

A Trans-Temporal Resonance of Intellect: On Albrecht Dürer's Artistic Practice and the “Sayable” and “Unsayable” in Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophy*

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This paper explores a profound intellectual convergence, transcending historical periods and disciplinary boundaries, between the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and the 20th-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). The study focuses on two pivotal events in Dürer's career: his woodcut *Rhinoceros* (1515), created based on second-hand accounts, and his overwhelming experience of being left speechless before Aztec artworks in 1520, which he described as “indescribable”. Through the lens of Wittgenstein's “picture theory of language” and the strict demarcation between the “sayable” and the “unsayable” as proposed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, this paper reinterprets *Rhinoceros* as a form of “visual utterance” conducted under conditions of incomplete information. It is argued that the work does not aim for biological accuracy but successfully constructs a symbol of an “exotic marvel” that met the cultural expectations of contemporary Europe and circulated effectively within a specific “form of life”. Dürer's speechlessness when confronted with the art of a heterogenous civilization vividly embodies the aesthetic and value domain that Wittgenstein defined as “unsayable” yet “showable”. Furthermore, by introducing perspectives from Wittgenstein's later thought (*Philosophical Investigations*), such as “language-games” and “meaning as use”, this paper argues that Dürer's lifelong practice—navigating between establishing a universal visual science (e.g., *Four Books on Measurement*) and engaging with specific historical networks (the Age of Discovery, the print revolution, cross-cultural encounters)—unconsciously prefigures Wittgenstein's own philosophical shift from pursuing a static “logical picture” to embracing dynamic “language-games”. Ultimately, the paper proposes that artistic creation is essentially a “boundary-crossing practice” or a “manifestational activity” operating at the frontier between the “sayable” (facts, technique, rules) and the “unsayable” (value, experience, otherness). By creating sensible forms, it enables the perception and communication of the unspeakable, thereby expanding the boundaries of human cognition and understanding. The trans-temporal dialogue between Dürer and Wittgenstein suggests that the highest form of human rational activity lies not in constructing closed epistemic

* **Acknowledgements:** This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

AI Assistance Statement: The authors utilized the DeepSeek-AI/DeepSeek-V3.1-Terminus model for language enhancement purposes during manuscript revision. All ideas, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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temples, but in the continuous, vital “play” of both following and creating rules within concrete practice when faced with the infinite complexity of the world.

Keywords: Albrecht Dürer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the sayable and the unsayable, picture theory of language, language-games, artistic creation, cross-cultural cognition, manifestation, boundary-crossing practice

Introduction: Framing the Problem—When Renaissance Images Meet Modern Philosophical Silence

Albrecht Dürer, renowned as a giant of the Northern Renaissance, profoundly shaped European visual culture through his masterful printmaking, scientifically rigorous art theory, and ardent curiosity about the unknown world. Two episodes from his career present a striking contrast: In 1515, relying on vague second-hand descriptions, he created the woodcut *Rhinoceros*—an image filled with “errors” yet possessing immense visual persuasiveness, which would dominate the European conception of the rhinoceros for nearly three centuries. Five years later, in Brussels, upon facing Aztec artifacts brought back by Cortés from the Americas, he recorded in his diary a state of complete speechlessness: “I have never in all my days seen anything that rejoiced my heart so much... I do not know how to express what I saw”.

Nearly four centuries later, Ludwig Wittgenstein concluded his seminal work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with the succinct aphorism demarcating the limits of thought: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”. He sought to distinguish the realm of the “sayable” (the facts of the world describable by natural science) from the realm of the “unsayable” yet “showable” (such as ethics, aesthetics, the meaning of life).

This paper aims to demonstrate a profound trans-temporal “resonance” between Dürer’s artistic practice and Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. This resonance is not evidence of historical influence nor a simple application of theory, but is rooted in their shared engagement with a fundamental human condition: How do we employ limited symbolic systems (image/language) to apprehend an infinitely rich world that often contains “otherness”? What occurs when this system reaches its limit or encounters radical heterogeneity? By conducting an intertextual reading of Dürer’s creation of *Rhinoceros* and his cross-cultural aesthetic experience within the framework of Wittgenstein’s “sayable/unsayable” distinction and the dynamic context of Wittgenstein’s own intellectual development, this study seeks not only to provide a novel philosophical perspective for understanding Dürer but also to distill a general theory of artistic creation as cognitive manifestation and boundary practice. This research reveals that great art and profound philosophy, though employing different media, can address the same fundamental questions concerning representation, limits, and understanding at the frontiers of human intellectual exploration.

Dürer’s Boundaries: An Epistemological Reading of Two Cases

***Rhinoceros*: “Visual Utterance” and Cultural Construction on the Ruins of Information**

Dürer’s *Rhinoceros* is often treated as an amusing historical anecdote where an “erroneous image” triumphed over “objective truth”. However, from the perspective of its creation and reception, it should be seen more as an active endeavor of “cognitive mapping” and “meaning construction” under conditions of severe informational scarcity.

- Context of creation and the dilemma of representation: In 1515, an Indian rhinoceros arrived in Lisbon as a gift, causing a sensation in Europe. Dürer, located in Nuremberg, did not see the animal himself. His sources were likely a distorted sketch or a textual description, possibly mediated by a non-specialist illustrator. This first exposes the mediated and incomplete nature of any representational system: We seldom directly “depict” the thing itself but work through already filtered and coded “reports”.

- Imaginative filling and visual synthesis: Confronted with informational gaps, Dürer did not abandon representation. Instead, he mobilized his entire reservoir of knowledge: a goldsmith’s understanding of metallic texture and volume (accounting for the “armor-plated” skin), the visual vocabulary of mythical creatures (like dragons) in Northern European art, and classical texts (e.g., Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*) describing exotic beasts of the East. The result was a richly detailed, structurally solid, fantastic figure clad in plate armor and sporting a “Dürer horn”. This is not a failed work of realism but a successful cultural symbol, a visual signifier of “exoticism”, “power”, and “wonder”.

- Reception history and “Meaning as Use”: The meaning and “truth-value” of this image lie not in its anatomical correspondence to the real animal (which was unverifiable at the time and not the primary concern) but in its “use” and reception within a specific historical-cultural context. It perfectly matched the Renaissance European society’s desire to conquer, categorize, and understand newfound global knowledge through images, satisfying the public’s collective imagination of the “exotic marvel”. Its capacity for mass reproduction through print technology further enabled it to quickly become a standard node within the European cognitive network. This anticipates the core insight of Wittgenstein’s later *Philosophical Investigations*: Meaning lies in “use”. The meaning of an image resides in how it is understood, disseminated, and generates social effects within concrete “forms of life.”

Encounter With Aztec Art: The “Earthquake” of a Cognitive System and the “Showing” of the Unsayable

In sharp contrast to the active construction of *Rhinoceros* is Dürer’s passive astonishment before Aztec art. This event serves as an excellent historical footnote for understanding the realm of the “unsayable”.

- Failure of the cognitive system: For Dürer, who was committed to constructing a rational pictorial order through perspective and proportion, Aztec art represented a wholly heterogeneous, self-contained aesthetic, and symbolic system. Its logic of form, totemic significance, and material veneration (gold, feathers) lay entirely outside the familiar framework of European Renaissance aesthetics. The terms he relied on to analyze and discuss art (harmony, perspective, anatomy) completely failed. This was not a personal shortcoming but an encounter of his entire cognitive and symbolic system with the “outside” or its “boundary”.

- “No Language to Describe” and “Showing”: Dürer’s exclamation faithfully records a philosophical condition in the Wittgensteinian sense. The experience of beauty, especially the shock upon encountering the exquisite “craftsmanship” of a fundamentally different culture, belongs to the realm of value and meaning, not fact. Wittgenstein noted that such matters are “unsayable” and can only be “shown”. The Aztec artworks, through their material, sensible presence, directly “showed” Dürer their undeniable power and uniqueness. His silence constitutes an epistemic humility and awe, a positive acknowledgment of the value of the “unsayable”. This silence is not the end of understanding but the necessary starting point for genuine cross-cultural comprehension: It requires suspending one’s own “empire of categories”, allowing the “other” to first “manifest” itself in its own terms.



Figure 1. Commemorative silver coins featuring Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait and his copper-etching print *Rhinoceros* (Note: Author collection).

These two experiences of Dürer together outline the two poles of human cognitive activity: One pole is active and constructive, creating order and meaning from uncertainty (*Rhinoceros*); the other is passive and receptive, encountering awe-inspiring shock at the boundaries of order and maintaining reverent silence (Aztec art). Dürer himself, in his identity as a “universal man”, embodies this tension.

Wittgenstein's Framework: From Demarcating “Pictures” to Generating “Games”

To deeply understand the philosophical pre-echoes in Dürer's practice, it must be placed within the dynamic spectrum of Wittgenstein's own intellectual development. Wittgenstein's philosophical career itself represents a profound shift from “demarcation” to “play”.

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: The Ambition of Representation and Strict Demarcation

The early Wittgenstein was deeply influenced by the pursuit of logical certainty. In the *Tractatus*, he proposed:

- The picture theory of language: A proposition is like a logical picture. Its elements (names) correspond to objects in the world, and its structure corresponds to states of affairs. Language represents worldly facts through this picturing relation.
- The distinction between the sayable and the unsayable: The task of philosophy is demarcation. The “sayable” consists of facts in the world (the domain of natural science). The “unsayable” encompasses ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, the meaning of life, etc.; these can only be “shown”. Concerning the latter, we must remain silent.

This ambition for a clear, certain, universally valid “picture” representational system resonates directly with Dürer’s effort in *Four Books on Measurement* to establish a “universal visual grammar” for art and to achieve precise depiction of the visible world. Both share the ideal of a “cartographer” or “engineer”: to establish a perfect symbolic order for the world.

Philosophical Investigations: The Pragmatic Turn of Meaning and “Language-Games”

However, in his later work *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein underwent a fundamental shift. He critiqued his earlier “picture theory”, arguing that:

- Meaning as use: “For a large class of cases... the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. Understanding language is not decoding a static picture but mastering a practical skill.
- Language-games and forms of life: Meaning is generated within specific “language-games”, which are embedded in broader “forms of life” (shared, historical patterns of behavior and reaction). Philosophical problems often arise when language is removed from the concrete context of its everyday use.

This shift implies that meaning is no longer a priori and fixed but is “played out” in dynamic, social, historical interactions. Philosophy moves from “demarcation” to “therapy”—clarifying confusions arising from the misuse of language by describing its actual use.

Dürer as “Player”: A Prefiguration of Wittgenstein’s Turn

Introducing the perspective of the *Philosophical Investigations* yields a more subversive interpretation of Dürer. He was not merely a seeker of “pictures” but a skilled participant in “games”.

- *Rhinoceros* as a masterpiece of “Language-Game”: The creation and reception of this woodcut perfectly illustrate “meaning as use”. Dürer participated in the specific cultural-visual “game” of “depicting and consuming exotic wonders” in Europe at the time. Following the “rules” of this game (imagining the mysterious East) and employing superior “skill” (woodcut technique), he created an “effective move” that was widely accepted and disseminated. Its meaning lies precisely in its successful “use”.
- Facing Aztec art: Conflict of “Game” Rules: Dürer’s shock was akin to being suddenly thrown into a “game” with entirely unfamiliar rules. His customary “visual grammar” failed here. His silence and admiration were the first step in learning a new game—observing and acknowledging the existence of another, masterful way of “playing”.
- “Family Resemblance” and multiple identities: Dürer, working as a goldsmith, printmaker, painter, and theorist, constituted a network of “family resemblances” for the concept of “artist”, which cannot be defined by a single essence.

Therefore, Dürer’s life’s work inadvertently serves as a “historical prefiguration” and “sensuous footnote” to Wittgenstein’s shift from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*. He both pursued universal laws (the early Wittgensteinian ideal of the “picture”) and demonstrated in concrete practice how meaning is generated through “use” and “play” (the insight of the later Wittgenstein).

Synthesis and Sublimation: Art and Cognition as “Boundary-Crossing Practice”

Based on the above analysis, the resonance between Dürer and Wittgenstein can be distilled and elevated into a more comprehensive theoretical paradigm: boundary-crossing practice. This refers to the creative, generative activities humans engage in when confronting cognitive uncertainty and the boundaries of symbolic systems.

Art as Sensuous “Boundary-Crossing Practice”

Art does not rely on propositional logic but operates in the borderland between the “sayable” and the “unsayable” by creating sensuous, concrete “forms of manifestation”. Dürer’s *Rhinoceros* constructs an effective cognitive model at the boundary of incomplete information; Aztec art directly “showed” Dürer the power of beauty through its “otherness”. Art is the pioneer that explores and crosses cognitive boundaries through creation.

Philosophy as Conceptual “Boundary-Crossing Practice”

Philosophy reflects upon and “therapizes” the activity of representation itself. Wittgenstein early on sought to “demarcate” language, and later “crossed the boundary” into the fluid domain of “use”. Philosophy is the rearguard that clears the ground and maps the terrain for boundary-crossing practices through analysis and description.

Insights from “Boundary-Crossing Practice”

This paradigm reveals:

- Creation springs from uncertainty: Dürer’s *Rhinoceros* was a creative construction catalyzed by a lack of information. Cognitive progress often begins with encountering phenomena unexplained by existing paradigms.
- Understanding begins with silent awe: When facing the other, the eagerness to “speak” using one’s own system may lead to simplification. Dürer’s path suggests that true understanding might begin by accepting the initial, ineffable shock, allowing the “other” to first “show” itself.
- The practical nature of human reason: Dürer and Wittgenstein together demonstrate that the most vibrant activity of human reason lies not in building eternal logical temples but in engaging in an endless, vital “game” of both following and creating rules within historical, concrete networks. Meaning, understanding, and beauty are continuously generated, manifested, and transformed in this dynamic process.

Conclusion

Dürer and Wittgenstein, one exploring the boundaries and unknowns of the visible world with a burin, the other dissecting the limits and possibilities of language and thought with propositions, their trans-temporal “resonance” stems from responding to the same fundamental human condition: How do we navigate between the impulse to understand the world through order and the stubborn fact that the world always exceeds our frameworks of order?

Dürer’s practice shows that artistic creation is a “boundary-crossing practice” conducted between the “sayable” of technique and the “unsayable” of mystery. It neither evades speech nor lapses into futile metaphysics; instead, by creating sensible forms, it allows the unsayable to “manifest”, thereby expanding the boundaries of cognition. Wittgenstein’s philosophy provides profound conceptual clarification and defense for this practice.

Their dialogue ultimately reveals that, in the face of the world’s infinite complexity and otherness, the most rational and creative stance may be to become a courageous yet humble “boundary player”—mastering the rules of existing games while being ever ready, upon encountering new continents, to set aside old maps, and in shock and silence, learn new languages and draw new, imperfect yet vital cognitive landscapes. This is the precious wisdom that art and philosophy offer us for grappling with the “fundamental problems of human existence”.

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Journal of Literature and Art Studies

Volume 16, Number 4, April 2026 (Serial Number 173)

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