a process which had already been noted by Dürer in a proportional study made in Nuremberg in 1504 or 1505) and with the computation of π (as 3.141).

The first part of the third book includes bird’s-eye and profile elevations of pyramids, cylinders, and columns of various sorts (in 1510, in Nuremberg, Dürer had already sketched a spiral column with spherical processes). The second part of the book deals with sundials and astronomical instruments; Dürer had a small observatory at his disposal in the house that he had acquired from Bernhard Walther, a student of Regiomontanus, and could also make use of Walther’s scientific library, part of which he bought. In the third part of the third book Dürer is concerned with the design of letters and illustrates the construction in a printer’s quad of capitals of the Roman typeface named after him as well as an upper- and lowercase *fraktur* alphabet.

In book IV Dürer presents the development of the five Platonic solids (polyhedra) and of several semiregular (Archimedean) solids. He additionally shows how to construct the surfaces of several mixed bodies and, of particular importance, presents an approximate development of the sphere (he had begun work on the last for the construction of the first globe in Nuremberg in 1490–1492; his work on other globes, celestial charts, and armillary spheres is well known). He also shows how to duplicate the cube (the Delian problem) and related bodies, demonstrates the construction of the shadows of illuminated bodies, and finally summarizes the theory of perspective.

Except for the *Geometria Deutsch* (ca. 1486–1487), a book of arithmetical rules for builders which Dürer knew and used, the *Underweysung der Messung* is the first mathematics book in German. With its publication Dürer could claim a place in the front ranks of Renaissance mathematicians.

Dürer’s next technical publication, the *Befestigungslehre* (“Treatise on Fortifications”), was a practical work dictated by the fear of invasion by the Turks, which gripped all of central Europe. This book was published in Nuremberg in 1527; as well as summarizing the science of fortification it contains some of Dürer’s chief architectural work (various other architectural drawings and models are extant). Many of his ideas were put to use; the city of Nuremberg was strengthened according to his plan (in particular the watchtowers were fortified), similar work was undertaken at Strasbourg, and the Swiss town of Schaffhausen built what might be considered a model of Dürer’s design with small vaults above and below ground, casemates, and ramparts that still survive intact.

Dürer's third book, his "Treatise on Proportion", *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*, was published posthumously in 1528; Dürer himself saw the first proof sheets (there are no other details of his last illness and death) and his friends saw to the final stages of publication. This book is the synthesis of Dürer's solutions to his self-imposed formal problems; in it, he sets forth his formal aesthetic. In its simplest terms, true form is the primary mathematical figure (the straight line, the circle, conic sections, curves, surfaces, solids, and so forth), constructed geometrically or arithmetically, and made beautiful by the application of some canon of proportion. The resulting beautiful form may be varied within limits of similarity. (In the instance of human form, there should be sufficient variation to differentiate one figure from another, but never so much as that the figure becomes deformed or nonhuman.) Dürer's Platonic idea of form figures in his larger aesthetic; for him beauty was the aggregate of symmetrical, proportionate, and harmonious forms in a more highly symmetrical, proportionate, and harmonious work of art.

Dürer's aesthetic rules are firmly based in the laws of optics—indeed, he even designed special mechanical instruments to aid in the attainment of beautiful form. He used the height of the human body as the basic unit of measurement and subdivided it linearly to reach a common denominator for construction of a unified artistic plan. This canon was not inviolable; Dürer himself modified it continually in an attempt to approximate more closely the canon of Vitruvius (which was also the canon most favored by Leonardo). Thus the artist retains freedom in the act of selecting his canon. In books I and II of the *Vier Bücher* Dürer deals, once again, with the arithmetic and geometrical construction of forms; in books III and IV he considers the problems of variation and movement.

The last of the *Vier Bücher* is perhaps of greatest mathematical interest since in treating of the movement of bodies in space Dürer was forced to present new, difficult, and intricate considerations of descriptive spatial geometry; indeed, he may be considered the first to have done so. At the end of this book he summarizes and illustrates his theories in the construction of his famous "cube man."

Dürer's chief accomplishment as outlined in the *Vier Bücher* is that in rendering figures (and by extension, in the composition of the total work of art) he first solved the problem of establishing a canon, then considered the transformations of forms within that canon, altering them in accordance with a consistent idea of proportion. In so doing he considered the spatial relations of form and the motions of form within space. His triumph as a painter lay in his disposition of carefully proportioned figures in surrounding space; he thereby elevated what had been hit-or-miss solutions of an essential problem of plastic composition to a carefully worked out mathematical theory. No earlier method had been so successful, and Dürer's theoretical work was widely influential in following centuries.

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Albrecht Dürer

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The German painter and graphic artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) introduced the achievements of the Italian Renaissance into northern European art. His prints diffused his new style, a fusion of the German realistic tradition with the Italian ideal of beauty.

Until the end of the 15th century late medieval realism in the north and the art of the Renaissance in Italy developed more or less independently of each other. While Italian artists invented rules of perspective and proportion to govern their representations of man in his natural environment, the German and early Netherlandish painters perfected their observation and depiction of individual natural phenomena without, however, establishing a correct perspectival space within which to contain the multiplicity of detail. Albrecht Dürer was, in effect, the first non-Italian artist to associate the humanistic disciplines with the esthetic pursuits of art.

Albrecht Dürer was born on May 21, 1471, in Nuremberg. His father, Albrecht the Elder, was a Hungarian goldsmith who went to Nuremberg in 1455, where he married Barbara Holper, daughter of a goldsmith. The young Dürer received his first training in his father's workshop as an engraver. He executed his first self-portrait, a drawing in silverpoint, at the age of 13.

His Apprenticeship

From 1486 to 1490 Dürer was apprenticed to the Nuremberg painter and woodcut illustrator Michael Wolgemut, following which he went on his bachelor's journey, the route of which is not known but which presumably led him to the Rhineland and to the Netherlands, since influences of early Netherlandish art are traceable in his works. He arrived in Colmar in 1492, soon after the death of the prominent German graphic artist [Martin Schongauer](#) in 1491, and continued on to Basel, where he stayed until late 1493 working extensively as a woodcut designer.

There is a difference of scholarly opinion in regard to Dürer's work in Basel, mostly woodcuts in books illustrated by several artists. The works generally ascribed to him show he was an extremely lively and many-faceted artist, interested in the representation of various aspects of daily life. The prints and drawings he executed at that period were influenced by Schongauer and the Housebook Master, the two major representatives of Rhenish graphic art.

In 1493 Dürer painted a self-portrait (Paris) in which he represented himself in a lyrical, romantic vein and inscribed above his head, "My affairs will go as ordained in Heaven." In May 1494 he returned to Nuremberg, and 2 months later he married Agnes Frey.

First Trip to Italy

In the fall Dürer journeyed to Venice, Padua, and Mantua. He copied works by the leading contemporary Italian masters, and it is apparent in his drawings that he soon learned how to impart to his figures perfection of anatomy, classical pathos, and harmony. It was at this time that Dürer began to be interested in the art of the ancients, although he probably had access to the classical works largely through Italian copies and interpretations. In the process of assimilating the spirit of classical art, he became aware of the necessity of art theory, to which he later devoted much of his time. Dürer's travels not only opened his eyes to the marvels of ancient art but also to the variety to be found in nature, which he captured in his excellent landscape drawings and watercolors of Alpine views.

Return to Nuremberg

In 1498 Dürer published a series of 15 woodcuts, the *Apocalypse*, which represents the highest achievement of German graphic art in that medium and which had a dramatic message to impart on the eve of the Protestant Reformation. The series is a tour de force in giving shape, in a realistic framework, to the fantastic images conjured up in the Book of Revelation. Each of the woodcuts represents a homogeneous action but at the same time contributes to create a powerful unity of the whole series. In the *Apocalypse* series as well as in the later series of prints representing the Passion of Christ (The *Great Passion*, begun before 1500 and published in 1511; the *Small Passion*, 1509-1511, repeated in copper engravings in 1507-1513; and the *Life of the Virgin*, 1500-1511), Dürer interpreted the Gospel in a new, human, and understandable language, organically fusing northern realism with the ideal beauty of Italy.

In Dürer's painting, another self-portrait (1498; Madrid) marked the turning point of his art. He represented himself as a humanist scholar and an elegant young man without the attributes of his profession. In this way he opposed the concept of art as craft current outside of Italy. "There were many talented youths in our German countries who were taught the art of painting but without fundamentals and with daily practice only. They therefore grew up unconscious as a wild uncut tree," he wrote. He wanted to be different and to change his followers: "Since geometry is the right foundation of all painting, I have decided to teach its rudiments and principles to all youngsters eager for art..."

In his altarpieces Dürer revealed his interest in perspective, as in the *Paumgartner Altarpiece* (1502-1504). His portraits, such as *Oswolt Krell* (1499), were characterized by sharp psychological insight. Dürer depicted mythological and allegorical subjects in engravings on metal, for example, the *Dream of the Doctor* (after 1497) and *Sea Monster* (ca. 1498), and he also used that technique for one of his most popular prints, the *Prodigal Son* (ca. 1496). Dürer represented the hero in a novel way, the scene chosen being neither the [prodigal son's](#) sinful life nor the happy ending of his return to his father, but the moment in which the hero becomes cognizant of his sinful life and begins his repentance. In the print *Nemesis* (1501-1502) Dürer's study of human proportion is manifested, together with his taste for complicated humanistic allegory, which appears in several of his prints of that period.

Second Trip to Italy

In 1505 Dürer went to Venice again. Records of that stay abound in his letters to his humanist friend Willibald Pirckheimer. There is no mention of a visit to Rome. The assumption that Dürer visited Rome has been a subject much discussed by art historians. It was only quite recently that the inscription "Romae 1506" was discovered on his painting *Christ among the Doctors* (Lugano), which seems to argue favorably for the assumption that he did go to Rome. Until recently scholars knew only that he went as far as Bologna, but even if he really visited Rome his stay there must have been rather short as it left no visible traces in his drawings.

It was the art of Venice that profoundly influenced Dürer's work. He was on good terms there with artists, humanists, and noblemen. He wrote Pirckheimer that the painter [Giovanni Bellini](#) was his friend and wanted Dürer to paint a picture for him. It seems, however, that it was Dürer's prints rather than his paintings which established his reputation.

In 1506 Dürer painted for the church of the German merchants in Venice, S. Bartolommeo, his most Italian picture—in composition as in color: the *Feast of the Rose Garlands*. Even today, in spite of its damaged condition, "a solemn splendor of the southern town rests upon the picture," according to M. J. Friedländer. Dürer's portraits done at this time excel by nature of their soft subtlety of chiaroscuro, compositional simplicity, and lyrical mood, for example, *Portrait of a Young Girl* (1505; Vienna). The same freedom of touch, subtle and flexible, characterizes his drawings of nudes, done during and after the Italian journey.

Nuremberg Altarpieces

The large altarpieces executed when Dürer returned to Nuremberg show a mixture of colorful Italianisms with the traditional northern style. One of them is the *Heller Altarpiece* (1507-1509). The central panel was destroyed by fire in 1729 and is

known only through a copy by Jobst Harrich. The wings were painted by Dürer's assistants, and four panels were executed by Mathias Grünewald.

The other two important altarpieces of that period are the *Adoration of [the Trinity](#)* (1511) and the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (1508), in which Dürer's placement of little figures in vast landscapes was a return to his early style, based on the traditions of northern painting. Dürer was also returning to his personal heritage in that he once again took up the engraver's burin as his main tool.

Melancholy and Humanism

Perhaps Dürer's most important works of the period from 1513 to 1520 were his engravings. In them his humanistic interests appear, developed through his friendships with distinguished German scholars, especially Pirckheimer. Through Pirckheimer, Dürer became acquainted with contemporary Italian thought as well as with classical philosophy and its recent revival known as Neoplatonism. The three so-called Master Engravings *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513), *St. Jerome in His Study* (1514), and *Melencolia I* (1514) are the climax of Dürer's graphic style and also express his thoughts on life, man, and art.

These engravings are allegories of the three kinds of virtue associated with the three spheres of human activity: in *Knight* the active sphere is depicted; in *St. Jerome*, the contemplative sphere; and in *Melencolia I*, the intellectual sphere, which Erwin Panofsky describes as an allegory of "the life of the secular genius in the rational and imaginative worlds of science and art." The three prints excel not only in transmitting their complicated allegorical messages but also in conveying a powerful expression of mood: heroic in *Knight*, intellectually concentrated but serene in *St. Jerome*, and dramatic and gloomy in *Melencolia*. At the same time they show the greatest virtuosity in the handling of the medium; their silvery, vibrant surfaces contain both graphic and pictorial effects. It is possible that *Melencolia* was connected with a difficult moment in the development of Dürer's theoretical concepts, which he formulated at that time, although it was only later that his theoretical works were published.

Dürer was equally interested in a direct depiction of observed data. Throughout his life he drew and engraved simple motifs studied from life, as in the dramatic drawing of his old mother, emaciated and ill (1514).

Until 1519 Dürer worked for Emperor Maximilian I, taking part in the execution of various artistic projects of allegorical and decorative character, mostly in graphic media (the *Triumphal Arch* and the *Triumphal Procession of Maximilian I*) but also in miniature (drawings in the *Maximilian I Prayer Book*, 1515).

Last Period

In July 1520 Dürer left for the Netherlands in order to receive from Charles V, Maximilian I's successor, the re-confirmation of his yearly salary of 100 florins that Maximilian had allotted him. This trip was a triumph for the artist and proved the esteem with which he was regarded. In his travel journal Dürer left a moving day-by-day record of his stay in Antwerp and of his visits to various Dutch, Belgian, and German towns. He met princes, rich merchants, and great artists. He drew portraits, landscapes, townscapes, and curiosities in his sketchbook. He met Erasmus of Rotterdam, whom he greatly admired and of whom he made a portrait drawing, which he later engraved (1526).

Dürer's last years were difficult. The Reformation was creating great religious and social changes. Dürer supported [Martin Luther](#), whose teachings were heralded by Dürer's *Apocalypse*. In his last drawings, such as the *Oblong Passion* (10 drawings, 1520-1524), he expressed his powerful religious feelings, but held in check by a severe composition.

Dürer's last great work was the so-called *Four Apostles* (1526). The monumental, sculpturesque figures towering in their shallow space represent Saints John and Peter (left panel) and Saints Mark and Paul (right panel). The two paintings were probably intended as the wings of a triptych, the central panel of which was not executed. He gave the panels to the Town Council of Nuremberg. In the panels he included quotations from the writings of the saints represented, which contained accusations against "false prophets." Dürer's work proclaimed the unity of the new faith against the different sects arising at that time.

In 1525 Dürer published his book concerning perspective (*Instruction in Measurement*), and in 1527 his treatise on fortifications appeared. He died on April 6, 1528, a few months before his last and most important theoretical work, *The Four Books on Proportions*, was published. Excellent painter, engraver, and draftsman, Dürer was also a learned theorist. Active in art and science, he was the first true Renaissance artist outside of Italy and in his diversity a typical Renaissance man.

Dürer's Influence

Dürer's influence was greater than that of any artist of northern Europe of his time and was most widely felt through his woodcuts and engravings. He created a language of visual forms that furnished his contemporaries and followers with modern

tools adapted to their needs: his art was a translation of the Italian Renaissance vocabulary into a dialect understandable north of the Alps. Dürer was beloved by the German romantic artists and writers of the 19th century, for whom he represented the quintessential German artist.

Further Reading

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DÜRER, ALBRECHT (1471–1528), German painter, printmaker, mathematician, and theorist. Dürer is the first Western artist for whom an entire era is named—the *Dürerzeit* (the Dürer Time, c. 1490–1528), as the transitional period from late medieval to [Renaissance](#) in [Germany](#) is called. First mastering both the northern European tradition of rendering objects and textures in meticulous detail, he visited Italy twice to learn the Italian secrets of one-point perspective and classical human proportion. His graphic art was marketed internationally by two sales agents whose contracts still survive, and it was eagerly acquired by other artists as well as by the humanists who were his contemporaries. He counted among his friends the classicist Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530); the imperial [poet laureate](#) Conrad Celtis (1459–1508); the mathematicians Johannes Werner (1468–1522), developer of conic sections, and Niklas Kratzer (1486/7–1550), court astronomer to [Henry VIII](#) of [England](#); the Lutheran reformers Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534) and Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560); and the Augustinian vicar-general Johann von Staupitz (1468/9–1524), [Martin Luther's](#) (1483–1546) confessor. He owned sixteen of Luther's early pamphlets and sent Luther some of his own work as a gift. The Saxon elector Frederick the Wise (1463–1525), the Holy

Roman emperor [Maximilian I](#) (1459–1519); Cardinal Albrecht of [Brandenburg](#) (1490–1545), archbishop of Mainz and primate of the empire; and the great humanist Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466?–1536) were among his most famous patrons.

Dürer was born in [Nuremberg](#) on 21 May 1471, the third of eighteen children of the Hungarian-born goldsmith Albrecht Dürer the Elder (1427–1502) and his wife, Barbara (née Holper, 1442–1514), and was apprenticed to the leading Nuremberg painter–woodcut designer, Michael Wolgemut (1434–1519). Hoping to study engraving under [Martin Schongauer](#) (1445/50–1491), he went to Colmar on his bachelor's journey, only to find that Schongauer had died. He worked briefly in [Basel](#) as a book illustrator before returning to Nuremberg (1494) to marry Agnes Frey (1475–1539) and made his first trip to Italy soon afterward—a journey commemorated in a series of pioneering landscape watercolors.

Returning to Nuremberg in 1495, he opened his own workshop, with Frederick the Wise his first portrait sitter (1496). His most famous works include his *Self-Portrait* (1500, Alte Pinakothek, [Munich](#)), the *Fall of Man* (engraving, 1504); the altarpiece for the church of St. Bartholomew in [Venice](#) (1506, National Gallery, [Prague](#)), the three so-called Master Engravings—*Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513), *Saint Jerome in His Study* (1514), and *Melencolia I* (1514), and his watercolor *The Wild Hare* (1502, Albertina, [Vienna](#)) and chiaroscuro drawing *Praying Hands* (1508, Albertina, a study for the lost Heller altarpiece), and the *Four Apostles* painted for the Nuremberg City Hall (1526, Alte Pinakothek, Munich). Underscored by quotations from the [New Testament](#) writings of Saints John, Peter, Mark, and Paul warning against the danger of following false prophets, this last work was created in reaction against the violence of the German Peasants' War (1525).

Dürer made further trips abroad, to Venice (1505–1507), [Switzerland](#) (1517), and the [Netherlands](#) (1520–1521), attending the coronation of the new emperor, Charles V, in [Aachen](#) and making Antwerp his headquarters for a year. His experiences are recorded in his travel diary, and they include two dinners as the guest of Erasmus and his friend Peter Gillis (Aegidius: 1486–1533) and dinners with King Christian II of [Denmark](#), [Norway](#), and [Sweden](#) (1481–1559), the Portuguese consul, João Brandao (served 1514–1521), and the young Dutch artist [Lucas van Leyden](#) (1494–1533), and an audience with Margaret of [Austria](#), regent of the Netherlands (1480–1530). He recorded his delight at viewing the golden objects from Mexico sent to court by Hernán Cortés, as well as his deep despair at hearing the false news of Luther's arrest after the Diet at Worms (entry of 17 May 1521). During his stay in the Netherlands, however, he contracted the lingering illness that ended his life seven years later. He died in Nuremberg on 6 April 1528, aged fifty-seven, having devoted his last years to the writing of his theoretical works the *Treatise on Measurement* (*Unterweysung der Messung*, 1525); the treatise on fortification (*Befestigungslehre*, 1527), and the *Four Books on Human Proportion*, edited after his death by his friend Pirckheimer in 1532 and published by the widowed Agnes.

In 1509 Dürer had bought the house previously owned by the mathematician-astronomer Bernhard Walther (now the Dürerhaus Museum), which still contained both its observatory and scientific library. His house, tomb, and the bronze portrait statue of Dürer by Christian Daniel Rauch (1777–1857) erected in 1840—the first such public monument to honor an artist—can still be seen in Nuremberg.

See also [Erasmus](#), [Desiderius](#) ; [Luther](#), [Martin](#) ; [Melanchthon](#), [Philipp](#) ; [Nuremberg](#) ; [Peasants' War](#), [German](#) ; [Prints and Popular Imagery](#) .

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Dürer, Albrecht (1471–1528)

The Renaissance

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A German painter and draftsman, a leading figure of the [Renaissance](#) in northern [Europe](#), Albrecht Dürer was born in [Nuremberg](#) as the son and grandson of goldsmiths. His early training took place in the metalworking shop of his father, where he showed great talent in drawing. In 1486 he joined the workshop of Michael Wolgemut, a painter and illustrator. Dürer traveled as a young man to the [Low Countries](#), the Rhine River valley, and [Basel, Switzerland](#), where he worked as an illustrator for books and studied the work of masters of silverpoint engraving and woodcut block prints. His earliest known painting was a portrait of his father, completed in 1490. In 1494, he returned to Nuremberg, which became his permanent home, but after his marriage there he was soon voyaging again, this time to [Italy](#). The ruins and literature of ancient [Rome](#) impressed him, as did the works of Italian painters of [Venice](#), Milan, and Padua—foremost among them [Giovanni Bellini](#) and [Andrea Mantegna](#). Their paintings in a new style had a strong influence on Dürer, who would synthesize in his works the Italian ideas of classicism, human proportion, and compositional balance with the northern European taste for detailed and naturalistic draftsmanship.

After returning to Nuremberg, Dürer published *The Apocalypse*, a series of woodcuts that illustrate events in the [Bible's](#) book of Revelation. Dürer also used biblical themes in later series known as *The Great Passion*, *The Small Passion*, and *The Life of the Virgin*. His famous *Self Portrait* of 1498 is one of the renowned images of the Renaissance, showing Dürer as an idealistic humanist scholar, a type of person he had encountered often during his journey to Italy.

The Italian Renaissance had taught Dürer that certain principles of arranging scenes and rendering figures allowed the skilled artist to convey a sense of spirituality and reverence for religious subject matter. He put this principle to use in his altarpieces, paintings done for prominent display inside a church. One of the most famous of these works is the *Paumgartner Altarpiece*, which was completed by 1504. Dürer also adopted myth and allegory in his engravings, such as *Nemesis* and *The Prodigal*

Son. Along with his [watercolor painting](#) of *The Wild Hare*, still one of the most common art reproductions, these works were reproduced as prints by the thousands and circulated throughout Europe.

Dürer returned to Italy in 1505; he visited Venice and Bologna and may have traveled as far as Rome. During this trip he wrote a series of engaging and observant letters to his friend, Willibald Pirckheimer, one of the leading humanist scholars of [Germany](#). In Venice, where he lived for two years, Dürer struck up a friendship with [Giovanni Bellini](#) and other artists, and was hired to create a painting for the church of San Bartolomeo. He developed great skill at rendering the natural world of landscapes, plants and animals in his engravings, a skill he refined during his crossing of the [Alps](#) from Germany to Italy.

After his return to Germany, he completed two major altarpieces, *The Adoration of the Trinity* and *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, and created a series of masterful engravings reflecting ideals of humanistic thought Dürer had encountered in Italy. These works include *Knight, Death, and the Devil*; *St. Jerome in His Study*; and *Melancholia*. They represented the new ideal of philosophy: the contemplative life of study in Neoplatonism and observations in science that countered medieval religious doctrines. On commission from the emperor [Maximilian I](#), Dürer also completed two monumental engravings, *The Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I* and *The Triumphal Procession of Maximilian I*. In 1520 the new emperor, Charles V, continued the salary and privileges that Maximilian had extended to Dürer, recognizing the artist's talent and importance. But the Catholic emperor was a powerful opponent of the Protestant Reformation of [Martin Luther](#), a movement that Dürer wholeheartedly supported and celebrated in engravings such as *The Last Supper* and *Praying Hands*. One of his last works was *The Four Apostles*, a painting of the four apostles of the [New Testament](#): John, Peter, Mark, and Paul. In his last years he wrote extensively on art theory and history. He published a work on fortifications and another on the science of perspective, *Instruction in Measurement*, and wrote *The Four Books on Proportions*, which was published a few months after his death.

Dürer's reputation spread throughout Europe, and particularly in Germany, in the years after his death. He ushered an entire nation of German artists from the medieval period into the Renaissance, and brought graphic art of printmaking and woodcuts to a higher level, where they began competing with painting and sculpture for the attention of art historians and patrons. His detailed, well-crafted allegorical works fit well with notions of the Romantic movement that emerged in northern Europe in the eighteenth century, and which adopted Dürer as an artistic forefather.

See Also: Maximilian I; Pirckheimer, Willibald; printing

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Dürer, Albrecht

The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.

Albrecht Dürer (äl'brëkht dūr'ər), 1471–1528, German painter, engraver, and theoretician, most influential artist of the German school, b. Nuremberg.

Early Life and Work

The son of a goldsmith, Dürer was an apprentice, first in his father's workshop and later until 1490 in the studio of the painter [Wolgemut](#). After his bachelor journey, which took him to Colmar, Basel, and Strasbourg, and a trip to Italy in 1494, he established himself permanently in Nuremberg. Through these travels he gained a firsthand acquaintance with the art of [Schongauer](#), the foremost Northern engraver of this time, and while in Italy he was drawn to the art of [Mantegna](#) and [Bellini](#). Together with a keen sense of observation for realistic details, Dürer developed a rational system of perspective and bodily proportions, but was also able to create visions of fantasy, such as his [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#). A series of large woodcuts of the *Apocalypse* was issued in 1498.

Later Life and Work

After 1500 Dürer became more interested in art theory, and his engravings reveal a meticulousness of craftsmanship, with a great richness of detail. Two woodcut cycles of the *Passion of Christ* and a *Life of the Virgin* appeared in the first decade of the 16th cent. Dürer made a second trip to Italy in 1505, staying in Venice for nearly two years. His sensitive perception of the natural world is shown in a number of drawings and watercolors of plants and animals and in a remarkable series of Alpine landscapes executed in the course of his journey to Italy.

A friend of some of the leading contemporary humanists, Dürer expressed his humanistic inclinations in such engravings as *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513), *St. Jerome in his Cell*, and *Melencolia I* (both: 1514). The artist's investigation of the ideal proportions of the human body culminated in the *Fall of Man* (1514). For the Emperor Maximilian I, Dürer was the designer of more decorative projects, including a mammoth woodcut known as the *Triumphal Arch*, a *Triumphal Procession*, and a small prayer book. As a theoretician, Dürer composed a treatise on human proportions, a work on applied geometry, and a treatise on fortifications.

Converted (c.1519) to the cause of Protestantism, he reflected the doctrines of Luther in some of his later works, such as a woodcut of the [Last Supper](#) (1523) and drawings of saints for an unexecuted altarpiece. In 1520 Dürer went to the Netherlands, where he was received as a recognized master—the first German artist to achieve substantial renown beyond the borders of his native country. In the second decade of the 16th cent. he concentrated more on the translation of lighting and tonal effects into the graphic medium.

Paintings

Dürer's *Portrait of His Father* (1490) in Florence, and his *Self-Portrait* (1493) in the Louvre are his earliest known paintings. He signed most of his work and made penetrating self-portraits throughout his life, revealing a consciousness of his individuality that was unusual in German art before his time. Among Dürer's several important altarpieces are the *Paumgärtner Altar* (1502–4) in Munich and the *Feast of the Rose Garlands* (1506) and the *Adoration of [the Trinity](#)* (1511) in Vienna. The *Heller Altar*, finished in 1509, was destroyed by fire in the 18th cent.

Achievement

Dürer's principal accomplishments were the elevation of graphic art into the realm of fine art, the evolution of the profession of artist above that of other artisans in Northern Europe, and a highly original realization of a unique artistic vision. In addition, he defined his figures, particularly in mythological scenes, with a superb sense of proportion. An equally talented draftsman and painter, he executed a vast number of woodcuts and engravings throughout his career, achieving as a graphic artist an unsurpassed technical mastery and expressive power. His work has influenced generations of printmakers and draftsmen.

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Dürer, Albrecht

Mathematics

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German Painter, Printmaker, and Engraver 1471–1528

Albrecht Dürer was born in 1471 in [Nuremberg, Germany](#), and died there in 1528. He is regarded as one of the leading artists of the [Renaissance](#). His use of mathematical methods in artistic composition influenced subsequent development of art.

Dürer first worked with his father, who was an accomplished goldsmith, then broadened his artistic training by assisting artist Michel Wohlgemuth. Developing his expertise quickly, Dürer was soon able to go out on his own as a painter and printmaker. He became widely known, traveling throughout [Europe](#) while studying and producing works of art, and was a particular favorite of Emperor Maximilian I.

Dürer attempted to portray nature realistically in his works, paying close attention to the appearance of animals, plants, and the human body and trying to reproduce them accurately. He was even known to have dissected **cadavers** to better understand the human body. Dürer's realistic paintings of plants influenced botanists to use drawings that more closely resembled the plants portrayed.

To improve his paintings and etchings, Dürer sought a mathematical formulation for the ideal human body and for beauty in general. He studied the problems of space, **perspective**, and **proportion** and constructed his forms on the canvas, using arithmetic and geometric techniques. The results of his studies were published posthumously in 1528 as *The Four Books on Human Proportions*, a work that has had a significant effect on succeeding generations of artists.

see also Human Body.

J. William Moncrief

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Dürer, Albrecht

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Dürer, Albrecht (1471–1528) German painter, engraver, and designer of woodcuts, the greatest artist of the n [Renaissance](#). During Dürer's visits to Italy, he was influenced by artists such as [Leonardo da Vinci](#). His personal synthesis of n and s European traditions deeply affected European art. Dürer's album of woodcuts, *The Apocalypse* (1498), established him as a supreme graphic artist. His paintings include *The Feast of the Rose Garlands* (1506) and *Four Apostles* (1526), which reveal his preoccupation with [Lutheranism](#).

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05209c.htm>; <http://www.nationalgallery.org>

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Albrecht Dürer

World Eras

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1471-1528

Painter and printmaker

Sources

German Roots. Albrecht Dürer was born on 21 May 1471 in Nuremberg, the third of eighteen children. He began his training as a goldsmith in his father's workshop but persuaded his father to allow him to apprentice with Michael Wolgemut, a local painter and designer of woodcut book-illustrations. Wolgemut's shop created works for Anton Koberger, Dürer's godfather, and a prestigious printer and editor. After completing his apprenticeship, Dürer traveled (1490-1494) and visited notable artists and publishing centers at Colmar, Basel, and Strasbourg, while employing his skills as a print designer. He married Agnes Frey, the daughter of a local well-to-do artisan, upon his return but left several months later when the plague broke out in Nuremberg. During that trip to Venice (1494-1495) he created some of the first autonomous watercolors depicting landscapes and architectural settings. Upon his return he concentrated on the production of woodcuts and engravings. Dürer acted as his own publisher for the *Apocalypse* series, produced in 1498, using the typefaces of Kolberger. The combination of the printing press and oil-based ink had made books more widely available to upper-middle-class readers during Dürer's lifetime, and he was able to shape the tastes of his public and to select his images and subject matter with great freedom.

Commissions. A second trip to Venice from 1505 to 1507 resulted in a commission to paint *The Madonna of the Rosegarlands* (1506) for the German merchants of the Con-fraternity of the Rosary. Dürer writes of the new respect he obtained from the Venetian community in letters to his humanist friend Willibald Pirckheimer. He recognized the elevated status that artists had in Italy and wished to obtain these benefits in his home country. His choice of subjects, such as Adam and Eve, enabled him to incorporate his understanding of the classical nude in his engravings. Dürer's choice of themes and medium (woodcut or engraving) reflected his awareness of his audience and their resources in the marketing of his prints. He painted portraits of the emperors Charlemagne and Sigismund for the Nuremberg city council around 1510-1513. These works were located in a room of a house where the imperial relics and jewels of the Holy [Roman Empire](#) were displayed to the citizens. Dürer's altarpiece *The Assumption of the Virgin and Her Coronation by the Holy Trinity*, commissioned by Jakob Heller of Frankfurt am Main, survives only in a copy, but the letters he wrote to his patron record the conflicts he encountered about the cost of his work and his time. He received several major commissions from Emperor Maximilian I, including a multiple-block print series of *The Triumphal Arch* (1515-1517) and *The Triumphal Procession* (1516-1518). In 1520-1521 he traveled with his wife to the Netherlands, recording his experiences in a journal and sketchbook. He devoted his subsequent time to preparing a series of theoretical treatises on human proportion and measurement, which was published in 1527-1528.

The Artist's Role. Dürer's position within a nascent print culture functioned at the nexus of developments in which oral and scribal culture both existed. His work expresses some self-consciousness about the role of the artist in the newly developing consumer market among the nobility and educated burghers. He was a member of the humanist circle of Konrad Celtis, the imperial [poet laureate](#). He also frequented a religious study group organized by [Martin Luther's](#) mentor, the Augustinian monk and theologian Johann von Staupitz. Dürer had a substantial collection of Luther's writings (1517-1519), which has led to scholarly investigations that attempt to place his work within specific theological views. The fact that Dürer created work for such diverse patrons as Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam and Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg documents that his personal views did not enter into these arenas.

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Dürer, Albrecht

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May 21, 1471

Nuremberg, Germany

April 6, 1528

Nuremberg, Germany

Engraver, painter

"My affairs will go as ordained in Heaven."

Albrecht Dürer.

The German painter and graphic artist Albrecht Dürer introduced the achievements of the Italian Renaissance into northern European art. The Renaissance was a cultural revolution that began in Italy during the mid-1300s. It was initiated by scholars called humanists who promoted the human-centered values of ancient Greece and Rome. Humanist ideals were soon influencing the arts, literature, philosophy, science, religion, and politics in Italy. During the early fifteenth century, innovations of the Italian Renaissance began spreading into the rest of Europe and reached a peak in the sixteenth century. Dürer's influence was most widely felt through his woodcuts and engravings.

During the fifteenth century, the Rhineland (a region along the Rhine River in Germany) and southern Germany were the foremost centers for the early printing and publishing industry. The industry was based on the technology of printmaking, which involved reproducing text and images from woodcuts and engravings. After the invention of movable type in the mid-1400s (see **Johannes Gutenberg** entry), woodcuts were used for illustrating books that were produced on the printing press. By 1500 illustrated books were issued in great numbers north of the Alps (a mountain range between France and Italy). In the 1490s Dürer singlehandedly raised the woodcut to the level of high art. A much more complex technology was needed to manufacture a flat, smooth metal plate than to prepare a plank of wood. For that reason the production of engravings was more

expensive, so it was usually confined to a local area. Engraving seems to have begun in the upper region of the Rhine River valley, near [Lake Constance](#). Again it was Dürer who brought the Renaissance to the north by using engravings to reproduce fine art.

Woodcuts and Engravings

During the fifteenth century, the Rhineland and southern Germany were the foremost centers for the early printing and publishing industry. Woodcuts could be created with a minimum of technological expertise. To make a woodcut, an image was drawn onto a flat plank of fairly hard wood, such as pearwood. The wood was cut away from the sides of the lines, leaving the image in relief (raised above the surface). Ink was then applied onto the woodcut, which was pressed onto a piece of paper. An engraving is made by cutting lines into a metal plate (usually copper). The cutting tool, called a burin, creates grooves of varying width and depth, depending on the pressure applied to it. Ink is spread onto the plate, and the surface is then wiped clean. A dampened piece of paper is put on top of the plate. Next the paper is covered with a piece of felt or blanket, and the two are run through a roller press. In the 1490s Albrecht Dürer raised the woodcut and the engraving to the level of high art.

Embraces humanism

Dürer was born on May 21, 1471, in Nuremberg, Germany. His father, Albrecht the Elder, was a Hungarian goldsmith (one who makes items from gold) who went to Nuremberg in 1455, where he married Barbara Holper, daughter of a goldsmith. The young Dürer received training as an engraver in his father's Nuremberg workshop. He made his first self-portrait, a drawing in silverpoint (a drawing technique using a pencil of silver, usually on specially prepared paper or parchment), at the age of thirteen. In 1490, after serving a four-year apprenticeship with the painter and woodcut illustrator Michel Wohlgemuth (1434–1519), Dürer set out on a trip through the Rhineland and the Netherlands. He then worked as a woodcut designer in Basel, Switzerland. In 1493 Dürer painted a self-portrait in which he represented himself in a romantic image. Above his head he inscribed these words: "My affairs will go as ordained in Heaven." The following year he returned to Nuremberg and married Agnes Frey. He then journeyed to Venice, Padua, and Mantua, where he copied works by the leading contemporary Italian masters. It is apparent in his drawings that he soon learned how to perfect anatomy and harmony (balanced relationship arrangement features) in his figures. He returned to Nuremberg in 1494.

During his travels, Dürer encountered humanism, the intellectual and literary movement that initiated the Renaissance. The Italian scholar and poet **Petrarch** (1304–1374; see entry) is credited with starting humanism in Florence in the mid-1300s. Soon other scholars were spreading his ideas throughout Italy and eventually into the rest of Europe. Humanism was being promoted in the Netherlands and Germany by the Dutch scholar **Desiderius Erasmus** (1466–1536; see entry). Humanists studied the works of Greek and Roman writers from ancient times (called the classical period) for the purpose of imitating them. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, humanists valued the earthly life, glorified human nature, and celebrated individual achievement. As an expression of their optimism, Renaissance scholars defined a new area of learning called the "humanities," which initially included language and literature, art, history, rhetoric (public speaking), and philosophy.

Above all, humanists believed in the human potential to become well versed (knowledgeable) in many areas. Embracing this ideal, Italian artists absorbed a broad range of subjects and came upon new ways to view the world. One important discovery was perspective (also called single-point perspective), the technique used by painters to represent three-dimensional objects on a flat canvas (a cloth used for paintings) from a fixed point of view. The Florentine sculptor and goldsmith [Filippo Brunelleschi](#) (1377–1446) invented perspective when he was working on architectural drawings. Perspective eventually led to the concept of proportion, that is, the harmonious and balanced relationship of details in a work of art. The great Italian painter and sculptor **Michelangelo** (1475–1564; see entry) was one of the first artists to use perspective and proportion in his works.

Dürer absorbed many of these influences. He became interested in such humanist concepts as reviving the ancient use of allegory (a story featuring characters that have symbolic significance). He gained an appreciation of art theory (application of general principles to artistic creation), to which he later devoted much of his time. He also met prominent humanists such as the German scholar Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530), who became his lifelong friend. Dürer's travels opened his eyes not only to the marvels of ancient art but also to the variety to be found in nature. For instance, while working in Basel he created woodcuts as illustrations for books. These works show that he was a many-faceted artist who represented various aspects of daily life. He also captured views of the Alps Mountains (a mountain range between France and Italy) in landscape drawings and watercolors.

Takes art in new direction

Upon returning to Nuremberg, Dürer established a workshop and entered one of the most productive periods of his career. The year 1498 was a momentous one, both for Dürer and for the art world in northern Europe. Until the end of the fifteenth century, art in northern Europe and in Italy had developed more or less independently of each other. Italian artists were using perspective and proportion to represent figures and objects that seemed actually to exist in space. Painters from Germany and the Netherlands, on the other hand, were producing essentially flat images that did not portray spatial relationships. Another important distinction was that Italian artists were promoting idealized concepts of beauty with refined, carefully balanced

images that gave a sense of harmony and unity. The works of artists from Germany and the Netherlands were less refined, relying on a more "realistic" style that gave figures and objects a rougher appearance. Dürer was, in effect, the first non-Italian artist to introduce humanist concepts into the creation of art.

In 1498 Dürer painted his famous second self-portrait, which marked a turning point in his art. He represented himself as a humanist scholar and an elegant young man, suggesting that the artist is a member of the cultural elite instead of being merely a craftsman. This was a new concept, widely accepted in Italy, that raised the artist to the status of a creative genius. The idea had not yet reached northern Europe. At that time northern artists were still considered craftsmen, and their work was viewed as simply decorative and functional. Dürer wanted to pass his ideas along to a younger generation of artists, but he found that talented young German artists were not taught the fundamentals of painting. He therefore decided to teach them geometry, which he believed was the basis of painting. (Geometry is the branch of mathematics that deals with the measurement, properties, and relationships of points, lines, angles, surfaces, and solids.)

In 1498 Dürer published the last of fifteen woodcuts in a series titled *Apocalypse*. Using experimental techniques that combined the realistic style of northern art with the Italian concept of ideal beauty (perfect balance and harmony among all elements, such as shapes and colors, in paintings), he explored greater expression of form, texture, and light in woodcuts. *Apocalypse* is based on the fantastic images described in the Book of Revelation (also known as Apocalypse), the last book of the [New Testament](#) in the Bible (the Christian holy book). Revelation was possibly written by [Saint John](#) (called the Apostle; first century a.d.) while in exile with other Christians on the Island of Patmos off the coast of [Asia Minor](#). They had fled there in a.d. 81 after being persecuted by Roman Emperor Domitian (a.d. 51–96). Depicting an apocalypse (a great catastrophe that brings momentous change), Revelation contains visions of triumph over evil and persecution. The book is organized according to patterns of sevens. Among them is the opening of the seven seals on the scroll in the hand of God. Four of the scrolls reveal the [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#), who will bring the catastrophe. The rider on the white horse is generally thought to symbolize Christ, and the rider on the red horse is war. Famine (widespread hunger resulting from lack of food) rides the black horse, and death rides the pale horse.

The Four Horsemen were included in the images Dürer depicted in *Apocalypse*. The results were dramatic. Never before had the terror of the Four Horsemen seemed so real as in Dürer's woodcut. Likewise, the artist convincingly portrayed an angel dissolving into a band of clouds in *St. John Eating the Book*, another woodcut in the series. Now considered the highest achievement in German woodcut art, *Apocalypse* presented biblical teachings in a new and understandable language that shows strong humanist influences. Dürer later created a series of prints representing the Passion (crucifixion) of Christ (*Great Passion*, 1511; *Small Passion*, 1511 and 1513; and *Life of the Virgin*, 1500–11). This work is also notable for its innovative, humanist style.

Dürer revealed humanist influences in other works. He used perspective in the *Paumgartner Altarpiece* (1504). His portraits, such as *Oswolt Krell* (1499), were characterized by sharp psychological insight. He depicted mythological and allegorical subjects in engravings on metal, such as the *Dream of the Doctor* (after 1497) and *Sea Monster* (c. 1498). Dürer also used that technique for one of his most popular prints, *Prodigal Son* (c. 1496). It is based on the [New Testament](#) story of a young man who leaves home and leads a wasteful life, then repents and returns home to a joyful welcome from his father. In the print Dürer represented the son in a novel way. He chose not to depict the young man's sinful life or to show the happy reunion between father and son. Instead, Dürer captured the moment when the son becomes aware of his sinful ways and begins his repentance. This was a significant approach because the focus was on the son's emotions, which was consistent with the emphasis on the individual. In *Nemesis* (1502) Dürer showed his knowledge of human anatomy. The print also reflects his interest in allegory.

Supports Reformation

Dürer went to Venice again in 1505. The following year he painted *Feast of the Rose Garlands* for the Chapel of [Saint Bartholomew](#), the German merchants' church in Venice. The artist's use of bright colors and the techniques of perspective and proportion show the influence of Renaissance painters. After returning to Nuremberg, Dürer painted several large altarpieces (works hung above altars in churches), which combined colorful Italian features with the traditional northern style. Among them are *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (1508) and *Adoration of the Trinity* (1511), which show little figures in vast landscapes. Dürer then left painting and returned to print-making. Perhaps his most important works of the period from 1513 to 1520 were his engravings, which show the influence of his friendships with distinguished German humanists. The three so-called Master Engravings—*Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513), *St. Jerome in His Study* (1514), and *Melencolia I* (1514)—represent the height of Dürer's engraving style and also express his thoughts on life, man, and art. These engravings are allegories of the three kinds of virtue associated with the three realms of human activity—action, contemplation, and intellectual pursuit. The active realm is depicted in *Knight*; the contemplative, in *St. Jerome*; and the intellectual, in *Melencolia I*.

Dürer gave equal attention to the world around him. Throughout his life he drew and engraved simple motifs studied from life, as in the dramatic drawing of his aging mother, who is emaciated (extremely thin) and ill (1514). Until 1519 Dürer worked for Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519). He was involved in various allegorical and decorative projects, most of them prints, such as *Triumphal Arch* and *Triumphal Procession of Maximilian I*. Dürer also did some miniatures, such as drawings in the *Maximilian I Prayer Book* (1515).

In 1520 Dürer left Nuremberg for Antwerp, Belgium, to collect his yearly salary from **Charles V** (1500–1558; see entry), the new Holy Roman Emperor. This trip was a triumph for the artist and proved that he was held in high esteem. In his travel journal, Dürer left a daily record of his stay in Antwerp and of his visits to various Dutch, Belgian, and German towns. He met princes, rich merchants, and great artists. He drew portraits, landscapes, and townscapes in his sketchbook. He met Erasmus, whom he admired and of whom he made a portrait drawing, which he later engraved.

Lucas Cranach the Elder

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) was a German painter, printmaker, and book illustrator who helped promote the Protestant Reformation. Born in Kronach, near Bamberg, he was trained by his father. Almost nothing is known of his early career, except that he absorbed the revolutionary style of Albrecht Dürer. Cranach went to Vienna, Austria, in 1502. There he entered a humanist circle centered on the university and led by the poet Conrad Celtis (1459–1508). In Vienna, Cranach made religious paintings with a new expressive power. By loosely applying colors, he gave a sense of turbulence to figures, and he set them in agitated landscapes that seems to reflect their emotions. These works, especially their rendering of nature, influenced other artists in the Danube River region, including **Albrecht Altdorfer** (c. 1480–1530).

By 1505 Cranach had moved to Wittenberg, Germany, where he became court painter of the Saxon elector (representative for the district of Saxony to the imperial court) Frederick the Wise. Serving three more electors over the next fifty years, Cranach dominated the art of northern and eastern Germany through his works for the princes. He also produced work for the Protestant cause, which was centered in Wittenberg. His shop employed his sons Hans (c. 1513–c. 1537) and Lucas, called the Younger (1515–1586), plus apprentices and assistants. Cranach was Renaissance Germany's most prolific portraitist. Along with likenesses of Saxon nobles, he portrayed Protestant reformers in paintings and prints that spread the Protestant cause well beyond Wittenberg.

Cranach's links to the Protestant reformer **Martin Luther** (1483–1546) were both personal and professional. The men were godfathers to one another's children, and they collaborated on projects, such as anti-Catholic pamphlets, diagrams of reform doctrines, and illustrations for Luther's Bible translations. Nevertheless, Cranach continued to work for Catholic patrons, notably Luther's foe, Albrecht of Brandenburg. After his death his shop continued to thrive under Lucas the Younger.

During the final decade of his life, Dürer supported the ideas of Protestant reformer **Martin Luther** (1483–1546; see entry). Dürer's last great work was a two-panel painting, often called *Four Apostles* (1526). The monumental, sculpturelike figures represent Saints John and Peter (left panel) and Saints Mark and Paul (right panel). The paintings were probably intended as the wings of a triptych (three-panel artwork), but Dürer did not paint the central panel. He gave *Four Apostles* to the Town Council of Nuremberg. In the panels he included quotations from the writings of the saints, which contained accusations against "false prophets," or those who falsely claimed to speak the word of God. Dürer's work proclaimed the unity of the new Protestant faith against the different sects arising at that time. In 1525 Dürer published a book on perspective (*Instruction in Measurement*), and his treatise on fortifications appeared in 1527. He died in 1528, a few months before the publication of *The Four Books on Proportions*, his last and most important theoretical work.

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Dürer, Albrecht

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1471–1528

Painter
Graphic artist

Early Life.

Albrecht Dürer was born in Nuremberg to a large family. His father had migrated to Germany from Hungary, and had by the time of the younger Dürer's birth established himself as a successful goldsmith in this prosperous German city. Dürer's father expected him to carry on in the family's trade, but early in life the child demonstrated great skill as a draftsman, and the son soon became an apprentice to the local artist Michael Wolgemut, a painter and book illustrator. In 1490 Dürer completed his apprenticeship, and he undertook a series of journeys through Germany and Switzerland during which he made acquaintances in the printing trade and befriended a number of artists. Along the way he supported himself by occasionally undertaking printing projects. Upon his return to Nuremberg in 1494, he married the daughter of a wealthy artisan, but an outbreak of the plague several months later encouraged the artist to leave the city, this time for Venice. Along the way Dürer kept both a written and visual record of his journeys. The drawings he completed on this trip were some of the first independent landscapes in European history. When the artist returned to his native city, he began to publish prints. The first undeniable masterpiece, his woodcut *Apocalypse* series, appeared as a book published in a joint venture with his godfather, the accomplished Nuremberg printer Anton Koberger. In these woodcuts Dürer relied on amazingly precise techniques to invoke the horrors of the biblical prophecies concerning the end of the world. During this early stage of the artist's career he also painted, designed [stained glass](#), and undertook a number of decorative projects. His theoretical interests in art and aesthetics also grew, and the author kept written records of his thinking on these subjects. From his youth, the artist had also painted and drawn self-portraits. In 1500, he completed the last of these portraits, one that shows the artist staring at the viewer in a Christlike pose. While Dürer portrayed himself as serene, a restless temperament seemed always to lie beneath his calm exterior. By 1505, for instance, the artist's love of travel and adventure caused him to set out on a second journey to Italy.

Venice.

When Dürer arrived in Venice for the second time, his reputation preceded him. Although several Venetian artists befriended the German, Dürer wrote home to a friend in Nuremberg that he was the constant victim of Italian jealousy. The artist admired the higher status and social standing of Italian painters and he longed to see artists treated similarly in Germany. In Venice Dürer won a commission for an altarpiece, the *Madonna of the Rose Garlands*, from a confraternity of German merchants who lived in the city. Criticism from Italians about his skill in painting caused the artist to devote considerable time and attention to this picture, which showed the influence of the great Venetian artist Bellini on its completion. Soon after finishing the work, though, Dürer returned home and entered into another very productive period. He demonstrated his mastery of the lessons he had learned in Italy by painting life-size nudes of Adam and Eve as well as his altarpiece panel the *Adoration of the Trinity*. These works demonstrated the artist's mastery of the skills of the painter, while at the same time his skills in [graphic arts](#), particularly in the copper engraving process, improved tremendously. Throughout the 1510s the artist released a number of

new series of engravings, including his famous *Melancholia I*, *The Knight*, and *St. Jerome in His Study*. Professional recognition also mounted in this period, which culminated in Dürer's receiving a lifetime pension from the German emperor.

Later Years.

In 1520 the artist embarked with his wife on his final travels, a visit to the [Low Countries](#). Dürer ostensibly set off on this journey to make certain that the new emperor, Charles V, would not revoke his pension. But he indulged his taste for art and spent months exploring the Netherlands. As he had done in the past, Dürer supported himself and his wife on these journeys by selling his prints and undertaking occasional commissions along the way. Unfortunately, during one of his many side trips, he developed a fever, which may have been malaria, and he returned to Nuremberg with weakened health. Because of his frailty, the artist spent the last years of his life painting portraits of local dignitaries and writing about art. Earlier, Dürer had begun a painter's manual, similar to those written by many Italian artists. He now took the opportunity to work on this manual, as well as several other works on proportions and [civil engineering](#). Although pioneering in their scope, the publication of several of these works after the artist's death did not have an immediate effect on German artists. Instead it was the example of Dürer's engravings that survived to stimulate graphic art production in Germany during the following generations. Like many German artists at the time, Dürer also followed the religious debates that were erupting in his native country at the time. Humanism had deeply colored the artist's outlook in the previous decades, and he aligned himself with the Lutheran cause. In 1526, Dürer painted his two panels of the *Four Apostles* to be hung in Nuremberg's town hall. Although there was little that was specifically Lutheran about these works, his choice of subject—the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—was an expression of his hope that the town would continue to follow the Reformation's biblical path in religious matters.

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Dürer, Albrecht

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Personal

Born May 21, 1471, in Nuremberg, Germany; died April 6, 1528, in Nuremberg, Germany; son of Albrecht (a goldsmith) and Barbara (Holfer) Dürer; married Agnes Frey, July 7, 1494. *Education*: Apprenticed to painter Michael Woldgemut. *Religion*: Roman Catholic.

Career

Artist, engraver, mathematician, and woodcutter. *Exhibitions*: Work included in museum collections in Munich, Dresden, Cologne, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Weimar, and Berlin, Germany; Vienna, Austria; Gardner Museum, Boston, MA; Florence, Italy; Paris, France; Madrid, Spain; [New York](#), NY; Ottawa, Canada; Washington, DC; Prague, [Czech Republic](#); and Providence, RI.

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Sidelights

While German painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer is well known as an innovative artist on par with contemporaries Raphael and Michelangelo, less well known are his achievements in the areas of mathematics and artistic theory. Known for introducing Italian Renaissance innovations into northern Europe, Dürer himself melded the Renaissance style with a Germanic realism that had strong roots in the [Middle Ages](#) and created a unique style of his own; he also took advantage of advances in printing-press technology to promote, through sales agents, the [wide distribution](#) of his wood and copperplate engravings among members of Europe's upper middle classes. His engravings and woodcuts, signed with his easily identifiable "AD" monogram, are considered among the major influences of modern European art.

Dürer was born on May 21, 1471, in Nuremberg, a thriving city with a reputation for business, the arts, and scholarship. His father, Hungarian-born Albrecht Dürer Senior, was a goldsmith; Dürer's mother, Barbara Holfer, was the daughter of the

goldsmith who had trained the senior Dürer. One of eighteen children, Dürer received his first training in his father's workshop, where he became a skilled engraver and began to learn the jeweler's trade. His first known work of art, a self-portrait rendered in silverpoint, was completed when he was age thirteen, while the future artist was attending the Lateinschule in St. Lorenz.

At age fifteen Dürer requested that he be apprenticed to noted Nuremberg painter and woodcut designer Michael Wohlgemut, an artisan who was well known for his altarpieces. His apprenticeship to the woodcutter completed in 1490, he then began a four-year excursion throughout the Rhineland and into the Netherlands, where he gained a strong grounding in the Germanic aesthetic while also developing his unique style. The year 1492 found him in Colmar, and from there he traveled to Strasbourg and then Basel, where he remained until the end of 1493, working extensively as a woodcut designer and contributing woodcut illustrations to several books of prints. Returning home to Nuremberg in May of 1494, he established his own shop as a woodcutter. Two months later, in July, pursuant to the desire of both their parents, he married Agnes Frey, the daughter of wealthy Nuremberg scholar and designer Hans Frey.

Takes First Trip to Italy

Only months after his marriage, prompted perhaps by a local outbreak of the bubonic plague as well as by receipt of funds in the form of Agnes Frey's dowry, Dürer left his young wife and traveled on a much anticipated trip through Augsburg and the Tyrol and into Italy. Visiting the cities of Verona, Venice, Padua, and Mantua, he studied classical art and also duplicated the works by the most popular artists of the day—Raphael, Michaelangelo, and [Giovanni Bellini](#), the last of whom became a strong influence and good friend—as was typical of art students. He also began to devote a great deal of time to the study of art theory, an area new to him because he had trained as a craftsman. Working in watercolor and in pencil, he made several landscape renderings that reveal his interest in nature but which also are cited as revealing his limitations in the use of color. Dürer's woodcut engravings would more than make up for any such limitations.

In the medieval world, the cultural divide between the German states and Italy was vast, and this north-south divide would increase following the Protestant Reformation sparked by German theologian [Martin Luther](#) in 1515. At the start of the sixteenth century the differences in the development between Renaissance art in Italy and German art were apparent: Italian artists such as [Leonardo da Vinci](#) and Raphael devised and followed rules of perspective and proportion in their depiction of both human figures and the natural world, while German artists—as well as Dutch painters—focused on the detailed depiction of each object without determining a proportional framework within which the details would relate to one another. Because of his interest in mathematics, and his study of Renaissance art, following his return to Nuremberg in 1494 Dürer adopted a scientific approach to his art, devised methods of determining realistic perspective through the use of compass and ruler, and educated German artists such as Hans Baldung, Sebald Beham, and Jörg Pencz in this new approach to painting. "Since geometry is the right foundation of all painting," he wrote, "I have decided to teach its rudiments and principles to all youngsters eager for art." He also read widely on mathematics and architecture as they related to proportion.

Despite his youth, Dürer became known in the upper circles of polite society after his works caught the attention of Frederick the Wise of Saxony. Pleased with a portrait painted by the young Nuremberg artist, Frederick encouraged Dürer to relocate his studio to Weimar, but Dürer declined due to his love of the city where he was raised; nonetheless, Frederick's praise prompted others to seek out work by the artist. In addition, engravings such as 1504's *Adam and Eve* and the woodcut series *The Life of the Virgin*, completed between 1502 and 1505, showed the artist's ability to render the human form in dimensions that corresponded with nature, making Dürer's work unique in northern Europe.

Among the earliest works reflecting the influence of the artist's trip to Italy were a series of finely detailed woodcuts titled *The Revelation of St. John* and depicting the Apocalypse (1498). This work—a self-published series that includes *Angels of the Euphrates*, *Four Riders of the Apocalypse*, and *Battle of the Angels with the Dragon*—are considered by many to represent the culmination of German graphic art in that medium. Based on the events detailed in the Book of Revelation, these fifteen woodcuts represent the Gospel in the humanist perspective reflective of Dürer's social milieu; his lifelong friend, the humanist scholar Willibald Pirckheimer, introduced him to contemporary Italian thought as well to classical philosophy, which was receiving renewed intellectual interest through the study of Neoplatonism. Through Pirckheimer's influence, Dürer took up the cause of raising the repute of German visual arts to a position on par with those of Italy.

In addition to woodcuts and engravings, Dürer continued to paint. In 1506 he undertook a commission for Saint Bartolommeo, a Venice church attended primarily by German-born Italian merchants, to paint *The Feast of the Rose Garlands*, which was highly praised. His painted portraits are notable for their use of a technique called *chiaroscuro*—the use of light and dark rather than color to denote depth—as well as for their simple composition and benign quality.

Dürer's engravings, done on metal plates, took many forms—from allegorical works to nature studies—and it was these, more than his paintings, that quickly established his reputation throughout Europe. In addition to portraits, he also depicted mythological and allegorical subjects, among them *Dream of the Doctor* (after 1497) and *Sea Monster* (c. 1498). One of his most popular early works, 1496's *The Prodigal Son*, showed the son at the moment he recognizes his sinful lifestyle and determines to change his ways, rather in the more traditional manner; *Nemesis* (1501-1502) is also unique due to Dürer's decision to depict a complex humanistic allegory. In addition to engravings, Dürer also produced a number of altarpieces in his Nuremberg studio. His Paumgartner altarpiece, made between 1502 and 1504, reflects his insights into perspective.

Returns to Italy in Pursuit of Science

In 1505 Dürer returned to Venice, but his intent during this trip was to advance his knowledge of perspective through geometry. While seeking out noted court engraver Jacopo de Barbari, he also met with mathematicians such as Bolognese monk [Luca Pacioli](#), whose friendship with [Leonardo da Vinci](#) had informed much of the Italian artist's work on human proportion.

Following his return to Nuremberg, Dürer entered into what scholars have determined to be his Second Period, which between 1505 and 1520 saw him gradually move from painting and woodcuts to the engravings that would characterize his later period. Paintings such as 1511's *Virgin with the Pear* showed him excelling in the creation of religious works, while his large altarpiece installations, among them the Heller Altarpiece (1507-1509), *The Adoration of [the Trinity](#)* (1511), and *The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (1508), are also considered high points in his career.

Beginning in 1512, Dürer received a number of commissions from Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, and in return was granted tax-exemption and an annual pension paid by the councillors of Nuremberg. Among the works completed for the German emperor were the massive woodcut *The Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I* as well as designs for miniature illustrations and marginalia for 1515's *Maximilian I Prayer Book*. The most famous copperplate engravings completed by Dürer during this second period include *The Knight, Death, and the Devil*, completed in 1513; *St. Jerome in His Study*, from 1514; and *Melancholia I*, also from 1514. Arguably the most well-known works of his career, these three engravings represent the three virtues associated with the corresponding spheres of human activity: *The Knight, Death, and the Devil* represents the active sphere, the serene *St. Jerome in His Study* represents the contemplative sphere, and the dramatic *Melancholia I*, which is of particular note as the first European work to contain a 4 x 4-block magic square (an arrangement of numbers such that the sum of each row, column, and diagonal are equivalent) so cleverly worked as to contain the date "15-14", represents the intellectual sphere.

Final Years

At Maximilian's death in 1519, Dürer's pension was discontinued, forcing the artist to travel to Antwerp in July of 1520 to petition Maximilian's successor, Emperor Charles V, for a similar pension. This annual salary of one hundred florins, while not required by the now-affluent artist, was desired as a symbol of his prestige. During this trip the artist kept a journal in which he records his visits to Dutch, Belgian, and German towns, as well as with princes, merchants, and other notable artists of the day. He also includes sketches of people, settings, and other points of interest that he encountered, making the diary—eventually published in English translation as *Dürer: Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands 1520-21*—a valuable resource for students of the Renaissance world.

After 1520 Dürer, like many Germans eager for Church reform, fell under the growing influence of [Martin Luther](#), whose Ninety-five Theses challenged the supremacy of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and ultimately caused much of Germany to convert to Protestantism. While he remained a Catholic, Dürer's own study of Luther's writings influenced such works as his *Apocalypse*, as well as his *The Oblong Passion*, a series of ten drawings completed between 1520 and 1524. His last great work, *The Four Apostles*, which dates from 1526, also makes reference to Luther's teachings in its warning to beware of "false prophets." Despite this slight break with Roman Catholic doctrine, the [Council of Trent](#), which convened from 1545 to 1563, cited Dürer as one of only two artists praised for upholding standards of morality and propriety.

After his return to Nuremberg, Dürer's health began to fail, and his artistic output fell as a result. The study of geometry and perspective that had been the artist's focus since his first trip to Italy inspired Dürer to begin writing in his mid-fifties. His first book, a two-volume work published by the author beginning in 1525, was *Unterweisung der Messung mit dem Zirkel und Richtscheit*, and is notable as the first geometry text to be published in German; two years later he completed a treatise on fortifications titled *Unterricht über die Befestigung der Städte, Schlösser und Flecken*. Dürer passed away on April 6, 1528, the same year that his more elementary *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion (Four Books on Human Proportion)* appeared. He was fifty-seven years of age.

Considered a true Renaissance man although he lived outside Italy, Dürer was one of the most highly influential artists of northern Europe. His works, numbering over 350 engravings and woodcuts, were widely distributed among the upper classes of Europe due to his own efforts to promote them. In addition, advances in printing such as oil-based inks allowed for their mass production, and many of Dürer's prints even made their way to the New World via Spanish missionaries. His work in descriptive mathematics was highly respected as an extension of Euclidean geometry, and among his fellow artists he advanced the study of perspective and imbued it with the same scientific spirit that would later inspire Enlightenment philosophers. Despite the influence of the Italian Renaissance upon his artwork, he also retained a unique Germanic style that endeared him to scholars desirous of promoting northern European cultural supremacy in the centuries that followed. German political leaders Kaiser Wilhelm and Chancellor Adolph Hitler praised Dürer as a mainstay in a pure German culture, while writers from Victor Hugo to [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) cited the influence of Dürer's more well-known engravings as influential to their own art.

If you enjoy the works of Albrecht Dürer

If you enjoy the works of Albrecht Dürer, you might want to check out the following:

The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, 2 volumes, 1970.

Gustav Doré, *The Doré Bible Illustrations*, 1974.

The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt, 1994.

In the years after his death, Dürer's works were used as models for painters, engravers, and sculptors throughout Europe, while his books, translated into several languages, are credited with inspiring scholarship even during the Enlightenment two centuries later. With the installation of a bronze statue by Christian Daniel Rauch at Nuremberg's Albrecht-Dürer-Platz in 1828, he became the first artist immortalized with a public monument. Dürer's home and tomb in Nuremberg were likewise restored in one of Germany's earliest historic preservation efforts. While his birth date was celebrated annually by German artists for several centuries after his death, the date has been honored more spectacularly—albeit less frequently—by centenary celebrations in more recent times. On the 400th anniversary of Dürer's birth in 1929, Nuremberg city fathers proclaimed a "Dürer year" that included exhibits, lectures, and other events memorializing the artist. As a London *Times* correspondent reported of that April 10 celebration: After "an impressive rendering by choirs and a Reichswehr band. . . torchbearers then proceeded . . . up the steep hill, followed by the populace in thousands, to the square in front of the house where Dürer was born. There, after . . . the singing of 'Deutschland über Alles,' the torches were flung in a blazing pile in the middle of the street." In 1976 a crater on the planet Mercury was named in Dürer's honor.

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