

## Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

Dürer was born in Nuremberg, the son of a successful Hungarian goldsmith. His godfather was Anton Koberger, the leading German publisher of his day, whose best-selling Nuremberg chronicle of 1494 contained illustrations designed by the painter Michael Wolgemut, with whom Dürer served three years of apprenticeship from 1486-1489. Dürer's travels as a journeyman from 1490-1494 included a visit in 1492 to Colmar to the workshop of the most highly regarded painter and engraver of the period, Martin Schongauer, who had died the previous year. After his return to Nuremberg in 1494, he married Agnes Frey, the daughter of a local metalwork designer. During the autumn and winter of 1494-1495, he visited northern Italy, where the works of artists such as Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini had a powerful effect on his artistic development.

In 1495, Dürer opened his own workshop in Nuremberg, a wealthy centre of trade which was situated at a focal point within the Holy Roman Empire. He took the radical step of producing high quality prints for an open market, and the first edition of his famous Apocalypse series of woodcuts was published in 1498. Dürer's paintings also display a deep interest in new themes and ideas, particularly his self-portraits of the late 1490s. From 1505 to 1507 he visited Italy again and painted the *Adoration of the Holy Rosary* for the German merchants in Venice (now in the National Gallery, Prague). From 1507 to 1512 he worked on numerous paintings and the Engraved Passion. The woodcut series of the *Life of the Virgin*, the *Great Passion* and the *Little Passion* were published in 1511. Signs of his increased social standing and prosperity were evident by 1509, when he became a member of the Great Council of Nuremberg, and purchased a house in the Zisselgasse (today the Dürer-Haus Museum).

Dürer's re-vitalisation of printmaking techniques caught the attention of the circle of humanist scholars in Nuremberg, centred around his close friend Willibald Pirckheimer, who informed him on the literature and ideals of the Italian Renaissance and advised on subjects that would appeal to the educated elite. His achievements as a printmaker played a key role in the choice of the woodcut medium by the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, for his colossal commemorative projects commissioned in Augsburg. Dürer was the chief designer of Maximilian's *Triumphal Arch* of 1515-1517 (on display in Room 12). His imperial annuity was ratified after Maximilian's death by the Emperor Charles V in Cologne in 1520. From 1520-1521 he travelled in the Netherlands. A detailed account of his activities there has survived in a transcription of his diary. In later years, he worked on the publication of his ideas on art theory, *Treatise of Measurement* (1525); *Treatise on Fortification* (1527), and *Four Books on Human Proportion* (1528).



Above: *Apollo and Diana* c.1501-1505, Pen and brown and black ink, touched with white, 283 x 205 mm, Sloane 5218-183

Dürer was a prolific draughtsman and approximately nine hundred and seventy drawings by him are known to have survived. The collection of one hundred and thirty-eight drawings in the British Museum is one of the finest in existence and includes work from all stages of his career. They come chiefly from an album of drawings by Dürer and his school bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane in 1753, and were fully catalogued by John Rowlands in 1993.

Dürer's prints have been highly praised since his lifetime and remain at the core of all serious print collections. The British Museum has a virtually complete collection of Dürer's ninety-nine engravings, six etchings and a substantial number of his designs for three hundred and forty-six woodcuts and book illustrations. The woodblocks for his *Little Passion* series, *Hercules* and *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* are also housed here.

## Other Collections

<b>London</b>	British Library Courtauld Institute Galleries National Gallery
<b>UK</b>	Ashmolean Museum, Oxford Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge Hunterian Museum, Glasgow Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester The Royal Library, Windsor Castle
<b>Europe</b>	There are strong holdings in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Madrid, Munich, Dresden and Florence
<b>Ireland</b>	Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
<b>USA</b>	Metropolitan Museum, New York Museum of Fine Art, Boston National Gallery of Art, Washington Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

## Further Reading

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