

The immortal journey of Dürer

Forget Leonardo: there is a case to be made for the German artist being the true Renaissance great, argues Michael Prodger

ASK the question ‘Who was the Renaissance’s greatest Renaissance man’ and the most common responses are likely to be Leonardo, then Michelangelo and Raphael. So tightly is the Renaissance interwoven with its Italian heartlands that few would think to look beyond it. Yet, take a step back, and a realistic contender for the most talented and varied man of the age would not be Italian at all, but German: Albrecht Dürer.

This year marks the 550th anniversary of Dürer’s birth, so it is a fitting time to remember exactly what it was that made him great. Dürer (1471–1528) was a contemporary of the big three—indeed, he corresponded with both Leonardo and Raphael—and was their equal in accomplishments. He might not have been a visionary scientist in the style of Leonardo or a sculptor, architect and poet like Michelangelo, but he was, nevertheless, a painter of the highest skill, a printmaker of genius and the author of treatises on measurement and fortifications. He was more widely travelled than his Italian peers and was probably a religious reformer for good measure.

‘The Emperor noted Dürer was “already a nobleman for the excellence of his art”;

His achievements were all the more impressive because of the country and city of his birth. Nuremberg was prosperous and cultured, but was no Florence or Urbino, so Dürer did not have exposure to the buildings, artworks and courtly taste of the earlier Renaissance generation to inspire him. Nor were Germany’s cultural and trading relationships with Italy as developed as those of the Low Countries. He was an artist from the fringes with no alternative but to forge his own way.

How high Dürer’s status eventually climbed is demonstrated in an anecdote in which the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, tasked him with painting a design on a wall and, finding that the artist was too short to reach, instructed him to stand on the back of an



Left: A prideful look in Dürer’s Self-portrait of 1500, in which he appears to emulate Christ himself. Facing page: Dürer’s dramatic Lot and his Daughters, about 1496–99, with its rich, bright colours, reveals the influence of Venetian artists, such as Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna, whom the artist had recently met on his first tour of Italy

aristocratic courtier. The offended nobleman objected, complaining he found it ‘contemptible to serve as the footstool of a painter’. The man was put witheringly in his place when Maximilian noted that he ‘could make a nobleman out of a peasant, very easily, but that it was not in his power to make an artist out of a nobleman’. To rub the salt in further, he added that Dürer ‘was already a nobleman for the excellence of his works of art’.

Dürer did not come from peasant stock, but was the son of a goldsmith in whose studio he worked as a draughtsman before, in 1486, being apprenticed to Michael Wolgemut, an undistinguished artist, but nonetheless the leading painter and printmaker in Nuremberg. Some three years later, Dürer emerged

to start a period of travelling. These *wanderjahre* formed a sort of gap-year adventure to expose him to the work of more distant artists, taking him initially around Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. On his return in 1494, he entered an arranged marriage with Agnes Frey, the daughter of a local brass worker; it was not to prove a happy match.

Perhaps it was his uncomfortable new domestic arrangement that spurred him to pack his bags within three months and head for Venice, leaving his no-doubt relieved bride at home. In Italy, he encountered the paintings of Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna, among others, which were deeply to influence his own work, sparking an interest in the nude, human proportions and Venetian colour. ➤



Artist of the week

In 1505, by this time a famous printmaker, Dürer was to revisit the city. Indeed, one of the reasons for the return trip might have been to complain about an engraver named Marcantonio Raimondi, who was making a good living by counterfeiting Dürer's prints, complete with the 'AD' monogram. Dürer felt at home in Italy, writing from Venice in 1506: 'O, how cold I will be away from the sun; here I am a gentleman, at home a parasite.'

‘Dürer elevated print-making to an art form that matched painting for expressiveness’

It was his prints, more than his paintings, that won Dürer renown. He had learnt the elements of graphic art back in Wolgemut's studio, but took both woodcuts and engravings to new heights. His prints of biblical scenes, of a rhinoceros, of Adam and Eve, of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse and of personifications of Melancholy and Nemesis sold in huge numbers, were disseminated across Europe and made him the most widely copied artist of the Renaissance. Through the clarity of his designs, the drama of his



Above: Displaying his characteristic attention to detail, Dürer heightened the gouache of *A Lion*, 1494, with gold. Below: For *The Adoration of the Kings*, 1510–15, Jan Gossaert borrowed angels and a dog from his contemporary. Facing page: In Dürer's 1521 *Saint Jerome*, the wisdom of the translator of the Bible shines forth

storytelling, the fineness of landscape settings, the accuracy of incidental details such as animals or clothing and the delicacy of his modelling, Dürer elevated printmaking into an art form that, although it could not compete with painting for colour or scale, could match it for expressiveness.

Dürer was equally as innovative with a watercolour brush in his hand. His famous studies of a hare and a tuft of grass, for example, show an attention to detail characteristic of the Northern Renaissance, but are painted with rare finesse. He may have used the medium, then in its infancy, only occasionally, but he did so with the assurance of a master. This naturalism, which included pure landscape pictures, the first in art, was consistent with his belief in depicting 'the genuine forms of Nature, for simplicity is the greatest adornment of art'.

The majority of Dürer's career was spent in Nuremberg, where he won the patronage of Maximilian and, with it, an imperial pension, although he didn't give up his wanderings altogether. His final voyage, a year-long trip to the Netherlands in 1520, was made to attend the coronation of the new emperor, Charles V, following Maximilian's death in 1519. He took a large batch of prints with him to sell, but the main result of the trip was not financial, but physical—he contracted a debilitating disease, possibly malaria, that was to afflict him for the rest of his life. The effects were such that Dürer felt he was losing 'my sight and freedom of hand'.

Although his output as a painter did include large-scale altarpieces, Dürer was perhaps most influential as a portraitist, especially



Agnes's story

DÜRER'S wife, Agnes, has not been well served by posterity. She has come down to us as a shrew who nagged him to an early grave, but the tradition that they were ill-suited comes largely from the pen of Dürer's oldest friend, Willibald Pirckheimer. The two men were regular correspondents throughout their lives and, in at least one letter (found centuries later, hidden behind a panel in the wall of a Nuremberg house), Agnes was certainly the butt of a crude sexual joke. In another, the artist's reference to an 'old crow' has been taken by some scholars as a reference to his wife.

What really set her reputation, however, was a letter Pirckheimer wrote in 1530, two years after Dürer's death. He evidently still felt raw and didn't hold back: 'I can blame no one other than his wife, who made his heart heavy and tormented him, to the extent that he took leave of this life all the more quickly.' She left him 'dried up like a bundle of straw, he was allowed to seek courage nowhere, nor to go among the people... she drove him to work hard day and night solely in order to earn money that he would leave to her when he died'.

Was this true? There are at least six drawings of Agnes by her husband, one of which is tenderly inscribed 'My Agnes'. Another proudly states that they 'have had each other in marriage 26½ years'. Perhaps Agnes was less guilty of being a scold than Dürer was of indulging in ungallant chatter with an old friend.



as a self-portraitist. Long before Rembrandt turned the study of the self into a profound genre, Dürer made a series of images showing himself as a blond-haired 'prince of painters', as a muscly nude, a gentleman of fashion and sensibility and, in a self-portrait of 1500 that teeters on the edge of blasphemy, almost as Jesus Christ, staring unnervingly out at the viewer from between curtains of long hair.

This last picture was painted 18 years before the artist met Martin Luther and became an avowed follower. In 1520, he wrote of his desire 'to make a portrait of him with great care and engrave him on a copper plate to create a lasting memorial of the Christian man who helped me overcome so many difficulties'. Dürer did not explain what those spiritual difficulties were and it is unclear whether he ever formally renounced his Catholicism. As did many artists, he had

a healthy self-regard—once asking rhetorically, 'Why has God given me such magnificent talent? It is a curse as well as a great blessing'—yet he was also a deeply spiritual man. With some religious works, it can be hard to tell if they are a reflection of the painter's own beliefs; with Dürer, they undoubtedly were.

The final years of his life were largely devoted to the writing of theoretical books, but the fever never left him and he died in 1528, aged 56. The epitaph on his tombstone, written by his childhood friend the humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, elegantly expressed the imperishable nature of both Dürer's fame and his work: 'What was mortal of Albrecht Dürer lies beneath this mound.' 🐉

'Dürer's Journeys—Travels of a Renaissance Artist' is due to open at the National Gallery, London WC2, this year (020-7747 2885; www.nationalgallery.org.uk)

Life and times of Dürer

- **May 21, 1471** Born in Nuremberg, then a flourishing artistic and commercial centre, the third of 18 children
- **1486** Apprenticed to Michael Wolgemut
- **1494** Marries Agnes Frey
- **1494–95** Visits Italy for the first time
- **1497–1500** Begins work on his three most famous series of religious woodcuts, 'The Apocalypse', 'The Large Passion' and 'The Life of the Virgin'
- **1512** Is engaged by Maximilian I and is later awarded a pension of 100 florins. Continues as court artist under Charles V
- **1528** Publishes the first of four *Books of Human Proportion*
- **1528** Dies in Nuremberg