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Dürer and Italy Revisited: the German Connection

For four centuries, the opinions expressed by Giorgio Vasari in 1568 and by Carel Van Mander in 1604 have been central to discussion of the relationship between Albrecht Dürer and Italian art. According to Vasari, Dürer sought:

to imitate the life and to draw near to the Italian manners, which he always held in much account... Of a truth, if this man, so able, so diligent, and so versatile, had had Tuscany... for his country, and had been able to study the treasures of Rome... he would have been the best painter of our land...¹

Van Mander turned this criticism of Dürer against itself:

he applied himself to the imitation of life... without meticulously seeking out or choosing the most beautiful of the beautiful, as did the judicious Greeks and Romans with great discernment in ancient times, which, when it was perceived in the ancient sculptures, opened the eyes of the Italians in early days... It is most admirable how he brought about or discovered so many particulars of our art from nature or, as it were, from within himself...²

While Vasari regarded Dürer as essentially second-rate on account of his ignorance of Tuscan *disegno* and the surviving remains of classical antiquity, the Dutchman Van Mander valued his achievements the greater, for springing directly from nature and his own genius.

The comparative value of academic training as opposed to the study of nature, reinforced by native genius, remained a contentious issue in Georgian England. In his *Third Discourse*, delivered to the students of the Royal Academy in 1770, Sir Joshua Reynolds observed that:

Dürer, as Vasari has justly remarked, would, probably, have been one of the first painters of his age... had he been initiated into those great principles of the art, which were so well understood and practised by his contemporaries in Italy.³

Against these lines, in the margin of his copy of the second (1798) edition of Reynolds' *Discourses on Art*, William Blake interjected:

What does this mean, 'Would have been' one of the first Painters of his Age? Albert Durer Is, Not would have been... Ages are all Equal. But Genius is Always Above The Age.⁴

During the earlier 19th century Dürer was the object of a huge upsurge of enthusiasm among German artists and writers, and in 1842 his marble bust by Christian Rauch was formally installed in the neo-classical pantheon known as the Walhalla, outside Regensburg, to commemorate a hero of the German nation. By 1905 his canonical role was such that the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin posed – albeit somewhat tongue in cheek – the rhetorical question:

can Dürer be extolled by us as *the* German painter? Rather must it not be finally admitted that a great talent has erred and lost its instincts by imitating foreign characteristics? ... his work is interspersed with things which are alien to us. Samson has lost his locks in the lap of the Italian seductress.⁵

Erwin Panofsky took a quite different line in 1922, characterising

him as a key figure in the reintegration of classical form and subject-matter:

Dürer was the first Northern artist to feel this 'pathos of distance'. His attitude towards classical art was neither that of the heir nor that of the imitator but that of the conquistador. For him antiquity... was a lost 'kingdom' which had to be re-conquered by a well-organised campaign.⁶

Vasari and Van Mander, Wölfflin and Panofsky still condition our perception of Dürer and Italy. In this reconsideration, I will trace some parallels among Dürer's German contemporaries, including merchants and printers as well as artists, courtiers and humanists. I will then consider several of his principal Italianate works, and seek to summarise his attitude towards Italian art.

Numerous German artists are documented in the Veneto during the 15th century. We find seven painters at Padua in 1441–61 and five in Venice between 1432 and 1489, while German sculptors produced numerous works in the region, such as the 50 walnut reliefs in the choir stalls of the Frari, completed in 1468.⁷ The goldsmith's craft, which Dürer learned from his father, was represented by 13 German and Netherlandish practitioners at Venice between 1437 and 1508.⁸

A major surviving work by a German painter active in Italy in the mid-Quattrocento is the *Annunciation* painted in 1451 by Jos Amman of Ravensburg at Santa Maria di Castello in Genoa.⁹ Such works were praised by contemporary humanists, especially Bartolommeo Fazio, who considered Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden to be two of the four greatest painters of his day.¹⁰ Before Dürer, the German artist most familiar with Renaissance art was the sculptor and painter Michael Pacher.¹¹ Probably in the 1460s, he travelled from the Tyrol to Padua, where he encountered the work of Donatello and Mantegna. Pacher became expert in one-point perspective, and low viewpoints and abrupt foreshortening became a hallmark of his personal style. He rejected the antique repertory of form and decoration, retaining an assertively late gothic style.

Dürer's home town of Nuremberg was one of the largest and richest cities in the Empire; its pre-eminence symbolised by custody of the Imperial regalia. Following a visit in 1444, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, enthused over the splendid appearance and setting of the city, and praised its culture and government.¹² In 1483, the Spanish visitor Pero Tafur was more laconic:

Nuremberg is one of Germany's largest and richest cities... Many craftsmen live there... and because of its position in the middle of the continent, its trade routes are many.¹³

Pre-eminent among the south German merchant elite were the Fuggers of Augsburg. Jörg Fugger (1453–1506) and his brothers Ulrich and Jacob founded what became the largest counting-house in Europe. He worked for some years in Venice, where he was painted by Giovanni Bellini in 1474 (**Pl. I**).¹⁴ Such merchants were required to work at the German House, called the Fondaco

de' Tedeschi, next to the Rialto bridge. In 1497 the pilgrim Arnold von Harff wryly observed:

I was able to see daily much traffic in spices, silks and other merchandise packed and dispatched to all the... German cities of the Empire... the counting-houses paid daily to the lords of Venice a hundred ducats free money, in addition to which all merchandise was bought there and dearly paid for.¹⁵

From 1484 until 1500, Jörg directed the Fugger branch in Nuremberg, and married into the wealthy Imhoff family. He sat for a lost portrait drawing by Dürer, who later designed his tomb.¹⁶

The Nuremberg patriciate also had intellectual links with Italy. This was especially true of the family of Dürer's closest friend, Willibald Pirckheimer.¹⁷ His great-uncle spent many years in Italy, and knew the celebrated German philosopher Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, the papal legate at the Diet of Nuremberg in 1444. Willibald's grandfather studied at Perugia, Padua and Bologna, and his father at Padua during the 1460s. Dürer was born in a house rented from the Pirckheimer family, near their principal residence.¹⁸

The greatest astronomer of the day, Johann Müller, known as Regiomontanus, settled in Nuremberg in 1471. He had taught at Padua and attended the principal centre of humanist culture in central Europe, the court of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary. Regiomontanus' library included a manuscript copy of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura*, and his printing press was one of the first in Germany to employ humanist typeface.¹⁹ After his return to Rome, his research was continued by the merchant Bernhard Walther, whose wife stood as godmother to Dürer's sister Christina in 1488.²⁰

The Schedel family of Nuremberg also had a tradition of studying in Italy. Hermann Schedel studied medicine at Padua in 1439–44, while his cousin Johannes read canon law at Bologna in 1468, and the latter's brother Hartman studied medicine, and the elements of Greek, at Padua in 1463–6.²¹ Hartman's huge library of over 1,000 manuscript and printed volumes survives largely intact, and ranges from letters, geography and history to medicine, astronomy and theology. He was commissioned by the merchant Sebald Schreyer and his brother-in-law Sebastian Kammermeister to edit the Nuremberg *World Chronicle*.²² This weighty compilation of numerous authorities, from Ptolemy and Strabo to the modern historians Flavio Biondo and Aeneas Sylvius, appeared in Latin and German editions in 1493. It was printed by Dürer's godfather Anton Koberger, and his master, the painter Michael Wolgemut, designed its enormous programme of over 1,800 woodcuts.

The *World Chronicle* was essentially a humanist enterprise, and about a quarter of its Latin print-run was consigned to Italy. However, its style of decoration is far from humanist in character. Few Italian prints circulated in Germany at this date; the Florentine engraving of *The Battle of the Trousers* pasted into Hartman Schedel's manuscript volume of medical texts was probably acquired during his stay in Padua in the 1460s (Pl. 2).²³ As an astronomer, Schedel seems a plausible conduit for the arrival in Nuremberg of the engraved astronomical Ferrarese *Tarrochi*, made in the 1460s, which were copied as woodcuts by Wolgemut around 1490, and later as drawings by the young Dürer.²⁴

The deluxe illustrated account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land called the *Opus transmarinae peregrinationis* appeared at

Mainz in 1486.²⁵ Its frontispiece depicts a lady in Venetian costume by the Utrecht painter Erhard Reuwich (Pl. 3). When he and his companion Canon Bernard von Breydenbach visited Venice in 1483, they stayed with the Frankfurt patrician Peter Ugelheimer, who financed the most celebrated printer in Venice during the 1470s, the Frenchman Nicolaus Jenson.²⁶ In part payment, Ugelheimer received deluxe copies of Jenson's publications, richly bound with covers inspired by Islamic bindings, and decorated by leading miniaturists such as the Paduan Benedetto Bordon.²⁷

The Venetian print trade had been founded in 1469 by the goldsmith John of Speyer, whose business was continued by his brother and his widow Paola, who may have been the daughter of the great painter Antonello da Messina.²⁸ German printers dominated the trade until the 1480s, and over 30 are documented in Venice in the last three decades of the century.²⁹ The most distinguished was Erhard Ratdolt, son of an Augsburg sculptor, who arrived as a teenager in 1462, and set up as a printer in 1476, initially in partnership with Peter Loeslein of Nuremberg and an Augsburg painter named Bernhard.³⁰ His publications have elegant classical design, and his 1482 edition of Euclid was the first printed book with mathematical figures and gold lettering.

Anton Kolb, a Nuremberg merchant resident in Venice, was a middle-man in the distribution of the *World Chronicle*. In 1500, probably employing German block-cutters, he published the great multi-sheet woodcut, the *View of Venice*, designed by the Venetian painter Jacopo de' Barbari.³¹ Around this time, the block-cutter Johannes of Frankfurt published a close woodcut copy of Pollaiuolo's engraved *Battle of the Naked Men* (Pl. 4).³² In collaboration with the Alsatian woodcutter Jacob of Strassburg, Benedetto Bordon branched out into the design and publication of large woodcuts, notably the *Virgin and Child with St. Sebastian and St. Roch* and the *Triumph of Caesar*, published at Venice in 1504.³³ Such examples indicate the central role of German entrepreneurs, craftsmen and artists in the print culture of late *Quattrocento* Venice.

The Imperial court had begun to embrace humanism by 1487, when the Emperor Frederick III crowned the German 'arch-humanist' Conrad Celtis as poet laureate in Nuremberg Castle.³⁴ In 1493 Celtis delivered an ode in praise of St. Sebald in Nuremberg, and in 1501 received a charter from Maximilian I to establish a school of Roman literature at the University of Vienna 'to restore the lost eloquence of the previous age'.³⁵ Maximilian married Bianca Maria Sforza of Milan in 1494: his marriage gifts included an illuminated copy of Giovanni Simonetta's life of Francesco Sforza.³⁶ Its frontispiece bears an equestrian figure of the first Sforza Duke, probably based on the effigy erected in Milan Cathedral to celebrate the marriage settlement. Bianca Maria was accompanied to Innsbruck by the illuminator and painter Giovanni Ambrogio de Predis, who carried out portrait commissions, and designed new coinage at the Imperial mint.³⁷

At this time Willibald Pirckheimer was completing his studies at the University of Pavia.³⁸ He was a close friend of Galeazzo da Sanseverino, a patron of Leonardo da Vinci and favourite of Ludovico Sforza, who married the duke's natural daughter Bianca in 1496. Pirckheimer acquired an exquisite small volume of Italian sonnets and songs, written in gold and silver script on leaves tinted green and purple, with miniatures

of *Apollo and the Muses* and *Apollo and Daphne* by the Sforza court artist Giovan Pietro Birago (Pl. 5).³⁹ Pirkheimer's final years in Italy coincided with Dürer's first visit.

In 1494 Dürer made dated copies after Mantegna's engraved *Bacchanal* and *Battle of the Sea Gods*, and a distinctly Mantegnesque *Death of Orpheus*, whose original model does not appear to survive (Pl. 6).⁴⁰ His drawing of the group of Turks which also appears in Gentile Bellini's *Procession in the Piazza San Marco*, and several studies of ladies in Venetian costume, one dated 1495, confirm his presence in Venice (Pl. 7).⁴¹ The copies which Dürer made the same year after Pollaiuolo and Lorenzo de' Credi probably derive from works available in the Veneto, as a nude sketch by Pollaiuolo is documented at Padua by 1474, while Credi visited Venice in the 1480s, where his master Verrocchio was working on the Colleoni monument.⁴²

Following his return to Nuremberg, Dürer made five prints of secular subjects with nudes, based on Italian studies. Of these, only the *Four Witches* of 1497 is internally dated (Pl. 8). It follows an antique group of the *Three Graces*, and its central figure copies a *Venus Pudica*.⁴³ The only woodcut among these secular prints, titled *Ercules* in the block, is probably the earliest of the group. Its female figures and antique armour recalls Mantegna, while the hero's right leg follows Dürer's copy after Pollaiuolo. Its subject has been identified as the little-known tale of Hercules conquering the Molionide Twins.⁴⁴ Dürer's engraved *Sea Monster* recalls Mantegna's *Battle of the Sea Gods*, as well as a niello by the Bolognese engraver Peregrino da Cesena.⁴⁵ The drawing titled *Pupilla Augusta* is a reversed design for a print which was never cut (Pl. 9). Its musing figure at the right is copied from a Ferrarese engraving of the same title. The background group with Venus Urania on a dolphin recall another niello by Peregrino.⁴⁶ Dürer's so-called *Hercules at the Crossroads* is a pastiche (Pl. 10). Its figure of a reclining nymph is a variant, in reverse, of the abducted woman in the *Sea Monster*. The central trees, staff-wielding woman, fleeing child and the defensively-raised arm of the nymph derive from Mantegna's lost *Death of Orpheus*.⁴⁷ Vasari called it 'Diana beating a nymph' and praised its 'supreme delicacy of workmanship, attaining to the final perfection of this art...'.⁴⁸

Such recondite subjects would have delighted a narrow circle of local humanists such as Conrad Celtis, who praised Dürer in 1499–1500 as 'the most famous painter in German lands... a second Phidias, a second Apelles...'.⁴⁹ However, it is likely that most viewers would have enjoyed these compositions simply as virtuoso assemblages of figures – male and female, beautiful and grotesque, at rest and in violent action. These prints were widely copied, from the Dutch border to Moravia, as well as in North Italy.⁵⁰ This does not suggest that they were the sole preserve of a cultural elite. Dürer's only mythological painting is *Hercules Slaying the Stymphalian Birds*, now in Nuremberg, which was painted around 1500 for the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, a supporter of humanism who founded the university of Wittenberg (Pl. 11). The heroic archer resembles that in Pollaiuolo's *Hercules and Deianira* in New Haven, but the muscular tension and swerving posture of this Florentine model have been eliminated, in favour of a more relaxed profile which emphasises its proportions.⁵¹

In 1500, Jacopo de' Barbari was appointed 'portrait painter and illuminator' to the Emperor Maximilian at Nuremberg, where he remained until 1503.⁵² Dürer's proximity to Jacopo

during these years is demonstrated by the similarity between their two engravings of *Apollo and Diana*.⁵³ Hartman Schedel owned at least five engravings by Jacopo which he pasted into a manuscript volume of antiquities and epigrams compiled in 1502–5.⁵⁴ Many years later, Dürer recalled:

If I cannot find someone else who has described how to make human proportions, then there is always Jacopo [de Barbari], a lovely painter, born in Venice. He showed me [figures of] a man and woman which he had made from measurements; and at that time I would have preferred to have had his judgement than a new kingdom, and if I had it, I would have put it into print in his honour for the general good. But at that time I was still young, and had not heard of such things... I realised that Jacopo wouldn't clearly explain his principles. So I set to work on my own and read Vitruvius, who writes a little about a man's limbs. Thus I took my start from or out of [the work of] these two men, and since then have continued my search from day to day according to my own notions.⁵⁵

This is confirmed by Dürer's constructional drawing of a female nude, dated 1500, which embodies Vitruvius' canon (Pl. 12).⁵⁶ His slightly later *Nemesis* engraving is also based on a study with Vitruvian proportions.⁵⁷ Vasari described this sheet as 'a Temperance with marvellous wings, holding a cup and a bridle, with a most delicate little landscape'.⁵⁸ *Nemesis* has the features of Dürer's wife Agnes, and seems to represent a mismatch between ideal proportions and external form. It may have been one of the prints Vasari had in mind when he mischievously observed that:

Albrecht was perhaps not able to do better because, not having any better models, he drew, when he had to make nudes, from one or other of his assistants, who must have had bad figures, as Germans generally have when naked...⁵⁹

Dürer proceeded, via several drawings embodying the ideal types of the *Apollo Belvedere* and a *Venus Pudica*, to the *Fall of Man* engraving of 1504.⁶⁰

He also experimented with ideal equine proportions, based on a modular principle which may derive from sketches by Leonardo da Vinci.⁶¹ These culminated in the engraved *Small Horse* of 1505 (Pl. 13). This has recently been plausibly identified as Bucephalus, the steed of Alexander the Great; whose head appeared on antique coins.⁶² It has been pointed out that the latter also inspired the horse's head on the reverse of Pisanello's medal of Francesco Sforza, cast around 1441 (Pl. 14).⁶³ The latter source was more probably Dürer's immediate model. In its features and proportions *The Small Horse* recalls studies made by Leonardo da Vinci at Milan during the 1490s, in the stables of the courtier Galeazzo da Sanseverino; the friend of Pirkheimer, who visited Nuremberg in 1502.⁶⁴ The arch above *The Small Horse* may derive ultimately from the effigy erected at Milan in 1493 to celebrate Bianca Maria Sforza's marriage to Maximilian, which seems to be reflected in the frontispiece of the Emperor's copy of the life of Francesco Sforza.⁶⁵

Dürer returned to Italy in 1505, and wrote the first of 10 surviving letters from Venice to Pirkheimer in January 1506. He settled into the local German community, seeking out books, jewellery, glassware, carpets and oil for Pirkheimer, and accepting portrait commissions, such as the *Portrait of a Venetian Lady*, dated 1505, now in Vienna. Vasari later believed that Dürer visited Venice to prevent the Bolognese engraver Marcantonio Raimondi from pirating his prints.⁶⁶

However, his principal undertaking was the altarpiece of *The Feast of the Rose Garlands*, now in Prague (Pl. 15). This was

commissioned by the German confraternity of the Virgin of the Rosary, founded in 1504 at San Bartolomeo, near the Fondaco de' Tedeschi.⁶⁷ Its head was Leonhard Wild of Regensburg, active as a printer at Venice in 1478–81.⁶⁸ He may have first encountered Dürer on his previous visit. The fee of 85 ducats compared favourably with those of leading Venetian painters, but was lower than some Dürer received in Germany.⁶⁹ The iconographic programme of the altarpiece is German, but its principal formal models were works by Giovanni Bellini – such as the Pala Barbarigo of 1488, and the San Zaccaria altarpiece of 1505.⁷⁰ By February 1506, Dürer was already asserting to Pirckheimer that:

Giovanni Bellini has highly praised me before many nobles. He...himself came to me and asked me to paint something and he would pay well for it. And all men tell me what an upright man he is, so that I am really friendly with him. He is very old, but is still the best painter of them all.⁷¹

The care Dürer took over *The Feast of the Rose Garlands* is demonstrated by its 21 surviving studies, mostly in the Venetian technique of wash on blue paper (Pl. 16).⁷² Such coloured paper was principally employed for wrapping goods, and considerable quantities of it would have been used at the Fondaco de' Tedeschi, where the German packers were sufficiently numerous to have their own craft brotherhood.⁷³ Dürer wrote triumphantly that his altarpiece had silenced critics who thought that he couldn't handle colours.⁷⁴ Vasari agreed that it was 'a rare work and full of most beautiful figures', which he believed had influenced Giovanni Bellini.⁷⁵ In October 1506 Dürer announced his intention to visit Bologna, 'to learn the secrets of the art of perspective, which a man is willing to teach me'.⁷⁶ If he made this journey, he would have arrived at about the same time as Erasmus of Rotterdam, in time for Julius II's triumphal entry on 11 November.⁷⁷ Dürer was in Venice at the start of 1507, when he purchased a copy of Euclid's *Opera*, but was back in Nuremberg by the end of the following February.⁷⁸

In 1508–9, he painted one of his most Italianate works, the altarpiece of the *Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin*, commissioned by the merchant Jacob Heller for the Dominican church in Frankfurt. Its central panel was lost to a fire, but is recorded by a faithful 17th-century copy (Pl. 17). This indicates that, like *The Feast of the Rose Garlands*, the Heller Altarpiece was iconographically something of a German-Italian hybrid. It combines a *Coronation of the Virgin by the Trinity*, similar to those in South German retables such as Michael Pacher's Gries Altar, with a two-tier *Assumption and Coronation*, as in Raphael's *Coronation* altarpiece of 1502–3.⁷⁹ If Dürer knew the latter composition, he rejected its static phalanx of apostles, in favour of a seething ring of figures viewed from every direction, with one facing the viewer, staring into the empty tomb. An analogous configuration appears in a Florentine engraving of this subject by Francesco Rosselli after a design attributed to Botticelli, which probably dates from the 1490s (Pl. 18).⁸⁰ Rosselli's lost six-plate engraved *View of Florence* is a likely prototype for Jacopo de' Barbari's woodcut *View of Venice*, and the former is recorded as having been in Venice in 1505 and 1508.⁸¹ It therefore seems likely that impressions of his large and imposing print of the *Assumption* would have been available to Dürer in Venice.

During his second visit, Dürer entirely ignored the younger generation of painters, such as Giorgione and Sebastiano del Piombo. That he did not entirely lose touch with Italy is

demonstrated by his gift to Raphael of a self-portrait in gouache on fine cloth, in return for a red chalk nude study for the Vatican *Stanze*.⁸² In the Low Countries in 1520–1, he saw Michelangelo's Bruges *Madonna and Child* and met Tommaso Vincidor, with whom he exchanged prints for what were probably engravings after Raphael.⁸³ However, the masters of Vasari's 'third period' left no trace in Dürer's work. This omission is underlined by his last great monumental painting, *The Four Apostles* of 1526, which he gave to the city of Nuremberg. Its composition derives from the wings of Giovanni Bellini's Frari Triptych.⁸⁴ As he had observed 20 years earlier, at Venice, Bellini remained 'the best painter of them all'.

Along with Jacopo de' Barbari, who Dürer recalled in 1523 as 'a lovely painter', he especially acknowledged his debt to Mantegna, who had died during his second visit to Venice.⁸⁵ Dürer was principally drawn to a narrow Veneto-Padua circle of artists, all with German connections. Giovanni Bellini's earliest surviving oil painting is his portrait of Jörg Fugger. Bellini's brother-in-law Mantegna worked for the Marquis of Mantua; whose house was closely linked by marriage with the Margrave of Brandenburg, the Duke of Bavaria, and the counts of Württemberg and Görz.⁸⁶ When Paola Gonzaga married Count Leonhard of Görz at Bolzano in 1478, her trousseau included two pairs of elaborately decorated cassone inspired, and possibly designed by Mantegna.⁸⁷ The Mantuan court painter aspired to an imperial title, and apparently painted Frederick III during his visit to Italy in 1469, although the Emperor actually knighted his brother-in-law Gentile Bellini, creating him a count palatine.⁸⁸ As we have seen, Jacopo de' Barbari worked for Anton Kolb in Venice, and for the Emperor Maximilian in Nuremberg. He was subsequently employed by the Electors of Saxony and Brandenburg, Count Philip of Burgundy and Margaret of Austria, Regent of the Netherlands.⁸⁹

By the 1490s, humanism was a significant element in the elite culture of Nuremberg and the Imperial court. At Venice, it was broadcast through the new medium of printing, by German entrepreneurs and craftsmen, including goldsmiths who cast type, and painters and carvers who designed and cut blocks for illustrations. From his formative years Dürer was closely associated with this burgeoning print culture. He evidently felt little need to travel further afield than the Veneto, where his countrymen felt so much at home, despite mentioning to Pirckheimer on 18 August 1506, that 'I have a mind if the King comes to Italy, to go with him to Rome'.⁹⁰ However, the imperial coronation of Maximilian I was delayed until 1508, and then took place in Trent, the seat of a German prince-bishop subordinate to the Italian patriarch of Aquileia.

By middle age, freed from financial need by his substantial 'back catalogue' of prints, Dürer was able to devote himself to his own publications on 'measurement, perspective and other like matters...' (Pl. 19).⁹¹ By the eve of the Reformation, writers such as Ulrich von Hutten and Jakob Wimpheling were expressing reservations about the influence of Italian fashions in Germany.⁹² The waxing and waning of Dürer's fascination with Italy invites comparison with that of Erasmus, whom he may have met in Bologna as early as 1506, and certainly drew in 1520–1.

Around 1489, the young Erasmus wrote the dialogue *Antibarbari*, in defence of classical studies. In 1528, the year of Dürer's death, in his treatise *The Right Way of Speaking*, the

elderly humanist praised him for achieving – with only the black lines of his prints – the full range of effects, emotions and sensations which Apelles had needed colours to represent.⁹³ The same year, in his *Ciceronian Dialogues*, Erasmus criticised his Italian contemporaries' slavish imitation of classical models, and argued that if 'Apelles... by some chance returned to life...' and 'painted Germans as he once painted Greeks... wouldn't he be said to have painted badly?'⁹⁴ He believed that humanists should emulate the spirit, rather than imitate the forms of their classical sources.

Notwithstanding Dürer's observation, in an early draft of a treatise on painting, that an artist should be 'instructed in Latin, so far as to understand certain writings',⁹⁵ his own, exceptionally privileged access to the ancient world was provided by his humanist friends Pirckheimer, Melanchthon and Camerarius. Their expertise liberated him from the need to laboriously crib classical subject-matter from Italian pictorial sources. His treatises, *Instructions on Measurement* and *Four Books on Human Proportion*, published in 1525 and posthumously in 1528, indicate that towards the end of his life Dürer sought to reduce the elements of beauty to a mathematical system (Pl. 19). The acquisition of such essential principles made redundant the imitation of the external appearances of any approved canon – Italian or otherwise.

Dürer acknowledged that the lost arts of antiquity had been brought to light by the Italians, and conceded that 'many talented scholars in our German land have been taught the art of painting, without any foundation...', and had 'grown up in ignorance, like a wild unpruned tree...'.⁹⁶ However, he believed that if German artists would add knowledge of measurement and perspective to their traditional dexterity and colour sense, they would 'gain skill by knowledge and knowledge by skill' and 'in time allow no other nation to take the prize before them'.⁹⁷ Vasari acknowledged this independence when he observed that 'if Albrecht Dürer... did once come to Italy, nevertheless he kept always to one and the same manner...'.⁹⁸

Notes

- 1 G. Vasari (trans. G. du C. de Vere Cole, intro. and notes by D. Ekserdjian), *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, London 1996, vol. 2, 75, 77.
- 2 K. Van Mander (ed. H. Miedema), *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, vol. 1, Doornspijk 1994, 90.
- 3 J. Reynolds (ed. R. R. Wark), *Discourses on Art*, New Haven and London 1975, 51.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 299.
- 5 H. Wölfflin (trans. A. and H. Grieve), *The Art of Albrecht Dürer*, London 1971, 18.
- 6 E. Panofsky, 'Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Harmondsworth 1970, 277.
- 7 M. Evans, 'Northern Artists in Italy during the Renaissance', *Bulletin of the Society for Renaissance Studies*, 3, 2, 1985, 15, 17–18.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 9 M. Belozerskaya, *Rethinking the Renaissance. Burgundian arts across Europe*, Cambridge 2002, 221–222.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 181–184, 186, 209.
- 11 M. Evans, 'Appropriation and application: the significance of the sources of Michael Pacher's altarpieces', in P. Humfrey and M. Kemp (eds.), *The Altarpiece in the Renaissance*, Cambridge 1990, 106–128.
- 12 J. Campbell Hutchison, *Albrecht Dürer. A Biography*, Princeton 1990, 6.
- 13 Quoted in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg: 1300–1550*, exhib. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1986, 51.
- 14 N. Lieb, *Die Fugger und die Kunst im Zeitalter der Spätgotik und Frühen Renaissance*, Munich 1952, 28, 30–31.
- 15 A. von Harff (trans. and ed. M. Letts), *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, London 1946, 51.
- 16 Lieb, *op. cit.* (note 14), 31, 234–238.
- 17 H. Rupprich, 'Willibald Pirckheimer: A Study of His Personality as a Scholar', in *Pre-Reformation Germany* (ed. G. Strauss), London and Basingstoke 1972, 383–384.
- 18 Hutchison, *op. cit.* (note 12), 9–10.
- 19 F. Anzelewsky, *Dürer-Studien*, Berlin 1983, 14; F. Geldner, *Die Deutschen Inkunabeldrucker*, vol. 1, *Das Deutsche Sprachgebiet*, Stuttgart 1968, 170.
- 20 Hutchison, *op. cit.* (note 12), 98.
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Plate 1 Giovanni Bellini, *Portrait of Jörg Fugger*, 1474. Oil on panel. Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum



Plate 2 Anon Florentine, *The Battle of the Trousers*, c. 1460. Engraving. Munich, Bayerisches Staatsbibliothek



Plate 3 Erhard Reuwich, Venetian Lady, frontispiece to Bernard von Breydenbach, *Opus transmarine peregrinationis*, Mainz, 1486. Woodcut. London, British Museum



Plate 4 Johannes of Frankfurt, after Pollaiuolo, *The Battle of the Nude Men*, 1490s. Woodcut. London, British Museum



Plate 5 Giovan Pietro Birago, *Apollo and the Muses*, early 1490s. Miniature on vellum, volume of Italian sonnets and songs, fol. 1v. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek

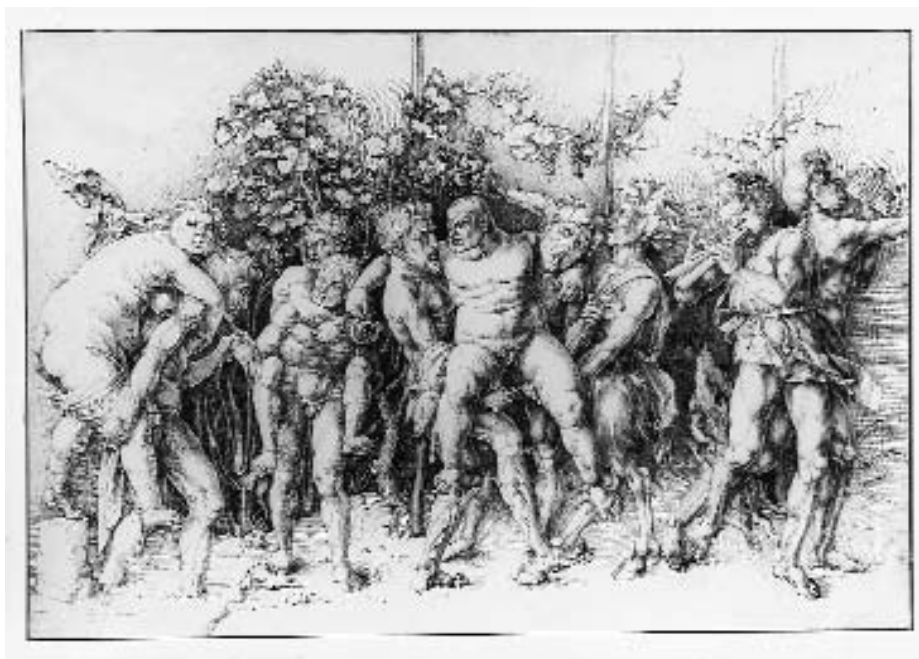


Plate 6 Albrecht Dürer, after Mantegna, *Bacchanal with Silenus*, 1494. Pen and brown ink. Vienna, Albertina



Plate 7 Albrecht Dürer, after Gentile Bellini, *Three Orientals*, c. 1494-5. Pen and black and brown ink with watercolour. London, British Museum

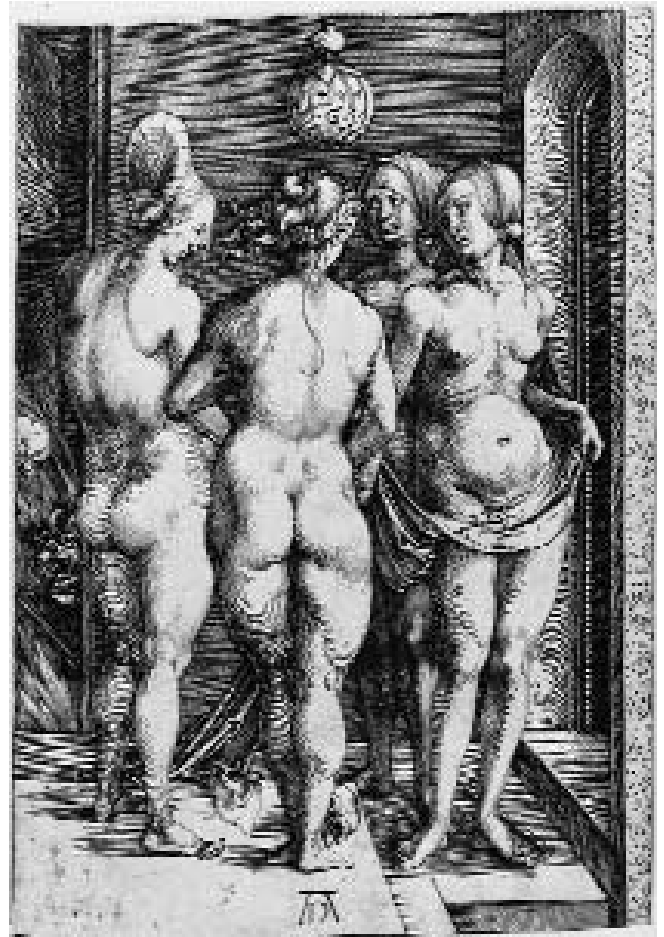


Plate 8 Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Witches*, 1497. Engraving. London, British Museum



Plate 9 Albrecht Dürer, *Pupilla Augusta*, c. 1496-8. Pen and black and brown ink over black chalk. The Royal Collection © 2004, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

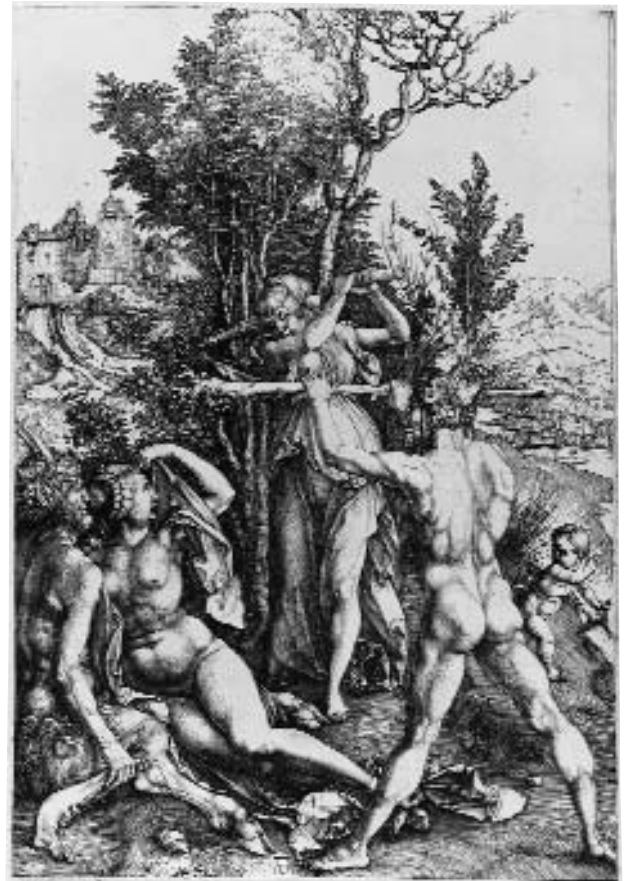


Plate 10 Albrecht Dürer, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, c. 1498. Engraving. London, British Museum



Plate 11 Albrecht Dürer, *Hercules Slaying the Stymphalian Birds*, c. 1500. Tempera on canvas. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum



Plate 12 Albrecht Dürer, *Study of a female nude*, 1500. Pen and brown ink with green wash. London, British Museum



Plate 13 Albrecht Dürer, *The Small Horse*, 1505. Engraving. London, British Museum



Plate 14 Pisanello, Horse's head on the reverse of a medal of Francesco Sforza, c. 1441. Bronze. © Münzkabinett Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz



Plate 15 Albrecht Dürer, *Feast of the Rose Garlands*, 1506. Oil on panel. Prague, Narodni Galerie



Plate 16 Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of an architect*, 1506. Brush and grey wash heightened with white, on blue paper. © Kupferstichkabinett-Sammlung der Zeichnungen und Druckgraphik Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz



Plate 17 Jobst Harrich, after Albrecht Dürer, Copy of the central panel of the Heller altarpiece of 1508, c. 1614. Oil on panel. Frankfurt am Main, Historisches Museum



Plate 18 Francesco Rosselli, after Sandro Botticelli, *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1490. Engraving. London, British Museum

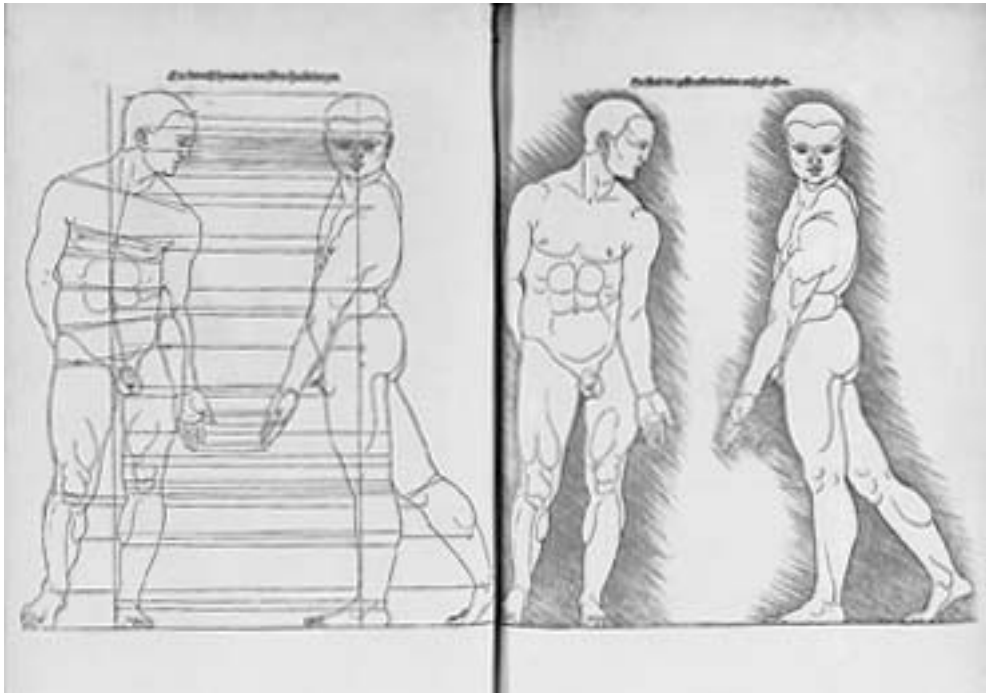


Plate 19 Albrecht Dürer, Two proportion studies in *Four Books on Human Proportion*, Nuremberg, 1528. Woodcut. London, British Museum