Albrecht Dürer
and his Legacy

The Graphic Work of a Renaissance Artist

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Albrecht Dürer: A Sixteenth-Century *Influenza*

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By the year 1500, as the twenty-eight-year-old artist audaciously commemorated in his 'Christomorphic' *Self-Portrait* (fig. 1), Albrecht Dürer was already Europe's most famous living artist.[1] No artist before him had ever achieved such prominence during a lifetime, and none had ever affected as wide a range of cultural production. From the British Isles to Thessalonika, from Spain to Scandinavia, artisans of every kind – painters, sculptors, printmakers and book illustrators; goldsmiths, enamellers, medallists and furniture designers; producers of stain-glass, tapestry and maiolica – were beginning to exploit the images he made. And, more novelly, they could discern that these were the products of one man, an individual whose nestled initials were 'AD'.

This capacity to project his influence over an entire continent and beyond, this power to impress what he had fashioned on the far-flung work of others, rested on three essential conditions. First, there needed to be certain means of transmission allowing an image designed by Dürer to reach a multiple and distant audience. Printing, together with the network arising from the mechanically reproduced book, enabled the one image to be potentially everywhere. It was not enough that Dürer's products could be thus disseminated worldwide, however. To ensure that his work was recognized *as his*, that wherever it ended up, and whatever impact it had, it retained some legible attachment to him, his images needed to register their origin. Signs of authorship – the intertwined forms of signature, monogram, and self-portrait, plus the cultivation of a consistent, recognizable personal style – constituted the second enabling condition of Dürer's influence. Third, there was the ingredient of mastery itself, the fact that whatever Dürer issued was something he alone could make, that the skill it evidenced certified its authority – in short, that people both *could* possess his product and, for reasons of its quality, avidly *wanted to*.

This essay considers the first century of Dürer's influence through these enabling conditions: the copy, the trademark and mastery. Tracing a trajectory from the multiple, via signs of the singular, to the inimitable performance of one skilled hand allows us to travel between artist and influence. To discern Dürer's uniqueness, to understand the novelty, inventiveness and skill embodied by the multiples that made him famous, we must observe the impact he made on others, particularly those who, working in his shadow, sought vigorously to be unique themselves.

The Copy

It is hard for us to appreciate the changes brought about in early modern visual culture by new replicative technologies. Our ability to post our holiday snapshots on the web the day we take them certainly refines the network of images that already enmeshed us. But the shift from album to cyberspace is small compared to the difference made by print. Much has been written on the social, literary and epistemological revolutions wrought by the

Tyrol, Maximilian I of Bavaria and Emperor Rudolf II, Dürer's works were passionately admired, forming the aesthetic core of art collecting *per se* in northern Europe.[9] When a collector coveted a particular Dürer they did not possess, they sometimes commissioned copies by painters skilled in this trade. Replication shifted easily into emulation, and a fashion arose for images in a Dürerian style.[10] Meanwhile, original Dürers enjoyed almost cultic veneration. When in 1606 Rudolf II purchased the *Feast of the Rose Garlands* (1506) and transported it from Venice, he treated it like a relic, conveying it 'carefully wrapped in rugs and much cotton-wool and baled in a waxed cloth' and 'carried on poles by a group of strong men all the way to the Imperial Residence in Prague'.[11] Matthias von Kinckelbach, in his 1609 account of the history of German art, describes Dürer's reception in explicitly religious terms: 'His manuscripts and other plainly designed drawings on paper and parchment are regarded by artists and other admirers as holy things; his panels and paintings are displayed and preserved as the highest and noblest relics, so that, for several, one must pay money simply to see and scrutinize them.'[12] What was the effect of such an extravagant reputation on strong artists working in Dürer's shadow?

Mastery

The critic Harold Bloom contends that ambitious poets cannot begin to write without wishing to have 'named something first'.[13] Like Adam in Paradise, they want to be the first to put a word to a thing. Perhaps artists, too, cannot begin to paint ambitiously without desiring to be the first portraitist of some *thing*. Yet in the wake of Dürer there seemed to be nothing left to paint anew. The historical paradigm of a work by this master coming to stand for the thing itself is his *Rhinoceros* woodcut of 1515 (cat. no. 243).

The print is a third-hand portrayal to begin with. It replicates a drawing by Dürer which itself attempts imaginatively to portray the beast on the basis of a verbal description – probably a newsletter account transcribed in the inscription (cat. no. 242). Famously, the result is a memorable mix of fact and fancy. A goldsmith's son and himself a designer of armour, Dürer treats the loosely folded skin of the Indian species like embossed sheets of metal. The heavier lines of the woodcut only increase this effect. Through their stiff, regular treatment, the large convex tubercles of skin become like crafted ornaments. Despite these fabulous elaborations, however, Dürer's became the standard image of this creature, so much so that, even in the late eighteenth century, a British naturalist, James Bruce, produced what he called 'the first drawing of a rhinoceros with a double horn [i.e., the African genus *Diceros*] ... from the life'[14] on the basis of the 1515 print. Indeed, in the 1930s German science textbooks still featured Dürer's beast.[15] This persistence of the stereotype fascinated the art historian Ernst Gombrich, who used the woodcut to support his theory that 'the correct portrait' is not 'a faithful record of a visual experience but the faithful construction of a relational model'.[16] I would note that most observers unfairly accuse Dürer of concocting the animal's armour out of his own imagination. The skin of the almost extinct Indian *Rhinoceros unicornus* has, in fact, the faceted appearance that Dürer gives it, with the folds in just the spots he represents them.[17] In my view, he must have worked from a fairly accurate image to produce his sketch.

What Dürer's woodcut was to the rhino, as the creature itself rather than a portrait of the thing, his whole production was to the repertoire of sixteenth-century art. Where we think we see nature in the art of the period, chances are we see Dürer. Hans Hoffmann's